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Fort Atkinson Blacksmiths

See page 20

INSIDE
Nebraska Has Scorpions? • Live Well. Go Fish.
My Fillet Knife • Did Nebraska Cause the Civil War? • House Wrens
Insect Camouflage • What to Do in May • The Last Stop

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FEATURES

20

A HAMMER, AND A GOOD SWING

Fort Atkinson Blacksmiths

Story and photos by Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

28

OUTDOOR NEBRASKA

What to Do in May

By Renae Blum

30

LIVE WELL. GO FISH.

Catching Fish, and Smiles

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

36

DID NEBRASKA START THE CIVIL WAR?

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

40

CUTTING BACK TO ANOTHER TIME

By Justin Haag

42

THE BOISTEROUS, BUSY HOUSE WREN

A Natural History with Nesting Habitats

Story and photos by Justin Haag

46

INSECT CAMOUFLAGE AND MIMICRY

Story and photos by Brianna Nugent

DEPARTMENTS

- 12
- In the Field
- 50
- Mixed Bag
- 60
- Portraits from the Past
- 62
- The Last Stop

ON THE WEB

For more articles and
information, visit
NebraskalandMagazine.com

Cover: The late blacksmith Tom McDowell speaks to visitors during a living history event at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park. See story on page 20.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

This page: Vince Gewinner of Weeping Water fishes for largemouth bass from a kayak with a set of homemade wooden fishing lures at Verdon State Recreation Area in Richardson County.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland
magazine

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Rates: \$18 for one year; \$33 for two years; \$44 for three years. Nebraska recipients must add appropriate sales tax. To subscribe call 1-800-NEBLAND (632-5263), or go online to: NebraskalandMagazine.com.

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MAY PHENOLOGY
Watch for flying June bugs. GETTY IMAGES

PATHWAY FOR WILDLIFE
CREATING HIGH-QUALITY HABITAT THROUGHOUT NEBRASKA



Program Overview
Pathway For Wildlife (PFW) offers incentives to enhance wildlife habitat on cropland, working lands, and within local communities. Participants will apply specific wildlife and pollinator conservation practices to benefit pheasants, quail, grassland songbirds, monarch butterflies, native bees, and other wildlife. Additionally, the program aims to reduce soil losses, encourage soil health and improve water quality.

- Program Highlights
1 to 3-year contract options
75-100% cost-sharing
No cropping-history necessary
Incentive payments
Annual payment option



PATHWAY FOR GRASSLANDS

Plant native grasses and wildflowers to transition cropland or degraded grassland areas to working lands better suited for landowner objectives. Incorporate grassland management practices including brush management, prescribed fire, shrub thicket establishment, and chemical control.



PATHWAY FOR PRECISION AG CONSERVATION

Plant a diverse cover crop mixture as part of a cropping rotation with benefits of soil health, weed competition, grazing utilization, wildlife and pollinator habitat providing awareness and an economic incentive to farmers considering alternatives. Limited to Rainwater Basin.



PATHWAY FOR COMMUNITY HABITAT

Plant native wildflowers, including milkweed for monarchs, in backyard habitats and urban green spaces to provide wildflowers blooming from April to October. Eligible project sites include city parks, colleges, libraries, churches, and other frequently visited areas.

Eligible Land

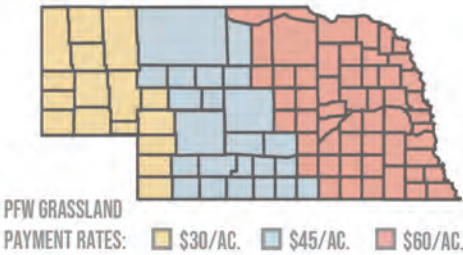
Land must be suitable for one of three program areas and its objectives. Cropland, grassland, community, business, and residential sites are eligible. Cropland must be in the Rainwater Basin area to be eligible for the Precision Ag Conservation project area. Pheasants Forever biologists will evaluate sites to determine program eligibility based on feasibility and other conservation programs available.

Contract Length

1, 2, or 3-year contracts are available.

Payments

Pheasants Forever provides cost-share assistance for seed and seed establishment. Additional cost-share is available for brush management, prescribed burning, and shrub thicket establishment. Annual payments for grassland projects are based on location.



Monitoring and Evaluation

To increase awareness and increased personal investment, participants will monitor project areas. Pheasants Forever will evaluate seeding success rate, management needs, and wildlife use.

Enrollment and More Information

Please complete and return a Notice of Interest form if you wish to join us in creating a pathway for wildlife. Pheasants Forever staff administers PWF and provides technical assistance. For more information about Pheasants Forever and its programs, visit NebraskaPF.com or contact your local Farm Bill Wildlife Biologist.



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Don Brockmeier, Eustis
Blue Jay on Black

Curt Blum, Lincoln
Blood Moon near Dunbar



Lee Major, Valentine
Above the Niobrara



Mat Custer, Omaha
A Serene Foggy Morning

Correction: On page 48 of the April issue, the “Loup River Water Trail” story should have read: “The last diversion located near Genoa sends a majority of the river’s flows down a canal that feeds Loup Power District power plants.”
– Jeff Kurrus, Editor

Send your comments and photos to:

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

SWIFT FOX AND PUPS

A female swift fox tends to her pups as they play near the den in the Panhandle Prairies Biologically Unique Landscape in Sioux County.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

NEBRASKA HAS SCORPIONS?

By Theo Huber and Keith Geluso



Scorpions hiding under a rock during daylight hours in Franklin County. PHOTO BY KEITH GELUSO

Scorpions are often associated with arid, desert environments of the south and west. Therefore, Nebraskans likely are unfamiliar that one species of scorpion inhabits parts of south-central Nebraska along the Kansas border.

The striped bark scorpion (*Centruroides vittatus*) was first documented in Thayer County in the 1940s, but our research team at the University of Nebraska at Kearney has recently observed them in Franklin County in upland mixed-grass prairies. This species is about 2 inches long and is tan to brown with two parallel black stripes that run along its back.

The striped bark scorpion ranges throughout much of the south-central United States, from New Mexico to Louisiana, and from northern Mexico to southern Nebraska. While commonly found in arid environments, this species also thrives in grasslands, woodlands and even urban areas. They frequent rocky outcroppings, canyon walls and even visit homes. This species is most active at night and easily observed using ultraviolet light.

In 2023, researchers at UNK began to study scorpions in Franklin County. To date, we have learned they are dormant from late October to mid-March, during which they are underground and decrease their activity. Being at the northernmost extent of their distribution, this dormancy is longer than southern populations where warmer climates either shorten or eliminate dormancy altogether.

These scorpions are known to climb on trees, shrubs and human-made structures to ambush prey or reduce predation risks. We also have observed them climbing on native forbs in prairie ecosystems. Because this species is most active at night, our current research surveys are conducted in the dark to investigate their feeding habits. We commonly find them during the day by flipping over rocks.

In much of the southern United States, this species is considered a pest due to its tendency to enter homes. While its sting is not typically harmful to humans — it is comparable to a bee or wasp — it can potentially pose a significant risk to those allergic to stinging insects. Despite this defense mechanism, these scorpions are generally not aggressive and sting only when provoked.

As we investigate further, we hope to learn more about the distribution of this species. If you know other areas with populations in the state, please reach out to us.

Theo Huber is an undergraduate student at the UNK and is conducting this research. Keith Geluso is his professor. For more information, contact gelusok1@unk.edu.



The striped bark scorpion is most active at night and can be observed using ultraviolet light. PHOTO BY KEITH GELUSO

NEBRASKA LAND IS IN DEMAND



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Situated in the beautiful Nebraska countryside, just outside of Beaver Crossing and a short drive to Friend, this exceptional property offers the perfect blend of comfortable living, functional workspace, and outdoor recreation. Built in 2006, the custom home features a beautifully designed living space with granite countertops, a striking stone fireplace, and a lofted balcony overlooking the main living area. The primary suite is a true retreat, complete with its own fireplace, a spacious walk-in closet, and a jacuzzi tub for ultimate relaxation. The upstairs offers a lounge loft area beside a game room complete with a pool table. The game room has direct access to the shop area.

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A FREE-FOR-ALL

Story and photos by Julie Geiser

One day each year, it's free to try out fishing and making new memories at a state park or state recreation area. This year, Free Fishing and Park Entry Day will be May 17.

Maybe you have never fished before and don't want to take the plunge of buying a permit until you test the waters first. This day gives you the opportunity to see if fishing is in your future. Also, many parks across the state host free fishing events, providing gear, so you can wet a line without having to invest in tackle.

Even if you don't catch anything or aren't interested in

fishing, come share a laugh with family or friends, catch a toad along a muddy bank or enjoy the fresh air and sunshine to kick off the new park season.

With nearly 80 state parks and state recreation areas in Nebraska, chances are you won't have to travel far to find a great place to visit. Go for a drive, hike a trail, learn history, have a picnic or play games. There are many ways to enjoy a day outside.

Plan your day at OutdoorNebraska.gov/parks/find-a-park/.



Tent camping is a popular activity at Smith Falls State Park near Valentine, where visitors also hike, view the falls and float the river on tubes and kayaks.



All ages can enjoy Free Fishing and Park Entry Day at nearly 80 state parks and state recreation areas across Nebraska.



Fort Kearny State Recreation Area near Kearney has seven pit lakes that total 21 acres of water.



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Perch flavored with blackened seasoning is served in tacos with avocado sauce. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

BLACKENED PERCH TACOS

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Blackened seasoning goes well with just about any fish. I don't know why it took me so long to try out this pairing, but the bold, spicy Cajun flavor just makes sense in a taco, while cool avocado sauce complements the heat.

I typically like to coat fish generously with blackened seasoning. But be aware that different brands will have different amounts of salt added. Taste first to make sure you're not oversalting fish.

Use whatever fish you have for this recipe, including walleye, bluegill, crappies, drum or catfish.

