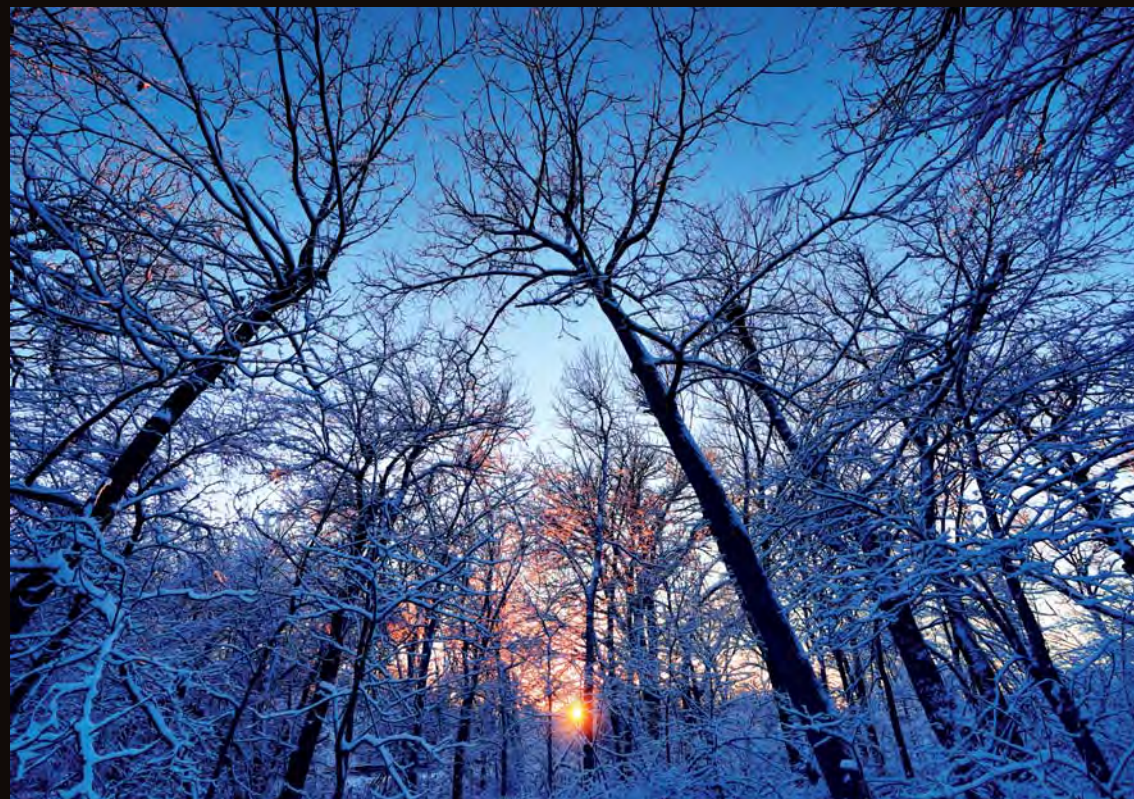




With crunchy snow underfoot, photographer Chris Masada shot this icy sunset at Wilderness Park in Lincoln on the southbound trail, just off the trailhead.

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INSIDE

Hunting a Hunter • Ice Fishing for Crappie
A White Background • Nebraska's Bur Oaks
Winter Bird Feeding • Ponca Winterfest

NEBRASKAland Magazine

Volume 91 • No. 10 • December 2013

FEATURES...

16 Winter Bird Feeding

By JENNY NGUYEN

22 Ponca's Winterfest

By AMY KUCERA

24 Bur Oak - A Hardy Native Tree

Text and Photos by GERRY STEINAUER

30 Novices and Experts... of Winter Crappie Fishing

Text and Photos by JEFF KURRUS

32 A White Background

Text and Photos by JEFF KURRUS and ERIC FOWLER

38 Hunting a Hunter

Text and Photos by JEFF KURRUS

DEPARTMENTS...

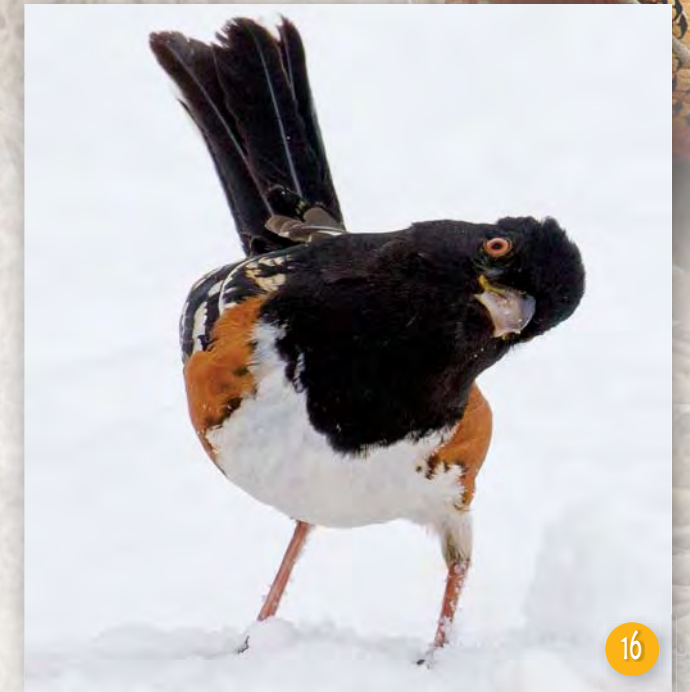
Comment.....	4
Mixed Bag.....	6
Product Reviews	44
Junior Journal.....	45
Classifieds.....	46
In the Kitchen	47
Portraits from the Past	48
Page 49.....	49
The Last Stop.....	50
Gift Collection 2014.....	51

ON THE WEB...



When you see this symbol in the pages of *NEBRASKAland Magazine*, visit NebraskalandMagazine.com and view our interactive digital edition for more information.

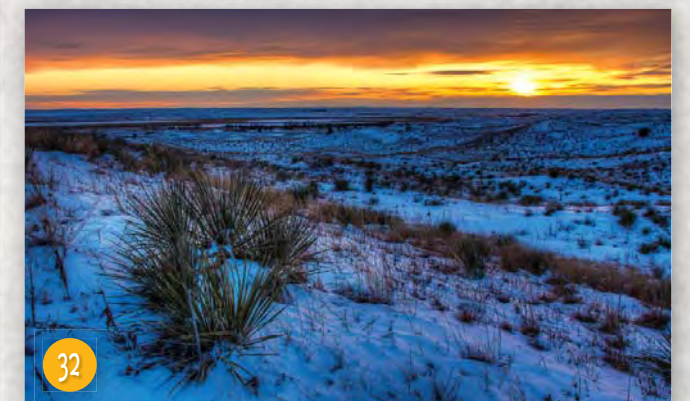
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16



24



32

Cover: While puppies sometimes make a great Christmas gift, keeping them wrapped and under the tree isn't easy. Photo by Eric Fowler.

Opposite: A pair of antique ice skates hang from Eugene Cromwell's barn door in Nance County. Photo by Jeff Kurrus.



A Visitor Letter

I know this is going to sound like the way I start every email, but I just got back into town and found this month’s issue of *NEBRASKAland*. As usual, I flip through the magazine looking at this month’s goodie to read and for the visitor. On page 13, I saw a number of them in the pictures: an ant, monarch, termites, spiders, lady bug, etc. But I bet it’s the metallic green and yellow beetle that’s crawling off those pictures you are looking for this month. Am I right?

The 6th graders at Edison School in Omaha enjoy the magazine as well as I do. I take it to the classrooms when I finish and the kids go through it page by page. I use many of the articles to expose them to different aspects of the outdoors. I will also take them on excursions about 4 to 6 times a year. We’ve been to Rock Creek Station, Ashfall, Homestead National Monument, DeSoto, Squaw Creek, etc. I try to expose them to as many different varieties of outdoor activities as I can. We fish, look for mushrooms, skeletons, butterflies, flowers, draw, take photographs, etc. It’s all about getting the next generation interested or we won’t have an outdoors to enjoy. Thanks for the wonderful job you all do.

Steve Tyler
Omaha, Nebraska

Portraits from the “Huskers” Past

That was a neat picture in the August/September issue of Allen Zikmund with all those fish. It might be noted that 73 years ago “the kid from Ord” became one of the all-time heroes of Nebraska football. He caught the pass and ran for a touchdown that put the Cornhuskers ahead of Stanford in the 1941 Rose Bowl.

We old-time fans of the Huskers cherish the memories of all those Saturdays played by those all-Nebraska teams of our youth.

Ramon D. Hansen
Carthage, New York



This photo of the Niobrara River in Brown County, by Angela Carroll of Lincoln, won first place in the “Wild and Scenic Nebraska” class at the 2013 State Fair. Congratulations to Angela.



Dustin Lorenson shot this photo of sunflowers at Little Salt Creek Wildlife Management Area in Lancaster County.



Pat Barnes shot this photo of bull elk in velvet at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in Cherry County.



Hawk in the Bird Bath

This photo was taken when the temperatures were in the very high 90s to 100 degrees.

We had just got home from church and I looked out and saw this hawk in the bird bath – all wet but just sitting there. I got the camera with a 300 mm lens and took a series of photos through the window, though they were not too good. My daughter took the camera and walked around the house to the backyard corner and was able to get a couple of shots before he or she took off.

This is possibly a sharp-shinned but most likely a Cooper’s hawk. I have not seen the bird back yet.

Rich Ryan
Omaha, Nebraska

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

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4 NEBRASKAland • DECEMBER 2013

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2012 Even Too Dry for Grasshoppers

By Justin Haag

Nebraskans probably won't hear many complaints about the population decline of one type of creature that occurred on the High Plains this summer.

While grasshoppers usually thrive in drought, it appears the dry conditions of 2012 actually were too extreme for many of the familiar jumping insects to reproduce.

Entomologist Mathew Brust of Chadron, a college professor who studies rangeland grasshopper populations closely, said many species of grasshoppers that are usually common were virtually nonexistent this summer.

Grasshopper species that Brust call "forb generalists," which feed on a variety of plants, were especially in great decline. Brust said the spring of 2012 had a strong hatch, but mortality rates among both immature and adult insects were extremely high – likely the result of the hot and dry conditions which left grasshoppers and other animals searching for moisture and nutrition. Fewer grasshoppers likely resulted in fewer eggs laid for the 2013 brood, he said.

A few species, which feed on drought-hardy grasses such as buffalograss and blue grama, did increase in 2012, he said.

"Virtually all other species declined significantly," Brust said. "What this clearly shows is that species composition of rangeland grasshoppers is of major significance as each species responds differently to a particular set of conditions."



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

He also noted declines in other species that he studies, namely butterflies and tiger beetles.

The decline in grasshoppers is welcomed by many farmers and ranchers, who have been challenged to grow grass and crops in the extreme conditions. While grasshoppers in abundance can certainly throw an ecosystem out of balance and become a pest, scientists say they do have redeeming qualities.

In the right numbers, grasshoppers are valued as a component of a balanced ecosystem. They are a vital component of the food chain as many animals – and some humans – consume the hoppers as a high protein food source. ■

Nebland Flashbacks

NEBRASKAland Magazine has been known to feature covers with a holiday theme, as seen in December of 1970. Images of each featured story hang from ornaments on a frosted tree.

One article, "Santa's For Real," is the true story of Christmas on a snowbound train written in 1925 by Will M. Maupin.

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Travelogue

Text and photos by Justin Haag

Pine Ridge Winter

The picturesque buttes, ponderosa pines and grasslands of the **Pine Ridge** in the northwestern corner of the state transform to a winter wonderland after Jack Frost's arrival, making it an excellent getaway for people seeking fun in the cold.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climatic Data Center reports that **Chadron**, in the heart of the Pine Ridge, receives more annual snowfall than any other city in the state on record at 42.7 inches. That total is more than double that of many Nebraska cities.

The long list of activities includes hunting, ice fishing, snowshoeing, sledding, cross-country skiing, wildlife viewing or just taking in the sights. Be sure to bring a camera.

The region has become known for its population of big game animals, including pronghorn, deer, elk and bighorn sheep. Whether chasing northern pike at **Box Butte Reservoir State Recreation Area**, or crappie at **Carter P. Johnson Lake**, ice anglers are sure to enjoy their time on the hard water.

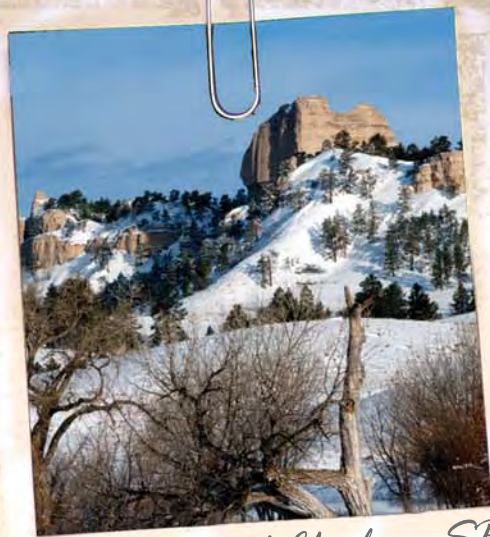
With hiking trails and scenic vistas, **Chadron State Park** and **Fort Robinson State Park** serve as an excellent base for winter visitors. Although the parks' lodging is closed from late November through mid-April, campsites with electrical hook-ups are available. From charming bed-and-breakfasts to modern motels, **Chadron** and **Crawford** also offer accommodations with advantageous winter rates.

