



A group of sandhill cranes look for a suitable overnight roost at sunset on the Platte River near Alda. Photo by Chris Helzer.



NEBRASKAland Magazine

Published by the
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

NebraskalandMagazine.com

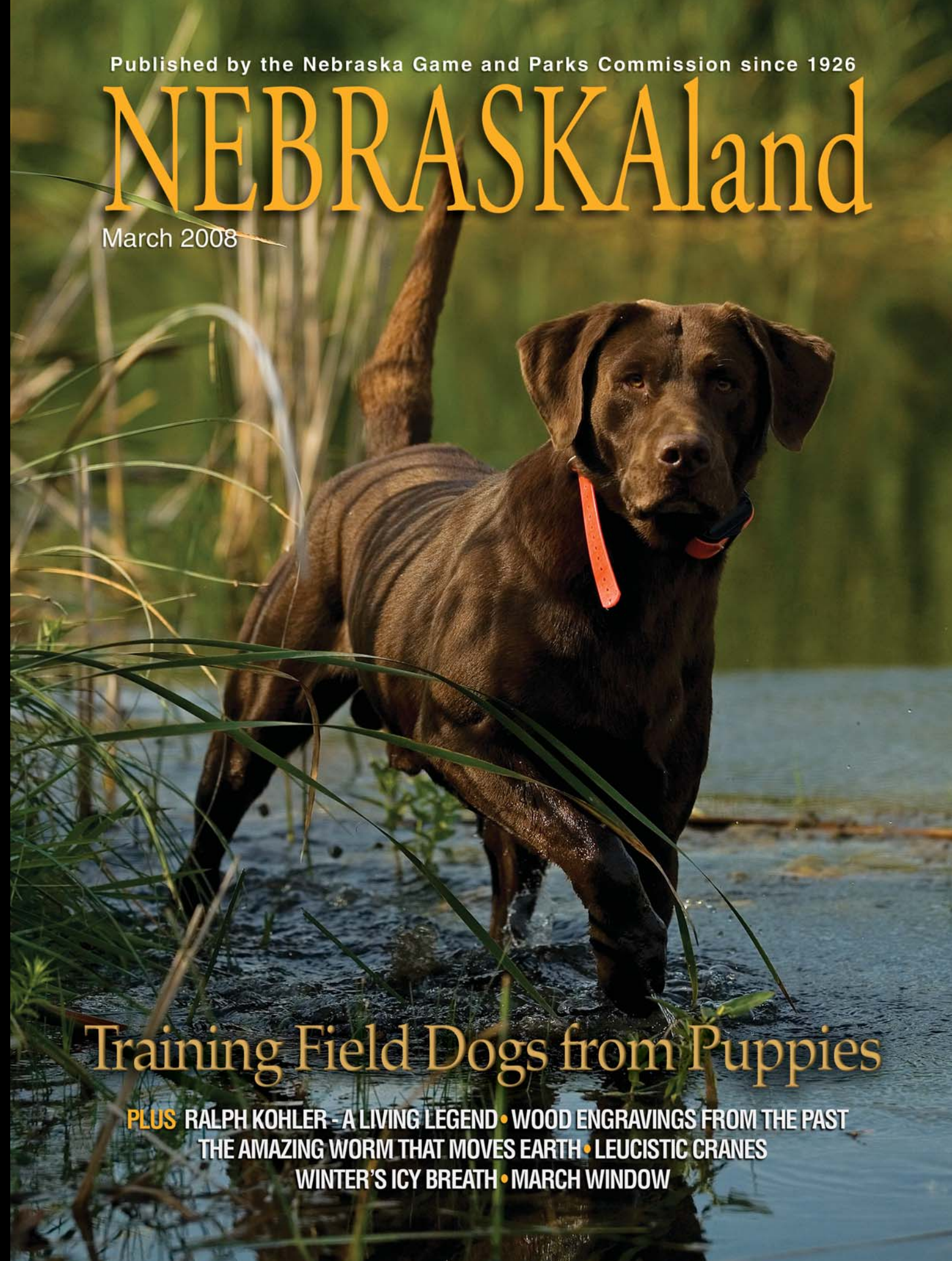
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March 2008



Training Field Dogs from Puppies

PLUS RALPH KOHLER - A LIVING LEGEND • WOOD ENGRAVINGS FROM THE PAST
THE AMAZING WORM THAT MOVES EARTH • LEUCISTIC CRANES
WINTER'S ICY BREATH • MARCH WINDOW



NEBRASKALand

Volume 86, Number 2, March 2008

FEATURES

10 From the Litter to the Field

Purchasing a puppy is just the start of a new dog owner's commitment. From picking to training, each step must be carefully executed to provide the most reliable companion afield. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

18 Earth-mover

One can easily marvel that this practically senseless, dim-witted, vulnerable, fluid-filled tube is both a fertilizer factory and an earth mover par excellence. BY LISA KNOPP

20 Wood Engravings of the Past

Precursors to today's photojournalism practices, woodblock engravings brought to life many aspects of early Nebraska life that otherwise would have remained virtually unknown. BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

28 Ralph Kohler - Legend of the Outdoors

It is unlikely any Nebraska waterfowl hunter can match the number of days Ralph Kohler of Tekamah has logged in a blind during the last 80 years. BY JON FARRAR

38 Leucistic Cranes - Rare, But Hard to Miss

"Rarer than hen's teeth," a pair of leucistic sandhill cranes were often mistaken for whooping cranes last year near Kearney. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER

40 Winter's Breath

Major ice storms last year left a swath of destruction across central Nebraska that was both beautiful and costly. BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

DEPARTMENTS

8 Outdoor Business

Power lines at Rowe Sanctuary more crane friendly.

46 In the Field

A March window of opportunity opens at Mayberry Lake SRA.

47 Mixed Bag

Good-All reels of Ogallala.

49 Parks & Places

Spawning catfish gather below Spencer Dam.

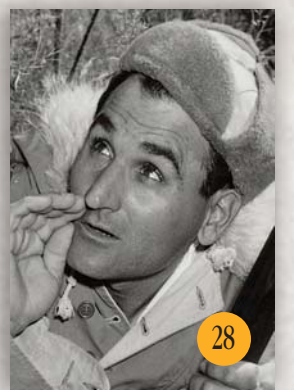
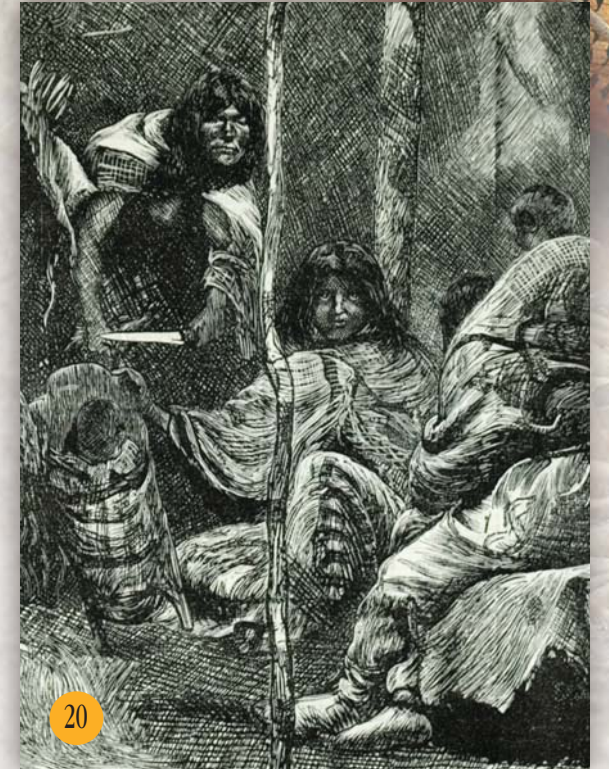
Comment 4

Outdoor News 6

Classifieds 48

Portraits from the Past 50

Cover: With a little planning and training, you may have a dog as well trained and stylish as the chocolate Labrador pictured. For tips on choosing and training a dog you can be proud of, turn to page 10. Photo by Jeff Kurrus. **Opposite:** Last fall's rigid goldenrod seed heads are encased in ice following an ice storm in Aurora. Photo by Chris Helzer.



NEBRASKAland Magazine



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NEBRASKAland VOL. 86 / NO. 2
ISSN: 0028-1964 MARCH 2008

Published monthly, except for Jan./Feb. and Aug./Sept.
issues, by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, 2200
N. 33rd St., Lincoln, NE. Copyright 2008, all rights reserved.
Please address comments or questions to this address.
Periodicals postage paid at Lincoln, Nebraska, and other
locations. POSTMASTER: Send all address changes to
NEBRASKAland, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370.
NEBRASKAland is available on audio cassette from the
Nebraska Library Commission Talking Book and Braille
Service, Suite 120, 1200 N St., Lincoln, NE 68508, (800)
742-7691.

Rates: \$18 for one year; \$33 for two years; \$44 for
three years. Nebraska residents must add
appropriate sales tax.

To subscribe call 1-800-NEBLAND (632-5263),
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Comment



Shirley Alder of Lincoln sent in this picture of her grandson. "Issak was ice-fishing with his dad and grandpa. He fell asleep but still held on to his line."

Storz Story

I enjoyed the November issue of *NEBRASKAland*, especially the photo of former governor Roy Cochran and Art Storz. I'm from Ogallala and after World War II, spent many a happy morning in a duck blind on Lake Mac and the Platte River west of Lewellen, so the photo was full of memories. One of my friends at the time was Bill Olson, a banker in Ogallala whose family was from Oshkosh and Lisco. Sometime after the passing of Art Storz, they purchased Ducklore Lodge and one Sunday we spent the day there.

I was really moved by this issue and think an article regarding Art Storz, the history and activities at the lodge, his guests, and the hunting that occurred there would be fantastic! I hope you consider it.

Dan Saunders,
Tempe, Arizona

Although it was quite a while ago, we have done a story on Art Storz and Ducklore Lodge. It appeared in the 1987 November and December issues of the magazine.

-Editor

Missing Names

The picture on page 16 of the November 2007 *NEBRASKAland* magazine was also on pages 32-33

of the July 1979 issue, "Sportman's Scrapbook, A 100 Year History of the Outdoors." I showed the picture to my dad, John A. Herrod Jr. (1905-1992) back then. He was able to tell me the likely names of those pictured with Keith Neville, and that the group hunted on Brogan land. My grandfather, John A. Herrod Sr. (1861-1957) hunted on McFadden land just west of theirs, and one of his daughters married a McFadden. I purchased the Brogan ground and hunt there now with the grandsons of one of the men pictured. We believe Fred Petersen Sr. is second from the left. He was the North Platte postmaster. The other three men may be, in no particular order, John Denn, Eric Broker and "General" Miltonberger. The General was head of the National Guard we believe. All or some of these men may have been WWI veterans. They were all involved in the Lincoln County Sportsmen's Club and helped organize a Ducks Unlimited chapter in North Platte in the late '30s. My dad was on the committee and remembered the names of all his friends who worked on the event. Ducks Unlimited, sportsmen's clubs and *NEBRASKAland Magazine* have been a large part of my life.

Good health and good hunting,
Joe Herrod
Lincoln, Nebraska

Blue With Cold Bluebirds?

Every year that I've lived here, bluebirds have been stopping for a brief rest, mostly to take a drink. One late winter (almost spring) I saw a bluebird two days in a row, checking out birdhouses. I purchased two bluebird nesting boxes, thinking I could entice the birds to stay here and nest. So far, however, the bluebirds have not made their home here and the wrens have moved in instead. Well, last December 5, four bluebirds where resting in the tree across from the sunroom, taking turns drinking water from my heated birdbath. All



of a sudden, one flew onto the shepherd's hook outside the window. I had no time to open the window and was forced to take a picture through it. I noticed the birds had frozen droplets of water on the end of their beaks. I didn't get another photo op of the birds before they left for a warmer climate, but am sharing this story because the December 5 sighting of bluebirds was a very unusual event.

Marion Ball
Arlington, Nebraska

Send your comments to:
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Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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Variable-power Scopes Now Legal for Muzzleloaders

At their January 17 meeting, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission approved the use of variable-power scopes on muzzleloaders during Nebraska muzzleloading seasons. Prior to this action, only scopes of up to one power were legal to use during the statewide muzzleloading season.

Kit Hams, big game program manager for the Commission, said the change in regulations should result in cleaner kills, increase the number of deer harvested and hopefully recruit more hunters to the muzzleloading ranks.

"First, this change should enable people to sight more accurately, which will assist in harvesting deer, especially in low light conditions.

"Second, it will also allow people to use something they are familiar and comfortable with, since a lot of people don't know how to use open sights very well. The argument about people with poor eyesight having trouble shooting accurately without a scope is a fact – open sights are more difficult to use, so this change is a benefit for them.

"Third, this should increase recruitment and participation, with more hunters probably willing to buy a muzzleloader permit. I hope it can raise the number of permits sold 20 to 25 percent and increase the harvest of antlerless deer."

Hams said that despite arguments that muzzleloader hunters will now wound more deer because they will take longer shots, he believes just the opposite will happen: Hunters will shoot more accurately at closer deer.

The bottom line, Hams said, is that the new regulations will help a lot of current and potential hunters while hurting very few. Traditionalists will still be able to hunt with open-sighted, more traditional weapons, while other hunters can use more modern technology in their hunting efforts.



Antler Scoring Workshop

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's annual antler scoring workshop will be held from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, March 8, at the Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium, located five miles south of I-80 exit 432 on Nebraska Highway 31.

Hunters are invited to bring their deer, elk, or pronghorn trophies to be officially scored on a first-come, first-served basis by Commission staff and volunteer scorers for entry into the Nebraska Big Game Trophy Records Program, the Boone & Crockett or Pope and Young clubs or the Longhunter Society record book.

There is no charge for the scoring or entry into Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium, and hunters are encouraged to bring proof of harvest in Nebraska for recording purposes.

Call the aquarium at (402) 332-3901 for more information.

Rivers and Wildlife Celebration

The 38th annual Rivers and Wildlife Celebration will be held March 14-16 at the Holiday Inn in Kearney.

Wildlife enthusiasts from around the world are expected to attend and help celebrate the annual migration of 500,000 sandhill cranes and millions of waterfowl through central Nebraska while learning more about the natural world in a friendly and informal atmosphere.

Renowned wildlife artist Robert Bateman will be one of the featured speakers at the event, which includes field trips to crane viewing blinds along the Platte River and excursions

to local wetlands and lakes. This year there will also be a pre-festival trip to Lake McConaughy on March 13.

Conference activities will be held in the Holiday Inn convention center, and discount room rates are available for conference registrants. For more information visit www.nebraska.audubon.org.

Hunting-Related Incidents Up from 2006

Following a record year in 2006, when only six hunting-related accidents were reported, Nebraska recorded 12 hunting-related incidents in 2007, including one that was fatal.

The fatal incident involved a 50-year-old man who shot at a coyote with a rifle from the deck of his Saunders County home. The bullet struck and killed a 47-year-old man who was hunting for deer several hundred yards away.

"Hunting incidents that result in injury or death are extremely rare in Nebraska," said Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Hunter Education Coordinator Mike Streeter. "The injury rate per 1,000 hunters is usually lower than .01 percent. The average number of people who participate in hunting in Nebraska is around 170,000 each year, and the last 10-year average of incidents where a hunter was injured or killed is around 12 per year."