- Servings:** 4
Prep Time: 15 minutes
Cooking Time: 15 minutes
Ingredients:
- 8 perch fillets, skinless
 - Blackened seasoning, to taste
 - 4 tbsp. butter
 - 8 corn tortillas
 - Shredded cabbage
 - Diced tomato
 - Diced red onion
 - Queso fresco cheese, crumbled
 - Hot sauce

- Avocado Sauce**
- 1 medium avocado
 - ¼ cup cilantro
 - 3 tbsp. sour cream
 - Juice of half a lime
 - 1 clove of garlic
 - 3 green onions, coarsely chopped
 - ¼ tsp. kosher salt

1. In a food processor, combine avocado sauce ingredients and pulse until smooth. Season to taste. Add more sour cream as needed. Scrape sauce into a sandwich-size zip-top bag. Refrigerate until ready to use.
2. Generously season perch with blackened seasoning. In a medium-size pan, melt butter until it reaches a slightly hazelnut color. Add perch and cook until deeply golden on both sides.
3. Warm tortillas in a hot skillet or over open flames until slightly splotchy brown. Assemble tacos with cooked fish, cabbage, red onion and tomato.
4. Snip the corner of the zip-top bag with avocado sauce and use it to drizzle over the tacos. Garnish with crumbled queso fresco cheese. Serve immediately with hot sauce on the side.



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A Hammer, and a Good Swing

Fort Atkinson Blacksmiths

Story and photos by Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Dean Slader has tried retiring his hammer and anvil several times. The 82-year-old blacksmith's relationship with Fort Atkinson State Historical Park "goes back." While a student at Fort Calhoun High School, the archaeological dig down the road made a lasting impression on the teenage Slader.

Abandoned by the U.S. Army in 1827, the site of Fort Atkinson was converted to farmland, and in 1961, concerned Washington County locals rallied for the restoration of the site, thus creating the Fort Atkinson

Foundation that same year. Slader's mother, Genevieve Dorsey Slader, was a founding member. Her son took such a strong interest in the area's history that he went on to teach high school social studies for 35 years, retiring in 2001 in Valley.

In the 1960s, Slader threw himself into buckskinning, a subset of historical reenactment concentrating on the fur trade. He also became involved with the Fort Atkinson Muzzleloaders group. As a competitive shooter, Slader started building his own guns, including the ironwork of

fashioning trigger guards and butt plates, which led him down the path of blacksmithing.

"I got ahold of an anvil and a forge and some basic small tools sometime in the mid-to late-'70s and started down that direction and never built another gun," Slader said. It became what he calls an avocation, a self-sustaining hobby. His passion for blacksmithing has everything to do with his interest in the past.

"My craft is a 3,000-year-old craft," he said. "Historically, a hammer is a hammer. A pair of tongs for handling iron is a pair of tongs. A chisel is — that hasn't changed. A punch hasn't changed. It's because the form follows function."

To be a part of living history is to be a part of ongoing research, Slader explained. It's the same for the tinsmith, the weavers and spinners. In many ways, Slader's story follows the dawn of the state historical park, its renowned living history program and dedicated volunteers.

Friends of Fort Atkinson

The early days of living history at Fort Atkinson were informal. The earliest volunteers came from the Fort Atkinson Muzzleloaders group, which amounted to three or four people, Slader said, including himself.



Slader showing a nail he made bearing his "DS" stamp.

Blacksmith Dean Slader of Valley has been a living history volunteer at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park in Fort Calhoun for nearly 50 years. He also does demonstrations at the Missouri River Outdoor Expo at Ponca State Park.





A variety of blacksmithing tools hanging on the wall at the blacksmith shop.



To-do list of projects at the blacksmith shop include Christmas nails, tent stakes and Fort Atkinson hooks.

Then the Bicentennial Wagon Train Pilgrimage came through Nebraska in 1976 to commemorate the westward movement of white American settlers in the 19th century. Fort Atkinson SHP was one of the stops, an event that Slader attributes to the genesis of the fort's living history program.

"And then it just grew from there, from maybe half a dozen of us, and then into the teens, and then 20s, and so on and so forth, as far as numbers," Slader said. The volunteer program grew so large in the 1980s and '90s that it finally had to be formally organized,

hence the creation of the Friends of Fort Atkinson group.

By the time the Bicentennial Wagon Train came through, Slader had made his transition from mountain man to blacksmith permanent — a position he still holds today, some 50 years later. It's a unique occupation in the military, Slader said. Not only can a blacksmith make his own tools, he's also responsible for making and repairing tools for everyone else, from shovels, to axes, to hoes and rigs, hinges, latches and clasps.

"Like most things in the army, you

needed it yesterday," he said. "To run a post of this size, we know from the enlistment records, they had 24 blacksmiths."

Naturally, the Friends of Fort Atkinson experiences frequent turnover with its volunteers. People's life circumstances change — they get busy, move away or have children. Some, like Slader, have stuck around. Fort Calhoun local Doug Appel, who worked alongside Slader in the blacksmith shop for nearly 15 years, volunteered until he was no longer able before his death in 2020. Despite

attempts to retire and the loss of a dear friend, the fort keeps calling Slader back.

"There's a passion, and it's a part of home. It becomes a part of what you do. It becomes part of a thought process that you have. You can't stay away," Slader said. "Some of those volunteers, within their family, they're on second or third generation. And I've always said, people who do live in history — they're a different breed of cat."

"We're always looking for new volunteers," he added.

Over the decades, Slader, Appel and

others have striven to provide visitors an insightful view of the day-to-day operations of blacksmithing at Fort Atkinson. Not only is the accuracy of their research and performance of living history important, volunteers also are conscientious of their role in representing the Nebraska Game and Parks. They are essentially on stage.

"Nothing will take place at Fort Atkinson that will jeopardize the experience for the visitor. It's not written anywhere, but if there's a guiding rule, I guess that's one of them," he said. "It can become a heavy

weight to bear sometimes."

This unwritten mission statement, Slader has passed down to his latest apprentices, Thomas Bansen of Blair and Kody Keefer of South Sioux City — both in their early 30s. Their timely arrival has brought both elation and relief to the veteran blacksmith.

"They're godsend," Slader said with no attempts of hiding his excitement. "I now feel much more comfortable about what we do at the blacksmith shop, and so on, continuing. Because they exhibit the same passion and attitude."



This photo, taken with a slow shutter speed during a Candlelight Tour, shows blacksmiths Doug Appel at the forge, Slader's ghost-like form hammering at the anvil to the right and Lauren Joyce sitting at the work bench in the back.



The late blacksmith Tom McDowell speaking to visitors during a living history event. He often sat in this corner, Slader said, making Fort Atkinson medallions. Visitors who purchased one at the shop could have their initials stamped on it.

New Blood

As a child, Bansen frequently visited Fort Atkinson with family. He became drawn to the blacksmith shop more than anywhere else on the fort, and years later, a college professor noted Bansen’s interest in historical weapons and armory and connected his student with a blacksmithing instructor in 2012. Bansen started taking lessons once a week and, in 2015, struck out on his own.

In addition to general ironwork, Bansen’s interest lies in making

knives, swords and axes; one of his favorite creations is a 13th century knight’s arming sword. Bansen finds fascination in the enduring history of ironwork, its role in the progression of technology, and the creative outlet the craft provides. After several years of encouragement, Bansen finally made the leap to join Slader’s fort shop in 2022, following a career change that freed up more time.

Keefer showed up at Slader’s door with no experience in blacksmithing. His path to Fort Atkinson came by

way of the Missouri River Outdoor Expo at Ponca State Park, where he volunteered at the muzzleloading station annually with his father and uncle. During breaks, Keefer would wander down to the heritage encampment by the riverfront, where he befriended several Fort Atkinson volunteers, including Slader, who invited him to events at the fort.

In early 2022, Keefer’s father and uncle unexpectedly passed away within three weeks of each other. Despite his grief, their deaths spurred

Keefer to join the Friends of Fort Atkinson in 2023. He realized that life was too short.

“If it wasn’t for the unfortunate, untimely passing of my dad and my uncle, I never would have had the gumption to pick up blacksmithing,” Keefer said. “Dean, with his wisdom and his years of knowledge and experience ... I figured if I was going to learn something from somebody, it had to be him.”

Slader has been an enthusiastic teacher to his young apprentices,

receptive to new ideas and ways to approach projects, Keefer said. In return, Slader’s apprentices eagerly receive the older gentleman’s knowledge with reverence. All have committed to the ongoing work of research and practice that is the beating heart of living history.

“Dean has no problem standing right there with you and maybe bumping you or whatever. ‘Hey, lift your elbow like this.’ Or, ‘Hey, turn your hand ... ’,” Keefer said. “Every single time that I’m with him, it’s always a learning experience.”

Perfection

Despite Bansen’s previous education, tending a coal forge at Fort Atkinson and setting the temperature on his propane forge at home was night and day different. Getting used to the early-1800s setup was his

Living History Schedule

May 3-4

May 31-June 1

July 5-6

Aug. 2-3

Sept. 6-7

Oct. 4-5

Nov. 1 - Candlelight Tour

A park entry permit is required of all vehicles entering Fort Atkinson SHP. Paid reservation required for the Candlelight Tour.

For more information, visit fortatkinsononline.org or call 402-468-5611.



This style of hook is unique to Fort Atkinson, and during the fort’s height, as many as 2,800 hooks may have been driven into its walls.



Slader's apprentices Kody Keefer of South Sioux City, left, and Thomas Bansen of Blair take turns striking a piece of metal on the anvil in the blacksmith shop at Fort Atkinson SHP.

biggest challenge.

“[With] propane or a natural gas forge, you just set the heat level, and you forget it. But with coal or charcoal, you are constantly tending that because you’ve got to think, ‘Okay, I might have good heat right now, but I’ve got to add more coal to make sure that I still have that good heat five minutes from now.’”

For example, if a blacksmith was forge welding — joining two pieces of metal by heating them to a high temperature and hammering them

together — the forge would need to be just under 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit. However, that borders the temperature where steel will start to burn.

“It’s a very fine line between the right temperature and, you’ve entirely ruined the material,” Bansen said. “If you look away, if you get to talking with somebody or, if you just got too many irons in the fire — this is where the phrase comes from — your project’s ruined.”

Keefer describes his education so far as a love-hate relationship.

“The reality of it is, in this case, I don’t know hardly anything. You expect to be able to watch someone produce a product or work or repair an item, and then in your head you think you can do it. Whether or not you can is soon to be proven by your ability to manipulate the material or use certain tools,” he said.

