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Into Whooperland

A photographer's journey

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Cover: Two whooping cranes dance with each other at
Funk Wetland Protection Area in Phelps County.
See story on page 38.

MICHAEL FORSBERG

This page: A damselfly at Smith Lake Wildlife
Management Area in Sheridan County.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland
magazine

Published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission since 1926. The Commission is dedicated to the conservation and protection of all the state's natural resources and the people who use them.



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Bighorn sheep ewes and lambs
congregate in nursery groups.
JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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EQUIPMENT

Habitat tools like no-till grass drills and prescribed burn equipment are available through local chapters across the state. No-till drills are funded in partnership with local PF and QF chapters, The Nebraska Environmental Trust and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

In addition, statewide habitat programs and costshare assistance through your local chapter might be available. For more information and access to these options, visit our website at:

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Marquene Koontz, Ogallala
Bullsnake



Chuck Hackenmiller, Lincoln
Water Skier at Pawnee State Recreation Area



Kirk Pridell, Papillion
Great Blue Heron

Corrections:

May 2025 issue

- Page 45 – The holes for the sides and floor of the house wren nest box are labeled $1\frac{1}{4}$ " — they should be just $\frac{1}{4}$ " for ventilation and drainage.
- David Ruder's name was misspelled in "Live Well. Go Fish."

June 2025 issue

- Page 38 – Caption should have read: "Lily Bloomfield of Minden paddles a whitewater kayak on one of the

rapids with other participants during a University of Nebraska – Lincoln Outdoor Adventures trip."

- Page 58 – The Walk to the Rock trail is managed by the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation on 360 acres adjacent to the Chimney Rock National Historic Site, which is managed by the Nebraska State Historical Society. The two properties operate independently and have separate fees. This separation was not clear in the story.

Send your comments and photos to:

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Please include your postal address and telephone number. Letters may be condensed and edited. Photographs are also welcome.

STRANGE FORMATIONS

Eroded layers of sandstone and siltstone left by ancient rivers create the unique geologic formations that give Toadstool Geologic Park its name.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Citizens are encouraged to participate in this year’s summer turkey survey, which provides valuable information to biologists regarding wild turkey management throughout the state. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

PARTICIPATE IN THE SUMMER TURKEY SURVEY

By Julie Geiser

Citizen scientists are key components to many aspects of biological research, including Nebraska’s wild turkey population. This year, the public can help biologists learn more about turkeys and their reproductive success by participating in the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s annual summer turkey survey, which starts July 1 and goes through Aug. 31.

This research provides useful estimates about annual production by wild turkey hens and the survival of young turkeys, or poults, through the summer months — information essential for turkey management.

During the two-month survey participants are asked to record all turkeys they see, including hens, poults, males and those you couldn’t classify. Visit OutdoorNebraska.gov and search “turkey brood survey” for reports since 2020, including the Rural Mail Carrier Survey, and instructions for this year’s survey. The survey link can be bookmarked on a phone for easy use in the field or printed off and submitted later.

“Turkey surveys are truly the lifeblood of population management,” said Carlie Saline, wild turkey manager with Game and Parks. “Without baseline knowledge of abundance and reproduction, we could not responsibly set hunting season parameters. Records of sightings give us an index of where and how many individuals are utilizing certain parts of the state, and poult-per-hen ratios lend insight into females’ nest successes and poult survival. We are grateful to the volunteers who have offered their knowledge over the years so we can best conserve this species and our hunting heritage.”

Information gathered through the survey includes:

- Average brood sizes of poults per documented brood.
- Percentage of adult hens with poults.
- Percentage of males in the adult portion of the population.
- Annual Production Index = total number of poults/total number of adult hens.

These results will be evaluated annually, helping managers understand why populations are succeeding or not.

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Don’t miss this versatile and high-potential property! Contact Luke Wallace today for more details or to schedule a private showing.

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The black-bellied whistling-duck is undergoing a dramatic population increase and range expansion. TOBIN BROWN

WHISTLING-DUCKS PUSH NORTH

By Joel Jorgensen

Population sizes and geographic ranges of animals are rarely static. While some changes may occur at time scales imperceptible to most people, other species’ populations and ranges undergo rapid change often associated with recent human activities. Sometimes that may cause a species to disappear from a place like Nebraska, but other times it results in a new species moving in.

The black-bellied whistling-duck is one species undergoing a dramatic population increase and range expansion. This striking member of the waterfowl clan, with its black and chestnut plumage and nifty orange-pink bill, was historically restricted to the very southern tip of Texas in the U.S. through most of the 20th century. It was not until the 1970s that the species began to push north aided somewhat by nest boxes, which the species readily uses, as well as releases of captive-reared birds in states like Louisiana.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, as the core population continued to thrive, individuals and small groups ventured far to the north of Texas. Nebraska garnered its first record of this dapper bird in 1989 when a hunter harvested one in Clay County. It would be another 10 years before Nebraska would claim its second

record, but it would again come from Clay County.

Since 2000, the whistling-duck occurrence in the state has steadily increased. Presently, it remains a rare find but it now occurs annually during warmer months. The first records involved singles or pairs, but now flocks in the double digits are being seen. In 2019, a pair with ducklings was observed at Funk Waterfowl Production Area in Phelps County and since then three more nesting records have been documented. Interestingly, all breeding records have been in August and September, which is much later than the typical nesting season of most bird species, including waterfowl.

It seems nearly certain that black-bellied whistling-ducks will continue to increase in Nebraska as the years go on. Breeding now occurs annually in Kansas, and it seems logical that regular nesting is in Nebraska’s future. These beauties are readily at home at ponds in parks and near human activity, so do not be surprised if this summer you come across this new member of the Nebraska breeding bird roster.

Joel Jorgensen is the nongame bird program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

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UV CAREFUL

By Julie Geiser

Summer brings heat, sun and outdoor fun, but it also means you're at a higher risk of sunburn and exposing your skin to harmful ultraviolet sun rays. Ultraviolet rays that reach the Earth's surface come in two varieties: ultraviolet A (UVA) and Ultraviolet B (UVB).

UVA rays make up about 95% of all the rays that reach the Earth's surface. These rays can penetrate deep into skin and even pass through glass. UVA rays can damage the collagen and elastin in your skin, causing wrinkles, sagging and age spots.

