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NEBRASKAland

April 2011



As winter finally gives way to spring, waterfowl of all shapes and sizes begin their northern migration, occasionally stopping to rest and feed on their way to summer breeding grounds. These birds were taking advantage of open water at Memphis Lake State Recreation Area. Photo by Doug Carroll.

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NEBRASKAland

Volume 89, Number 3, April 2011

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While Interstate 80 was still being planned, Mel Steen saw an opportunity for a "chain of lakes." Thus Windmill State Recreation Area was born. PHOTOS AND TEXT BY JON FARRAR.

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Cover: To the novice, walleye fishing is often seen as a complicated passion. Yet last year the author learned that there's more than one way to catch a walleye. See story, page 22. Photo by Jeff Kurrus.

Opposite: A dominant tom struts on the crest of a hill along the western edge of E.T. Mahoney State Park in Cass County. Photo by Justin Reed.

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Whooper Siting

On opening day of pheasant season in 2010, just north of Tilden, Jack Verschuur and I saw what we considered quite an unusual sight. Three huge birds – the two largest were white and the smaller was a tannish colored juvenile. We were quite sure they were whooping cranes. Of course I didn't have my camera with me but fortunately the man that rents the land, Dave Negus of Tilden, did and was on the opposite end of the field when he took these pictures.

William Barr
Tilden, Nebraska



Baby Foxes

My wife spotted some baby foxes along our road by Ceresco. We turned around and went back home to get a camera, and got some good pictures. The foxes were romping around and were curious about us watching them. This was sometime in May. Thank you. Doug and Shawn Rudeen
Ceresco, Nebraska

But Where?

The “Do you know where this photograph was taken?” quiz on page 9 of the March 2011 issue brought back many memories for me. Having grown up in the Crawford area, I immediately knew where the photo was taken.

As a youth I hunted, fished and hiked as much of the Pine Ridge area around Crawford as I could. One of my favorite hikes was to the top of Saddle Rock Butte, which is in the background of your photo. My fondest memory was the fantastic view from the top of Saddle Rock looking west up the White River valley toward Fort Robinson, especially in the autumn with the beautiful fall colors on full display. Thanks for your great magazine.

Michael Hudson
Lake Havasu City, Arizona

NEBRASKAland Visitor Letters

We want to thank all 83 readers that sent e-mails and letters for last issue's visitor, a **treehopper** that was on page 50 (see page 13 for the winner, rules and this issue's hint).

Here are some of the many wonderful responses we received:

Hi, I found your bug on page 50 down in the right corner. We always called them leaf hoppers, don't know the “legal name.”
My late husband was an avid hunter and fisherman, we spent many a summers camping and fishing and many winters enjoying hunting.
Our favorite campgrounds were at Calamus by Burwell – sure do miss those days. We always made a trip out there around Christmas time to see all of the eagles and crows on the frozen lake.
Janelle Schachenmeyer
Waco, Nebraska

Your treehopper (order *Homoptera*; family *Membracidae*) is on the bottom right margin of page 50.

Loved the bone broth suggestion you had on page 12. I have made it occasionally, but have been reading it more lately and will have to save more bones of my deer harvest from now on. Need to just saw up the long bones especially and the ribs and freeze them for soup! I did deer heart soup this year and it was great! Keep up the good work,
Ron Macomber
Sioux City, Iowa

Found it! The visitor in the March issue of *Nebraskaland Magazine* is on the bottom of page 50 and is, I believe, a katydid.

Thank you for the article about the sandhill cranes! My husband and I talk about going to see them every year and never have. THIS is going to be the year and we have plans to take the trek south this year for a weekend road trip.

Thank you also for the great article about snow geese! Such amazing and interesting birds. Two years ago we were fortunate to witness the migration back south as they stopped on the Missouri River behind our home. The sky was so full of them it blacked out the satellite dish. Watching them circle the sky over the river before they landed was so amazing – just like watching a tornado in slow motion. Awesome sight!
Vicki Butler
Burbank, South Dakota

This afternoon, I barely had a chance to set down the stack of mail before my seven-year-old son, Alex, picked up the March issue of your magazine, opened the back cover and said “Dad, there's the cicada.” Upon further review, he decided that it is a Buffalo Treehopper on page 50.

Our family really enjoys the stories and photography in the magazine. This monthly challenge has really sparked my son's interest in identifying insects and many other things found in nature.

Thank you for helping interest in the outdoors to thrive.
Scott Carson
Omaha, Nebraska

This small, bright green insect is a treehopper, in the order Hemiptera, and is closely related to planthoppers and cicadas. This one is likely a Buffalo treehopper, one of the largest and more common treehoppers in North America. They get their common name because they can be found on trees and shrubs, and are known to jump or hop away from danger. They often have a prominent pronotum, sometimes shaped to look like a thorn or spur, to camouflage the inset from predators. These insects overwinter as an egg. Females insert eggs into plants with their ovipositor. They emerge as nymphs and may secrete a sweet substance called honeydew, which is collected by ants.



– Julie Van Meter,
State Entomologist,
Nebraska Department of Agriculture.

Send your comments to:
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P.O. Box 30370
Lincoln, NE 68503
or e-mail Doug.Carroll@Nebraska.gov
Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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www.OutdoorNebraska.org

Tiny Assassins

Chris Helzer

Not surprisingly, assassin bugs aren't exactly cute and cuddly little creatures. As their name suggests, they are lethal predators, catching prey by ambushing them or simply hunting them down. Assassin bugs use their sharp beak to pierce and inject small insects with paralyzing venom before sucking out and ingesting the liquefied remains.

Assassin bugs are part of the order of insects called *Hemiptera* or "true bugs." Other insects in the same order include stink bugs, boxelder bugs and aphids. True bugs are characterized by their long, sharp mouth parts that most use to puncture and siphon juices out of plants. A few, however, are predators (including assassin bugs) and have adapted these same mouth structures into deadly weapons.

One of the most common species of assassin bugs is *Zelus luridus* – a small green assassin bug about half an inch in length. As with all assassin bugs, both

the adults and the various nymph stages are predatory. The above photo shows a nymph that caught a fly in my backyard prairie garden and was busily sucking it dry while I photographed it. *Zelus* is commonly found on green vegetation, especially trees and shrubs, throughout Nebraska. They catch and eat many kinds of small insects, but particularly like flies. Special glands on their front legs produce a very sticky fluid that the assassin bug rubs on the hairs of those legs, helping them to grab and hold on to strong prey.