Unlike modern tools and parts, which are made by machinery and consistently duplicated, blacksmithing is a hand craft. Although this human element brings inconsistency to

products, it allows each blacksmith’s style and technique to be differentiated. No two blacksmiths will produce the same exact piece of work. Keefer is learning to embrace this universal truth: that nothing is perfect.

The Fort Atkinson Hook

If you’ve visited a living history event, chances are you’ve heard of or seen the Fort Atkinson hook. Slader guessed that at the fort’s height, as many as 2,800 hooks — minimum

— were driven into the fort’s walls, bearing all manner of soldiers’ kit. This unique style of hook is not found outside of Fort Atkinson, and it is because of Slader that it still exists.

Around 1991 or 1992, Slader found an original hook while walking along the area where the northeastern barracks are presently located. As it was the habit of living history volunteers at the time, he kept his eyes on the ground that day, in hopes of finding something interesting that the archaeologists had missed.

“There it was — the right angular portion with the curl on the end and tapered to a point on the other end,” Slader said. “That became the beginning of the Fort Atkinson hook, which was the proof that that’s what they were using. They needed those by the thousands, and they had to be done quickly.”

Slader then conducted his own archaeology. It took him seven or eight tries to figure out the process the fort’s blacksmiths used to produce the hooks. Bansen explained that by examining hammer and tool marks on a work, a person could piece together how a smith produced an item hundreds or thousands of years ago. Every blacksmith that has worked with Slader at the shop has been schooled in making the Fort Atkinson hook.

“I’ve burned several hooks during demonstrations,” Bansen said. “It looks so simple, but it’s not. And Dean’s pretty proud of those hooks, and he has every right to be. That is something that is both intensely frustrating, but also incredibly satisfying.”

Slader has produced hundreds of them. Visitors may purchase souvenir hooks at the Sutler Store.

How They Do It

The Fort Atkinson Living History program is one of the best in the Midwest. While other historical sites may host one to two events each year, the park in Fort Calhoun offers six weekends of living history

Fort Atkinson History

Active from 1820 to 1827, Fort Atkinson held nearly one-quarter of the standing U.S. Army, approximately 1,200 soldiers. It was established to protect the growing western fur trade and was the only U.S. garrison west of the Missouri River. After the Army reassigned soldiers elsewhere, the fort was abandoned and converted to farmland. In 1961, Fort Calhoun locals chartered the Fort Atkinson Foundation. The group dedicated itself to the acquisition of the Fort Atkinson site and its restoration. With help from the Nebraska Game and Parks and the Nebraska State Historical Society, the park was completed in 2000 after the construction of the Sutler Store.

demonstrations annually, plus a Candlelight Tour in November.

“Every once in a while, somebody will show up from another site, and they’ll start asking questions. ‘How do you do this?’ ‘How do you sustain it all these years?’” Slader said. “You know, it’s a cooperative effort.”

Bansen and Keefer are quickly learning that living history is not just about the research and dressing the part — it’s also about the people. Fellow volunteers are becoming like family, and all enjoy the aspect of interacting with visitors.

“For the most part, when visitors come to the blacksmith shop, they want to see some kind of a project or product produced,” Keefer said. “I feel like there’s just as much energy given as there is taken. And that’s probably what makes it the most fun — and being around a good group of people.”

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

For Nebraskans, May is a time of year when it’s easy to be excited about spending time outdoors. Here are a few ways to use that time. 



Forage for wild asparagus

Late April through May; prime time is mid- to late-May statewide

Boasting a fresher, more vibrant flavor, wild asparagus is a popular spring edible in Nebraska. It prefers sunny, moist spots near water in rich saline or alkaline soil. Try searching irrigation canals, ditches, waterways, roadsides, fencerows and pastures or meadows — even old homesteads or farmsteads. Always get landowner permission and remember foraging for wild asparagus isn’t permitted at Nebraska Game and Parks properties. Search “Stalking Wild Asparagus” at Magazine. OutdoorNebraska.gov for more tips.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



Go herping

April and May, or as weather allows statewide, though species will vary

If you enjoy exploring and looking for wildlife, try “herping.” Herpers search for reptiles and amphibians, such as snakes, frogs, turtles and lizards, which can be found anywhere there is nature — forests, fields, ponds or even your own backyard. Places near water are also a great bet. If you find a critter, don’t pick it up, but do take pictures — and share those photos with others. Learn more by searching “reptiles and amphibians” at OutdoorNebraska.gov.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

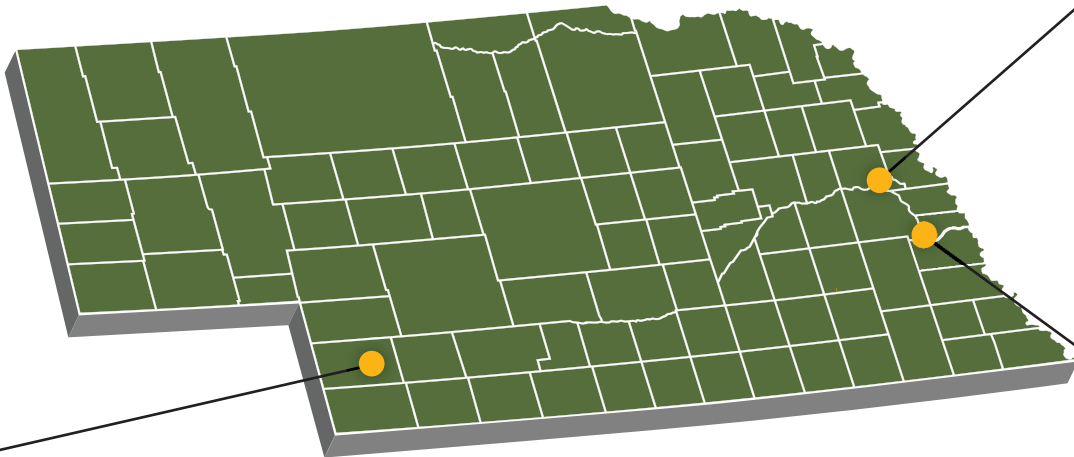


Attend the Bob Bruner Memorial Fishing Derby

May 17, 9 a.m. to noon | Lake 16 at Fremont Lakes State Recreation Area

Bring the family to Fremont Lakes for a morning of fishing, food and fun. Youth 15-years-old or younger, accompanied by an adult, are welcome to compete for prizes in the derby. Other attractions include wildlife encounters, free sloppy joes and hot dogs, and entertainment from local civic groups and radio stations. May 17 is also Free Fishing and Park Entry Day, so take advantage of the chance to fish and visit state parks without the need for a permit. 

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Bring your horse on a spring trail ride

May 10, 9 a.m. MT | Enders Reservoir State Recreation Area

You may have heard of Enders’ Fall Trail Ride, but did you know it’s a spring occurrence, too? Bring your horse, meet other horse enthusiasts and experience the beauty of Enders in spring, from greening trees to new wildlife. Riders can also take in lake views and a scenic landscape of rolling hills. Call the park office to register at 308-394-5118. Horses are not provided for the trail ride, and a state park entry permit is required.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Visit a historic iris garden

Blooms mid- to late-April through early June, peaking around Memorial Day weekend | Eugene T. Mahoney State Park

Soak in the beauty of spring with this stunning iris display garden. The Sass Memorial Iris Garden features collections of award-winning irises, including some varieties bred right here in Nebraska by the Sass family, renowned hybridizers who worked from the 1920s to the 1950s. The garden is easily accessible, with paved walkways, convenient parking and nearby restrooms and picnic tables. Check out the nearby conservatory and education center, too. 

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Live Well. Go Fish.

Catching Fish, and Smiles

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

World War II veterans. Ninety-year-old nursing home residents who had never fished and caught their first fish. Hospice patients who caught their last. Alzheimer's patients. Twenty-somethings who have been blind since they were infants. Youths from the Boys & Girls Clubs in Omaha. Those are some of the nearly 10,000 individuals who have boarded the Live Well. Go Fish. boat.

The Lincoln nonprofit knows the therapeutic value of fishing and simply being on the water. The people they serve have lost plenty of bobbers, but they also have caught plenty of fish, and shared an untold number of smiles.

Retirement Gig

Live Well. Go Fish. is David Rudder's retirement venture. When he left his career, he thought he might be a fishing guide, but then came up with a better idea: guiding seniors, veterans and others who wouldn't otherwise have a chance to fish.

"There are a lot of programs already out there for the kids, but there's just not a lot for mainly the seniors and people with disabilities," Rudder said.

In 2016, Rudder started knocking on the doors of care, retirement and veterans' services centers to see if they would be interested. Enough of them were that Rudder formed a nonprofit and ordered a custom-made, U.S.-Coast-Guard-approved 26-foot pontoon boat that could accommodate up to three wheelchairs. He recruited some volunteers, and in 2017, started fishing. All but a few trips have been at Lake Wanahoo near Wahoo. The nonprofit now serves about 75 care facilities and organizations from 17 counties in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa.

Rudder is not only the CEO of the organization, he is also the on-board entertainment, armed with plenty of bad dad jokes like "Why are the fish so smart? Because they've been in school all day." He's also the DJ, starting each trip with a patriotic song as a salute to veterans, followed by various fishing-related songs and assorted tunes to fit the crowd.



David Rudder, founder and head of Live Well. Go Fish., takes a photo of Joyce McIntosh, a resident of Saunders Medical Center Long Term Care in Wahoo, and the bullhead she caught during an outing at Lake Wanahoo.

There is plenty of dancing, even for those who can't stand and swing with a volunteer from their boat seat.

During each cruise, they break out the bubble machines and fire up "Tiny Bubbles" by Don Ho, often for the entertainment of shore anglers. As they move parallel to U.S. Highway 77 on the dam at Wanahoo, they all turn into kids, pump their arms and see how many semi-tractor trailer drivers they can get to blow their horns — many do. They fly a kite from a fishing pole.

Early on, some people who had signed up for a trip would cancel when they found it conflicted with their regular bingo game. So Rudder and company came up with Bobber Bingo,

passing out cards, dumping a bucket of bobbers marked with letters and numbers overboard and fishing them out with a dip net.

