



A North American river otter rests on the ice on the Platte River near Grand Island.
Photo by Luke Kathol.

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NEBRASKAland

Volume 91, Number 2, March 2013

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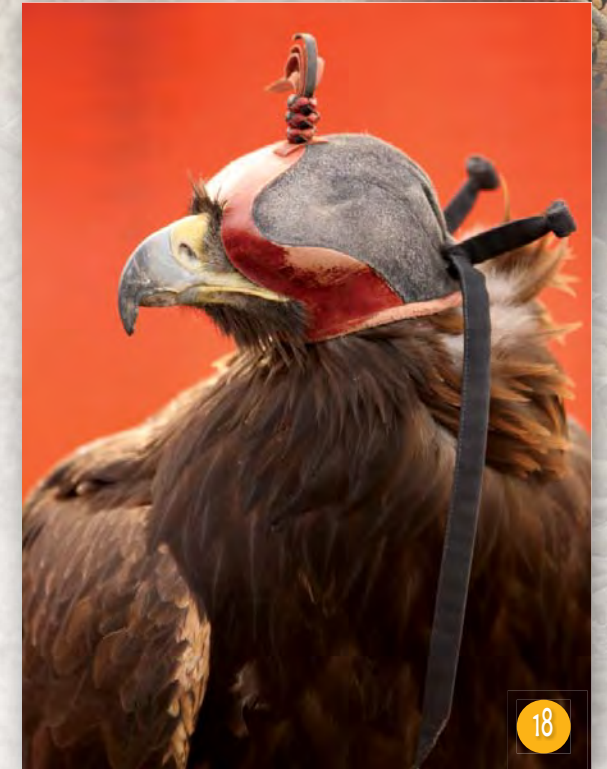
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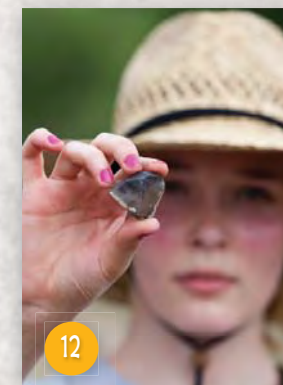
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Cover: Sandhill cranes settle in for a cold evening on an ice-covered Platte River channel. Photo by Brad Mellema. **Opposite:** Old iron greets visitors to Fort Kearny State Historical Park. Photo by Jeff Kurrus.

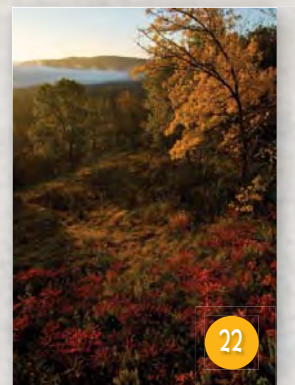
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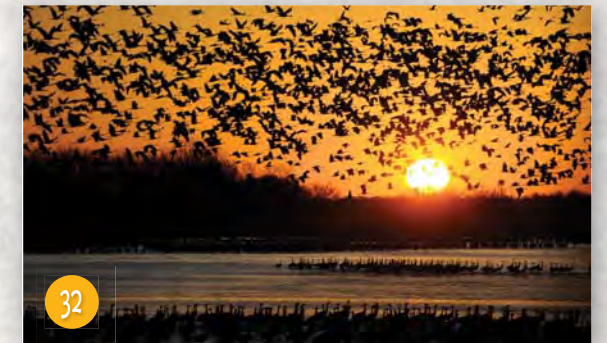
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Lifetime Gifts

This year we, grandparents Bill and Marilyn Bailey, decided to try to give Christmas gifts that wouldn't end up in yard sales, as broken toys or be just forgotten.

We outsmarted the grandkids this time – Marilyn and I bought lifetime hunt and fish permits for all nine of them, from 2½ years of age up to 17.

Now they will always be able to enjoy Nebraska no matter where they end up living.

Bill and Marilyn Bailey
Lexington, Nebraska

Editor – What a great gift!

NEBRASKALand Visitor Letters

We want to thank all 24 readers that sent e-mails and letters for last issue's visitor, a **spotted cucumber beetle** that was on **page 13** (see page 11 for the winner, rules and this issue's hint). Here are some of the wonderful responses we received:

Thanks for the hidden visitor in each issue of *NEBRASKALand*. I wasn't sure I had found it until I looked at a previous issue and found that same space empty. Then my wife Becky and I had the same discussion – could it be that obvious? On page 13, in the *NEBRASKALand* Visitor Winner and

Hint section is a spotted cucumber beetle.

Please keep up the great work!
Dave Poppe
Fremont, Nebraska

Every month all of our family takes turns looking for the visitor in *NEBRASKALand Magazine*. Sometimes it's a challenge to find the visitor and we need to search several times thru the pages. January-February 2013's visitor, however, is hidden in plain sight on page 13, lower righthand corner in the section announcing last month's winner and the hint of where the visitor is not in this month's magazine. The visitor is a green and black spotted beetle-type insect. I have always enjoyed the magazine from the time it was called *Outdoor Nebraska* to the present. It's been a part of our family's home as long as I can remember.

Tom Ourada
Omaha, Nebraska

You guys were very cruel this month. I looked through your magazine just about with a magnifying glass three times and my husband looked – no bug. Then we decided it had to be the bug on page 13 in your Nebraska Visitor Winner and Hint area. Too obvious – I kept thinking that could not be the bug, that you had that bug in each issue there. Then I looked in the last issue. No bug. So I say the bug is the obvious one on page 13.

Chick and Linda Straub
via e-mail

Pretty cagey on this one! At first I could not find it and thought it had just walked off my magazine this month.

Then I thought it must be the grub that is inside the acorn on page 27! Even though I thought you had used the beetle before that was page 13, (I was thinking it was just part of the "visitor" box each month) I got looking at past issues and realized it was not there before!

So there it is on page 13 in the visitor box!

Being a deer hunter I love Rick's deer photo on page 17 – it is great!
Ron Macomber
via e-mail

A familiar garden pest to many, the spotted cucumber beetle is the bane of cucumber and squash growers everywhere. Spotted cucumber beetles are ¼-inch long and yellowish-green in color, with 12 spots on their backs. They overwinter as adults in southern states, and migrate into Nebraska by early summer. Females lay eggs in the soil, and after hatching the larvae feed on plant roots. These larvae, also known as southern corn rootworms, have a fairly wide host range, including cucurbits (cucumbers, melons, squash, pumpkins), beans, peas, potatoes, tomatoes and corn. Adults emerge and begin to feed on foliage and stems of cucurbit plants. In addition to the physical damage caused by their feeding, they transmit bacterial wilt to the plants. Bacterial wilt infection will initially cause wilting in only one part of the plant, but as the bacterium moves through the plant tissue, the entire plant collapses and dies. In Nebraska, one to three generations of spotted cucumber beetle occur each growing season. Controls for this pest in your garden include using row covers to physically block the beetles from your cucumbers, planting beetle and wilt resistant varieties, and the use of insecticides. Another tactic is to plant more than you need and surrender some plants to the beetle.



Special thanks to Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture. Visitor image by Chris Helzer.
www.bugguide.net is a good site for identification

Send your comments to:
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or e-mail Doug.Carroll@Nebraska.gov
Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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Chytrid Research Ongoing

Jeff Kurrus

NEBRASKAland readers were first introduced to chytrid and its devastating effects on amphibian populations in the August/September 2009 article “Survivor – the North American Bullfrog.”

Chytrid, specifically *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* (Bd) or “frog chytrid,” is one of the planet’s worst infectious vertebrate diseases because of how many species it affects. Amphibians with Bd experience a thickening of the skin, which negatively affects keratin, the protein that makes amphibian skin tough and resistant to injury. These changes then prohibit the amphibian from absorbing water and electrolytes through its skin. When these electrolyte levels decrease too much, the amphibian’s heart stops beating.

Until recently, there had been little Bd research conducted in Nebraska. In 2010, Mary Harner from the Crane Trust and researchers from the University of Nebraska at Kearney conducted research on American bullfrogs along the Platte River in south-central Nebraska. There they found that 41 percent of bullfrogs sampled tested positive for Bd. But as reported in the 2009 NEBRASKAland article, American bullfrogs are carriers of chytrid but they are rarely affected by it.

The same is not necessarily true for native Nebraska amphibian species. During a follow-up study conducted by Harner and a team from the Crane Trust in 2012, chytrid was found not only in American bullfrogs again, but also Woodhouse’s toads and plains leopard frogs, two native species that are negatively affected by this fungus.

The Crane Trust plans to continue research in 2013 to evaluate chytrid prevalence in relation to changes in habitat and season in order to better assist resource managers looking for conservation measures to reduce the threat of Bd to native amphibians throughout Nebraska. Frogs are a food resource for whooping cranes along their migration route and fish throughout the year, so protecting amphibians will help sustain this prey base for these species, as well as help maintain the overall biodiversity of Nebraska’s wetlands.

For more information on wetland research being conducted by the Crane Trust, visit www.cranetrust.org. Funding for the Crane Trust’s chytrid research has been provided by the Nebraska State Wildlife Grants Program, the University of Nebraska at Kearney, and the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



Upcoming Events

Here is a list of upcoming outdoor events across Nebraska. For more information about these and other events, visit the calendar page at www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

March
Boating Safety Classes
 Sign up now to take Boater Education classes. To find available classes in your area, to go OutdoorNebraska.org and click on the Boating tab.

March 2-3, 9-10 and 16-17
Marsh Madness
 Witness the spring migration spectacle at Ponca State Park, where nearly 300 bird species have been reported and which The National Audubon Society calls an “Important Bird Area.” Special educational bird programs will be offered at the park’s Resource and Educational Center each of these Saturdays and field guides and binoculars will be available for public use. A park entry permit is required to enter the park, and the mini-lodges offer a 30 percent discount off regular rates during these weekends. Contact Ponca State Park 402-755-2284 ngpc.ponca@nebraska.gov

Mid-March
Two Rivers SRA Trout Lake
 Two Rivers’ popular put-and-take trout lake will open approximately mid-March this year, possibly as early as March 9 depending on the weather. Contact Two Rivers SRA 402-359-5165 ngpc.two.rivers@nebraska.gov

March 25
Spring Turkey Archery Season
 March 25 through May 31. For more information on turkey hunting in Nebraska, check out the 2012 Turkey Guide or visit www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

NEBRASKA Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever 2013 SPRING BANQUETS

BANQUET DATES		
Date	Chapter	Location
March 1	High Plains PF	Sidney
March 2	Dodge County PF	Fremont
March 2	Heartland PF	Omaha
March 2	Heritage PF	Alliance
March 2	Lincoln Creek PF	Aurora
March 2	Rainwater Basin PF	Sutton
March 8	Nemaha Valley PF	Johnson
March 8	Wachtel Fur Immer QF	Eustis
March 9	Corn Country PF	McCool Junction
March 9	Dixon County PF	Newcastle
March 9	Loup River PF	Ord
March 9	Lower Elkhorn Valley PF	West Point
March 9	Southeast Nebraska PF	Beatrice
March 10	Boone County PF	Albion

BANQUET DATES		
Date	Chapter	Location
March 14	Elkhorn Valley PF	Norfolk
March 15	Logan Creek PF	Wayne
March 16	Otoe County PF	Syracuse
March 21	Douglas County West PF	Elkhorn
March 23	Franklin County QF	Franklin
March 23	Mile High PF	Kimball
March 23	Republican Valley PF	Cambridge
March 23	Saline County PF	Crete
March 23	Washington County PF	Blair
March 23	Niobrara Sportsman PF	Gordon
April 6	Cass County PF	Plattsmouth
April 6	Medicine Creek PF	Stockville
April 13	Antelope Valley PF	Oshkosh
April 27	Sherman County PF	Loup City



For further contact information and details visit www.NebraskaPF.com



Travelogue

by Jeff Kurrus and Julie Geiser

More Than Cranes

To view the migration of more than 500,000 sandhill cranes is reason enough to invade Kearney, the self-proclaimed "Sandhill Crane Capital of the World," this month. But it's not the only one. There is a long list of other activities happening at the same time, making this locale perfect for the entire family. Here is a two-day option to consider:

Day 1

6:00 AM – Crane Viewing at **Rowe Sanctuary**. Reserve your spot at rowe.audubon.org.

9:00 AM – Drive country roads and watch cranes in the fields, then head back to your campsite at **Fort Kearny SRA** or at a lodging option in **Kearney**.

12:00 PM – Lunch at **Cunningham's Journal** in Kearney.

1:00 PM – Visit the **Kearney Area Children's Museum**.

4:00 PM – Return to **Rowe Sanctuary** for an evening field trip.

7:00 PM – Dinner and dessert in **Downtown Kearney**.

Day 2

6:00 AM – Roll over and press the snooze button.

8:00 AM – Venture to the **Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center** at the **Alda exit**.

10:00 AM – Visit the **Museum of Nebraska Art, Trails to Rails Museum**, or **Fort Kearny SHP** for a dose of history.

