

Nebraskaland

INSPIRING OUTDOOR ADVENTURE SINCE 1926

APRIL 2026

Swift Foxes

See page 20

INSIDE

Illustrating Nebraskaland • Get Low Photography
Old Tackleboxes • Omaha Train Robbery of 1909
Lake Ogallala • 125 Years of Conservation Officers



Chasing rainbows is
the easy part.

*Four species. One state.
Are you up for a challenge?*



OutdoorNebraska.gov
(search "Trout Slam")



NEBRASKA LAND IS IN DEMAND



LISTED

CEDAR COUNTY, NE | 140 ACRES± | CEDAR COUNTY CABIN AND HUNTING

This peaceful and secluded hunter's paradise is located in the hills just south of the Missouri River. The 42x66 steel building is finished off in a more than comfortable fashion. Two bedrooms and a ¾ bath help make it ideal for a weekend getaway. The shop portion is insulated and heated with a concrete floor and a well-set-up meat prep area.

Not far from the cabin is a large food plot with a very comfortable and well-built tower blind. Many ideal bowhunting locations are throughout the property with abundant deer and turkey populations. Plus, the area offers many great opportunities for fantastic fishing, boating, and waterfowl hunting. This turnkey hunting property is set up for comfort and success for the entire family to enjoy.



LISTED

LANCASTER COUNTY, NE | 226.73 ACRES± | AG AND REC FARM

This multi-use acreage in Lancaster County offers a functional combination of agricultural and livestock production, infrastructure and recreational opportunity - all within approximately 10 miles of Lincoln and roughly 4.5 miles from Highway 77. The location provides efficient access to town while maintaining the space and versatility buyers look for in a rural property.

The property offers county road frontage on two sides with both power and water readily available. The land presents a balanced mix of hay, alfalfa, row crop production, and pasture. Three outbuildings and an additional garage provide ample storage capacity for equipment, feed, hay, or livestock needs. The tail waters of Salt Creek Reservoir 13-B also flow through the farm, creating a slough area that enhances habitat diversity.

CALL TODAY FOR MORE DETAILS OR TO SCHEDULE YOUR PRIVATE TOUR!

JASON SCHENDT
NORTHEAST NEBRASKA
BROKER

📞 402.707.4885

📧 jason.schendt@whitetailproperties.com



LUKE WALLACE
SOUTHEAST NEBRASKA
LAND SPECIALIST

📞 402.340.6187

📧 luke.wallace@whitetailproperties.com



WHITETAIL TROPHY PROPERTIES REAL ESTATE

HUNTING | RANCH | FARM | TIMBER

WHITETAILPROPERTIES.COM



Whitetail Properties Real Estate, LLC DBA Whitetail Properties, DBA Whitetail Properties Real Estate. In the States of Nebraska & North Dakota DBA Whitetail Trophy Properties Real Estate LLC. Licensed in NE - Jason Schendt, Broker.

FEATURES

20 THE FAST AND THE FURRY

Story and photos by Justin Haag

28 OUTDOOR NEBRASKA

What to Do in April

By Jeff Kurrus

30 THE INTRIGUE OF OLD TACKLEBOXES

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer

36 OMAHA'S 1909 TRAIN ROBBERY

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

40 LAKE OGALLALA

Photos and story by Eric Fowler

48 125 YEARS OF PROTECTING WILDLIFE RESOURCES

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

60 ILLUSTRATING NEBRASKALAND

The Art of Tim Reigert

Story by Jeff Kurrus, Art by Tim Reigert

DEPARTMENTS

8 Your Nebraska

12 In the Field

70 Mixed Bag

76 Portraits from the Past

78 The Last Stop

ON THE WEB

For more articles and
information, visit
NebraskalandMagazine.com

Cover: An adult swift fox stands alert near the entrance of its den in Sioux County. See story on page 20.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

This page: Clouds fill the sky above the South Platte River at sunrise in Lincoln County.

ERIC FOWLER, 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.



Administration

Director Tim McCoy
Chair - Donna Kush, Omaha
Vice Chair - Dan Hughes, Venango

Kurt Arganbright, Valentine
Scott Cassels, Omaha
John Hoggatt, Kearney
Kent McNeill, Papillion
Steve Mossman, Lincoln
Lisa Roskens, Omaha
Doug Zingula, Sidney

Commission Offices

Headquarters/Southeast District Office
2200 N. 33rd Street Lincoln, NE 68503
Phone 402-471-0641

Northeast District Office
2201 N. 13th St. Norfolk, NE 68701
Phone 402-370-3374

Southwest District Office
301 E. State Farm Rd. North Platte, NE 69101
Phone 308-535-8025

Northwest District Office (temporary)
1317 W 3rd St., Alliance, NE 69301
Phone 308-763-2940

Bassett Office
524 Panzer St., Box 508 Bassett, NE 68714
Phone 402-684-2921

South Central District Office
1617 First Ave. Kearney, NE 68847
Phone 308-865-5310

Schramm Education Center
21502 W. Highway 31 Gretna, NE 68028
Phone 402-332-3901

Omaha Office
8495 Frederick Street, Omaha, NE 68124
Phone 402-595-2144



OutdoorNebraska.gov

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission does not discriminate based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin, sex, pregnancy, religion, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, marital status, and/or political affiliation in its programs, activities, or employment. Any person who believes he or she has been discriminated against in any program, activity, facility, or service should contact the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Lincoln, NE 402-471-0641, the Equal Opportunity Commission, Lincoln, NE 402-471-2024, TTY/TDD 800-642-6112; Director, Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1849 C St., NW, Washington, DC 20240.

Magazine Staff

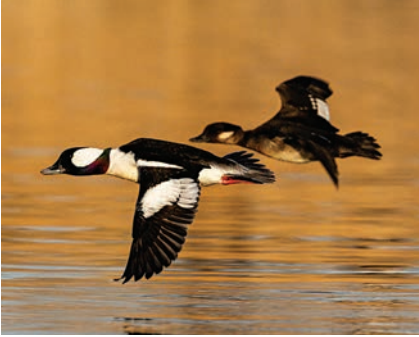
Communications Director Christy Firestone
Public Relations Manager Shawna Richter-Ryerson

Editor Jeff Kurrus
Associate Editor Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley
Regional Editors Eric Fowler, Julie Geiser, Justin Haag
Contributing Editor Michael Forsberg
Regular Contributors Chris Helzer, Chris Masada, Todd Mills, Ryan Sparks, Gerry Steinauer

Art Director Ryan Holt
Graphic Designer Mel Severin
Videographer Nick Sauvageau
Photo Librarian Jaclyn Cruikshank Vogt

Magazine Subscriptions
For address changes, magazine and subscription questions, 800-632-5263 or visit nebraskalandmagazine.com

Advertising
For advertising information, contact:
Shane G. Gilster, 402-742-0125
shangelilster@solotreemedia.com



North America's smallest diving duck, the bufflehead, relies on old nesting cavities created by northern flickers, which larger ducks struggle to fit into. This limits their breeding area to wherever northern flickers can be found. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland Magazine Copyright 2026, all rights reserved. Nebraskaland is available in audio from the Nebraska Library Commission Talking Book and Braille Service, Suite 120, 1200 N St., Lincoln, NE 68508. 800-742-7691. Nebraskaland Magazine and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission reserve the right to reject any advertising not in keeping with the agency mission. Rates: \$18 for one year; \$33 for two years; \$44 for three years. Nebraska recipients must add appropriate sales tax. To subscribe call 1-800-NEBLAND (632-5263), or go online to: NebraskalandMagazine.com.

Conservation Officers

ADMINISTRATION
Jeff Clauson 402-471-5531
Travis Shepler 402-471-5531
Stacey Lewton 402-471-5531
Mike Thome 402-471-5531

NORTHWEST
Sean McKeehan 308-672-1824

SOUTH SUB-DISTRICT
Jerod Hahn 308-520-5539

Grant Albrecht 531-229-4405
Hunter Lee 308-280-4320
Jaden Porter 308-289-2274
Tyler Stueck 308-289-6260
Keith Jadowski 531-310-2869

NORTH SUB-DISTRICT
Casey Gehrt 402-617-2112

Josh Widhelm 308-279-9133
Brandon Wallace 308-280-4488
Travis Schultz 308-279-1292
Vacant: Morrill, Scotts Bluff, Box Butte

NORTHEAST
Dale Davis 402-760-0712

WEST SUB-DISTRICT
Jeff Jones 402-762-5022

Hannah Holtmeier 402-601-7514
Greg Hesse 308-546-7464
Jonathan Andreasen 402-340-3981

Madison, Pierce
Trevor Stahlecker 402-928-9099
Mitch Johnson 402-613-8612

EAST SUB-DISTRICT
Cory Krause 402-380-6410

Kyler Prochaska 402-830-8278
Matt Costello 402-317-4014
Kelbi Abke 402-237-2537

WEST SUB-DISTRICT
Nicholas Fix 402-508-0261
Kyle Hansen 531-739-7392

Vacant: Cuming, Wayne, Stanton
CENTRAL SUB-DISTRICT
Doug Pollard 308-730-7050

Vacant: Howard, Greeley, Merrick
Matt Brandt 308-202-0819
Klint Gill 402-613-5800
Garrett Zimmer 402-416-5736
Tim Williams 308-380-7331

SOUTHWEST
Brian Piernicky 308-330-8780

NORTH SUB-DISTRICT
Alex Hasenauer 308-660-4671

Frank Miller 402-389-0444
Dana Miller 531-229-4404
Luis Nuñez 531-333-6093
Jacob Stoinski 308-395-6001
Brandon O'Neal 308-530-3157

SOUTH SUB-DISTRICT
Kelsey Glodowski 308-242-9000

Logan Smith 531-229-4406
Bryce Streger 308-537-0404
Logan Sanders 402-601-6302
Tyler Adelman 402-314-4783

SOUTHEAST
Matt Seitz 402-806-0915
Matt Taylor 402-200-9597

WEST SUB-DISTRICT
Vacant: Adams, Clay, Webster

Vacant: Thayer, Nuckolls, Fillmore
Vacant: Harlan, Franklin, Phelps
Vacant: Buffalo, Kearney

EAST SUB-DISTRICT
Heath Packett 402-210-0888

Brett Greenfield 531-350-0915
Russell Mort 402-209-1506
Rich Berggren 402-619-1355
Brian Arp 531-530-9011
Mike Luben 402-443-6392

Bryan Adams 402-429-1924

CENTRAL SUB-DISTRICT
Curt Prohaska 402-470-1298

Easton Albrecht 531-229-4407
Benjamin Keller 308-430-5500
Mark McDonald 402-805-2353
Mark Sullivan 402-741-0636
Jarrod Messman 531-739-9760



QUALITY HABITAT STARTS WITH SEED SELECTION

A seed mix lays the foundation of habitat results for years to come. Let Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever help you make the most of every acre on the landscape. Our cost-effective seed mixes are designed to maximize benefits for pheasants, quail, and other wildlife. Pricing includes delivery to your location in 7 to 10 business days with high quality customer service!

ASK YOUR LOCAL CHAPTER ABOUT DRILL RENTALS



CRP STANDARD SEED MIXES
We design seed mixes to meet NRCS practice standards that benefit soil, water quality, and wildlife conservation objectives.



WILDLIFE & POLLINATOR MIXES
Whether you're interested in wildlife or wildflowers, we have diverse seed mixes that provide multiple positive benefits.



FOOD PLOT & COVER MIXES
Provide food and shelter for game birds to enhance winter survival and body condition going into nesting season.

ORDER TODAY!
308-362-7015
OR VISIT NEBRASKAPF.COM

 Instagram Photos

Follow us @nebraskaland
and tag us in your photos
to be featured in an
upcoming issue.



TOP RIGHT: Brandon Fankhauser, Scottsbluff
Mallard Drake

BOTTOM RIGHT: Chad Gideon, Wood River
On the Hunt with Cauly Gideon

BELOW: Jeff Phelps, Sidney
Echoes of a Winter Past

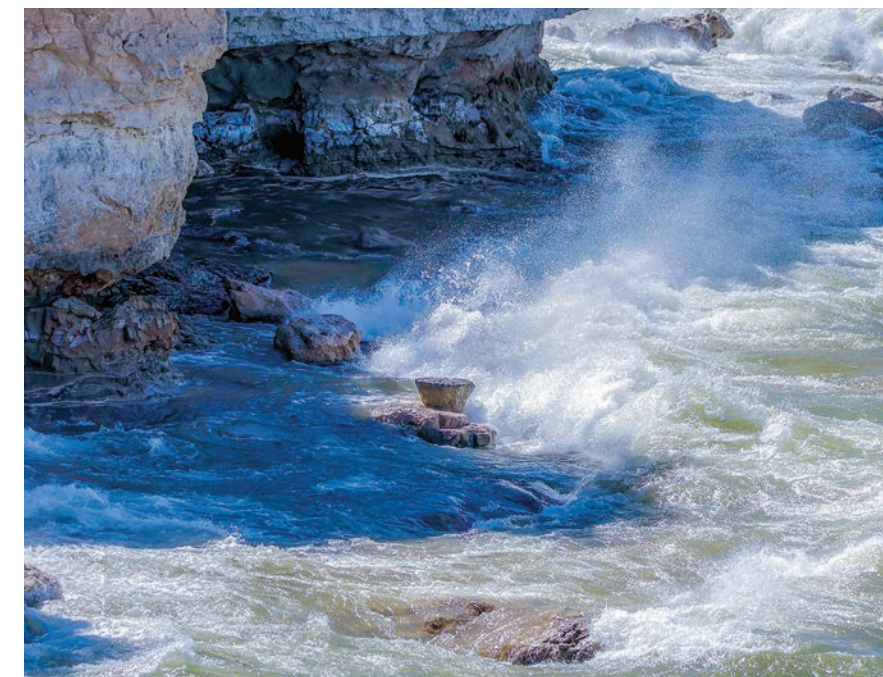




OPPOSITE LEFT: Curt Blum, Lincoln
Harvest is Over

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Kojo Baidoo, Wood River
The Evening Special

RIGHT: Rachel Valdez, Mesa, Arizona
My Nebraska Roots



LEFT: Paul Snyder, Scottsbluff
Rams in Rut

ABOVE: Marquene Koontz, Ogallala
Windy Day at Kingsley Dam

*Send your comments and photos to:
Jeff Kurrus, Editor
Nebraskaland Magazine
P.O. Box 30370
Lincoln, NE 68503
or email Jeff.Kurrus@Nebraska.gov*

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

ALMOST

The hand of Gretna's Ryan Glatter waits for a crappie to make one final shake before landing the fish at a Douglas County pond.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND





THE MISUNDERSTOOD WATER SNAKE

By Monica Macoubrie, Wildlife Education Specialist

If you spend enough time along Nebraska’s lakes, rivers or wetlands, you’ll likely spot a long, dark snake gliding effortlessly across the surface or coiled on a sunny bank. Chances are, it’s a northern water snake (*Nerodia sipedon*) — and the odds are even higher that someone nearby will immediately call it a “water moccasin” or “cottonmouth.”

Let’s bust this myth: Cottonmouths don’t live in Nebraska. What we do have are northern water snakes, which are nonvenomous, native and important to our ecosystems.

Life by the Water

Northern water snakes are true to their name. They spend nearly all their time around water, whether it’s a quiet farm pond, a shaded creek, a muddy riverbank or the cattail edges of a marsh. They’re built for an aquatic life: Their bodies are muscular and streamlined, and their keeled, or rough-textured, scales help them move smoothly through both water and vegetation. Watching one slide from a sun-warmed rock into the water is like watching liquid slipping into liquid — they vanish with barely a ripple.

These snakes aren’t just good swimmers — they’re also athletes. They can climb low branches to bask above the water, wedge themselves into rock crevices to hide from predators and even hunt while partially submerged.