He is the official photographer for the voyages, posting stills and videos on social media. He took one step too far back one day and fell off the dock while taking a photo of residents from a West Point retirement home and volunteers. He was trying to make sure he got all 12 people in after realizing their ages added up to 1,137, a record. Other records include the longest married couple (73 years) and the longest serving veteran (41 years).

The Seniors

One of the first groups to join them on Lake Wanahoo was from Saunders Medical Center Long Term Care in Wahoo. They have been with them ever since.

"I could sit here all day," Joyce McIntosh, a resident of the center, said on an outing last summer. "It's just peaceful. I forget about the whole world ... Who would want anything more?"

On that day, Shirley Schoenrock did, "I can't catch the buggie," she said, annoyed by the small fish nipping at her baited hook hanging below the boat.



Shirley Schoenrock, a resident at Saunders Medical Center, smiles as she drives the Live Well. Go Fish. boat on Lake Wanahoo.

Both women had fished creeks or ponds growing up and relived experiences, including McIntosh's dad stocking fish in the three ponds built on their farm, and Schoenrock catching bullheads for breakfast.

As an adult, Schoenrock couldn't ski, so she drove the boat when her family went to the lake on Sundays. She's driven the boat nearly every time she's been out with the Live Well. Go Fish. crew. They presented her with two awards on the same trip last year: One was for Honorary Captain. The other was for Ornery Captain.

Joking around and friendly banter are part of each trip. Saunders residents and staff were quick to point out that Dorothy Sorensen was a noted cheat at bingo. "This is a new experience," she said with a wry smile. "Cheating at fishing, it's a little difficult."

She had a plan, though. While she didn't catch a fish, she already knew what she would tell others back at the center. "I got several," she said. "They weren't too big, but there were 5 or 6. I'll explain it when we get back."

Water Therapy

The value of the recreational therapy for participants, whether they are residents in assisted living homes, under memory care for Alzheimer's or dementia, or at a home for a short time for rehabilitation, can't be understated.

"It's hard," said Kayla Massa, life enrichment coordinator at Saunders. "A lot of them lose a lot of freedom the second they walk in here. Just being able to get them out there just to kind of feel alive again, honestly, it's one of the best things that I've ever been able to do for them."

Some residents simply go out and take a nap in the sun. Some are eager to go every time. They all talk about their



Laura Eivins, enrichment coordinator at Saunders Medical Center, chats with resident Dorothy Sorensen during a game of Bobber Bingo.

trips for days.

Laura Eivins, another enrichment coordinator at the center, was on one of the first Live Well. Go Fish. voyages. She has many memories of those who have participated, but one sticks with her of a couple who were regulars on the boat. The husband was a lifelong angler living on his own, but joined his wife, a resident at the center, who simply enjoyed sitting back and watching her husband fish. When he died, she was reluctant to get back on the boat.

"I told her she needed to do that as a tribute to her husband," Eivins said. "The first time back I held her, and we shed a lot of tears. It was very emotional but, at the same time, very healing for her."

The Last Fish

Live Well. Go Fish. grew to accommodate patients in hospice care. That led to a partnership with the Dreamweaver Foundation, an Omaha-based group that, among other things, helps make bucket-list wishes come true for older adults and others with life-limiting illnesses.

Initially, Rudder wasn't sure whether volunteers would want to work with hospice patients. Those trips "kind of tore your heart out," he said, but are some the most rewarding for the volunteers because of what it means for the patients and their families. Together, they came up with a motto: "Everybody remembers their first fish. We try to make sure nobody forgets their last."

Some participants include a young man who was an avid hunter and angler but is now confined to a wheelchair by illness; he wanted to spend a day fishing with friends. A 74-year-old woman simply wanted to go on a boat ride with her family. A 95-year-old man wanted to fish with his great-



The 26-foot Live Well. Go Fish. pontoon boat can hold 14 people, but never carries more than 13 on its outings. It has room for three wheelchairs, and once hosted a hospice patient in a hospital bed.

grandson. Another grew up fishing with his brother and wanted to spend one more day on the water, enjoying nature, sipping on a cold beer. Some Dreamweaver participants arrive at Lake Wanahoo in an ambulance. Others, or their family and friends, arrive in limousines.

Covid Shift

Coronavirus shut Live Well. Go Fish. down for a time. When it resumed operations, there were concerns about the lingering health risks to seniors, which had made up 90 percent of the clientele. So Rudder and the board reached out to other organizations serving special needs patients, which led to a relationship with the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. That group in 2023 set the record for the most fish caught in an outing: 128, including 81 by one boat.

Jon Herron, blind since 2021, was on that trip. The 62-year-old retired U.S. Air Force officer remembers spending summer days catching sunfish from a creek near his home, but hadn't since. "I would say it can be harder without vision, but what you want to do is to use your sense of touch. So when one sense goes away, the other senses kick in," he said. "So my hearing is better now, my sense of smell is better now, my sense of touch is better now."

"In order to read the braille and stuff, you really do have to have sensitive fingers," said Makenzie Gray, 23, who lost her eyesight when she was 6 months old. "My fingers are



Volunteer Robin Taylor and Dennis Jeppson, a resident at Saunders Medical Center, are all smiles after Jeppson landed a small wiper.



Charli Saltzman, above, a counselor with the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, holds and feels a bluegill she caught. Below, Makenzie Gray, a participant in commission programs, lets a nightcrawler slither across her hand, giving a play-by-play of what she was feeling as it did.



very sensitive.”

Gray has been fishing with Live Well. Go Fish. since 2021. “I love to be on boats,” she said. “The fishing is pretty fun. I absolutely love this program.”

Honoring Veterans

Veterans are a big part of Live Well. Go Fish. The American flag always flies from the back of the boat. There are days set aside to honor those who have served in different wars, including the Women’s Army Corps. Rudder didn’t serve but had uncles who did, including one who died in Korea. He and the volunteers appreciate those who did, and the freedom they fought to defend. “We wouldn’t be doing this without them,” he said.

The group works with veterans homes, county veterans’ services offices, nonprofits and hospice groups that work with veterans, VFW and American Legion clubs, and Women’s and Family auxiliary groups.

Rudder is still amazed by the group of four World War II veterans they hosted on D-Day in 2018. On the boat was a soldier who landed on Normandy Beach in France and then marched into Berlin, another who worked undercover as a spy in a German concentration camp, and one who helped liberate those camps.

Some of the Live Well. Go Fish. volunteers are veterans who enjoy working with veterans. Better able to relate to each other, guides and passengers are apt to open up and share stories they might not share with others.

The Volunteers

Rudder is the only paid member of Live Well. Go Fish. Helping him are 48 volunteers, who come from as far away as Nebraska City and West Point and last year donated nearly 1,500 hours of their time to the program.

“This program works because of the volunteers,” Rudder said. “You see them catch a fish and they hand the rod to somebody. They’re not in it for themselves.”

Tom Lanz is a longtime volunteer hunter education instructor for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and has mentored many young hunters and anglers.

He often saw Rudder and the Live Well. Go Fish. boat when he was fishing at Lake Wanahoo. After learning what the group was about, he told Rudder he would be happy to help if they ever needed him. He’s now a member of the board of directors.

“I’ll tell you what, it’s about as rewarding as anything you can do,” Lanz said. “Everybody does a lot of things for kids, and that’s the future of hunting and fishing. But there’s a little bit of payback for a lot of these elderly people and the people who can’t get out.”

It brings things full-circle Lanz said, just as taking his elderly grandfather fishing decades after he taught him to hunt and fish did.



Kayla Massa, enrichment coordinator at Saunders Medical Center, helps resident Dennis Jeppson off the bus for an outing at Lake Wanahoo.

Beth Alberts and Carla Hiatt both worked with Live Well. Go Fish. when they were activities directors at retirement villages in Lincoln. Hiatt never got to go on the boat. “Our van was always full and I wanted our residents to go,” she said. “So, when I retired, I said I want to volunteer.”

Alberts did the same. The two appreciate the smiles they see on the boat, especially from memory care patients who struggle remembering parts of their past or current day-to-day lives, but can sing along with many of the songs Rudder asks Siri to play, and the other memories the trips spark. “They don’t really know what they are getting into, but then when they get here, they are like, ‘I was at Johnson Lake.’ Or they say, ‘Oh we used to go to Minnesota.’ Or ‘We used to go to Canada fishing.’ It just brings back so many memories,” Alberts said.

“It just fills my heart every time I step off the boat.”

The Future

Care homes pay a fee to the organization that helps cover the cost of the boat, insurance and other expenses. Donations from individuals and corporations pay the fee for veterans and other groups. Rudder said he believes there is enough demand and support for the program that it could expand, forming chapters in different communities. “This is probably

never going to be a Pheasants Forever or a Ducks Unlimited, but I think it could be,” he said.

Last year, Live Well. Go Fish. brought youths from the Boys & Girls Club of the Midlands on board, one of a handful of youth organizations they have served. They work with Apace, formerly Region V Services, which supports people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and others serving those with special needs. They take cancer patients from an Omaha hospital fishing. And active senior groups such as Aging Partners.

They fish primarily at Lake Wanahoo, settling there to draw from both the Lincoln and Omaha areas, not knowing what the demand would be from just one of the communities. The first year was slow. “We were begging people to try us,” Rudder said. Those who came back told others. Now they host two or more trips a day, most on weekdays, from May to mid-October. Sometime in May, Rudder expects the number of people they have served to top 10,000, a number he didn’t foresee.

The benefits to the seniors, veterans and others who participate extend to the volunteers.

“They’re helping us, too. We learn from them ... empathy, care, respect. It unites us,” Rudder said.

“We all go fishing, but the fishing is just a bonus.” 🐟

Did Nebraska Start the Civil War?



By David L. Bristow,
Nebraska State Historical Society

What did the founders of the Republican Party call themselves before they called themselves Republicans? “Anti-Nebraska Men.”

The early GOP had nothing against Nebraska as a place. What they opposed was a certain feature of the law organizing the territory. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 sparked a huge national controversy and was one of the main events leading to the Civil War. It is a story of railroads, Native Americans, backroom politics and slavery.