2:00 PM – Late lunch at **Tru Cafe** in Kearney or a picnic at **Windmill SRA**.

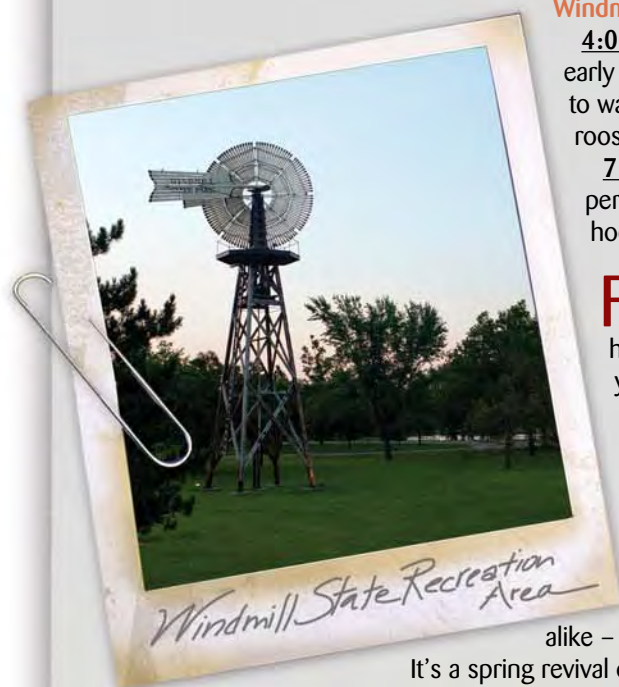
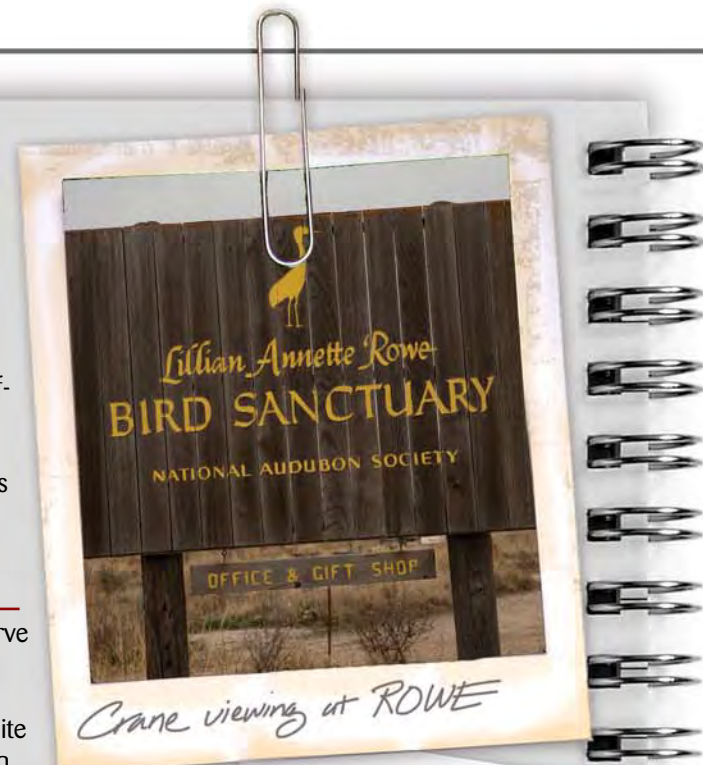
4:00 PM – Return early to **Rowe Sanctuary** to watch the evening roost from the Center.

7:00 PM – See the **Minden Opera House** performance of "Annie, the Musical" or watch the Storm play hockey at the **Viaero Event Center**.

For more information about these events, take a look at VisitKearney.org. There you'll get specific dates for hockey and play performances as well as additional ideas for your trip to Crane Country.

The thing this site won't tell you, however, is one more reason why you should visit Kearney this time of year – the people. There's never a time of the year where visitors – birders and non-birders alike – are in a better mood.

It's a spring revival on the grandest of scales.



Whooper Watch

Eric Fowler

If you happen to be one of the lucky few to spot a migrating whooping crane while traipsing around Nebraska this spring or fall, call Whooper Watch at 1-888-3wwatch (1-888-399-2824) to help researchers learn more about these endangered birds.

A program of the Crane Trust, Whooper Watch will help track the fewer than 300 birds left in the last naturally migrating flock, which pass through Nebraska each year on their 2,500-mile journey to and from their nesting grounds in northern Canada and wintering grounds on the Gulf Coast in Texas. These 5-foot-tall white birds often stop to rest and feed along the Platte and other rivers and wetlands in central Nebraska for one to several days before continuing on their trip. The spring migration typically occurs from March through April, while the fall migration is usually October

through November.

When a call is received, Whooper Watch sends a scientist to confirm the sighting, document key features of the location and learn more about the habitat the birds are using to survive. "The program is really a unique opportunity for the public to get involved and help us document locations visited by these magnificent birds during their migration," said Mary Harner of the Crane Trust. "Because there are so few whooping cranes to be seen, the more eyes we have watching for them, the better our chances of documenting their stopover locations."

Scientists are already monitoring about 40 whooping cranes that have been fitted with GPS transmitters since 2009. The transmitters record the birds' locations four times daily, allowing researchers to determine where they stop during migration. The project is a joint effort of the Crane Trust, Platte

River Recovery Implementation Program, US Geological Survey Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Canadian Wildlife Service, with support from the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, International Crane Foundation, and Parks Canada.

Migration places a large physical toll on whoopers, so the Crane Trust asks that people not approach or disturb the birds in any way or report locations to others, which may draw a crowd of people and increase the risk of disturbance. "We want to make sure that the calories these birds expend are being spent to reach their final destination in Texas or Canada, not flushing from photographers or birdwatchers," said Greg Wright, a Crane Trust biologist.

Observers should stay at least 2,000 feet from whooping cranes, remain in their vehicle or other viewing area, and use binoculars or spotting scopes to positively identify the birds. They should then provide the following to Whooper Watch™:

- The exact location of the whooping crane(s)
- How many were seen and the date and time they were observed
- What the whooping crane(s) was doing (feeding, resting, flying, etc.)
- Distant photographs to help researchers confirm the identity and age of the bird(s)

For more about the program, including information on how to identify whooping cranes, go to NebraskaNature.org.

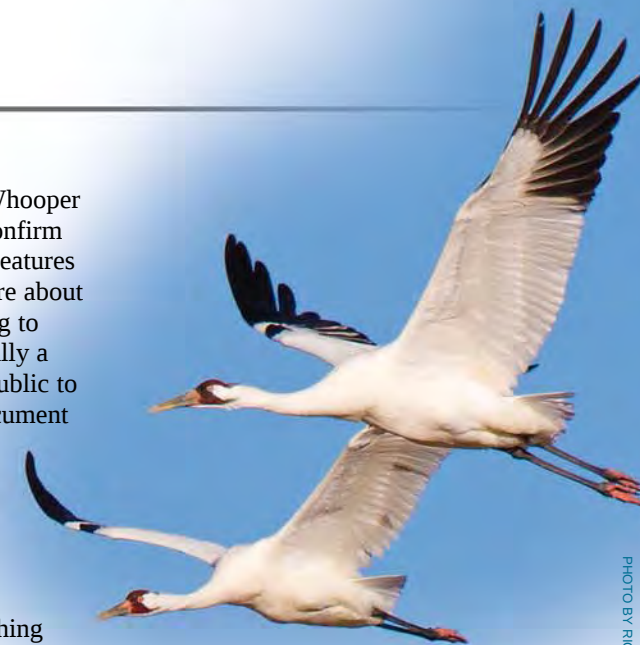


PHOTO BY RICK RASMUSSEN

Send Us Your Trail Cam Photos!



Deer hunters aren't the only ones using trail cameras. Tom Menze of York set one up to capture photos of pheasants using his food plot. During two weeks in early 2011, he captured more than 1,000 images of ringnecks, and a few bonus photos of deer and red fox.

Please submit your trail camera photos by e-mail to: nebtrailcam@gmail.com. Also include any information that will help explain your photo.

Nebland Flashbacks



“A paradise for lovers of the outdoors” was the March 1965 NEBRASKAland description of northwestern Nebraska’s Pine Ridge. That issue of the magazine featured a 14-page color spread of the region throughout the seasons, drawing attention to the landscape’s unique attractions and describing it as a land where “imagination becomes reality.”

Nearly 50 years later, the Pine Ridge still boasts natural beauty to be enjoyed by all outdoor enthusiasts, but visitors may notice considerably fewer ponderosa pines today than they would have in 1965. A recent article published by the Omaha World-Herald states that last year’s immense wildfires took away the Pine Ridge’s title of largest ponderosa pine forest in the state. Now the Niobrara River Valley comes in first, according to Doak Nickerson, district forester for the Nebraska Forest Service.

“What pictures we have of the Pine Ridge with a beautiful pine forest draped over top these beautiful hills – those pictures might be historic if we don’t turn this ship around,” stated Nickerson.

Read more about the effects of last year’s Pine Ridge fires in an upcoming issue of NEBRASKAland.

— Olivia Johnson

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Rock Bass

By Olivia Johnson

Regardless of how much one fishes, there are times when catches are unexpected and the question “What is this?” arises. While fishing for smallmouth at Gavins Point Dam that question arose as a small, red-eyed fish emerged from the water that definitely was not a smallmouth. As it turns out, it was a distant cousin known as the rock bass.

Rock bass (*Ambloplites rupestris*) are a member of the sunfish family, along with crappies, bluegills, largemouth and smallmouth bass. While I caught mine in moving water last August, most rock bass populations are found in standing waters, said fisheries biologist Daryl Bauer. “Nebraskan anglers have a good chance of finding them in Box Butte Reservoir, Minnechaduza Creek, the Missouri River and many interstate lakes in central Nebraska. Anglers hoping to hook one have several tackle options.”

The same tackle and presentations used for other panfish also work well for rock bass. Small jigs, jig-spinners, small spinners, crankbaits, small crayfish and leeches are effective baits. An angler also can’t go wrong with the traditional nightcrawler or minnow – that’s what I was using when I hooked my first one. Light to ultra-light spinning gear or spincasting gear spooled with with 4- to 8-pound test line is

all an angler needs.

Rock bass are usually found in, around or under some type of cover, including rocks, fallen timber and aquatic vegetation. In addition to its red eyes, other identifying features include an overall brassy color and black spots on the scales that form horizontal lines. Rock bass average between 8 and 15 ounces in weight, 6 to 9 inches in length, and the state rod-and-reel record is 2 lbs. 4 oz., caught by Edna Zuege in 1972 from a Dundy County farm pond.

Consider pursuing rock bass when you’re out on the water this spring. This species may be smaller than other fish you’d normally seek, but the challenge of finding them makes up for it.



PHOTO BY KEN BOUC

Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

This old rod is sort of a special rod for me ... it’s different. It’s a seven-foot split bamboo rod – a fly rod – and it’s just kind of neat. It’s one of my favorites and I like to take care of it and you know one of the ways I do that? This is a cheap shot kids, it don’t cost you anything – go down to the hardware store and pick up some of the pipe insulation. You run that fish pole up like that – or your spinning rod – and cut this to length and just slip that in there. It isn’t going to protect your reel much but it’ll surely protect that rod and the eyelets. Once you get that in there, what I like to do is take a little duct tape ... wrap that around every so often ... because this foam is split ... this is actually a split piece of insulation and I just tape it a bit on the end so the rod cannot come out ... wrap it in a couple of places so it don’t come undone. Throw that in the back of your truck and you’re not going to hurt the eyelets on that fishing pole. This is a good tip – you try this – you’ll save your gear for the next fishing trip. ■



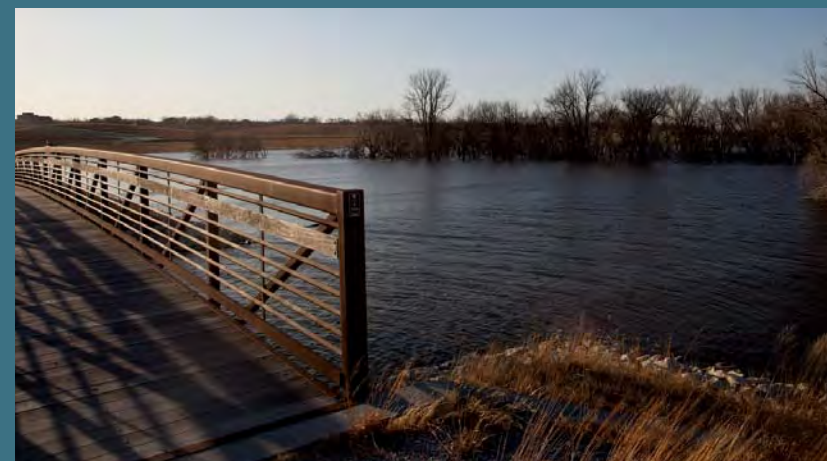
Southwest Focus on Pheasants Wins Conservation Award

The Southwest Focus on Pheasants (FOP) Partnership was given the Wildlife Conservationist of the Year award this past February at Pheasants Forever (PF) state habitat meeting Kearney. It was presented by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and PF for outstanding efforts in promoting conservation and working in a partnership.