There are many kinds of assassin bugs, found all over the world. In the United Kingdom, researchers have discovered that at least one kind of assassin bug fools spiders by plucking their webs in a way that makes the spiders think they've captured prey. When the spider comes to investigate, the assassin bug kills and eats the spider!

Another kind of assassin bug are known as "kissing bugs" and actually feed on the blood of mammals, including humans. Found from southern North America through much of South America, these bugs pierce the skin of mammals and suck their blood. Their name comes from their tendency to bite humans on or around their lips. If that isn't disturbing enough, some species – mainly in South America – can carry a dangerous parasitic disease that can cause severe illness or death to people.

In Nebraska, assassin bugs are commonly found in gardens and many natural habitats, feeding on small insects rather than humans. If you pick them up some can give you a painful bite, but it's a defensive tactic rather than a bloodthirsty attack. Since assassin bugs prey upon many insect species we've designated as pests, they can probably be called "beneficial" insects. Regardless, they are worthy of admiration and interest because of their rugged good looks and killer abilities. If you see these small creatures in your yard, take a moment to admire (and maybe even thank) them.

But I wouldn't kiss them.

Upcoming Events

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

April 1

• **Ashfall Fossil Beds SHP – Royal**
Will conduct school and tour groups by special arrangement from April 1-October 20. For details and to make reservations, call the park at (402) 893-2000.

April 1-30

• **Paddlefish Archery Application Period – Statewide**
Permits remaining following the first draw will be sold on first-come, first-served basis beginning at 1 p.m. on June 1.

Contact: Bob Zegar
(402) 471-5455
bob.zegar@nebraska.gov

April 8

• **Becoming an Outdoors Woman Workshop – Ponca State Park, Ponca**
Learn a variety of outdoor skills through hands-on/one-on-one instruction. Registration is online at OutdoorNebraska.org.
Contact: Ponca State Park
(402) 755-2284
ngpc.ponca@nebraska.gov

April 9

• **Spring Turkey – Youth Shotgun Season – Statewide**
The youth shotgun turkey season starts April 9 and youth turkey permits only cost \$5. The regular shotgun turkey season begins the following Saturday, on April 16. Purchase permits at OutdoorNebraska.org.
Contact: Jeff Lusk
(402) 471-1756
jeff.lusk@nebraska.gov

April 18

• **Bighorn Sheep Lottery Application Period – Statewide**
Lottery permit applications are accepted from Nebraska residents only. All applications must be submitted with a nonrefundable \$25 application fee.
Applications may be submitted at OutdoorNebraska.org.
Contact: Bob Zegar
(402) 471-5455
bob.zegar@nebraska.gov

Nebland Flashbacks



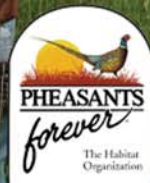
Can you identify this young man from the November 1967 issue of *NEBRASKALAND* Magazine? Seen here in a story on how to make jerky, he was working in the Information and Education Division of the agency. He has worked for the Commission for 43 years – 23 in his current position – and has been honored by serving as President of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in 2008-2009.

NEBRASKA Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever LANDOWNER HABITAT TOURS

Date and Time	Tour Topic	Date and Time
March 30, 2011	CRP Mid Contract Management	9:30 am to 3:00 pm - Ogallala - Lake McConaughy Visitor Center
April 5, 2011	Conducting Mid Contract Management on CRP for wildlife	9:00 am to 4:00 pm - McCook - Chief Motel
May 21, 2011	Wildflower Walk	11:00 am MST - Gering - Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area
May 21, 2011	Pine and Cedar Tree Thinning	1:00 pm MST - Gering - Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area
June 2, 2011	Wetland Management Workshop	1:00 pm to 4:00 pm - Merna - Merna Community Center
June 4, 2011	Youth Habitat Tour of the Loess Canyons	8:00 am to 5:00 pm - North Platte - Nebraska Game & Parks Commission
June 8, 2011	Pheasant Management Workshop	9:30 am to 3:00 pm - Trenton - USDA Office
June 9, 2011	Sandhills Prairie & Wet Meadow Management & Plant ID Tour	8:30 am to 4:00 pm - Bartlett - Sandhill Seasons Guest Ranch & Hunts
National Pollinator Week Events		
June 21, 2011	Pollinator Habitat and Plant ID Tour	9:00 am to 3:00 pm - St. Paul - The Gathering Place
June 22, 2011	Pheasant & Quail Management	10:00 am to 3:00 pm - Broken Bow - One Box Gun Club
June 23, 2011	Prescribed Burning and Diverse Seeding Results	1:00 pm to 5:00 pm MST - Scottsbluff - North Platte NRD
June 23, 2011	Making Wildlife Cost-share and Incentive Programs work for You	1:00 pm to 5:00 pm - Syracuse - 1st National Bank & Trust
June 24, 2011	Improving Habitat for Pheasants and Quail	5:00 pm to 9:00 pm - Grand Island - Heartland Public Shooting Park
July 7, 2011	Prescribed Fire & Managing for Wildlife in the Niobrara Valley	8:30 am to 4:00 pm - Stuart
July 13, 2011	Dakota County Twilight Habitat Tour	5:30 pm to 8:30 pm - Dakota County
July 14, 2011	Quail Management Workshop	9:00 am to 3:00 pm - Sargent - Myrtle Hall WMA
July 29, 2011	Restoring an Oak Savanna	9:30 am to 3:00 pm - Schuyler - USDA Office
August 4, 2011	Management of CRP Reenrollments and Mid Contract Management	9:00 am to 3:00 pm - Franklin - Franklin County Fairgrounds
August 5, 2011	Pheasant and Quail Management	9:30 am to 3:00 pm - Wahoo - USDA Office
August 9, 2011	Pheasant Management Workshop	9:30 am to 3:00 pm - Branched Oak - Dog Trial Area on Branched Oak WMA
August 18, 2011	4th Annual Rangeland Management Workshop	9:00 am to 3:00 pm - Oconto - Pressey WMA
August 18, 2011	Prescribed Burning Results on Grasslands	9:00 am to 3:00 pm - Red Cloud - Trailblazer RC&D

Landowner Tours for Better Habitat

WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS FROM ACROSS THE STATE WILL BE HOSTING A SERIES OF HABITAT TOURS THIS YEAR. TOURS ARE DESIGNED TO DEMONSTRATE HABITAT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES, AVAILABLE CONSERVATION PROGRAMS AND HOW TO CREATE THESE RESULTS ON YOUR OWN PROJECTS.