UVB rays make up only 5% of the rays from the sun and can also cause skin damage. These rays produce tans and sunburns and are largely responsible for skin cancers, such as melanoma, and long-term eye damage.

One severe sunburn doubles your chances of developing skin cancer, and the damage becomes permanent. This summer, protect your skin while enjoying time outside.

Skin Protection

- Hit the shade. Avoid overexposing your skin to the sun without protection, especially between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., which is when the sun's rays are at their highest intensity.
- Wear clothing and a hat that provides UV protection.
- Wear sunglasses. Photokeratitis is an inflammation of the cornea, which is the clear covering on the front of the eye. Sunglasses with UV protection can help prevent damage to the cornea and other parts of the eye.
- Wear sunscreen. Even on cloudy days, UV rays can cause burning through cloud cover. Choose sunscreen that provides broad-spectrum protection from both UVA and UVB rays. Some people prefer mineral-based sunscreen containing zinc oxide and titanium dioxide as opposed to chemical formulas. Make sure the sunscreen has a sun protection factor (SPF) of

30 or higher and is water/sweat resistant. Reapply sunscreen every two hours and after swimming or sweating. Pay attention to areas that are most exposed, such as your face, lips, ears, neck, shoulders, back, knees and the tops of your feet. Be aware of the expiration date on sunscreen.

- Use extra caution near water. Water can reflect the damaging rays of the sun, increasing your chance of sunburn.
- Keep infants under six months old in the shade, preferably wearing sun-protective clothing. If this is not possible, use a lotion sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher and be sure to wash it off as soon as you are home.
- Be aware that certain medications can make your skin more sensitive to UV rays. Consult your doctor if you have questions about your medication.

Sunburn Relief

If you get sunburned, take a cool bath or shower to help relieve the pain. Gently pat your skin dry. Soothe your skin with products containing aloe vera or soy.

Calamine lotion, damp washcloths and oatmeal baths can aid in pain relief. Ibuprofen can reduce swelling and pain.

Hydrocortisone creams can help treat swelling and irritation. Purchase 1% hydrocortisone over the counter, or a doctor can prescribe a stronger version.

Be sure to drink extra water and electrolytes to rehydrate your skin and body — your body will send extra fluids to sunburned areas.

Examine your skin often to detect skin cancer as soon as possible. See your doctor right away if you notice any abnormally dark or discolored patches or spots, bleeding, areas of flaking or crusting skin, or changes in the color, size or shape of a mole.

In July, UV rays are at the highest in Nebraska, so make sure to protect yourself while having fun in the sun.



Skincare products are endless. For optimal protection, choose sunscreen that has a SPF of 30 or higher and is water/sweat resistant. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

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NEBRASKA
— GAME  PARKS —



Wild turkey pho is an easy, flavorful way to use the leg and thigh meat from your turkey. RYAN SPARKS

WILD TURKEY PHO

By Ryan Sparks

For those unfamiliar, pho (rhymes with duh) is a Vietnamese noodle soup. A rich, clear broth is paired with rice noodles, meat and plenty of herbs. Pho was popularized throughout the world, especially in the U.S. and Canada, by refugees after the Vietnam War. Pho is an excellent way to transform wild turkey legs and thighs into tender bits of meat that are then added to an enriched stock.

Servings: 6

Cooking Time: 1 hour of active cooking, 4-6 hours of waiting.

Ingredients:

- 2 wild turkey legs and thighs
- 2 yellow onions, roughly chopped
- 1 (4-inch) piece of ginger, sliced into thick coins
- 12 cups turkey or chicken stock, homemade if you have it
- ¼ cup fish sauce

- 1 star anise pod
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 (1-pound) package dried rice noodles
- 1 small bunch Thai basil (or any variety of basil)
- 2 jalapenos, thinly sliced
- 2 limes, quartered
- 1½ cups chopped cilantro leaves and stems
- 1 bunch thinly sliced scallions

1. Place turkey thighs and legs in a slow cooker and barely cover with water or stock. Set the heat to high and cook until the meat easily separates from the bone (around 5 hours).

2. When the meat is nearly done, cook the onions and ginger in a dry pan over high heat until they are charred.

3. In a large Dutch oven or stock pot, combine onions, ginger, stock, fish sauce, star anise and brown sugar. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for around

45 minutes. While the stock is simmering, remove the meat from the slow cooker, let it cool slightly and shred it with your hands or two forks, making sure to remove all bones and tendons.

4. Cook the rice noodles according to the instructions on the package. Drain and set aside.

5. Remove onions, ginger, and the star anise pod from the pot. Add the shredded turkey meat and bring the mixture to a simmer. Taste the soup for salt and add more fish sauce if it needs more salt.

6. Arrange the limes, basil, and sliced jalapeno on a platter and set on the table.

7. Divide rice noodles, cilantro, and scallions evenly among large soup bowls, then ladle the hot stock over the top, making sure each bowl gets an ample portion of turkey. Serve immediately accompanied by the platter of garnishes. Remember the hunt.

When boating, remember to:

 **CLEAN**  **DRAIN**  **DRY**



NEBRASKA
— GAME PARKS —



OutdoorNebraska.gov
(search for Aquatic Invasive Species)

A Water Quest

Story by Jeff Kurrus

Water — during July in Nebraska, it's a necessity. No amount of shade can prevent the onslaught of sweat that accompanies hiking, biking and the host of other outdoor activities we covet during the summer.

Theresa Fowler of Lincoln and Regina Osburn of Valentine look out over Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area in Cherry County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND





TOP LEFT: A personal watercraft pulls a skier across Branched Oak State Recreation Area in Lancaster County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

BOTTOM LEFT: Raelin Campbell of Wood River plays in the water at Cheyenne State Recreation Area in Hall County. Her father, Riley, fishes and her mother, Sarah, and brother, Ethan, watch. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

BELOW RIGHT: Children play in Bone Creek at Keller Park State Recreation Area in Brown County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

We can wake up early and adventure late, but come midday there’s only one place to be: in or near water.

Yet this commodity has been hard to come by the past couple of years across the state. Drought has affected many of our state parks, but a plethora of locations remain where we can stake our tents or park our RVs near the one place that forever draws us when a person couldn’t imagine it getting any hotter — water.