The Southwest FOP, formed in 2010 to improve pheasant hunting by creating more and better habitat, encompasses more than 950,000 acres in Hitchcock, Hayes, Frontier and Red Willow counties. It has affected more than 15,000 acres.

The key partners include the Commission, PF, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Cooperative Research Unit, UNL Extension Service, landowners and volunteers.

See You Out There... But Where?



Do you know where this Nebraska photograph was taken?
See answer at the bottom of page 11.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Report Pond Fish Kills

Private pond owners are encouraged to report severe winter fish kills to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission following ice-out.

Winter fish kills occur when oxygen levels fall too low to support fish under the ice. Ice prevents the direct absorption of oxygen from the atmosphere, so oxygen produced by plant photosynthesis during the winter months is crucial to fish survival. Oxygen levels drop because of plant decomposition and respiration by aquatic organisms. Shallow ponds with heavy vegetation are particularly susceptible.

Once the ice is gone, pond owners should check their shorelines for dead fish and note the species, size and quantity. If hundreds of dead fish are observed, owners may call Jeff Blaser, Game and Parks’ private waters specialist, at 402-471-5435, to discuss options for restoring the fish community.

NEBRASKAland Visitor Winner and Hint



Last issue’s winner of the Visitor drawing was Glenn Swoboda of Omaha, Nebraska, who found the **cucumber beetle** on page 13. Readers are encouraged to contact NEBRASKAland within 10 days after this issue’s publication with the correct page number and name of this issue’s “Visitor” – a bug found in Nebraska that just happened to find its way onto one of the pages.

We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a NEBRASKAland Magazine year. To enter each month, write:
NEBRASKAland Visitor
2200 North 33rd Street,
Lincoln, NE 68503.

Or e-mail:

Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov
with “Visitor” in the subject line of the message.

HINT: This issue’s visitor is not on page 5, 40, 41, or 45.

Keep Your Head Down

Bottles, Bones and Family

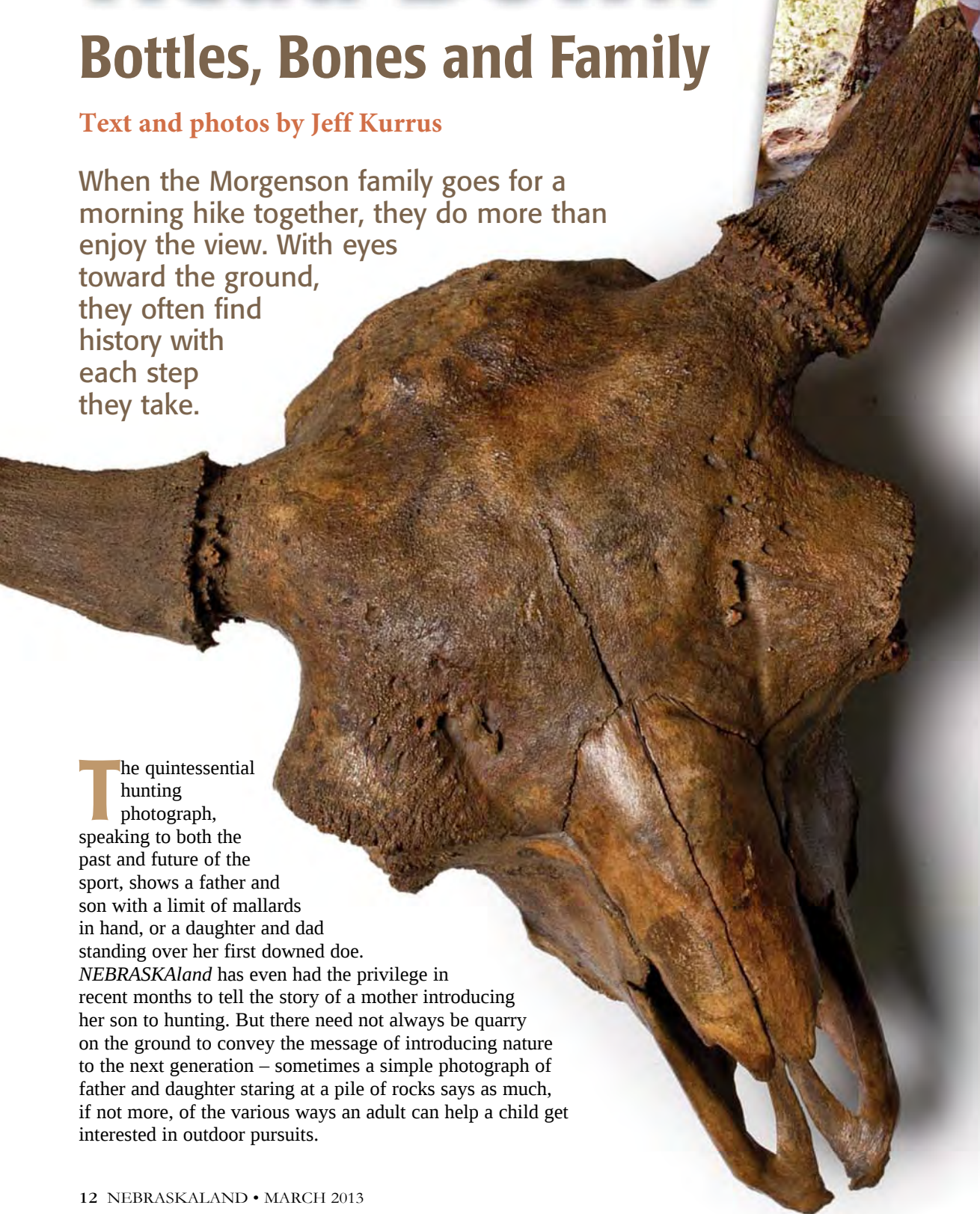
Text and photos by Jeff Kurrus

When the Morgenson family goes for a morning hike together, they do more than enjoy the view. With eyes toward the ground, they often find history with each step they take.

The quintessential hunting photograph, speaking to both the past and future of the sport, shows a father and son with a limit of mallards in hand, or a daughter and dad standing over her first downed doe. *NEBRASKAland* has even had the privilege in recent months to tell the story of a mother introducing her son to hunting. But there need not always be quarry on the ground to convey the message of introducing nature to the next generation – sometimes a simple photograph of father and daughter staring at a pile of rocks says as much, if not more, of the various ways an adult can help a child get interested in outdoor pursuits.



Above: A family affair shows (from left to right) Cara, mother Carol, Krista, with dog Sierra on a trip to the Black Hills of South Dakota in 2003.



Bison skull, Salt Creek drainage, 170 or more years old.



Krista Morgenson looks at a fossil camel toe bone found on a sandbar. She and her father have been hunting for fossils, rocks, bottles, skeletons and the like since she was five years old.



Found items (from left): Buffalo brick, made in Buffalo, Kansas, dates from the 1920s to 1930s; greenhorn limestone with fossil fragment of inoceramus clam shell, late Cretaceous period, more than 65 million years old; 6-ounce Coca-Cola bottle, bottled in Fairbury, early to mid 1950s; shark tooth, late Cretaceous period; ox shoe (one half), most likely dates from Oregon Trail; small (miniature) sad iron made of cast iron, early 1900s; fossil camel toe bone, 10,000 or more years old; Dakota sandstone rock found in eastern Nebraska, dates from Cretaceous period; pharmaceutical bottle filled with Pharyngeal teeth and serrated fin spines of carp; and badger skull.

Jon Morgenson and daughter Krista look at a transparent agate she found on a sandbar. Some 15 or so years of hunting has given Krista good experience in identification.



Recently, Lincoln native Jon Morgenson and his daughter, Krista, spent a Saturday morning looking for fossils on the Little Blue River in southeastern Nebraska. It was a significant morning because it would be their last together – at least the last of an era. A few days later she would be leaving for college, but not one where weekend fossil trips could still be the norm – she was heading off to Purchase College in White Plains, New York, some 1,300 miles from Lincoln and seemingly millions of miles away from river bottoms filled with bison bones and bottles.

“Bottles yes, bottle caps no,” said Jon in a recent interview. “They rust. I’m a generalist, but I have to draw the line somewhere,” he said with a laugh. Instead, Jon also looks for bricks and arrowheads, but is not opposed to uncovering other objects as well. “I have a huge historical interest – from Native Americans to settlement to natural history. It’s just what I’ve always done in the outdoors, and has become a passion.”

That passion started while he was a kid growing up in Abilene, Kansas. “Mud Creek was a hangout spot for kids back then, and we’d find old bottles and rocks,” said Jon. “And I also had an older brother who pushed it along. So on family vacations to Colorado, I was always picking stuff up.”

Special Battery Oil bottle, Thomas A. Edison, post 1915, found in Little Salt Creek. These were used by the railroads to power crossing guard arms and signals. The battery (a glass jar) contained zinc and lead plates covered in an electrolyte solution that was then covered by a layer of battery oil. After being used, the bottles were frequently discarded along railroad tracks.





His hobby continued into adulthood, where a pile of books, the Nebraska State Historical Society, and the paleontology department at UN-L answered the questions he couldn't after uncovering his latest finds. And finds there have been many, with Jon having more than a thousand items he has brought home through the years, including a recently discovered **mummified mouse (above)** that took center stage on the family mantle until his wife Carol vetoed their newest decoration.

"Now, I had to draw the line somewhere," said Carol with a grin.

It's a very vague line in the Morgenson house, however, because of all the family participants throughout time, including Krista and her sister, Cara. "Ever since we were young our parents were taking us hiking and camping," said Krista. "They encouraged us to pick up stuff and look at it. Then Dad would tell us where it came from and we developed a fascination with the natural world."

"Anywhere we could peak their interest in the outdoors," Jon added. "See a bluejay feather or pine cone and pick it up – that's where it started. Then we just transitioned to rocks

Artifact Hunting in Nebraska

Where to Go

Many public areas, including Game and Parks and National Park System lands in Nebraska, have specific laws prohibiting the removal of artifacts from their lands. Therefore, a person has two alternatives to finding a place to "hunt." One, because there are many public areas owned locally, contact those individual entities and state exactly what your intent is on these lands. They may not want you to remove bones, but may allow you to keep any bottle you find. For a person like Jon Morgenson, a place like this would be a goldmine. Two, you can seek private landowner permission, explaining your purpose and adhering to the landowner's wishes.

During your search for spots to search, you're probably going to ask "Why not on public lands where people hunt and/or fish?"

"I've asked this same question," said Jon,

"especially when I have no interest in hunting or fishing in a traditional sense. And the answer is that there is a finite amount of objects on these lands, yet the animals that are taken should replace themselves."

So why else aren't there lands set aside for people like the Morgensons the way there are for hunters and anglers? Funding.

Federal excise taxes on much of the equipment used by hunters and anglers, as well as money raised through the permits and habitat stamps they have to purchase, funds many parts of outdoor recreation while birders, rock hounds and photographers access these same areas without needing to buy any permit.

It's definitely an inequity that may need to be addressed as more and more people access nature in nontraditional ways.

Preparation of Bone and Fossil Finds By Jon Morgenson

Some fossils and bones or skulls may be found in a good, solid state of preservation where they need no more than gentle water rinsing and then left to air dry before being displayed. Other finds, however, especially if they have undergone repeated wetting/drying cycles and outdoor weathering, may need a little more attention.

One method that has worked well for me is to give the 'find' a good but gentle cleaning with water and a nylon bristle brush, removing all mud, dirt and sand or gravel. Be careful if the fossil or bone is weak and crumbling, making sure to capture any pieces that fall off during this process. Following washing, the fossil or bone should be air dried in a protected location. When it is completely dried, re-attach any loose pieces with Duco cement

(hobby type glue with an acetone base) and dry again.

The final step is applying a hardener, referred to as a consolidant by professionals. This is done to harden the entire fossil or bone, not just the exterior surface. For this reason, white or school glues (even diluted) are not a good choice because they only provide an outer coating and do not penetrate, allowing the fossil or bone to possibly crumble from within.

A good choice for home preparation is a mixture of one part white shellac diluted with five parts denatured alcohol. The alcohol acts to carry the shellac deeply into the fossil and harden it throughout. Multiple applications can be made until the hardener is no longer being absorbed.

and fossils as each year's hikes went a little farther."

Trips around Lincoln turned into vacations to Colorado, Texas, the Dakotas and Kansas as the family knocked on doors seeking permission to "hunt," much like game hunters do throughout the year. Once they gained permission, the competition would begin.

"One-upsmanship has always been part of this," said Jon. "It was developed by my brother and a friend from Chadron, and has continued with our girls. Pushing each other out of the way or sprinting past each other down a beach, it's always been a fun competition of sorts."

On Krista and Jon's last morning together before she went away to college, each strolled along with their heads looking down, occasionally glancing up to look for any sort of texture change in the terrain ahead of them. "Your eye becomes trained to pick out what is different," said Jon. "Once you know the texture of a gravel bar, for example, the gloss from an arrowhead will distinguish it [from surrounding rocks]."