FOR DETAILS AND TO REGISTER: WWW.NEBRASKAPF.COM

A Look Back - April 1986

Jeff Kurrus

It's only a matter of time before I wear down longtime Nebraska humorist Roger Welsh into writing for *NEBRASKAland* again. Yet until that day comes, I'll have to rely on his past stories in our publication, including his April 1986 article entitled "Sniping" which begins:

"Just as Nebraska newspapers tend to overload their pages with football stories and to ignore minor sports like competitive moseying or frog-sled racing, *NEBRASKAland* has, it seems to me, devoted too much attention to pheasant and deer stalkers or bass fishing, and has neglected fundamental sports like sandcat fishing or snipe hunting."

Once your snipe bags were full, you could pick this issue back up and read "Canada Geese – Managing The Comeback," a Notes on Nebraska Fauna piece on Orioles, or "Blueprints for Broods," with the latter being a step-by-step tutorial for building artificial nest boxes.

"Legacy of Grass" was the next article in this month's edition, which speaks of the value of native grasses, with writer Carl Wolfe penning the words to paper. A voice, once again, that would be nice to hear in our current publication.

To read "Sniping" and "Legacy of Grass," visit NebraskalandMagazine.com and click on "A Look Back."



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

Grouse Viewing

Jon Farrar

Beginning in March and peaking mid-April, male prairie grouse gather on display grounds called leks, sharp-tails on dancing grounds and prairie chickens on booming grounds, to attract and mate with hens. Everyone who enjoys watching wildlife should observe both species display at least once in their lifetime.

Male prairie grouse display most vigorously in the morning. Plan on being in the blind at least an hour before sunrise, and stay in the blind until displaying grouse have left, anywhere from two to three hours after sunrise. Dress warmly. You can always shed layers of clothing you have on, and in April the nights are often chilly. Displaying grouse are amazingly tolerant, but for the best display keep noise and observable movement to a minimum.

There are a number of private grouse viewing outfitters in the state. Google "grouse viewing Nebraska" or something similar to find them. Several public viewing sites with blinds are listed below.

Burchard Lake Wildlife Management Area – Five miles north, five miles east of Burchard; Pawnee County. Greater prairie chickens. Two blinds on a first-come/first-served basis. Few birds have used the area in recent years.

Valentine National Wildlife Refuge – Cherry County. One sharp-tail, one prairie chicken blind. For information call (402) 376-1889 or (402) 376-3789.

Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge – Garden County. One sharp-tail blind. For information call (308) 762-4893.

Nebraska National Forest Bessey Ranger Division – Thomas and Blaine counties. One sharp-tail, one prairie chicken blind. For information call (308) 533-2257.

Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest – Southwest of Valentine in Cherry County. No blinds, visitors allowed to view displaying grouse from a distance or with personal blinds. For more information call (402) 823-4154.



Wildlife Conservation Fund

Tax season is upon us, which provides provides an opportunity for Nebraskans to contribute to wildlife and habitat conservation in our state. Line 41 on the 2010 state income tax form (Form 1040N) allows individuals to donate all or a part of their tax refund to the Wildlife Conservation Fund.

"The check-off is one of the principal sources of state funding used to conserve more than 98 percent of fish and wildlife species that are not hunted, trapped or fished," said Kristal Stoner, wildlife diversity program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Check-off donations are matched to other grant sources that require a financial match before they can be used; so a donation of \$10 allows \$40 to be spent on wildlife projects.

Taxpayers who are not entitled to a state tax refund may contribute by visiting NebraskaWildlifeFund.org, or by mailing: The Wildlife Conservation Fund, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370.

The Nebraska Bird Library

Kelsea Nore

The Nebraska Bird Library web site (www.NebraskaBirdLibrary.org) offers users several easy and effective methods to determine just what kind of bird has been chirping outside of their window now that spring has arrived. The web site was launched in early September and by year's end had over 1,000 visitors from 20 states and four different countries, said Nebraska Game and Parks Commission wildlife education specialist Lindsay Rogers.

The site is the result of what was initially going to be a field book for students participating in Project BEAK (Bird Education and Awareness for Kids), a program whose aim is "the more students understand and are connected to the places where they live, the more they will care about what happens on the land." Early research with Project BEAK suggested that a web-based program would benefit a larger population and the Nebraska Bird Library found its place on the Internet, where it is accessible to birdwatchers of all ages.

More than 400 different species of birds can be found in Nebraska. Determining which species you're looking at (or for) can be a little daunting. The web site allows you to

search by characteristic, common or scientific name or group (goose or owl, for instance). The characteristics search is broken into three categories: size, colors and region (or habitat).

Using this tool, you can discover that the small, red bird you saw in Schramm Park SRA wasn't a cardinal but a male summer tanager. By clicking on a bird's image, you can find more in-depth information about it, such as habitat, songs or calls, and fun facts.

The site will be adding sound recordings of each bird by the year's end.

"The goal of the Nebraska Bird Library is to provide a comprehensive library of all Nebraska's bird species. We hope it will help beginner birdwatchers identify what they are seeing in the field, homeowners identify what they see in their backyard and in the end," said Rogers "get more Nebraskans outside enjoying birds and birdwatching."



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Information about the indigo bunting (pictured) and other Nebraska bird species can be found at NebraskaBirdLibrary.org.

Stay Safe This Spring



The end of winter and reappearance of open water across Nebraska means one thing to many people – boating season. Make sure you stay safe this season by following boating regulations and wearing an approved life jacket whenever you are on the water.

Ancient Voices

Kelsea Nore

Paul A. Johnsgard's latest book, *Sandhill and Whooping Cranes: Ancient Voices over America's Wetlands*, is an informative and interesting addition to his vast collection of books. Johnsgard, Professor Emeritus in the Biology Department at UN-L, has a keen appreciation for his subjects that is reflected in his writing, which is both professional and tender. The book is divided by chapters on the Lesser and Other Sandhill and Whooping Cranes and the future of all North American cranes. Also included are the author's own illustrations, maps, references, suggested readings and the wonderful inclusion of an appendix of crane viewing sites throughout the United States and Canada.

The book touches upon the biology of the cranes but focuses more on the migration patterns, habitats and the efforts being made to protect and grow wild crane populations. The book,

available in March of 2011, will be enjoyed by admirers and enthusiasts alike. All proceeds will be donated to the Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary and Iain Nicolson Audubon Center near Kearney.