Enjoy these areas and more throughout the state as you feel yourself pulled by the one magnet we all seem to be attracted to this time of year. 📍

ABOVE: Zoe Balero of Fort Morgan, Colorado, fishes near her campsite at Bridgeport State Recreation Area in Morrill County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

BELOW: Kayakers float the Niobrara National Scenic River at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in Cherry County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Steve Peterson of Vermillion, South Dakota, sails on Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area in Knox County.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Campers line the shoreline in the No Name Bay area at Lake McConaughy State Recreation Area in Keith County.

To check water levels at any of Nebraska's state parks or recreation areas, visit OutdoorNebraska.gov/parks and search "Find a Park."



Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Beat the summer heat by having too much fun to notice, whether you're kayaking a beautiful lake, celebrating the Fourth of July or even indulging in some holiday cheer. [N](#)



Celebrate National Bison Month

Throughout July | Statewide

July is National Bison Month — a fantastic opportunity to celebrate America's national mammal, the American bison. In Nebraska, these large, beautiful animals help support prairie ecosystems through the wallows they create by rolling and lying on the ground. Take the opportunity to view bison this month at places like Fort Robinson State Park, Pioneers Park Nature Center in Lincoln, the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center near Alda, Wildlife Safari Park near Ashland or Niobrara Valley Preserve in Brown County.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Kayak at a beautiful southwestern park

Spring and summer best times | Red Willow State Recreation Area, located 11 miles north of McCook

This summer, explore one of southwestern Nebraska's best parks for kayaking. Red Willow State Recreation Area offers more than 1,600 acres of water, along with striking views and three secluded coves to explore. "As you paddle along, you're tucked into what feels like a large canyon," said regional park supervisor Tyler Francisco. "You kind of forget that you're in Nebraska." Kayak fishing is popular, too. Launch from one of three boat ramps or the sandy day-use beach area.

JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND



What To Do in July

Enjoy a Fourth of July barbecue

July 4, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. | Fort Robinson State Park, on west lawn near main lodge/office

Celebrate the Fourth western-Nebraska-style, with an outdoors barbecue set against the rugged, epic backdrop of Fort Robinson State Park. This popular annual barbecue kicks off after Crawford's town parade finishes around 11 a.m., leaving plenty of time for afternoon park activities like Jeep tours and guided horseback rides. In the evening, many participants head back into town for a rodeo and fireworks. The meal of burgers, beans and potato salad has a fee, and a vehicle park entry permit is required. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Enjoy a sunrise trail ride

Tuesday mornings | Niobrara State Park, 2½ miles west of the town of Niobrara

During Niobrara State Park's new sunrise trail rides, visitors will experience breathtaking views atop the river bluffs, watching the sun rise over the Niobrara and Missouri rivers. "It's one of the most spectacular sunrises you'll ever see," said park superintendent Cogan Thompson. Rides typically accommodate up to six people and last 45-50 minutes. Ages 6 and up are allowed, and no prior experience is needed. Rides cost \$30 per person. Book your ride through the park office by 6 p.m. the day before at 402-857-3373. [RV THERE YET? TV](#)

Attend 'Campfire Christmas in July' event

July 25 from 6-10 p.m. and July 26 from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. | Indian Cave State Park, located 10 miles south of Brownville

Sometimes a touch of holiday cheer is exactly what you need during a Nebraska summer. Now in its 12th year, this festive celebration offers activities for both children and adults. Stop by to enjoy tractor-drawn Polar Express hayrack rides, Christmas-themed crafts and games, visits with Santa, a yule log quest, food trucks and even a campsite decorating contest. Learn more at [Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov](#).

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Homeschool Hikes at Schramm

Story by Jennifer Ruyle, Outdoor Education Specialist
Photos by Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Every third Wednesday and Thursday of each month — except in June and July — a group of homeschool families assemble in the lobby of Schramm Education Center near Gretna to prepare for a guided hike. Led by a Nebraska Game and Parks naturalist, the Homeschool Hikes program welcomes a different group each week. Participants might be just two moms and their kids or a crowd of 80 people. The hike invites strangers and friends to meet. Kids who know each other hang back and walk together.

Babies in chest carriers come along, too. It seems like there's always one curious 6-year-old who finds their way to the front of the pack to hike alongside the naturalist, chatting about their favorite animal or their dog or their weekend plans. In fall and winter, we may hike in rain, single-digit temperatures or several inches of snow. Sometimes we are blessed with the most gorgeous “false-spring” with clear blue skies and 70-degree days. Unsurprisingly, our spring and summer programs usually draw big groups, when the park



Kelsey Wood, Luanne Wood and Oliver Wood of Millard look out onto the Platte River during a Homeschool Hike.

is green and in full bloom. Whatever the conditions, we hit the trails for adventure and fun. The program offers opportunities for learning about local plants, animals, ecosystems and natural phenomena. Families who attend throughout the year are able to witness and appreciate the phenology of the park, from the first snow geese that pass overhead in February to the last monarchs that

leave in October. It's also become an opportunity for homeschool families to find nature-loving community. Many parents and caregivers specifically join the Homeschool Hikes program to meet other outdoorsy homeschool families. Each month's hike features a different topic, which is planned around the happenings at Schramm Park at different times of the year. Our

naturalists keep a close eye on what wildlife is doing. For example, in March, we noticed the sudden reappearance of red-winged blackbirds the same week we held Homeschool Hikes, so it became that month's theme. One November, we had a hike that focused on turkeys, and we were rewarded with the chorus of our resident wild turkeys gobbling during our excursion. We also lean on the strengths of

our seasonal naturalists to determine topics for the year ahead. Some naturalists are knowledgeable about wildflowers and grasses, while others are lifelong birders. Several have been avid anglers and can share information about all the fish in the area and the aquatic creatures that coexist within the ponds in our park. Past themes have included “Frogs and Toads,” “Wetlands,” “Lichen” and less tangible



Naturalist Alena Carlson points at a bird during a Homeschool Hike at Schramm Park State Recreation Area.



Families hike on a trail following the Platte River at Schramm Park State Recreation Area.

themes, such as “Relationships in Nature.”

While we do prepare a lesson plan for each month, we allow room for “rabbit holes” and fully embrace being in nature without a rigid schedule. One day, while hiking in December, we noticed bullfrog tadpoles swimming underneath the ice. Of course we had to stop and investigate. This random encounter allowed an opportunity for

great questions: Aren’t the tadpoles cold? What do they eat when the pond is frozen over? Why haven’t they turned into frogs yet?