Streeter said the incidents occurred because one or more of the participants did not follow safety rules. Three were due to the shooter not paying attention to what was beyond the intended target, and two involved falls from tree stands. Other causes were: failure to unload a firearm when it wasn't in use, failure to practice muzzle control, and allowing the muzzle of a firearm to be pointed at another person. Five of the incidents took place while hunting deer, three while hunting upland birds, two while hunting nongame animals, and one each while hunting turkey and small game. ■

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Firefly Diverters Installed at Rowe Sanctuary

Partners hope devices will make power lines more visible and reduce bird mortality.

By Eric Fowler

It is a virtual smorgasbord for predators and scavengers, the short stretches of the Platte River that lie beneath two power transmission lines on Audubon's Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary near Gibbon. Last year, a study found 90

dead sandhill cranes on sandbars and in the shallows beneath the wires, where coyotes, raccoons, crows and other furred and feathered creatures feasted on the carcasses. The river and predators carried away more evidence of death before it could be counted.

Still more birds were fatally injured but died elsewhere. In all, the study estimated that 150 cranes died as a result of the power lines, as well as 15 other species of fowl.

"We found bones and pieces of birds all across the river," said Bob Harms of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Biological Field Services office in Grand Island. "Every kind of bird you could imagine was hitting those lines – cranes, ducks, geese, pelicans, sparrows – it's a predator buffet."

Whether it's 90 sandhill cranes or 200 that died is but a drop in the bucket in the grand scheme of things, a few hundredths of a percent of the 500,000 or so sandhill cranes that stop on the river each spring during their northward migration. But the risk to the 237 or so endangered whooping cranes that stop on the Platte, where one bird represents four-tenths of one percent of the population, as well as other endangered, threatened and even common birds, was great enough that it led to a project biologists hope will reduce bird deaths.

"This river segment between the Gibbon and Minden bridges is the most frequented by whooping cranes," said Harms. "We can't afford to lose even a single whooper to a collision with a power line. That's the greatest single cause of mortality for migrating cranes, hitting power lines."

In late-August, Dawson Public Power District (PPD) installed 465 Firefly diverters at 20-foot intervals at the two sites, covering nearly a mile at one location and 3,800 feet at the other, across both water and the adjacent land.

The plastic diverters clip to the wires and spin in the wind. With both reflective and glow-in-the dark stickers on each side, they will create a flashing effect for a few hours after sundown that biologists hope will be



PHOTO BY BRADLEY MELLEMA, ROWE SANCTUARY

Bob Miller of Dawson Public Power District installs Firefly flight diverters on a transmission line across the Platte River.

enough to get the birds to fly over the lines.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) got the ball rolling on the project a few years ago, after hearing about the bird deaths and then surveying the sites. Dawson (PPD) was eager to cooperate on the project, which soon grew into a collaborative effort that also included the National Audubon Society, which owns and manages Rowe Sanctuary, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, the Platte River Whooping Crane Trust and the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UN-K).

When it approached Dawson PPD, the FWS was acting under the authority of both the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which allows no take, be it voluntary or involuntary, of most migratory birds, and the Endangered Species Act, which extends even more protection to whooping cranes. There is also concern for the threatened piping plover and the endangered

We can't afford to lose even a single whooper to a collision with a powerline. That's the greatest single cause of mortality for migrating cranes...

least tern, which also use the river.

Most collisions with power lines occur between dusk and dawn, but weather can also play a factor.

"If we have a lot of fog or a snowstorm and the birds get disturbed at night ...," said Bill Taddicken, a biologist at Rowe. "There are times that birds can't see well anyway. But people in the blinds have seen them hit wires in good light, too."

Area birdwatchers and other visitors have also seen grotesquely injured birds, with shattered wings or missing legs, that are the result of collisions with the

wires. "That's not a great thing for people to have to see," said Taddicken.

A previous attempt to make the lines more visible by installing yellow coils on the wires proved ineffective because the coils quickly faded and weren't very visible. Project partners are more optimistic about this attempt, but a UN-K study will measure the effectiveness.

Bob Murphy, an assistant professor of biology who is teaching natural resources and ornithology at the school, said this year's research will be more intensive than the previous two years in an effort to quantify the variables that are difficult to measure, including how many birds washed downstream or were carried away by predators before observers counted them, or how many flew off and died elsewhere.

"We really didn't know where to start," he said of the difficulty of estimating those factors. "This year,

because we're going to do intensive observation, we'll be able to get the information and see whether that is an issue. We collected 90 carcasses and based on stream flows and depth, there were possibly another 50 or 60 cranes we missed."

Observations at dawn and dusk will also determine if a strike indicator that will be installed on the transmission line is as accurate in this case as it has proven to be elsewhere. The instrument detects vibrations caused by birds colliding with power lines. Observations and carcass monitoring will also be conducted at other sites where power lines span the Platte to see how bird mortality compares to what is occurring at Rowe. The effectiveness of the Fireflies will fade in a few years and they will need to be replaced. But the cost is less than burying the lines, a multi-million dollar project that has been discussed but no more. ■



PHOTO BY BRADLEY MELLEMA, ROWE SANCTUARY

Firefly reflectors, which spin in the wind and glow in the dark, are being installed to help make power lines more visible to birds. A previous attempt, yellow coils that glowed at night, is pictured here as well.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

University of Nebraska at Kearney student Tim Smith counts sandhill crane corpses in the Platte River beneath a power transmission line at Rowe Sanctuary last March. An estimated 90 cranes died from collisions there last year.

From the Litter to the Field

Text and photos by Jeff Kurrus

Purchasing a puppy is just the start of a new dog owner's commitment. From picking to training, each step must be carefully executed to provide the most reliable companion afield.

The Italian spinone (pictured) excels at both pointing and retrieving, a fact potential dog owners should know before purchasing.





Purchasing a hunting dog can do nothing but add to the pleasure of the sport – if done correctly. I have seen more than one dog point a covey a quail, wait for the flush, then point the first of many singles before the shooter has vested the first bird. On the other hand, I’ve also been on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, Kansas, chasing a dog that refused to hunt or return to the car, as the group debated whether to leave just the dog, or the owner and his dog, to fend for themselves while we went to the closest restaurant for supper.

You never want to be “that guy” in the field, the one with the dog who doesn’t obey, can’t locate birds, or can’t retrieve. Instead, you want to be the one that is called when a friend has wrangled a new hunting spot. With a good dog, you will be.

Given another chance, are there things a dissatisfied pet owner could

have looked for to help guarantee a better field companion? Furthermore, are there universal teaching steps that should be taken, regardless of the type of dog selected or hunting desired, once this training begins? Yes, and yes.

The practicality of the following steps makes dog training seem like one of the most doable aspects of the outdoors as long as you possess one attribute: commitment.

Litter Picking

“I train a dog which retrieves 200 geese during a weeklong trip to Canada each year,” said Bart Peterson, professional dog trainer and owner of Bar Ten Kennel in Cozad, “and then comes back to Nebraska and hunts four days a week with his owner.” Prospective dog owners have to know themselves when purchasing a dog: Are they a once-a-week hunter looking for a dog

that works close and is easy to handle? Do they hunt three times a week and want a strong dog that can hunt long days? Aggressive and quick, or slow and methodical? Ducks or quail? Pheasants or geese? Or a little bit of everything?

There is a long list of traits to look for in a new dog. “You want a dog that walks through like he owns the place,” said professional dog trainer Scott Steede. “When I’m picking out a dog, I’ll throw an empty milk jug in the corner of the pen and see what puppies go to it first. The milk jug is usually bigger than the dogs and gets them ready for tall grass. The ones that go to it aren’t intimidated and are going to do well in the field. If I have a hat, I’ll do the same thing.”

“If you’re picking out a dog to hunt with because he’s cute or an attractive shade of yellow or white,” said Pheasant Bonanza trainer Ben Murray,

“then you’re taking a big chance on whether or not he’s going to be a good dog.”

“Forget looks. You want a dog that has two things: confidence and desire,” said Steede. “Have you ever been with a dog who will hunt for 10 minutes and then be behind the hunter? That dog has a lack of desire. A hunter wants a dog that would rather spend time in the brush versus near the fireplace.”

Murray laughed. “I’ve seen very young dogs, ones with a ton of desire, walk right up to birds, tame geese for example, and try and bite them.”

“With a good breeder, you can find an entire litter that has confidence and can turn off the lights and get a good dog. Take the milk jug, and look for the one that wants to explore,” Steede said.

Conversely, picking a dog from an unknown breeder or a classified ad can be quite chancy. Spend a lot more on your dog versus your gun, these dog trainers said, but the real issue goes back to the seller of your dog. There’s no reason to think spending \$75 on a crossbreed between a German shorthair and a German wirehair is going to yield a bird dog that you would stake your life on. At the same time, many people reason that spending an excessive amount of money is not an option.

“But you will be wasting money if you’re paying \$150 for a dog and then spending \$800 a month in training,” Steede said. “You’re better off putting that money in a good dog and training it yourself.”

“If a dog is talented,” said Murray, “after 30 days we’ll know the dog is going to be great. If we have a marginal dog come in to be trained, after 90 days, you’ll see a marginal dog.”

“A potential dog owner needs to understand that some dogs are very talented and some are not,” said Peterson. “No matter how hard you work and prepare, and no matter how good you are as a trainer, if you don’t have the ability that God gave the dog then you’re not going to get to the upper level.”

“A lot of people think they’re getting a good deal when they buy a \$150

Some basic training steps will be used with any dog, but there are major differences in the overall training regimen for pointing breeds, such as a Brittany spaniel (pictured, left) versus retrieving breeds, such as a Labrador retriever (right).

puppy,” Steede said. “My experience is when the dog has been part of a field trial family and they have eight puppies, all eight puppies will be good. With a backyard breeder, you’ll have a couple shining stars and the rest are marginal. We have more problems with \$150 dogs than we do with any other ones.”

“Most dogs I reject as candidates to train are those found in a classified ad that says ‘both parents hunt,’” said Peterson. “Maybe they do, but do they really retrieve? Plus, finding a well-bred puppy also deals with a dog’s health, especially a Labrador retriever’s. If you are buying a Lab, you need to ask two questions before anything else: 1) Are the dog’s hips Orthopedic Foundation of Animals (OFA) certified, stating they are free of hip

dysplasia; and 2) Has CERF (Canine Eye Registration Foundation) found the Lab’s eyes free of retinal displacement (or genetic eye disorder)?”

Peterson recommends finding a dog with a pedigree of field trial work. While there is a misconception about these dogs being too wound up and headstrong, he said dogs with these traits don’t make it in field trial competitions. “Abby, that yellow Lab,” he said, pointing to her as she lie beneath his truck, “when she’s done working, she’s calm and does exactly what she’s doing now. But she is a Platte River machine,” he said. “She marks, runs super-straight blinds and you can shoot as much as you want. She’s also a good pheasant dog. Eight people walking CRP fields in South Dakota and she’ll quarter the



entire time. She can go from the pheasant field, to the duck blind, to the field trial, without missing a beat.”

“The problem we have is that people buy a dog without putting a whole lot of thought into it,” said Murray. “You have to look at it like having a child. You’re taking care of this dog for the next 15 years.”

Taking care of that dog begins as soon as the owner signs on the dotted line. Subsequently, training is not far behind. And there are two ways to do it: professionally-trained or home-trained. A new dog owner should look at it this way: should they home school their child, or send their child to school? Dog training should be viewed in the same way. And the owner must still understand how important it is to continue working with that dog at home, regardless of who first trains it.

Home Training Tips

The owner must first lay a foundation for future training. This is why so many people begin with simple commands such as “sit” and “stay.” There’s no reason to have a dog that knows how to hunt but hunts for itself. Having a dog learn there are rules to your relationship will allow for additional teaching down the line when more challenging training begins. When you have a new dog, look at this dog like trying to break a habit. It is going to take time.

“Start your training session with a goal,” said dog trainer Scott Steede. “If the goal takes two minutes, then stop. If it’s twenty, quit after it’s achieved.”

The best way to begin working is in short bursts. Long, drawn-out training sessions are negative for both the trainer and dog. Not only will the young dog lose interest because of its short attention span, there’s also a good chance the trainer will lose something even more important, consistency.

For example, a new dog owner might become so upset with a task the dog is failing to complete that he will do it over and over again long after the dog has become frustrated or lost interest. At the same time, a dog might perform a task correctly and the owner wants to see it repeatedly, wants to show friends and family that their newfound student can do it “one more time, one more time.”

A trainer has to understand that the task, even one as simple as sitting, could become work for an anxious puppy. “I’ve seen Lab owners take a very young pup and make him retrieve all summer and then question why he isn’t retrieving come wintertime. A dog will look forward to coming out here every day because it’s a blast, not if it becomes a job,” said Steede.

“The biggest aspect of training Labs is socialization,” said Peterson. “With Lab pups, we like to get people involved at three to four weeks of age once the pups have their eyes open and are climbing out of the whelping box. They are weaned, eating solid food and also receive their first vaccination at the fourth week. After this, it is pretty safe for them to interact with the world and we make sure they do just that. We will have clients and their kids come over, and have the kids sit right in with the puppies and play with them. At four to five weeks, the puppies come out of the whelping room and venture outside. At that point, they are introduced to their first birds – a frozen teal or pigeon. Just so they can pick the bird up. At five to six weeks, we start retrieving with tennis balls and small birds. At seven weeks, they start riding in the truck, going along to training sessions and field trials. They begin to hear gunshots, and they should also be retrieving on land or in water with birds or dummies. During that same time, our clients will pick their dogs back up. And the first thing the owner should notice is how aggressive and happy their new Lab pup is running out



When working with Labs, says dog trainer Bart Peterson, be sure to start your dog on water retrieves at an early age.

of the kennel.”

With this said, Peterson also added that there is no magic date to officially start training a dog. Some dogs are more immature than others, and others aren’t as aggressive. As a general rule, however, once a dog’s adult teeth are in their mouth it’s usually a good time to start the training that a handler intends to reinforce.

“Start your training session with a goal,” said Steede. “If the goal takes two minutes, then stop. If it’s twenty, quit after it’s achieved.” Steede pointed to a German shorthair he was training. “This dog has never been out here. If he finds the bird, the goal is done.” Steede motioned to a pointer. “He is

working on steadiness. I’ll restrain him when he’s on point. If he stays calm once the bird flushes, the goal is accomplished.”

One of the most important aspects of training, Steede said, is that a limited amount of negativity should occur when in the field. The tougher moments, he believes, must occur in the yard because the field is for hunting and positive experiences, an idea also shared by other trainers. “I don’t do a lot of training with my dogs, per say,” said longtime Nebraska pheasant hunter Lee Rupp, who was the topic of the November 1999 *NEBRASKALAND* article, “Think Like a Rooster.” “But everything I do with the dog is associated as something

positive.”

Even if some negative training moments do occur between handler and dog, finish with a positive. This is age-old, common sense handling, yet it still applies today. The last thing a young pup needs to do is finish a day at school feeling like the dumbest kid in the room. “You don’t want to be forceful in the field,” said Steede. “You can do the retrieving work, which can become extremely repetitive, in the yard. A lot of people read books and the books stress yard work drills. That’s good, but when people come out in the field, they force steps like they would in the yard and dig themselves a hole.

“Even the ones I restrain out here,”

continued Steede, holding a chukar in his hand before releasing the next dog from its kennel, “I only restrain a little bit. You’ve seen guys cramming a dead bird in a young dog’s mouth. Why would you want to give a dog that bad experience? Do things like that with a retrieving dummy in the yard. Make reads off the dog. You’ll hit walls. When you do, back off.”

“I have a six-year-old male field champion Lab that weighs 88 pounds,” said Peterson. “He’s a creampuff. So you have to be real careful with him when training, making sure you don’t overtrain or overcorrect because the dog will get down about it. I have another dog, a young 45-pound female

Lab, that you can't train enough. Another Lab I have has so much drive that when he sits in a holding blind, he quivers and nearly yodels the entire time he sits there, waiting for something to happen."