Northern water snakes are opportunistic feeders, eating whatever they can overpower. Fish make up a large portion of their diet, from small minnows to unlucky sunfish to catfish fry. They’re also quick to snatch up frogs and tadpoles, and they won’t pass up a tasty salamander or crayfish.

If the opportunity arises, northern water snakes also will go after mice or young muskrats that wander too closely

to shore. They swallow their prey whole using backward-pointing teeth to grab hold while flexible jaws do the rest.

By preying on so many different species, northern water snakes help keep aquatic ecosystems balanced. They prevent any one population — like frogs or small fish — from exploding in numbers, which in turn helps protect water quality and the fragile web of life in these habitats.

Live Birth, No Eggs!

One of the northern water snake’s most fascinating adaptations is their ability to give live birth instead of laying eggs. This adaptation, called ovoviviparity, means females carry the eggs inside their bodies until the babies are fully developed and ready to be born — usually in late summer or early fall. This strategy protects the eggs from being eaten by predators or washed away by floods, and it gives the newborns a head start on survival.

Water snakes can have anywhere from 10 to 30 tiny, fully formed young in a single litter, each ready to swim and hunt from the moment they hit the water. Combined with their strong swimming ability, excellent camouflage and defensive behaviors, this live-bearing trait helps northern water snakes thrive in Nebraska’s waterways year after year.

The Misunderstood Water Neighbor

Because they’re dark, thick-bodied and not shy about standing their ground, northern water snakes often get labeled as “dangerous” — a reputation they don’t deserve. Their color doesn’t help their case: most are brown, gray or reddish with darker bands or blotches that can look almost black when wet. To the untrained eye, that can resemble a

A common water snake suns itself on a fallen tree at Stagecoach State Recreation Area. These nonvenomous snakes are often misidentified as the venomous cottonmouth. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

cottonmouth. Consequently, a lot of harmless snakes are unfairly accused and, often killed on sight.

When they feel threatened, northern water snakes employ an arsenal of defensive tricks. The most obvious one is the bluff. They’ll flatten their heads and bodies, which makes them look broader, almost like a triangle-headed venomous snake. They’ll also hiss loudly and sometimes strike toward the threat without trying to bite, hoping to scare off whatever’s bothering them.

What if all that bluffing doesn’t work? They’ll bite. And bite. And bite again. These snakes don’t have venom, but they do have dozens of tiny, needle-sharp teeth that can leave your hand looking like you lost a fight with a blackberry bush. Their saliva contains a mild anticoagulant, which means their bites tend to bleed more than you might expect — it looks dramatic, but it’s not dangerous.

If you really push their buttons, northern water snakes have one final, stinky trick up their sleeve: musk. When threatened, they can release a foul-smelling liquid that seeps into your clothes and seems impossible to wash out. A lot of people assume this musk is just snake poop, but that’s not quite true. While both musk and feces exit from the same opening —the cloaca — they’re different substances. Musk comes from specialized scent glands, while feces is simply the digested leftovers of their last meal.

Note that northern water snakes don’t chase people. They’re not out to pick fights on riverbanks. Every display — the flattening, the hissing, even the biting — is about one thing: Convincing you to back off so they can get away. When left alone, these snakes prefer to slip quietly into the water and vanish.

When Water Snakes Board Your Boat

If you spend enough time paddling or fishing, you might eventually spot a northern water snake climbing onto a kayak, canoe or even a boat dock. While this can make your heart skip a beat, the snake isn’t “attacking” or trying to hitch a ride, it’s looking for the easiest way out of the water. Like us, snakes can get tired after a long swim and will seek out the nearest solid surface to rest and warm up. Boats, docks and even the sides of kayaks make convenient “logs” in their eyes. Once they’ve caught their breath or warmed up a bit, they usually slip back into the water on their own.

The best thing you can do is stay calm, give the snake a little space and avoid splashing or swatting. It’s not looking for trouble — just a moment to bask before moving on.

Water Moccasin vs. Northern Water Snake

It’s easy to see why people mistake the northern water snake for the water moccasin, or cottonmouth.

Northern water snakes have slender bodies with round pupils and a narrow, more oval-shaped head that blends smoothly into their neck, while cottonmouths have stockier, heavier bodies and a distinct blocky triangular head.

Color can be tricky — both can have dark bands — but cottonmouths tend to have wider, “chunkier” bands and a more uniform, dull tone as they age, often turning nearly solid brown or black.

Another giveaway? Cottonmouths have that famous “cotton-white” mouth lining they flash when threatened, while northern water snakes don’t have that dramatic display.

And here’s the most important clue that Nebraskans should remember — cottonmouths simply aren’t found in the state. But the fascinating water snake is.



A juvenile brown-headed cowbird clings to the branch of a ponderosa pine tree at Ponderosa Wildlife Management Area. This bird species relies solely on other birds incubating and feeding their young; this is called brood parasitism. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

BROOD PARASITES

By Alie Mayes, Assistant Division Administrator – Fish & Wildlife Education

Cuckoos gained their name from the sound of the Eurasian common cuckoo's call. But the term "cuckoo" has now grown to be synonymous with brood parasitism, an evolutionary strategy for outsourcing the rearing of young.

Let's begin with avian brood parasitism.

Avian Brood Parasites

Avian brood parasites are birds that lay their eggs in other birds' nests. In Nebraska, birds that exhibit brood parasitism include cliff swallows, goldeneye and of course, our cuckoos.

We have two kinds of cuckoos in Nebraska: the black-billed cuckoo and the yellow-billed cuckoo. Both species are migratory, with the black-billed being the rarer of the two. Our native cuckoos differ from their Eurasian namesake in many ways, including not having the classic cuckoo call and not being obligate brood parasites — species that depend on a host to complete its life cycle, as it cannot survive or reproduce on its own. In contrast, a non-obligate parasite can live and reproduce both with and without a host.

All these birds mentioned also rear their own young, an example of non-obligate brood parasites. There is a benefit to having this two-pronged reproductive strategy — it increases the chances that at least some of their young will survive.

However, Nebraska and the greater United States is home to one avian obligate brood parasite, the brown-headed cowbird. These incredible birds rely solely on other birds

incubating and feeding their young but still provide vital parenting to their young. In a study published by ecologist Matthew Louder, cowbird females continue to keep tabs on their young and even use the failure or success of different nests to decide where to lay future broods.

Cuckoos — More Than Just Birds

Birds are not the only group of animals that rely on parasitic reproductive strategies. In Nebraska, we have two kinds of cuckoo bumble bees that have been found in recent years. Although rare, both the indiscriminate and the lemon cuckoo bumble bee have been recorded. Like cowbirds, cuckoo bumble bees are obligate brood parasites.

Cuckoo bumble bees don't just lay eggs in the host's nest, they also take over. Female cuckoo bumble bees will invade the host's nest and replace the current queen. This allows them to take over a fully functional nest with plenty of worker bees to take care of both the false queen and their young.

Nomad cuckoo bees are a kind of bee in Nebraska that utilizes brood parasitism. These bees are wasp-like in appearance. They lay their eggs in the nest of ground-nesting bees. The larvae hatch with impressive mouthparts that enable them to kill the host larvae and utilize the food left by the host mother.

These evolutionary strategies have allowed these species to thrive in our complicated natural world.

JOIN OUR TEAM Spectacular Work Environment

Explore career opportunities statewide
Full-time • Part-time • Seasonal • Permanent

Benefits include:

- Education Reimbursement
- Career Growth
- Healthcare Options
- Training and certifications such as CPR, lifeguard certification and CDL
- Flexible Schedules

NEBRASKA
— GAME PARKS —

LEARN MORE AT
OutdoorNebraska.gov



Apply Now

Crow Butte in Dawes County



VENISON STIR-FRY

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Velveting is a special technique in Chinese stir fry. Marinating slices of raw meat in egg and cornstarch protects it from drying out while cooking, which results in juicy meat. For this recipe, I used the eye of round from an older doe, a muscle located in the hindquarter. I was surprised by how tender it was and thought leftovers reheated well, too.

- Servings:** 2-4
Prep Time: 1 hour
Cooking Time: 40 minutes
Ingredients:
- 1 pound of venison eye of round, or another tender cut
 - 1 egg
 - 5 tbsp. of cornstarch, separated
 - 1 tsp. of kosher salt, separated
 - Canola/vegetable oil for frying
 - ½ cup of sweet chili sauce
 - ½ cup of hoisin sauce
 - ½ to 1 tsp. red pepper flakes, to taste
 - 1½ tbsp. of apple cider vinegar
 - ¼ cup of water
 - 1 tsp. of sugar
 - 1 red bell pepper
 - Half a medium onion
 - 5 cloves of garlic, minced
 - Freshly cooked white rice
 - Thinly sliced green onion for garnish

1. Trim off silver skin on venison and cut thinly against the grain. In a small bowl, beat egg and then mix in 1 tablespoon of cornstarch and ½ teaspoon of kosher salt. Add sliced venison, stir to coat and refrigerate covered for 1 hour.

2. Meanwhile, remove ribs and seeds from the red bell pepper and cut into 1-inch squares. Cut onion into similar-size pieces. In a small bowl, combine sweet chili sauce, hoisin sauce, red pepper flakes, apple cider vinegar,



water, ½ teaspoon of kosher salt and sugar, and set aside.

3. When venison is done marinating, add the remaining cornstarch to the bowl and stir to coat. In a saucepan, heat 1 inch of oil to 350 degrees F. Separate venison pieces and carefully drop into the hot oil one by one — do not crowd the pan. Once the pieces start turning golden at the edges, about 1 to 2 minutes, remove and drain on paper towels. Repeat with the rest of the venison.

4. While the venison is frying, add oil to coat the bottom of a frying pan/

wok over medium-high heat. Add onion and red bell pepper and sauté until caramelized at the edges. Lower heat to medium and then add minced garlic and a pinch of salt; sauté for 30 seconds.

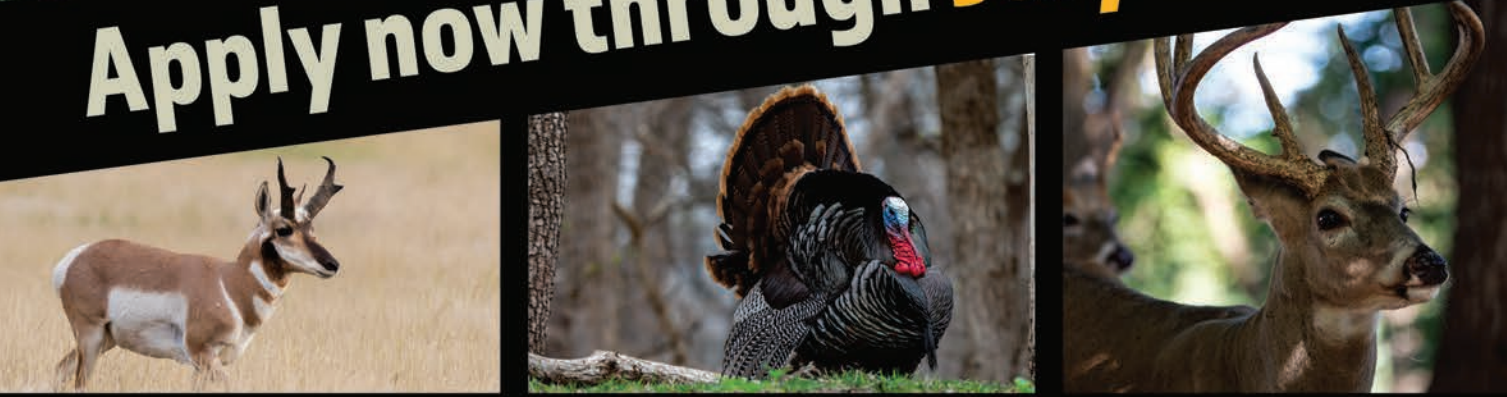
5. Add the sauce and bring to a low boil, stirring frequently and being careful not to scorch the bottom. Add the cooked venison and toss to coat. Simmer for a couple minutes until thickened and warmed through. Season to taste. Serve hot with freshly cooked white rice. Garnish with sliced green onion.

Super Tag Lottery

Multiple Entry Super Tag
Includes tags for elk, deer, antelope and turkey
\$11.50
per entry
Nonresidents eligible

Resident Super Tag
Includes tags for elk, deer, antelope and turkey
\$29
single entry
Nebraska residents only

Apply now through July 3, 2026



Other Multi-species Lottery options offered.



Learn more at OutdoorNebraska.gov/SuperTag



THE FAST AND THE FURRY

Story and photos by Justin Haag

***THE SWIFT FOX** is an iconic species of
western Nebraska's shortgrass prairie.*



*THE SWIFT FOX PREFERS
SHORTGRASS PRAIRIES AS AREAS
IT CAN SEE ITS SURROUNDINGS
AND SCAN FOR DANGER.*



ABOVE: A young swift fox looks to its mother while growing up in Kimball County.

LEFT: Although the swift fox measures only 12 inches tall at the shoulders, it stands tall on the shortgrass prairies.

At 3 to 7 pounds, the swift fox (*Vulpes velox*) is the smallest wild canine species in North America. It's surely diminutive but stands tall as one of the most charming mammals residing in western Nebraska — a superb poster species to represent wildlife diversity of the often overlooked wide-open prairies of the High Plains.

The swift fox is about the size of a housecat, half as big as the much more common red fox. It also is distinguished from the red fox with a black-tipped tail instead of white and its proportionally bigger ears that help in listening for predators.

As the swift fox's name indicates, its agile feet are among its best features for evading predators. Even though it's much smaller than one of its nemeses, the coyote, its short legs can run at about the same speed — up to 40 mph.

The swift fox is an opportunistic omnivore who typically hunts at night, consuming a variety of rodents and other small mammals, insects, grasses and carrion. Most daytime sightings of swift foxes are when they're sunning themselves at the entrance to their den with pups, sometimes called kits.

The swift fox prefers shortgrass prairies as areas it can see its surroundings and scan for danger. Unlike other canid species, it uses the cover of burrows year-round and not just during mating season. They are capable of digging dens but often take up residence in the vacant holes of badgers and prairie dogs, the latter of which is one of their favorite prey.

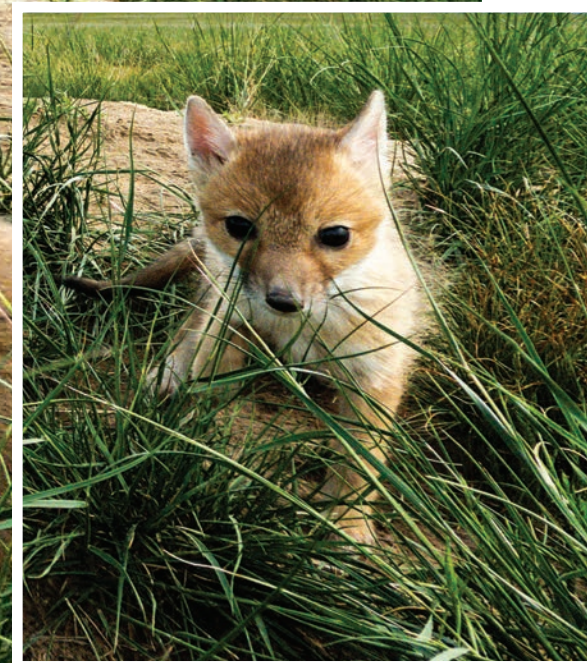
Swift foxes form monogamous pairs in the fall, and those relationships often last until death do them part. A female swift fox gives birth to two to six pups in spring, which both parents help raise until the young disperse in the fall. They are not considered to be territorial, and family ranges often overlap.

As the parents are teaching them to hunt and avoid

predators, the family may live in several different burrows and often move because of flea infestations. A swift fox may travel 4 to 9 miles each night in search of food.

Long ago, the swift fox's range extended from Alberta to Texas and from Iowa to New Mexico and Montana. The decline in shortgrass prairie has not been kind to the population, however. It now lives on less than 44 percent of its original range.