A Book of Pheasants

Jon Farrar

Lonnie Shafer's book, *Nebraska Pheasant Hunting Almanac*, was a two-year labor of love. Shafer's father planted the pheasant hunting passion that is now in the family's third

generation. The book is a combination of Shafer's personal reminiscences of times afield in pursuit of the ring-necked pheasant and the most thorough summary of the bird's history in Nebraska to be found between two covers. Included is an accounting of early introduction efforts and Nebraska's first pheasant hunting season in 1927, when only Wheeler and parts of Sherman counties were open for a three-day season with a limit of five cock pheasants. Shafer methodically traces the changes in hunting regulations, year by year, from that first season to the present. In addition, the book is filled with sundry information about Nebraska's most successfully introduced game bird – everything from how to dress and debone a pheasant, to recipes, to a primer on pheasant habitat requirements. It should be on the shelf of ever dedicated pheasant hunter. See the classified advertising section of this issue for ordering information.

Permit Brings Record Price

A Nebraska bighorn sheep hunting permit has brought a record \$117,500 at auction, according to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Thomas Lemmerholz of Heiligenhaus, Germany, made the winning bid at the Grand Slam Club/Ovis Hunter and Outfitter Convention held at the end of February in Las Vegas.

The previous record for a Nebraska bighorn sheep auction permit was \$87,500 in 1998. All proceeds from the sale of the permit go to the state's bighorn sheep management program.

Lemmerholz, who has never visited Nebraska, hopes to make a scouting trip this June. Along with the bighorn permit, he will receive four days of guide service, lodging and meals at Fort Robinson State Park during the 2011 bighorn sheep hunting season, which is Nov. 29-Dec. 22.

Two bighorn permits are authorized in Nebraska for 2011. A lottery for Nebraska residents will take place later this year for the other permit. Lottery applications will be accepted April 18 through August 5, and the drawing will take place in late-August. The estimated bighorn population in the state is 250-300.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Nine-year-old Morgan McCarthy focuses while fishing at Platte River State Park.

Check Your Park Facts

Michelle Stryker

Every two years the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's parks division conducts a survey of visitors to the state park system starting in June and going through mid-July. It includes questions regarding what people are participating in while at the park, how the services and amenities rate, how long they are there, what the visitor would like added to the area, and input on management issues the parks division is dealing with. Trend data is gathered to use for management decisions, support information to the Nebraska Legislature and for other various planning documents. Visitors will be surveyed again this summer at 32 different state parks, recreation areas and historical parks. Below are a few highlights of the most recent survey:

The most important activities to park visitors, whose overall average age was 50.6 years, was camping, fishing, picnicking, swimming and boating. While 79.2 percent of the visitors to Nebraska's state park system were residents, Colorado, Iowa, Wyoming, Kansas and Missouri led the park system's out-of-state visitors. The average stay when spending at least one night was 3.67 nights, and the average daily use at a park was 4.02 hours.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Become a campground host at one of Nebraska state parks and recreation areas by applying at <http://outdoornebraska.ne.gov/parks/programs>.

Campground Host Program Call for Volunteers

Kelsea Nore

Do you plan on spending your summer vacation in a Nebraska state park? Know the area around one of these parks like the back of your hand? If so, you are a great candidate for the NGPC's Campground Host Program, which is currently looking for volunteers. Hosts will act as liaisons in parks throughout the state, sharing their outdoors and camping knowledge with visitors and assisting with some light maintenance. Examples of maintenance may include litter pickup, painting, mowing and overall care of the park facilities. The most important activity a campground host will do, however, is meeting and greeting visitors, assisting them in finding their campsites and answering questions on the area and the park.

Hosts must be able to spend at least two weeks in the park and in return will receive free camping with electrical hook-ups and showers (where available). Host positions are open to anyone 18 years or older who are familiar with the area where they will be staying and Nebraska camping regulations. The program will generally run from April 1 through September 15. For more information on areas to volunteer at, contact Michelle Stryker at michelle.stryker@nebraska.gov.

Outdoor Message Plates

Leo Turner of grew up fishing, hunting and trapping in Nebraska. He remembers getting \$20 for a mink, measuring beaver pelts by the inch, and shooting his first buck at Swanson Reservoir one morning and still making it to work on time in Stratton, where he was school superintendent. When he retired as superintendent at Arthur in 1998, the faculty gave him this plate. Now 77 and living in Lisco, he believes trout fishing is the state's best kept secret.

If you have a unique outdoor message plate you would like to share, or know someone who does, e-mail a photo (high-resolution, jpeg format only, please) of it to Eric.Fowler@Nebraska.gov, along with your name, hometown, and a brief description of the interests expressed on your license plate.



News From Abroad

Barred Owl Dive Bomber

State wildlife biologists in Bethel, Maine recently captured a barred owl that had been decapitating chickens inside a local barn and flying off with their heads. This serial killer, as local authorities called it, was killing about one chicken a day.

Wildlife biologist Judy Camuso stated that during the winter months, barred owls have a tough time finding food because of the deep snow. "Then you combine our snowpack with the rain we got that created a little ice pack on top of it – that makes it even harder for them," she said.

She added that many animals that owls eat – such as red squirrels and voles – live under the snow. "That's why many owls, particularly barred owls as they're so common, are being taken to wildlife rehabbers now," she said. "They end up hunting along roadsides and tend to get hit by cars."

The owl was taken to Avian Haven, a wildlife rehabilitator in Freedom, Maine, said local wildlife biologist Chuck Hulsey. "It was probably under a lot of stress and is going to rehab, which won't hurt it," Hulsey added.

"Owls will often eat the head of an animal first," said Camuso. "There are some nutrients in the brain that they like, minerals in particular. Usually, owls and weasels are kind of notorious for eating heads."

Authorities caught the owl with a mist net after receiving a call from the local farmer, yet not before the bird had collected six chicken heads.



Officer's Notebook

"There's a Few in There"

A few years ago, when fur prices were high enough that lots of people were trapping and hunting raccoons, I received a call about someone spotlighting coons before the season opened. The informant gave me a general idea where the spotlighting was taking place, and also told me where the raccoons were being stored after they were shot.

I spent the next three nights staking out the area where the spotlighting was supposedly taking place, but didn't see anybody. The day before raccoon season started, I decided to contact the suspect since I didn't have any other options. I visited the location the informant had given me and it was just as they had described. I walked over the shed and saw a deep freeze with feed sacks on top and surrounded by hay bales. Since I didn't have a search warrant, I couldn't look inside the freezer, so I went to the suspect's place of work and asked to speak to him.