After the cheeks turn red, warm up at one of the region's quaint coffee shops, such as the **Bean Broker**, **Cleo's Daily Grind** and **Daylight Donuts** in Chadron or the **Perennial Haus** in Crawford.

When night comes, enjoy a sports contest or fine arts production at nearby **Chadron State College**, gather with friends at one of the bar-and-grills, or just cozy up in your room.

One bit of warning: Travelers should watch road condition reports and weather forecasts carefully as Mother Nature can be especially fickle in this country.

For more information, visit DiscoverDawesCounty.com, Chadron.com, OutdoorNebraska.org and Csc.edu.



Fort Rob and Chadron SP



Ice fishing at Box Butte SRA



Bean Broker coffee shop



Send Us Your Trail Cam Photos!

Chris Coburn sent in this photo from his leased ground in Hayes County, which is also a mule deer conservation area. "Does on parade," he wrote in his caption.

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



Suitable Sleeping Bags for the Season

By Nebraska Outdoor U!

When enjoying the outdoors, no one wants to lay down for the night and wake up a popsicle the next morning, or vice versa and wake up drenched in sweat. The proper sleeping bag for the season makes all the difference. Sleeping bags come in a myriad of different styles, shapes and characteristics. These steps will help you understand which bag you need, and when.

Shape does matter, because the amount of circulating air in your sleeping bag determines the temperature. A rectangular bag is nice for the summer, and a mummy style bag will keep you warm in the winter.

Synthetic or Down filling material will not only affect the warmth of the sleeping bag but also the weight and size too. Down is super lightweight for the space it takes up, but if it gets wet it loses its warming power easily. Synthetic filling is heavier, performs well in moist conditions and is much easier to care for compared to down; though it also lasts less than half the life of down insulation.

Construction of the bag will influence its warming power too. Baffles are the sewn compartments of insulation in the sleeping bag. Vertical baffles make for a comfortable cool bag for warmer weather trips, and horizontal baffles make up great 3-season, warm bags suitable for a variety of trips.

Visit OutdoorU.org and start your own pathway to exciting and memorable experiences in the outdoors. Get outside and see what the Nebraska outdoors has for you. ■



Making Sure Your Muzzleloader Fires

By Nebraska Outdoor U!

Cleaning muzzleloading firearms clears the barrel of fouling, oils or preservatives and eliminates potential obstructions to loading or firing safely. Below are a few tips for the different parts of your gun once you remove the barrel, nipple and flash hole insert.

Barrel- Immerse the breech end in a bucket of soapy water. Using a cleaning patch, swab the bore thoroughly with the soapy solution until the water comes out clean. Flush the inside of the barrel with hot water, then run several dry patches through the barrel to completely dry. Finally, swab the barrel with a lightly oiled patch to prevent corrosion.

Nipple and Flash Hole Insert- Scrub with a small brush to remove all fouling from the channels and the threads. Rinse thoroughly in clean, hot water and then dry.

Lock- Remove from the stock, then scrub it with soapy water. Next, rinse the lock in hot, clean water and dry.

Other Metal Parts- Lightly oil the moving parts and the surface of the metal to prevent corrosion. Avoid oiling the face of the frizzen or getting oil on the flint or the leather padding for the flint. Too much oil is worse than not enough, so use the gun oil sparingly.

Stock- Clean any powder residues from the stock with a soft brush and cloth. Use water or oil on the stock only if a severe problem exists. Scratches may be treated with boiled linseed oil (thinned with turpentine or mineral spirits) or with a commercial stock finish. Do not soak the stock with gun oil, for it may destroy the wood.

Lastly, store the firearm in a secure, dry area with a stable temperature and controlled access for safety. Storing the muzzleloader with the muzzle down allows any excess oil to drain out of the barrel, preventing oil damage and ensuring your gun fires the next time the trigger is squeezed. ■

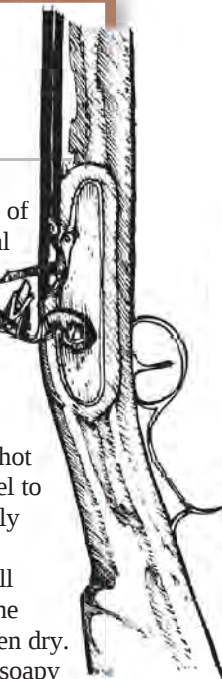


ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT



Log barracks at Fort Robinson, built in 1883.

A Brief History Christmas at Fort Robinson, 1882

By Lori Cox-Paul and James W. Wengert, Nebraska State Historical Society

Fort Robinson provides the following holiday story of devotion and courage. It can be found in *A Frontier Army Christmas*, published by the Nebraska State Historical Society. Martin J. Weber, an old soldier, remembered: “December 1882 then a corporal in Troop H, Fifth Cavalry, I was ordered to report to the quartermaster at Fort Sidney, the nearest railroad point, to get the Christmas goods for the Fort.

A driver and a six mule team were detailed for the purpose.”

Weber carried out his orders and headed back to Fort Robinson. “The weather had turned cold and frost began to fly through the air indicating a storm. The next morning the storm broke in all its fury, a regular blizzard raging. We had to head into the storm.

We made Camp Clarke where the Sidney-Black Hills Trail crossed the North Platte River.

“The bridge tender and his wife advised us to stay until the storm passed. As much as we disliked to leave the snug quarters and hot meals, we bid them goodbye and headed into the storm.

“We got to the Running Water stage station the night of the 23rd. Here we had hay for mules and horses and a warm place to cook our supper. How good that hot coffee tasted. It gave us new life and courage for the last twenty miles of our journey.

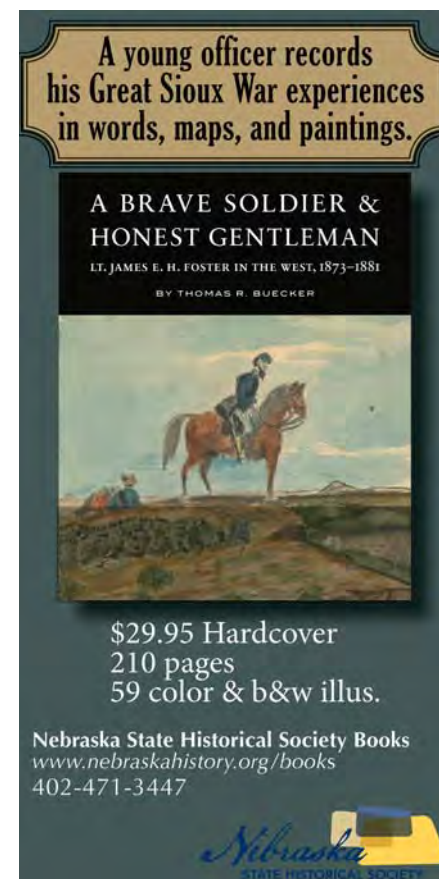
“The stage had broken the trail to the top of Breakneck Hill; the storm had passed, the fort only five miles away. We got safely down the Breakneck, crossed White Clay Creek, and broke trail across the valley, arriving at the fort on the 24th.

“When I passed the officers’ quarters, the kiddies were all out running up and down the walks. When they saw me, they began to shout, ‘The Christmas wagon has come!’ Hearing them the officers and men came out. They could hardly believe it until the teamster drove his six weary mules up and we began to unload the Christmas goods. Even the officers were willing to help.

“So old Santa arrived, and there was a Merry Christmas after all had given up hope of seeing either. I was snow

blind and had to wear dark glasses for some time after that. One year later I was promoted to first sergeant of Troop H.” ■

For more information, go to Nebraskahistory.org/books.



RG127-43-2-SFH95613_2 NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Hot Additions

By Cristina Woodworth

Instant hot chocolate has been a staple hot beverage choice at campsites around the country for years. Campers can try adding some of the following ingredients to kickstart their cocoa and give their taste buds something to rave about.

Mix up a fresh cup of hot chocolate and then try adding:

- Caramel: Stir in a spoonful of your favorite caramel sauce for an even sweeter take on your hot chocolate drink.
- Peppermint stick: Adds a great new flavor to your traditional brew. Use a candy cane during the holiday season for added spunk.
- Chili powder: Sounds odd but tastes great. The perfect amount of zip and sweetness makes chili powder and cocoa good partners.
- Cinnamon: About ½ of a teaspoon of cinnamon is sure to add some spice to your drink. It goes well with the holidays as well.
- Coffee: Add some coffee or espresso to your instant hot cocoa if you need a little more of a pick-me-up. Coffee makes your hot chocolate seem like more of an adult drink too.
- Peanut butter: A classic flavor combination – just make sure it melts all the way in before sipping.
- Pumpkin: Plop a few spoonfuls of canned pure pumpkin into your next mug of hot chocolate. Tastes even better if you top it off with whipped cream and a dash of nutmeg.
- Orange zest: Cut up some strips of an orange peel and let them soak in your mug for a few minutes before drinking. The citrus taste and scent are a delightful addition. ■



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Christmas Bird Count

By Amy Kucera

Before the early winter bird census known as the Christmas Bird Count was proposed by ornithologist Frank Chapman, the holiday custom was to divide into locations and kill every bird in sight, including non-game species. As the awareness of natural resource conservation arose, these side hunts were replaced with bird counts, a tradition that continues today.

The first annual Christmas Bird Count was conducted on Christmas day 1900, with 27 birders in 25 locations. Since then, it has grown to become the largest and oldest citizen science event in the world. Sponsored by the National Audubon Society, thousands of volunteers have endured a variety of weather conditions to participate in organized count circles, led by experienced birdwatchers. Data compiled from each area is valuable for researchers and used to study the health, habitat and status of bird populations, in addition to guiding future conservation actions.

This year, the 114th annual Christmas Bird Count will take place December 14 to January 5. For more information and to participate in a count near you, visit Birds.audubon.org/christmas-bird-count. ■



PHOTO BY RICK RASMUSSEN

Cabin Rental

By Cristina Woodworth

Once Nebraska’s winter winds start to howl and snowflakes begin to blanket the ground, many campers may choose to pack away their tents and sleeping bags for the season.

There are still cozy ways to enjoy all the outdoor activities the state has to offer, though, by booking a cabin for a weekend sledding getaway or full week of family festivities.

There are five Nebraska recreation areas that offer cabin rentals year-round: Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, Platte River State Park, Ponca State Park, Lewis & Clark State Recreation Area and Niobrara State Park.

Most of these parks have a fair amount of weeknight availability during the winter season. Some parks even offer a 30 percent discount on winter cabin reservations made for Sunday through Thursday nights.

Weekend visitors looking for a cabin stay are also usually able to find one, although some of the bigger cabins, especially at Mahoney State Park, tend to get booked further in advance.

Over holiday breaks, especially Christmas and New Year’s Eve, open cabins at Nebraska’s state parks are sometimes difficult to find. Holiday reservations for cabins at Mahoney and Platte River state parks generally need to be made an entire year in advance.

Cabin sizes range from Mahoney’s

six-bedroom deluxe structures and Ponca State Park’s four-bedroom mini-lodges and earth-friendly two-bedroom green cabins. Almost all of the state park cabins offer amenities such as wireless internet, cable television, full kitchens, modern bathrooms and living areas.

Visitors wanting to snag a cabin at the last minute should never assume a state park or recreation area is already full. Always check online or call the reservation customer service center to make reservations or to check the availability at certain parks.

Don’t settle for staying at home all winter. Get out and enjoy the comfort and rustic atmosphere of sleeping in one of Nebraska’s state park cabins. ■



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Silicone Gun Cloths

By Julie Geiser

After a day in the field your firearm can be wet from incremental weather, a condition not good for any gun’s wood or metal surfaces. But in the field cleaning can be done simply and inexpensively with a silicone cloth purchased from any sporting goods store or online – costs range from \$4 to \$8.

Easily carried in a coat or pant pocket, the cloth provides the ultimate in rust prevention and is a must for finger print removal on all firearm surfaces.

While a more thorough cleaning will be needed at home, a silicone cloth is a great way to take care of your gun until you can get there. ■



PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER

Skiing Cross Country

By Cristina Woodworth

Across the state, visitors can discover a new winter passion by strapping on a pair of cross-country skis and gliding across snow-packed fields, through peaceful woods and around frozen lakes.

Cross-country skiing differs from traditional downhill skiing in that the ski boots generally only attach to the ski at the toes, allowing skiers more heel movement to help propel themselves forward.

Cross-country skiing involves a technique similar to the movement used when ice skating and is known to be a great cardiovascular workout to be taken advantage of during the winter months.

In the Panhandle, Fort Robinson and Chadron State Park are both popular cross-country ski options with each offering groomed ski trails as well as off-trail possibilities. Experienced skiers can enjoy the steep pine-covered buttes while beginners can first try out the area’s more gently sloping hills.

The bluffs and steeper areas located along the Missouri River corridor also offer a variety of challenges for skiers at Ponca State Park near Ponca and Indian Cave State Park near Falls City. Many of the hiking and horseback riding trails in these areas are re-opened for cross-country skiing during the winter months, providing miles of skiing weaving through woods and across open meadows.

Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, near Ashland, is another popular cross-country skiing destination in eastern Nebraska,



WHITE RIVER TRAIL NEAR FORT ROBINSON STATE PARK. PHOTO BY BOB GRIER

with several looping ski trails kept up during the winter season and many more acres open for off-trail exploration around the park.