These statements are made by people who train dogs for a living, those who analyze the differences between dogs and make adjustments because of these differences. Not only is a handler training a dog, they're also training themselves to be a more consistent trainer, something that doesn't end when the dog is out of the field.

"The dog needs to learn that regardless of where he's at, he needs to perform because a dog will shut down," said Steede. "The big key is following

up. A dog will do what it wants to do, hunt and quarter, but will often not do what it doesn't want to do, sit and mind. 'How come the dog won't do it for me?' people ask. Because we make them do it."

Advanced Do's and Don'ts

There are several specific points that both the dog trainer and the dog should know before entering the field. Here is that list:

1) Know your breed: Pointing breeds and young dogs want to run. "We put birds out close for dogs that want to run," said Steede. "That way, the dogs understand that the birds aren't far off. They are right here." In the future, if

the dog isn't finding birds in front of its hunters, the dog will check back knowing that there is the possibility of a bird being close to the handler. "As far as breeds are concerned, we also make it a point to pet and praise pointing breeds when they are standing, and retrieving dogs when they are sitting."

2) The "Whoa" Command: If working with a pointing breed, don't introduce the "whoa" command until it is apparent that the dog is comfortable with working with birds in the field. Many dogs, if pressured, will sit when "whoa'd," something that isn't needed when a covey of quail is close by. The "whoa" command never needs to be something that a dog fears.

3) Collars and leashes: It's good to work a dog with a collar. It gets them used to a routine. Using a leash is part of avoidance training. If a dog is new to the field, it allows for more control to keep a dog extremely close by, avoiding potential problems that could arise if releasing a leashless dog in the field for the first time.

4) Obedience training: "A dog that knows he has to be good is a perfect problem to have," said Steede. "He learns that it is the handler who is going to give him freedom." Always work with obedience training with your dog and be creative. For example, if it is a dog that will be sitting most of the time in the field, such as a duck blind Lab, have the dog sit at each door you encounter before you enter. You go through, and then have the dog go through behind you. If it is a standing breed, such as a pointer, go through the same steps with the dog standing.

5) Obstacles: Provide as many different obstacles as possible during training so there are few surprises

One of the largest problems a dog trainer can encounter is a dog that hasn't worked with live birds enough. In Nebraska, the harvest of pen-reared birds, with a limit of five quail, two hen pheasants and unlimited partridges, mallards, chukars (pictured, left) and pigeons per dog per training session, is allowed on private land as well as five designated dog training areas: Yankee Hill WMA and Wagon Train Lake SRA dog training areas in Lancaster County, Rakes Creek WMA in Cass County, Red Willow Reservoir WMA in Frontier County, and Sherman Reservoir in Sherman County.



For pointing breeds, steadiness during a point is one critical component for success in the field.

afield, including water training. If you like to pheasant hunt near cattails, there is eventually going to be a downed bird in the water. Make sure this isn't the first time your dog is exposed to a water retrieve. Also, have the dog make retrieves where they are forced to cross a road, going from taller grass to no grass at all. It's just one more thing that won't confuse a dog if they see it in the field. "If I have a dog that does not do a certain type of retrieve well, that's all I'll do for two weeks. I will do it with very little correction, but I will make them grind it out until they're doing it," said Peterson.

6) Train alone: Quite often people buy a puppy and work it with an older, more experienced dog. "I never train puppies with other dogs," said Steede. "They'll just learn bad habits from old dogs. Once I know the young dog can hunt by himself, I'll hunt with an older dog. But people do it all the time. Generally, as a rule, they'll learn bad habits and it's better to let them learn on their own."

7) Teething: Steede and Peterson both start formal training after the dogs

have their permanent teeth, which can be a different time for each dog breed. "There is no reason for a dog to pick up a bird while they are teething and associate that bird to some sort of negativity, pain in this instance, with hunting," said Steede.

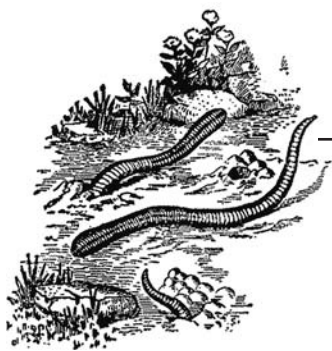
8) Distractions: When a dog gains confidence with its surroundings in the field, begin to add distractions. Extra walkers, gunshots, conversations, different terrain. The dog shouldn't hunt for just one person in the group. Get the dog used to working with other hunters so that the dog becomes a very needed accomplice in the field, not an adversary.

Time Spent

Steede spends at least six days a week with the dogs he trains. He sees them in small doses, and he understands each of their strengths and weaknesses and how to point them in the right direction. He argues that a person can't teach a dog desire, but knows that if a dog has talent there is a long list of steps that should be taken when

training. And even though his knowledge is immense, he is still in constant contact with trainers asking questions, and is always watching videos and reading books to add one more weapon to his training arsenal. Because in the end, whether he's at a field trial competition or pheasant hunting throughout Nebraska, he knows his dog is only going to be as good as its trainer. So he must instill the same rules upon himself as he would the dog.

Peterson, while working with a different breed, carries similar sentiments. "The money and time you will spend, whether you choose a professional or do the training yourself, is a huge commitment. Watch the videos and read as much as you can. Something you read in this particular book or journal might be more suited for you, might strike a better idea while you're studying. Involve as many different sources as you can. But remember, always use common sense. If you don't want your dog to jump up on the table, tell it not to. You don't want it to do something else, don't let it." ■



EARTH-MOVER

By Lisa Knopp

The lowly earthworm does more than move earth.

After the first spring rain, the earthworms are back: thickening and thinning pieces of spaghetti strewn on the sidewalk; wriggling, pink tubes borne in a rivulet along the curb; smashed smears on the street. Not that the earthworms haven't been there all along. During the winter they burrow deeply and hibernate. But when it rains, legions of them come to the surface where I can see them. I used to believe that they surfaced because the

water flushed them out of their burrows. Now I know that they surface before or after a rain because then they can move easily over the surface without drying out.

Once the rain stops and the earth dries, my work begins. When I set out on my daily walk on such days, it's not for one of the carefree, meditative city rambles that I love. Rather, I keep my eyes to the ground and stop frequently to lift a stranded worm off the sidewalk

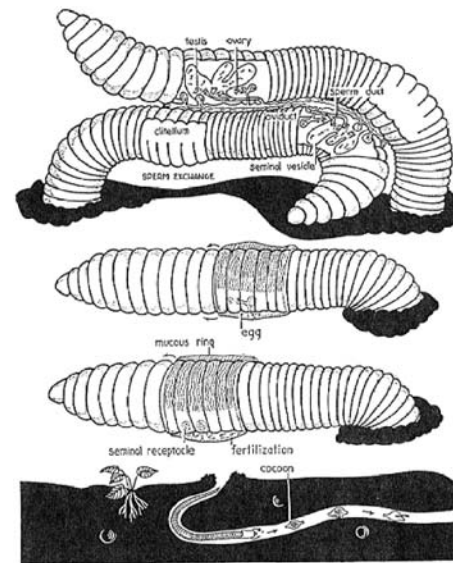
and set it in a curbside garden or in the shade beneath a tree where it can retreat into the moist, cool, dark underworld. The earthworm is a "skin breather." In the absence of lungs, it absorbs oxygen directly into its blood vessels through its skin, kept moist by mucus-secreting cells. If the thin skin dries out, the worm suffocates. Some worms that I encounter are flat, brittle "S's." I can't save them. But some are dark, dry and weakly moving. They're the ones that need me.

I barely noticed earthworms, much less rescued them, until I read Charles Darwin's *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, Through the Action of Worms, With Observation of Their Habits*, a slim volume in which he makes no mention of evolution, natural selection or the descent of man. By "vegetable mould" Darwin meant topsoil, the rich layer of soil in which I plant marigolds, tomatoes and snow peas. For 44 years, Darwin closely observed earthworms and speculated about their significance. In the final paragraph of this book, published in 1881, one year before his death, Darwin proclaimed: "It may be doubted whether there are many other creatures which have played so important a part in the history of the world."

Darwin based this lofty claim on what he observed in a pasture near his house in England. In 1842, a layer of chalk was spread over the field. Eventually, the chalk dissolved but pieces of flint remained. In 1871, Darwin dug seven inches into the soil before he reached the rock layer. He calculated that the earthworms had covered the flint with an average of .22 inches of fertile soil per year. Give the worms a full century and they'd cover the rocks with two feet of soil. Give them a couple of millennia and they'd bury a city. The Roman ruins in England were so well preserved, Darwin said, because earthworms had

buried them.

What made these remarkable feats possible is that in the process of swallowing food (bacteria, fungi, nematodes and manure; decaying roots, rodents, bugs and a tossed apple core), earthworms eat a lot of soil. Tons of it. What they excrete are "castings" – pellets of soil well-mixed with organic matter that they deposit in mounds outside the mouths of their burrows. These castings are rich in calcium, nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, organic minerals and nutrients, and so fertilize my garden. Tunneling earthworms also break up hard-packed soil, sift and aerate it, even move stones. When in need of fish bait, my son goes into the backyard after dark with a flashlight and picks up the night crawlers that have surfaced into the relatively cooler, damper night



air. "Stay away from my garden," I tell him. "I need those worms."

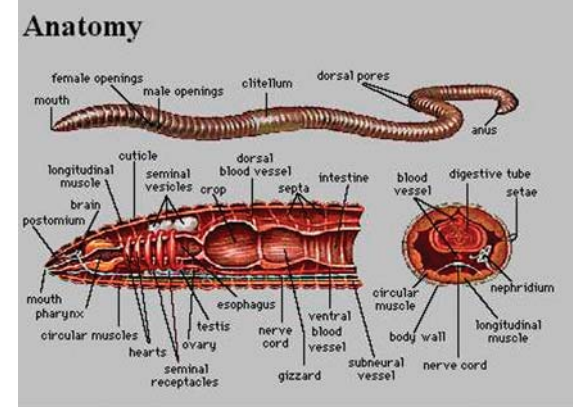
Darwin didn't limit his studies to the earthworm's soil-building abilities. "As I was led to keep in my study during many months worms in pots filled with earth, I became interested in them, and wished to learn how far they acted consciously, and how much mental power they displayed." To test their sense of smell, Darwin breathed on the worms after he'd put tobacco, perfume, paraffin and ascetic acid in his mouth. The earthworms only responded to the latter, Darwin surmised, because it irritated their sensitive skin. To test their sense of hearing, Darwin assaulted them with "the shrill notes from a

metal whistle ... the deepest and loudest tones of a bassoon ... the keys of a piano ... played as loudly as possible," none of which had any observable effect on the worms. But when he placed a pot containing two worms on the piano and he hit "C" in the bass clef, both worms "instantly retreated into their burrows." Earthworms couldn't hear sounds but they could feel them.

To study the mental powers of earthworms, Darwin observed them as they pulled leaves into the mouths of their burrows. An instinctive behavior, one might think, to keep food nearby and to plug the entryway. Yet the skillful manner in which these blind, deaf, and appendage-less creatures dragged the leaves, tip first, in most cases, and "foot stalks" extending from the burrow, and the fact that their favorite leaf, that of the lime or linden tree was not native to England, suggested they'd learned how and with what to stuff their burrows through trial and error. "A near approach to intelligence," Darwin concluded.

Sometimes before I drop a once-stranded earthworm into the shadier, damper soil beneath a tree, I pause. I observe the worm's segments, stacked rings and grooves; the darker end where the miniscule brain and the voracious mouth are located; the clitellum, a smooth, light band which produces the egg case; and the strong muscular contractions. If I had a magnifying glass, I could see the setae, bristles arranged in pairs around each segment that allow the worm to hang on tightly when a robin tries to pull it from its burrow. I marvel that this practically senseless, dim-witted, vulnerable, fluid-filled tube is both a fertilizer factory and an earth mover par excellence.

But not everyone is so appreciative. Last summer, as my daughter was forking salad greens from a bowl onto her plate, she shrieked. There, peeking out of the leaves, was a pink earthworm. "I know what happened," I said. "A worm got out of your brother's box of fish bait. Maybe the lid wasn't closed right or the box tipped over and this one crawled out. I bet it's glad to have landed in a bowl of leaves."

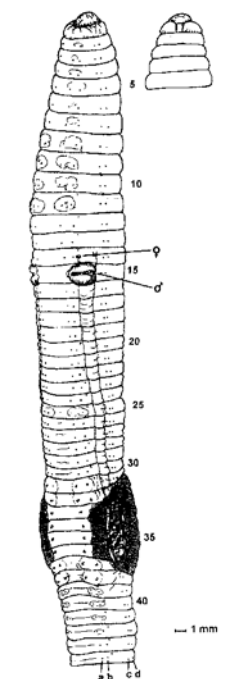


"I don't care how it got there," she said with horror. "I'm never eating anything out of that refrigerator again."

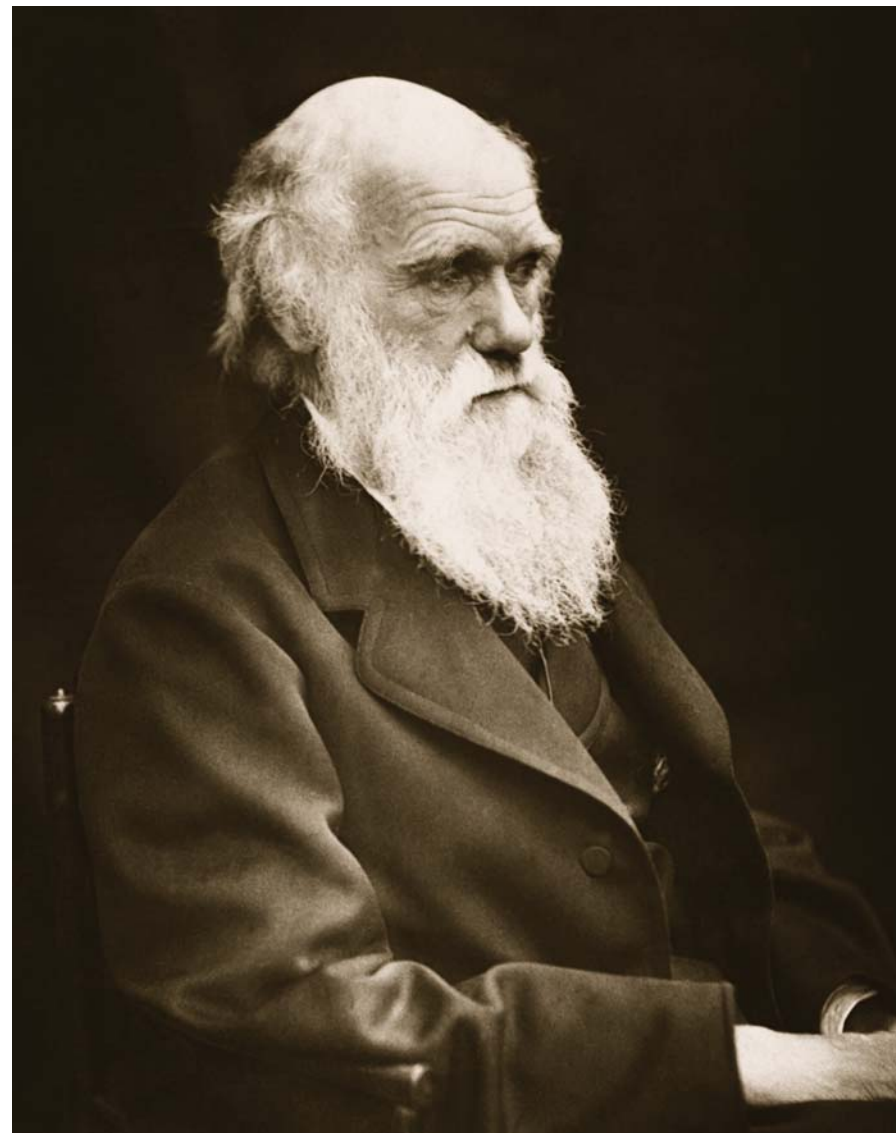
Perhaps there were worms in the fruit bin, worms in the butter dish, worms in the potato salad, worms in the small bowl of snow peas that I'd just brought in from the garden. The snow peas. The pods are so crisp and sweet that usually I eat them as fast as I pick them, with little to bring into the house. Snow peas grown in soil that had passed through the guts of many earthworms many times, soil made rich and vital by earthworm excrement. I opened the refrigerator and inspected. "Nope, I think it was just that one worm that got loose." I plucked the runaway from my daughter's plate and dropped it in the box with the other worms.