Even on days when we only see “ordinary” things, time spent in the park with our homeschool hikers always feels well spent. With that said, we have had some spectacular moments during hikes simply because we took the time to be outside in the

right place, at the right time, with people who are observant. A few of my favorite Homeschool Hikes moments include:

- While walking on the river trail in January, we witnessed two bald eagles locking their talons and cartwheeling through the sky in a mating ritual.
- Discovering an alien-like orange, spiky caterpillar crawling on the underside of a leaf while looking for

snails and slugs.

- Spotting bright yellow chicken of the woods mushrooms growing on a tree and sharing the excitement of my first find with the homeschool students.
- Looking for animal scat and instead finding a huge owl pellet on the trail. We dissected it on the trail and found it contained the skull of a squirrel.



Janna O’Mally of Omaha, left, and Katelynn Moore of Seward learn with their children during a Homeschool Hike program.

- “Borrowing” horse poop from the stables at Platte River State Park to bait dung beetles for students to observe, and then successfully finding dung beetles in it during our hike!

Through the program, we hope to create space for families to make memories and find community, and to learn new information and practice their science skills at the park.

Learning in nature allows for deep, meaningful connections to take place. As any “ologist” will tell you, observing nature in the field makes concepts much more memorable and understandable than reading about them in a textbook.

Science is all about asking and investigating your own questions, letting your curiosity lead the way, and the pleasure of making conclusions through observation and trial and error. [N](#)

Homeschool Hikes are open to everyone. To view upcoming events, visit [Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://calendar.outdoornebraska.gov) and search “Homeschool Hikes.”

Join Us

Homeschool Hikes is a monthly nature exploration program hosted by Schramm Education Center geared toward homeschool families. During the program, participants are encouraged to ask questions, draw, observe and make discoveries in nature.

The cost to participate is \$5 per person per program. This includes admission to the Schramm Education Center after the hike. Schramm Family Pass members participate free.

Homeschool Hikes are recommended for ages 5 and up. Participants should dress in season-appropriate layers and wear closed-toed shoes that can get dirty.

Register in advance so naturalists can estimate attendance at [Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://calendar.outdoornebraska.gov).

Note that there are no Homeschool Hikes in June and July for summer break.

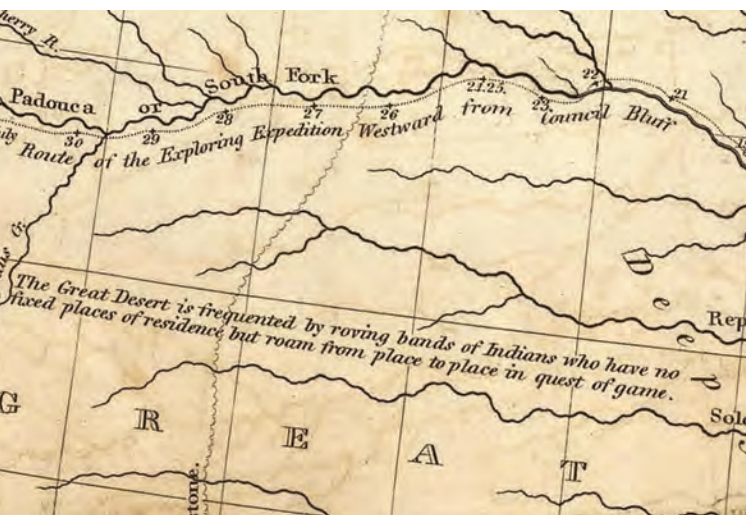
When Rain Followed the Plow

By David L. Bristow
Nebraska State Historical Society

Rainfall follows the plow” is one of the most consequential ideas in Nebraska history. That doesn’t mean it was a good idea.

For centuries, Nebraska’s Native American inhabitants planted corn in the east and hunted bison in the west. When a U.S. military expedition crossed the region in 1820, the soldiers noted the lack of trees and the increasingly arid conditions as they moved west. After that, maps labeled the Great Plains as the GREAT DESERT. The region was “almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence,” in the words of an early geographer.

As a result, the U.S. government was happy to leave the Great Plains as a permanent “Indian Country” into which displaced eastern tribes could be moved. But by the 1850s, the U.S. was planning to build a transcontinental railroad through that region and opened it to settlement. Following the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of settlers poured into the new state of Nebraska, pushing ever farther west into



Detail of a map from Stephen Long’s 1820 expedition. The South Platte River runs along the top; today the spot numbered 22 is the location of the city of North Platte. The future Nebraska and Kansas are labeled GREAT DESERT.

STEPHEN H. LONG AND EDWIN JAMES, “COUNTRY DRAINED BY THE MISSISSIPPI” (1823)

country with less and less rain. West of the 100th meridian (in other words, west of Cozad), rainfall averaged less than 20 inches a year. Good luck farming with that.

In 1880, a University of Nebraska professor named Samuel Aughey published a book explaining how plowing the prairie

would allow rain to penetrate more deeply. Plowed land would soak up rain like a sponge. The broken sod would slowly evaporate moisture, which would create more rain. In the words of another writer, “rainfall follows the plow.”

Railroads and town boosters had a strong incentive

to promote Nebraska’s land and climate, and they were enthusiastic for this new, scientific-sounding explanation. The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad even paid a stenographer to record Professor Aughey’s speeches, printing them as pamphlets to be distributed as far away as Europe.