Other ski areas across the state include Lake Maloney State Recreation Area near North Platte, Fort Kearny State Recreation Area near Kearney and Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area near Gering.

Many other outdoor areas are also open to cross-country skiers as well. Visitors should call beforehand to get the most up-to-date snow and trail information for their state park or recreation area of choice.

Skiers new to the sport will find cross-country ski, boot and pole rentals available at several places across the state including the University of Nebraska at Omaha and University of Nebraska-Lincoln recreation centers. Snow and Sun Sports in Scottsbluff and Moose’s Tooth in Lincoln also sell skis and other snow equipment.

Nebraska may lack mountain ranges, but skiing is still certainly a winter option for park visitors across the state. ■

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Upcoming Events

by Jerry Kane

Contact the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at 402-471-0641 or visit OutdoorNebraska.org for more information. Visit HuntSafeNebraska.org for a list of hunter education classes and BoatSafeNebraska.org for a list of boating safety classes.

November 28-February 18 Winterfest, Ponca State Park (SP), Ponca, 402-755-2284

December 1 Cornucopia of Crafts, Eugene T. Mahoney SP, Ashland, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., 402-944-2523

December 1 Bobcat hunting and trapping season opens

December 1, 21-22, 26-30 Roger G. Sykes Outdoor Heritage Education Complex open to public, Platte River SP, Louisville, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., 402-471-5547

December 1-31 Antlerless elk hunting season

December 1-31 Muzzleloader deer hunting season

December 7 Fort Robinson SP Historical Christmas Dinner, Crawford, 308-665-2900

December 13 White-fronted goose hunting season (first segment) closes

December 14 Christmas Bird Count, Ponca SP, 402-755-2284

December 16 Snipe hunting season closes

December 16 Application period begins for Prairie Unit mountain lion permits

December 17 Duck and coot hunting season in Zone 2 Low Plains and High Plains (first segment) closes

December 17 Duck and coot hunting season in Zone 4 closes

December 24 Duck and coot hunting season in Zone 1 closes

December 25 Christmas Day, Game and Parks offices closed

December 31 Archery antelope hunting season closes

December 31 Archery, Mule Deer Conservation Area and Statewide Whitetail Buck deer hunting seasons close

See You Out There... But Where?



Do you know where this Nebraska photograph was taken? See answer at the bottom of page 15.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Show Us Your Man Caves ...

By Jenny Nguyen

Think you have the best man cave in the state? *NEBRASKAland* is looking for the most decked out, unique and jaw-dropping man caves in all 93 counties. Send us photos of your sanctuary and it may be featured in the magazine or online. Ladies, you're welcome to send submissions, too!

Show us where you hang out with the boys (or girls), where you contemplate your next hunt and where you proudly display all your accomplishments in the field. Photos can be of your garage,

basement, office, attic, workshop, cabin or any space that you go to for escape – we're talking game mounts, fish mounts, fur rugs, hanging pelts, unique signs and posters, gun displays, game tables, outdoor gear and equipment, and of course, lots of camo!

Submissions must be outdoor-related to be considered. Please send high-resolution images to jenny.nguyen@nebraska.gov, along with your name, a brief description of your man cave, your city or town of residence, and best contact information. ■



... And Your Bat Caves

By Eric Fowler

Researchers know that eight of the 13 species of bats found in Nebraska likely hibernate here during the winter months. What researchers would also like to know, however, is how many bats there are and where.

Nebraska has few natural caves where bats could hibernate. But these unique mammals are known to overwinter in houses, quarries, mines and sewers. Researchers have an interest in locating bat hibernacula to gather baseline data on wintering populations before white-nosed syndrome, a disease that has killed millions of hibernating bats in eastern North America, arrives. Caused by a white fungus that appears on the muzzle and other body parts of hibernating bats, it was first documented in New York in 2006 and has spread rapidly across the eastern United States and Canada and is now found as far west as Minnesota, Iowa and Oklahoma.

"Any kind of information on possibly where there's a cave or hole would be great," said Keith Geluso, a University of Nebraska at Kearney biology professor who has researched bats and his currently studying the small number of tricolored bats that hibernate in the Happy Jack Chalk Mine near Scotia.

"Bats may not be here in huge

numbers [in the winter], but if we can find some we can monitor for white nose and better understand a bat's winter ecology in Nebraska in general," Geluso said.

Bats enter their hibernacula as early as September and exit in May. Geluso and other researchers believe the best potential to find larger hibernating populations lies in mines and quarries in southeastern Nebraska.

If you know of such a site, contact one of the following:

Keith Geluso, University of Nebraska at Kearney, 308-440-3430, gelusok1@unk.edu.

Trish Freeman, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 402-472-6606, pfreeman1@unl.edu.

Mike Fritz, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, 402-471-5419, mike.fritz@nebraska.gov.

Jeremy White, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 402-554-3294, jeremywhite@unomaha.edu. ■



NEBRASKAland Visitor



Last issue's winner of the Visitor drawing was Kyle Held of Elkhorn, Nebraska, who found the **dogbane 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 critter found in Nebraska. We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a *NEBRASKAland* Magazine mug. 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 6, 15, 52, or 53.

The dogbane beetle is a beautiful native insect that shimmers like a tiny blue-green jewel. This iridescence is caused by thousands of tiny plates that cover the beetle. As light hits the plates, it is reflected back to the viewer. The colors seen, which can range from greens and blues to reds and golds, depend on the angle of the viewer. Adult dogbane beetles feed on the foliage of dogbane and milkweed, while larvae feed on the plant roots. The sap of these plants contains chemicals toxic to many insects. However, the dogbane beetle is not affected by the toxin, instead storing it in its body and releasing it when threatened to ward off predators. The beetle's showy coloration may also deter predators, while its ability to suddenly drop from a leaf offers a quick escape to avoid being eaten.

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

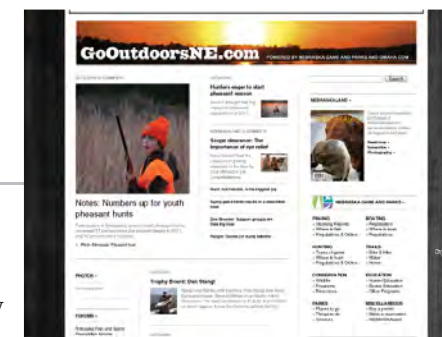


Omaha World-Herald Partner Site Launched

By Amy Kucera

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has partnered with the Omaha World-Herald to create the new website: GoOutdoorsNE.com.

The site features a mix of outdoor-related content from the Commission, *NEBRASKAland* and Omaha World-Herald staff, including the latest interactive digital edition of *NEBRASKAland*, as well as news alerts, social media updates, access to outdoor forums, trophy board for hunters, photo galleries, videos, links and more. Content is updated daily. ■



Winter Bird Feeding

By Jenny Nguyen

Invite a variety of visitors to your backyard this season.

Looking out my window last winter, I would say that the birds were confused as I was. Spring was late in coming, and the robins, not knowing whether to start their spring nesting, hung idly by my apartment complex looking for whatever food they could find. It had been a month and a half past the last day of winter, and I was still seeing birds outside being thrashed about in the cold, icy wind. Perhaps I saw my own frustrations in their struggle to survive this seemingly never-ending chill that I took conscious note on how hard long winters must be on birds.

Like us, birds are warm-blooded creatures. They must maintain constant body temperatures within a normal range in order to survive. Flight, especially, requires a considerable amount of energy – energy that birds must get from what they eat. Sudden drops in temperature and sudden snowstorms, like what we experienced towards the end of this last winter season, can catch birds off-guard and unprepared. During these severe times, keeping well-stocked bird feeders around can be especially helpful to our feathered friends.

Bird Food Basics

There are many different types of bird feed available on the market, so many that it can be overwhelming and confusing to a novice bird enthusiast. The important thing to remember for winter is that birds require high

amounts energy in order to sustain their high metabolism, therefore feed that is rich in fat is more desirable. This includes nuts and seeds that contain high oil contents and actual fat like suet or vegetable shortening.

Although there is no such thing as the perfect bird seed mix, the consensus among birders is that black oil sunflower seeds, peanut kernels, white proso millet and Niger thistle are most preferred by a wide variety of wild birds. Providing a good variety of seed will allow you to help as many birds as possible in addition to being able to attract as many birds to your backyard. When it's too cold to be outside, just watching all the different colored birds that come by your bird feeder is a nice change from looking at the same dull winter scene.

Actual seed preferences will vary depending on the time of year, the types of birds present, temperature, moisture and rainfall, and the location of feeders relative to nearby water and other food sources. The best way to find out is to experiment and see what types of feed will work best in your area. Your local bird specialist or pet shop can also provide you with a wealth of information on feed and all the types of feeders you can get.

Here are some common bird feeding options as well as their pros and cons. You should include at least five or six of these seeds in your feeders to attract a variety of birds. Feeders should also be placed in locations that are out of the wind and harsh weather.

Blue jays mainly feed on nuts and seeds, using their strong beak to crack acorns.



PHOTO BY RICK RASMUSSEN

SUET AND VEGETABLE SHORTENING

are excellent sources of energy for birds in the winter. Suet is raw animal fat that you can feed whole to birds or it can be rendered down to make suet cakes that incorporate both fat and seeds. Suet is sold in the meat section of some grocery stores, but if you ask, your butcher might even give it to you for free. One disadvantage in using raw suet is that it can go rancid, and for that reason, some people prefer to render it down to make suet cakes or they will use vegetable shortening instead. Rendered suet and vegetable shortening will last much longer, especially during breaks of warmer weather. Commercially-made suet cakes are also sold in stores.



BLACK OIL SUNFLOWER SEEDS

should be the primary component in any bird feed mix. Ideally, it should make up 75 percent of the seeds you offer birds. Easy to crack open and high in energy-rich oils, over 40 different bird species will eat black oil sunflower seeds, including chickadees, purple finches, pine siskins, blue jays, northern cardinals, evening grosbeaks, mourning doves, dark-eyed juncos and more. However, constant clean-up will be needed at any active bird feeding station containing sunflower seeds. A cleaner alternative would be to offer hulled sunflower hearts or chips, which are preferred by smaller birds like white-throated sparrows, American goldfinches and house finches.



PEANUT KERNELS OR PEANUTS IN THE SHELL

are popular among a variety of birds, including blue jays, woodpeckers, tufted titmice, sparrows, red-winged blackbirds, indigo buntings, northern cardinals, gray catbirds, black-capped chickadees, purple finches, goldfinches, wild turkeys, American robins, nuthatches, wrens, doves, ravens and more. Peanuts are high in fat, protein and vitamins needed for birds to survive through the winter. Peanut hearts, the tiny chips left behind when peanut halves are broken, are great for smaller birds.



WHITE PROSO MILLET

is common in many ready-made bird seed mixes found at the store. They are cheaper than other seeds available. Although they are popular among wild birds like bobwhite quail, northern cardinals, mourning doves, purple finches, dark-eyed juncos, North American sparrows, towhees, wild turkeys, blue jays and ring-necked pheasants, they are also attractive to the non-native house sparrow and brown-headed cowbird. House sparrows outcompete native song birds for nesting areas, while cowbirds displace native bird species by laying their eggs in songbirds' nests. White proso millet is fine in a pinch, but if you want to attract a wider variety of wild birds to your feeder and fewer house sparrows, stick to black oil sunflower seeds although it may be a little more expensive.



NIGER THISTLE

is highly popular among American goldfinches, in addition to being able to attract other species like redpolls, mourning doves, dark-eyed juncos, North American sparrows, red crossbills and indigo buntings. However, it is one of the more expensive wild bird foods available. A potential problem with thistle is that it can easily mold or go rancid in wet weather.



ALL SEEDS PROVIDED BY THE WILD BIRD HABITAT STORE WWW.WILDBIRDHABITATSTORE.COM



A white-breasted nuthatch (left) and a red-bellied woodpecker (right) dine at the feeders at Ponca State Park.

PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

CORN

is eaten by many types of birds. Cracked corn is well liked by species such as blackbirds, bobwhite quail, indigo buntings, northern cardinals, doves, ducks, finches, pheasants, sparrows, wild turkeys and woodpeckers. However, cracked corn will also attract problem species including house sparrows, brown-headed cowbirds and starlings. Shelled corn or corn still on the cob is popular among bigger birds such as ring-necked pheasants and wild turkeys, but the problem is that squirrels also love it, too. Whole corn kernels are not a preferred feed among birders because they are too big and hard for most small birds to digest.

SAFFLOWER

can be a great alternative to black oil sunflower seeds. Cardinals, rose-breasted grosbeaks, chickadees, nuthatches, mourning doves, house finches and white-throated sparrows love safflower while house sparrows and starlings don't seem to touch it.

SQUIRREL PROBLEM

For many bird feeding enthusiasts, squirrels can be a nightmare. Feed such as black oil sunflower seeds, nuts, corn and suet are just as attractive to squirrels as they are to birds. Oftentimes, squirrels will scare or chase birds away and consume large quantities of feed, leaving little behind. They can also damage feeders by chewing through plastic or wood. To minimize the impact of squirrels, there are a variety of squirrel resistant bird feeders and accessories like spinners and baffles available. Squirrels can also jump long distances of 10 feet or greater, so make an effort to keep feeders away from trees, wires and porches that can make it easy for squirrels to launch from. Offering seeds that squirrels don't eat, such as Niger thistle and safflower, will also help reduce seed lost. And because squirrels are sensitive to the heat of peppers and birds are not, another trick is to add cayenne pepper or similar spices to bird feed – just don't rub your eyes afterwards.