Eradication efforts on prey, such as the prairie dog, and even other predators, also have put the swift fox in peril. Even though coyotes prey upon swift foxes, efforts to poison and trap that species have been linked to the unintentional killing of many of their smaller relatives.



*AS PARENTS ARE
TEACHING YOUNG
TO HUNT AND AVOID
PREDATORS, THE FAMILY
MAY LIVE IN SEVERAL
DIFFERENT BURROWS.*

For pups, the area surrounding the swift fox den is all about play, and the occasional snack. Mother, however, keeps a watchful eye for danger.



As swift foxes frequently reside in burrows near roads, where coyotes avoid, the risk of becoming roadkill is high.

The swift fox is not listed as an endangered species on the federal level, but it is on Nebraska's endangered species list. Once extirpated from Canada, the species has rebounded after reintroduction efforts there.

Sam Wilson, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission furbearer and carnivore program manager, said the agency has conducted surveys in the past and takes note of photos from the public, roadkill data and staff observations.

In 2016, Lucia Corral Hurtado published results of the state's most comprehensive survey of swift fox distribution ever for the University of Nebraska. Using camera traps, she and her conservation partners conducted four surveys on

200 public and private sites within western Nebraska over two years. The cameras were placed on both private and public lands west of a line running roughly diagonal between Gordon and Beaver City.

"We found they are mostly present where we had been detecting them in the past through track surveys and opportunistic data collection — in the shortgrass prairies of the Panhandle and there may be a few in the southwestern portion of the state," Wilson said. "Distribution looks somewhat stable over time."

Wilson encourages the public to contact him or a nearby wildlife biologist if they see swift foxes.

To learn more about the swift fox and other wildlife, visit OutdoorNebraska.gov. 

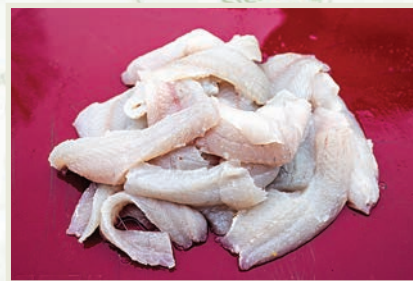
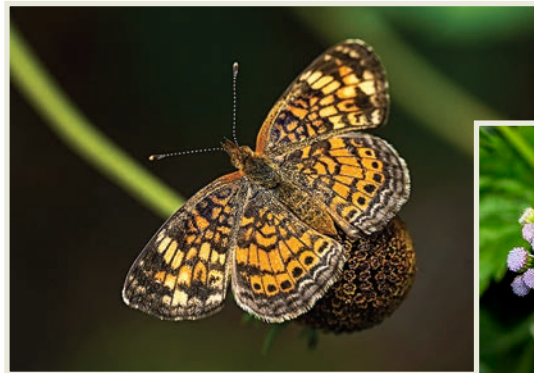
Mother works to keep a youngster safe and well groomed on the Sioux County grasslands.

Outdoor Nebraska

WHAT TO DO IN APRIL

By Jeff Kurrus

Green surrounds us. Take advantage of spring with a variety of activities that include hiking, hunting and counting butterflies. Then, when the sun sets, cook up a mess of fish for dinner. 🍽️



Big Butterfly Count

April and May | Statewide

Nebraska's Big Butterfly Count is a community science project designed to collect population and habitat data to better understand butterfly diversity across Nebraska. Training is required to contribute to this project, and workshops and field days will take place in April and May. During these workshops participants will learn about community science, identifying eastern and central Nebraska butterfly species, and how to conduct surveys for Nebraska's Big Butterfly Count. Volunteers will conduct a survey at least once every other week, from May 1 through Sept. 30. Learn more at OutdoorNebraska.gov by searching for "big butterfly count."

BRIANNA NUGENT

Frying Largemouths

April | Select Fisheries

Largemouth bass are great in the frying pan, grill or oven, and there are three lakes — Prairie View, Duck Creek and Prairie Queen — where there is a 15- to 18-inch protected slot, allowing anglers to legally keep largemouth bass less than 15 inches and one fish above 18 inches. At Frye Lake, there is no minimum length limit and anglers are allowed one bass over 18 inches. Look for shallow water next to deeper contours at these lakes and enjoy having the water to yourself. Visit OutdoorNebraska.gov/guides for the complete regulations.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Sporting Clays

April | Statewide

Recently, a hunting partner who had bought a new pump shotgun was struggling with this new action versus what he had shot his entire life. "Sporting clays," I told him. "A lot of kinks can get worked out on these courses." With facilities across the state, these courses allow shooters to replicate scenarios like pass shooting, birds dumping into a decoy spread and rabbits on the run. And April is the perfect month to practice for the fall season.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Gobble Time

April | Statewide

As photoperiod increases and days begin to warm, toms will begin separating from the flock in search of mating partners. The early part of the season is so advantageous to hunters because toms aren't call shy, and there are just enough grasses to hide in if you're stationary or on the move. On cooler temperature hunts or when birds are flocked up, hunt the middle of the day to catch insecure toms by themselves.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Take a Hike

April | Statewide

The earliest spring wildflowers are in bloom, and hikers should keep an eye out for these small beauties. In the wooded hills of Ponca and Indian Cave state parks, white fawn lily and Dutchman's breeches add color to the forest floors. In tallgrass prairie at Rock Creek Station State Historical Park and Niobrara SP, look for the purple flowers of prairie violet and buffalo bean, along with the white tufts of field pussytoes. Out west at Fort Robinson, Chadron and Wildcat Hills state parks, white star lily, pussytoes and several cushion-like milkvetches with various-colored flowers stand out on the rugged, prairie- and pine-covered escarpments.

BY GERRY STEINAUER, PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

The background image shows a workshop or storage area filled with fishing gear. In the foreground, there are two tackleboxes: a weathered, light-colored metal one with a latch and a brown leather one with a 'PLANO' logo and a latch marked '5303'. Behind them, various fishing rods, reels, and other tackle are visible, creating a sense of a well-used, old fishing shop.

The INTRIGUE OF *Old* TACKLEBOXES

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer

Although I am not a serious fisherman, I have long been drawn to old tackleboxes. Opening one feels a bit like gazing into a long-forgotten treasure chest. Among the battle-scarred jigheads, rusty hooks and melted rubber worms there is always usable gear, but what really grabs my attention are the older lures — some of them art, others antiques.

I have acquired several tackleboxes from friends who have given up fishing or died. For me, just as interesting as the gear inside is the insight they offer into the former owner's fishing habits, or even their personality. They are cherished keepsakes, especially two I acquired from people I greatly admired.

Jon Farrar's Tacklebox

Jon Farrar was a longtime Nebraskaland photographer and writer, as well as a close friend and co-worker. I admired his love of nature — especially the Sandhills, his favorite haunt — along with his dry humor and his writing. His articles, whether about duck hunting, black-necked stilts or wildflowers, were well-researched, highly-organized and beautifully-written. His tacklebox came into my possession by plain luck.

When Jon died a few years ago, I bought several of his hand-carved duck decoys and some hunting gear through his online estate auction. On a fall Saturday, hoping to beat the crowd, I was among the first to arrive at his Lincoln home to pick up those items. I was surprised to see that the auction company had laid out more of Jon's possessions in his garage for sale. My heart skipped a beat when I saw his tacklebox beneath a table. I grabbed it, along with his decoy-carving tools and a few other items. I asked the woman from the auction company how much she wanted for my armful. "Twenty bucks," she said. I about dropped.

My drive home was one of anticipation. Once there, I opened the box, and, as expected, its contents were immaculately organized — much like the file cabinets in Jon's office. Rubber worms were lined up in one tray, lures neatly placed in others and lead weights and hooks sorted by size into plastic containers and old, metal film canisters. Small spinners and Doll

Flies were tucked into Sucrets tins. There was not a loose item about.

The gear was basic: Jon was not an avid fisherman, and it was what one would expect for fishing Sandhills waters. For years, he kept a trailer house and small johnboat on Big Alkali Lake in Cherry County. Fishing for Jon was likely a diversion during spring and summer photo expeditions, or between morning and evening duck flights. His real passion was duck hunting.

"I know Jon fished Big Alkali and Pelican Lake, and he also fooled around on the lakes at Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge," said Jim Van Winkle, Jon's longtime friend from Wood Lake. Van Winkle said Jon fished for catfish in the Loup River and Loup Power Canal when he was growing up in Monroe. That explains the numerous large sinkers in his tacklebox.

The wire leaders and many spoons were for hooking toothy northern pike in the shallow reed beds of Sandhills lakes; the small spinners, Beetle Spins, and Doll Flies for panfish; and the rubber worms, Jitterbugs, and other plugs for largemouth bass. Jon's lures all appeared older and a bit faded, suggesting his interest in fishing waned after he lost his trailer lease on Big Alkali a few decades ago.

Although I will use Jon's leaders, hooks and weights, the Jitterbugs, Rapalas and other plugs will stay in the tacklebox as a remembrance of Jon: They are too valuable to risk losing on a snag.



Omaha's 1909 Train Robbery

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

A double-header freight train leaving the Union Pacific yard near South 35th Street in Omaha, 1921. This is about seven blocks east of where the Overland Limited train was robbed in 1909. *NSHS RG2941-6-70*



Next time you're driving through Omaha on I-80, notice the Union Pacific tracks running parallel to the Interstate. Just east of 72nd Street, imagine you're still west of town, rolling east aboard the Overland Limited by night, your hands on the steam engine's levers. It is May 22, 1909.

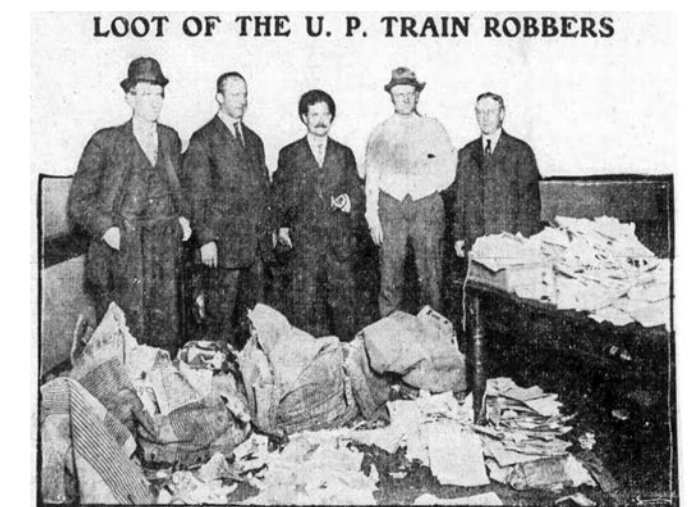
Suddenly, two men appear over the coal tender and jump down to the engine, pistols drawn. Wearing slouch hats, long coats, and with blue polka-dot handkerchiefs covering their faces, they look like Western outlaws. Which they are.

Holding a pistol to your temple, one of them looks out the cab window until he spots a signal fire. He orders you to proceed until he has you stop the train in a deep cut just west of 42nd Street. There are four or five bandits in all, and in no more than 15 minutes, they empty the postal cars of seven registered mail sacks bound for eastern banks — “a hell of a load to carry in an automobile,” one of them complains.

Though the bandits do not enter the passenger cars, they keep everyone cooperative by firing their revolvers at random. Before disappearing into the night, they order you to take the train ahead into the city. Shaken, you notify the authorities as soon as you arrive at Union Station.

That's what you would have seen and heard had you lived through the “Mud Cut Robbery.” As soon as the morning papers arrived, it became the talk of the city. But despite the offer of thousands of dollars in reward money, days passed without any useful leads.

A group of South Omaha schoolboys broke the case open on May 27. They attended Brown Park Elementary at 19th and U streets. Playing in a wooded gully nearby, they discovered abandoned guns, hats and blue polka-dot handkerchiefs. Police staked out the area and soon arrested three men. Janitors then found the missing mail sacks — minus everything of value — in the Brown Park school attic.



Post Office inspectors with the stolen mail sacks found in the attic of Brown Park Elementary School. *Omaha Daily News*, May 29, 1909.

THREE SUSPECTS ARRESTED AS BANDITS; FOURTH ALLEGED TRAN ROBBER ESCAPES

PICTURE OF FOUR ALLEGED TRAIN ROBBERS
FOUND IN SUSPECT WOOD'S GRIP



From left to right—Lower row: Woods, unknown woman, Torgenson.
Upper row: Gordon, unknown man, supposed to be the fourth man, who is still at large.
The accompanying picture was reproduced from a photograph found in Wood's grip. Three of the four men in the picture are those under arrest. The identity of the other man and the woman is still unknown. The auto as shown is palpably "faked" being a piece of "scenery" in a photograph studio as is the view in the background.



South Omaha Police Arrest D. W. Woods,
James Gordon and Fred Torgensen---
Fourth Man Escapes.

Three Colts Guns, Old Hats, Masks and Pocket
Light Found Near Where the Men
Were Arrested.

Finding of Cache of Guns and Ammunition by
Small Boys Gives Tip to Police, Who
Lay in Wait for Suspects.

D. W. Woods of Minneapolis, James Gordon of Denver and Fred Torgenson of South Dakota, believed to be three of the four bandits who held up the Overland Limited Saturday night, were arrested at South Omaha last night at 11 o'clock, near a gulch in which had been found two automatic revolvers, a Colt revolver, cartridges, a flash lamp, three old hats and dark-colored handkerchiefs. Officers lay in wait where the weapons and ammunition were hidden and arrested the three when they approached the cache.

A fourth man, who was seen in the same neighborhood, with the others, escaped the two officers who made the arrest.

The fact that cartridges found in the hiding place are exactly similar to the empty shells found at the spot where the train was held up, that the men have been telling conflicting stories, denying acquaintance with each other, when a picture has been found with all four of them in the same automobile, and letters to two of them, and their grips were found in an Omaha room, in addition to the suspicious circumstances under which they were arrested, and the stories they told, seem to furnish the strongest evidence that the police are on the right track.

The clue that resulted in the capture of the men, was discovered by some school boys at play, between 7 and U streets, about 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

Johnny Krolk, aged 12 years, who resides at Eighteenth and U streets and John Swoboda, of Eighteenth and U streets, both boys pupils at Brown Park school, and Frank Kudna, aged 19 years, were playing together in a gully.

Suddenly in falling over a little gully washed by the rain, near a telephone discovery. A little later Anton Kubal, Harrell Whitaker and John Potach found the flash lamp. Officers then found the other things that had been hidden there.

In the evening Detective Elsfield and Captain Turnquist concealed themselves near the place, waiting for the men to appear. Captain Turnquist finally saw a man leave a saloon and approach the place.

He seized the man before he had a chance to make any resistance, and turned him over to Officer Mawhinney and returned to the spot. Detective Elsfield and he were lying in wait when two more men approached.

"You are under arrest," the officers exclaimed as they jumped out on them, guns in their hands.

"As though it was not a surprise to them, the men offered no protest to being arrested, nor did they ask for what they had been arrested.

In the meantime, Woods, the first man captured, had been asked what he was doing there at that time of night. "I was taking a woman home," said Woods, "and her name was Mrs. Olson." I have an uncle in Omaha, worth \$50,000, and so I don't want anything said about this, and I don't want to put the woman in a compromising position.

Denied They Knew Woods.

The other men were then questioned about what had been done, suspecting that Woods had been caught.