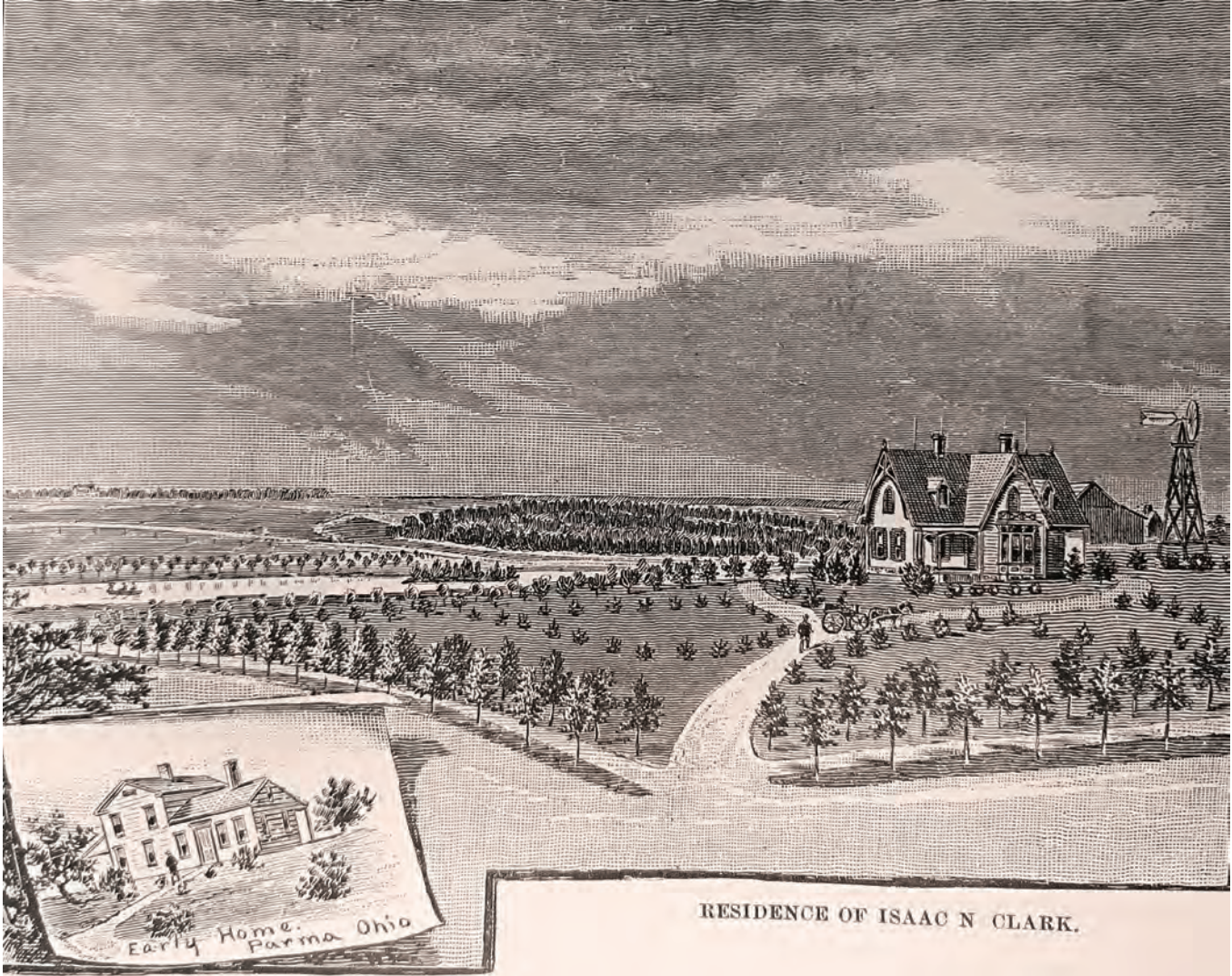
“Using all the farm for crops — plowing corn in door yard.” Custer County, 1888. Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. NSHS RG2608-0-20235



When rain didn't follow the plow in the 1890s, Nebraska communities hired professional rainmakers who used explosives, smoke and chemical reactions to create rain. It didn't work but sometimes they got lucky. NSHS RG2545-0-9



"Farmers attending a siphon tube irrigation demonstration," Clay County, Nebraska, 1948. Soil Conservation Service photo. NSHS RG2570-18-45



A Clay County farm, showing its owners' humbler previous residence in Ohio. Published in 1882, A.T. Andreas' "History of the State of Nebraska" is full of flattering images of prosperous farms, usually shown with plantings of trees.

And for several years in the 1880s, it all seemed to be true. Rainfall really did increase across Nebraska even as more land was plowed. A modern scientist would have warned people not to confuse correlation with causality, but nobody worried too much about that.

Then came the drought years of the 1890s, which were worse than anything most non-Indigenous people had seen. The new settlers hadn't lived here long enough to know that such extremes are normal. And in many cases, they didn't even know the area's recent history. In his book "The Last Days of the Rainbelt," geographer David Wishart writes that due to recurring drought, some parts of the high plains (including southwestern Nebraska) were settled and abandoned by "three or more waves of homesteaders before successful farming took root."

THE RAINFALL

is ample for all human needs. In the eastern division of the North Platte country the annual rainfall of the last decade has exceeded *thirty-two inches*. In the middle division it reaches *twenty-eight inches*, and in the western division *twenty-four inches*. Still further west, in the unsettled counties, it runs from sixteen to twenty inches, with a very marked yearly increase. The rains of Nebraska are not so long and excessive as in many of the older states, but they are vastly more equable in distribution.

From the promotional material on the back of "Map of Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Lands in Nebraska, Columbus District, 1890." NSHS M782 1890 B92b

Most of the Great Plains became cattle country. Successful farming in arid regions came only after the development of irrigation. Rain doesn't follow the plow, but you might say the plow follows the center pivot. 🌱

Visit NSHS's website at history.nebraska.gov.

Into Whooperland

A Photographer's Journey

Book review by Jeff Kurrus
Photos by Michael Forsberg

Michael Forsberg's newest book, "Into Whooperland — A Photographer's Journey with Whooping Cranes" is a celebration and warning to readers regarding one of the world's rarest birds.

The book starts where Forsberg is at his best — in the field. A journal

entry prepares readers for what is yet to come: "A flash of lightning from a predawn thunderstorm lit up the roost and revealed a glimpse of white among the thousands of dark shapes. As the storm passed and the veil of night lifted, there he was: a rare white wonder standing tall above the noisy pulsing masses of sandhill cranes."



An hours-old whooping crane chick receives its first health check by Marianne Wellington, senior aviculturist, and Cindy Gutter, assistant curator of birds, at the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin.



Two whooping cranes dance with each other at the Funk Wetland Protection Area in Nebraska.



Forsberg, alongside International Crane Foundation scientist Andy Caven, spent eight days in two separate photo blinds to capture this whooping crane nest at Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada. A two-day-old chick explores its new world.