A NEWFOUND HOBBY

With this basic knowledge, you are now ready to start bird feeding. In addition to online sources, there are several bird feeding experts throughout the state that can further assist you with feed selection, feeders and general wild bird facts, including the Wild Bird Habitat Store in Omaha and Lincoln, Wild Birds Unlimited Nature Store in Omaha and For the Wild Birds in Bellevue and Omaha. This winter, pick up bird feeding. You never know what kind of visitors will come calling. ■



Madeline Heemstra glasses through the back window at Ponca State Park's Resource and Education Center during the Great Backyard Bird Count.

Easy, Kid-friendly Pinecone Seed Cakes

Bird feeders come in all shapes and sizes, but they don't have to be complicated to serve their purpose. For a fun indoor winter activity, make pinecone bird feeders with your children. This is easy and cheaper than buying commercially prepared suet cakes at the store. Once assembled, set these bird seed cakes out, then go back inside and watch. This is a great opportunity for you and your family to learn about the wild birds of Nebraska.

What You'll Need: medium to large size pinecones, twine, vegetable shortening, bird seed mix, raisins or dried cranberries, scissors, disposable aluminum pans or rimmed baking sheets lined with foil or parchment paper, and spoons.

1. Cut twine into about 10-inch pieces. Tie twine to the top of the pinecones and make a loop for hanging. With a spoon, spread vegetable shortening all over the sides of the pinecones, making sure to pack it into all the crevices. Work in aluminum pans or rimmed baking sheets for easy clean-up.

2. Next, pour a handful of bird seed mix into the aluminum pan or baking sheet. Roll the pinecones in the bird seed, and then use your fingers to fully pack and incorporate the seeds into the shortening. Pack as much seed as the shortening can hold in all the pinecones' crevices. Afterwards, stick raisins and/or dried cranberries throughout.

3. Once done, hang your pinecone seed cakes outside and watch for feathered visitors.



Cora Heemstra makes homemade seed cake bird feeders during the Birds and Breakfast event at Ponca State Park.



Ponca's Winterfest

Rekindling Family Traditions

By Amy Kucera

Cloaked in a fresh cover of early winter snow, a spectacular solitude filled the frosted woodlands and high bluffs of Ponca State Park. But the stillness didn't last long.

Footprints and fruitcakes soon lined the frozen ground during the pinnacle event of the season known as Winterfest, a celebration that encourages guests to rekindle wintertime traditions – as well as create anew – in the great outdoors. During the Fruitcake Fling competition, visitors were invited to toss loaves baked with millet and sunflower seeds, which doubled as a gift of food to the feathered residents of the 2,400 acre park.

Under a stone shelter, the steam of mulled cinnamon cider rose from the cups of competitors, keeping warm with wassail before competing in a series of challenges on a quest to locate the yule log, a traditional custom in European culture adapted to include an obstacle course and kindling hunt for kids.

Once teams completed each challenge, they were presented clues leading to the location of the yule log. After

an exciting discovery, the decorated Austrian pine was pulled from the forested hills by horse and cut by hand-saw. Together with kindling bundles, the log pieces – save one for next year – fueled the flames of the celebratory bonfire. According to earlier tradition, this practice was meant to bring good luck throughout the year. Awards were presented and more laughs and wassail shared around the glowing blaze.

Families also gathered indoors within the Missouri National Recreational River Resource and Education Center for wreath making, card and cookie decorating, popcorn and pine cone crafts, student art show displays and family photographs by the fireplace. An open house in an adjacent mini-lodge featured refreshments of wine and cheese.

Adorned in blue and silver costume, an elf with sparkled eyes, known as the Winter Sprite, greeted and assisted visitors throughout the celebration.

As dusk settled in, guests wrapped in blankets and boarded a lighted hayrack to ride to the park's tri-state overlook for a serene scene of the Missouri River Valley under winter's icy spell, only to return to the bustle of cooks in the kitchen and soup smells of homemade chili, chicken noodle and oyster stew. R.P. Smith of Broken Bow shared his humorous brand of cowboy poetry and wintertime tales from the Pine Crest Ranch to the delight of the crowd.

While the bonfire smoke faded into the night sky amid the glow of decorative lights, smiles radiated from those still lingering, reflecting on their first Winterfest experience, with a promise that it won't be their last.

And so the tradition continues. ■

Ponca Winterfest Events Calendar

November 30 - December 28 Homemade Holidays
Special discounts at the park gift shop, free hot chocolate and wassail, lighted hayrack rides and more.

December 4 Hometown Holidays Christmas Parade
Caroling, horse-drawn sleigh rides, tree-lighting, decorated floats and a visit from Santa Claus are features of the Christmas Parade in downtown Ponca.

December 14 Christmas Bird Count
Track feathered friends for the National Audubon Society's annual count. Free chili feed for participants at noon.

December 21 Winter Solstice Wine & Cheese Tasting
Sample tastes of the season, including flavored coffee and sparkling cider, and enjoy last-minute holiday shopping with special discounts at the park gift shop.

December 28 3K Snow Run, Yule Log Quest & National Championship Fruitcake Fling
Teams compete in challenges to locate the yule log in the park, as well as other outdoor activities including a snow run, bonfire and competition fruitcake toss.

January 1 First Day Hike
Ring in the New Year along park trails and end the trek with hot cider and cookies.

January 5 National Bird Day
See for yourself why the park was declared an "Important Bird Area" by the National Audubon Society, with guided avian adventures and educational programs for all ages.

February 2 Super Bowl Sunday Mini-Lodge Package
Football fans can enjoy watching the big game with family and friends in a beautiful mini-lodge setting with complimentary food and firewood.

February 14-18 Birds & Breakfast
Especially for love birds, this Valentine's Day lodging package coincides with the Great Backyard Bird Count and includes everything a couple needs to enjoy a cozy mini-lodge stay with complimentary breakfast on Saturday, special bird viewing opportunities, guidebooks and more.

Regularly scheduled park events include a sledding hill, groomed cross-country ski trails, winter crafts, bird, wildlife and tracks identification, critter corner, guided hikes and more.

Ponca State Park's Winterfest brings guests out for an evening hayrack ride through the park.

Bur Oak

A Hardy Native Tree

Text and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

Last spring I ventured to Bellevue to see Nebraska's largest bur oak. As I eyed the mighty giant, I was awestruck. At 70 feet its spreading crown draped the 1950s, wood-sided house and nearly the entire backyard in which it was rooted. Its stout trunk, a staggering 18 feet in circumference, rose and split into three main branches: each of these as thick as the trunks of many stately oaks.

The oak was old, at least 300 and possibly 400 years in age. Had Otoe Indian children played below the tree while their mothers gathered fallen acorns? Had members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition paused in its shade while exploring the area in July of 1804? Certainly, now-extinct passenger pigeons had once flocked among its branches as bison and elk grazed nearby.

The oak's short trunk and spreading lower branches testify that it had matured in open prairie, for in forests, sparse sunlight forces trees to grow rapidly skyward, forming tall and straight trunks. As a seedling in prairie, the oak faced fierce competition from dense, sod-forming grasses and frequent nipping by rabbits and deer. As a sapling, prairie fires likely scorched the oak, but it sprouted each time from protected, below ground buds. Taking advantage of a period with no fires and few browsers,

the young oak shot upward until its crown was beyond reach of browsers and damage by fire. The mature oak survived droughts from the 1700s and 1800s more prolonged than the Dust Bowl, and countless wind and ice storms. It also escaped the settlers' ax that felled many oaks, perhaps its wide trunk dissuaded ax-wielding homesteaders.

By any measure, the Bellevue bur oak is a magnificent specimen and exemplifies the characteristics attributed to this species – adaptable, sturdy, and above all, resilient.

The Ancient Oak-Hickory Forest

"The ancient oak-hickory forest was immense and spectacular," wrote Thomas Bonnicksen in his 2000 book *America's Ancient*

Forests. "This was not a forest of lofty trees with great trunks. Some trees were indeed large, but it was mostly a forest of relatively small trees in open woodlands or scattered through grasslands It was spacious and sunny because the trees stood apart, and it seemed as big as it was. Early travelers who saw this ancient oak-hickory forest for the first time stood breathless at the scene. Not only because it



looked like an artist's rendition of the perfect landscape, but also because of the animals that teemed within it and gave it life."

At the time of Euroamerican settlement, oak-hickory forest covered some 132 million acres of the Midwest forming a wide belt between the Great Plains grasslands to the west and more humid forests to the east. Far eastern Nebraska lay at its western frontier.

Nebraska's semi-arid climate is only marginal for tree growth. Far southeastern Nebraska averages 33 inches of precipitation a year, whereas areas of the Panhandle average only 16 inches. By comparison, eastward, areas of the oak-hickory forest average more

than 40 inches of annual precipitation. Our stream and river valleys, however, are sheltered from drying prairie winds, their north- and east-facing slopes partially shaded from the desiccating summer sun, and their waters raise the local humidity making a more favorable environment for tree growth than adjacent uplands.

Predictably, the valley of the Missouri River and its lower tributaries support Nebraska's most extensive growth of deciduous trees. In his 1965 book *Native Vegetation of Nebraska*, famed University of Nebraska plant ecologist J.E. Weaver split our state's oak-hickory forest into three plant community types. The Red Oak-Linden Community occupies protected slopes

and ravines along major streams in far eastern Nebraska, while the Black Oak-Shellbark Hickory Community is found on slightly drier sites south of Omaha. Although, a component in these two types, bur oak reaches dominance in Weaver's Bur Oak-Bitternut Hickory Community that inhabits drier slopes, hilltops and river terraces. The term woodland, rather than forest, may best describe this community for woodlands have fewer trees and a more open canopy than forests, thus more sunlight reaches the ground.

In southeastern Nebraska, chinkapin oak, hackberry, green ash and other tree species grow with bur oak and bitternut hickory in this community, though in less abundance. Westward

and northward, along our major rivers, the less drought-tolerant species, including bitternut hickory, begin to drop out. On the Niobrara River in Brown County, for example, basswood, black walnut and ironwood grow on low slopes in this type, but near Valentine, a mere 50 miles westward, only the drought hardy bur oak remains.

Occasionally, bur oak woodlands are found far from Nebraska's major stream valleys. In the Bohemian Alps of Butler, Saunders and Seward counties, for example, bur oaks grow on rolling hills, formerly amidst a sea of prairie, though now mostly bordered by cropland. Our westernmost bur oak stand is isolated in Hitchcock County's



At 70 feet in height and with a trunk circumference of 18 feet, this mighty Bellevue bur oak was crowned a Nebraska Champion Tree in 2005.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL FORSBERG



An old bur oak grows on a ridgetop at Indian Cave State Park. Its short trunk and spreading lower branches testify that it had matured in open prairie.

deep and rugged Bur Oak Canyon. Here 300 to 400 trees survive along a two-mile stretch of the dry canyon nearly 100 miles west of other bur oaks in the Republican River Valley. Possibly, these trees are relicts of a post-Ice Age period 11,000 to 9,000 years ago, when Nebraska's climate was cool and moist and bur oaks and other deciduous trees occupied much of our state, or they are more recent migrants to the area.