After identifying myself, I told him I had information that he had been shooting raccoons out of season, which he denied, of course. Then I asked him, "You don't have raccoons in a freezer surrounded by hay bales with feed sacks on top?"

His whole attitude did an abrupt about-face when I asked that question. "There's a few in there," he admitted. He went with me as we went back to the freezer, and when he opened it up, a "few" raccoons turned out to be 63. He ended up paying a pretty penny in fines and liquidated damages, thanks to an informant and asking the right questions.

— Randy Pomplun,
Conservation Officer, Fullerton



Chronic Wasting Disease Numbers Up

Nebraska saw an increase in the number of deer testing positive for chronic wasting disease (CWD) in 2010, as well as a wider distribution according to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. There were a record 51 positives found in harvested deer in 2010, compared to 42 in 2009.

CWD is a disease that can affect deer and elk and is always fatal to the affected animal. Humans, however have never been known to contract CWD.

As part of its ongoing efforts to monitor the disease, the Commission collected 3,645 lymph node samples from deer harvested during the 2010 November firearm season and also tested elk that were harvested in Nebraska.

The counties with the highest number of positives were: Sioux, 11; Sheridan, 7; Dawes, 6; Garden, 6; Box Butte, 4; Scotts Bluff, 4; and Morrill, 3. There were two positives each in Banner and Hitchcock counties and one each in Hooker, Keith, Lincoln, Loup, Cherry, and Hall counties. The counties in which CWD was found for the first time were Hitchcock, Hooker, Lincoln and Loup.

No elk tested positive for CWD in 2010.

Coat Color

Jeff Kurrus

For many people, an occasional roadside view of a deer is about all that is seen of this wary mammal outside of harvest and hunting seasons. Yet even with minimal viewing throughout the year, it's quite evident how much a deer's coat changes through the seasons.

Designed to provide thermoregulation and camouflage, a deer's coat undergoes two yearly molts, altering coat color dramatically. In the spring, a deer's thicker winter coat is replaced by a reddish summer coat that is thin, allowing deer to better cope with warmer temperatures. This coat molts in August and September, replaced by a winter coat that consists of two layers: The outer coat has hollow, stiff, grayish-brown hairs that are about two inches long. The undercoat has short, wool-like hairs that are soft, dense and insulate the deer from cold winter weather and snow and is again molted in the spring.

Coat color, regardless of season, can also be influenced by sun exposure – the more open the areas that a deer inhabits, the lighter the coat color. In addition, fawns are born with a reddish-brown coat that has several hundred small white spots for camouflage. At approximately three to four months of age, this coat is replaced the brownish-gray winter coat worn by their elders.



February 23



May 15



July 27



November 9

PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

I was cleaning my camping gear awhile back and I was shining up the silverware and some of it was silver. It was those old silver plated spoons in my camp kit and boy they really shined up and I got to thinking how those things would make good fishing lures. So I took some of them home and I drilled holes in the ends so I could hook my line in and of course my hook...and then I took a grinder...took the spoon handle off...and I ground that smooth and I narrowed it up with a grinder so it made a little more of a spoon shape like the commercial fishing lures...like a daredevil or something like that. I just shined them up and after I put the split ring, the hook in the end...and boy they made a terrific spoon lure...really flashed in the water when you cleaned that silver up and I got to thinking with all the grandkids I have and them throwing those 3 to 5 dollar



lures out and snagging them up that this made a way more reasonable approach to that. You could sit down and make 50 of these so fast it would make your head swim so I thought this is the route to go...make your own lures. I got some fishing buddies that tell me "Sometimes you've got to spoon feed those bass"...you know something...I literally do that...I spoon feed them.

Vilsak Announces 2011 CRP General Signup

Eric Fowler

Up to four million acres could be enrolled in the latest federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) general signup currently underway and announced by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack at National Pheasant Fest 2011 in Omaha in January.



Tom Vilsack

"Over the past 25 years, support for CRP has grown thanks to strong backing from partners like Pheasants Forever, farmers, ranchers, conservationists, hunters, fishermen and other outdoor sports enthusiasts," said Vilsack. "Not only has CRP contributed to the national effort to improve water and air quality, it has preserved habitat for wildlife, and prevented soil erosion by protecting the most sensitive areas including those prone to flash flooding and runoff."

Nebraskans enrolled 189,515 acres in the 2010 general signup, the first since 2006, replacing slightly more than the 172,000 acres expiring. Of the land offered for enrollment, 95.1 percent was accepted. Nationally, 4.3 million of the 4.8 million acres offered were accepted.

Conservationists had hoped to see higher demand in the 2010 signup to help make their case for increasing the cap on enrollment from the 32 million acres set in the 2008 Farm Bill to the previous caps of 39 million or even 45 million acres in the next Farm Bill. Interest may not improve in this signup, with high commodity prices making it much more profitable to farm land than enroll it in CRP at the current

rental rates. Additional incentives are available to landowners who agree to allow public walk-in hunting and enroll their CRP in the Commission's Open Fields and Waters program.

Contracts will expire on 151,895 acres of CRP in Nebraska and 4.4 million acres nationally in October. Vilsack said the signup should keep acreage near the 32 million acre cap. Current enrollment is about 31 million acres nationally and one million in Nebraska.

Acceptance in CRP is based in part on the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI), which weighs wildlife, water, soil, air and enduring benefits and cost. Nebraska's average EBI trailed only Missouri and Oklahoma nationally.

Anyone interested in enrolling in the general CRP program can visit their local Farm Service Agency office between March 14 and April 15. There are many other options for enrolling land in other conservation programs. For more information, contact the farm bill biologist in your area. ■

NEBRASKALAND Visitor Winner and Hint

Last issue's winner of the *NEBRASKALAND* Visitor drawing was Jackie Nunnenkamp of Henderson, Nebraska, who found the **treehopper** on page 50.

Readers are encouraged to contact *NEBRASKALAND* within 10 days after this issue's publication with the correct page number and name of this issue's "Visitor" – a bug found in Nebraska that just happened to find its way onto one of the pages of our publication.

We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a **new** *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 5, 6, or 33.



See You Out There ... But Where?



Do you know where this Nebraska photograph was taken? See answer at the bottom of page 13.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

The Incredible, Obsessive, Questionable, (and sadly) Truthful Life of a Turkey Hunter

Text and photos by
Jeff Kurrus

It's 4 a.m., nearly two hours from legal shooting time, and I'm sitting against a tree in a small patch of woods with my eyes wide open, sweat already creeping down my forehead from my long walk in. I'm here because sleep evades me during spring turkey season; I'm here because every single morning when I arrive near shooting time the toms I covet walk in the opposite direction; I'm here because this is no longer a quest for fun – it has simply become a quest.