I turned to set the box back in the refrigerator but stopped. Why feed

these fine worms to the fish at Branched Oak Lake when I have a garden that needs to be aerated and fertilized? It was time for another rescue. We took the fish bait box to the backyard and dumped the pink wrigglers in the garden where they belonged. Darwin would have approved. ■



Lisa Knopp is a teacher and writer who lives in Lincoln.



Charles Darwin (1809-1882) in his later years. Photo by J. Cameron, 1869.

WOOD ENGRAVINGS OF THE PAST

By Rocky Hoffmann



Precursors to today's photojournalism practices, woodblock engravings brought to life (and readers across the world) many aspects of early Nebraska life that otherwise would have remained virtually unknown.

Likely the most romantic, colorful and appealing era of American history involved the century-long epoch of settling the West. Beginning with the incredible journey of Lewis and Clark, the 19th century produced countless adventures that included two wars between Americans, rushes for gold and for land, oxcarts and railcars, the first, last and celebrated hunts of the nation's

great bison herds, gunslingers, hangings, the Wild West Show, forts, Indians, and dirt farmers contending with prairie fires, floods and blizzards.

Relatively few individuals of the world's population experienced firsthand any part of this remarkable sequence of events. Instead, most remained comfortable in the more civilized habitations of America's seaboard cities and Western Europe.

Swollen with curiosity, however, these armchair crusaders of the westward-ho movement hungered for news of the American campaign to "conquer the frontier."

Newspapers flourished, and editors scrambled for news. Many upstart periodicals hit the city stands, and Old West novelettes competed ruthlessly for readership. Prior to mid-century, the daring acts of heroes and outlaws alike could only be captured by descriptive and imaginative text writers. Their flamboyant and over-dramatic depictions of frontier events oftentimes excessively stretched the truth. The term "a photo is worth a thousand words" must have originated from one of those writers when photojournalism arrived late in the 19th century. Although photography was being used to capture images in the west somewhat earlier in the century, the production of the photo image for mass publication would not be possible for several more years.

Until that time, artists produced line drawings based on photo images. Other artists of equal talent then produced woodblock engravings of the line art, which were used to print the images onto newsprint. Not all line drawings, however, were based on photographic images. Many drawings were produced only from descriptive text, allowing the artist free rein on interpretation of

ARTHUR BOYD HOUGHTON, THE GRAPHIC



ARTHUR BOYD HOUGHTON

Houghton's first Nebraska illustration "Coasting in Omaha" in 1870.

"facts." If American history were based wholly on the depictions of 19th century illustrators, accuracy, most certainly, would be called into question.

A few of the larger and more profitable journals, such as *Harper's Weekly*, *A Journal of Civilization*, *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing*, *Leslie's Illustrated* and the London-based *The Graphic*, hired illustrators, who were dispatched directly into the action to draw events firsthand based on their observations. As the result of such aggressive journalism, papers with a strong staff of artists rose head and shoulders above the rest. The *Illustrated London News*, for example, was the leading paper in Western Europe for more than a quarter century.

Its eventual complacency with success, however, led to a challenge by *The Graphic*, a new paper in town. In 1869, W. L. Thomas, the head engraver from *The London News*, broke ranks and began publishing *The Graphic*. Thomas was an opportunistic, highly skilled wood-engraver who sensed the lack of competition in the European news market, and formed the startup paper.

At one time, *The Graphic* employed nearly a dozen illustrators that accounted for the newspaper's success. It described itself to advertisers as "a superior illustrated weekly newspaper, containing twenty-four pages imperial folio, printed on fine toned paper of beautiful quality, made expressly for the purpose and admirably adapted for the display of engravings." Many of

Arthur Boyd Houghton's "Indians in North America – Pawnee Squaws" appeared in *The Graphic*, a London newspaper, on February 22, 1873.

The Graphic artists eventually gained fame for their inspiring, clever and often action-packed drawings. The paper was immediately recognized throughout Europe and in America, and its illustrators became highly celebrated.

One such artist was Arthur Boyd Houghton. Houghton was born in India in 1836 and lived a short but interesting life, dying in England at age 39. Known early on for his oil and watercolors, he later became a highly sought-after news illustrator. He traveled east and west for *The Graphic*, creating illustrations from Russia to America. His illustrations were also



“Bartering with Indians” appeared April 1871 in *The Graphic*. The location was the Indian Agency between Genoa and Fullerton.

found in books, most notably *The Arabian Nights* and *Don Quixote*. Houghton’s foreign news drawings were rushed back to the engravers at *The Graphic* who cut the images into wooden blocks for printing.

Wood engravers, unlike the illustrators from which they worked, have become a forgotten lot of artists whose masterful work made it possible for any illustration to be sent to a large readership. After transferring the original art in reverse

onto the end grain of a wooden block, the engraver, with an assortment of engraving tools known as burnishing tools, painstakingly cut the lines of the art into the block. Ink was applied to the block, much like the printed type blocks, and then pressed onto the paper, producing a replica of the original art (print) on every copy of the paper going to press.

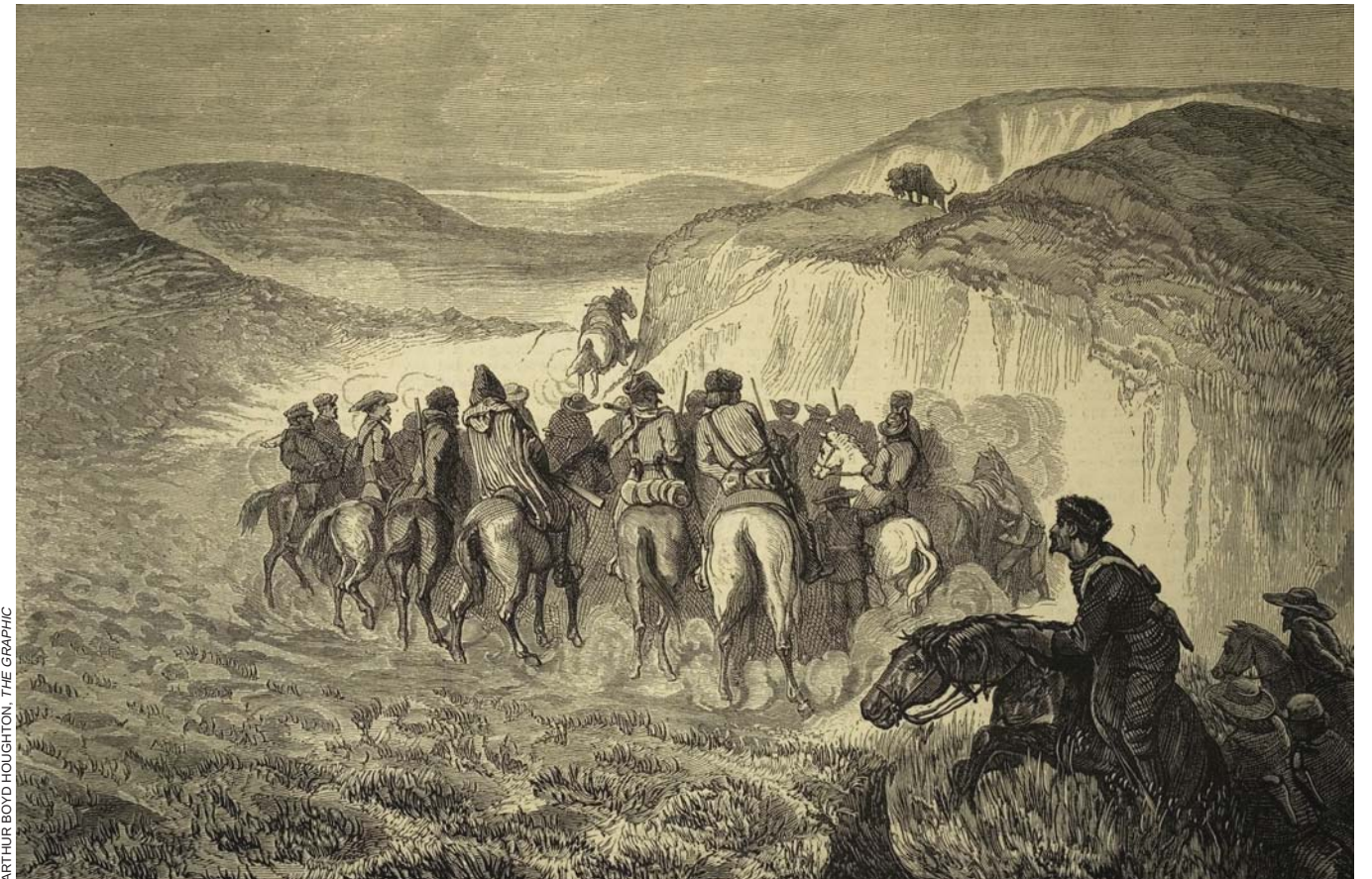
Sadly, most of the original illustrations have been lost, as they were likely damaged during the transfer process, and the engraved woodblocks have also disappeared. Although newspapers retained some of the blocks as generic

engravings that could be used again for similar illustrative needs, others were likely discarded or used to stoke the wood stove in the engraver’s studio. When photo printing became available, most of the engraved woodblocks were discarded.

Surviving, however, are the printed illustrations clipped directly from the newspapers. This may seem somewhat surprising to those familiar with modern print. Laying today’s newspaper anywhere in the direct or indirect path of the sun’s rays will turn it yellow in a very short period of time and cause rapid deterioration. But that’s the fate of today’s paper, a highly acidic, wood pulp-based product which has an acid content that produces a self-destructive mix with sunlight. In the 19th century, the paper that was used to produce printed pages was cotton-based and non-acidic. Much to the delight of collectors, artwork from early papers sustained the test of time and are well preserved.

Major collections of illustrative art are found around the world. Both personal collectors and museums have established a value for this form of era art. Contributing to the salvation of news illustrations were public libraries and the development of microfiche. Until the process evolved where entire newspapers could be preserved on small filmstrips or negative plates, libraries kept bulky inventories of every edition of major papers. When micro-storage was perfected, libraries happily sold their print files for the ton price of paper. Clever purchasers clipped the art and tossed the rest.

Houghton’s art has been well collected and is of particular relevance to this article because a lot of his illustrations were based on Nebraska events. After arriving in New York Harbor in 1869 on an emigrant ship, Houghton spent the rest of that year illustrating life in the big city for *The Graphic*. In early January of 1870, Houghton boarded a train and headed west to fulfill his life ambition. Still curious if the exciting tales he had heard and read about while back in England were fact or fiction, his goal was to illustrate the adventures of the new frontier. The railroad had



connected the Atlantic and Pacific oceans just months earlier and Nebraska had been a state for only three years. By passenger train, it took him nearly two weeks to travel from New Jersey to Omaha. In late-January, while sitting in his Pullman car waiting to depart Omaha Station for Clarks, Nebraska, he was caught up in a snowy scene of children sledding down a slope in a park near Farnam Street. The experience resulted in his first Nebraska illustration, *Coasting in Omaha*.

At Clarks, Houghton got off the train and traveled to Nance County near Genoa, where he stayed for a time at the Pawnee Agency on Beaver Creek, recording native life and rituals in his sketches. The Pawnee liked Houghton and rewarded him with a ceremonial farewell feast. At the conclusion of the feast, he shared the pipe of peace with Pawnee elders and illustrated the event that appeared in *The Graphic* on November 4, 1871.

Europeans were keenly interested in stories about Native Americans, and one of Houghton’s first Nebraska illustrations appeared in *The Graphic*

in April of 1871. Titled, “*Bartering with Indians*,” Houghton sketched a transaction at the Indian Agency between Genoa and Fullerton. His interest in Native Americans was revisited in future illustrations. In 1873, *The Graphic* published Houghton’s “*Indians of North America – Pawnee Women*,” titled inappropriately for today’s standards of acceptance.

Buffalo Bill Cody led the hunt that produced this scene between McCook and North Platte. Titled “*The First Buffalo*,” this artwork appeared in *The Graphic* in July 1871.

Below: “*Carrying the Mail*” depicted either the Platte or North Platte River.

Several of Houghton’s illustrations appeared in *The Graphic* from 1871 through 1873. On July 29, 1871,





Harper's illustrators Jules Tavernier and Paul Frenzeny created this large and complicated piece titled "Indian Sun Dance, Proving Their Endurance by Self Torture."

The Graphic printed a 6-by-9 inch wood engraving of Houghton's "The First Buffalo," which depicts an event south of Lincoln County after his earlier stay with the Pawnee in Nance County. "The First Buffalo" illustrates his hunting party as they spot a herd bull on a Hayes County canyon bank. Buffalo Bill Cody guided the hunt,

which was arranged for Houghton by General Phil Sheridan. Ironically, only six months after The Graphic ran the illustration, Cody guided the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia on a buffalo hunt near Hayes Center, a hunt which historians have labeled the last great buffalo hunt.

On July 29, 1871, The Graphic printed another 6-by-9 Houghton illustration of a situation that he had captured on either the Platte River or North Platte River near North Platte. "Carrying the Mail" indicated there

was adventure in almost all aspects of frontier life, including such mundane activities as delivering letters. It also revealed just how important letters from home were to the pioneers.

On March 9, 1873, Houghton's work revisited Bill Cody in a rare portrayal of the young Cody before public fame. Titled "On the Scout," the 24-year-old plainsman is depicted crossing a stream near North Platte by balancing on a tree branch. Few Houghton illustrations are available after that, as he soon returned to England, where he died two

years later.

In 1857, New Yorker Fletcher Harper launched Harper's Weekly, an offshoot of Harper's Monthly, which went to press in 1850. Harper had become aware of the tremendous success in Britain of London Illustrated News. His monthly addition of Harper's was such a success that the weekly-illustrated edition was an obvious choice. In three years the circulation of Harper's Weekly had reached 200,000 subscribers, mostly due to its highly illustrative format and political innuendos.

Keeping illustration in the forefront, the journal hired Thomas Nast, who developed political caricature art and designed the donkey for the Democrat Party and the elephant for the Republican Party. He was also responsible for the design of Uncle Sam to represent the United States.

But Harper's had a long list of illustrators, two of whom were Jules Tavernier and Paul Frenzeny. One of their classic illustrations was titled "Indian Sun Dance, Proving Their Endurance by Self Torture." This was a

large and complicated illustration, measuring 13½-by-20½ inches and likely depicted a ceremony that took place at or near Fort Robinson in the Nebraska Panhandle. The illustration was so large that it covered the page fold of the newspaper and involved the engraving of three blocks of wood. When printed, an editing artist "stitched" the prints together. Close

"On the Scout" is a rare portrayal of a young Bill Cody before public fame hit. In it the 24-year-old is seen crossing a stream near North Platte by balancing on a tree branch.