A Wide-ranging, Adaptable Species

From eastern Nebraska, bur oak ranges northwestward through the

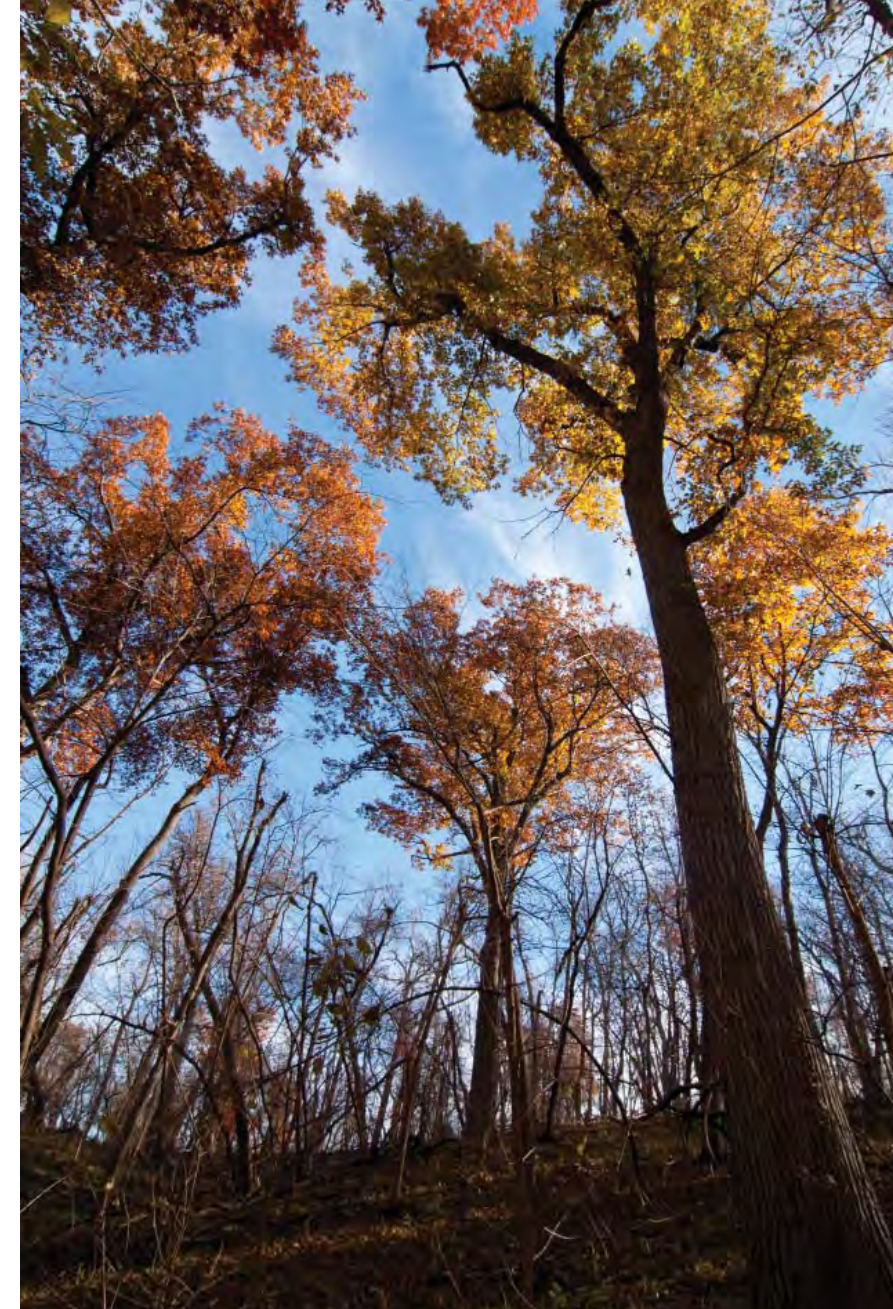
western Dakotas and into southeastern Saskatchewan, from there eastward to southern Quebec and then southwestward to the Texas Gulf Coast. Bur oak is the most common and widespread of our state's six native oaks. A malleable growth form allows it to grow in diverse habitats. On a moist, deep-soiled Missouri River terrace at Ponca State Park, for example, forest-grown, long-trunked bur oaks tower to near 80 feet in height. Whereas, westward, on sandy Niobrara River bluffs in Cherry County, short-trunked, gnarled bur oaks reach only 15 to 20 feet tall. On the Black Hills' low northern flank, shrub-like bur oaks eke out an

existence on dry, rocky prairie. By comparison, the species can reach 130 feet tall in eastern Midwest states.

Fast-growing, deep and extensive roots allow bur oak to survive periodic Plains drought. First year taproots can penetrate the soil nine inches before the first leaves unfold, and by fall reach a depth of five feet. In 1932, Weaver's graduate student Joseph Cramer excavated the entire root system of a 65-year old eastern Nebraska bur oak. The 37-foot tall oak's main taproot reached 14 feet in depth and it had 64 other main roots greater than two inches in diameter, some up to 15 feet in length. The roots' weight nearly equaled that of the tree's above ground growth.

Having evolved in fire-prone environments, bur oak is well adapted to Nebraska's prairie landscape where lightning and Indian-set fires were once common. The tree's outer bark, up to 1½ inches thick, protects the sensitive inner cambium from flames and heat. If top-killed by the heat of intense fires, small to medium-sized bur oaks can resprout from the trunk base or lateral roots. For example, in 2012 the raging wildfire in the central Niobrara River Valley scorched the bark off the trunks or otherwise top-killed numerous bur oaks, and many are now sprouting new growth from the base.

Bur oak seedlings and saplings also can resprout when top-killed,



A stand of black oak on the Missouri River bluffs in Richardson County. These forest trees have tall, straight trunks and few lower branches.

and if repeatedly burned, the saplings can develop grubs – large, burl-like growths at the soil surface. Given several years of fire-free growth, and using energy stored in grubs and roots, saplings can bolt to a height where safe from all but the most severe fires.

Bur oak's leathery leaves, after falling, remain dry, curl and become highly combustible. When conditions are dry, Nebraska's oak woods will burn any time after leaf fall to spring green-up. Oak leaf-carried fires are generally slow-moving, with flame heights of a foot or less. By comparison, the leaves of elms, ironwood and other fire-intolerant species are thin, easily dampened when

on the ground and far less combustible. Woodlands dominated by these species burn sporadically at best, except when extremely dry.

Without fire, fast-growing, fire-intolerant trees and shrubs invade the oak subcanopy and cast a dense shade. Oak acorns will germinate under the invaders, but their sunlight-requiring seedlings usually wither and die in a few years. Oak seedlings develop into saplings and then adults only in open woodlands or woodland edges. In a dense Iowa oak woodland where only two percent of full sunlight reached the woodland floor, for example, oaks did not regenerate. In adjacent thinned and burned stands, however, with 14

Bur Oak Acorns

The flowers of bur oak appear in May when its leaves are just beginning growth. The male flowers occur in slender, four- to five-inch long catkins that hang in loose clusters on the previous year's twigs. The small and inconspicuous female flowers are in groups of one to four on young shoots. The acorns ripen in the fall of their first year (red and black oak acorns ripen in their second year) and have a rough, frilled cap or cup, hence the name "bur," covering about a third of the acorn, though sometimes nearly the entire nut. Acorn size generally decreases northward and is usually larger on shade-grown trees than those in sun. Nebraska's largest bur oak acorns are less than one inch in diameter, while Texas acorns can reach a monstrous two inches across.

Oaks produce large acorn crops every few years. Known as masting, this process overwhelms seed predators and ensures survival of some nuts. White-tailed deer, turkeys, squirrels, mice, jays, woodpeckers and other wildlife relish bur oak's nutritious acorns. Fall caching by rodents and birds help disperse acorns and burial increases germination rates. Rodents can carry acorns up to 500 feet from source trees, while blue jays can airlift small acorns up to 2½ miles from parent trees.

Bur oak acorns have little or no dormancy and most germinate soon after falling in September and early October. This first fall, they initiate only taproot growth.



percent full sunlight, oaks regenerated, and grasses, sedges and wildflowers flourished. In dense-shaded woods, younger oaks are not replacing older oaks when they die.

Humans and Bur Oak

Midwestern Indian tribes burned oak woodlands for many reasons: to promote a lush growth of grasses and wildflowers that sustained game, to maintain their openness for ease of travel and hunting, and to keep fire-intolerant trees at bay as maintaining oak dominance ensured abundant acorn crops, a vital food. Euroamerican settlers, the first arriving in eastern Nebraska in the mid-1800s, wisely continued to burn oak woods. They set fire to the woods less frequently, but for many of the same reasons as the Native Americans. By the mid-1900s, however, wildland fire had unfortunately attained a negative image, and burning of our oak woods all but ceased. Initially, bur oak responded positively to reduced fire, saplings quickly developed into trees and oaks spread into adjacent prairie. Lack of fire, though, eventually became detrimental to oak woodlands as fire-intolerant and shade-loving trees invaded.

For settlers, forests and woodlands provided scarce lumber, fenceposts and fuel to heat their homes and for cooking. Of the bur oaks first felled were the bottomland stands on rich, farmable soils and with long-trunked trees that produced prime lumber. As the rate of settlement increased in the late-1800s, so too did the demand for farmland, lumber and fuel. Eventually, the only trees to escape the ax were those on steep or otherwise inaccessible sites.

Exemplifying the extent of early logging, an Iowa survey found that only about 300 white oaks on public lands predated 1850. In Nebraska, commercial harvesting of oak stands continued into the mid-1900s; however, harvesting has recently decreased as the lumber value of and demand for our trees has declined.

Some oak stands have recovered from logging as many trees resprouted after cutting and more sunlight in cut stands promoted oak regeneration.

Aerial photographs from the 1930s and 1940s of Indian Cave State Park, for example, show areas of clear cut oak timber, some of which were being farmed. These fields, later abandoned, have reverted, in part, to oak woodlands.

Domestic livestock have at sometime grazed most of our oak woodlands. The free-ranging cattle of early settlers probably had little effect on woodland flora, as their grazing somewhat mimicked that of native ungulates. But the hogs of these settlers did damage young trees and other vegetation while rooting for acorns, roots and other foods.

With the introduction of barbed wire in the late-1800s, however, fenced herds did overgraze bur oak woodlands. In recent decades, though livestock grazing of oak stands has decreased, high deer populations have resulted in over-browsing.

In her 2008 book *The Emerald Horizon – The History of Nature in Iowa*, Cornelia F. Mutel wrote "Where land [woodlands] is heavily overgrazed, soil compaction, erosion, and reduced organic matter and fertility cause injury to trees. ...With the animals' browsing and trampling, tree seedlings decrease in number, and eventually tree reproduction ceases.

Native wildlife vanishes. The more discriminating wildflowers disappear or decline in abundance."

Many of Nebraska's oak woodland-dependent plant species, including Texas sedge, yellow lady's-slipper orchid and Turk's cap lily, are now uncommon or rare. The Turk's cap survives only as vegetative clones that never flower or set seed in the overly shaded woods. Several wildlife species that require open oak woodlands, including the timber rattlesnake, southern flying squirrel and wood thrush, are also in decline.

Recently, a few Nebraska landowners and conservation groups have begun restoring bur oak woodlands. They are controlling exotic plants, such as garlic mustard and amur honeysuckle, thinning invading fire-intolerant trees, and perhaps, most importantly, setting prescribed fires in



Nebraska Champion Tree Program

I have always been captivated by really big trees. Whether this be the neighbor's stout willow I climbed as a child; the giant, creek bank cottonwood on my aunt and uncle's farm under which I hunted squirrels as a teenager; and now, the old-growth oak and black walnut stands at Indian Cave State Park through which we run prescribed fires on sunny November days.

Other Nebraskans seem equally fascinated by large trees as evidenced by the popularity of the Nebraska Champion Tree Program. Administered by the Nebraska Forest Service, the program's mission is to promote public awareness of Nebraska's forest and tree resources by searching for and recognizing our state's largest trees. More than 80 trees, including native and non-native species, have been crowned champions. Examples include a massive 82-foot tall (16.7-foot trunk circumference) black oak growing in woods near Barada in Richardson County and a 100-foot tall (22.5 foot trunk circumference) silver maple (photo right) located in Beatrice's Chautauqua Park.

Nebraska's largest known tree was an eastern cottonwood growing southeast of Seward. This one time state and national champion cottonwood measured a resounding 36.7 feet in circumference, 85 feet in height, and with an average crown spread of 107 feet. Unfortunately, the old timer died in 2007 and its top national spot was taken by a Kansas cottonwood.

The program uses rules established by the national American Forests' Big Tree Program. Champion trees are determined on a point system. One point is awarded for every inch of trunk circumference, one point for each foot of height and a quarter point for each foot of average crown spread. Directions on how to measure and nominate a tree, and a list of Nebraska's champion trees, are located on the Nebraska Forest Service website at Nfs.unl.edu.

NEBRASKAland Magazine will honor selected Nebraska champion trees in an upcoming series of articles covering the history of the tree and natural history of its species.



PHOTO BY JON MORGENSEN

Visit the Nebraska Forest Service for more Champion Tree information.



A prescribed fire in oak woodlands at Indian Cave State Park burns through the night. Fire thins small trees and shrubs and promotes oak regeneration.

the fire-starved woods. Among these are the Game and Park Commission's Ponca and Indian Cave state parks, both located on the Missouri River bluffs.

Bur oak woodlands without

committed long-term management, however, will continue to decline. As Native Americans once helped sustain oak woods through burning, human actions again are needed if bur oaks are to endure. ■

Novices and Experts... of Winter Crappie Fishing

Text and photos
by Jeff Kurrus

Most hobbies can become as complicated as you want to make them. Winter crappie fishing is no different. While it is one species that ice fishing novices can successfully target, it is the same species that can become nearly impossible to catch by anyone but the most experienced angler. Whichever end of the spectrum you find yourself, here are a few tips to help you pull a stringer of slabs from under hard water.

Catching crappies through the ice can be both easy and a challenge, offering both novices and experts plenty of practice.

Novices

The first step is to find underwater structure, especially trees. In a study at Tennessee's 57,920 acre Lake Barkley, researchers revealed that each acre of underwater structure averaged 1,530 crappies while each area without structure contained only 319 crappies. Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Fisheries Biologist Daryl Bauer agrees: "Crappies love woody cover, any time of year. On any body of water, that is always a good place to start."

If you fished a lake during the summer, you'll know where the flooded trees or brush piles can be found. If you didn't make notes or are on new water, don't fret. On some lakes, especially new ones, the tops of flooded trees poke through the ice for all to see. On others with good, clear ice you can look down and see them for yourself. Drill holes above or next to the structure and fish. Also, don't limit yourself to submerged timber: rock faces of dams, weed lines and the edges of creek channels are also good places to find crappies.

Tackle is simple. Start with a spinning reel and 4-pound test line. If you want to be active, tie a 1/16-ounce or smaller jig on your line. If you want to relax, tie on a No. 8 hook, split shot and slip bobber. If the regulations allow them, a live minnow works best for crappies. If they don't, artificial minnows by Gulp, wax worms or dead minnows will do. Crappies sometimes rise up and lift your bait rather than tug on your line. A pencil-shaped float on your bobber rig or a spring bobber on your jigging pole will help detect these bites.

Because crappies are a schooling fish, pay attention to how deep the fish are. If you find crappies and don't like their size, jig deeper as bigger fish are often just below the smaller ones.

Overall, the bites may be subtle, but the fight is not, making crappie a great starting point for anyone new to ice fishing.