Sharp bends in creeks, sandbars and other low-water areas draw heightened interest. "We wouldn't be opposed to some lakes completely drying up for a few weeks," said Jon, "but don't tell fishermen I said that."

Jon's generalist interest makes any place – a dried creek bed, an old barn, or even a pile of fast-food flower bed gravel – a great place to look. "I once found a piece of **ammonite (left)** in a pile of rock gravel in a shopping center,"

Jon said. "A colleague of mine found a **grooved hand axe (above right)** in a pile of gravel he ordered for his yard. You just have to keep your eyes open."

This advice has been well heeded by the Morgenson's daughters – their rooms are filled with cigar boxes and dresser tops full of bones, rocks and other remnants of

family trips together – along with copies of the fashion magazines that seemingly find themselves in the rooms of all teenage girls.

"There's a ballerina in me and one who wants to be in the mud," said Krista. "And I think this connection with nature through my parents has really kept me grounded in dance. Because I'm in such a competitive industry that can drive you crazy, there are just certain moments when it's time to take a hike."

"Our daughters have always balanced both worlds," said Jon. "Krista started in the Lincoln Dance Academy when she was six and is still studying dance. Cara, meanwhile, is studying in Poland after earning a Fulbright scholarship."

When asked if their hunting forays are a thing of the past, Jon can only smile. "I'm getting a lot of calls and e-mails right now from Cara," he said. "She's wanting to come home and start looking for stuff."

This is how the Morgensons spent time afield, from mom and dad to daughters, gazing just in front of their shoe tips for something to pick up and doing so in the eyesight of each other for as long as they can. That is why that day before Krista left was so powerful to see. Days later, she would be thrust into one of the world's biggest and most intense cities. While picking up rocks that day, her mind had to be running a thousand directions. Meanwhile, Jon was close by doing his own searching, but no doubt also wondering where his little girl was going.

Yet for the moment life was nearly perfect for a dad – he had sand, he had rocks and he had a hunting partner. ■



HAND AXE PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER



Jon and Krista search along a sand and gravel bar.



Learning About An Ancient Sport

A partnership between man and bird

Text and photos by Abby Jensen

Falconry was a world I knew nothing about until last November, when I was fortunate enough to get an introduction to this world of passionate people, amazing birds of prey and ancient cultural traditions in Kearney, where more than 500 people from 40 countries had descended for the annual meeting of the North American Falconers and the International Falconers associations.

I arrived at the Kearney Holiday Inn a bit too late Monday morning to join any of the falconers on their morning hunts (in addition to educational and procedural meetings, a big part of these “meets” is the opportunity for the attendees that are able to bring their birds to hunt the surrounding area and show off their birds), so I went to check out the raptors that weren’t being hunted. Just south of the hotel was the “weathering yard” – an open area where tethered birds could preen, stretch their wings and enjoy the weather. Inside the enclosure were more raptors than I had ever seen in one place – kestrels, red-tailed hawks, peregrine and gyrfalcons, and many other pure and crossbreeds of every size and shape. I had been walking around awhile admiring and photographing these beautiful creatures when I noticed a separate area being built west of the main yard. My curiosity was peaked.

Turns out the new area was specifically for golden eagles, which require a line of site blocked from the other raptors in order to relax while in a weathering yard. This is where I met Minnesotan Chase Delles and Dexter, his seven-year-old golden eagle, for the first time. After visiting with Chase for a while and photographing his beautiful, bird, I asked permission to join them on a hunt and Chase very willingly let me tag along.

So off we drove into the country side in search of

jackrabbits, joined by several falconers from other countries as well as Lauren McGough, who has become a sort of falconry “rock star.”

Lauren started getting into falconry in Oklahoma at 14 years of age, when her love of the outdoors and research of wildlife, especially snakes, led her to the sport. As a 17-year-old, Lauren traveled to Mongolia to immerse herself

in golden eagle falconry, returning as a Fulbright Scholar at age 22 to not only hunt foxes, but to also study rich culture surrounding falconry in that ancient land. She then moved to Scotland to pursue golden eagle falconry on the moors, and is currently working towards an anthropology doctorate at the University of Scotland. Lauren is currently in the process of writing a travel book that will include stories from her falconry adventures worldwide, and said she was hooked on the sport the first time she got a taste of it: “I believe you are born a falconer – once you discover it, it is a passion that you must pursue.”

Chase, who had become a good friend of Lauren through past meetings, was thrilled she

could join us. Although most birds are somewhat shy around people other than their handlers, Lauren’s vast experience with golden eagles was easily evident, so it didn’t take long for Dexter to settle in with her and do his thing. Once we got to the area that we had permission to hunt and everyone was ready, the group scattered out in a line and started walking the field with Dexter perched on Lauren’s leather glove-covered arm (like almost all raptors, goldens have extremely sharp talons), hoping to flush jackrabbits and watch Dexter in action. Golden eagles hunt by sight and you could see him scanning the fields as we walked. We were able to jump several “jacks” that day, and each time Dexter would launch



Dexter keeps up with a twisting and turning jackrabbit as he closes in for the kill.

Lauren McGough and Dexter, a golden eagle, watch for jackrabbits during a falconry hunt near Kearney last November.



A wide variety of raptors enjoy the early morning sun in the weathering yard as they prepare for the day's events.

himself off Lauren's arm and use his powerful wing beats to chase the rabbit until close enough to grab it. Once the rabbit was caught, Dexter would wait for Chase to come retrieve the prey. It was an understanding the two of them had come to – Dexter would soon enough get his reward for his hard work, often a rabbit heart from a previous hunt. Although Dexter didn't catch every rabbit that was flushed (sometimes the prey wins!), it was a very successful day – we got to watch this magnificent species spot, chase and catch a number of "jacks."

Perhaps the best part of the hunt was watching the interactions between Chase and Dexter and the partnership they shared – falconry birds are trained to come back for food, but fly completely free while they hunt and it's totally up to them whether they return to the falconer. Most return to their handler time and time again, choosing the good quality food, safe habitat and security that their handler offers. In the event that a bigger hawk drives the falcon

away, or strong winds drive it out of sight, many falconers fly their birds with telemetry gear attached that helps them track down the bird. Dexter has

never once opted to not come back to his people.

Many of the birds used by falconers were born in captivity. Others were taken from the nest (by those with the proper permits) at a young age and raised and trained in captivity. Dexter is a bit of a different story – a "passage" bird (one captured from the wild that can already fly), Dexter was trapped by Chase in March of 2008 when the United State Department of Agriculture declared part of Wyoming a 50-square mile depredation area due to golden eagles in the region killing livestock, mainly newborn lambs. Possessing all the necessary permits, Chase was allowed to enter the area and trap Dexter when the golden was approximately three years old.

Three short months later, Dexter was free flying with Chase and had learned that they would be hunting partners. Chase was able to take his time with Dexter because of the hunting seasons in Minnesota: "No need for me to rush, we had time to build a good working relationship – hunting season didn't start until September."

As for himself, Chase first learned about falconry at the ripe old age of seven. He was at a renaissance fair in Minnesota when he came upon a falconer. By age 15 he



Dexter returns to his hunting partner, Chase Delles, after catching seven jackrabbits during an early afternoon hunt.

Mark Hurd of Washington works with a young golden eagle.



had passed all the necessary federal and state falconry tests and was permitted to have his first bird, which ended up being a red-tailed hawk. His love of falconry quickly grew and he became interested in goldens. After much research and training, including meeting and trading tips and ideas with Lauren, he became one of the most recognized eagle trainers in the United States. In fact, he and Lauren traveled to the United Arab Emirates in 2011 to train 20 eagles in three weeks for the International Festival of Falconry. "That was a huge honor and it was an incredible opportunity to work with those eagles," said Chase, adding that "through falconry I have developed close friendships, started to travel internationally, which I probably would never have done, and falconry is now helping to shape my career path. This is a passion for me, a front row seat to the natural world."

Falconry was a passion, no doubt, for everyone I talked to at the meet. Everyone was welcoming, willing to explain this ancient sport, and eager to share their stories and invite me along on hunts. Although the North American Falconers Association holds a national meet every year, it rotates among various states. This year marked the sixth year it has been in Nebraska – in 2013 it will be held in Colorado, and in 2014 it's scheduled to be held in Texas. In a few years it'll probably be back in Nebraska, likely Kearney again. When it is, you know where I'll be. ■

Abby Jensen is a native Nebraskan who now lives in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. To see more of her wildlife photography and other work, visit www.jensen-photography.com.

Becoming a Falconer

The federal and state permitting and licensing process for becoming a falconer is very detailed and does not happen overnight – finishing the apprenticeship takes about two years, and becoming a master falconer takes at least seven. This is to help ensure the safety of these raptors and the continuation of the sport.

Falconry is also not cheap – it takes a lot of time and money to properly care for the birds, which require attention 365 days a year as well as a significant amount of room in their "mew" – the place where they are housed. That said, this sport can be a wonderful way to interact with nature for those willing to endure the intense demands involved with being a falconer.

Falconry clubs exist across the United States and throughout the world and are a great way to find out more about the sport and how to get started in it. Information about the Nebraska Falconers' Association can be found on the web at <http://home.earthlink.net/~nebraskafalconers/>, and The North American Falconers Association web address is <http://n-a-f-a.com>.

To receive a falconry packet that explains the process of getting the permits necessary for possessing a raptor in Nebraska, write:

**Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
Wildlife Division, Nongame Section
2200 N 33rd St PO Box 30370
Lincoln, NE 68503**



Parks Through the Seasons

Photos by Eric Fowler and Jeff Kurrus

Fog rising from the Missouri River drifts up a wooded draw below the overlook at Indian Cave State Park on an October morning. Spectacular autumn color is the prime attraction for visitors who flock to the park each fall, but a full slate of activities, including a Haunted Hayrack ride, greets them on many October weekends.

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Where? When? What? It's the start of any vacation discussion amongst a family looking for something new to see. In Nebraska it can be a tough decision – should you go out west into canyon country? Explore the rolling Sandhills? Head east to enjoy the scenery of the Missouri River bluffs? Somewhere in between? Hiking or skiing? Binoculars or fishing poles?

We know these challenges because we deal with them every month in NEBRASKALAND. In the following pages we've suggested a few options, but don't limit yourself to these – use a few of the locales as starting points for your own Nebraska adventures and visit a place you've never been before.

Or re-visit an old favorite during a different time of year. You'll find it's easy to rekindle the love affair. We always do. ■