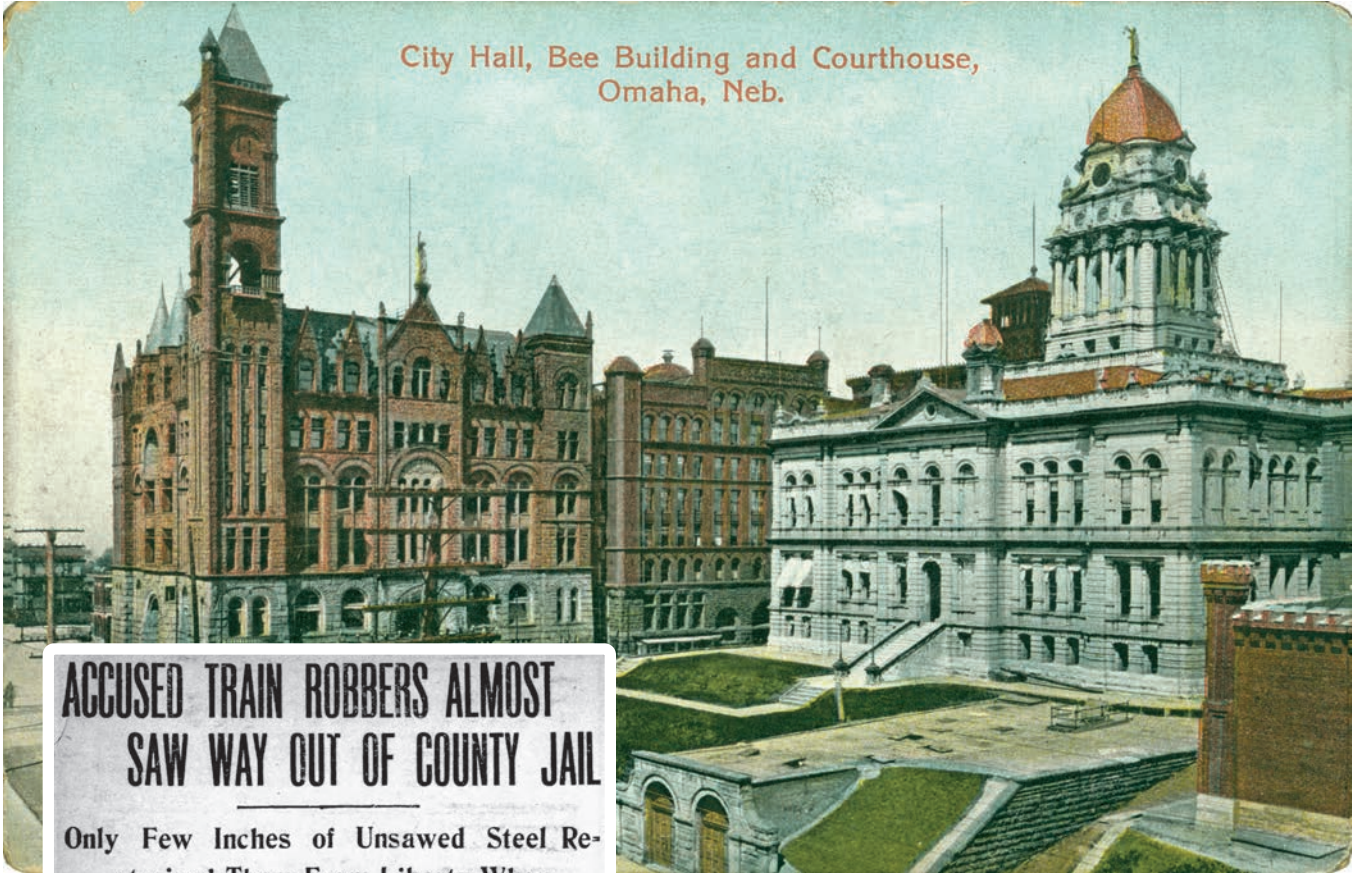
"We were taking some women home," they said, "but don't want to give their names, as we don't want to put them in a compromising position."

"Then the men denied all knowledge of Woods. 'My pal isn't in town, one of the men said.

They told conflicting stories as to how they had met each other. One said that they had met last Friday in Denver, and the other said said that they had met Thursday in South Dakota. Woods said he was from Denver, and the clothing of all three bears the trademark of a Denver firm.

ABOVE: A studio photo (with an auto cutout and fake scenery) helped investigators identify the suspects and pressure Lillian Stevenson (center) into testifying against the others. *Evening World-Herald*, May 28, 1909.

LEFT: Overland Limited train in Oakland, California, in 1906. The train was operated jointly by the Southern Pacific, Union Pacific and Chicago and North Western railroads. *Library of Congress*



ACCUSED TRAIN ROBBERS ALMOST SAW WAY OUT OF COUNTY JAIL

Only Few Inches of Unsawed Steel Restrained Them From Liberty When
Discovered.

How the Implements Were Smuggled in Is
Still a Jail Secret—Brailey Does
the Talking.

Searches of the suspects' apartments turned up more evidence. Of special interest was a group photo showing the three men plus a fourth man and his lady friend — a Denver woman who, after being "sweated" by the police, agreed to turn state's evidence against the others. The men were said to be a gang of "well-known Spokane crooks and safe-blowers" who apparently left the Pacific Northwest after becoming too well-known to authorities.

By the time the trial was underway in November, the defendants — apparently believing that conviction was inevitable — tried to break out of jail. They were caught with saws in their cells, and one of them had nearly finished sawing through the roof of his "solitary cage." After the jury found the five men guilty, they were immediately hustled off to Fort Leavenworth for what was supposed to be "a life of hard labor."

ABOVE: The old Douglas County Courthouse, right, on the site of the present courthouse. A corner of the turreted, red-brick county jail is shown at far right. *NSHS RG3348-6-394*

LEFT: News of the attempted jailbreak was kept from the sequestered jury to avoid prejudicing the verdict. *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 11, 1909.

In Omaha, the schoolboys, school principal and janitors, and members of the Omaha Police Department spent the next four years squabbling over the reward money, which a judge eventually divided among them.

Most of the convicted men ended up serving between one and 17 years. One was pardoned by President Woodrow Wilson after the others swore he was innocent, and three of the others had their sentences commuted for good behavior.

But one of the five, Frank Grigware, escaped from Leavenworth with a group of convicts who "commandeered a locomotive in the prison grounds and crashed through a gate to freedom," in the words of historian Tommy R. Thompson. Grigware lived for many years in Canada under an assumed name. By the time his identity was discovered in 1934, he was such a popular local citizen that he was never extradited. 

Read more about the case by searching "Great Omaha Train Robbery" at history.nebraska.gov



LAKE OGALLALA

The sun sets a little earlier at Lake Ogallala than it does elsewhere in Keith County, as much as a half hour earlier if you are parked in the west campground of the lake.

Photos and story by Eric Fowler

That’s what happens when you find yourself in the shadow of Kingsley Dam, rising 150 feet above the west side of the lake.

Not only does Lake Ogallala literally lie in the shadow of the dam, and Lake McConaughy behind it, it sits there figuratively as well. And that suits its regulars, who often refer to it simply as “the little lake,” just fine.

The depression left behind when sand and clay were pumped from the North Platte River Valley to build Kingsley Dam between 1935 and 1941 is Lake Ogallala. But while they were born at the same time, the two couldn’t be more different.

There are no Jet skis flying around the little lake, where the speed limit is 5 mph. No wake boats with loud music blaring from their speakers either. You will find kayaks and fishing boats plying its waters, which are sheltered from the westerly winds by the dam.

The campgrounds are quiet, too, be it the modern campground on the east side or the basic RV and tent sites strung along the north and west sides. The most noise you are likely to hear is from playgrounds in the east and west campgrounds when the youngsters are burning off some energy, or from a spirited conversation around the evening campfire.

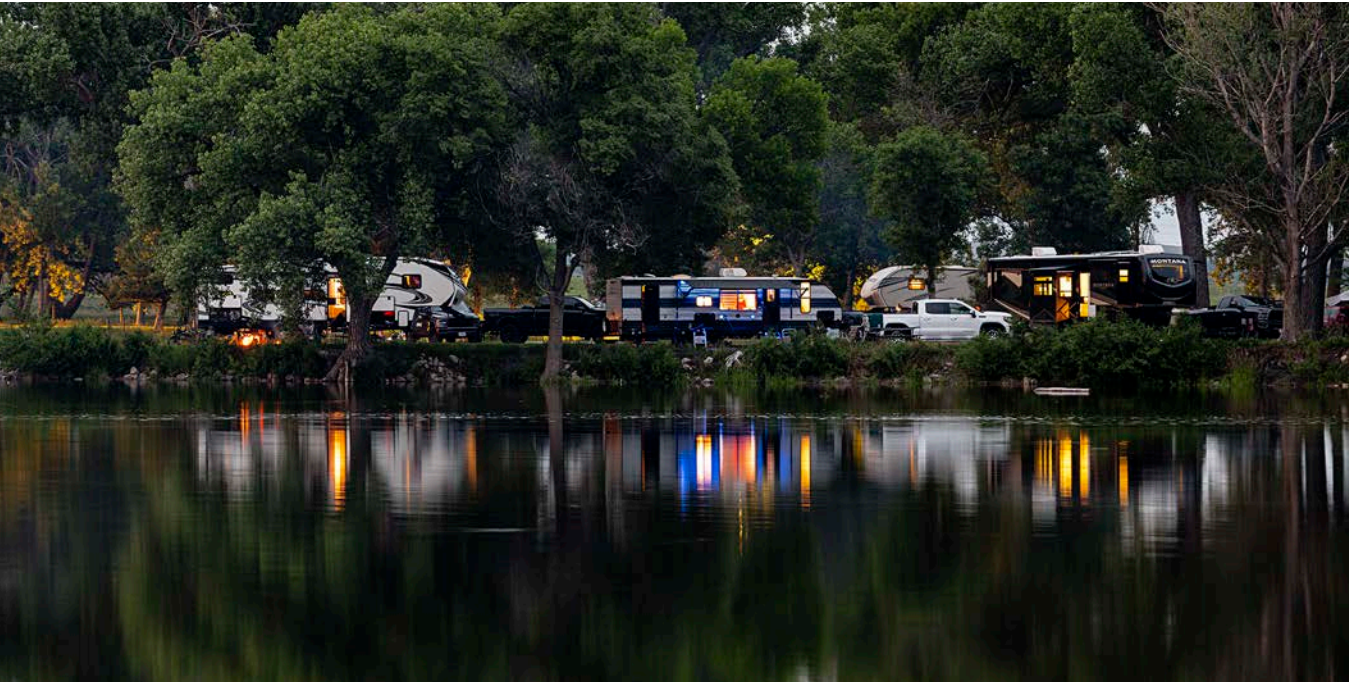


Abigail Martens of Sidney rides a stand-up paddleboard past a boat.



ABOVE: Children enjoy the playground in the west campground.

BELOW: The east campground is reflected in the lake.



The Parriott family of Murray relaxes around a fire in the east campground.

There are no white sand beaches on the little lake either. You can swim there if you like, but you will likely find the water, which is drawn from the depths of Big Mac, a bit cold. That makes it more suited for trout and yellow perch, which have done well in the cold, clear waters since a 2023 Aquatic Habitat Program project renovated the lake to reset a fish population dominated by common carp and white suckers.

More than 134,000 9- to 13-inch trout have been stocked since, mostly rainbows but also some tiger trout, a brook and brown trout hybrid, and

cutbows, a cross between cutthroat and rainbow trout. With plenty of invertebrates to eat, these trout are growing fast, 6- to 8-inches a year, with some already reaching Master Angler proportions now topping 23 inches, or 5 pounds.

The 80,000 perch that were stocked are growing nicely, too, with some topping 8 inches. While none were stocked, plenty of channel catfish have swum through the dam, including some big ones waiting to be caught. This year, walleyes will be added to the mix as well.



Callie Beck and her dad, Britt, of Colorado Springs, fish for catfish in the spillway.



Doug Steinke of Grand Island fly-fishes for trout in the shallow Keystone basin on the lake's east end.



Rainbow trout are thriving in Lake Ogallala following an Aquatic Habitat Program project completed in 2022.

Bald eagles flock to Lake Ogallala during the dead of winter, roosting in trees around the lake and feasting on fish flushed through the dam.



American white pelicans take flight from a sandbar in the Keystone basin.



The sky glows over the Kingsley Hydroplant on Lake Ogallala.

If you want some exercise, you can take the nearly mile-long mowed trail up the north end of the dam, hop across the highway and go explore the beach at Martin Bay. Or you can take the Lake Ogallala Hike-Bike Trail from the east campground to the Nebraska Public Power District's Diversion Dam. There, along the shallow Keystone Pool, you might find pelicans, shorebirds and other waterbirds feeding on shallow flats or in deeper water. If you are really adventurous, you can take a 6.4 mile lap around the lake.

The Keystone basin draws duck and goose hunters during the fall and winter. And during winter, especially when rivers and lakes, including McConaughy, freeze, bald eagles and other waterbirds flock to the spillway in the southwest corner of the lake to feed on alewife, gizzard shad and other fish that flushed through Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District's hydroelectric plant.

"We love it over here," said Vincent Cooper of North Platte, who, with his wife, Tia, camp there often. "You can't beat waking up and looking out of your tent and seeing this." He pointed to the lake and the cedar-covered hills on its south shore.

It's a different world below the dam. And people like it that way. 



Tent camping sites line much of the west side of Lake Ogallala.



125 YEARS OF PROTECTING WILDLIFE RESOURCES

*Nebraska conservation officers
celebrate quasiquicentennial*





FOR 125 YEARS, NEBRASKA GAME WARDENS, BETTER KNOWN AS CONSERVATION OFFICERS, HAVE SEEN THROUGH EVERY GAME LAW REVISION AND STOOD AT THE FRONTLINES OF ENCOUNTERING EVERY WHIM OF PUBLIC SENTIMENT IN THE FIELD. THEIR DUTIES HAVE BEEN EVER CHANGING, REFLECTING THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AND PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS. WHAT STARTED AS AN OPEN-SEASON MENTALITY ON WILDLIFE HAS EVOLVED INTO A POWERFUL SENSE OF SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AND STEWARDSHIP AMONG NEBRASKANS.

DE FACTO OPEN SEASON

Despite the game laws that existed prior to 1900, hunting and fishing at this time was more of “a de facto open season,” wrote Jon Farrar in “Centennial of Wardens,” published in *Nebraskaland Magazine*, November 2001. Although overstretched county sheriffs and town constables were responsible for enforcing all state laws, catching poachers was low priority, and wildlife suffered.

In 1901, after mounting pressure from concerned sportsmen, the Nebraska Legislature finally took meaningful action. Alongside the creation of the Game and Fish Commission — a precursor of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission — the legislature backed up this new agency with the state’s first game wardens.

Lincoln Gun Club President George Simpkins would serve as chief deputy; Joseph Matousek of Brainard was his second; and P.C. Counselman of Omaha, Harry L. McConnel of Albion and George Carter of North Platte were named assistant deputies, reported the *Stanton Register* on April 9.

This thinly staffed, underbudgeted department depended on 88 special deputies to be their “eyes and ears” throughout the state. These special wardens had the authority to issue citations and make arrests, but they initially served without pay. Wardens were not issued uniforms and, before 1921, depended on inefficient railways, horses and rented vehicles to cover their areas.

Consequently, enforcement during these first several decades was spotty, and game wardens faced an uphill effort to get Nebraskans to abandon their old ways of seeing wildlife as mere commodity. Although fines for violations were steep, up to \$500 for dynamiting fish or \$300 for killing protected species, the odds of getting caught were miniscule. Furthermore, not all special wardens were armed and were occasionally shot at by violators.

Still, despite its rough start, this new arm of law enforcement was vital to the survival of the fledgling Game and Fish Commission.

EARLY CONUNDRUMS

The challenges in enforcing game laws in the early 20th century were manyfold. The most obvious hurdle being funding, which was controlled by a Nebraska Legislature that continually fielded criticism on whether wildlife law enforcement was good value for money.

The few paid game wardens had to cover an immense territory, and the reliability and competency of the volunteer special wardens was tenuous. Occasionally, special wardens were arrested for violations, which newspapers delighted in reporting.

Market hunting also continued to be widespread. As Farrar wrote, “There were too many hungry settlers, too many families to whom \$4 for a dozen prairie chickens was a windfall.”