“Shooting Antelopes from a Railroad Train in Colorado” likely depicted an area formerly in Nebraska Territory. Below: “The Overland Pony Express Station at Cheese Creek, Nebraska.”

examination reveals the presence of “stitch lines” in the printing. Frenzeny and Tavernier combined on another large piece of art titled “Shooting Antelopes from a Railroad Train in

Colorado,” which likely was depicting an area formerly in Nebraska Territory. In 1873, William M. Cary illustrated an antelope hunt on the high plains. Not much is known of Cary or where the illustration was originally published. Because of the unconventional technique employed in luring the antelope into gun range, the illustration has appeared in many modern texts.



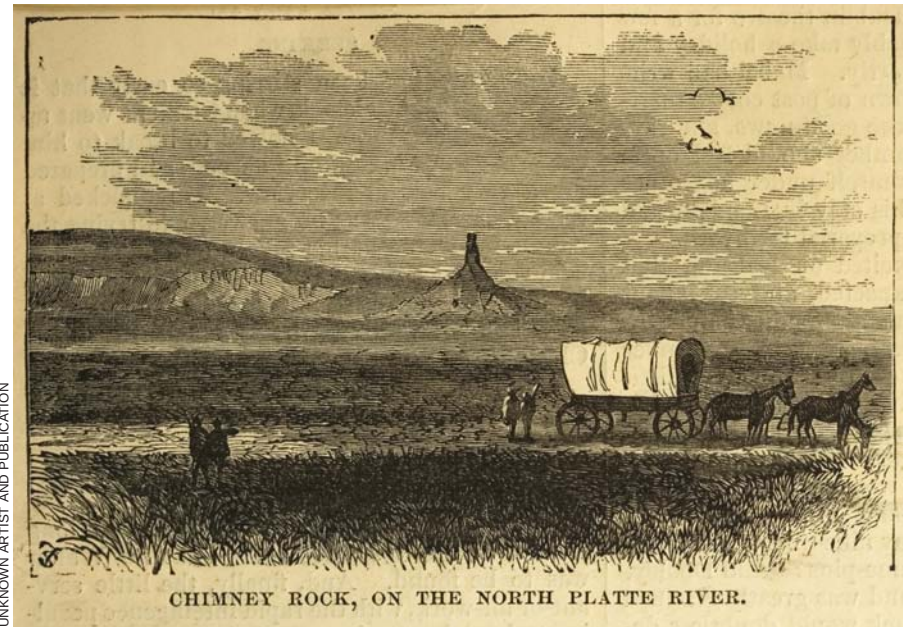
The drawing shows a hunter taking aim at an antelope in a small herd that has been enticed into range by the hunter’s partner lying on his back in the tall grass and peddling his feet in the air. We do know that the engraver was named Maurand and that he engraved Cary’s name in reverse when the art was transferred to the block.

Several works of art taken from the Nebraska plains have survived but are unclaimed by artists or publications. However, at one time they have been woodblock-engraved and printed. One is of “The Overland Pony Express Station at Cheese Creek, Nebraska.” Cheese Creek was one of the many supply posts located along the eastern Platte. Most road stores were noted in particular for specialty supplies and named for that product. Cheese Creek was no exception. Another unclaimed wood engraving is “Chimney Rock on the North Platte River.” Although a small illustration, it continues to reappear in many historical references.

It was through wood engravings that many of the West’s people and scenes were first introduced to the rest of the people of the world. How timely it was

that the mass printing of images developed during the expansion of America into a rugged, and sometimes ruthless, frontier. The drawings from a relative few talented illustrators shaped the perception of those events, in effect shaping history itself and establishing the groundwork for today’s photojournalists. ■

During the late 1970s, Gary Zaruba and Larry Peterson, University of Nebraska-Kearney professors of art, acquired a collection of 19th century wood and steel engravings of Plains Americana. Many were related to the Nebraska scene. The wood engravings depicted in this article were published in British and eastern American illustrated newspapers from the 1850s to the 1870s. Dr. Zaruba and Dr. Peterson, two of the founders of Kearney’s Museum of Nebraska Art (MONA) will display their 44-piece



collection by 18 individual artists at the museum from April 8 through August 17 in an exhibit titled “19th Century Images of Nebraska.” Following the exhibit, they will donate their entire collection to the museum.

Above: An unknown artist’s “Chimney Rock on the North Platte River.” Below: This engraving came from William M. Cary’s illustration of antelope hunters luring the herd into range by one lying on his back and peddling in the air with his feet.



RALPH KOHLER

legend of the outdoors

By Jon Farrar

It is unlikely any Nebraska waterfowl hunter can match the number of days Ralph Kohler of Tekamah has logged in a blind during the last 80 years.

He started hunting with his uncles when only 10 years old, when the Missouri River bordering Nebraska was not yet tamed by channelization, when live decoys were legal, when bluebills drifted downstream in rafts of hundreds. That was 80 years ago. He still hunts ducks and geese every day of the fall season, and in recent years in March when snow geese are legal game, but he rarely fires a shotgun. He has guided more than 50,000 hunters over 68 years. In 2006, he was the first person west of the Mississippi River to be inducted into the Legends of the Outdoors Hall of Fame. That same year, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission presented him with a certificate of achievement for his contribution to the state's wildlife resources. Without question he is the state's best-known waterfowl hunter. He is Ralph Kohler, a living legend.

Born in Chicago, Kohler was only 18 months old when his family moved to Tekamah to be near his mother's family after his father died. The loss was tragic, but the move set Kohler's path in life. His mother's three brothers (Max, Fredric "Manie" and Dennis "Skip" Saltzman) were river men who made their living hunting, fishing and trapping. "Their tolerance of my presence at a very young age could only be matched by my appreciation and love for them at a time I needed them most," Kohler wrote in the dedication to his 1995 book, *Born to Hunt*. The outdoors tradition had deep roots in Kohler's family. His great uncles, Jack and Bill Faulk, were prominent eastern Nebraska sportsmen in the late-1800s and early 1900s. They market hunted when it was still legal and later guided on an oxbow lake and wetlands east of present-day Fort Calhoun. Kohler seemed predestined

to carry on his family's love of the outdoors.

"Hunting was fast becoming the most important thing in my life," Kohler wrote of his youth. He was given a .410 shotgun damaged in a fire, repaired it and began striking out on his own on the Missouri River bottomland. "No sooner was I home from school than I would grab my gun and out

through the timber and down the hedgerows I would go, looking for new adventures," Kohler wrote. "Nothing could stop me, I had to go hunting."

"We lived about a mile and a half from the river," Kohler recalled in a 2007 interview. "I would go out and hit the main road. A right would take me to school. If I took a left, it took me to the river. I would look back and see if Mom was looking, and then, bingo, I was gone to the river."

The Missouri River was wide and sprawling in the 1920s, with sandbars, chutes, cutoffs and backwaters attracting waterfowl in now unimaginable diversity and numbers. When Kohler was 10 years old, his uncles initiated

him to waterfowl hunting on the river.

"The morning was bitter cold, with snow flurries driven by a thirty-mile-an-hour wind out of the north," Kohler recalled in his book. "We arrived near the river in the blackest part of the night." Skip and Manie fed the 50 call ducks held there in a pen, then crated the birds and loaded them in their boat. Both were concerned about crossing the channel in the storm, especially with the boy aboard.

"The waves were pounding against the sides [of the boat], rolling it back and forth, revealing the severity of the storm," Kohler continued. "There were two sets of oarlocks and both men would be needed to make the crossing to the sandbar blind. Progress was slow and there were times we were so



Ralph Kohler taught himself to call snow and Canada geese by mouth when he was a boy. He mouth called until one day in 1973, when the snow goose migration was peaking, and he lost his voice. He has not been able to mouth call since.



Kohler is in a pit on his manmade lake east of Tekamah every day of the hunting season, calling birds and the shot.



Kohler, right, was 13 years old when he posed for a photo with Carl Schoenburger, left, and his uncle, Max Saltzman. It was the first time Kohler was allowed to shoot one of his uncle's Remington automatic shotguns, which could hold nine shotshells.

close to the bank the oars would tangle with debris that had washed ashore The slightest mistake could mean disaster The squeaking of the oars was becoming increasingly louder as the wind and current carried us downstream We had hit the full impact of the storm and were being pushed onward, nearly out of control."

The terror of Kohler's first boat ride in the dark was quickly forgotten as the magic of the river and its waterfowl unfolded in the dim predawn light. "Then there was a roar of wings. Even above the raging wind I could hear them. 'Bluebills,' said my uncle, 'looks like it's going to be a great day.'" The young Kohler's first chance to shoot was at decoying mallards, "hundreds of mallards, some of them so close I could almost touch them." On that day, Kohler's uncles began parceling out river lore and waterfowl hunting secrets to the young boy. Often their teaching was oblique, encouraging Kohler to learn by observing, answering his question if a flock of ducks would decoy by telling him to watch the ducks closely and "they will tell you what you need to know." Kohler absorbed it like a sponge.

"There were times the river would be a mile wide," Kohler said of his early years on the Missouri, "beautiful white sandbars. Down where my uncle hunted ... it made a great

big bend and there was a huge sandbar. It was, oh, a 50-acre sandbar out there. When the migration was on you could see pretty near any species sitting on that big bar. My God, those bluebills would get in that shallow water along the edge, and it was just like another whole big bar. I've seen that when it was real windy when the flight was on. The whole day, anytime you looked up, there'd be rafts of those bluebills floating down the river, 500 or 600 in a raft ... and they'd be flying six feet off the water. They would float about so long and then pretty soon they would get up and here they would come out over the water. I never, ever, ever will forget it. It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw."

In his youth, Kohler learned to call snow and Canada geese by mouth by listening to the birds during spring migration. "Just as young as I can remember, I'd be laying out on a sandbar or in the fields in the spring, watching those geese and hollering at 'em, and I just kept hollering until I finally found what they liked," he recalled in a 1989 interview. "And I got to the point where I could be out in the field and if the geese got up and started away, I would have bet you a thousand dollars that I could call that bunch of geese back. I had so much confidence. Whatever I was doing, it was right. And for years and years and years, anybody that hunted with

me could tell you, I didn't think a snow goose could fly by. I really didn't. If he did, I knew somebody had just shot at him."

Kohler mouth called until October 19, 1973. That day he had a large group of hunters in his blinds, the snow goose migration was underway and the shooting exceptional, with 87 snow geese killed. "From the time that you could shoot 'til noon, I never let up. I got really hoarse that day, which I had many times before, and started losing my voice about noon. And from that day on I never could holler right any more. I just plain lost it. I couldn't get that real high pitch that I needed. It just vanished."

CHANGING TIMES

During the early years Kohler hunted with his uncles, they shot over live decoys – typically eight to 10 call geese and about 35 English call ducks.

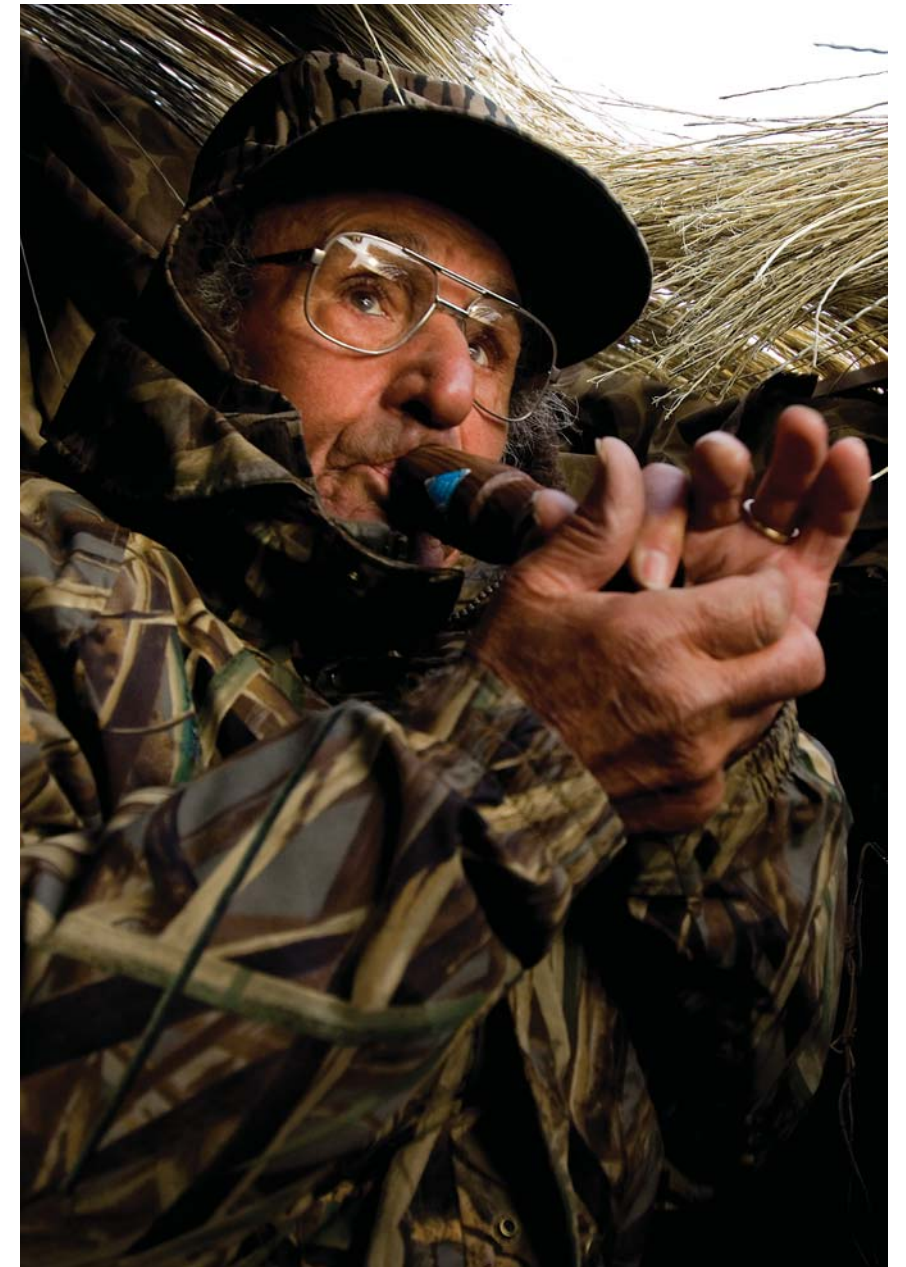
"The hens had a harness with a strap and you tied them," Kohler recalled. "The drakes, you just turned them loose. They'd stay right there, just swim around. On still days, when it was sunshiny, those drakes would kind of get in a ball and ... they'd be floating down and they'd be a nodding. Pretty soon they'd wake up and they'd be down there a hundred yards. And boy, boom, back up they'd come [to the hens]. We always had two flyers ... in the blind, and when the birds would be going by, you'd throw one up and if that didn't get the wild birds to decoy, you'd give them the next one. Usually the next one was it. It really worked."

Drought and depression during the 1930s brought many changes, including stringent waterfowl hunting regulations in response to plummeting waterfowl populations. In 1931, federal regulations prohibited shooting over more than 10 live call geese. The following year hunters could use no more than 25 live call ducks. The banning of all live call birds in 1935 sent waterfowlers scrambling for legal decoys.