Experts

One of the first aspects separating ice crappie novices from experts is knowing what a subtle bite feels like. While this may be difficult for many, it all starts in one place – knowing where the fish are. Some of the best ice anglers around know that they often have to drill a lot of holes to find fish, just like you often have to pull anchor and move when fishing open



A flasher is a sonar system that provides depth information and reveals the presence of fish or underwater structure.



Ice angler Marcus Dryak with a crappie caught at Merritt Reservoir in Cherry County.

water. If there have been fish there before, there will be again so experienced ice anglers will return later.

Second, have GPS coordinates on every piece of structure that holds fish, and know specifically what the depth of that structure is. Then, turn on your flasher, a sonar system that provides depth information and reveals the presence of fish or underwater structure, and see what depths fish are schooling. If you're looking for big crappies, you'll have to do your research to get on a lake that has potential for producing slabs. Once on this lake, look for isolated cover next to deep water, because these places are often too small to hold the masses of smaller crappies but can be occupied by a few large crappies, and are often overlooked by other anglers.

When selecting a lure, use a jig color just slightly lighter than the water color, and as winter progresses and the water clarity increases, move to smaller jigs. Fish plastic jigs for a more subtle approach and feather jigs for more lively moment. A minnow will also provide increased movement.

Then, when all else fails, use these same strategies at night.

Becoming an expert is not an overnight endeavor. But by paying attention to every single catch, one will slowly transition from beginner to veteran so that every time you're on the ice, the fish are always biting. ■

The author would like to thank OutdoorU!, Daryl Bauer and Eric Fowler for their expertise with this story.

A White Background

By Jeff Kurrus and Eric Fowler

We often forget what it was like to be 10 years old watching snowflakes fall from the sky for the first time each year. Even before they hit the frozen ground, we're already calculating the extra time it's going to take to get to the office. Some of us have become snowbirds without ever flying south.

But while many are immediately begging for spring, others are basking in winter whites. We marvel at how blue the sky looks after a fresh fallen snow, and how every species of wildlife walking the fringes of our lives seemingly stand out for all to see.

Cross-country skiing, sledding, snowshoeing, ice fishing – these are the activities that require our atmosphere to freeze. But anything we do outside – cutting a new trail on a hike through fresh snow, following the dog through a snow-covered grassland in search of pheasants, or sitting in a tree stand over a deer trail – stands out in our minds when cast against a white background.

When the world turns white, spend a moment to be an adult, tackling the extra chores that snow inevitably adds to the to-do list. Then revert to your childhood and enjoy the season. Start by locating the sled that will carry you down the hill the fastest. Then try not to smile all the way down. Be a kid again. That should be your job right now.

Your real job? Take a snow day and worry about it tomorrow. ■



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

ABOVE: The toboggan run at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park in Cass County is a wintertime must for all ages. With a short, slower hill for less experienced sledders and a long, faster hill for adrenaline junkies, it's an all day snow activity once the ground turns white.



See a sledding video from the toboggan run at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park.

RIGHT: Shooting Canada geese with a shotgun or camera is more fun when doing so during a snowstorm.

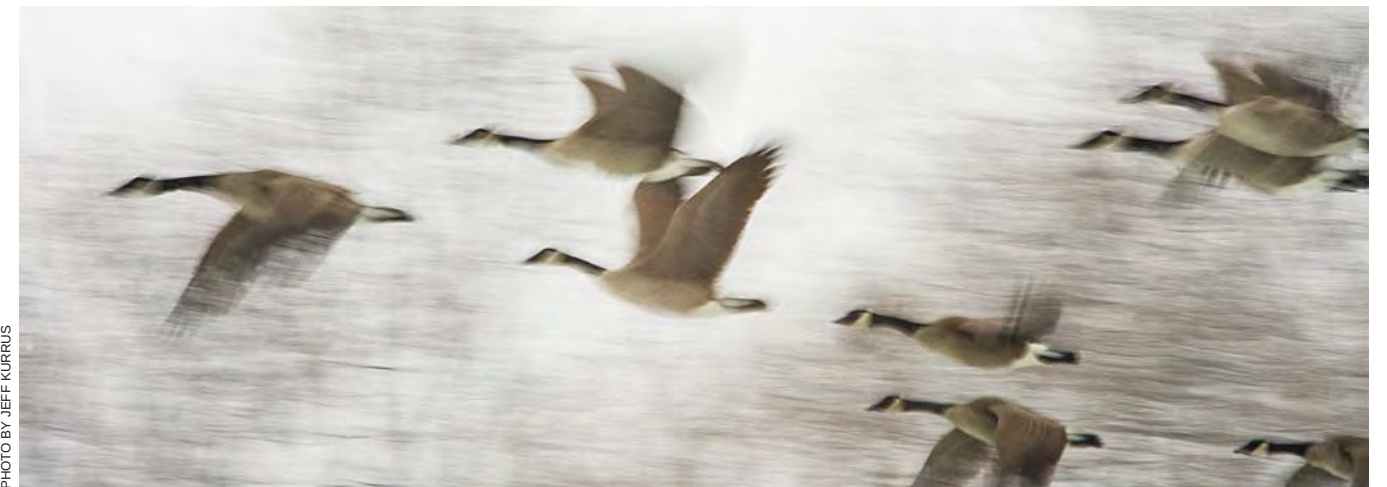


PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



PHOTO BY JEFF KUREUS



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

ABOVE LEFT: When all of a pheasant's colors are cast against a white background, you'll have dreams about that flush for months. Nothing in the outdoors is better than a late season rooster hunt, like this one in Platte County.

LEFT: Destined for the fry pan but first flash frozen on a bitterly cold January day, crappies and bluegills lay on the ice at Lake Wanahoo State Recreation Area near Wahoo.

RIGHT: Trail horses drink from a stock tank off Smiley Canyon Road at sunrise at Fort Robinson State Park near Crawford.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

ABOVE: The sun sets over a snow-covered Sandhills landscape at Ballard's Marsh Wildlife Management Area near Valentine.

LEFT: A youngster has Platte River State Park's Stone Creek to himself after a March snowstorm.

RIGHT: Wildlife are easier to view from the field or the road during a snowy winter, including this white-tailed deer chewing on a tree limb in Sarpy County.

 View additional winter activity photos by NEBRASKAland field staff.

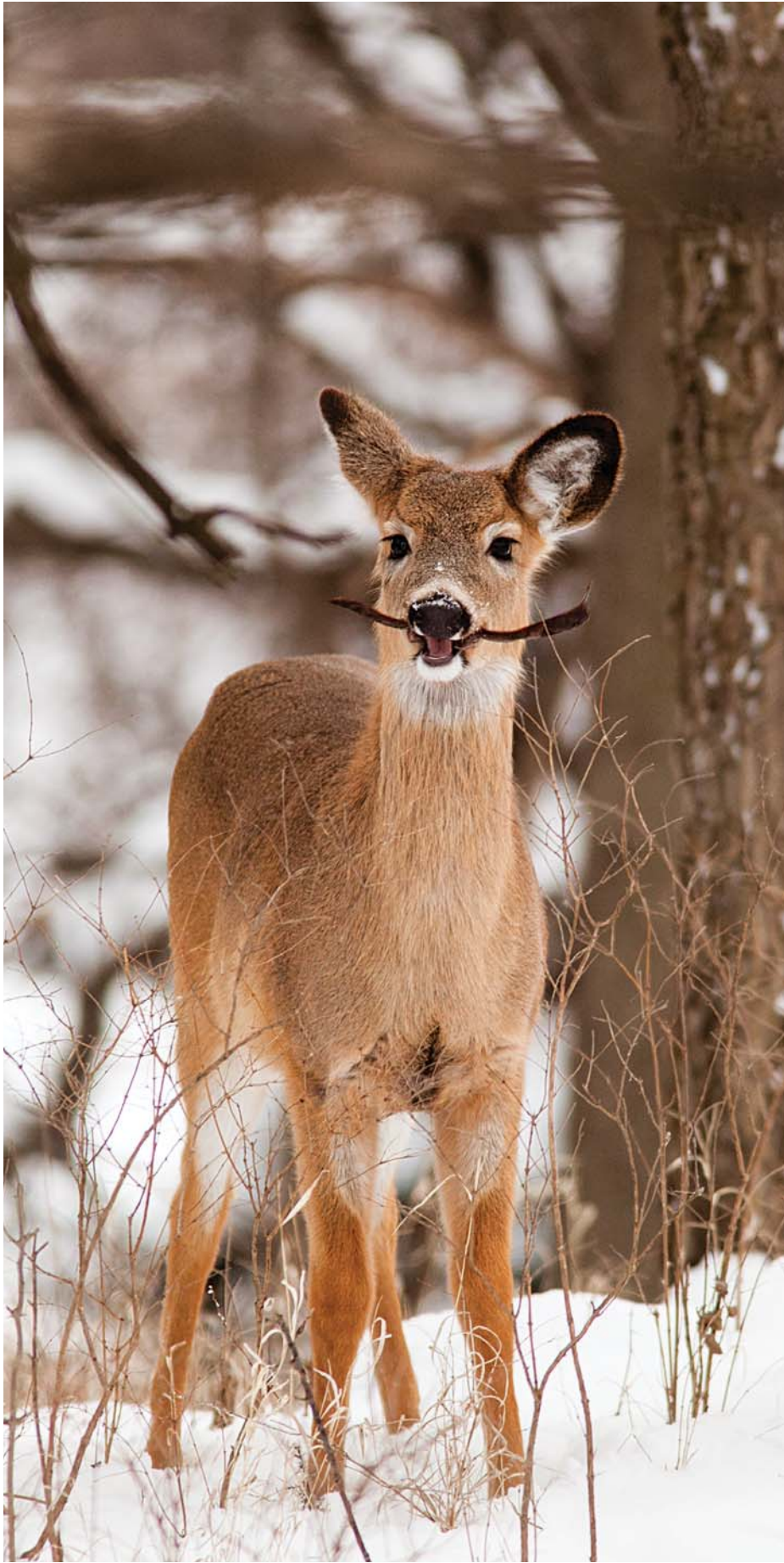


PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Hunting a Hunter

Hunting coyotes is a constant challenge, as Nebraskan Chris Pokorny's preparations reveal all too well.

Text and photos
by Jeff Kurrus

PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

Before Chris Pokorny and his hunting partners leave Omaha and head for the Sandhills each winter to hunt coyotes, a tradition that began in 1995, Pokorny sends a checklist to his friends. The list includes common sense items, such as food and cold weather gear.

But a closer look reveals that he is not planning an ordinary hunt, as electronic calls, air current testers and camouflage for all possible weather conditions are also required. What is not on the list, however, are Pokorny's rules that must be followed if accompanying him on his annual hunt. For Pokorny and his friends are chasing a predator who has been chased for hundreds of years. And the predator knows it.

Rule No. 1: Understand Your Quarry

Successful hunters and anglers would immediately agree with this statement, but the imperative becomes more difficult when hunting an animal that is seldom seen and always adapting. Coyotes are found in every state, save Hawaii, and their range is larger than that of any other North American animal.

They live in the grasslands, deserts and mountains. They can sleep day or night, and they have no specific food requirements. In a recent study, it was found that white-tailed deer comprised the greatest portion of coyote diets in the Black Hills, South Dakota, region, while small and medium-sized mammals composed more of the diet in prairie regions of the central United States. However, coyotes will change their diet, which can also include birds, invertebrates and vegetation throughout the year in response to changing prey availability.

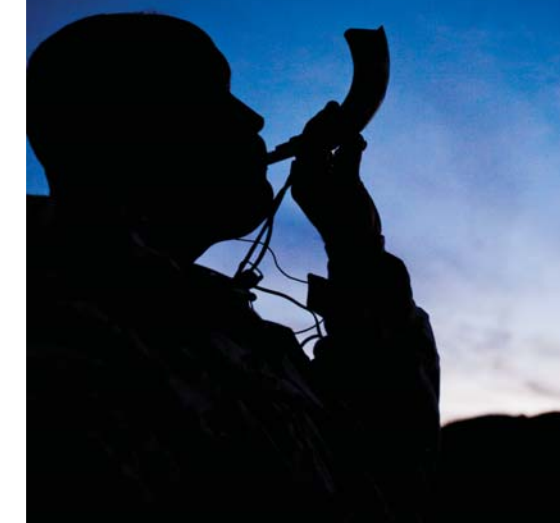
They will also alter their travel routes depending on humans. When trapping is intensified, said former coyote control officer for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Charles Cadieux, coyotes somehow let others know where traps are set.

In another example, an experiment by researcher Stuart Ellins separated

two sets of coyotes he was raising. He fed one group untainted sheep, and the other sheep laced with lithium. The group subjected to the lithium became very sick while the other group went about business as usual. When he combined the groups in the same cage, none of the coyotes would eat sheep meat, tainted or not. This led Ellins to conclude that some sort of communication was occurring between the animals, allowing them to avoid future harm.

However, even when coyote extermination practices have been enacted, they have produced curious results. For example, Kansas

Hear a classic coyote howl.



Chris Pokorny blows a cow horn howler call at nightfall hoping to hear a coyote howl back.

maintained a bounty for 93 years before concluding that the system had failed to reduce the number of coyotes. Michigan paid \$1.9 million in bounties from 1935 to 1970 and just as many coyotes were killed in the first year of the program as the last.