During the Commission’s first two years, only 5,718 resident and 97 non-resident licenses were issued. Created in 1901, the new license law required all male hunters and anglers over the age of 18 to buy a \$1 license and imposed additional restrictions on the taking of fish and game. The low number of permits sold suggested that many hunters and anglers simply ignored the new law or did not know it existed.

The game department and its wardens had a conundrum on their hands. How do they educate Nebraskans about wildlife conservation? And how do they persuade the public to care? Only then will game laws be honored.

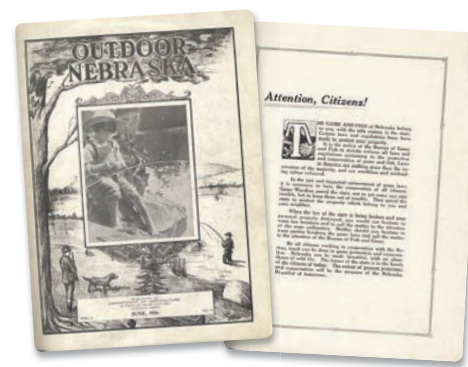
POWER OF THE PRESS

In January 1917, George C. Kusters of Niobrara was appointed head of the Commission and chief deputy warden. It was also Kusters who quickly recognized that building a relationship with the state’s newspapers would be advantageous to the Commission’s

objectives. With his political acumen and public support, Kusters fostered respect for game laws by sharing his warden’s exploits in apprehending poachers and violators with the press.

Still, despite his administration’s best efforts, it would be many years before the tide of public opinion would truly turn. But it was a start.

On March 1, 1926, Frank B. O’Connell — former adjutant of the American Legion — was appointed chief deputy warden. Although O’Connell was not a “sportsman of any fashion,” reported the newspapers, he was a competent administrator, wrote Farrar. And he understood the power of the press. While Kusters solicited the favor of the newspapers, O’Connell took one step further by creating his own publication.



In June 1926, the first edition of *Outdoor Nebraska* magazine — the precursor of *Nebraskaland Magazine* — was published. In addition to serving as chief game warden and secretary of the Bureau of Game and Fish — formally the Game and Fish Commission — O’Connell was also the magazine’s editor. He used this new platform to spread the word of conservation, to urge the public to adhere to game laws and to advance the aims of his administration.

A TURNING POINT

O’Connell’s administration was a turning point. In 1927, the legislature determined that all fees collected from hunting and fishing licenses were to fund the work of the Bureau of Game and Fish — a measure that sportsmen had been demanding. In addition to

more funding, this measure would also help remove politicians from the game department and increase its accountability.

The larger budget allowed for hiring more and better qualified game wardens to handle the increasing demands of a new pheasant season in October 1927 and the rise in violations that resulted from more stringent federal waterfowl hunting regulations during the 1930s — a response to plummeting bird numbers. At the end of 1928, a growing department budget left room for 12 to 20 paid wardens to be employed on a seasonal basis.

Then, at the end of the decade, another major shift occurred — one that would usher in the modern era of game, fish and parks management in Nebraska.

A NEW ERA

Prior to 1930, the Bureau and its wardens were effectively one and the same. Law enforcement had made up half of the state’s game and fish department, and its leadership served as both chief deputy game warden and Bureau head. However, during the 1929 legislative session, that changed.

Backed by the Izaak Walton League, “which has been working for a number of years to put in force the Commission form of government in game affairs,” reported *Outdoor Nebraska* magazine in July 1929, the Bureau of Game and Fish was removed from the Department of Agriculture

and merged with the Forestation Commission and the Park Board, resulting in the creation of the Game, Forestation and Parks Commission.

A board of commissioners would increase efficiency and help prevent corruption. Elected officials would also be leaders in their fields, bringing their knowledge and expertise in decision making. However, this restructuring meant that law enforcement would take a less prominent role in the administration of the fish and game department, subsequently becoming one of many divisions that fell under the responsibility of the agency. Still, the role of game wardens became no less vital — it became more focused.

By the end of the year, 17 full-time officers were on payroll and furnished with green and gray, Mountie-like uniforms that were fitting of their position. O’Connell also began eliminating volunteer special deputy wardens, keeping only a few individuals on a commission basis. In a 1929-1931 report, he referred to game wardens as “officers” for the first time.

“In the 1930s and 1940s, less was said about game wardens and more about game farms, improved fish hatcheries and new recreation areas and parks,” Farrar wrote. “Law enforcement had become the reliable old horse in the team. It pulled its load without a lot of attention.”

It seems Nebraskans were finally warming up to their defenders of wildlife and wild places.



In 1942, McCook junior college science teacher Paul T. Gilbert replaced Acting Secretary W.H. Lytle as head of the Commission. Under Gilbert and William R. Cunningham, who filled the newly created role of “supervisors of conservation officers,” conservation officers evolved to become much more than game wardens. In 1946, Gilbert’s officers made more than 200 public appearances, including speaking to civic groups, school classrooms and sportsmen clubs to educate the public on conservation.

“Good public relations are worth a thousand arrests,” Owen often said, highlighting the importance of building relationships and trust with the public. He believed education was key to getting Nebraskans to comply with the law.

During Gilbert's tenure, the number of officers grew, and the division saw several upgrades in equipment. Although expenditures by the game department were under constant scrutiny, Gilbert moved forward with the purchase of a 22-foot boat to patrol the new Lake McConaughy. A single-engine Cub Cruiser was also

As editor, Gilbert utilized the pages of Outdoor Nebraska to justify expenses that some in the public decried as “luxury.”

Steen proved to be a sharp administrator and was relentless in his belief that Nebraskans deserved a top-notch fish and game department and more recreation opportunities. As a result, the legislature increased the cost of hunting and fishing permits three times, and with the expanded budget, Steen grew the number of conservation officers from 29 to 50.

Under Steen's administration, the expectations of conservation officers also grew considerably. When officers weren't patrolling Nebraska's fields, waters, woods and roads, or making public appearances, they assisted with other emergencies as needed, such as flood patrols or storm damage clean-up.

Nebraska's conservation officers would continue to evolve from O'Connell, Gilbert and Steen's modernist vision through the turn

“For 125 years, we have stood as the thin green line educating the public and enforcing laws that protect Nebraska’s natural resources. We honor those who came before us in celebrating our long tradition of stewardship and professionalism and set the path for those coming in behind us. I am truly humbled to serve.”

~ Jeff Clauson, Chief Conservation Officer





While the conservation officer's job has grown more complex, their duty in serving the public and protecting the state's natural resources remains the same.

of the century, and since the centennial, would see through even more changes.

ENTER SOCIAL MEDIA

Presently, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's law enforcement team continues to face many of the challenges of the last century, in addition to new ones — the rise of social media and technology being two of the most significant factors in changing the way conservation officers have done business during the last 25 years, said Law Enforcement Division Assistant Administrator Travis Shepler.

"Everybody likes to take pictures of what they kill," said Shepler. "It used to be everything was stored in somebody's deep freeze in their house. Now, everything's stored in their phone or on the cloud somewhere."

Today's conservation officer must be adept in digital evidence collection, including obtaining search warrants on a violator's phone, email and social media accounts when needed, along with integrating traditional methods of investigation. The division also employs a team of investigators dedicated to working on complex cases involving commercialization and trafficking.

These investigators are "tech-type, undercover officers" skilled in the collection of digital evidence and analysis, and they have been instrumental in cracking larger, more complex investigations, such as the Noble Outdoors case, when a North Platte man was prosecuted for guiding 114 unlawful hunts to knowing, paying clients between 2015 and 2021 (see page 57).

Social media also has changed the way officers have traditionally shared information and formed relationships with people.

"Historically, the way that was done was meeting with people in person to talk and go into coffee shops," Shepler said. With social media, those spaces no longer exist, and more people prefer to get their information online.

On the one hand, social media has allowed conservation officers to reach more people. On the other, Shepler also feels that it has hindered their ability to maintain meaningful connections with the public, as conservation officers have previously relied on these relationships to gain tips and information on violations.

Although the division has come a long way since 1901, with 72 sworn-in officers and 5 vacancies to be filled, coverage will always be a problem. Each officer patrols an average of 1,700 square miles — an area larger than the size of Rhode Island. They simply can't be everywhere at once.

"The number of officers that we have, it's not enough. It'll never be enough for us to be behind every violation," said Shepler. "A deer gets poached on Farmer John's property. Does he know who to call now? We lost that connection."

NEW TECH

Violators, too, are using technology to change the way they poach. The availability of thermal imaging rifle scopes has allowed poachers to unlawfully kill big bucks under the cover of night. Compared to the old method of spotlighting, thermal imaging is just about impossible to detect. At the same time, conservation officers are using this same technology to rescue people at night.

If Shepler could point to one major shift in Nebraskan's expectations of conservation officers in the last 25 years, it would be public safety. Today's conservation officers respond to considerably more non-fish-and-wildlife-related calls than they did 25 years ago, and communities have come to rely on them.

"If there's an accident on the interstate or a domestic violence call in a small town, we may be the only law enforcement available. This day and age, we're trained and expected to be able to deal with those things," Shepler said.

Search and rescue efforts are more common than not. A fleet of all-terrain vehicles, utility-task vehicles, advanced patrol boats, personal watercrafts and airboats are vital for searching missing people in remote areas or drowning victims.

Larger lakes, such as Lake McConaughy, can be unpredictable during storms, capsizing boats and stranding people in the water. It's also not uncommon for a duck hunter to drown or an ice fisherman to go under, said Shepler, sharing that his team might respond to about 15 sportsmen-related drowning incidents per year. During the flood of 2019, law enforcement patrol boats were used to rescue stranded people in Fremont.

Shepler also told a story of how technology helped save a hiker who had gotten lost deep in a Scotts Bluff canyon. Although the hiker's phone died, conservation officers were able to locate him by drone, after which local emergency medical services came to the rescue.

The conservation officer's green and gray uniform has not changed much in the last 25 years, but a load-bearing vest with body armor is a new addition. Although Shepler admits the vests can make officers look more

aggressive, their adoption was purely driven by comfort.

"They're designed so that everything besides your gun can be carried on your vest. And it's a load-bearing vest that takes the weight off your hips, which historically has caused back problems for law enforcement," Shepler said. When fully loaded, these vests can weigh as much as 15 pounds.

In 2021, conservation officers also transitioned from the Glock .40 caliber to the 9mm. Advances in ammunition ballistics has come a long way for the 9mm, and the smaller-frame gun allows officers with smaller hands to shoot more comfortably and with less recoil; the 9mm also can hold more ammo in each magazine.

A COMPLEX JOB

All in all, a conservation officer's job has become — if not harder — more complex and diverse. Ironically, officers look forward to the slowness of the fall and winter hunting season after coming off the long park and boating season, with non-consumptive outdoor recreation becoming increasingly popular.

"Most of our calls in the summer are reactive to disturbances — domestic violence, drugs, alcohol,

that kind of stuff," Shepler said. But during hunting season, most interactions are positive and more about compliance checks.

In addition to hunting and fishing law enforcement, conservation officers must also maintain proficiency in boat operation, boating under the influence enforcement and general law enforcement in state park areas, including handling alcohol use, drug use, traffic, domestic violence, assaults, etc. Thus, training requirements have also increased. On top of state-mandated firearms shooting qualifications, the law enforcement division also has added additional training to make sure their officers are prepared, including dynamic shooting, scenario-based training.

Conservation officer Curt Prohaska is a sergeant in the southeast district. After retiring from the National State Patrol, where he served 21 years as a police officer, deputy sheriff, and a state trooper, and transitioning to a career in the financial industry, Prohaska realized that public service and law enforcement was where his passion truly lay. As a CO, Prohaska enjoys combining law enforcement with outdoor education, stewardship and long-term resource protection.





OPERATION NO TRACE

By Jeff Kurrus

“Conservation work ... requir[es] strong law enforcement skills and judgement but applied in a way that protects natural resources for future generations. After many years in traditional policing, that aspect has been especially fulfilling,” Prohaska said. He appreciates working with the public in a setting that fosters positive, proactive interactions rather than strictly reactive enforcement.

What Prohaska enjoys less about being a conservation officer is the paperwork, reporting and time spent navigating the complexities of evolving rules and regulations. While necessary, the administrative workload can sometimes take away from time spent in the field and interacting with the public, he said.

Additionally, “enforcement isn’t always clearly understood by the public. Educating individuals who may not realize they are in violation can be time consuming, and compliance doesn’t always come easily. That said, those moments also reinforce the importance of patience, communication and professionalism,” he explained.

The downsides don’t outweigh the satisfaction of the work. Serving the public and protecting the state’s natural resources is what ultimately drives conservation officers to do what they do.

Although there is no “typical” work week, officers do “follow the activity.” They adjust their schedules to whenever hunters, anglers, boaters and parkgoers are most active.

For example, during deer season, Shepler is out early in the morning to check permits. Then he might go home for a couple hours and then go back out in the afternoon. And then again at night to watch for night hunters. On the other hand, during the park season, most bad activity happens during the evening, late night and early morning.

Despite having to work weekends, holidays and some nights, which can put a strain on family life, the job does allow for some flexibility during the week, and it’s fun.

“What other job do you get issued a truck and/or a boat and/or a UTV and/or a jet ski? Where your job is to go out and interact with people who are

fishing, and get on the water and ride a boat, and enjoy the sunrise and the quiet?” said Shepler. “And the good thing is, most of the people that we interact with are good people.”

While officers like Prohaska and Shepler found conservation law enforcement later in their careers, there are rare birds like Sophia Gobber, who became a conservation officer right out of college at 21 years old, the minimum age. She is the youngest CO to be hired since southeastern district conservation officer Russell Mort joined 50 years ago. Six years on the team, Gobber still considers herself a “baby” in her career.

Gobber showed a strong interest in wildlife from an early age. She grew up hunting and fishing near Syracuse located outside of Lincoln and volunteered her time with a local wildlife biologist, who inspired her to pursue a career in the outdoors. Then, while attending the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, an internship with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission cemented her path. The time she spent riding along with COs led to her pursuing a double major

in fisheries and wildlife and criminal justice.

Accepting the job meant that Gobber was trading the timber and whitetails of southeastern Nebraska for the rolling hills and canyons of mule deer country in the southwest. Prior to becoming a CO, she had never visited that part of the state.

“My husband and I always told each other, ‘Two years and we’re going to move home’,” Gobber said. “But we have absolutely fallen in love with southwestern Nebraska, and the natural resources that are out here, and the people, and the landowners, and the opportunities for being outdoors — personally and professionally. It’s just an amazing place to be.”

Gobber loves the complexity of her work. She enjoys the diversity and ever-changing nature of a career that combines law enforcement, wildlife conservation and education in one. She gets to teach people firearm safety and take kids and first-timers out hunting, and she gets to work with landowners.

“Landowners are what fill my cup,” she said. “I love talking about the wildlife populations that are on their

Operation No Trace, conducted by conservation officers from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and multiple state agencies, was one of the largest game violation cases in Nebraska history. After more than four years of investigation and subsequent court proceedings, federal sentencing outcomes were handed down against outfitter Dustin Noble and his business, Noble Outdoors, in U.S. District Court.

Noble was ordered to pay more than \$179,680 in restitution and is currently serving 22 months’ imprisonment for 114 big game animals and turkeys he or clients of Noble Outdoors illegally harvested between 2015 and 2021.

The first evidence from this landmark case came from a traffic stop on the Missouri River bridge near Nebraska City in 2017. A state patrol officer stopped a hunter who had a pronghorn in the back of his truck. The officer called Russ Mort, the conservation officer assigned to that area at the time, who asked where the animal had come from. The pronghorn had not been checked in legally.

The hunter told Mort he had been hunting with Noble and his outfitter business near North Platte. From there, officers investigated and found Noble was hunting and guiding mostly at night with thermal devices and suppressed rifles; he was also leading clients to hunt before the season and dumping carcasses at nearby public areas or in the Tri-County Canal. As a taxidermist, he would mount the heads for the clients.