I was introduced to turkey hunting by a close friend who stands 6'5", topples the scale at 350 pounds and is afraid of no man, big or small. Snakes, raccoons, possums, spiders and the dark, however, scare him beyond words. Yet during his first year of turkey hunting, he admitted to crawling across forest floors, swimming across creeks and arriving in the woods for a morning hunt more toward midnight than daylight in an attempt to get close to a roosting tree. "It's the most fun I've ever had in the woods," he said, "and I never fired a single shot."

But I still wasn't convinced of turkey hunting's allure ... at least not until I walked into Commission fisheries biologist Daryl Bauer's office the next April, the one location where I thought fish and fishing are always paramount, and asked when we might be able to catch a few walleyes together. "Let me be honest with you, Kurrus," he said. "I have turkey on the brain right now. I'll fish later."

Turkey on the brain. There's probably no better way to explain the spring

turkey hunting phenomenon. For the turkey hunter, everything in life sounds like that guttural call from a tom – doors slamming, a coffee pot turning on – and every noise afield makes a hunter tilt their head to listen in hopes of hearing a second blast.

Sometimes, however, one call is all that a hunter hears, at least until the bird has walked completely around the blind, crept to within 10 feet and gobbled again at point-blank range, only to run away before a shot can be had. These moments lead to seemingly sleepless nights for the hunter, when one finally dozes off two hours too late and wakes up two hours too early.

This morning turkeys will not evade me. It's near 5 a.m. now, still an hour and four minutes before shooting time, and I am less than 60 yards from their roosting tree. The air is cool, in the mid-50s, and I am absent of both insects and fatigue. All I can see are stars and it's still too dark to make out even a single bird in the roost tree. I lower my head, stretching the muscles in my neck, and hear the first gobble of the morning. Turkeys will not evade me today.

"Dawn for show, noon for dough" is a common turkey hunting statement. If you want to hear birds, arrive before sunrise as a tom attempts to gather every hen he possibly can for a morning stroll



Early morning calling for turkeys is one of hunting's most exciting, and anxious, activities. It can also be a waste of time since many toms are already with hens when they leave the roost.



through the woods. Never has the phrase “one in the hand” been more true. He may talk back to you, responding so quickly to your calls that you’re convinced he’s running in your direction, but if he is already with hens, stop calling.

You’re probably wasting your time.

Come midday, however, the tom tends to get a bit lonely. While strutting and calling all morning, he’s more than likely forgotten to pay close attention to his harem. They’ve disappeared, often one by one, to lay eggs in the woods and the tom suddenly finds himself alone.

I’m here because sleep evades me during spring turkey season ... I’m here because this is no longer a quest for fun – it has simply become a quest.

But my tom is not alone this morning. At least not yet. There are at least two more gobblers with him, as well as a number of hens. I can’t see them yet, but soon I may be able to. Despite the twinges of regret already entering my mind regarding my close proximity to the roost tree, I remain still. They are only twinges, mind you – I have hunted these birds for nearly two straight

weeks, and this morning I plan on shooting the first one in range as soon as his feet hit the forest floor. I feel nearly compelled to do so.

Turkey hunting is a cure of many phobias including, but not limited to, acarophobia (itching), achluophobia (darkness), ambulophobia (walking), amyphophobia (being scratched), arachnophobia (spiders), entomophobia (insects) and herpetophobia (reptiles). Unfortunately, turkey hunting can also lead to fears, namely atychiphobia (failure), decidophobia (making decisions), and, most notably, dementophobia (insanity). It is unimaginable what it must have been like for hunters who needed to kill a bird for food. Unimaginable how much hate accumulated in the hearts of men whose survival was predicated on whether they could convince a bird to coming within killing range.

Watching Richard Johnson of Gretna take his six-year-old son Nolan on his first turkey hunt last spring, it was impossible not to think about the treacherous road that the father was introducing to his son. Nolan skipped through the woods like only a child can, with camouflage clothes too large for him and the inability to see the heartaches ahead in his life.

The birds are on the ground. I still can’t see them, but I can hear them. Multiple “peeps” fill the woods as an occasional gobble echoes through me. I call, first with my slate, then with a box, and a tom responds. I scratch again, and he returns my advance. Repeatedly we talk to each other, me asking if he would like more companionship. He affirms, yet his replies grow fainter, regardless of what “hen” I use.

A grunt call, a bleat call and an occasional set of rattling antlers. What a deer hunter carries. A rarely blown for practice but too often blown in the field call. What a duck hunter carries. A mouth call, another mouth call, a third mouth call, a slate call, a second slate call, two strikers, a gobble call and your son’s push-button hen yelper. What a turkey hunter carries.

Two chest pockets and two shell pockets. What the vest of a duck, quail,

The beautiful, exhilarating, nerve-racking experience of watching a tom strut up to a hunter’s call is highly, and dangerously, addictive.

deer or pheasant hunter looks like. Two large chest pockets, two shell pockets, two inside pockets, two interior pockets with shell pockets inside, two thin, long pockets between the chest and the shell pockets. And Velcro, buttons and zippers. Lots of zippers. What the vest of a turkey hunter looks like.

I continue to call, even though I have seen this act before. I will receive an occasional over-the-shoulder reply that will bring a brief feeling of hope, but every other gobble will continue to be fainter. I lean my head against the tree, for the first time tired, and remove the wet mouth call from my lips. “Damn,” I say to myself. “You gotta be kidding me.”

Then I catch a glimpse of my birds, at least five toms and fifteen hens, already 200 yards away. I have no idea which way they will go from there, so any advances toward them are for naught. I must now wait for midday, hoping that one of the toms finds his way back across a creek, through a patch of woods and into my open area. I’m sure these grounds have more birds

than this flock, but my own doubtful shrugs convince me otherwise. So I remove my facemask and continue to shake my head.

Unless one is a member of the special forces, a sniper...or a turkey hunter, one probably doesn’t own a ghillie suit. Yet for those whose springs are spent trying to get close to what seems to be nature’s smartest animal, ghillie suits are one possible option. Face painting and head-to-toe camouflage also provide confidence to the turkey hunter, at least until a bead of sweat crosses the tip of the nose, forcing an itch so demanding that the hunter’s eyes start to water, prompting a scratch. “You can be as camouflaged as you want,” a turkey hunter once told me, “as soon as that camouflage moves, you’re done.”