Coyotes will hybridize with dogs, gray wolves and red wolves, move young to and from multiple dens throughout their home range, and even change their killing strategies if met



In prone position, Pokorny waits for a coyote to appear. His movement is minimal as he eyes the snow-colored valleys in front of him.

with obstructions. When protective collars were added to the necks of sheep in one study, researchers reported coyotes moving to the side of their neck to kill.

They move well in snow, have been known to use highways, rivers, lakes and the ocean as a travel corridor up and down the coasts, and have been seen in large metropolitan areas throughout the continent. If larger carnivores, including gray wolves, dominate an area, they move. If there is an influx of food in an area, such as an increase in the number of mice, hares, or dead ungulates following a harsh winter, they have larger litters and their numbers increase. If food is sparse, they have smaller litters.

They are the ultimate survivor, as Pokorny knows, making hunting them a challenge and delight for he and his friends.

Rule No. 2: Know Your Wind and Terrain

Pokorny's hunting party in the winter of 2012 consisted of he, Roy Richters from Utica and Luke Niedbalski from Loup City. The more people that are included, the more the group has to be careful with their positioning to ensure they are not seen or smelled by coyotes. Not only must Pokorny make sure he approaches and sets up downwind from where he expects a coyote to appear, he must also pay attention to thermals, and the possibility they could carry his scent up or downhill from his position at different times of the day.

Therefore, Pokorny refuses to simply pull a hand full of grass from the ground and throw it into the air.

Instead, he carries milkweed seeds, which reveal the air currents for as far as the drifting seed can be seen. If the wind isn't right, it's a complete waste of time to even try and set up and a new plan is formed.

Rule No. 3: Create an Advantage

The large plastic container in the back of Pokorny's truck houses his array of camouflage hunting clothes, each set aligned with the climate he may face. With snow camo from head to toe, he's prepared to change to brown as a Sandhills warming trend in the middle of a hunt erases the white. Gloves, facemask ... the works – creating an advantage is of pivotal importance when hunting an animal that sees much better than the

one holding the high-powered rifle, especially in low light.

Pokorny will set up a quarter to half mile from where he expects the coyotes to be from a vantage point where he can view all avenues of approach, including downwind. Quite often a coyote will approach from the downwind side.

Once everyone is in position and uses their two-way radios to report their readiness back to the other group members, the electronic caller or mouth call sequence begins, both mimicking the sound made by injured small mammals, usually rabbits. The advantage of an electronic call is that the sound can be positioned away from the hunter and reduce the chance of a coyote seeing any hunter movement. With mouth calls, the sound can be varied, making the calling even more realistic.

“Impose fifty-dollar bounties, and [the coyote] population grows. Increase the number of hunters, and it has larger litters. Send in more sharpshooters, taking aim from helicopters, and the animal begins breeding in its first year of life, rather than waiting until it is close to two.”

– Catherine Reid, from *Coyote*



Pokorny shot this coyote with his .22-250 after using an electronic caller in Thomas County.



Before moving to their next set, Luke Niedbalski (left) from Loup City, Roy Richters from Utica and Pokorny strategize after their first kill.

Rule No. 4: Be Prepared

Pokorny or someone else calls for at least 15 minutes and sometimes more than an hour, and the group has seen coyotes respond from more than a mile away. Lying prone or sitting against a small cedar tree, Pokorny holds his gun in ready position, bipod steadying it as he scans the scene in front of him, his eyes the only thing moving.

As the animal approaches within shooting range, the hunter will bark loudly to get the coyote to stop, then shoot. Weapon of choice for this group is the .22-250 in open country and a 12-gauge with No. 4 buckshot or

copper-coated BBs in heavy timber. Even after the shot, the group remains still. As long as his group uses slow, deliberate movements, then there’s always a chance of calling in a second animal.

Rule No. 5: Shhhhhh

Humans have a very distinct way of communicating – talking – and coyotes know it, for they’ve heard these voices, and witnessed the impending results, for a long time. Between the years of 1937 and 1981, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received an average

of 80,000 coyote scalps per year. In addition, coyote hunting contests in various states, including Nebraska, brought the estimated number of coyote deaths to 1,000 each day.

So, when his vehicle tops a hill on the way to the next hunting location, Pokorny’s lights are extinguished as they slowly drive to a stopping point. From there, Pokorny and his group communicate with a series of hand signals, lip reading and two-way radio whispers. They will not be “made” before they walk to a hunting spot.

And even if they have a good year hunting coyotes, even if they discover something this season that they can use to their advantage the next year, the

coyote will always be one step ahead. As J. Knox Jones Jr. wrote in *Mammals of Nebraska*, “The methods to kill coyotes have been varied and have met with varying success, but despite all efforts the species persists.”

Which is all the more reason for Pokorny and his friends to hunt this year – because they never really know what to expect each time they oh-so-quietly exit their vehicles. ■

Read Chris Helzer’s “The Value of Predators” in the next issue of NEBRASKAland Magazine.

 View an additional photo gallery of images from this hunt.

Coyote (*Canis latrans*) Fact Box

- Size:** Average weight for males is 20 to 35 pounds, while females is 15 to 30 pounds.
- Coat:** Color varies. From gray to reddish brown. Melanistic coyotes are rare.
- Life Expectancy:** In the wild, up to 14 years.
- Range:** Entire continental United States, including Alaska, and throughout many areas of Canada. *National Geographic* has reported that populations could be at an all-time high.
- Reproduction:** Gestation lasts approximately 63 days. Average litter size is 6, but will vary depending on population density and food availability the previous winter.
- Feeding Habits:** Opportunistic, generalist predators. Consumes fruit and insects to large ungulates and livestock.
- Nebraska status:** Southeastern population recovering after mange outbreak. Sporadic mange still witnessed across state.



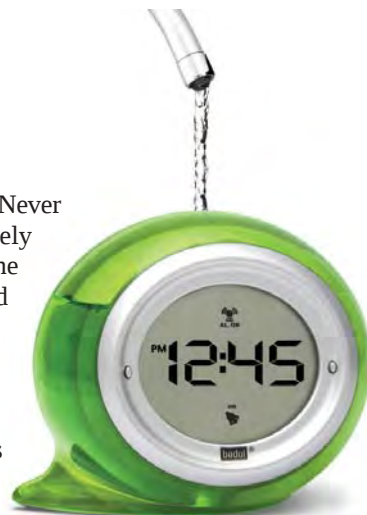
Christmas Gift Ideas for Kids

These items probably aren't on their Christmas lists, but they should be.

By Jeff Kurrus

If you're tired of buying toys for your kids that will be replaced by more toys in a month, consider a few of these nature-related options sure to start a learning opportunity as well.

Start with the **Bedol Water Clock**. Never needing batteries or electricity and rarely needing water once you fill it up, the clock's makers boast about its reduced carbon footprint and conservation of energy. These are subjects to talk to your family about, possibly even beginning an introduction to reducing your own footprint in other ways. Prices start around \$20. Visit Bedol.com



While it may not seem like a logical gift for a youngster, pick up an **Adventure Medical Kit** and peruse its contents with your budding outdoor enthusiast. With clearly labeled pockets and instructions on how to treat various injuries, these kits become not only a practical addition to your nature adventures but a teaching tool about safety for your children. The kits range in price from \$26.00 to \$125.00 and are available at Bass Pro Shops, Cabela's, Dick's Sporting Goods, Scheels and at AdventureMedicalKits.com.



For your next purchase, think a little bit about yourself, but not too much. **Fisherman Eyewear** has the ideal frames for your outdoor lifestyle. Light and polarized, these frames come in 29 styles and 3 lens shade options, ranging from \$15 to \$40 and available at FishermanEyewear.com. The price will help you during this holiday season, but can also start a conversation about eye protection with little people who may like to spend even more time outside than you do.



The holidays would not be the holidays for kids if a game wasn't unwrapped. Make sure when you do it is **Snipe Hunt**, an indoor/outdoor hide and seek game from the folks at EducationOutdoor.net priced around \$25. Their concept is simple: you hide the battery-operated snipe and turn your little one loose to find it. After 2½ minutes, the snipe will start to chirp. After 5 minutes, its eyes start to blink. But do be prepared for one thing: your child won't be the only one finding the snipe. They'll want to see if you can find it too.

When they're finished with these gifts, top the morning off by giving a gift that may not seem like much now, but they'll thank you later for it – a **NEBRASKAland Recycled Journal Book**. With 100 sheets of lined pages, record your outdoor memories together for one of the least expensive gifts you'll give all year – \$7. ■



from NEBRASKAland's Trail Tales magazine for kids

junior journal

interesting notes for readers of all ages

by Lindsay Rogers and Donna Schimonitz

FREE MEAL! Nebraska's Scavengers

by Lindsay Rogers, Wildlife Education Specialist, NGPC

What's for dinner, you ask? For many animals the answer is not pepperoni pizza or macaroni and cheese. Instead they prefer to eat dead deer, rotting rodents or putrid 'possums. These animals – known as scavengers – like to eat dead animals.

Why would an animal want to eat a dead, rotting animal? Well, it's easy. For predators, catching a live animal is hard work. It is much easier to eat something that is already dead. A predator such as a red fox will use a lot of energy walking around looking for a mouse and even more running to catch the mouse. And, because the mouse is so small, it does not provide much energy. So, a fox must continually search for food. When an animal eats a dead animal they find, rather than one that they had to catch, they save a lot of energy.

There are several species in Nebraska that are considered scavengers. Some only eat dead animals they have found – they never hunt. A good example of this is the turkey vulture. Others animals prefer to eat fresh prey they hunted down themselves, but if they haven't caught a fresh meal, they will scavenge a dead animal. A coyote is a good example of this.

Let's take a few minutes to think about the important role scavengers play in the ecosystem. People often believe most animals are killed by predators, but the truth is that most animals die from natural causes. When this happens, scavengers "clean up" the environment by eating these animals. If we did not have scavengers, the dead animals would build up. 🐾

We're Hungry!

Match the bird to its preferred food source: **fish, dead animal, water plants, flower, seeds.**



Turkey Vulture



(Ruby-throated) Hummingbird



Cardinal



Bald Eagle



(Wood) Duck

NATURE CALENDAR

- **Red Foxes breeding:** December through early January
- **Look for evidence of animals feeding on twigs and saplings:** December through February
- **Birds are active looking for food:** all winter long
- **Look for tracks in the snow or dry, dusty soil:** all winter long
- **Look for Bald Eagles along open water:** early December throughout the winter
- **Squirrels gather in nests to conserve energy:** January through February



Red Fox photo by Thinkstock

ANSWERS: Turkey Vulture – dead animal, Hummingbird – flower, Cardinal – seeds, Bald Eagle – fish, Wood Duck – water plants.

ATTRACTIONS/EVENTS

NEBRASKA SAFARI CLUB 2014 fundraiser-Aerospace Museum- Ashland, January 24 & 25, 2014. Guides, Outfitters, Seminars and 2 nights of auctions. Visit Scinebraska.com for more information.

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS/VIDEOS

NEBRASKA WILDFLOWERS. It's back. Out of print for 21 years, the second edition of Jon Farrar's *Field Guide to Wildflowers of Nebraska and the Great Plains* is now available. This 6-inch by 9½-inch paperback is a must have for anyone interested in learning more about wildflowers in Nebraska and the Great Plains region and makes a great gift. Richly illustrated with color photography and ink drawings. To order this publication or to learn about other great gift ideas, visit NebraskalandGifts.com or call (800) 742-0056.

EXPLORE NEBRASKA art, history, culture and the great outdoors with a subscription to Nebraska Life Magazine. One year (six issues) for \$24 or two years (12 issues) just \$44.00. Phone (800) 777-6159 or write us at 206 W Norfolk Ave, Norfolk NE 68702-0819. or visit Nebraskalife.com. Makes a great gift.

NEBRASKA SAFARI CLUB wild game cook book. Culinary Chef Daryl put together 136 "critter recipes" of all fields 308-324-5186 to purchase \$15.00 plus shipping.

DOGS

DUCKDAWG RETRIEVERS - Raising exceptional yellow and black Labradors. 30 month written health guarantee. Duckdawg.com North Platte, NE (308) 534-3659.

PREMIER GUNDOGS TRAINING KENNEL, Inc. Nebraska state licensed gundog training kennel specializing in training programs for waterfowl and upland hunting retrievers, spaniels, pointing Labradors and all gundog pointing breeds. Dale-Kris Taylor (402) 787-2048, Premiargundogs.com.

FLATLANDER KENNELS INC, Scottsbluff, Nebraska. This region's premier full-time retriever training facility

for the serious hunter or AKC and HRC hunt tester. Trainer of NE, CO, KS and SD's first and only GRHRCH's! Training, puppies and stud dogs available for all levels of hunt tests and gun dogs. Chris Jobman (308) 249-0707, FlatlanderKennels.com.

FISH/FISHING

FISH FOR SALE. Catfish, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, perch, crappie, bluegill, walleye, rainbow trout, grass carp, minnows. Pleasant Valley Fish Farm, 72645 U.S. Highway 83, McCook, NE 69001. (308) 345-6599.

NEBRASKA LAKE MANAGEMENT. Biological lake surveys, fish stocking, rough fish control, lake aeration, algae control, aquatic weed control. Rob Hofpar, Aquatic Biologist, licensed, insured and qualified. (402) 784-6005 Valparaiso - (888) 850-2460 Nelakes.net.

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Classified Rates: 85¢ per word, minimum \$15. Closing: First business day six weeks before issue date. Classified ads are accepted on a first-come, first-served, space-available basis. Classified Ads, NEBRASKAland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Telephone (402) 471-5473. Fax: (402) 471-1984. E-mail: ngpc.ads@nebraska.gov.