ERIC FOWLER

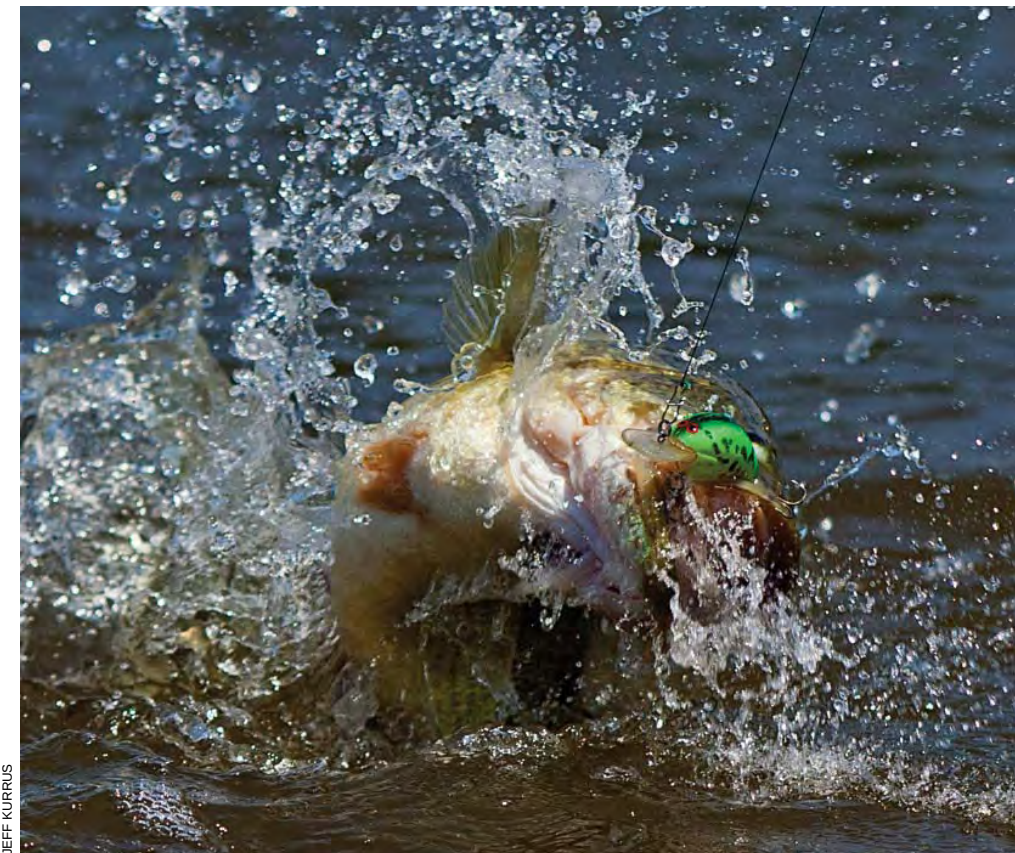


JEFF KURRUS

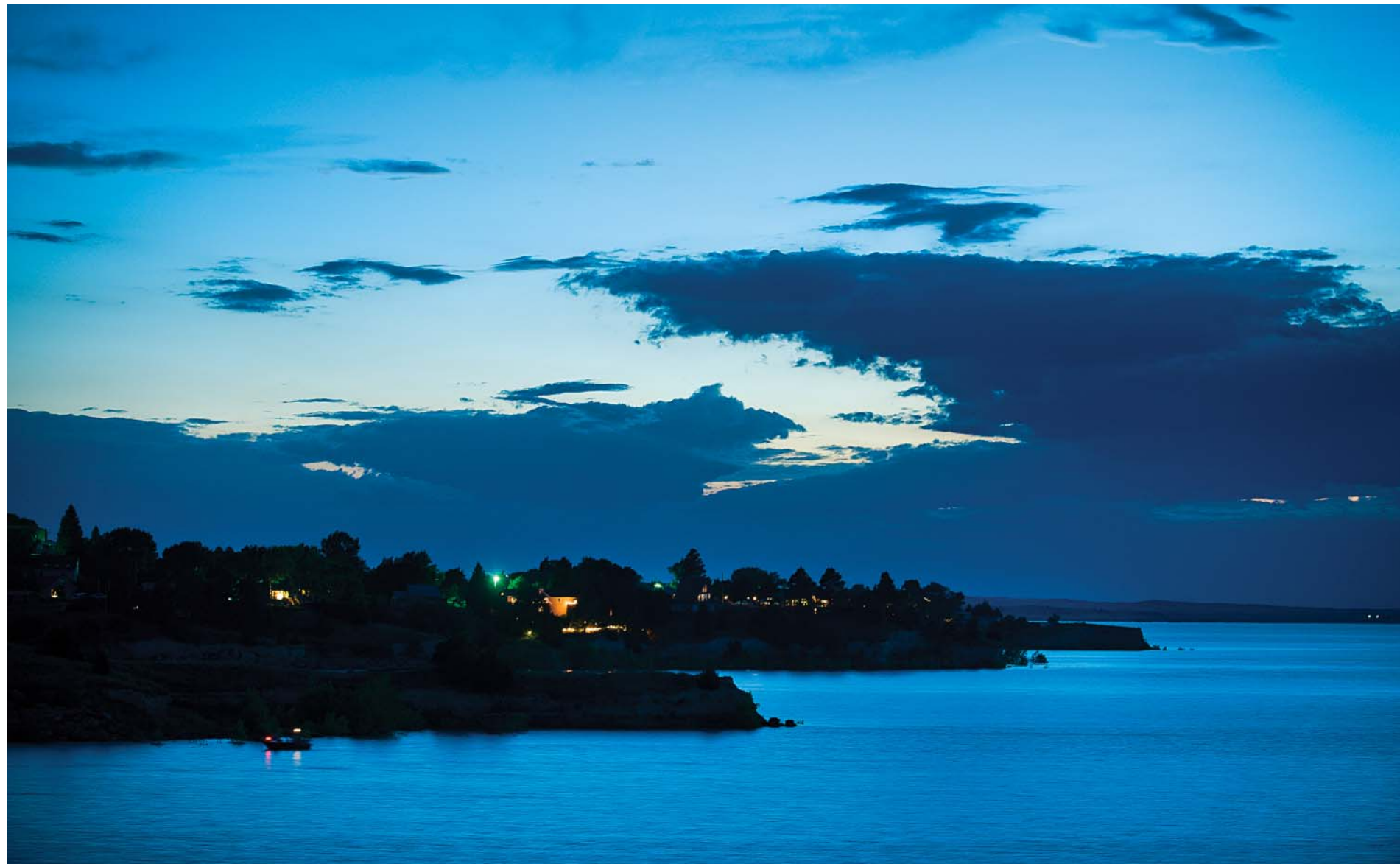
ABOVE: A pronghorn doe surveys Soldier Creek Valley beneath the Red Cloud Buttes at Fort Robinson State Park. More often associated with the wide-open Oglala National Grasslands to the north, pronghorn have taken a liking to the park as well, often roaming the pastures with the park's horses. Visitors might be able to view all of Nebraska's big game species at Fort Rob: elk, bighorn sheep, pronghorn and both white-tailed and mule deer.

LEFT: There are 10 state historical parks throughout Nebraska, including Fort Atkinson SHP (pictured). Living history demonstrations are held from May through October on scheduled weekends. Visit OutdoorNebraska.gov for specific dates.

RIGHT: Largemouth bass are a favorite species at Memphis Lake SRA, which boasted the state's highest catch rate of bass longer than 15 inches during 2012 fall surveys. With 81 acres of water to fish, ample shoreline opportunities for bank anglers, and 150 campsites, this eastern Nebraska hotspot is a must-fish for 2013.



JEFF KURRUS



ERIC FOWLER



ERIC FOWLER

ABOVE: Cabin and boat lights accent the deep blue sky and water of Lake McConaughy on a summer night. Big Mac offers great fishing and miles of white sand beaches to play on.

LEFT: Riders take in the historical scenery at Rock Creek Station SHP. The park and adjacent recreation area is a mecca for horse owners thanks to miles of trails and a campground that includes corrals.

RIGHT: Eugene Melechson of Omaha rips across Calamus Reservoir on his sailboard. While Calamus anglers may not appreciate the lake's seemingly constant wind, windsurfers do, often driving hours to catch a good ride.



ERIC FOWLER



JEFF KURRUS



JEFF KURRUS



JEFF KURRUS

ABOVE LEFT: Eugene T. Mahoney SP's CenturyLink Lake offers both bank and nonpowered boat fishing. With 10 acres of water, the lake is a destination point for panfishermen all year long or just another alternative at a park with so many recreational options.

ABOVE RIGHT: Driving roads with a camera out the window is a favorite pastime at Ponca SP. Fox squirrels (pictured), white-tailed deer and wild turkeys can turn any afternoon drive into an "I Spy" competition between friends and family.

LEFT: At Two Rivers SRA near Yutan, visitors can horseback ride, bike, fish, sleep in a caboose, or simply catch and release toads with folks of all ages. Located west of Omaha, Two Rivers has five fishing lakes, including one stocked with trout, and a swimming beach.

RIGHT: With nary a stitch of breeze and the lake like glass, an angler casts for pike and largemouth bass in the flooded brush at the upper end of Box Butte Reservoir on a September evening. The crystal-clear water of the reservoir draws visitors from near and far for its fishing, camping and watersports.



ERIC FOWLER



ERIC FOWLER



JEFF KURRUS

ABOVE: Frost and fresh snow cover the ponderosa pines and landscape at Chadron SP in 2011. The park and other areas in the Pine Ridge will look much different following last summer's catastrophic forest fires, but the park and its cabins are still open for business as usual.

LEFT: Pallid sturgeon are just one of many native fish and animals on display at Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium.

RIGHT: Steam rises up from the water at Smith Falls SP on a bitterly cold winter day. Like other streams in the Niobrara River Valley, the one that forms the falls is fed by groundwater bubbling up from beneath the Sandhills.



ERIC FOWLER

The Crane Trust

Sinking Roots, Deepening the Vision

Text and photos by Brad Mellema

In 1985, a group of local leaders in the Grand Island area got together to launch a nature center along the Platte River in south-central Nebraska. The plan was to provide a place where people could connect with the Platte River and the sandhill cranes that rely on it each spring as a place to rest and refuel during their northward migration.

Renown scientists such as Dr. Paul Johnsgard had written about the cranes and their remarkable journey and springtime concentration on the Platte. Birders took note of what he and others wrote, and soon people from across the country and around the world were showing up to see for themselves one of North America's greatest wildlife phenomena.

Soon the general public started to take notice of the spectacle, as nature photographers such as Mike Forsberg

and Joel Sartore, as well as famed ethologist Jane Goodall, started using their photos and words to tell the world how unique and important this event is.

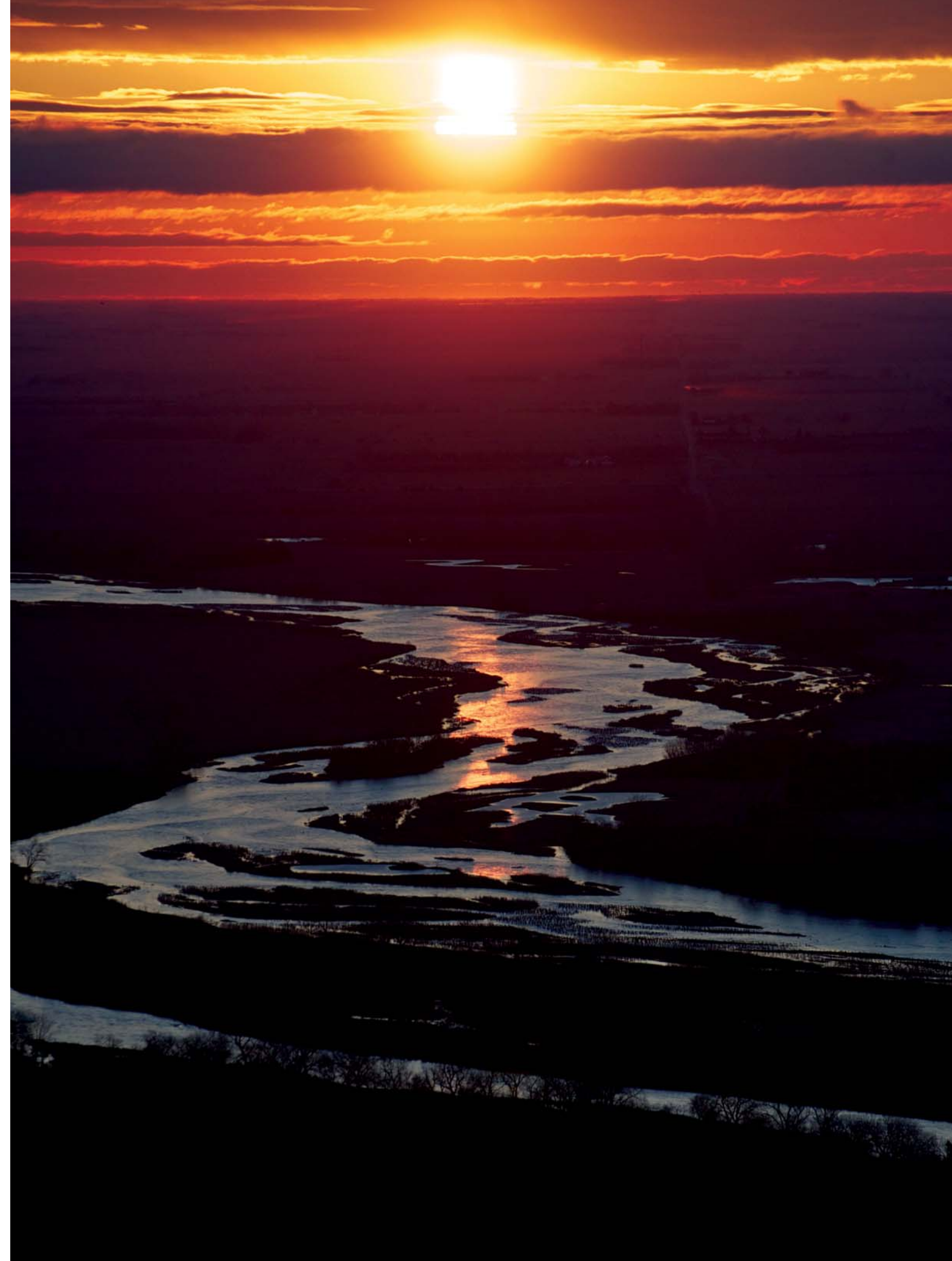
People raised in the Big Bend region of the Platte River have long known about the cranes – how could they not? Hundreds of thousands of them fill the area's landscape each spring, as they have for thousands of years, and their presence is as much a part of the season's rhythm as the planting of corn. For many of the locals, it never occurred to them that this was something unique or exotic, and many wondered about each year's increasing number of people who came to see the cranes. But come they did, and the hospitality industry certainly noticed, as they provided a large income boost during an otherwise slow time of year.

The nature center (then called Crane Meadows Nature Center) was

originally located in a small building on Alda Road, one-half mile south of the I-80 interchange. The site and its surrounding prairie and river channel were made available to the nature center by the Crane Trust, a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection and maintenance of critical habitat for cranes and other migratory birds along the Platte River. Under the arrangement, Crane Meadows prospered, public attention grew, and it wasn't long before the Bosselman family in Grand Island donated a nearby travel center on I-80 to expand the nature center.