A non-turkey hunting friend, one whose hunting choices in life I often envy, recently relayed a story about a turkey encounter he had during the archery deer season.

“I saw some turkeys the other day when I was hunting,” he said. “I almost

got a shot, but they just slowly eased away from me as I watched them in the field. It was strange. They were walking right toward me until they started fading. I mean, they didn’t see me – I know that. They must have just wanted to go in that other direction.” I didn’t have the heart to tell my friend he’d been made.

As I contemplate my next move, continuing to watch the flock feeding in the field, I notice one of the hens running back toward the creek. Then I see another one following suit, legs comically moving as they race away from some fear I have yet to see. A coyote appears in the distance, running full sprint toward the flock with a running mate close his side. Its partner, however, is not another coyote. Instead of the sleekness associated with coyotes, I watch a short, round-bodied sidekick



Trying to sneak up on a turkey is usually not a good idea, but frustration and obsession often force poor decisions.





that looks like a badger pursuing alongside the coyote.

The turkey flock soon busts completely as birds fly across the creek and back into the woods, many moving to the top of the tallest tree. With newfound hope, I lower my face mask back and ready for a second round.

Yet this round is short-lived. I once again call, and toms once again respond, yet when

I hear them fly back down, their calls grow faint once again. I try another call. Then another. Then another. I curse myself, convinced that I should never blow a call again, that the birds I had seen walk to my call in the past were anomalies and should not be considered reasons for current or future confidence.

I watch the group fly across the creek again. I pocket my call, pick up my 870 and begin to crawl through the woods. It's at least 100 yards to the creek, where I will have to find a place to effectively cross before mapping a way to the edge of the field where the turkeys are feeding. Logic still says that there is no particular direction that these birds traditionally travel. Logic also says that there is no possible way I can move that far without being made. To hell with logic. I keep crawling.

I crawl because I have seen turkeys

peck at their own reflections in windows, watched them feed on the median of Interstate 80 as vehicles pass in both directions, and heard them gobble after the slam of a car door. How can something this disillusioned and absent-minded evade me repeatedly? So I crawl, stinging nettles now and poison ivy later itching my skin.

Turkey hunting is the closest comparison most people will ever have to going to war, or at least playing war like we did as children. The shotgun manufacturers have picked up on this phenomenon in recent years, as "turkey" guns look much more tactical than

not care. I can buy more supplies, but I may never get a shot at a turkey again. I think I am close to the creek, but dare not look up. I'm not even sure if the turkeys are still in the field, but will crawl across a highway if it will keep me from being detected.

I reach the creek, slide down its muddy embankment, fill my boots with water and attempt to crawl up the other side. My gun, clothes and face mask are covered with mud. I care not. I only care about getting to the edge of this field.

When I arrive, my face falls to the forest floor as I swear again. The turkeys are at least 200 yards to my right. From my angle, there is no way I can maneuver through the woods and get ahead of them without being made. I am tired, I am frustrated and a combination of sweat, mud and creek water is already making me smell. I am done.

But as I move to stand up, I catch a glimpse of something black to my left. I turn and see a lone tom hustling across the cut cornfield, displaced by the earlier coyote interruption and quickly making his way back to the group, surprisingly within range. I shoulder my gun, click the safety off and "baah" like a sheep. He stops, I shoot and my hunt is over. I lay my head down on the dew-covered grass at the edge of the field, exhausted.

With bird in hand, a newfound smile on face and an empty vest, I retrace my path through the woods and slowly begin to recover one box call, two slate calls, three mouth calls, a dozen

heavy load 4s, camouflage gloves, an extra face mask and a can of bug spray. Then I make the long, but enjoyable, trek back to my truck, already wondering when I might be able to do this all over again. ■

The author would like to thank NEBRASKAland blog reader Kyle Schumacher for this article's title.



Nolan Johnson of Gretna was too young to understand the future heartaches his dad, Richard, was setting him up for during Nolan's first turkey hunt last spring in Nemaha County.

before, some appearing more like an anti-home intruder piece of weaponry than a turkey gun. With pistol grip handles, full camouflage details and an occasional scope, turkey guns are unlike any other shotguns on the market. Maybe for good reason.

I continue to crawl despite feeling things emptying from my pockets. I do



The Mob



Text and photo by Michael Forsberg

Last year, while taking a Sunday drive on backroads along the Platte River, I witnessed one of nature’s many common but poorly understood phenomena – mobbing.

LAST YEAR IN LATE-FEBRUARY I WENT for a Sunday drive, lazily following the etch-a-sketch pattern of gravel roads that parallels the south bank of the Platte River between Grand Island and Kearney.

I was birdwatching with a camera in the passenger seat next to me, hoping to see something out of the ordinary. I had become almost indifferent to the numerous flocks of snow geese gathered like snowdrifts in the center of brown crop fields, and the Canada geese flying in arrow-like formations overhead on their daily jaunts between crop field, river and prairie slough. What I was really looking for was a bald eagle perched on an arched limb over the river, or maybe the boomerang shape of a peregrine falcon speeding its way north up the central flyway.

Then, far off in the distance and through the heat waves of the horizon, I saw something extraordinary – a huge flock of blackbirds and starlings were moving in near perfect synchrony like a school of baitfish, shape-shifting in a sea of blue, noonday sky. The flock, numbering a thousand or more, would rise off the tarmac, swirl around in rhythmic, cyclonic waves, then fall back to earth or alight in a row of tall cottonwoods serving as a windbreak for a farmer’s calving yard.

Sometimes during migration flocks like these are simply moving across the landscape. But curiously, each time this flock would come to rest they would pile in on one particular tree, clustered as tightly on its naked branches as leaves in the summertime. As I drove closer to get a better look, I could see why.

A red-tailed hawk had set up perch in the tallest tree along the windbreak, and the flock wanted no part of its company. The birds would land around the hawk, starting on the outermost branches, and then fill in until those that were closest were almost within the raptor’s wing length away.

The flock’s noise was loud from the roadside, so it must

have been deafening to the hawk. As if the noise wasn’t enough, a small squadron of blackbirds was relentlessly dive-bombing the hawk, strafing its head from behind repeatedly and without mercy. If the hawk moved, the roost would explode into a flurry of wings and an attack mode commenced. Eventually the redtail had enough and flew off. A few minutes later, an immature bald eagle flew into the same windbreak, perched in a nearby tree, and the mob scene started all over again.