This description of seeing a lone whooping crane on the Platte River in Nebraska is indicative of this book’s most resonating strength: When Forsberg decides to tackle a subject, he is all-in. His work goes beyond photography, which is as stunning as it’s ever been.

To create “Into Whooperland,” he enlisted the help of what seems a countless list of scientists, landowners and other conservationists to deliver a simple message. This is written by Rich Beilfuss, President and CEO of the International Crane Foundation, in the book’s introduction: “We must find sustainable solutions for our lands and waters, for the wildlife we love and for our own livelihoods and future.”

This theme pervades throughout

the book, the message hitting you on every page. Forsberg wants you to know that the world’s whooping crane population fell to fewer than 20 birds during the 1940s, and readers are reminded of this number across the book’s more than 220 pages. The story of the whooping crane is a warning of what has happened and what will happen if we don’t protect this bird — if we don’t protect all wildlife.

Another dedicated member of Forsberg’s team was Chris Boyer, who traveled with the author in a Cessna 1957 prop plane along Whooper Highway, the migration route from the Texas Gulf Coast to northern Canada. Or the International Crane Foundation’s co-founder George Archibald, known for “dancing” with captive cranes and

encouraging Forsberg to write this book. Or scientist Andy Caven, who was his photo partner in the chapter entitled “Eight Days in a Blind,” where Forsberg chronicles his time in a photo blind deep in the heart of whooping crane nesting grounds in the boreal wetlands, forests and plains of Canada.

“One of us always watched the nest, except roughly between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m., when we both tried to sleep. The last thing I would do before nodding off was manually focus my lens on the nest. I kept a shutter release cable next to my head so I wouldn’t miss a photograph”

Drawings and other findings came from the trip. Observations became field notes and field notes became

science. “Into Whooperland” provides insight into Forsberg’s many hours in a crane blind, and sometimes, in the most unexpected places, the reader finds humor. “The mosquitoes are fierce inside the blind this morning. Somewhere there is a breach.”

“Into Whooperland” is divided into the following sections, which read like chapters: “Winter Grounds,” “Migration North,” “Summer Nesting,” “Migration South,” “The Central Flyway” and “New Beginnings.” It is in the Central Flyway where Forsberg chronicles his trip with Boyer in the Cessna as he attempts to follow the whooping crane’s migration path through the heart of the continent.

The book is part love story, part coffee table book and all documentary. The reader learns that these birds mingle. They jostle. They most certainly dance.

The reader also learns all the difficult steps to rearing a chick



Bird keeper Rebecca Arnold carries a young whooping crane named Fog to be checked by the veterinarian at the Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center in New Orleans.

in the wild and in captivity at the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin, and how the population got so low in the first place. “Whooping crane biology would

have made them especially vulnerable to hunting and egg collection,” writes Beilfuss. “They are long-lived, become flightless when they molt their primary flight feathers every two to three years, reach breeding maturity at three to five years old, and raise one or (rarely) two chicks per year that require intensive parental care for about three months until fledgling The birds’ preference for breeding in wetlands of the fertile tallgrass and northern mixed-grass prairie regions, made them highly vulnerable to habitat loss as settlers plowed and drained those lands for farming.”

Alongside the book’s educational components are Forsberg’s images. Close-ups of whooping crane chicks and landscapes of nesting grounds. Workers in crane suits. Juveniles with their parents. Birds in Canada, Nebraska, Texas and parts in-between.

As a longtime contributor and former staffer for “Nebraskaland Magazine,” Forsberg is known for entrenching himself in his subjects — whether it be whooping cranes in his latest book or sandhill cranes in his first coffee table picture book — “On Ancient Wings.”

The book also contains a chapter entitled “Building the Backup Flock” by Rene Ebersole. This tells the fascinating story of Tex, Gee Whiz



The braided channels of the Platte River in central Nebraska near Rowe Sanctuary provide critical stopover habitat for whooping cranes along their migration through the Central Flyway.



A harvested whooping crane. Circa 1888 in Elm Creek, Nebraska. JOEL SARTORE ESTATE

and Canus — three whooping cranes who have profoundly impacted the world’s current population of whooping cranes. Their story reminds readers of the human affects on these extraordinary birds and how science, love and common sense problem-solving have helped maintain this species.

Lastly, Forsberg shares a tip for the aspiring photographer: “I’ve found that the key to using blinds with cranes is to be in them before the birds arrive and to climb out of them only after they have left the area. It’s also necessary to live by the mantra of being comfortable with being uncomfortable. Blind work is a solitary experience. You must cope with being alone with your own thoughts, and often in physically awkward positions. Other challenges: weather extremes; myriad insects that buzz, bite and sting; knowing how to keep

the blood flowing to your extremities at all times; and keeping your mind active. The moment you let your guard down is always when the action happens. Always.”

These words are a microcosm for handling difficult situations in conservation as a whole and for life in general.

This mindset has also allowed the population of one of the world’s rarest species that fell to fewer than 20 birds rise to roughly 830 known individuals today with names like Yay, Nay and even Husker Red.

Michael Forsberg’s “Into Whooperland” reminds us to not let our guard down.

“Into Whooperland—A Photographer’s Journey with Whooping Cranes” recently won the gold medal in the Nature category of the 2025 Independent Publisher Book Awards and is available at MichaelForsberg.com.



Pilot Chris Boyer and Michael Forsberg at the Aransas County Airport in Texas. ALEX WILES



Pipped whooping crane egg hours before it hatches at the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

MID-SEASON BLOOMERS

By Chris Helzer, The Nature Conservancy’s Director of Science in Nebraska

July is a great time to see some of Nebraska’s most spectacular wildflowers across the state. After all, it’s smack in the middle of the growing season and prairies have really hit their stride. While droughts are common in Nebraska and can mute the vibrant green of prairies, many wildflower species, including the ones featured here, can flourish during and after those dry periods. They’re as tough as the Nebraskans who live in and around their favorite habitats. PHOTOS BY CHRIS HELZER



Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*). Located across Nebraska except some of the southwestern counties, this short-lived perennial can be abundant in some years and less in others, depending on rainfall and land management.



Upright prairie coneflower (*Ratibida columnifera*). One of the characteristic wildflowers of the mixed-grass prairie, but can found across the entire state, its petals can be yellow or red. This species is often confused with its taller cousin, the grayhead coneflower, which is native to the very eastern edge of Nebraska but is often used in wildflower plantings farther west.