In 2001, the center was completely remodeled into the state-of-the-art facility it is today, complete with

The braided channels the Platte River in central Nebraska provide important habitat for migrating sandhill cranes.





The annual spring stopover of sandhill cranes along the Platte River is a spectacle often taken for granted by locals, but each year thousands of visitors from across the country and world descend on central Nebraska to experience it.

meeting facilities, classrooms, art gallery and gift shop. An observation tower was erected overlooking the Platte River Valley, and two expansive footbridges were built to provide wheelchair-accessibility to the Platte River channel and a network of hiking trails that meander out across the prairie – all just a short distance from the main building.

Today the center operates as the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center, preserving a vital gateway for the public to this extraordinary ecosystem along the Platte. The new center is also a good place for illustrating the essential work being done by the Crane

Trust and other conservation partners to ensure a more promising future for America’s cranes.

Established in 1978, the Crane Trust is the product of a court-approved settlement over the construction of Grayrocks Dam on a Wyoming tributary of the Platte River, more than 400 miles upriver. The settlement between the National Wildlife Federation, the State of Nebraska and the Missouri Basin Power Project is a testament to the good that can happen when differing interests come together to find a lasting solution to complex and interlocking issues.

With more than 10,000 acres of

habitat under its control, either through direct ownership or conservation easements, the Crane Trust has been working from the ground up for more than three decades to research, restore and protect this extraordinary ecosystem for future generations. Well known in the conservation community, the Crane Trust remains one of the state’s best-kept secrets so far as the public is concerned, but the nature center may help change that.

This year, for example, the Trust hosted its first annual Research Symposium at the center, with researchers from across the country coming together to share ideas, present

findings and discover new ways to collaborate on future projects. The forum was open to the public and contributed to greater understanding and support for conservation through media and public participation.

Looking ahead, visitors will also be able to experience the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center’s new discovery trail currently being developed with support from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and private contributors. When complete, visitors will be able to use the trail to explore and experience Crane Trust grounds in ways that reveal the interconnectedness of the prairie



The Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center is a gateway into the Crane Trust’s work along the Platte River and features classrooms, an art gallery and a gift shop.

and river habitats. The trail will also highlight best practices in conservation along with the biology, hydrology and natural history of the region. Most recently, an exhibition herd of American bison was added in 2012.

Over the years, the Crane Trust and now its nature and visitor center have ushered a lot of water past their doorsteps, sharing this incredible bounty with a myriad of interests. As a new crane season begins, the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center has once again set the stage for visitors to experience the magic of the sandhill crane migration, including a variety of guided crane tours with spectacular

river views and its Wild About Nebraska speaker/event series. To learn more or to book a tour, visitors can go to NebraskaNature.org or call (308) 382-1820. ■

A life-long outdoor educator and now director of the Grand Island Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, Brad Mellema has introduced thousands of visitors to the Platte River and its cranes over the years.



The Year of the Rabbit

By Lisa Knopp

Last summer I planted my vegetable garden three times. Each time, shortly after the chard, cucumbers, carrots, beets, lettuce, onions, green beans, cabbage and sugar peas emerged, I found the tender new shoots and leaves mowed down and piles of tiny, round rabbit droppings nearby. I tried a variety of home remedies – onion water, garlic salt, human hair, chili powder, blood meal and something involving cat urine – to discourage the varmints. Sometimes I’d bolt out the backdoor, my arms flailing. “Stop, thieves!” I’d shout. The rabbits would zigzag across the yard and slip into the forsythia bushes or under the wooden fence, only to return once I’d gone back into the house. I even sicced my elderly beagle, Belle, on them. But with her dimming vision, deepening deafness and clear lack of interest in giving good chase, the rabbits were literally unmoved by her slow approach. Nothing I tried deterred the varmints. Finally, it was too late in the season for me to plant yet again. I grew chard in boxes on the deck and tended the corn, tomatoes and zucchini in what remained of my garden. Each Saturday morning I spent money at the Haymarket Farmer’s Market on vegetables I should have been able to grow in my own backyard.

This year on Mother’s Day my son, Ian, arrived at my house with a truckload of bricks, chicken wire, weed mat and stakes. His gift to me would be a rabbit-proof garden. He went to work digging a trench around my freshly tilled garden and partially buried the chicken wire. Next, he put down weed mat and then stacked bricks inside the fence.

He assured me that the rabbits couldn’t get in unless they dug under the fence and

pushed the bricks aside or pole-vaulted over the top. In the middle of the garden, he rigged an elevated sprinkler. I took a cardboard campaign yard sign from the last election and turned it inside out. With black marker, I outlined a cute bunny face with big, floppy ears, and then drew a red, circle-backslash symbol over it. If the fence and bricks didn’t keep the bandits away, surely my sign would. I was confident that my rabbit-free garden would soon be jungle-like, with every thing I needed to make a really good salad. In return for Ian’s good work, I’d plant extra cucumbers and a long row of the radishes that he loves.

After we fortified the garden, we sat on the deck sipping iced tea and looking out upon the rabbit-free space we’d created with our hard labor. “You know, part of the problem is the way rabbits are portrayed in the books that I read to you when you were little,” I said. “Take ‘The Tale of Peter Rabbit’ – it’s the worst. Peter wears those cute little shoes and that cute little blue jacket with brass buttons and cries real tears. His mother even brings him camomile tea when his tummy hurts. So when poor Mr. MacGregor finds Peter looting his garden, we’re rooting for the bunny. Don’t even get me started on what Walt Disney did with rabbits. What this world needs are children’s books and movies that portray rabbits as the evil, destructive, nasty pieces of work they really are. Then we’d be able to do what needs to be done to get rid of them.”

Ian nodded. He’s a deer hunter and has his own issues with Disney.

What I didn’t tell my son is that these misrepresentations are to blame for a terrible thing that I did winter before last.

During a particularly cold and snowy spell, I noticed a rabbit – big, shiny black eyes, twitchy little nose, flopsy ears and fluffy cottontail – huddled and shivering near my back fence. How could I leave something that precious to the ravages of the Nebraska winter? Each day I trudged through the snow and left carrot tops, broccoli stumps and potato peels by the back fence. Each day after my little friend finished eating, he or she turned to the kitchen window where I stood watching and gave me the sweetest look of gratitude. Ever since, I’ve been plagued by rabbits.

Ian and I complained a bit more about the problems with anthropomorphization, considered the efficacy of some of the rabbit repellents that I hadn’t yet tried (powdered fox urine, vinegar-soaked corn cobs, a border of thorny rose bush clippings, and chicken manure), and bemoaned the perfect environment that we city and suburban dwellers had unwittingly created for *Sylvilagus floridanus*. If only we could bring in some natural predators such as foxes, weasels, coyotes, bobcats, skunks, badgers, hawks and owls to assist the prowling house cats that are already hard at work on reducing the backyard rabbit population. If only. Then we talked about pickles. Come August, we we’re going to can cucumbers. Ian is partial to dill pickles. Even when he was a toddler, he’d take a dill pickle over a cookie or candy bar any day. I, however, prefer mild, sweet, bread-and-butter pickles. We considered the possibilities – mustard pickles, garlic pickles, chili pickles, cajun pickles, sweet Wasabi pickles, curried pickles. As we were estimating how many Kerr jars that we’d need to hold all of the slices and spears of cucumbers that we were going to be growing in my rabbit-free garden, I noticed two of the creatures nibbling grass near the forsythia bushes.

“You might want to throw some lettuce in the garden tonight and see if it disappears,” Ian said. I felt a flash of alarm. “And if it does?” “You could live trap them. You’d probably

catch one every night.”

“Then bring them to your place and turn them loose there?” Ian scowled. “We could electrify the fences.”

“Belle would get zapped every time I let her out, unless I’d put her on a stake and cable near the back door.”

“I could let you have Thunder.” Ever since Ian was given a beautiful, golden German shepherd that he didn’t ask for, he’s been trying to find a good home for her. “She chases rabbits.”

“I don’t need another dog.”

“I could bring over my bow and shoot them.” Normally, I’m opposed to the killing of sentient creatures. But if that sentient creature has a breeding season that lasts from February to September with an average litter of four to six kits, four to seven litters per year, a 28-day gestation and the ability to get pregnant the day after giving birth, and if all couple hundred or so descendants possibly produced by that one eastern cottontail doe in one season wanted to hold their family reunions in my backyard, I might backslide a bit on this moral principle.

“Would you eat them?” I asked. I’d feel a little better about this plan if I knew that the rabbits would end up in Ian and Brandy’s crock pot.

“Nah. Those are city rabbits. Full of pesticides. I wouldn’t even feed them to Thunder. I’d just throw them away.”

I considered my options: three dozen Kerr jars packed with pickles and a freezer full of green beans, peas, and chard or a garden full of leafless stumps and rabbit droppings. “Chicken manure. That’s what I’m going to try next.” ■

Lisa Knopp is an award-winning American essayist and author of introspective short stories, essays and creative nonfiction. She teaches creative nonfiction at UN-O and has been contributing to NEBRASKALAND since 1992.



Turkey Vultures

Nature's Cleanup Crew

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

There are many beautiful bird species that soar through Nebraska's skies. And then there's the turkey vulture, with a face only a mother could love.

To be fair, the turkey vulture's plumage, while drab, is not unattractive – it's the bird's beady eyes and bald, red head (which resembles that of a wild turkey, hence its name) that are hard to like. Add in its seemingly disproportionally smallness compared to the rest of the body and it's easy to see why its head adds nothing to the bird's attractiveness. It does, however, serve the bird's lifestyle well – you see, a feathered head would collect pieces and parts of dead deer, raccoons or whatever carcass it was sticking its head in at dinner time, possibly resulting in infection. Yes, the turkey vulture's preferred meal is a nice, ripe body. Yet another reason to not love this bird.

However, even if you don't like their feeding habits or appearance, you have to appreciate the turkey vulture's flight skills and you may have more opportunity to watch them in action in the years to come, as their numbers are growing rapidly, both here and elsewhere. But that could lead to problems, too. Some will be real, such as large numbers of roosting birds making a mess on homes, yards, businesses and the like. Others will be people just not wanting this ugly bird around.

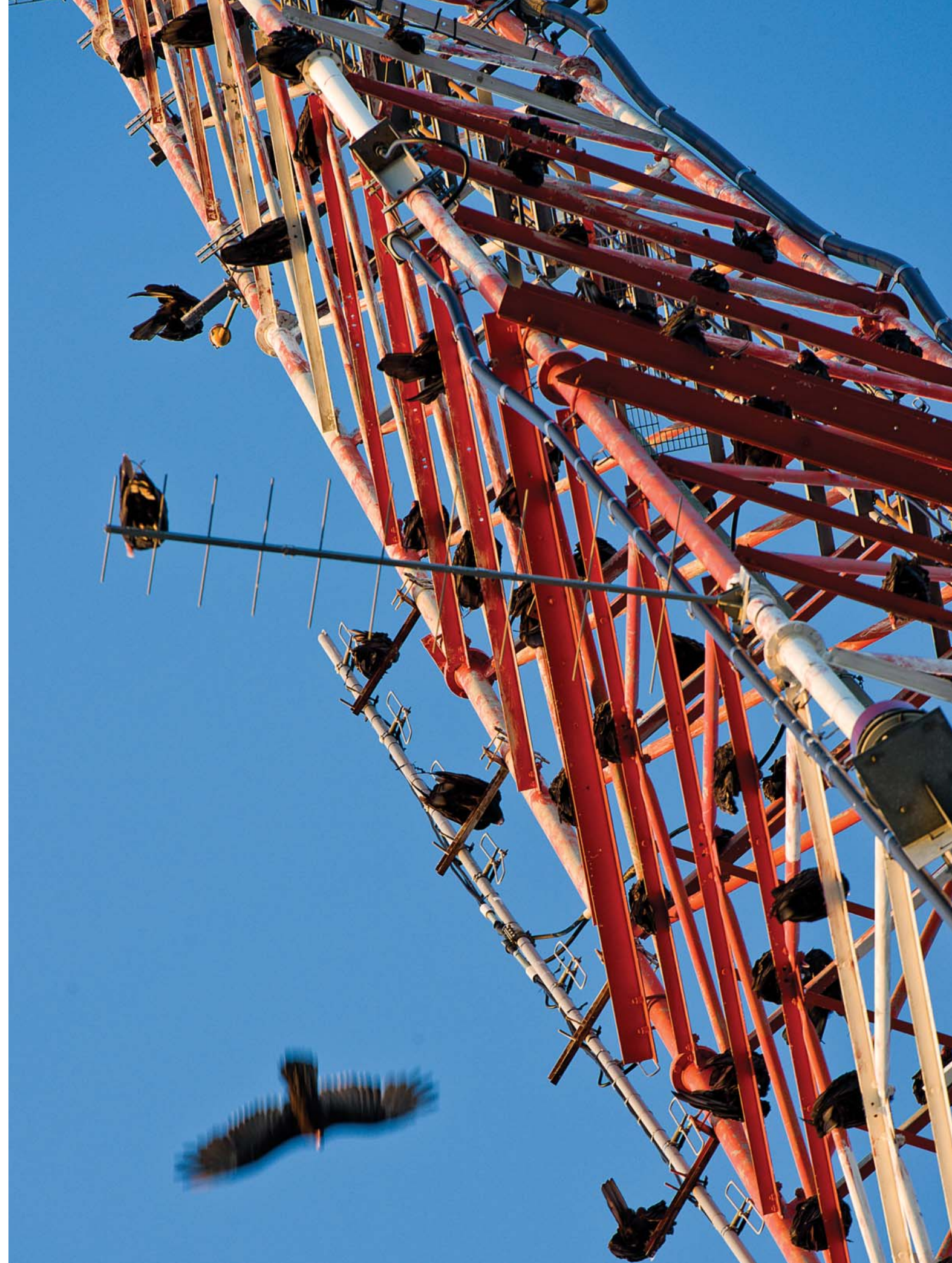
The turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*) is the most widely distributed of the seven vultures found in the New World, its range extending from southern Canada to the tip of South America. Most of the United States, including Nebraska, is included in the species' summer breeding range. Depending on the weather, turkey

vultures arrive in or migrate through Nebraska in March or April and stay through October or November. Those birds head south for the winter, some as far as Central and South America. Some turkey vultures are year-round residents of the southeastern U.S., from Texas to New York, a range it shares with the black vulture.