In the early 1850s, the only states west of Iowa were Texas (1845) and California (1850). Maps showed most of the Great Plains as a vast area

ABOVE: This skylight window, formerly in the U.S. Capitol, shows the Nebraska Territory's official seal. “Popular Sovereignty” was a controversial phrase in the context of the times. NSHS 7434-1

RIGHT: Nebraska and Kansas as they appeared in 1856. Early maps often spelled Kansas with a “z.”

NSHS M78 1856 C72





Stephen Douglas, senator from Illinois and namesake of Douglas County, Nebraska, circa 1860. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

labeled “Nebraska,” along with the names of rivers and of the Native tribes that still controlled the region.

Talk of a transcontinental railroad was getting serious, but it would be expensive. Most people assumed that only a single line would be built to the West Coast. The route mattered — in part because the cities at either end stood to profit. While Southern politicians wanted a southerly route, Sen. Stephen Douglas of Illinois wanted to lay track west from Chicago.

The Platte River Valley was the best route for Chicago, but it faced two obstacles. The first was that it was still “Indian Country.” Starting in the 1840s, Douglas introduced legislation to open Nebraska to white settlement, but this was blocked by the second obstacle: the politics of slavery.

Back in 1820, Congress admitted Missouri as a slave state while prohibiting slavery in the vast area later known as Nebraska. In 1820, it seemed like a place where farmers would never settle. Now Southerners feared it would become several new free states and upset the national balance. So, they made a deal with Douglas. His new bill split Nebraska into two territories and — crucially — reopened the question of slavery, which would be left to territorial voters and legislatures in the name of “Popular Sovereignty.” The Kansas-Nebraska Act became law on May 30, 1854. Just like that,



Nebraska City, as pictured in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Jan. 8, 1859. NSHS RG2294-0-11

the famous Missouri Compromise was repealed.

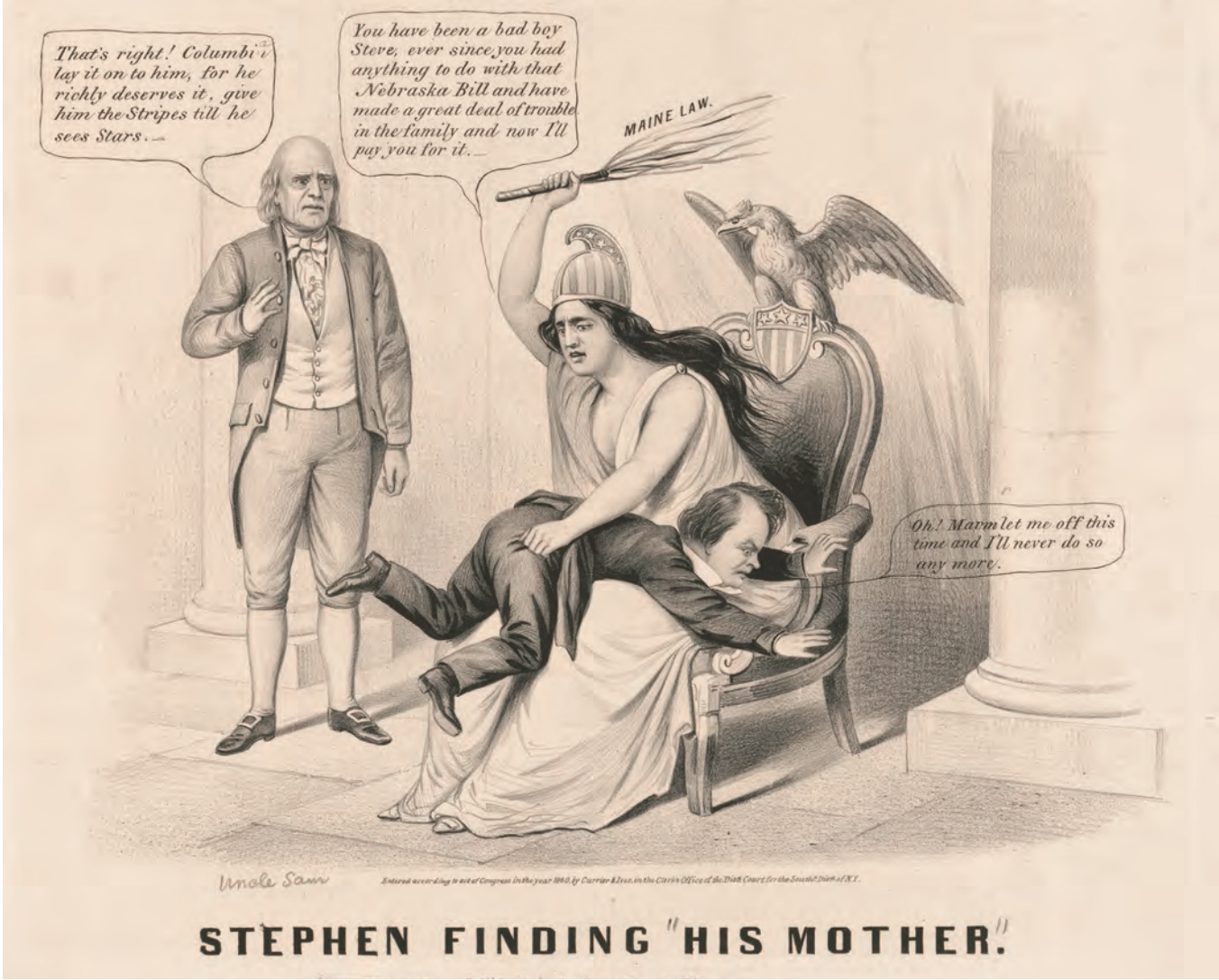
It’s hard to overstate the sense of shock and betrayal among many Northern voters. “We were thunderstruck and stunned; and we reeled and fell in utter confusion,” said Abraham Lincoln in a speech in Peoria, Illinois, on Oct. 16. “But we rose each fighting, grasping whatever he could first reach — a scythe — a pitchfork — a chopping axe, or a butcher’s cleaver.”

Lincoln was speaking metaphorically, but the violence soon became real as free-state and pro-slavery settlers fought each other in “Bleeding Kansas.” Nebraska saw little violence, but Nebraska City and Falls City soon became stopping points for Northern settlers pouring into Kansas — and for smaller numbers of enslaved people making their way to freedom.

The new Republican Party coalesced from the ruins of the now-defunct Whig Party and anti-Nebraska Democrats. Slavery was the big issue. Even so, few white people were abolitionists. (Nebraska had legal slavery until 1861.) Fewer still believed in racial equality. Mostly, they feared that aristocratic Southern planters were about to dominate the entire country.

Did “Nebraska” really start the Civil War? In fairness, it was part of a long chain of events, but it was a turning point. From then on, the nation increasingly became what Lincoln called “a house divided.” [N](#)

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



This 1860 cartoon was published the year Douglas lost a four-way presidential election to Abraham Lincoln. “You have been a bad boy Steve, ever since you had anything to do with that Nebraska bill” The “Maine law” probably refers to a state law defying the federal Fugitive Slave Act. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Bellevue, circa-1855, illustration by Polish artist S.W.Y. Schimonsky. NSHS RG2683-0-2

Cutting Back to Another Time

By Justin Haag

I occasionally pull it from the drawer to run it through the catch of the day. With its familiar wooden handle, conditioned by about 40 years of handling, this fillet knife has been with me for most of my fishing days, and my history with it is rooted in a favorite celebrity encounter.

It began when my dad took me to McCook’s new Walmart (back in the early ’80s when the L and M were still separated by a star) to see a living legend in action.

As a preteen kid who loved to fish, I was excited. Behind a small table near the sporting goods section stood the same grandfatherly figure who had shared his fishing adventures with me through the television set on many a cold winter Saturday. It was Harold Ensley, the founding host of the “Sportsman’s Friend.” At the time, Ensley was about 30 years into a remarkable 48-year run of the television program he began in Kansas City in 1953.

In his hand was the same model of knife prominently hanging on a display rack nearby. Its wooden handle, decorated with an autograph facsimile, and straight blade now seem as practical as the Ford Country Squire station wagon he drove. Its Japanese construction and plastic sheath seemingly bridge one

generation to another.

We watched closely as he pulled bluegills from a cooler and gave us pointers on filleting fish. While doing it, he extolled the assets of his knife’s design. Of course, we each left with a new cutting utensil that day.

Ensley is recognized as a pioneer in outdoor television — and television in general. He capitalized on the medium as TV sets were just becoming common in homes.

His approach to it seems worlds apart from today’s shows. An ordained minister with roots in the western Kansas town of Healy, he used a soft-spoken delivery to narrate over the top of the action footage from a cabin-themed studio.

When he started, video cameras didn’t record audio, and there was none of

the whooping and hollering, or amped-up music, that have become staples of today’s programming. Just a guy showing us experiences of doing what he loved with friends and family. He closed each episode by hanging a “Gone Fishin’” sign over the fireplace.

Bill Snead of the Lawrence Journal-World related Ensley’s impact in a profile piece:

“Ensley’s show and his athletic, teetotaling image helped change the public’s perception of hunters and fishermen,” Snead wrote. “Many non-



A wooden-handled fillet knife marketed by legendary outdoorsman Harold Ensley in the 1980s still serves to process countless bluegills, crappies and other panfish. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

sportsmen thought most outdoorsmen were usually an arm’s length from a case of beer or within range of a no-hunting sign filled with bullet holes. Ensley helped bring a new level of respectability to outdoor sports.”

The show took Ensley to premier fishing and hunting destinations and brought him considerable fame.

He fished with some of the biggest celebrities of the day and even appeared in guest roles on “Gunsmoke” and “The Beverly Hillbillies.” Of course, he was named to the National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame and garnered countless other honors.

With Ensley’s proximity to Nebraska, some readers surely have firsthand memories of the “Sportsman’s Friend.”

Whenever Ensley was mentioned in my family, someone would reference when he was the keynote speaker at my alma mater, Beaver Valley High School, when my aunt graduated. It happened before I was born, and I’ve always felt a little cheated that I didn’t get to see it.

Not surprisingly, he made his way into this publication. He was on the cover of Outdoor Nebraska, the former name of Nebraskaland, in September 1960 holding a shotgun and two sharp-tailed grouse.