The Versatile Pheasant

Panko and Herb Crusted Pheasant with Sorrel Cream Sauce

By Jenny Nguyen

Compared to other game species, pheasant is less intimidating to eat, especially for those new to eating wild game. It has its own flavor and texture of course, but for the most part, it tastes a lot like chicken. Its mild, light meat makes it versatile, allowing it to take on all sorts of flavors as well as being able to slip in and out of many different kinds of cuisines. If you can make something with chicken, chances are, you can probably make it with pheasant – provided that you adjust your cooking techniques accordingly to compensate for its leanness. If you don't plan on marinating or brining your pheasant breasts, or if you're like most hunters who breast them out without the skin, dredging them in Panko bread crumbs and frying is one way to keep them moist.

For this recipe, herbs like rosemary and thyme that classically pair well with chicken are also perfect for pheasant. Sorrel, a tangy herb used extensively in Europe – most notably France – is incorporated into a creamy sauce that adds a lemony brightness to this dish. Sorrel is not often seen in grocery stores, but a quick peep on Google will tell you that it's extremely easy to grow in any garden. This sorrel cream sauce is not only great with poultry, but also fish. It can make a fantastic alternative to tartar sauce.

Servings: 4

Prep Time: 20 minutes

Cooking Time: 15-20 minutes

Ingredients:

- 4 pheasant breasts
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- ¼ cup of all-purpose flour
- 1 cup of Panko bread crumbs
- leaves from 5 sprigs of fresh thyme
- ½ teaspoon of fresh rosemary, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon of kosher salt, plus more to taste
- vegetable oil and/or butter for frying

Sauce:

- 2 cups of sorrel leaves, packed
- ½ tablespoon of butter
- 1 large shallot, peeled and finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon of all-purpose flour
- ½ cup of heavy cream
- kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

1. To make the sauce, wash sorrel thoroughly. Remove the center ribs and stems, then give the leaves a rough chop and set aside. Next, melt ½ tablespoon of butter in a saucepan over medium-low heat. Add shallot and sauté until softened, about 2-3 minutes. Then add sorrel leaves and a pinch of salt. Stir often until leaves are wilted and tender, 5-10 minutes.



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

2. Next, whisk in ½ teaspoon of all-purpose flour to the wilted sorrel. Cook this mixture, which will turn into a paste, for 2 minutes and stirring often. Then whisk in ½ cup of heavy cream and bring the sauce to a simmer. Do not boil. Simmer to desired consistency then take off heat. Season with salt and pepper to taste and set aside, covered.

3. Lay 1 pheasant breast between two sheets of plastic wrap. With a mallet, flatten pheasant breasts until about ¼-½ inch thick and repeat with the others. Season all sides with salt and pepper to taste and set aside.

4. In a dish or bowl, combine Panko bread crumbs, thyme, rosemary and 1 teaspoon of salt. Then dredge flattened breasts in this order: flour, egg and Panko. Next, deep fry or pan fry coated pheasant breasts until thoroughly cooked and golden brown all over, about 2-3 minutes each side. I like to pan fry in a combination of both butter and vegetable oil.

5. Reheat sorrel cream sauce over low heat. Add more heavy cream to loosen sauce, if desired. Check seasonings. Spoon sauce over breasts or serve on the side. Serve immediately with your favorite side dishes. To reheat leftover pheasant, bake in a 400 degree Fahrenheit oven for 5-10 minutes. They will crisp right up again. ■



Read Jenny's blog "Midland Musings" to see other recipes from this NEBRASKAland regional editor.



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◀ Pictured in this 1973 photo are, from left to right, Carl Jacobs, Hank Matsamura, Dan Youngblade (my father) and Bill Chauncey. The photo was most likely taken by Paul Fee. All were from the Sioux City, Iowa or Newcastle, Nebraska area and hunted regularly in northeast Nebraska. This group had at least one and often two quail/pheasant hunting trips per season to the Grand Island (Hall County) area. In the mid-80s they hunted closer to Beatrice and Elk Creek (Johnson County). I was fortunate to join the group in the mid-80s after graduating from college as I had a good dog, was a decent safe shooter and knew how to play pitch!

In 2011, Dan Youngblade (my father) and Paul Fee, the last two living members of this group, and myself traveled to the Elk Creek/Tecumseh area for their 45th, my 24th, consecutive yearly hunt. In the last week of the 2012 season, Paul Fee and myself did exactly what my father wanted us to do – loaded the dogs and headed south to the Tecumseh area. We said hello to many friends, saw a few covey of quail (actually got a couple), and raised a glass or two in memory and honor of this group.

A special thanks goes out to all the Nebraska farmers and landowners who have provided us with such great hunts and memories. In many cases we now talk with sons and daughters of those whose relationships were created years ago by this group. The quail and pheasant numbers have not been as strong in recent years but this trip is more about going to "southern" Nebraska, the beauty of working your dogs and the friendship created by the experience. I am already looking forward to our trip next year.

– Dan Youngblade II, Sioux City, Iowa

▼ This is a picture of my grandfather E.R. (Sam) Wright and his hunting partner, J.F. O'Halloran, in 1921. This picture appeared in Outdoor Life Magazine in the February 1921 issue. The hunt took place on Hackberry Lake – but on the back of the photo it is labeled "Hackberry Rice beds." I am unfamiliar with the term "rice beds."

– Richard Swett, Kearney, Nebraska



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.

Meat of the Matter

A plea for sausage that can't be ignored.

By Roger Welsch

When I was a child my parents called me Fleischfresser ("meat-eater," but in the way that wolves eat meat!) when they weren't calling me Rotznase ... which means, well, uh ... let's leave it at "runny nose." I mostly got over that nose problem but I am still a dedicated carnivore. In one of my books I did a partial inventory of meats I have eaten and it is enough to make St. Francis and PETA weep. The point is, I want to make it clear that I enjoy meat – of course, beef. I mean, good grief, this is NEBRASKA! But lest I offend anyone, please know that I also enjoy pork, poultry, fish, lamb, and ... well, whatever else you want to throw into the mix.

The operative word there is "mix." I would like to propose that our State meat be declared by popular acclaim to be... [drum roll, please]... SAUSAGE! You heard me right – sausage! Given a choice between a good sausage and yet another predictable steak or pork chop, I'll take sausage, the best and wurst of all options. Think about it: you can go into just about any Nebraska small town and in the local café or chophouse find yet another superb cut of beef or pork, turkey or chicken. It might be tender or it might be tough, done the way you like it or burned to a crisp. But it's still the same.

I realize there's something to be said for continuity. Linda and I make regular trips to the Boelus Gold Nugget for steaks or the Dannebrog Tavern for superb prime rib. It says something about this wonderful nation of ours that even a couple of plain old country folks can eat like royalty. But my grandparents came from the German colonies along the Volga River in Russia and there's no avoiding the fact that they were peasants. My parents were migrant sugar beet workers in their youth, and later advanced up the ladder to factory worker (for Dad) and maid and cook (Mom). But little Rotznase is thoroughly, admittedly, and quite proudly peasant. As my father used to say, "Roger, some people's forefathers came to this country on the Mayflower. Yours came on the Burlington."

And peasant = sausage. The folks up the castle ate the steaks and prime rib, the loins and roasts. Down on the farms where the animals grew, they ate what was leftover when the high-falutin' folks were done. And as often as not, those discards and table scraps were converted into another culinary delight – sausage. And delights they are. Unlike almost any other meat dish, sausages come in a variety that bedazzles even the most fertile imagination. There isn't room on this page to list the kinds of sausages I have delighted in – the usuals ... beef and pork, but also venison, duck blood, potato, wild boar, goose, muskrat and unidentifiables that shall remain unidentified. (Look up a recipe for Linda's people's specialty, Jaternice. I rest my case.) Sausages come flavored with peppers, anise, garlic, caraway, gunpowder, squirrel tail hair, etc., etc., etc., and I do mean et cetera. Go ahead and look at your usual menu for consistency, but for adventure and real lip-smackers, it's sausage!

In my traveling days I made a point when cruising the main drag of some even the smallest Nebraska town to look for the grocery store and head for the meat counter. Off the top of my head, I remember the meat market at the north end of the main street in Clarkson, Markey's in Gering, Cetak's in Ord, Lone Wolf sausage in Eustis ("Sausage Capitol of Nebraska!"), Karpisek's in Wilber, Werts market in St. Edward, on and on and on. I was never disappointed. Even our cities boast gourmet joys like Stoysich's in Omaha. It may take some looking because the sausages may be only a side offering in an Asian market or bodega, with products designed primary for a specific, small, and local community. That means it is the most interesting food they have ... but you have to be a special breed of outsider to go looking for it. (Don't forget to look for huge jars or vats of sinister liquids in which float pickled sausages that look for all the world like ... oh never mind.)

These days I don't get around much, however, but that doesn't mean I can't go to Maschka's sausage market just down the road in Ashton or my favorite, Twin Loups in St. Paul, not only for old favorites like bratwurst, polish wursts, Jaternice, liverwurst, or increasing great Mexican and Honduran sausages as these markets hire new Americans and wisely turn them loose to produce the wonderful sausages of their homelands.

Of course presentation is an important part of any fine repast. Any food worth the attention of the sophisticated diner deserves an appropriate elegance upon serving. No, not fine china or silver setting with finger bowls, for Pete's sake! For sausage the very best context is a campfire, mustard if you really want to get fancy, a tin cup of cheap beer, and some good friends, preferably also of peasant stock.

My friends, NOW you are eating!

Before you bother to write a letter of complaint, believe me, I KNOW the sausage in *your* town is the best, and how could I *dare* not mention it? Not only is there only so much room on this page, there is a limit to the room in my freezer, and a severe shortage of storage in my brain. I have almost certainly enjoyed sausage in your town too, and I hope to be back soon again. So please forgive me. My intention here is not to send people to St. Paul, or Eustis, or Stoysich's (although that sure would be a good idea if you're anywhere in the neighborhood!) but to recommend that everyone make a point of seeking out interesting sausages wherever they are in Nebraska. Most of all I would like to receive information of that rarest of all Nebraska sausages – one that isn't a savory delight. ■

Roger Welsch is an author, humorist, folklorist and sausage-eatin' peasant living in Dannebrog, Nebraska.





Just a Leaf

As *NEBRASKAland* photographers, it's an understatement to say that we shoot a lot of photos. Some find their way to print. Most don't. That's part of the reason I try to post photos to social media as I go along. Through that venue, at least my friends get to see them before they're filed away to collect "cyberdust" in a digital repository.

When I hastily posted the above photo with the caption, "Just a leaf," I received a Facebook reply from my friend Joyce Hardy, a college biology professor. Her comment:

"Not just a leaf! An amazingly crafted factory that functions very effectively for photosynthesis! Now that it is done, the plant is recapturing all nutrients possible. The lack of chlorophyll production allows these beautiful carotenoids to show through. They were there, but hidden by the green chlorophyll before. Great picture!"

My science-minded friend's comment served as a reminder that in matters of nature there's always much more to it than what meets the eye. Much more than just a leaf, indeed.

Justin Haag, Regional Editor, *NEBRASKAland* Magazine
October 18, 2013



NEBRASKAland

Gift Collection 2014



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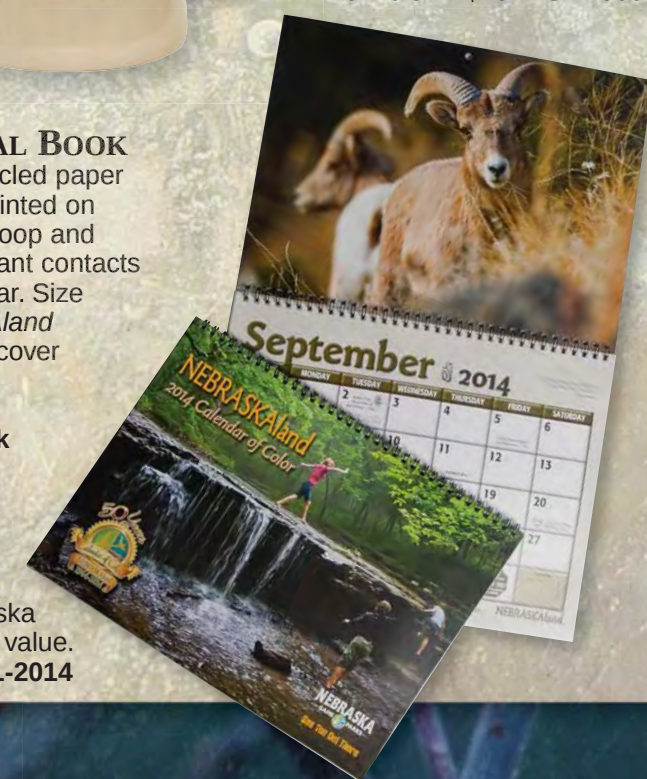
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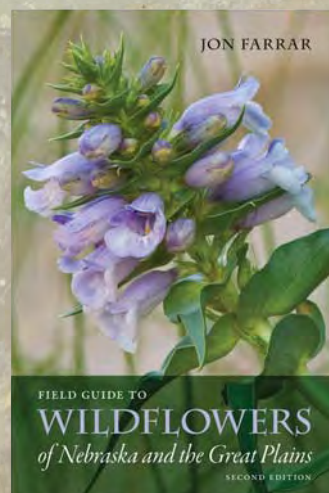


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