Other New World vultures include the endangered California condor and the yellow-headed vulture of Mexico and Central and South America. Turkey vultures are similar but unrelated to 15 species of vultures found in the Old World. While they have similarities to both, their relationship to hawks and storks is still debated.

Dark brown in color apart from the silver to white trailing edge on the underside of its wings, turkey vultures measure two to three feet in length and weigh five to six pounds. They make the most of their six-foot wingspan and are masters of soaring flight. Other than during takeoff and landing, they rarely flap their wings, which cant upward slightly. While cartoons and Westerns might lead you to believe that groups of circling vultures are homing in on their next meal – maybe even waiting for it to die – it's more likely the birds are riding thermals or updrafts to gain altitude, a common behavior called kettling. Thermals are columns or bubbles of rising air created by the uneven heating of the ground by the sun, especially in the morning. They often form over bare ground, city buildings and parking lots or hills

Left: The turkey vulture gets its name from its distinctive red, featherless head, an attribute it shares with the wild turkey. **Right:** More than 100 turkey vultures used this transmission tower on the University of Nebraska - Omaha campus as a roost during the summer of 2011.





Turkey vultures dine on a dead deer in a soybean field along the Platte River west of Louisville. While vultures prefer fresh kills, they often have to wait until the carcass has been opened by other predators or softened by decomposition.

facing the sun. Updrafts are caused by a hill or building deflecting wind upward. Once at the desired height, vultures can glide at speeds of up to 60 mph to their next stop or source of lift.

Turkey vultures use this climb-and-glide flight sequence to fly for hours without flapping their wings, teetering from side to side to stay on course. They can complete their entire migration, which takes some 5,000 miles from British Columbia to Venezuela, in the same fashion. One study documented a vulture covering approximately 100 miles a day for six days. Due to the lack of thermals, they typically avoid crossing large water bodies and don't often migrate on rainy or overcast days. While vultures may rise to altitudes of nearly four miles to fly over storms, they typically fly at 2,000 feet while migrating.

Vultures' soaring flight is also used in their search for food. Like their relatives, hawks and eagles, turkey vultures have excellent eyesight and sometimes locate meals with their eyes. Because they aren't equipped with sharp talons that are capable of

killing prey, however, they feed almost exclusively on carrion, using their highly developed sense of smell (a rare trait in the bird world and among the best of them all) to detect even the slightest trace of the scent of death while gliding at lower levels.

In a study done in Panama, turkey vultures found 71 of 74 chicken carcasses within three days, with no difference in the time took to find leaf-covered birds under the forest canopy to those in the open. The vultures did not easily locate fresh kills, but found most within a day. Studies have shown vultures prefer fresh meat but, because they lack a beak strong enough to tear the thick skin of larger mammals, often must wait until their meal is softened by decomposition or opened by coyotes, opossums or other scavengers.

Turkey vultures feed primarily on mammals, ranging from mice to large ungulates. They are opportunistic, however, and will also eat birds, fish, mussels, reptiles, amphibians, insects and even animal feces or rotting pumpkins. They also prefer to eat herbivores, avoiding dogs, coyotes and other carnivores. Many may gather at a

carcass, but typically only one feeds at a time, making others wait their turn.

While deemed disgusting by some, the birds are praised by others as part of nature's "cleanup crew." Its common name comes from the Latin word *vellere*, which means to pluck or tear. In its scientific name, *Cathartes* means purifier, and *aura* means air or the breeze. One study found that the stomach acid of a turkey vulture kills the bacteria responsible for such diseases as botulism, anthrax, cholera and salmonella, and that their feces were free of these pathogens. So by cleaning up carrion that would otherwise be consumed by maggots, bacteria or other scavengers, vultures may actually help curb the spread of disease.

Vultures are believed to mate for life, but don't build a nest. Instead they lay their eggs in or on whatever surface they might find in a variety of dark recesses, including rock ledges, hollow trees or logs, caves, animal burrows and abandoned hawk or heron nests or buildings. Most clutches contain two eggs, dull white with tan, brown or purple blotches. Both adults share

incubation, which begins when the second egg is laid and can last 28 to 41 days depending on the temperature of the nest site. Young weigh about two ounces when hatched and are covered with white down, except for their dark gray faces. The adults also share in



Turkey vultures spread their wings to soak up the morning sun at a Lincoln roost. This Horaltic (spread-winged) pose serves to dry the morning dew from the birds' wings and also helps raise their body temperature, which they lower at night to save energy.

Did You Know?

- When approached or threatened, vultures often vomit. Researchers are unsure if they do this to offload weight and make flying away easier, or to distract predators from continuing their pursuit.
- Vultures lack a syrinx – the vocal organ that most birds have – and are only able to communicate with grunts or low hisses. Hear samples of their sounds at www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Turkey_Vulture/sounds.

brooding and feeding, regurgitating well-digested food for the young. Young fledge at 60 to 84 days, their heads still gray. They spend a few weeks perching and roosting at the nest site, still dependent on their parents for food. That dependence is short lived, although young may continue to follow adults on foraging flights once they leave the nest site and join the communal roosts.

Found throughout Nebraska, vultures typically inhabit areas where forest meets open grassland or farmland, providing trees for perching and roosting and areas where carrion may be present.

While they don't have a voice box like other birds and communicate only in grunts and hisses, they are

social. Vultures gather in communal roosts at night, with numbers ranging from a few to a 100 birds or more, even thousands in some southern locales. Large cottonwoods or pines are common choices for these roosts, but transmission towers are also used. Vultures don't often leave the roost until a few hours after sunrise, when the air has warmed and thermals can be found. If undisturbed, vultures may use the same roosts year after year.

Vultures sometimes roost in cities, putting them at odds with those who live below them and don't appreciate the whitewashing caused by their feces. In recent years, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and USDA Wildlife Services biologists have responded to an increasing number of complaints



While vultures sometimes appear to be flying in circles simply because they can, they do so to gain altitude and save energy with the help of thermal currents or updrafts.

from communities across the state about vultures roosting on radio, television, phone and water towers, grain elevators, and in treetops above homes and even a cemetery.

One flock of vultures moves from roost to roost in a southwestern Lincoln neighborhood. Some of the roosts are on large lots and not directly above homes, thus are mostly tolerated by the homeowners. Other roosts, however, turn rooftops and back yards into bombing ranges. Some homeowners bang on pots and use other noisemakers

in hopes of scaring the birds away. While the birds are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, all are legal methods of hazing.

Other deterrents found to be effective and used elsewhere include spraying the birds with water, even using motion activated, rooftop-mounted sprinklers, “shooting” the roosting birds with red or green laser lights, or hanging an effigy in the roost. Scientists aren’t certain why this works, but the sight of a dead vulture hanging by its foot has proven effective enough that replicas of

dead vultures are being commercially produced and sold.

Tom Welstead, district wildlife manager in the Commission’s Norfolk Office, found the effigy doesn’t even need to be a vulture – in response to a Blair homeowner’s complaint about roosting vultures, he hung a tattered, broken wild turkey mount by its foot in a roost tree and was able to convince the 30 or so vultures using it to find a new home.

The need to haze vultures is growing with their population. The annual North American Breeding Bird Survey, which uses June bird counts to track the status and trend of bird populations, shows an average annual increase of 11 percent in turkey vulture numbers in Nebraska from 1967 through 2010 – among the highest rates in the nation and five times the rate of increase nationally in the same time frame.

Welstead has watched turkey vulture numbers grow in his 30-plus years with the Commission. “I grew up down in southeastern Nebraska and I don’t remember ever seeing turkey vultures,” he said. “I went off to college in Colorado and when I came back in ’76, that’s when I noticed my first one.”

Now he sees them throughout the territory he manages and throughout the state as well. “I think their numbers have just grown exponentially,” said Welstead.

The first turkey vulture complaint Welstead received came in the mid-1980s from the Genoa area, where birds were nesting in an abandoned barn and the landowner “didn’t like them being there because of the smell.” It wasn’t until early in the 2000s that he received the first complaint related to a vulture roost in northeastern Nebraska.

While the Commission doesn’t track vulture complaints, USDA Wildlife Services does. Chad Richardson, director of Wildlife Services for Nebraska, said their first recorded complaint was in 1996 and was the only one in that decade. Complaints have been an annual occurrence and increasing, however, since 2003. The most received was 12 in 2011, from which biologists dispersed 105 birds. The most birds dispersed was 370 in 2010, a number that came from six complaints. Damage to building,

vehicles or other property has ranged from none to \$20,400 – mostly involving the cost of washing feces off of property but also including a pricey antenna on a cellular phone tower that was broken by perching birds.

For Commission and Wildlife Services biologists, the initial response to a complaint is educating the homeowners on steps they can take, including harassing the birds. When that doesn’t solve the problem, Wildlife Services may step up the harassment with pyrotechnics or laser lights.

“You can pretty much move all those birds with harassment and pyrotechnics and everything else,” said Richardson. “But sometimes those last few just decide ‘To heck with you, we ain’t moving.’”

As a last resort in those cases, Richardson said his staff has had to resort to shooting vultures, a measure only allowed under a special permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Shooting one or two birds is usually all it takes to get the stubborn birds to move. “Death really translates

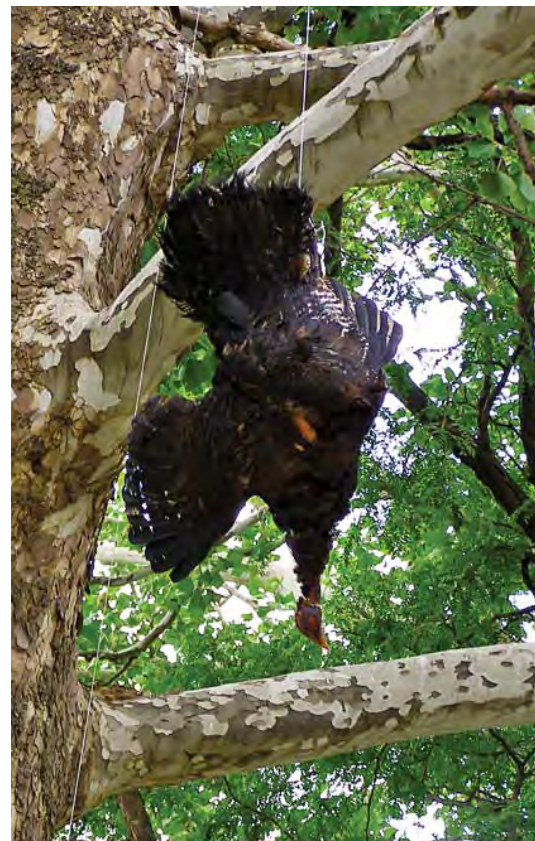


PHOTO BY TOM WELSTEAD

A tattered wild turkey mount hung in effigy in lieu of a turkey vulture was enough to get vultures roosting in a sycamore in Blair to move elsewhere.



A turkey vulture chick stretches its wings in a nest its parents chose on the second floor of an abandoned farm house south of Clarkson. The adults came and went through a broken window.

well with these birds,” said Richardson.

Welstead doesn’t blame those who complain about vultures. “These things are pretty filthy, I’ve got to admit,” he said. “It’s pretty nasty.”

On the other hand, Welstead also dealt with a complaint of 10 birds roosting on a water tower that may not have been as warranted as a whitewashed backyard: “They felt like those were birds that represented death or something and didn’t like to see them sitting on their water tower,” he said of the town folks who complained.

Joel Jorgensen, bird program manager with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, agrees the bird’s appearance and reputation may make some folks less tolerant than they would be otherwise. “If they had a group of bald eagles nesting in their trees rather than turkey vultures, I think they may view it differently,” he said. “But turkey vulture feces can make a mess, so I don’t want to give the impression they’re completely innocuous either.”