“I’ve hunted the chicken in Canada and had some fine shooting, but this sharptail hunting in your Sand Hill country is the best shooting I’ve had yet,” he said in the article. “Nebraskans

are mighty lucky people.”

In my research, I learned that Harold Ensley was a friend of Walmart founder Sam Walton. Walton would have been a handy friend to have if you were looking to peddle some goods.

The knife is not the only merchandise with Ensley’s name on it. Perhaps more popular were his lures, such as a plastic bait known as “The Reaper,” a jointed crankbait called the “Sneaky Snake” and a hair jig, “Tiny Tot.”

The knife has timeless utility, but it is especially good at evoking nostalgia. When it’s in my hand, I think about the TV show and those summer evenings bellying up to an old

metal ironing board to fillet fish with my dad and grandpa.

They were special times, reliving the day’s experiences. No doubt, some of the conversations at those sessions involved something I’d seen on TV — Ensley, Virgil Ward or perhaps the younger fellas, Bill Dance and Jimmy Houston. With the cold wind blowing outside, those shows certainly helped build excitement for warmer days.

After decades of sharing his love of the outdoors, Ensley died in 2005 at age 92. The legacy of the “Sportsman’s Friend,” however, lives on in the stories he produced and today’s outdoor entertainment industry. And, of course, in my drawer of fish and game cleaning utensils. ■

The Boisterous, Busy House Wren

A Natural History with Nesting Habits

Story and photos by Justin Haag

The northern house wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) presents remarkable gusto in a small package.

The tiny, energetic bird, with its inconspicuous brownish-gray plumage, is the most common of at least nine wren species observed in Nebraska. It quickly flits among dense vegetation as it feeds on small invertebrates such as millipedes, spiders and snails. It's often heard before seen, making its loud, chattering, exuberant call that seems impressive for such a small animal to make. It's a lot of music coming from a bird weighing about half an ounce and measuring just 5 inches long.

House wrens have an expansive breeding range, spanning across the northern United States and into Canada at locations from sea level to elevations of 10,000 feet. After the

wrens spend winter in the southern United States and Mexico, nesting season occurs from late April through July. Females usually produce one or two broods, but sometimes produce as many as four, as one Scottsbluff birdwatcher observed.

The male of the species is especially busy early in nesting season when he's trying to impress the female with his ability to choose and develop prime real estate. The wren is an opportunistic cavity nester that uses old woodpecker holes, fabricated boxes and about any other hole they can find. At multiple locations, the male wren collects and piles twigs in the cavities, topped with a soft bed of grass or other small fibers. If he does a suitable job, the female chooses one of the sites for laying eggs and raising young with him.

In finding locations, wrens often

A house wren makes a brief stop along the Jim MacAllister Nature Trail at Smith Falls State Park.





A house wren perches on a cut branch in the Pine Ridge Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest in Dawes County.

fiercely compete with other birds, such as house sparrows and starlings. Wrens sometimes evict other bird species from cavities and destroy

their eggs if they find a place they want. The “northern” part of the name is new. In 2024, ornithologists split house

wrens into two species. Those ranging from southern Mexico southward are now known as the southern house wren (*Troglodytes musculus*). While numerous subspecies of the northern house wren have been distinguished, all in Nebraska are *Troglodytes aedon parkmanii*.

While the house wren may have suffered population declines in the 20th century with the introduction of the house sparrow to North America, its population appears to be stable now.

House wrens were named for their tendency to nest near homes and in birdhouses, so they’re an ideal backyard species. People can attract house wrens by installing nest boxes. Position them facing east about 5 feet off the ground near the edge of a wooded area. The birds are drawn to trees, shrubs and brush piles that provide both cover for them and habitat for insects they like to eat. 



A male house wren gathers nesting materials. Males build numerous nests in spring, hoping one will be suitable for a female.

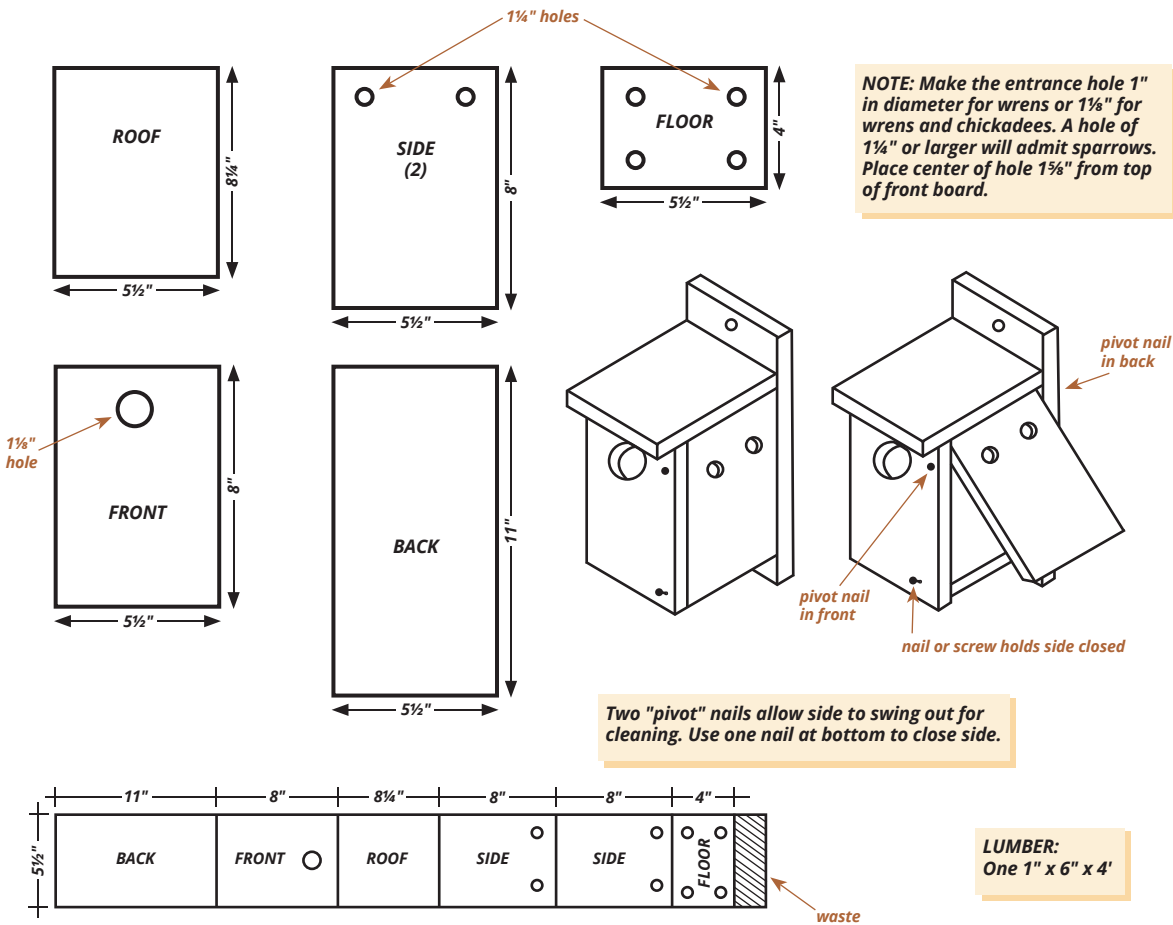


HOUSE WREN nest box

Using cedar, or non-treated wood is preferable

Its bubbling call and fervent energy make the house wren one of the most enjoyable backyard birds. They readily accept nest boxes placed between 5 and 10 feet above the ground. The protection of building eaves or a tree is attractive to wrens. Scribing a circle around a quarter produces a perfect 1-inch entrance hole appropriate for wrens.

Wrens will use a house that is solidly supported or hung from an eye-hook and wire. They hunt for insects in shrubs, low bushes, wood piles and brush. Highly manicured yards are less attractive to them. Do not use a perch under the entrance hole. Sparrows often will take up the perch and defend the hole, even though they are too large to enter. As soon as young wrens fledge, clean out the nesting material, and a new nest will surely follow.



Insect Camouflage and Mimicry

Story and photos by Brianna Nugent, Community Science Program Manager

Camouflage and mimicry are two fascinating adaptations that insects have developed for survival. These strategies not only help insects avoid predators but also enhance their chances of success in a world teeming with threats. While both camouflage and mimicry involve deception, they are distinct in their methods and outcomes.

Camouflage — Blending Into the Environment

When you hear the word camouflage, perhaps you imagine a barred owl perfectly melding into the bark of an old cottonwood tree or a sharp-tailed grouse disappearing into an endless sea

of grass. Animals can use coloration, shape, patterns, or all three to conceal themselves within their environments.

Insects, too, have all sorts of tricks of their own when it comes to hiding in plain sight, making them nearly impossible to spot, even when you are trying to look for them. As someone who is a hobby macro photographer, finding insects can be the most challenging part.

Threats are everywhere when you are insect-sized. From birds and other insects to nosy humans with cameras, the attacks are endless. By using patterns and coloration, insects can effortlessly hide out in the open. Many are covered in different shades of browns and greens to blend in with the plants and trees where they frequently forage.



This katydid has the perfect built-in leaf disguise.



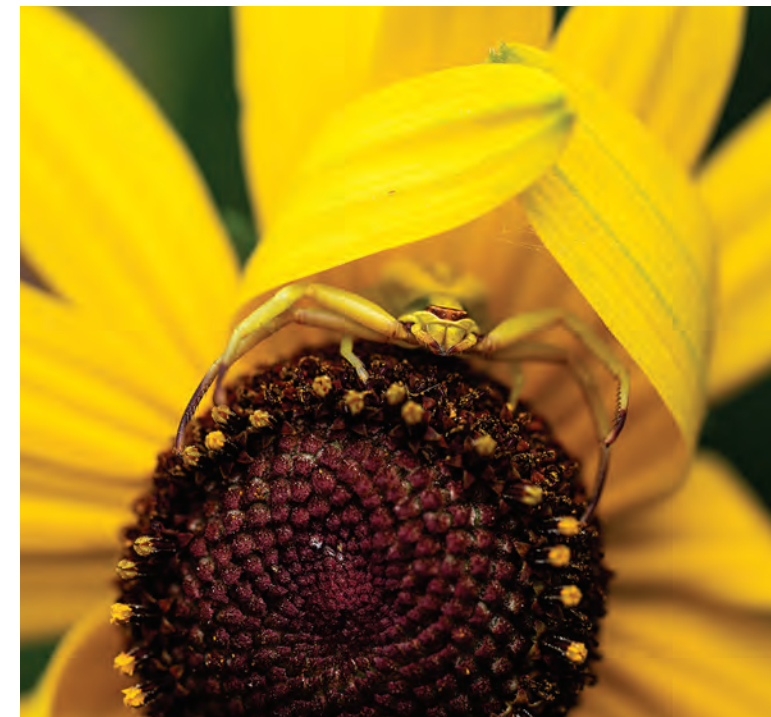
Camouflaged looper caterpillar dressed in yarrow petals.