Fourpoint evening primrose (*Oenothera rhombipetala*). A biennial species found throughout much of the state on sandy soils, it has tall, branched stems and large flowers, making it one of the state’s most striking wildflowers.



Hoary vervain (*Verbena stricta*). Found statewide, it is important for butterflies and other pollinators but often seen as a weed. Hoary vervain is not eaten by cattle and expands under heavy grazing, though it’s a poor competitor against lightly grazed grasses.



Plains sunflower (*Helianthus petiolaris*). Nebraska has seven perennial and two annual sunflower species. This image is of one of the annuals and is common in the Sandhills and other sandy soils across the state, especially in areas with exposed, bare soil.



Purple prairie clover (*Dalea purpurea*). Located statewide, this long-lived perennial legume is one of the most attractive of our summer flowers for bees, especially sweat bees and other small species. Purple prairie clover also provides good forage for cattle.



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THE SCIENCE OF COOLERS

By Eric Fowler

Years ago, after shelling out a few bucks for another bag of ice while on a fishing trip in the Sandhills, a friend of mine gave me some sage advice that has stuck with me: “I can make that stuff for next to nothing.”

Since my bloodlines include some frugal genes, I’ve been making block ice in the freezer using various sizes of plastic containers ever since, and smashing it into bits with a hammer when I need cubes.

I also have some nerd genes in me, so I’ve often questioned the science behind ice, coolers and keeping stuff in them cold. There are plenty of tips online, but are they fact or old wives’ tales? Having forgotten most of what I

learned about thermodynamics in high school and college physics classes, I asked an expert on the subject: Dr. Christian Binek, a physics professor at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.

Block or Cube?

You used to be able to buy blocks wherever ice was sold, but I can’t tell you the last time I’ve seen it for sale. It seems to last longer, but does it?

Indeed it does, Binek says, due to the increased surface area of cubed ice compared to a block weighing just as much. There is a misconception about cooling. It’s not that cold goes into something. Rather, it is that heat flows. This flow of heat is called the current

entity, and the temperature difference between what you are keeping cool and the ice determines the magnitude of the current.

“If you have smaller cubes of ice, or crushed ice, then you significantly increase the surface area it can flow through, and then the heat transport is just more efficient, or faster,” Binek says.

This is the type of science Binek studies at the Voelte-Keegan Nanoscience Research Center where he works. They look at things on a nanoscale, where the number of atoms on the surface of a particle can be greater than the atoms within it. Ice melts quickly at that scale.

All that said, block ice isn’t always the best way to go. “Let’s say you put your beer in the cooler, but the beer was not initially cold. Crushed ice would be an advantage because it will cool it faster,” Binek said. “But if your beer was cold and your goal is to keep it cold longer, then it might be a good idea to go with a solid block.”

To Drain or Not to Drain?

So what about the water that begins to pool in the bottom of the cooler as the ice melts? I’ve read or heard both sides of the cooler soup story.

“Water, as you say in the language of thermodynamics, has a high heat capacity,” Binek says, adding that property is what makes it an ideal fire extinguisher.

Water can also take on three forms, depending on the temperature: solid, liquid and vapor. During the transition between those phases, the temperature does not change.

“Let’s say you have ice, and that ice is pretty much at 0 degrees Celsius, or 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Then you feed in heat, and the ice starts to melt. Until the last piece of ice is gone the temperature hasn’t changed a bit, not at all. It always stays at 32 Fahrenheit.

“Basically, if you drain it out, you waste that potential to keep stuff cool.”

So leave the water unless you have a ready source of ice. A cooler holding a sandwich or other food, however, is another story. “It’s just nasty to have water floating around and making things soggy,” Binek says.

Dead Air?

Another popular theory is that filling the airspace in a cooler increases ice retention. In reality, air is the second-best insulator there is, trailing only a vacuum, Binek says. It is actually what makes the insulation we use in our homes, and coolers, work, not the materials those insulations are made with. “Air has little material, so it has

a tendency not to transfer heat very well,” Binek says.

“Now, what makes air bad for your cooler is simply when you open and close your cooler and the air escapes, or a large fraction of it will, and you exchange the cold air with air from the outside. That, of course, is bad because you bring in heat.”

Filling pockets to limit that exchange has value, Binek said, as does keeping the cooler closed. “Practically speaking, what’s the good of the cooler if you cannot open it?”

Super Coolers?

High-dollar, thick-walled coolers, some seeming to weigh as much as the beverages you could fill them with, have been the rage for some time now. Are they worth it? That depends, Binek said.

“Let’s say you go fishing in a more remote area, and you are off the grid and off access to ice or whatever for multiple days. Then, it is a very valid investment,” he said. “You can keep your beer literally passively cold for multiple days, up to a week, if you have a very expensive cooler. But if you’re just sitting at a lake for a couple of hours, then it’s overkill.”

For now, Binek, a native of Germany, keeps his trips to the lake simple, his small, standard-issue cooler filled with cubed ice and a few beers he can sip while waiting for a catfish to bite.

“Contrary to a far-reaching myth, Germans do not drink warm beer,” he said. “And honestly, I have the impression that if you don’t have a beer, they just don’t want to bite. I don’t know why that is. Maybe you are more relaxed then, and somehow it goes through the rod and through the bobber. Or maybe it’s the hops that gives you more patience, because fishing can have something to do with patience.”

Either way, he doesn’t need a super cooler. “My beer is usually gone before it has a chance to get warm.”

Ice and Coolers



ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Here are some tips for making ice and making it last longer.

- When making block ice, know that thin plastic containers can crack as water freezes and expands. But don’t use your wife’s best Rubbermaid to make block ice, as it can damage the inner coating.
- Throw what’s left of your block ice back in the freezer when you get back from a trip to use on the next one.
- If you will be far from an ice vendor and have cargo space, fill a quality cooler with block ice you can transfer to other coolers as needed.
- Keep your cooler out of the sun and your ice will last much longer.
- Precool everything in the refrigerator before you put them in the cooler. Freeze some of your water bottles and use them as ice. They will be partly thawed by the time you need them.
- If you store your cooler in a hot garage, bring it inside the day before your trip and it won’t eat some of your ice when you fill it.
- Coolers are just as good at carrying empty bottles and cans home as they are at carrying full ones to the lake. Leave no trace.