Jorgensen said only a handful of bird species are increasing as much as turkey vultures, including wild turkeys and Canada geese, which have also become a nuisance in some cases. Several factors could be contributing to the increase in turkey vulture numbers. The protection of the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act was the first, ending most of the trapping, shooting and poisoning that had been occurring based on unfounded beliefs that turkey

vultures preyed on newborn, young or weak livestock, and spread disease. While this continued into the mid-1900s in places such as Texas, where ranchers killed more than 100,000 turkey vultures in the early- to mid-1900s, the population rebounded elsewhere between 1920 and 1940.

The widespread use of DDT and other organochloride pesticides following World War II led to local and regional declines in turkey vulture numbers. DDT made its way through the entire food chain and affected many bird species, especially raptors, by reducing the thickness of egg shells and nesting success. Turkey vulture populations began to rise soon after it was banned in 1972.

Some believe the increase in deer populations and the number of vehicles on highways is also helping turkey vulture numbers, as the combination usually means more road kill for vultures to dine on. Were road kill not apt to be frozen part of the year, vultures might be year-round Nebraska residents. That said, the northern edge of the turkey vulture’s winter range is creeping northward, a byproduct of climate change.

Whatever the reason, the turkey vulture population increase is real and could very well continue. Which means there will be more opportunities for people to watch a kettle of soaring vultures, roadkill won’t linger on the roadside as long and people will need to learn how to live with the roosting birds or how to get them to move on. ■



Hedge Apples: Mysterious Fruit of the Plains

What is this lumpy fruit, and does it really repel pests?

By Olivia Johnson

Whether it was at the grocery store, the farmer's market or your grandpa's farm, you've probably seen a hedge apple at some point in your life. Many people, hopeful of deterring spiders and other unwelcomed home invaders, purchase this unique fruit with the belief that it repels undesirables. But what exactly are hedge apples, and are they really effective for pest control?

Hedge apples, also referred to as "hedge balls," grow on Osage-orange trees (*Maclura pomifera*). These trees, native to parts of Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas, get their name from the Osage tribe, which originated in the region. In the 19th century the trees were commonly planted throughout the Midwest as living fence lines, known as hedgerows, for farmers and ranchers. This led to the origin of the fruit's name, the "hedge apple." Widespread Osage-orange planting eventually ended with the debut of barbed wire. Treelines of Osage-oranges are still a common sight across the plains, but many have been bulldozed in recent years.

Osage-orange trees stand anywhere between 25 and 40 feet in height and are dioecious, meaning they produce male and female flowers on separate plants. The trees produce green flowers in May and June, and the female trees produce hedge apples in September or October. The tree is

fairly low maintenance, and can tolerate harsh heat, winds and poor soils.

So what purpose does the resilient Osage-orange tree and its strange fruit have in our part of the world? According to horticulturists at Iowa State University, not much – other than its use as a natural fence and some cover for wildlife, the trees are rather ambiguous. They are less than ideal for landscaping, as they're covered in thorns and leave the ground covered in softball-sized hedge apples every fall. Although squirrels are known to feast on the seeds buried inside the tough fruit, most animals find hedge apples unpalatable. They aren't a vital food source for wildlife.

What about repelling pests, such as insects and mice? Unfortunately this folktale, although rooted from a bit of real information, has not been proven to be effective. A study completed at Iowa State concluded that while insect deterrent compounds have been extracted from the apples, the fruit as a whole isn't effective at preventing nuisances from entering your home.

Scientific proof or not, some still claim that hedge apples are an ideal, natural pest control method. If you know of an Osage-orange tree in your area, go ahead and give the fruit a try in your basement. Just don't be surprised if you still have eight-legged roommates lurking around. ■



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

From the Field to Your Table

Wild Game with Pasta? You bet.

By Jenny Nguyen

Tagliatelle with Rich Three-Meat Sauce

While I was growing up, spaghetti wasn't a favorite. My brother and I ate a lot of the canned stuff, and we ate numerous pastas from boxes. If we were low on food in the pantry, my mom would sometimes do the unthinkable by using ketchup for sauce, which still traumatizes me to this day. Don't get me wrong: My mother is a fantastic Vietnamese cook, but when she decided to go "ethnic" – which included anything outside of Vietnamese – my brother and I never knew what we were going to get. Spaghetti was one of those foods, and we still joke about it today. I've had it in so many uninspiring ways that I used to avoid it altogether as a young adult.

About three years ago, however, I had my very first taste of wild game. I became completely enthralled, not only with the process of hunting, but also with the endless culinary possibilities that wild game held. That's when my boyfriend Rick and I started our blog called *Food for Hunters*, (www.foodforhunters.com) where we share our wild game cooking adventures. "Tagliatelle with Rich Three-Meat Sauce" is hands-down one of our favorite wild game recipes. It's hearty, rich and cooked with three different types of meat: ground venison, pancetta and the ever suspicious chicken liver. It's a pasta dish that I never mind having, and organ haters need not be scared: This dish doesn't have too much liver in it – just enough to give the three-meat sauce an extra something special.

Servings: 4

Prep Time: 10 minutes

Cooking Time: 30-45 minutes

Ingredients:

- 4 tbs. olive oil, extra for drizzling
- 3 ounces of pancetta (or lean bacon), diced



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

"Tagliatelle with Rich Three-Meat Sauce" is a wonderful pasta recipe to try out.

- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 carrot, chopped
- 1 celery stalk, chopped
- ½ lb. ground venison
- ¼ cup of chicken liver, chopped
- 1 cup of crushed tomatoes
- ½ cup dry white wine, such as Pinot Grigio or Chardonnay
- 1 cup beef stock
- ½ tbs. dried oregano
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 lb. dried tagliatelle (pasta)
- salt and pepper, to taste
- grated Parmesan cheese, for serving

1. Over medium-heat, heat 4 tbs. of olive oil in a large heavy-bottom saucepan. Add chopped pancetta and cook for 3-5 minutes, or until just turning brown. Stir occasionally. Next, add chopped onion, carrot, celery and minced garlic. Cook for another 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.

2. Turn heat to high, add ground venison and cook for 5 minutes, or until browned. Break up meat with a wooden spoon and stir in chopped chicken liver. Cook for another 2 to 3 minutes, stirring occasionally.

3. Pour in 1 cup of beef stock and ½ cup of dry white wine. Add 1 cup of pureed tomatoes, ½ tbs. of dried oregano, 1 bay leaf, salt and pepper to taste. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer. Cover and simmer for 30 to 45 minutes, or until sauce reaches desired thickness.

4. As the sauce simmers, bring a pot of lightly salted water to a boil. Add the tagliatelle pasta and bring back to a boil. Cook according to package directions until tender but firm, al dente. Drain cooked pasta and transfer to a warm serving bowl. Drizzle with olive oil and toss well.

5. Discard bay leaf and ladle sauce over pasta. Toss again. Serve immediately with grated Parmesan. ■

Jenny Nguyen recently joined the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as a Public Information Officer and is based out of the NGPC office in Norfolk.



PHOTO BY SEAN WALKER PHOTOGRAPHY

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS/VIDEOS

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▲ These two photos were taken at Mallard Haven north of Shickley back in the mid-'60s. Every year friends and I hunted the area for pheasants and ducks. Back then a dog wasn't needed to hunt – you just had to be willing to walk. I continue to use the same side-by-side 10-gauge that I used in the '60s.

LEFT PHOTO: Pictured from left are: Bill Siedhoff; Dale Johnson (myself); Steve Prawl; and on the ground is Richard Reed. Several of us were from Cortland, where we hunted a lot. Tom Mass is taking the picture.

RIGHT PHOTO: Pictured from left are: Richard Reed; Dale Johnson (myself); and Steve Prawl. I still hunt with my friend Tom Mass, who was the person taking the picture. Once in a while I see Steve Prawl. Richard Reed has passed away.

– Dale Johnson, Lincoln, Nebraska

► This picture is of Duane Green (left) of McCool Junction and myself, Don Mathiasen. Trapping was about the only means of making any money during the winter months while going to high school. The picture was taken about ¼-mile south of McCool Junction in either 1947 or 1948 and shows our pelts of three raccoons, one mink and 13 skunks that we had hunted or trapped.

Duane still lives in McCool Junction. Although I now live in La Mesa, California, I do return for deer hunting season as often as possible.

– Don Mathiasen, La Mesa, California



Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKALAND Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to tim.reigert@nebraska.gov. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1980. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Photos will be returned.

Questions for God

Cayden McConnell, a 12-year-old from Beatrice, recently passed away. Many want to know why.

By Jeff Kurrus

I have a journal near my desk at NEBRASKALAND that contains a list of questions for God. Shortly before Christmas of 2012, I added another entry after learning that 12-year-old Cayden McConnell of Beatrice had succumbed to cancer after fighting the disease for more than a year.

I did not know Cayden well. In fact, I barely knew him at all. I met him and his dad Ryan on the opening weekend of the firearm deer season in 2011 on the property of Gage County landowner Rex Adams. When I arrived that Friday night before, Cayden was already asleep in the bunk house/deer stand as Ryan and I shook hands and whispered pleasantries in the dark before we all fell asleep in anticipation for the morning hunt.

However, about three hours after we turned in I awoke, sweating. I reached over and, thinking of no one but myself, turned the space heater off. Shortly after, Ryan turned it back on and added another cover for Cayden. While it was my introduction to this family's situation, it obviously was not Ryan's.

Cayden's brain tumor was first discovered in August 2011— only two months before our opening day trip, but more than sixty nights of going to bed knowing he could be dying and sixty mornings of waking up to find he hadn't. Cayden's body, you see, was already breaking down, as evidenced by our meeting the following morning. His left arm was paralyzed and he had added a limp to his walk. Pills, radiation and chemotherapy had stripped any sort of normalcy from his life and those closest to him.

It was upon seeing him that I thought about my own daughter, Madeline, who was two years old at the time. Before her, I didn't truly understand the extreme sadness that accompanied the loss of a child. I just didn't get it. However, as soon as she was conceived, the feeling of mere potential overrode all. By the time she was born, I would have traded my father to guarantee her safety.

It was during these times shortly after her birth that friends and family were quick to say who she looked like – Mom's ears, grandmother's mouth, etc. And as the days became weeks, onlookers began seeing the personality traits that will make her for the rest of her life. What makes her angry, what makes her smile – all those little qualities that make each person special until they are old and gray.

But what happens if a child never gets that chance to grow old? What happens when you're only 11 and you have to walk with a cane? That's where the questions to God come in. For it was evident during that trip with Cayden that

he was patient as a hunter, and probably as a person. That he was confident when he squeezed the trigger, despite optimal use of only one limb. And that he was, above all, strong. How could one feel their body trying to both grow into a man and deteriorate at the same time and still keep it together without having a will of iron? And why, if placed on this planet with those qualities, does this person have to succumb to something so debilitating and dreadful? When we think about our own children, we see them as kids, teenagers and adults, then wives and husbands – not dying of cancer before they can drive a car.

Which is what pains me even more when I think about Cayden and his family.

I was told shortly after his death that he had put his new crossbow to good use last fall before passing away. And I imagine on those days that it wasn't easy for him to get around, and that everyone around hung on every word he said. Understandably so – while his physical self was just a shadow of the run-all-day boy he had been, all those traits that he had shown since he was a baby would repeatedly come out for those closest to him.

For Cayden's life brimmed. Any person who passes up small bucks for the chance at a bigger one is not thinking about the cancer in his body. He is thinking about the opportunity to shoot a big buck, to show photos to his friends, to stare at the deer on the wall for the rest of his life, remembering every moment of that day.

These are the stories we hear from the elderly whose lives have been filled with days afield. And it is much easier to be around these people whose own days are numbered, for the dozens of photos adorning their walls tell of a thousand lives lived. And not once have I ever thought about asking another question to God when an elderly relative or friend is laid to rest.

But when a young boy, whose passion for life and all that it will hold for him over the next 70-plus years, has a disease that ends his hunt too many years too early, I just repeat the questions again in my journal – praying that I won't ever have to ask them again. ■





Focusing on What's Important

On July 20, 2012, a lightning strike ignited a fire along the Niobrara River that ended up burning more than 65,000 acres and destroying several homes. Much of the area burned was part of The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve. I was at the Preserve during the latter days of the event, helping the staff deal with the fire and its aftermath; putting out smoldering trees, propping up burned fences, and documenting the impacts of the fire.

By the evening of July 25, the fire was still burning and we were all dog tired – but the end was in sight. I was crossing the Norden Bridge near sunset when I saw a photographer by the falls below. Something about his presence really struck me. Surrounded by a landscape that was mostly charred and black, he was focused only on the water and the light. Watching him was a reminder that there was still tremendous beauty in the valley.

Most people who look at this photo will only see a pretty image of a photographer and the river. For me, it will always represent much more. When I look at it, I'll remember the smell of smoke and sweat, and the emotional lift I felt from seeing this vignette of beauty at the end of a very long day.

Chris Helzer
July 25, 2012



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