Camouflage, But Make It Fashion

The larva of the wavy-lined emerald moth takes camouflage to another level. Also known as the camouflage looper caterpillar, this inchworm will chew off bits of flowers and attach the pieces to its body using silk from spinnerets located under its mouth. The caterpillar becomes the flower and is virtually invisible to potential predators. When the caterpillar moves to a different flower, it can change its “outfit” to match its new surroundings.

Invisibility Cloak

Although they are considered arachnids and not insects, I couldn't leave out these spectacular spiders. In Nebraska, we have two notable crab spider species — the white-banded crab spider and the goldenrod crab spider — that perform an elaborate disappearance act. These tiny magicians can shift their coloration between white and yellow depending on the flower from which they choose to ambush their prey. To accomplish this sorcery, they spend two to three days either mobilizing sequestered pigments or synthesizing new pigments. There are only a few arachnids in the world known to have this adaptation.



White-banded crab spider using its color-shifting ability to blend in on a black-eyed susan.



Butterflies like the common buckeye have distinct eye-like markings to confuse predators.

Crab spiders, like other pollinators, also see in ultraviolet, using this to their advantage by reflecting UV light. This adaptation allows them to further their superpower of invisibility.

Mimicry

While animals rely on their environments to practice camouflage, mimicry involves physical adaptations that

change an animal's appearance to copy another species. A common example is moth and butterfly species that have “owl eye” markings on their wings to ward off predators. There are also quite a few caterpillars that mimic snake heads or even bird excrement to fool other animals that might try to eat them.

Insects such as katydids, walking sticks, mantids and treehoppers have adopted the appearance of various plant parts like leaves, sticks, thorns and flowers.

Müllerian Mimicry — A Mutual Benefit

Müllerian mimicry, named after the biologist Fritz Müller, involves two or more harmful or unpalatable species evolving to resemble each other. This form of mimicry benefits all the mimics by reinforcing the avoidance behavior in predators. For instance, several species of bees and wasps have evolved similar warning coloration — bright stripes and markings of yellow, black, red and orange. This shared appearance ensures that predators quickly learn to avoid these species, benefiting all involved through collective recognition and avoidance.

The hidalgo mason wasp (below) and brown-belted bumble bee (opposite) both have similar black and yellow stripes that signal to predators that they are toxic.



Hidalgo mason wasp.



Brown-belted bumble bee.

Batesian Mimicry — The Deceptive Imitator

Coined after the naturalist Henry Walter Bates, Batesian mimicry involves a harmless insect evolving to resemble a harmful or unpalatable species. In Batesian mimicry, the success of the mimicry relies on the abundance of the model species (the harmful or unpalatable one). If the model is rare, the predator might not learn the association between appearance and unpleasant experience, making the mimicry less effective.

The monarch and viceroy butterfly species are the perfect example of how both mimicry methods can be utilized. Monarch butterfly larvae feed on milkweed species that contain a toxic white sap. This makes both the larva and adult stages poisonous for predators to consume. As adults, monarchs use their bright orange coloration to warn predators of their toxicity.

The viceroy butterfly, which is usually non-toxic, has developed almost identical coloration and markings to the monarch in the hopes of tricking predators. However, scientists recently discovered that in areas where monarchs and viceroys do not co-exist, viceroys can store toxins from the willow leaves they fed on as caterpillars to equip themselves with their own dose of poison. This adaptation allows them to ward off predators without relying on mimicry, revealing one more tool to help these insects survive their dangerous habitats. 



Monarch butterflies (above) use their bright orange coloration to warn predators of their toxicity. The viceroy (below), usually non-toxic, has developed similar markings in hopes of tricking predators.

Viceroys have a thick black band across their hindwings (circled in red), whereas monarchs do not.



VICEROY PHOTO BY CHRIS MASADA

HUMBLING OF THE HOUSE SPARROW

By Joel Jorgensen

Wise people will tell you to avoid thinking too highly about yourself when things go right and not getting down on yourself when they do not. The reason for this life lesson is that your circumstances can change despite and in spite of yourself. If capable of self-reflection, this may be the collective view of house sparrows in North America as their story has seen a tremendous rise and unceremonious fall.

Presently there is high awareness about the ecological and economic risks and dangers of introducing non-native species to places where they do not belong. However, in the 1800s, when invasive species introductions were all the rage, a contingent of European-American settlers strongly advocated introducing the familiar house sparrows to North America from Europe as a way to control insect pests. In 1850, the first house sparrows were released in Brooklyn, New York, and they quickly spread. If that were not enough, continued introductions elsewhere in North America hastened the species' rapid spread and eventual takeover of the continent.

In Nebraska, some of these birds were imported from Philadelphia and released in Nebraska City in the early 1870s. House sparrows quickly spread from town to town, apparently aided by railroads. By the 1880s, house sparrows had colonized Lincoln, Blair and Beatrice, but it took until 1895 for the species to be found in places like Gordon in northwestern Nebraska. At the beginning of the 20th century, though, the house sparrow had consolidated its range in the state and over most of the continental United States.

It did not take long for views of this species to sour, as it was quickly realized that releases were misguided, and the house sparrow was soon deemed a pest. Hordes of house sparrows consumed grain, built nests in openings in buildings and homes, made messes of structures and walkways with their

waste, and outcompeted several native bird species. They also never lived up to the hype of controlling problematic insects. At their peak, perhaps a half billion house sparrows inhabited North America and were introduced to parts of South America, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Fortunately, as time has marched on into the modern era, the house sparrow's heyday has come and gone. Since the 1970s, this species' population in North America decreased by more than 75 percent, and as numbers have decreased so have the problems associated with this species. Reasons for its decline are changes in agriculture practices, modern building techniques that limit nesting locations, and increases in avian predators that specialize in preying on small birds. In addition, the house sparrow also faces competition from the house finch, a species native to western North America that has expanded across the continent both naturally and via introduction in New York City in 1940. House finches also are not a nuisance in the same ways the house sparrow is, even when they occur in large numbers.

House sparrows remain a fairly common bird in Nebraska and throughout North America, and there is no evidence suggesting they will disappear altogether. However, the species has also seen substantial declines over its native range in Europe and Asia. During a recent vacation to Spain, I was initially dumbfounded to see locals had put up nest boxes on a building to attract this species, hoping as we would for purple martins to nest in artificial gourds.

But after a little thought this all made sense, bringing us back to that important lesson: Circumstances can change despite and in spite of yourself.

Joel Jorgensen is the Nongame Bird Program Manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.



House sparrow in Chadron in Dawes County.
JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



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WHAT'S HAPPENING TO OUR OAKS?

By Rich Wehmeyer, Game and Parks Horticulturist

Old Wolf Oak at Ponca State Park, one of Nebraska's oldest trees, has died. It was a bur oak living more than 380 years and had become an often-visited woodland destination for parkgoers. But it's not the only oak to die this year

from stresses from natural causes. Visit state parks along Nebraska's eastern edge, and you'll find large areas of mature trees that are dead or in decline. While trees are resilient and rarely succumb to a single stressor,



Photographed two years ago in 2022, Ponca State Park's historic Old Wolf Oak is now dead. This bur oak was aged and found to be a sapling in 1644, making it one of the oldest of Nebraska's trees. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Two-lined Chestnut Borer (*Agrilus bilineatus*). PHOTO COURTESY OF JENN FORMAN ORTH



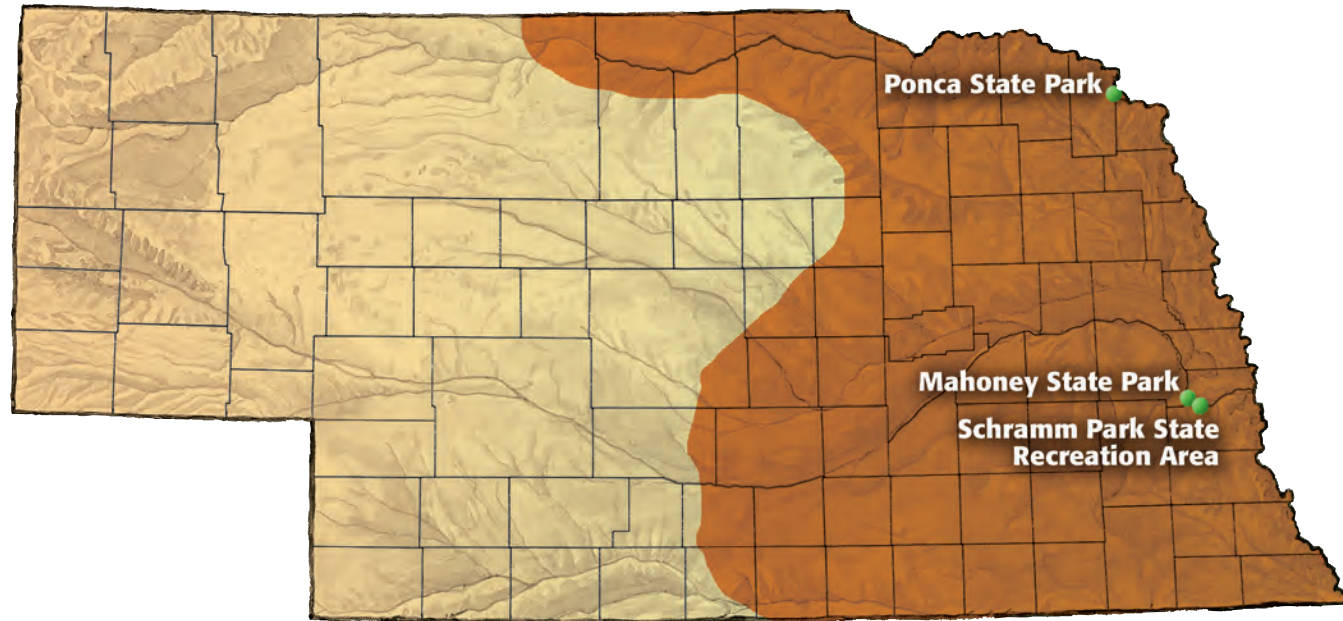
Nebraska Game and Parks and its partners identified multiple ones leading to massive die-offs among the region's deciduous trees. The plight they face is immense, but so is the plan to save as many trees as possible and embrace renewed landscapes going forward.