"The early decoys were really crude," Kohler recalled. He remembered watching his uncles fashion duck decoys by tacking the head and wings from a mallard onto a two-by-four block attached to a lath with a sharpened end to push into the sandbar. They would use them "until they got to smelling bad. Then you got new ones." Kohler's uncle Max fashioned goose decoys by cutting off chunks of piling from the river, shaping bodies with a

small ax and attaching heads cut from one-by-four lumber. "He'd paint them. They were beautiful." Because each decoy weighed so much, they only used 11 or 12 to make a spread.

Kohler said decoys were also made from stovepipe split and spread over a block of wood with a head cutout attached. Kohler recalled a man coming to hunt with him one day, and when he saw the seven stovepipe decoys he said, "What in the world is that?" Kohler replied, "That's our decoys," to which the hunter said, "Well, you could never get anything to come to that." Kohler said during the next 15 minutes they shot seven geese. Surprisingly, Kohler never used floating decoys on the river, only "stake-outs" on the sandbars, and usually no more than nine. "If you had a good place, it didn't make any difference what you had for decoys," he said. "My idea about decoying birds, if you got a place ducks or geese want to come, they're easy, but if you got a place they don't like, then they're tough." Identifying



"I've got so many calls," Kohler said. "I don't know how many. I've got boxes of them. Everybody in the world has sent me a call."



Guide Lyle Bohannon's yellow Lab, Dutch, retrieves a Canada goose on a November 2007 hunt on Kohler's lake.

where ducks and geese wanted to be, perhaps as much as any of Kohler's waterfowling skills, has been the key to his decades of successful hunting.

Blinds and boats, like decoys, were utilitarian, homemade and inexpensive during the money-tight Depression years when Kohler hunted the Missouri River.

"When we would hunt out on a point of a bar in the middle of the river, we'd just use a willow blind, make a frame and push willows in around it," Kohler said. "We would go out there in August or September and pick out a bar where we wanted to hunt and stake some willows on it. That was a code. If you saw willows on a sandbar, boy, you left it alone, because somebody had that marked. As the time came to hunt, then you would put a permanent blind in. But when we got over in the mouth of the chute, we dug into that high bank. We'd dig a pit and square it off and put the willow frame out in front, then take sweet clover after it was dead and weave it all in there and maybe use some canvas inside. We'd be pretty comfortable."

The redwood boats used by Kohler's uncles were made by Allen Schmidt, another of Ralph's uncles, and were similar to those used up and down the Missouri River during the early 1900s. Kohler remembers his uncle's being 18 feet long and 72 inches wide at the top, sloping down to a 48-inch wide bottom. "They weighed a ton," Kohler recalled, but were large enough to carry four or five hunters and decoys.

"We'd get up at 3 o'clock in the morning and cross that river in the pitch dark," Kohler recalled. "It would be so dark you couldn't see three feet ahead of you, but we just pointed the boat up the current and knew where we were going. When we first started to hunt over there we had to take our decoys over and bring them back, but after we learned the people around us, we just got to leaving them over there. On like a three-mile stretch, there may be only four or five blinds."

"The current was usually so swift out there," Kohler continued. "It was a big river. Crossing that first chute wasn't so bad, but after that you would get into the main channel Most of the time there were two uncles and two sets of oars and they would go pretty good. My uncle Manie, oh God, how he could row those boats. That's an art. I can still hear those old oarlocks squeaking. When they would get to squeaking fast, you knew you were in big trouble. I didn't understand what we were doing and it didn't make any difference, they were going and I was with them." Kohler first saw an outboard motor on the Missouri River in about 1930. Kohler's first was a nine-horsepower Johnson in the early 1940s.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers first channelized the Missouri River on Nebraska's eastern border in the 1930s to deepen the channel for barge traffic and to create jobs during the Depression. But the pile dikes and stone revetments were

no match for the floods of the 1940s and early 1950s. Not until heavy equipment and massive dredges were used in the early 1950s, and upstream dams closed, was channelization of the Missouri River really accomplished. Until that time the Missouri was essentially a wild and often treacherous river. Kohler recalled a huge whirlpool just below a clay point on the river about a mile above where he hunted. "Lots of people would drive out there on Sunday just to see it. You would see trees come around that point, then they would turn right up on end and you would never see them again. Great big trees. Oh, it was amazing."

DEPRESSION YEARS

Many young men quit school to work and help support their families during the Depression years. Kohler quit when he was 12 years old to work, and he had an additional reason – so he could spend more time hunting on the river. Most of the year he strung together part-time jobs, and in the autumn worked for his uncle Skip hunting and trapping.

Waterfowl hunting was a passion for Kohler, but in his mid-teens another passion appeared – girls, so long as they did not interfere with his time on the river. Then, as now, a car was essential for a boy to properly court. Kohler saved five or six dollars to make a down payment on a Model T Ford that Skip was selling. He paid off the \$10 balance whenever he had a dollar or two to spare. Kohler recalled hearing Skip, a bachelor, joke about watching the "noon flight" of girls on their lunch breaks on Tekamah's main street. While watching the "after-school flight" one day, Kohler met "a very attractive young lady" named Dorothy Redding. At the time Kohler was working part time in a machine shop, "barely making enough to support my Model T." Kohler started working full time and soon received a raise, from \$9 a week to \$12, working 11-hour days, six days a week. In 1935, just before Dorothy's family moved to Colorado, Ralph and Dorothy married.

Kohler continued taking time off during the hunting season to help Skip, working overtime at the machine shop after the season closed to make up for the lost income. With the arrival of their first child, Kohler could no longer leave his job for most of the hunting season, but still was on the river on Sundays and "flight days." Kohler had a natural aptitude for machine shop work, and in 1938 struck out on his own, opening the Kohler Welding and Machine Shop. Supporting a growing family and starting a new business made hunting difficult. "I still loved to hunt but there was a problem, you know, we were raising a family and everything," Kohler recalled. "If I took a day off to hunt, I felt guilty about it."

In 1939 or 1940, Kohler received a phone call that changed his life. A group of Des Moines hunters wanted to know if Kohler would guide them waterfowl hunting on the Missouri River. "I just jumped at the chance," Kohler said. "I

hunted on the river with them for two days. And they said, 'Well, we'd like to come back every Monday and Tuesday for the rest of the season.' The first thing you know, I got a group that came on Wednesday, then I had a bunch of doctors on Thursday." Before long, Kohler had hunters coming every day of the week. Kohler's machine shop was also growing, with 13 full-time employees who kept the business humming during the 60 or so days each fall he was guiding on the river. Still, Kohler was spending many nights in the shop after long days on the river.

By the mid-1950s, channelization of the Missouri River along Nebraska's eastern border was mostly complete. "The big sand bars that had provided resting privileges for all wildlife were gone," Kohler wrote in his book. "The channel was swift and deep and few hunting spots remained. The good hunting spots were being eliminated at an alarming rate." And, with upstream dams in place, the Army Corps of Engineers controlled the river flows. "It was frustrating to hunt under the high bank one day and the next be in the middle



During the 1940s and early-1950s, Kohler, right, guided waterfowl hunters on the Missouri River. Once the river was channelized he moved to a manmade lake.

of the river hunting on a sandbar." If Kohler was to keep on guiding hunters, he had to make a change. "When I moved off the river," Kohler said, "that was just about the end of the hunting there. It was just a narrow gut. I could see it coming for several years." Once again he rolled the dice.

COMMERCIAL HUNTING

With the end of waterfowl hunting on the Missouri River in sight, Kohler approached a landowner about purchasing a tract of land on the floodplain. "The farm where we lived when I was a child was about two miles west of our river blind," Kohler wrote. "I had watched the major migration of ducks and geese fly over it for many years and admit the thoughts of building a lake on some of the low ground did occur. Water would stand in some parts of it year-round,



Kohler has built and hunted over three different shallow lakes on the Missouri River floodplain, all near where he lived as a boy. He uses few decoys during the fall when hunting Canada geese and mallards, relying more on being in a place waterfowl want to be.

making excellent habitat.” In 1956, Kohler purchased the 60 acres he wanted and began building dikes to create a shallow lake. A 10-inch irrigation pump was installed so he would always have water, and blinds built and set in place. “It was probably the first manmade lake for hunting in the state,” Kohler said. “I was scared to death about it, not knowing if the hunting would justify the venture.” A day before goose season opened that fall, Kohler was adding final touches to the blinds, listening to the World Series on a transistor radio, and his concern was whisked away. “For one moment, I thought I heard the call of a goose,” Kohler wrote. “I waited. Then I heard it again, not one but many more and they sounded excited. Again there was silence. Then, as if a spotlight hit them, directly over me were about two hundred snow and blue geese with wings cupped, settling down from an unbelievable height. Down, down they came until all were settled in the lake. They wasted no time in starting to drink and feed on the tender millet.” That hunting season was the beginning of 30 years of unparalleled snow goose hunting, a species Kohler seldom had the opportunity to shoot during his years on the river. Snow geese would make his reputation as a commercial hunter. “It’s really funny, because during October, somewhere the middle of October, we’d have a rainy night and you could hear the snows and blues going over, and it would be very

possible the next day you’d get into a bunch or two, but that was it,” Kohler recalled of his years hunting the river. It was unusual to shoot snow geese, more common to shoot Canadas. “And it just seemed like they were waiting for us to build that lake.” Over the years, Kohler built three different lakes for waterfowl hunting. Eventually he returned to his first lake. Kohler’s success did not go unnoticed – today the bottomland where Kohler has hunted for more than 50 years is dotted with other commercial and private hunting setups. Hunting a lake was dramatically different than a river, but Kohler made adjustments. He quickly discovered that more decoys were required to lure the large flocks of snow geese out of the sky. A big problem for Kohler was finding good-looking decoys that would hold up being used day after day. Unlike most waterfowl hunters, Kohler possessed the skills to design and make what he needed. In 1957, Kohler and a longtime hunting companion began manufacturing decoys.

K&W DECOYS

“A friend of mine, Monte West, he loved to hunt the same as me,” Kohler recalled. “And we were always belly achin’ about the kind of decoys you had to tolerate and this and that, so we just got talking about it one fall, and I said to Monte, ‘Listen, after hunting season is over why don’t you come over and we’ll talk about this.’ We made the pattern ... and took it to a foundry in Omaha. We were going to have

them make the mold, and they wanted \$40,000 just for one part of it. We came home and were just about ready to kick it in the pants, you know. I said, ‘Monte, I think we can make them in the shop.’ We started small with it and the first thing you know we just went ahead and made all the molds and the dies and the whole thing.” Kohler and West used 1/8-inch-thick forming board with 40 percent resin, making the decoys tough and durable. When steamed, the board became pliable and could be formed in decoy molds with a 200-ton press. The body halves and head-neck halves were stapled together and the seam covered with gauze using a water-resistant adhesive. The decoys were spray painted using templates. There was no hand painting, a good way to distinguish an original K&W from a repainted decoy. See the April 2008 issue of *NEBRASKAland* for more on K&W decoys. K&W’s 1958 promotional brochures stated: “This high tensile forming board has a bursting strength of over five hundred pounds per square inch. Thus making the Decoys light, durable, steadfast in the heaviest wind. The Decoys are made in halves and reinforced on

the inside with 1/8-inch steel pipe frame. The feet are stamped from 18-gauge sheet steel and the legs are made from 1/4-inch steel rods. The complete Decoy with steel feet weighs 3 3/4 pounds. These Decoys are made to last and with normal use they should last the average hunter a lifetime.” They were sold with either a steel rod H-frame (\$64 per dozen) or with realistic feet (\$78 per dozen). K&W manufactured Canada geese in three models – a large Canada with several head positions, a small Canada painted on a snow goose body, and the Mae West version with an oversized breast; both white- and blue-phase snow geese; a field mallard and a mallard floater. All are collectible today, particularly if in good condition with original paint. The rarest are the Mae West and the floating mallard, because so few were manufactured. Only 200 mallard floaters were made because Kohler and West could not find a way to permanently seal the two halves. The success of K&W decoys proved there was a market for durable, high-end decoys, but in 1962 Kohler and West closed the business. “Operating a large and busy machine shop, overseeing the decoy business and the commercial hunting in the fall was just too much,” Kohler said. “After four years of that, Dorothy said, ‘Hey, I’d like to get acquainted with you again.’” All the equipment was sold to Art Johnson in Bridgeport, but he did not start manufacturing the decoys under the K&W name until 1968. Johnson discontinued making the decoys after five years. Kohler continued to hunt over his own decoys, mostly rejects not good enough to sell, until the late-1980s, when he started receiving phone calls from collectors wanting to buy them.

CHANGING MIGRATION

Kohler’s hunters had good success, particularly on snow geese, during the 1960s and 1970s, the season kill rising to nearly 700. By 1980, though, refuges along the flyway were altering snow goose migration patterns, and the size of migrating flocks continued to increase. Kohler said that during the 1970s, 200 snow geese was a large migrating



Carl Marhenke has hunted with Kohler for 38 years, guiding in recent years. Phones are usually busy in Kolher’s pits, mostly calls from hunters wishing they were there.



Since 1956, Kohler has kept a detailed field diary of every day he hunts. It is perhaps the most comprehensive record of duck and goose migration through Nebraska over the last 50 years. Kohler's notes have been computerized for easy access to specific information.

flock. Once they began using the refuges, flocks numbered in the thousands, and they became increasingly difficult to decoy.

“When I started the commercial hunting operation on the lake,” Kohler said, “the snows and blues would start coming anywhere around the 15th of September, and by the 25th they were coming to beat hell. By the 10th of October it was usually over. Back in the late ‘50s and all during the ‘60s and early ‘70s, we were killing 50 to 75 geese a day on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October. Then the migration got later. By about ‘83, ‘84 and ‘85, you always figured three days would be the main push, about the 26th, 27th and 28th of October. And by the end of the ‘80s, November 6th, 7th and 8th was about the peak.” Kohler’s success on snow geese declined dramatically during the 1980s, and in recent years few snow geese have been shot from Kohler’s pits during the fall migration.

Kohler attributes the decline in autumn snow geese hunting success to several factors, the foremost being the establishment of federal and state wildlife refuges along their migration

BORN TO HUNT



Ralph Kohler

route in the Central Flyway and managing those refuges to hold enormous numbers of birds by providing water and grain in the fields. There was little reason for the geese to leave the refuges and they became less vulnerable to hunters on private land.

Since the mid-1980s, Kohler’s hunters have been shooting more Canadas than snows during the fall season, a reflection of both the change in snow goose migration patterns and the increase of Canada geese resulting from restoration programs in the Great Plains. Kohler’s hunters also average about 1,200 mallards during the fall season.

With hunters bagging fewer birds, the mid-continent population of lesser snow geese mushroomed during the 1980s and 1990s, growing so rapidly they were destroying the Arctic grounds they and other species required for nesting. Refuges such as DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge, near where Kohler hunts, began leaving less grain in their fields to force snow geese to leave the refuge, making them more vulnerable to hunters during the fall migration. While successful to a degree, the ever-adaptive snow geese began marshalling in large numbers in Saskatchewan and Manitoba in south-central Canada, where hunting pressure is lighter. They linger there until pushed south by winter storms and migrate in massive flocks directly to southern wintering

grounds, flying over Nebraska with little more than a glance down. “The kill has gone down ever since we quit getting those early migrations,” Kohler said. “It seems like the longer they stay up north, the tougher they are to decoy when they get here.”

Kohler’s long tradition of providing snow goose shooting for clients revived in 1995 with the first Light Goose Conservation Action, allowing snow goose hunting when birds are pushing north. Even though Kohler vowed to never shoot a bird migrating to its nesting grounds, he opened his pits for clients that March and has every year since. “Even though I don’t shoot,” he said, “I probably enjoy it more than anybody else there, I really do.”