These actions weighed in the favor of investigators from Game and Parks, as well as colleagues from the Fish and Wildlife Service,

property. If they have problems, I enjoy going out there and working with them.”

Gobber is one of five female conservation officers in the state. The Commission hired its first female conservation officer in 1992, and officer Dana Miller, who continues to serve in Cherry and Hooker counties, was the second hire in 1996.

“It’s obviously extremely challenging on some days to have to constantly prove yourself to some individuals just because of your gender ... [but] at the end of the day, becoming a better officer and overcoming those challenges, that’s the most rewarding. And seeing little girls talk about wanting to be a game warden — that’s empowering,” Gobber said.

CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

While game wardens struggled with gaining compliance and public support for conservation early in the 20th century, perhaps the most glaring PR challenge is the anti-law enforcement sentiment that has been growing nationwide. Although Shepler would say that the Commission law enforcement has fared better than other agencies, the backlash has created several challenges.

“I do feel like it’s steering people, younger people, totally away from law enforcement,” Shepler said. “[However], we are hiring people that have an interest in the outdoors, for the most part. They may initially, like me, think they’re going to be a biologist. They just go down a different path. So, we’re kind of hiring from a different pool of people.”

The anti-law enforcement movement, if anything, has reiterated the importance of professionalism. In 2025, Commission law enforcement made the big change of adopting marked trucks, when, for over a century, conservation officers have historically driven unmarked vehicles.

“If we’re making a stop on the interstate [or] we’re making a contact for a domestic violence case, if we roll up in a truck that isn’t marked and has personal plates, there has been questions on whether we are actually law enforcement, even though we’re standing there in full uniform,” Shepler explained. “So, it’s a public safety issue. It’s an accountability issue, because that’s the accountability that the public expects these days.”

Another change is the return of body cameras, which will be in use

starting this year. Although COs previously had them, the state legislature and Nebraska Crime Commission passed a statute in 2016 that placed restrictive requirements on the use of body cameras and the storage of video, which at the time, the Commission did not have the infrastructure to fulfill.

“It’s really common during any contact that you expect to be on camera. That’s not a bad thing — that’s one area that’s changed since the anti-law enforcement movement, is the accountability that people expect, and we do, too,” Shepler said.

Also, officers’ well-being and mental health has been more concerning than ever, spurring administrators to make positive changes to provide officers the support they need throughout their careers.

THE FUTURE

Conservation law enforcement is changing fast. In addition to checking licenses and enforcing season dates, today’s officers also contend with organized wildlife trafficking, more complex criminal activity, public safety calls in rural areas and growing challenges, such as wildlife diseases

and climate impacts. To keep up, conservation officers will continue to modernize and adapt their policies, training and use of technology, just as they did 125 years ago. However, their maintaining positive relationships with Nebraskans will never change.

“Nebraska outdoor traditions are built on respect — respect for the land, the wildlife and for one another. Whether you hunt, fish, trap, hike or simply enjoy our outdoor spaces, you’re part of a shared stewardship that makes this state special. Conservation isn’t just something the agency does. It’s something we all do together,” Shepler said.

“On this 125th anniversary year, we celebrate our conservation officers for their dedicated service protecting Nebraska’s natural resources and helping keep the people who use our state parks and public lands safe,” said Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Director Tim McCoy. “Whether enforcing laws during hunting and fishing seasons or educating and interacting with the public, our COs have been key players in the continuation of our state’s outdoor legacy.”

For much that has changed, the conservation officer’s mission has been unwavering. **N**

who began comparing evidence from mounted animals to discarded carcasses found in the field.

In 2020, conservation officers from Nebraska, other state agencies and the USFWS interviewed Noble and many of his clients and executed search warrants on their cellular devices, computers and residences.

“It was a close circle of people that Noble was working with,” Conservation Officer Stacey Lewton said. “They would drive around, harvest a deer by illegal methods, and then leave a beer can up by the road so they knew where to find it later and recover it at night.

“These clients knew up front it was going to be an illegal hunt. ‘Pay me \$4,000, and I’ll get you a big deer.’ Some people would buy permits after the animals were already taken down. All of this was happening after Noble had previously received a 15-year revocation of his licenses for other fish and game violations dating back to 2014.”

In the end, conservation officers had gathered enough information to substantiate 114 illegal hunts, mostly for mule deer. Because Noble’s clients had transported mounts across state lines, it became a case of illegal commerce in violation of the Lacey Act.

“Wildlife in Nebraska and across this country is a public resource,” Lewton said. “It belongs to every citizen. When someone intentionally violates wildlife laws for financial gain, they are taking from the public. Our responsibility is to protect that resource so lawful hunters, anglers and families can continue to enjoy it.

“Cases like this require proactive enforcement. When individuals repeatedly choose to operate outside the law, we must be present, attentive and thorough. That is exactly what our officers and partners did.”

Several of the unlawfully possessed wildlife mounts are now on display inside a Wildlife Crimestoppers trailer. The exhibit highlights the quality of deer and other big game species Nebraska provides through lawful management and conservation.

The display also serves as a reminder that wildlife belongs to the public, and violations involving commercialization or unlawful take will be investigated and prosecuted. Conservation officers are committed to protecting these resources for present and future generations.



Celebrating 100 Years of
Nebraskaland Magazine



Illustrating Nebraskaland

The Art of Tim Reigert

By Jeff Kurrus

Tim Reigert's journal, which contains any number of caricature drawings, has always been the real prize.



Despite being an artist for Nebraskaland Magazine for 38 years, having contributed hundreds of science-based illustrations through that time, nothing makes one laugh more — especially during a staff meeting — than to see Tim “taking notes” from the speaker. Would the Nebraskaland editor be portrayed as a caveman? Or George Washington crossing the Potomac with the rest of the magazine staff? One delights in finding out.

These are the treasures in his portfolio.

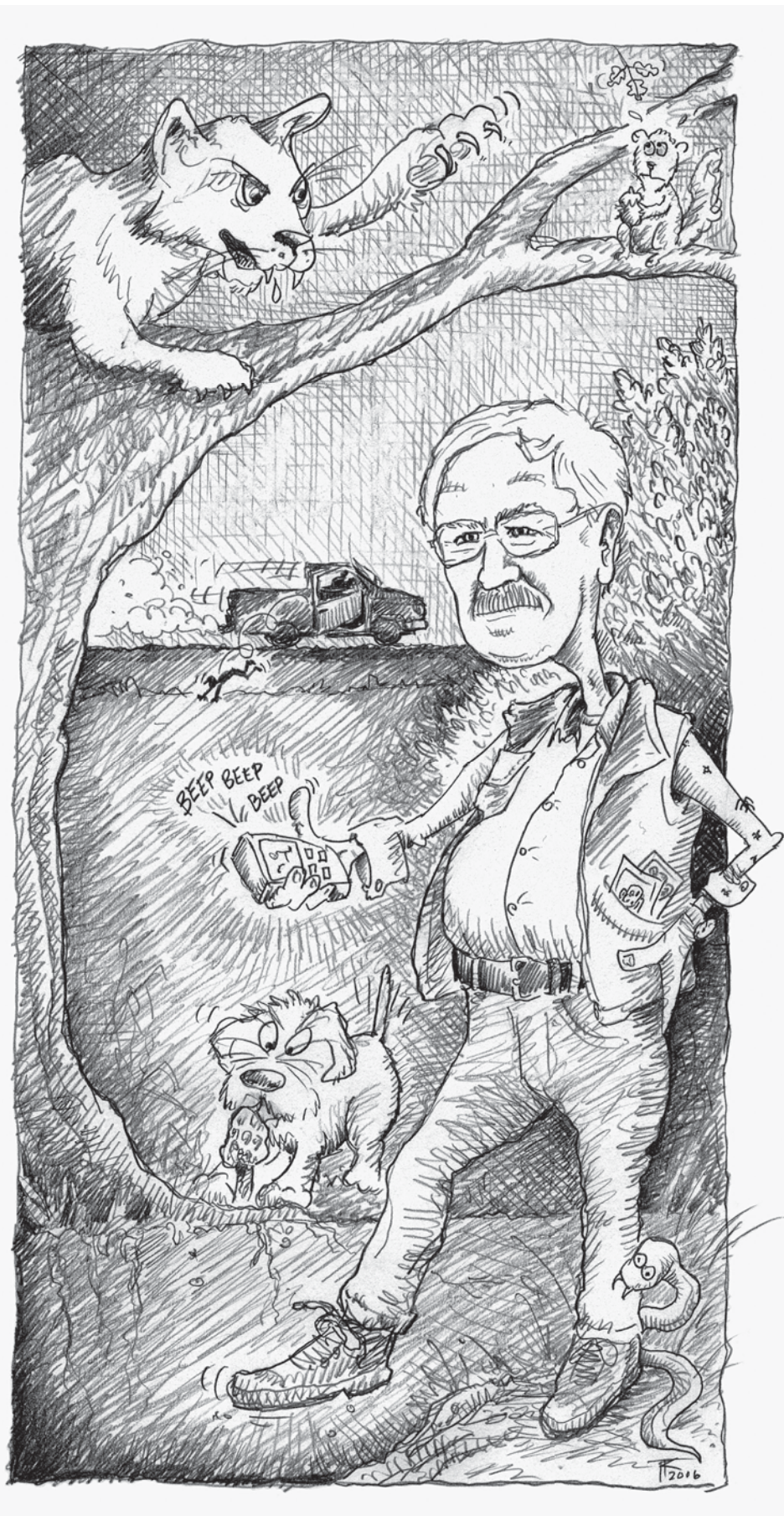
“I’ve always loved cartoons,” Tim said during a recent interview. “Even when I was a little kid. I still have a drawing of the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz when I was 3-years-old.” As he grew up, Tim was encouraged by teachers and continued to draw, knowing he would become an artist.

Tim then fell in love with MAD Magazine cartoons, underground comics and artists like Jack Davis and Al Jaffee. He continued to draw throughout his teenage years and into college, where he graduated with a degree in art from Nebraska Wesleyan University.

From there he worked odds and ends jobs in the art field, eventually landing at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in 1988 and with the magazine that same year.

His cartoons continued through the years, most often appearing on Page 49 — a staple essay column for Nebraskaland for many years — as well as supporting pieces by author Roger Welsch, longtime Nebraskaland staffer Jon Farrar and others. But cartoons were just a small part.

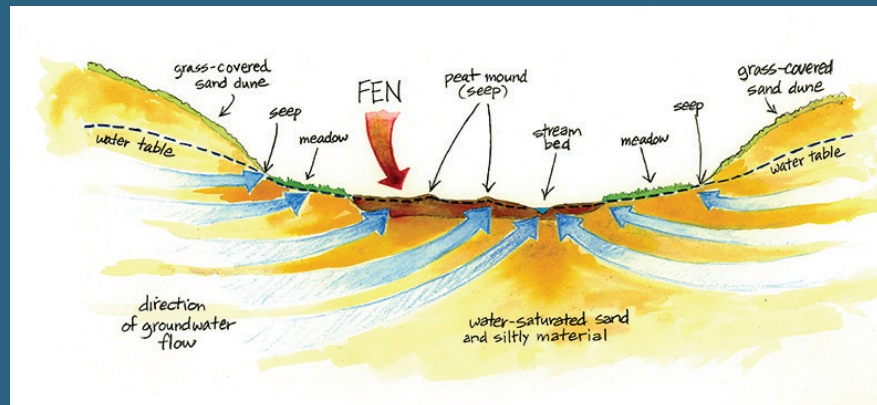
“I’ve always used the National Geographic Magazine theory regarding illustrations,” said Tim. “When you can, use a photograph to illustrate something. Otherwise, use artwork.”



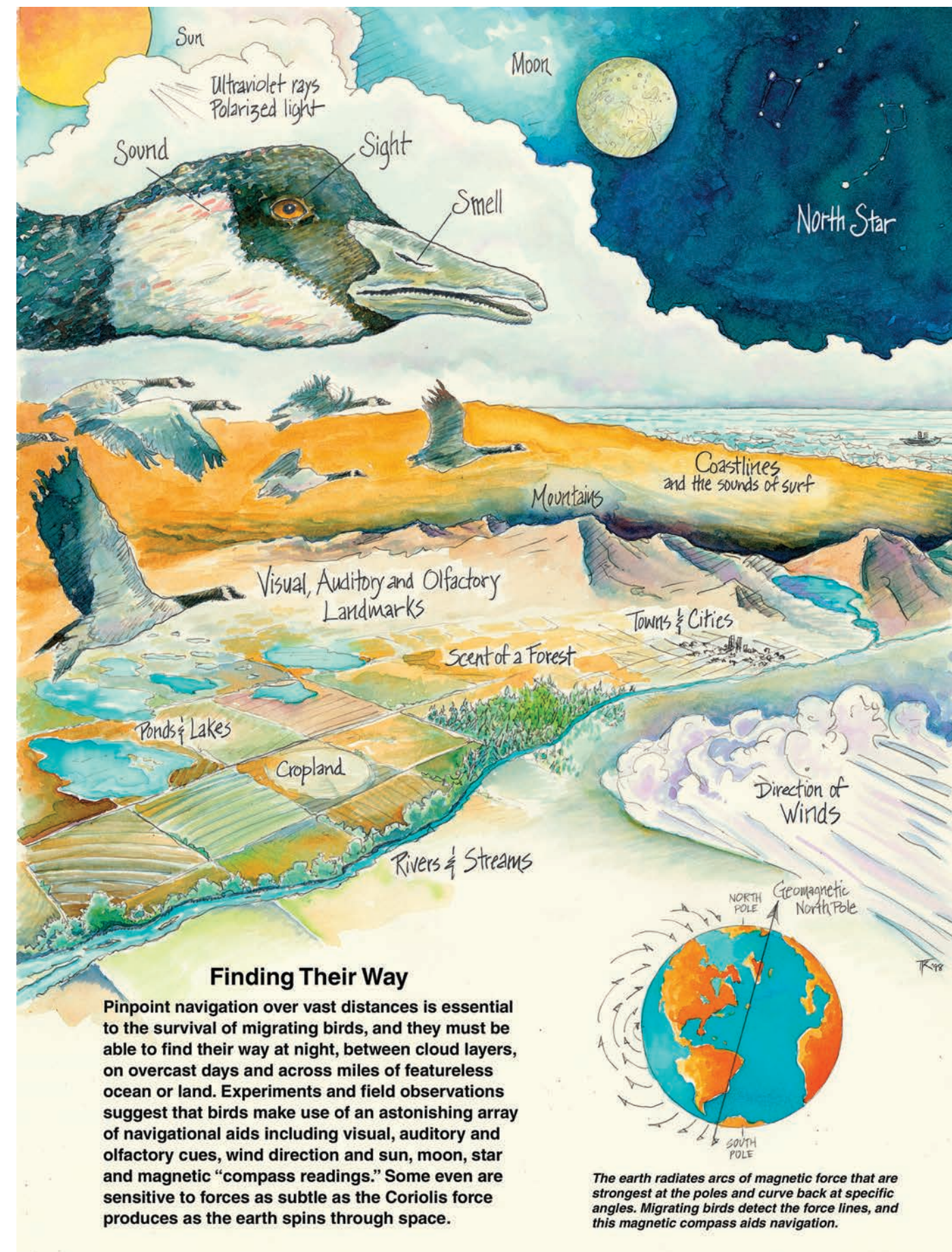
ABOVE: Pencil illustration for Jon Farrar's satirical Nebraskaland Magazine essay on morel mushrooms.

OPPOSITE: Watercolor and ink artwork for the “Teaming with Wildlife” poster to promote an excise tax on equipment to help fund wildlife efforts.





LEFT: Pencil and watercolor diagram of a fen for Nebraskaland Magazine.
 BELOW: Watercolor and colored pencil artwork for a duck hunting article.
 BOTTOM: Pencil drawing for a Roger Welsch essay.
 OPPOSITE: Pencil and watercolor illustration explaining the mystery of waterfowl migrations.