Homemade block ice can easily be made into “cubes” with a hammer. Just be sure to hold it in a gloved hand and wear eye protection. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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Pictured: Parker Wise, Buzz's great grandson



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NATIONAL MOTH WEEK *July 19-27*

By Brianna Nugent, Community Science Program Manager

As the sun sets over Nebraska’s expansive plains and rolling hills, a hidden world comes to life — the realm of moths, creatures of the night whose diversity and adaptations often go unnoticed. From bustling urban areas to tranquil prairies and dense woodlands, this diverse group of insects have evolved to possess a remarkable set of adaptations that enable them to thrive in their respective niches.

Moths are incredibly diverse in their coloration and wing patterns, which often serve as camouflage to evade predators or attract mates. Some moths mimic the appearance of leaves or tree bark to blend seamlessly into their surroundings, while others display vibrant colors to warn predators of their toxicity.

They are also experts in navigation. Males have highly sensitive antennae that can detect pheromones released by potential mates over several miles away, allowing them to locate partners in the dark.

Additionally, nocturnal moths are believed to navigate using celestial bodies, such as the stars and moon. To ensure they are always flying upright, moths can adjust their flight track to keep the light source at a constant angle to their eye. When you see moths chaotically gathering near your porch light, they are attempting to orientate themselves to the light. As they constantly turn inwards to keep the light at their backs, they are met with flight limitations, causing them to spiral until they inevitably collide with the artificial light source.

One of the most impressive adaptations that some moth species have developed is their ability to disrupt bat sonar. Moths and bats have been in an evolutionary arms race of survival for roughly 60 million years,



While setting up a DIY moth light trap in my backyard last year, a Carolina Sphinx moth was resting on the fence near the garden. PHOTO BY BRIANNA NUGENT

and scientists have been perplexed by the various adaptations that moths have developed to confuse or deter their bat foes.

How to Celebrate Moths

This year, celebrate National Moth Week July 19-27. We encourage you to observe and document moths in your local environments to gain a deeper appreciation for the beauty and ecological importance of moths. These insects play vital roles as pollinators, food sources for wildlife and indicators of environmental health. Understanding and conserving Nebraska’s moth diversity contributes to the preservation of our natural heritage for future generations to enjoy.

Whether you’re a seasoned entomologist or a curious amateur

naturalist, there are many ways to participate:

- Moth Storytime at Elleinad Books in Lincoln, July 24, 10-10:45 a.m.
- Moth Night at Schramm Education Center in Gretna, July 26, 8:30-10:30 p.m.
- Backyard Mothing - Set up your own moth trap using a light source and a white sheet or screen.
- Documentation - Capture photos of moths you encounter and share them on citizen science platforms, such as iNaturalist or Project Noah. Your observations contribute to our understanding of moth distributions and behavior.
- Create Moth Habitats - Plant native vegetation that moths prefer, such as native wildflowers and grasses, to provide food and shelter for these beneficial insects.



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Deer hunting in the Oak Canyons, 1998 ►
 This picture was taken in November 1998 northeast of Ord, Nebraska in the oak canyons. The way this scenario played out my dad was able to harvest this buck with an incredible free hand shot, which in the canyons is very rare for us to do. He is using his trusted Model 70 Winchester .270 he purchased in 1977 and still uses to this day. I was 11 in this photograph and was anxiously awaiting next year's season as I knew next year I would be able to complete my training and carry a rifle. My dad is now 70 and I am 38, and I still look forward to deer hunting together every year.

– Evan Klanecky, Utica



Pheasant hunting in Harlan County, 1990 ▲
 Pictured from left: Bill Applebee (me), Jim Applebee (my brother) and Vachel Applebee (my father). My father passed away in October 2021. We have many fond memories of pheasant hunting in Harlan and Franklin counties.

– Bill Applebee, Huntington Beach, California

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, Nebraskaland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 2000. 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. Text may be edited and photos adjusted for reproduction. All photos will be returned.



Pheasant hunting near Milford, 1995▲
 Good day with the roosters, near Milford in 1995.
 Left to right are Brian Isenberger, my brother Scott Tate, Buck the dog and me (in the cool hat).

– Mark Tate, Hallam



Deer Hunt west of Ashland, 1963 ◀
 This is a photo of my friend, Katherine Hancock, with her first deer. Katie took many deer in her lifetime. She passed away in 2020 at the age of 73. She was a lifelong hunter and angler and excelled at both. I hunted squirrels with Katie, and she was a crack shot.

– Stan Krause, Lincoln

**Pheasant hunting near
 Dorchester, 1972 ►**
 Pictured is Karl T. Feeken (my oldest nephew) at age 14 with his first pheasant shot on granddad's farm. Formerly of Dorchester, Karl now is a retired college professor in California.

– Gary Koci, Lincoln





Mike Marvin, from Omaha, has it right during a fishing trip at Two Rivers State Recreation Area. Every once in a while fish from the bank so at least you can go home with everything you came with. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

THE ANGLER’S DOWNFALL

By Jeff Kurrus

I know why so many pairs of sunglasses are at the bottom of lakes. The human brain can only process so many synapses simultaneously, and sometimes, fishing gear overloads the circuit board.

Rods, reels, bait. Seems simple enough, but if you want to change your bait? That requires, at least, a different pocket or container.

What if it’s a different catfish bait? You definitely can’t have two repulsively smelling substances hanging out together. And you would never have your less foul option in the company of your “when all else fails” bait option.

Don’t even get started on why it’s mandatory to put six rods and reels in your john boat when bass fishing. One for a shallow-diving crankbait, one for a spinnerbait, one for a

buzzbait, one for a scumfrog, one for a soft plastic and one last option when whimsy takes over after you verbally claim, “I know what they’ll hit.”

Plus, there are drinks and food to be had, plus a good pair of snips and a place to put fish if you happen to actually luck into one or two. Add sunscreen, bug repellent, somewhere to occasionally sit if you’re bank fishing, and a safe place to put your keys.

But what about your favorite lure? Where did you put that? It’s not in your tackle box. You would never put it in your catfish bait box. How about at the end of your rod?... No, it’s not there either.

Your hat. That’s right. Maybe you put it there.

Plop. There goes your sunglasses.

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