KOHLER’S DAY BOOK

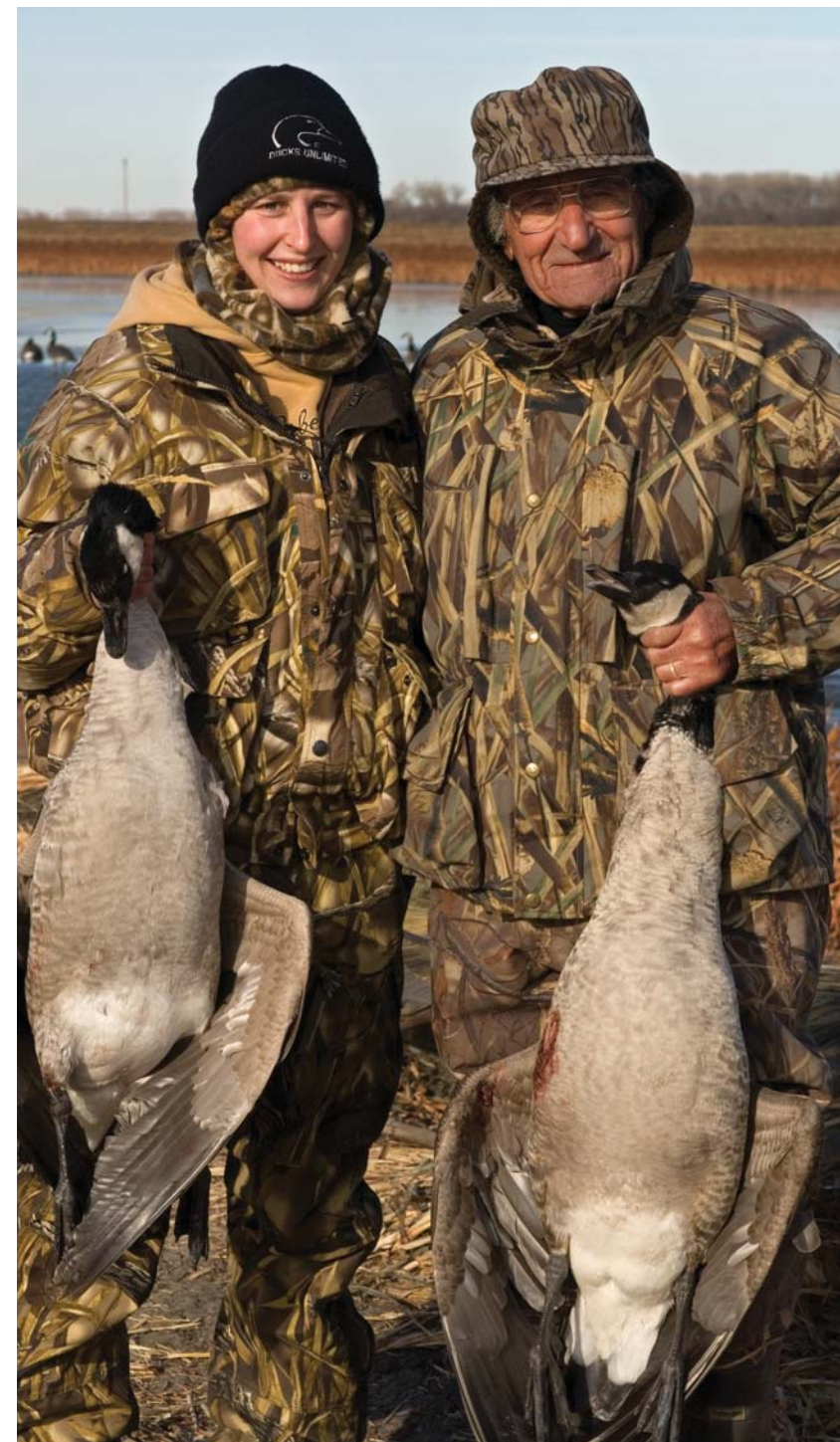
Kohler kept a field diary even before he started commercial hunting on his lake in 1956. Since 1956, he has not missed a day in the field without making notes, and they became more detailed, recording weather conditions, moon phase, wind direction and velocity, number of hunters, number of flocks by species, number of flocks decoyed, number of birds in the flock, time of day flocks seen and decoyed and the kill each day by species. His decades of records also track the rise and fall of waterfowl populations. It is probably the most complete record of the waterfowl migration through Nebraska during the last 50 years, and documents the changing snow goose migration particularly well. Since the mid-1980s, Kohler’s friend and hunting companion, Scott Houston, has entered Kohler’s information into a computer program at the end of each season so specific information could be easily accessed. At a glance the best shooting winds and weather can be pinpointed, even the most likely time of the day for geese to decoy – 9:23 a.m., 10:17 a.m., 12:08 p.m., 3:10 p.m. and 4:25 p.m. “It is uncanny how accurate these times can be,” Kohler wrote in his book. “Keeping that day book is just as important to me as it is going out there in the morning.”

Kohler reached his 90th birthday in January, and will celebrate his 73rd year of marriage to Dorothy in September. He was in his hunting pit orchestrating the shooting last fall, and no doubt will be when the snow geese return this month. While his days of shooting are essentially over, his desire to hunt has not diminished. “I’ll never, never grow tired of it. I come out just like a stallion every morning. I get out there, that crisp north wind is ablowing, and the blue sky and those white puffy clouds, even if you don’t shoot, you’ve had a good day. You look up and there’s 100 mallards coming. Give them a call and they stall out, and in the next 10 seconds, you’re picking up your birds.”

Kohler never took a shotgun to the blinds in 2006 or 2007. In the years before he only shot occasionally when Canadas or whitefronts decoyed. “I just don’t feel I have to shoot any more. The year I built that first

lake, a good friend told me, ‘Ralph, there will come a time in your life, I know how you like to shoot, but you won’t want to shoot anymore.’ I said, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’ But he was right. That time is here. I haven’t shot a duck for years. I just haven’t. I’ve shot my share. But I never miss a day being out there.” ■

Ralph Kohler’s book, **Born to Hunt**, is available for \$27.95 plus \$2.70 shipping and handling. Order by mail from Ralph Kohler, 820 Q St., Tekamah, NE 68061. Note if you want the book signed and inscribed.



Holly Olson of Oakland is a regular hunter in Kohler’s pits. Many hunters have come to hunt with Kohler for decades, something of an annual pilgrimage to hunt with a legend.

Leucistic Cranes

Rare, But Hard to Miss



Two leucistic sandhill cranes fly among a flock of normally colored cranes near Fort Kearny State Historical Park last March.

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

Sighting a whooping crane along the Platte River in the spring is a rare event. Last spring, however, something perhaps even rarer was seen: a pair of sandhill cranes that appeared to be albinos.

The pair was two of six sandhill cranes spotted in central Nebraska last spring that were white or partially white rather than the normal light gray and brown. None of the six were totally absent of pigment, meaning they weren't truly albinos. All retained

pigment in their beaks, skin and eyes, as well as some of their feathers, including the trademark red crown. Commonly, yet erroneously, referred to as partial albinos, the birds actually had a condition known as leucism, an inherited disorder that reduces the transfer of melanin to their feathers, leaving them colorless.

Only six known cases of leucism among the 500,000 or so cranes that visit the Platte in the spring makes the condition "rarer than hen's teeth," joked Gary Lingle, an avian ecologist with AIM, an environmental consulting firm that, among other things, monitors

endangered whooping cranes during the spring and fall migration.

"The really unusual thing was the fact that the pair, from all behavioral observations, were siblings," Lingle said. "Two surviving offspring from the same nest are rare to begin with, but for them both to be leucistic? I think that's probably unprecedented. In fact, I'd stick my neck out and say there are no other published records of leucistic siblings. That's extremely rare."

At least one leucistic sandhill crane shows up in the region each year, sometimes two or three. The six last year were the most Lingle has seen in



A close-up look at a leucistic sandhill crane reveals normal coloration in its legs and beak, as well as a touch of brown in its feathers. If the bird were a true albino, the legs and beak would be pink and the feathers pure white.

the 30 years he has monitored cranes. Most of the whooping cranes (237 were observed nationally in the 2006 winter survey) that migrate between Canada and Texas each spring and fall stop in Nebraska.

Leucistic cranes make Lingle's job difficult, as he has to fly the Platte River each morning during key migration periods to count whooping cranes. "They're problematic," Lingle said. "They both look like a white crane when you're flying in an airplane."

Size is one of the characteristics Lingle uses to sort out the two, but the difference is easier to see from the ground: Whooping cranes, at five feet the world's tallest bird, are one to two feet taller than sandhill cranes. Both birds have red caps, but whoopers add a black cheek patch. In flight, the whooping crane's black wingtips are a giveaway.

"Occasionally we get reports from the people seeing these (leucistic) birds and calling them in as whooping cranes," Lingle said. "When you see a white crane out there, that's the first

thing that comes to mind."

Researchers do their best to confirm sightings of whooping cranes. Because sandhill cranes tend to roost in the same reach of river each night and feed in the same area each day, researchers learn quickly which whooper reports are likely leucistic sandhills.

That fidelity to an area means it's

likely that if the pair of white siblings survived, they will be back again this spring. So if you want to see a rare sight, cruise the back roads around Fort Kearny State Historical Park and watch flocks coming to and leaving the stretch of Platte downstream from the Nebraska Highway 10 bridge. While rare, they are hard to miss. ■



Leucistic sandhill cranes are often mistakenly reported as whooping cranes. From a distance, the most easily recognizable difference between the two is size, as illustrated by this whooper feeding among sandhills in a cornfield south of Kearney last spring.

Winter's Breath

Text by Rocky Hoffman

Photos by Rocky Hoffmann and Eric Fowler

Trees, grass and an ice-laden Platte River sparkle under the rising sun following last year's late-December ice storm that hammered central Nebraska.

In December 2006, two powerful upper-level low pressure centers, one on December 19 and the other 10 days later, lifted across the desert Southwest and onto the central High Plains, each producing a strong, mid-latitude cyclone over much of south-central Nebraska. The rare results from these storms – up to four inches of ice on everything in their paths, followed by more than eight inches of snow – left a swath of destruction across the heart of the state. Although costly to infrastructure, its magical beauty could not be denied.

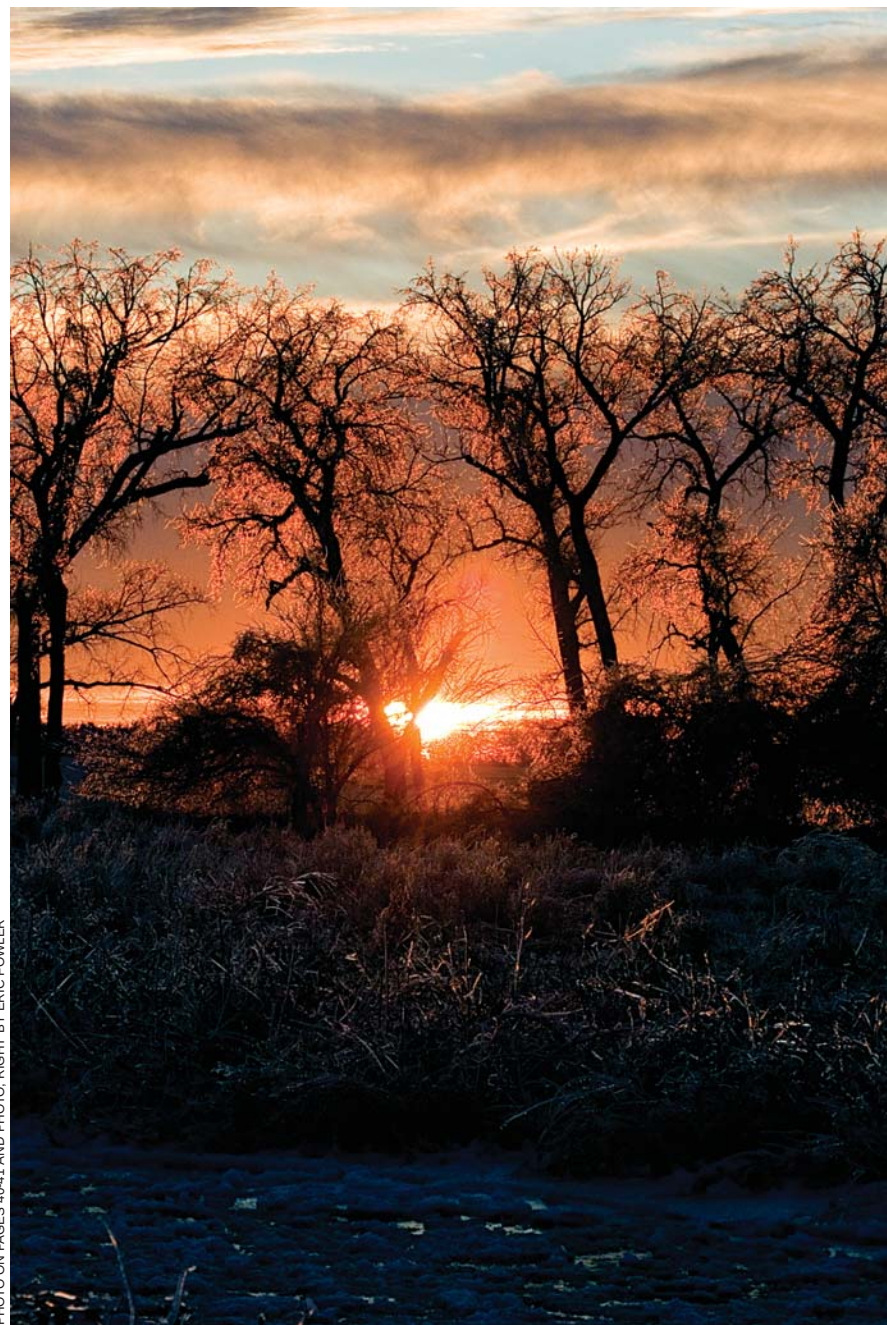


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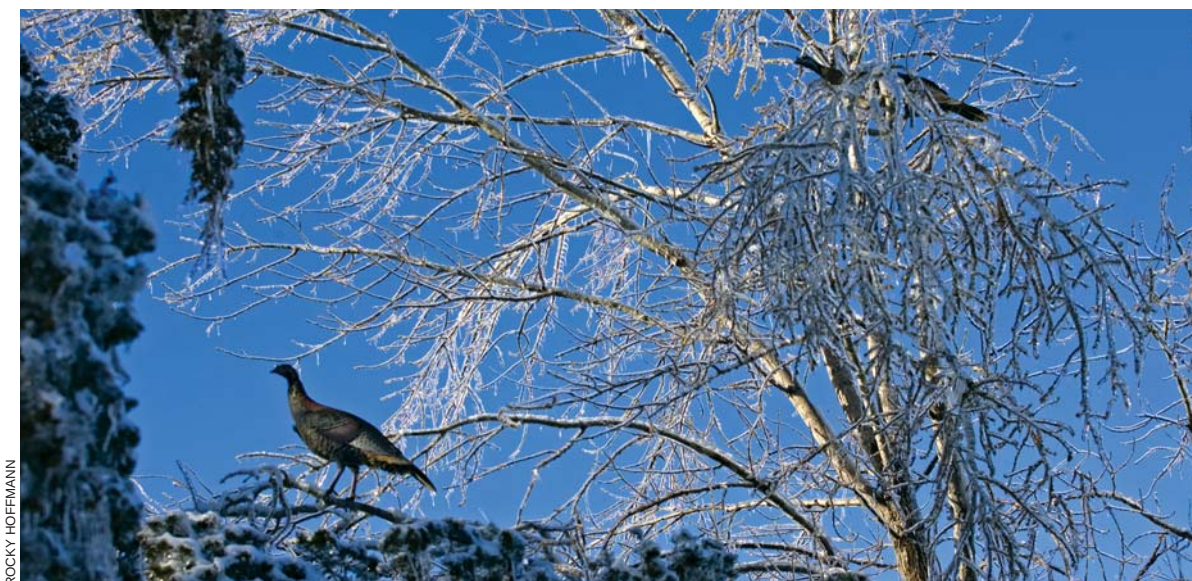


ROCKY HOFFMANN

LEFT: Ice-coated cottonwoods and grass along the Platte River near Grand Island reflect the warm glow of the sun peeking over the horizon.