True morel mushroom



False morel mushroom



Killdeer



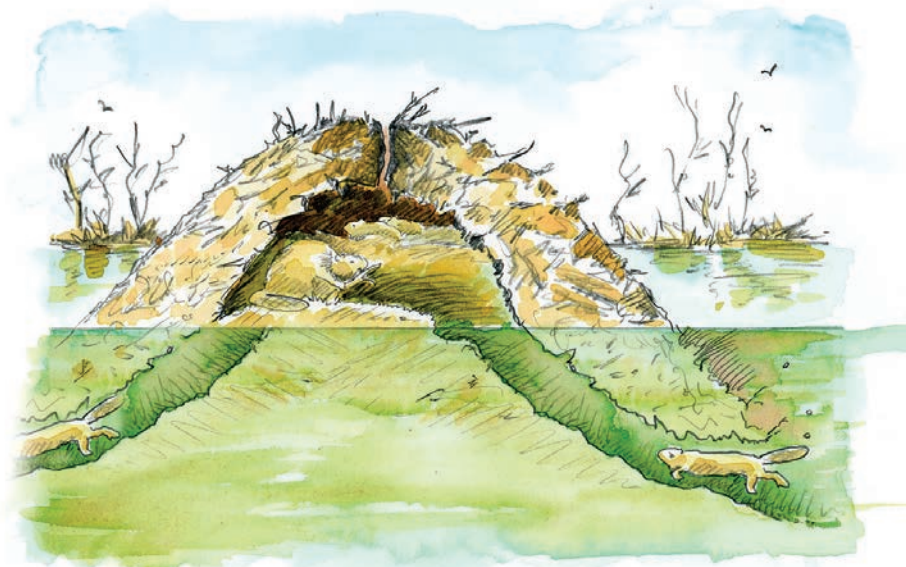
Larvae of the Salt Creek tiger beetle



Exploded view of a DIY bucketwarmer



Rainbow smelt



Beaver lodge

With this philosophy, Tim's depictions have been shown in the magazine since 1988 and have been included in fiction, humor, remembrance, diagrammatic and numerous other stories where artwork was beneficial.

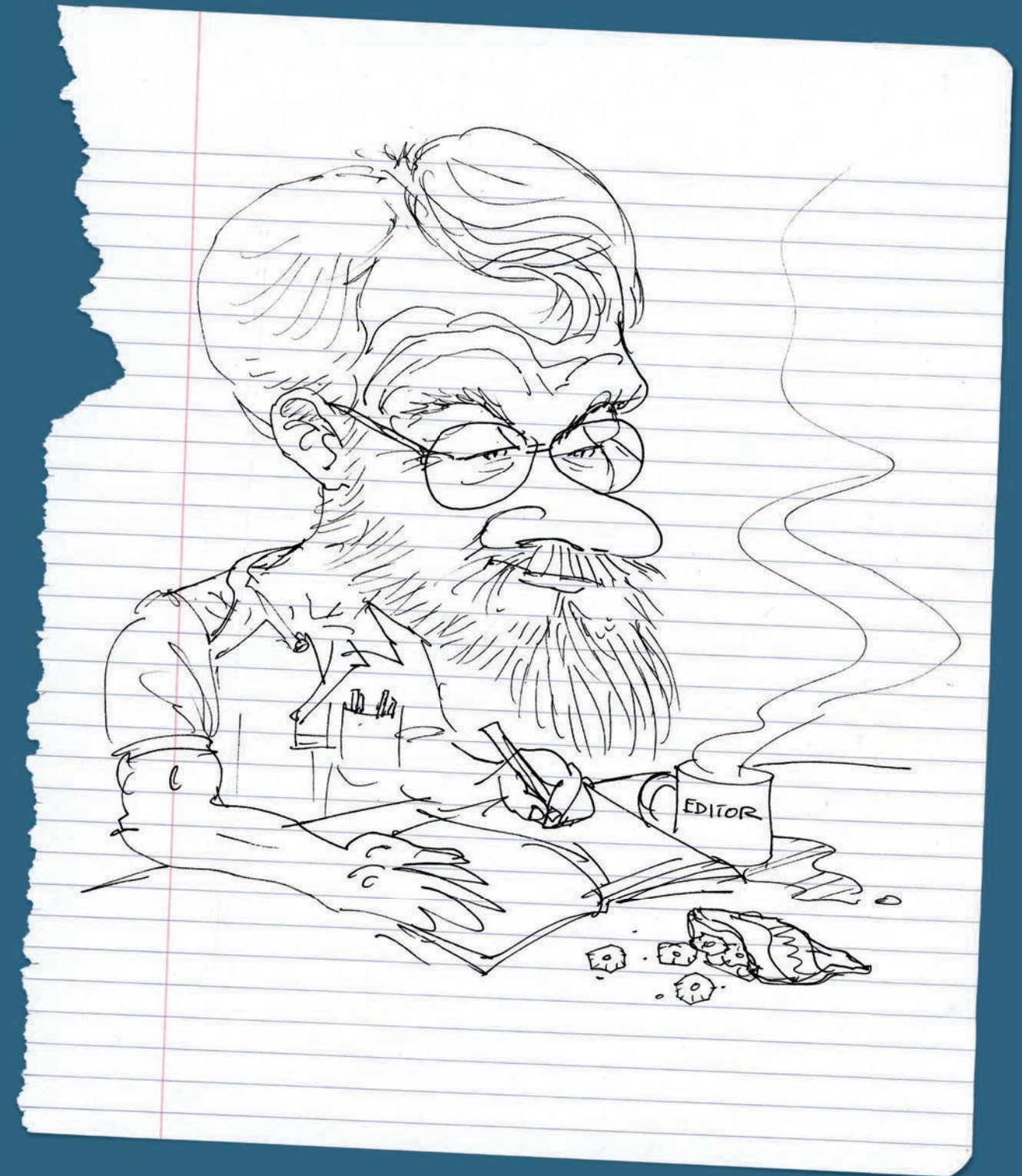
His drawings have included various animal species from a scientific perspective — detailing, for example, how the poisonous false morel mushroom differs from a morel. “For scientific illustrations, I have always observed the species or would use photo references. Illustration is very beneficial if it helps to explain. Do a diagram if you don't have a photo.”

He has also created watercolor visuals for DIY projects, types of knots and the imaginative visuals for essays that have appeared in the magazine.

With a background of hunting and fishing as a kid to observing various artists who have done work for Nebraskaland through the years, Tim's versatility was endless, from showing what it looks like beneath the water in a beaver lodge to depicting Nebraskaland regional editor Eric Fowler as an armored knight from Camelot besieging a castle with a fishing pole in his hand.

He, and his work for the entire Nebraska Game and Parks Commission for the past 38 years, is one of a kind. 

OPPOSITE: Former Nebraskaland Magazine editor Don Cunningham at his essence.



NEBRASKA BOATING GUIDE

NEBRASKA BOATING GUIDE

Buzz's has many options to fit your style of boating & fishing.

View our fishing boat lineup today at buzzsmarine.com



BUZZ'S MARINE
Our Best Product is our Service

In-House Fishing Pro
Josh Johnson

507 Central Avenue, Kearney
308.234.4576 • buzzsmarine.com

WACONDA
BOATS & MOTORS

NEW & USED



view our large inventory online

LUND HARRIS®
THE ULTIMATE FISHING EXPERIENCE

2 Locations

Glen Elder, KS 785-545-3545
Republican City, NE 308-799-5000
www.wacondaboats.com

KROTTERS
MARINE CENTER
O'NEILL, NEBRASKA



MERCURY **LUND**
THE ULTIMATE FISHING EXPERIENCE

A Lund boat is your best boating investment!
Krotters now carries Lund boats and is your full-service Mercury outboard engine dealer!

305 W Douglas Street
O'Neill, NE 68763
www.krottermarine.com
402-336-9912

FRITZ'S ISLAND TUBING & CAMPING

Come get your Tube on!

Where you can enjoy the natural beauty of the Niobrara River with modern amenities!

- TUBE RENTALS
- TENT CAMPING
- RV HOOKUPS
- (30 AMP, 50 AMP W / WATER)
- CONVENIENCE STORE
- SHOWERS



89927 Sparks River Road
Sparks, NE 69220
402.376.3791
FritzsIslandCampground.com

Find us on Facebook

Book Online!

River Life
AIRBOAT TOURS
CEDAR BLUFFS, NE



TAKE A RIDE ON THE WILD SIDE!

- * 7 Days a Week
- * Group Packages
- * Family Fun!
- * Party Area

Experience the Platte River!
Book a Tour!

402-699-4489
riverlifeairboattours.com

Niobrara River Escapes

BREWERS
CANOE • TUBE • KAYAK
Family-Owned
40 Years Experience

402.376.2046
brewerscanoers.com
433 E. Hwy 20 Valentine, NE



BOOK NOW

The Niobrara awaits you



Sharp's Outfitters invites you to float and stay along the scenic Niobrara River. Book your trip to tube, canoe, or kayak for 2-8 hours. Swing by the Clubhouse for snacks, ice and drinks. Then, find the perfect spot to camp with 127 campsites and 29 RV electrical hookups on more than two miles of riverfront. *Modern bathrooms and showers*

Office - 8am to 9pm (Fri. Sat) & 8am to 6pm (Sun. Thur)
Floating Season: May 1 to September 30

Sharp's Outfitters
sharpsoutfitters.com • 402-376-2506 • [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/sharpsoutfitters)
90048 Sparks River Rd • 5 miles south of Sparks

One of the largest multi-line dealers in Nebraska!

EICHNER'S SALES & SERVICE

1210 Ogallala Beach Rd.
Ogallala, NE 69153

Proud to be an authorized dealer for:

LOWE	STIHL	BENNINGTON
LUND	HONDA Power Equipment	can-am
SEA-DOO	MERCURY	YAMAHA
Kawasaki	MANITOU	HUSTLER TURF EQUIPMENT

Visit us online! www.eichners.net

Phone: 308.284.4852 [Find us on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/eichners)

NEBRASKA’S BEST BAIT

By Jeff Kurrus

Scrolling through the Nebraskaland Digital Archive at Archives.OutdoorNebraska.gov, I paused on the May 1960 cover image and its teaser “Best Bait Going.” I was beyond excited. What was the new-fangled answer to every angler’s problem 65 years ago? What might I discover that today’s anglers had long since forgotten about?

I quickly turned to page 12, engrossed with the possibilities.

“THERE ISN’T an angler who doesn’t sport a surplus of artificials in his tackle box,” the text read. “And chances are he’ll also cache some worms. But for real insurance, he’ll include a can of minnows. Along with garden hackle, these lively come-ons are the most popular bait going.

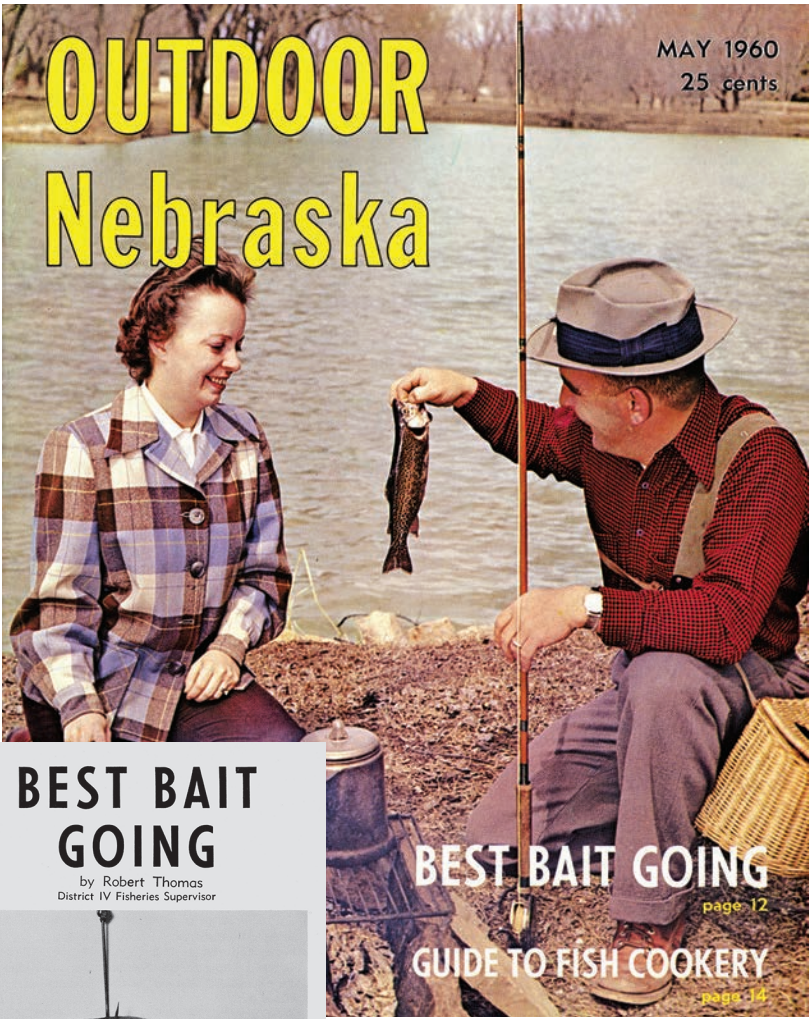
“The bluegill is about the only fish that shuns minnows. Trout, walleye, sauger, northerns, bass, perch, crappie, and channel catfish all find the minnow tempting fare

“The effectiveness of the bait depends much on the abundance or scarcity of minnows in the water. Before the spawn in the spring, minnows prove a rare treat. Later, when the water warms and teems with fry, they aren’t as desirable. During the colder months, fish are more inactive, and often only minnows will lure them into action.”

Well, sometimes you come across something that surprises you. Other times, like in this instance, you just nod your head, say “Obviously,” and press on. It just goes to show that fishing hasn’t changed that much.

However, some of the other tips in the 1960 article continue to apply today.

- Do not subject minnows to rapid water temperature change.
- When purchasing, look for “clean, strong minnows,” without missing scales.
- Always aerate a minnow bucket. As the water temperature warms, these fish use more oxygen. A crowded minnow bucket does the same.
- Hook the minnow through the lower lip, back or tail. Avoid the brain and backbone to keep it alive longer on the hook.



- Keep leftover minnows alive until the next trip by feeding them goldfish food, but not so much that leftover food accumulates in the carrier.

“When all else has failed,” continued the 1960 article, “the minnow moves in to transform the hook into an irresistible come-on. The smart fisherman who knows how and when to use this lively runt parleys it into a catch at least 20 times its size. Is it any wonder that it’s about the ‘best’ bait going?”

The best? I don’t know about that. Still, it’s one to remember when fish are hard to catch.



ONE-IN-A-MILLION
NEW GAME!

• NEBRASKA •

MILLIONAIRE
FOR LIFE™

nebraska
LOTTERY

Must be 19.
Free problem gambling help for Nebraskans
at problemgambling.nebraska.gov.
Top prize odds 1:22,910,580

- \$5 per play
- Win \$1 Million a Year for Life
- Drawings every day

Saving Wildlife
and Wild Places

The Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund improves land and water for native fish and wildlife, supports important research projects, and connects people with nature. Learn more about the fund, the projects it funds and how you can help at:

NebraskaWildlifeFund.org

Look for the Peregrine Falcon image on your Nebraska tax return.

PRAIRIE-CHICKEN VIEWING

By Jeff Kurrus

Each April, Prairie Wind Birding Tours owners, Robyn and Kent Hubbert, watch one magical moment after another at their prairie-chicken leks, but too often there are not enough people sharing these moments with them.

“The majority of our guests are in Nebraska to see the crane migration,” said Robyn. “Prairie-chicken viewing is outstanding the entire crane migration season, but it doesn’t end with the crane migration. The viewing is off the charts in April.”

The females spend more time on the leks, Robyn said, and guests typically see five to 10 females and between 20 and 25 males. “Our record day we saw 45 birds on the lek at one time.”