The Role of Drought

The past two years have seen extreme drought conditions across Nebraska. While native species like the bur oak are drought-tolerant, they do have their limits. Prolonged drought causes dieback in the canopy and root systems, weakening the tree's defenses. This creates an opening for pests and pathogens. When the tree's ability to compartmentalize decay or produce biochemical defenses declines, it becomes more vulnerable to infection.

Bur Oak Blight and the Two-Lined Chestnut Borer

Before the drought, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission staff had already been monitoring and, where possible, treating bur oaks for bur oak blight (*Tubakia iowensis*). While this disease is unlikely to kill a tree, it weakens it, allowing other pests, like the two-lined chestnut borer, to invade. Bur oak blight primarily affects a subspecies of bur oak, *Quercus macrocarpa* var. *oliformis*, which is found in upland areas, hilltops, ridges and southwest-facing slopes — regions that have been especially stressed by the drought.



Bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) native species range in Nebraska. Source: U.S. Geological Survey. MAP ARTWORK BY TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND

The Emergence of Hypoxylon Canker

A new threat, hypoxylon canker (*Biscogniauxia atropunctata*) has also emerged among drought-stricken trees. This fungus is normally benign, found on the bark of many tree species. But with tree defenses already compromised, it has invaded the vascular systems of many species. Hypoxylon canker feeds on the sapwood, cutting off the tree's ability to transport water and nutrients. As the fungus spreads, it causes the bark to slough off, revealing a grey-white fungal mat beneath, which produces spores that can infect other nearby trees.

Once hypoxylon canker enters the vascular tissue, the tree is doomed. This disease is not species-specific; it has also been found on elms and hackberries in the same woodlands. Unfortunately, no treatments are currently available to eradicate the fungus.

Embracing Change

Though discouraging, Game and Parks sees this as an opportunity for ecological renewal. The loss of trees represents a natural reset of the

ecosystem, allowing the reimagination of management strategies for these areas that have remained unchanged for so long.

After consulting with experts from states facing similar challenges, Game and Parks has developed a comprehensive response plan that includes the immediate removal and destruction of infected trees and limbs. To prevent the spread of infection, infected material must be destroyed on-site without further stressing the surrounding still-healthy trees.

Additional focus will be needed on controlling the spread of invasive species and taking advantage of the newly exposed areas of land to encourage native vegetation to grow. These efforts will include testing different management techniques — including periodic prescribed burns — to ensure a resilient, sustainable landscape in the future.

Long-Term Vision

Land managers, including Game and Parks, must approach this challenge with a blend of science and creativity. The problem cannot be eradicated swiftly, and responses will affect the broader ecosystem moving forward.

Game and Parks is committed to using this setback in our deciduous forests as an opportunity for growth, both in land management practices and in the interactions with the public witnessing these changes firsthand during their ventures among the trees.



An example of advanced hypoxylon canker on a tree. PHOTO COURTESY OF HUGH DARLINGTON



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CHIMNEY ROCK TRAIL *New trail at the monument ready for visitors*

By Justin Haag

As emigrants moved across the continent on the Oregon Trail in the 1800s, they often made note of Chimney Rock in their diaries. Visitors these days may be taking note as a new trail gives them a closer look at Nebraska’s iconic 350-foot-tall landmark south of Bayard.

Thanks to the opening of the newly constructed Walk to the Rock trails in late summer 2023, visitors now can get within 300 yards of the landform’s base. The system of 10-foot-wide trails courses over 2 miles on the land that spans between Chimney Rock and its Abbott Visitors Center. Those points are just under a mile apart as the crow flies.

The trails were surfaced with finely crushed gravel and include two 130-foot bridges over small ravines. A new parking lot with a small shelter at the south edge of the property allows people to get near the landmark with a shorter hike.

Loren Pospisil, Chimney Rock site supervisor, said the trail has been popular as most who come to the visitors center take a stroll through the property. Not only do they get closer to Chimney Rock, but they also experience the natural features of the Wildcat Hills escarpment.

“Visitors have always wanted to get closer to the rock when

coming here and this allows them to do it,” Pospisil said.

The trail became a possibility in 2018 when the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation purchased the 360 acres of land between the visitors center and the landform from the family of the late Gordon Howard, a pioneer of tourism who operated a popular wagon train operation there for decades. The Nebraska Environmental Trust and a private Lincoln-based foundation made large financial contributions to the purchase.

The trail construction followed a \$1.8-million renovation to the visitors center, which highlights the geographic, environmental and cultural significance of the site. It was originally opened in 1996.

Chimney Rock and the 80 acres surrounding it have been managed by the Nebraska State Historical Society since 1941. The site earned a National Historic Landmark designation in 1956.

Visitors may take in the full Chimney Rock experience by visiting when the Abbott Visitors Center is open, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day of the summer months and Tuesday to Saturday in the off-season. For those just wanting to take a hike, the trail is open during daylight.



The Walk to the Rock hiking trails opened to the public in 2023. Visitors to the landmark attraction can walk on four, 10-foot-wide hiking trails, ranging in length from .20 miles to 1.76 miles, and two 130-foot bridges. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



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Duck (goose) hunting near Kearney, 1972 ►

My father, Robert, and I were hunting ducks on the Platte River west of Kearney on Nov. 25, 1972. We rarely saw geese in that part of the state back then, so we were surprised when this lone goose flew by. We didn't have any goose decoys in our spread, let alone a goose call. My father had a knack of imitating many different animal sounds, and he was able to "call in" the goose using his voice. We talked and laughed about that hunt many times in the years to follow. Dad and I were able to hunt waterfowl together until he was 88 years old.

– Larry Bragg, Kearney



◄ Coyote hunting in Boone County, 1989

This photo of Ron Cruise calling coyotes was taken by Tim Simmons November 1989 in Boone County. We had recently purchased a new Pentax camera and I was hoping to get some wildlife shots, coyotes my dad would call in. The coyotes did not cooperate, the rifle was silent. But the shot of the day came at dusk of my dad in his element.

– Kris Simmons, Otoe



Grouse hunting near Chambers, 1980 ▲

Sometime around 1980 on the Wagon Hammer Ranch west of Chambers. My good friend Billy Lemburg shown on the right, and I enjoying a good day of grouse hunting and a good laugh.

– Bud Breiner, Lincoln

Pheasant hunting near Loup City, 1989 ►

Pheasant opener at Sherman County Lake near Loup City. From left: my uncle, John Lucas, Jr.; his son, Mark; and myself. Lots of weedy draws, shelterbelts and corn fields all over. An annual event for us.

– Bill Anderson, Platte City, Missouri



◄ Mule deer hunting near Crawford, 1960

This is a photo of myself with my dad (Danny). This mule deer was shot in November 1960 on the family ranch near Crawford. The rifle was a Parker Hale .270. I had just turned 1 year old that September.

– Mark Staman, Grand Island



Pheasant hunting near Pender, 1966 ▲

Picture (shown left to right) of myself, Barry Linstrom, Paul Hayduska and Frank Volcek with our limit of pheasants while hunting near Pender in what we called "soil bank" back in December 1966. Paul and Frank have both passed away and Barry gave up hunting so I have been hunting with my wife Linda who took up hunting after she retired in 2007.

– Ed Baburek, Omaha



Goose hunting near Sutherland, 1978 ▲

Here is a hunting picture of my husband Ike Miller (shown on the right) and our friend Andy Young (on the left). They were going to jump some ducks on the Applegate drain, west of Sutherland, and ended up with a couple of geese also. This picture was taken in December of 1978.

– Patty Miller, North Platte

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, Nebraskaland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 2000. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Text may be edited and photos adjusted for reproduction. All photos will be returned.



Vandals broke a rule on the sign they shot at the shotgun range at Pawnee State Recreation Area. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

THIS IS WHY WE CAN'T HAVE NICE THINGS

By Eric Fowler

Shaking my head. I can't tell you how many times I've been left to do that when visiting our state's parks and wildlife areas.

Some people are slobs. I don't understand how people can carry a full pop or beer can to the lakeshore, but not carry it back empty, when it weighs much less. Or leave a pile of empty shotshells in the food plot where they were shooting doves. Again, they weigh less.

Others are destructive. I have no clue what the people who started a fire ON TOP of a picnic table were thinking. Or tossed one of those tables into a lake. Or when they shot a sign off the side of a new concrete latrine (Is it bad that I secretly hope that scofflaw met a fate worse than Ralphie in "A Christmas Story" and actually did shoot their eye out?).

But one of my least favorite sights is when I visit a shooting range or wildlife area and see that folks have used something other than a target for practice. That was the case on a recent visit to the shotgun range at Pawnee State Recreation Area near Emerald, where vandals shot up a

sign with the range rules. It's not the first time the sign was replaced. Vandals have also shot up benches and the fence behind the range. Why?

I know our fine Nebraskaland readers are smart enough to NOT do stupid stuff like this. I wish there was a good way to let the folks who do know that they pay for the signs they shoot up or the picnic tables they ruin, and they will pay to replace them. Park and hunting permit fees pay for development and maintenance of park and wildlife areas, respectively. And when people purchase guns and ammunition, they pay federal excise taxes that, through the Pitman-Robertson Act, come back to the states to fund not only wildlife management but also shooting range development and maintenance.

So if you ever see some dufus doing stupid stuff like this, report them to the authorities. Along with a ticket, they can also get this valuable lesson: The more money we spend fixing things you ruin, the less we have to spend on nice, new things.

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