ABOVE: Nature's barbs coat a spliced barbed-wire fence in southern Lincoln County.

RIGHT: Hen turkeys perch on glass-like treetops near Wellfleet.



ROCKY HOFFMANN



ERIC FOWLER



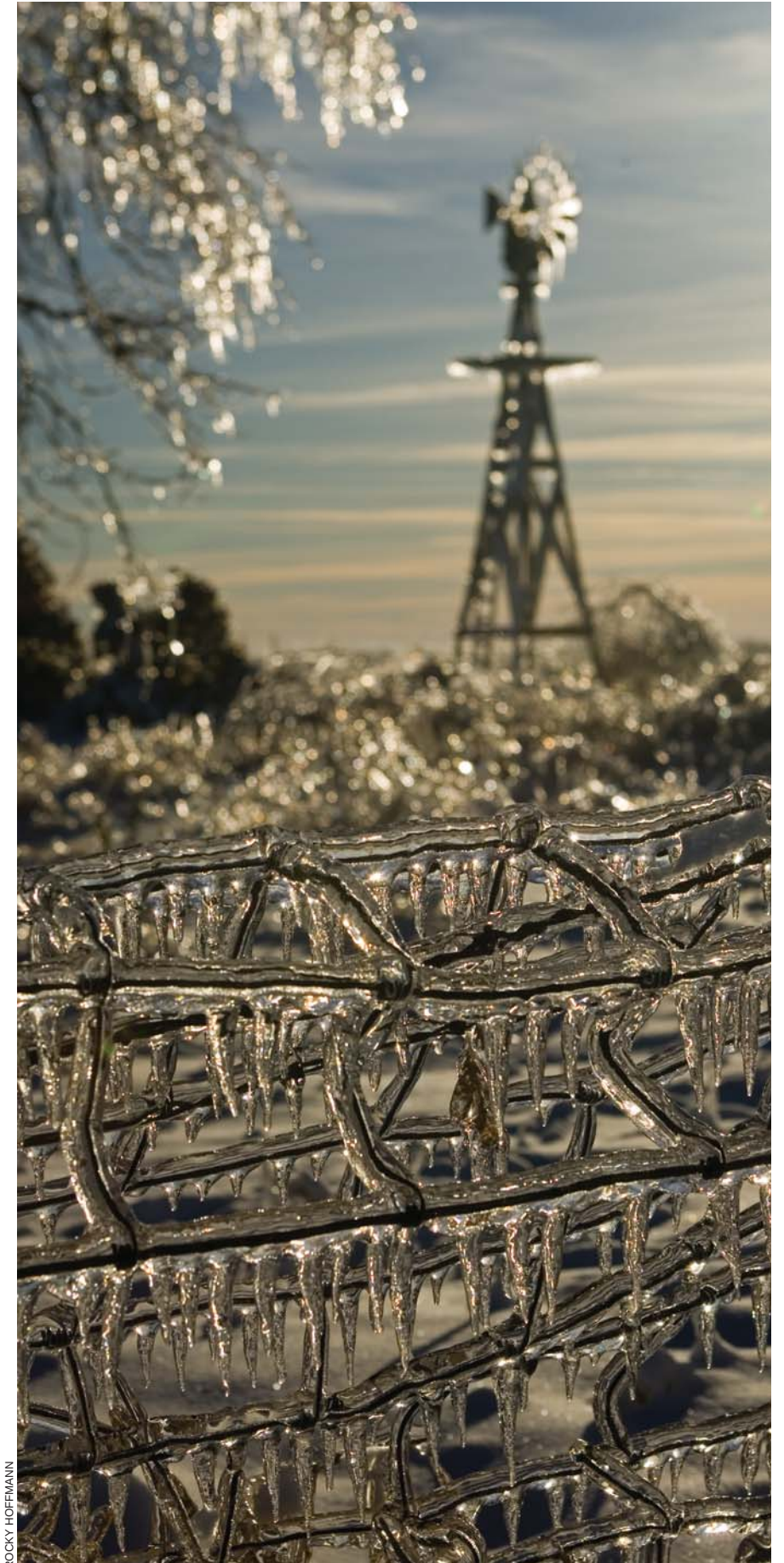
ROCKY HOFFMANN

Powerful Great Plains storms, sometimes dark and dangerous, sometimes bright and beautiful, oddly are oftentimes a little of both. Wild things survive or perish, man contends or moves on, and nature soon erases its impact, leaving only memories and photographs of what was.

ABOVE: Ice had only begun to melt off willows and phragmites on the Platte River near Alda by sunset on January 2, 2007.

LEFT: Encapsulated in ice, a foxtail seed head glimmers in northern Hayes County.

RIGHT: Near Lake Maloney in Lincoln County, wooden windmills to woven wire were made crystalline by winter's breath.



ROCKY HOFFMANN

March Window

The first warm day of the year draws anglers to the water.

By Jeff Kurrus



Keith Hansen unhooks a small bass caught last March at Mayberry SRA.

On March 2 last year, many would-be Nebraska anglers were shoveling nearly a foot of snow from their driveways. March has always meant spring for many people, yet last year spring was still so far away. One week later, however, t-shirts and waders and sunscreen were being packed for the year's first fishing trip. Freezing temperatures were gone, replaced by sun and 75 degrees – until four days later when the high temperature would again be 36 degrees. A sampling of heat sandwiched between two pieces of cold. In layman's terms, a window of spring fishing. And there was more than one person opening it up and climbing through.

"I put a little less than 200,000 miles driving from Murray to fish these lakes down here in less than four years. I finally said, 'that's enough,' and moved to Beatrice," Keith Hansen said last March at Mayberry Lake State Recreation Area (SRA) in southeastern Nebraska as he made repeated casts

toward the bank.

"The spawners will start showing up here good in late-April," he said, setting the hook of his Texas-rigged worm. "Right now you can catch a bunch of feeder bass, but the hotter, the better. I follow the wind here. When it's out of the west by June, I drop my worm through the holes in the moss and catch fish stacked up. You can fish this place when it's 100 degrees and catch big bass."

During the summer, Hansen also buzzes Burchard Lake at night. "That lake is just so clear. Buzzbaits, jitterbugs, anything on top. The lake is just so crowded during summer days that night has by far been the most productive for me." He always goes back to Mayberry, however, and for good reason.

"Last year I caught three bass over five pounds for the first time in 10 years. I've seen 18-pound catfish here and I even got a state certificate here on bluegill, with one almost 11 inches long."

As Hansen fished, 8- to 12-inch bass repeatedly struck, yet he was quick to note they weren't the norm there. "The average bass here is probably between two and three

pounds. Overall, and this will surprise people, Mayberry has a better average-sized bass than Burchard. Plus, no one fishes here. Look around."

Across the way, only one other set of anglers could be seen and they were bluegill fishing in waders. Chad Bright and George Stoner were hooking bluegill after bluegill, catching and releasing many more than they were keeping. Viewing both sets of anglers, one didn't know whether to watch bowing ultralight rods for bluegill or casting rods for largemouth.

If so inclined, an angler can make the 100-yard drag from the Mayberry parking lot to the lake with a small boat or canoe, but they don't need to. Because even on that first warm day last spring, waders were enough to provide ample fishing success.

Last March's window of fishing opportunity may well have been the best thing about that month. While ice-fishing lures many anglers, many more are waiting for that first time of the year when both the mind and body are convinced that winter is going to go away for awhile. Last March, these anglers had that, if only for a brief, very enjoyable, moment. ■



Last March, bluegills were plentiful for Chad Bright (left) and George Stoner at Mayberry Lake SRA.

PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

Good-All Reels of Ogallala

Locally made fishing reels enjoyed brief popularity in post-war years.

By Rocky Hoffmann

During the war years of the 1940s, R.A. Bob Goodall had a thriving business in Ogallala, manufacturing electrical condensers under government contract. When the war ended, so too did his government contracts. Goodall turned to the newly filled Lake McConaughy just north of town for inspiration to keep the Good-All Manufacturing plant afloat. Long time

employee Ben Reimers, who designed most of the company's electrical components, began designing fishing reels instead. Goodall retooled his plant to manufacture a variety of reels, rods and combinations of both.

Good-All reels were introduced early in the 1950s, marketed widely in *Outdoor Life* and *Field and Stream*, and developed the reputation of being worthy and innovative gear. The first Good-All reel was the Trouble Free Fishing Spinning Reel, with a single knob handle that was later replaced with a double knob handle. Good-All later introduced the Universal "snarl proof" reel that was promoted for spin-fishing, bait-casting, fly-fishing, trolling and still fishing. Without a brake it sold for just \$9.75 in a 1:1 line retrieve ratio. Up the ratio to a little more than 2:1, add a brake, and a fisherman paid \$17.50 for a Universal.

In short order, Good-All Mfg. was promoting what the company described as "the new reel sensation" – the Good-All Enclosed Spool Spinning Reel with fingertip drag control. Their advertisement in *Field and Stream* read: "Now pull the big



Although popular for some time, Nebraska-based Good-All reels had a relatively short-lived production run.

ones from hard-to-reach hiding places with spinning rod, bait rod or fly rod. Easy-to-use drag, controls fish at all times – puts constant tension on fish when running and assures instant pick-up when fish turns. So easy to use, you feel like an expert after 30 minutes time. Positively cannot backlash or snarl; Stationery multi-gear retrieve; Clicker; Rustproof stainless steel construction; Rich, satin-finish maroon aluminized aluminum cover. Model 15A \$14.95."

The manufacturing company then took their product line a step further with the Good-All Spinning Combination. Advertised as a complete unit that included a glass rod (solid or tubular), braided monofilament line, a lure and a carrying case. The rod had a shaped cork grip and came in either a one piece or two-piece model. A gold reel indicated left hand retrieve, while a maroon reel indicated a right hand retrieve. The various models ranged in price from \$19.95 to \$29.95.

Reel makers in this country have been producing combination rods and reels since the earliest patent in

1865 by William M. Stuart of Newark, New Jersey. Unlike what sportsmen know today as the combination rod and reel that simply pairs a popular spinning or casting reel with the appropriately matched rod, early combination units were integrated with the reels built into the rod butts. The Good-All rod/reel combination employed a closed-face spinning reel with the line passing

through the interior of the butt.

With all the models available and the initial appearance of popularity among anglers, Good-All reels had a surprisingly short run. Competition, however, was stiff in the post-war years. Because a host of companies had lost their lucrative manufacturing contracts with the government, many had turned to recreational development. With a national wealth of irrigation and flood control reservoirs, fishing equipment seemed to be the products of choice to market. Keeping up with the innovations of the new spin-fishing era, especially with the development of fiberglass and plastics, soon outpaced the smaller companies like Good-All. Introduced in 1950, Good-All reels were discontinued in about 1956. Reimers went on to start up the Fre-Line Reel Company in Boulder, Colorado, whose products were eventually picked up by Wright and McGill of Denver. The old Good-All reels remain moderately attractive to collectors and sell today for slightly more than their original retail price when era dollar values are compared. ■

PHOTO BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

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Spencer Dam

Spawning catfish gather below this Niobrara River dam.

By Jon Farrar

Spencer Dam, located immediately west of U.S. Highway 281, 18 miles north of O'Neill, and its hydroelectric generation plant were completed in 1927. The 3,700-foot-long, 18-foot-high, earthen dam originally impounded a 1,200-acre reservoir, but it has been diminished in size over the years by siltation. The hydro-plant, owned and operated by the Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD), has two generators, with a combined maximum capacity of 3,000 kilowatts per hour. Spencer's peak generation year was in 1996, when it produced 14,848 megawatts (one million watts) of electricity, enough to power about 1,250 households for a year.

While power generation in north-central Nebraska is something of a curiosity, the early spring catfishing below Spencer Dam attracts the attention of more people. Each spring, shortly after ice-out, channel catfish begin leaving the Missouri River and move up the Niobrara to spawn. Spencer Dam brings the migratory spawning runs to an abrupt stop, and during April and May, catfish gather in the tailwaters. "If Spencer wasn't there the lower and middle Niobrara would provide more fishing opportunity," said Jeff Schuckman, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission district fisheries supervisor stationed in Norfolk. "But it's just a fact of life that it is there, and it does provides some excellent spring and early summer catfishing."

Schuckman said that NPPD flushes sediment out of the reservoir twice a year, in early April and again in



Catfishermen David Bathke of Laurel (left), Randy Bathke of Sioux City, and Danny Jackson of Sioux City filled their stringers with catfish below Spencer Dam last May.

October. During the flushing operation, five gates are opened for about a week. Schuckman said because water temperatures are still cool at the time of the year when the flushing is done, it has minimal impact on fish downstream. While there has been talk of building a fish bypass to allow catfish to continue upstream, one has never been constructed.

Although an occasional sauger or flathead catfish is caught below the dam, channel catfish is the principal game fish species stopped by the impoundment. Schuckman said the size runs from "little nibblers" up to about 10 pounds. Because of the heavy harvest of channel catfish below Spencer Dam, the possession limit from there to the mouth of the Niobrara River is five, not 10 as elsewhere in the state. Cut baits are probably the most popular and effective at that time of the year and in the fast current.

Because riverbanks below the dam are on private land, most fishing is done immediately below the hydro-plant. NPPD officials advise anglers to be cautious when fishing below the plant because of the fast water in the tailrace, to stay clear of generating and electrical equipment, to be alert for audible or visual warnings given before water releases and keep a close watch on children.

Spencer Wildlife Management Area is located on the south side of the river just below the dam and has primitive camping facilities. ■



Spencer Dam is on the Niobrara River immediately west of U.S. Highway 281, 18 miles north of O'Neill. Primitive camping facilities are below the dam.

Portraits from the Past



This is a picture of my father, Charles Cronan (seated), and my uncle, Lew Dalgren.

My father is from Rushville and my uncle from Hay Springs.

The picture was taken somewhere in that area between 1910 and 1915.

— Lovella Wilkinson, Modesto, California



This is a photo from my late-father's collection of an early December hunt at Ainsworth, Nebraska in 1936. From left are: the Lambley brothers — Marion, Quatin (my father), June, and Ulysse; brother-in-law Pat Lessig, and his son, Tom.

The mixed bag includes jackrabbits, ducks, sharptailed grouse and a pheasant all tied to my father's A.H. Fox Sterlingworth 12-gauge double-barreled shotgun.

Tradition had it in the Lambley family that the brothers and their families would all come back to Ainsworth for one week during the hunting season to share stories together and hunt every day. The kids, commonly called 'bird dogs,' would go along to fetch game along with the real hunting dogs. In the evenings the wives would cook a full course meal which everyone sat down to. After the meal the men would go to one room and play poker, the kids to another to play penny-ante or kids' games while the women played pinocle in yet another room. Partaking in these 'family events' as a child in the late-40s and early-50s are some of my fondest memories.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege to submit a special memory that at age 66 has even more warm feelings for me.

— Fred Lambley, Morse Bluff, Nebraska

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKAland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1970. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Photos will be returned.

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