Visitors are within 10 to 30 yards from the majority of the birds, with room for tripods and larger photography equipment alongside comfortable office chairs.

A 20-minute drive from Kearney, Prairie Wind hosts visitors from March 6 to April 11. For more information, visit prairiewindbirdingtours.com.

Other April Prairie Chicken Locations to Reserve

Dusty Trails, North Platte: Boasting “the largest known prairie chicken lek in Nebraska,” Dusty Trails welcomes visitors to their school bus blind, where they climb in before sunrise and watch this spring ritual each morning. Prairie-chicken viewing begins March 10 and concludes April 11. dustytrails.biz.

Big Blue Ranch, Burchard: Big Blue offers greater prairie-chicken tours April 1-30. A two-person minimum is required, and lodging is also available. bigblueranch.com.

Prairie Chicken Dance Tours, McCook: Tours include an orientation and viewing session from March 17 to April 25. prairiechickendancetours.com.



Visitors to Prairie Wind Birding Tours have ample opportunities to bring along large photography equipment to view prairie-chickens within 10 yards. ROBYN HUBBERT

Call First Locations

NCORPE, North Platte: One viewing blind opportunity is available March 15 to April 30. Aside from the blind, there are no other amenities on-site. Call 308-534-6752 to request a viewing date and make reservations.

Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, Valentine: Two viewing blinds are available from April 1 to May 15. Reservations required. 402-376-3398.

First-Come, First Served Location

Burchard Lake Wildlife Management Area, Burchard: Two blinds are available at this southern Nebraska location. 402-335-2534.

Overall Ethics

Regardless of the viewing location, visitors are expected to have their cell phones on silent, wear dark clothes and have no flash photography or littering. “At self-directed blinds,” said Joel Jorgensen Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Nongame Bird Program Manager, “people need to arrive and get settled in before first light. Otherwise, if they show up late, around sunrise, they’re apt to kick birds off the lek.”

Prairie-chicken viewing is one of spring’s most sought-after birding activities, yet most of the interest ends by the end of April. Have the lek to yourself for an entire other month of booming action.

FIND YOUR KIND OF NEBRASKA IN VALLEY COUNTY

Where wide-open spaces, friendly communities, and unforgettable experiences come together.

Request a FREE travel guide at visitvalleycounty.com

PRAIRIE GRASS • TURFGRASS

STOCK SEED FARMS

AND WILD FLOWER SEED

Your Trusted Partner Since 1956

- Top Quality Turf & Buffalograss Seed
- High Value Pasture & Cover Crops
- Premium Native Grass & CRP Seed
- Wildlife Habitat & Foodplots
- Diverse Wildflower Mixes
- Pollinator Forage

SCAN HERE for a complete list of products & planting guides

COME CELEBRATE THE 13TH ANNUAL

SIP NEBRASKA

Mahoney State Park, Ashland

Friday, May 8 2026 | 4:00 - 9:00 PM

Saturday, May 9, 2026 | 1:00 - 9:00 PM

- Unlimited wine, craft beer, cider, and spirits tastings
- New non-alcoholic products—something for everyone
- Food trucks and artisan vendors
- Live music, craft & cocktail sessions, and Buzzed Bingo
- Skydiving demonstrations
- Lodging available at the park

SCAN TO GET 15% OFF TICKETS OR USE CODE: SIP15

SipNebraska.com

Hotwood's

EST. 1986

Premier compact pontoon manufacturers for 40 years!

308-381-6275 Grand Island, NE

www.hotwoods.com

FIVE MODELS

MULTIPLE PONTOON DESIGN TO ASSURE THE ULTIMATE IN STABILITY.

ALL-ALUMINUM DOCKS AND WALKWAYS

DO IT ONCE, DO IT RIGHT

WHAT DO YOU NEED IN A BLIND?

By Julie Geiser

With so many types of blinds on the market from pop-up types, hay bales, A-frames and more, it's hard to determine which is going to be best for you. Whether you're waterfowl, turkey or deer hunting, knowing what to look for can make or break a hunt.



Picking a Blind

Your blind must fit the type of hunting you plan to do. Will you be hunting alone? Will you need a heater? Shooting sticks? What kind of seat will you need? All of these are important questions as you decide the type of hunting you'll do and what your comfort needs are when in the field.

Fit can also mean the size and weight of the blind. It would be ideal if the blind is easy to access once placed in the field, but that's rarely the case. Rain and snow become huge obstacles when transporting a blind, so size and weight considerations are a must. Bigger isn't always better depending on your situation.



Ensure the blind has enough room (top) and your camouflage matches the blind's inside (above). JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

Other options include the need for dog doors on A-frames, whether a pop-up blind uses Velcro, zippers or some other fasteners, and the angle of the seat in a laydown blind.

A Better Pop-Up Blind

Once you have purchased a blind, there are other considerations. In a pop-up blind, be sure to keep the windows behind you closed. This prevents light coming into the blind, exposing you to be seen. Placing a roll of lightweight carpet in a pop-up is a must to keep noises down from inside the blind whether there is snow or leaves and twigs. Roll and strap the carpet onto the blind when carrying to condense gear.

If the inside of your ground blind is black, be sure to wear dark clothing to disappear inside. Wearing camouflage clothing may not hide you in this background.

When purchasing a chair, think about weight, stability and comfort. If you plan to hunt for hours, have a chair that won't interfere with the pleasure of your hunt. You must also be able to shoot from it effectively.

A Better A-Frame

Whether you're using an A-frame or laydown blind for waterfowl, your hide is crucial. Having success from one of these blinds in the middle of a cut crop field is not uncommon, but these blinds have to be "brushed up" with surrounding habitat to blend in. Having some sort of cutters with you to gather anything from cut cornstalks to nearby sticks and grasses will be the difference between waterfowl finishing into your decoys or turning tail completely.

Regardless of what you plan to hunt, spend some time in the blind before ever purchasing it. A lot of troubleshooting can be accomplished before ever leaving the store.



Whether in an A-frame (top) or laydown (above), brushing up a blind with nearby materials is a must. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



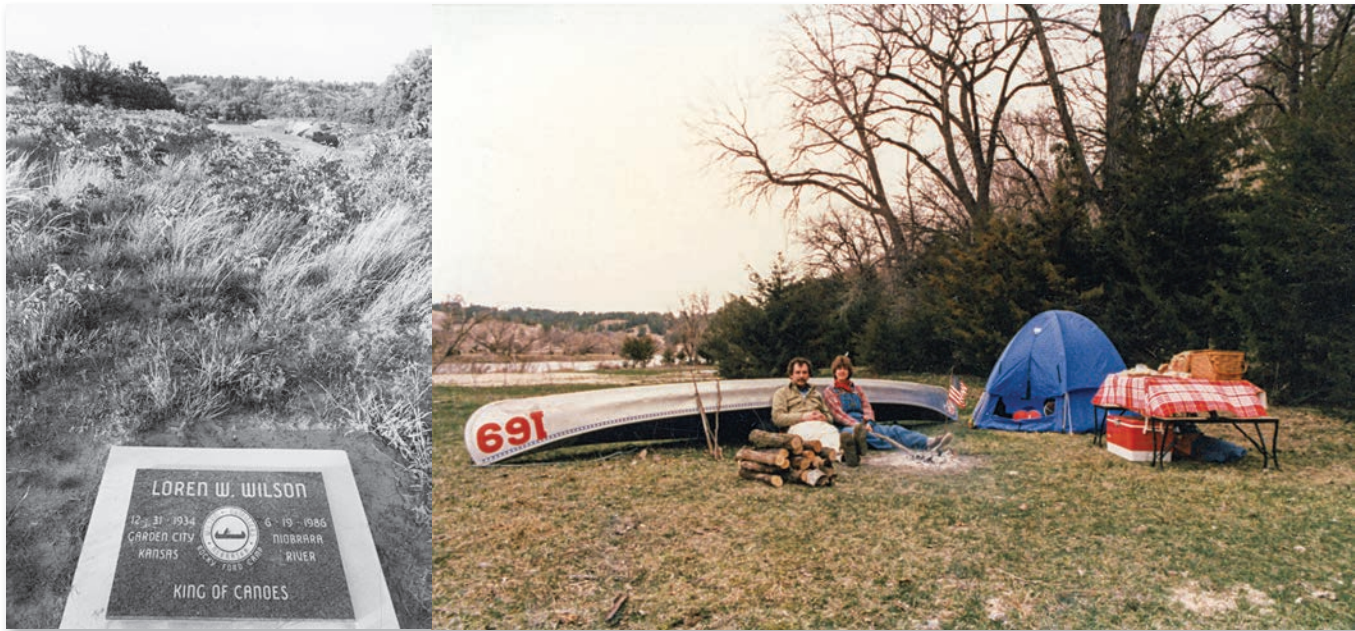
Nebraska's Home for Great Photography

Cameras, lenses, and local expertise to bring your vision to life.



Online Orders Ship Same Day!
rockbrookcamera.com

OMAHA | 168th & W. Center | 402-691-0003
LINCOLN | 70th & Pioneers | 402-488-4200



Canoe trip down the Niobrara, 1986 ▲

Loren Wilson owned Rocky Ford Campground on the Niobrara and Wilson Outfitters with an office in Lincoln for a number of years. In spring, he would haul the canoes from Lincoln to the Niobrara and then back to Lincoln in the fall for repair. In 1980, I started working with him and even worked for the outfitter for a short time after his death in 1986. This memorial marker for Loren is located at the Rocky Ford Campground while his ashes were sprinkled into the Niobrara River. The other photo is of my wife, Jo, and myself camping at Fred Krzyanowski’s pasture, just downstream from Turkey Feather Falls.

– Tom Bouse, Lincoln



◀ 1940s Pheasant Hunt

Left to right: An unknown man; my uncle, Bob Litz (the young boy); my grandfather, Glenn Litz; and my great-grandfather, George Curtiss. This was probably from somewhere near Bassett in the early 1940s. It is possible that the photo was taken near Valley County, too, as my grandfather hunted there for pheasants with the Arnold family who farmed in that area.

– Tom Lanz, Omaha

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, Nebraskaland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to Jenny.Wheatley@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. PLEASE SEND ORIGINALS IF POSSIBLE FOR BEST REPRODUCTION.



◀ Pheasant hunting in Wausa, 1970

My brothers and me after a Thanksgiving Day pheasant hunt near Wausa in 1970. Left to right: Greg Kirby, Kevin Kirby, Mark Kirby and me. We usually had about 70 relatives for dinner, so we threw the pheasants in the roaster with the turkey. I’m sure some got a few pellets in their food that day, but it added to a great time with family.

– Neil Kirby, Wausa

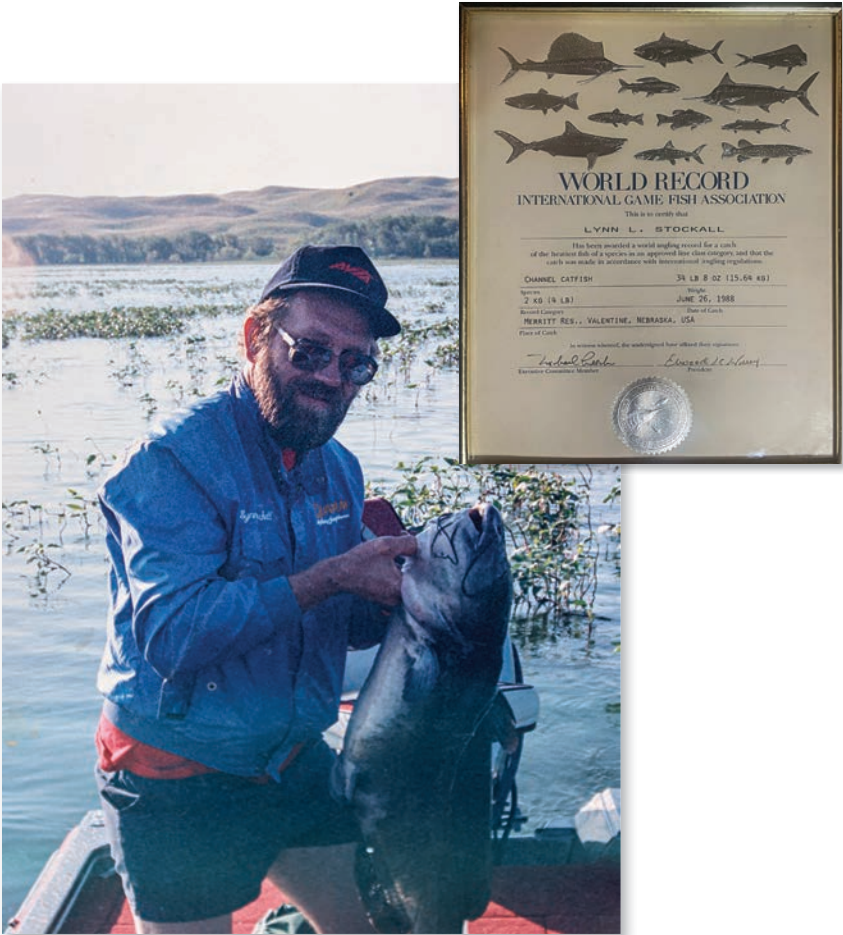
World record channel catfish at Merritt Reservoir, 1988 ▶

My great uncle and lifetime resident of North Platte, Lynn Stockall, holding the International Game Fish Association world record channel catfish on 4-pound test; it weighed 34 pounds 8 ounces.

He caught it at Merritt Reservoir in 1988 on one of his many fishing trips with his buddies. Lynn was an avid hunter and angler all his life.

He passed away in May 2024.

– Andy Yelinek, Omaha





Carolina anemone (*Anemone caroliniana*) is a spring wildflower that often grows only 3-4 inches tall. With my camera on the ground, it looks much more prominent than if I'd photographed it from above. CHRIS HELZER

GET LOW

By Chris Helzer

Nebraska has some very tall wildflowers, including goldenrods, bonesets and sunflowers. Most of those statuesque species, however, bloom in the summer or fall. Most early wildflowers grow and bloom low to the ground. That makes sense for a couple of reasons. First, they don't have much time for growing between frozen ground and flowering time. Second, morning frosts occur frequently in the early spring and soil holds heat much better than air. Hugging the ground is a smart strategy for protecting sensitive leaves and flowers.

The short stature of spring wildflowers can make them hard for hikers to find. Like an Easter egg hunt, wildflower hiking in the springtime takes patience and perseverance.

I'm always anxious to find and photograph the first wildflowers of the season. For years, though, I had a hard time getting images I was happy

with. Photographed from above, the flowers always looked small and insignificant. Kneeling down and getting closer helped a little, but the real breakthrough for me was getting myself and my camera right on the ground with the flowers.

From a low angle, photos of spring wildflowers can capture the majesty of those plants which, while short in stature, rule the early season prairies and woodlands of Nebraska. I also love photographing them with a wide-angle lens to show both the flowers and the world around them. While I'm lying there, I often see some of the first bees, butterflies and other pollinators of the year as well.

Try it! You don't even need a fancy camera. Most cell phone cameras work just as well close to the ground as they do at head height. Lie down, get comfortable and admire the tough, beautiful blossoms of early spring.

Let's do this!

OUTDOOR NEBRASKA

250-MILE CHALLENGE



January 1 – December 31, 2026

LOG YOUR MILES,
WIN GREAT PRIZES!

Join us for this fun challenge in outdoor Nebraska. Use your fitness tracker and log all your miles in 2026. Hiking, walking, biking, running or your favorite activity.

Scan the QR code to enter and find sponsors, or learn more at



OutdoorNebraska.gov

Share your pictures on social and tag @NEGameandParks



Nebraskaland magazine

To renew your subscription or change your address call **1-800-632-5263**

\$4.95



Nebraska can't be put in a box.

But it can be put in a frame, on a cup, hung on your wall or used as a blanket.

Bring the beauty of Nebraska into your home or office—
one stunning image at a time. **ShopNebraskaland.com**

NEBRASKA
— GAME  PARKS —