SCIENTISTS SAY MOBBING BEHAVIOR by birds is a common, but poorly understood, phenomenon. Birds often guilty of mobbing in Nebraska include blackbirds and jays, terns and gulls, crows, swallows, orioles, flycatchers, nuthatches and chickadees, to name a few. The mob victims

are predators – raptors such as eagles, hawks, falcons and owls; and egg and chick eaters such as squirrels, snakes, raccoons and domestic cats. Just about anything that poses a threat to the birds may be attacked.

Mobbing can take several forms – from a gentle scolding by one or more individuals to an attack by a large flock of mixed species. In a woodland if you hear a racket of birds and walk towards the sound, you will usually find birds scolding a predator that is trying to remain inconspicuous in the shadows of a tree. If you stay there long enough, the scolding will often draw the attention of birds of other species and the scolding may or may not elevate to an attack. Sometimes the predator leaves. Sometimes it does not.

Mobbing behavior can be seen any time of year. It is particularly common during the breeding season, when it

is used to distract predators away from nests or chicks. Scientists believe that at other times of year it is simply a strategy to let other birds know there is a predator in their midst, which hinders the predator’s element of surprise and perhaps even teaches younger birds how to recognize certain species as threats, a key survival skill they will need well into maturity.

In one sense, nature is a constant battle of strategies, a cat and mouse game between predator and prey. Mobbing is just one of many behaviors that probably helped coin the old adage that there is safety in numbers, at least most of the time. On this day: Mob 1. Hawk 0. ■

To see more of Mike’s images, visit his web site and online gallery at www.MichaelForsberg.com.



Already getting a good scolding, this red-tailed hawk readies for an impending attack from these blackbirds and starlings.

More Than One Way

To Catch a Walleye

By Jeff Kurrus

A lifelong fisherman, I had neither taken the time or had the opportunity to learn about walleye fishing until I moved to Nebraska. When I relocated I suddenly had the opportunity, but no real background on the sport – at least in my mind. To be honest, I was intimidated. Most of what I had ever read about walleye fishing talked about trolling (which I had never done), planer boards (I wasn't really sure what they were), in open water (where I was unfamiliar), at depths I didn't even know existed. However, with the help of some experienced walleye anglers, I quickly learned that there's more than one way to catch a walleye, with gear I already have, and on lakes I was already fishing for bass and catfish – two predators I found out were very similar to walleyes in multiple ways.

So, here are some of the tips I've learned. Put them to use, and you too could add "walleye angler" to your title and start enjoying this fierce fighting, and delectably tasty, game fish.

Fishing the Spawn

This time of year is a favorite for many walleye anglers, when cool weather often forces anglers to wear parkas while fishing, and when it seems as if every walleye is in shallow water. "If you were to turn an electrofishing boat on at sunset and drive it down the dam this time of year, the water

would be white with walleyes," said Commission Fisheries Outreach Program Manager Daryl Bauer. "If those fish were interested in eating, you'd catch a fish on every single cast. That's how many walleyes there are."

But they're not interested in eating, they're interested in spawning. At this time, males move in looking for females shortly after ice out. When a female appears, she'll broadcast her eggs on the rocks and the males will fertilize them in very shallow water. Once this occurs, the female retreats to deeper water while the males remain in the shallows, looking for the next female. After every female in a water body spawns, all of the walleyes move deeper.

While most walleye anglers catch males during this period, the heavier females are what anglers like Lincoln native Andrew Soderstrom are after. "I try and catch these big females with a variety of lures, including No. 13 Rapalas, Shad Raps and weightless flukes," he said. "And while the fishing can be slow at times because the fish are more concentrated on spawning, I often get a flurry of bites in quick order at some point during a night." Yet Soderstrom doesn't necessarily wait for this flurry – he is always prepared to move if need be.

His moving can consist of simply fishing another spot on the lake, or changing lakes altogether. While he spends a lot of time fishing 210-acre East Twin, he also fishes Pawnee, Wagon Train, Stagecoach and Branched Oak in the Lincoln area. "East Twin warms up faster than other larger water



PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

While walleyes are not typically known for being small-water fish, Soderstrom takes advantage of the fisheries close to home and frequently catches walleyes at the Salt Valley lakes around Lincoln, including East Twin.



bodies, so I usually start fishing there toward the end of March, during the pre-spawn and spawn. Then I move on to other lakes, where my largest walleye has weighed 10 pounds at Stagecoach, but I've caught quite a few eights as well."

To the novice walleye angler, this time of year is often seen as the best time to catch a trophy fish because the area being fished will be holding nearly all of a lake's walleye population close to the bank. This may not, however, be the best time to catch a walleye. "Those fish don't want to bite, they want to spawn," repeated Bauer. "Another option is to wait until the walleyes have finished spawning and are coming to the shallow water looking for food. That's when they're a lot easier to catch."

Merritt Casting

Steve Isom is a long-time tournament angler who calls Merritt Reservoir home. When there, he hits spots he has fished during tourneys over the last 16 years. The day I fished with him, he fished one lure all day: a silver-colored Rapala Shad Rap, simply casting and reeling this lure from his boat. I felt right at home.

Isom uses this technique from early spring until the early part of July in shallow water, catching those post-spawn fish that Bauer spoke of. "The way I look at it, all of these fish are predators. They're in the shallows this time of year looking for other fish that are making their beds. So you can catch most of these fish in the same spots when the water is near 60 degrees."

"Following the spawn, walleyes are feeding ravenously," agreed Nebraska Walleye Association tournament angler Todd Consbruck. "Through May and June various patterns seem to work, and it's not uncommon to have success in water from one to 25 feet deep."

Isom agreed. While he chose to fish crankbaits during our



PHOTO BY DOUG STEINKE

Above: Blake Steinke caught this walleye while shallow-water trolling with his father, Doug, at Johnson Lake near Lexington. Opposite: Crankbait fishing is one successful technique Steve Isom uses when walleye fishing during the late spring and early summer, as seen by this fish caught at Merritt Reservoir.

trip to Merritt – casting and reeling, casting and reeling – he will also pitch leadhead marabou jigs from 1/8-ounce to 3/8-ounce, and will also use minnows, leeches and crawlers, varying his retrieve until he finds the pattern. During this time of year he works coves and points, not unlike a largemouth, smallmouth or northern pike angler, casting near weedbeds, shallow-water drop-offs and submerged timber. That day Isom caught a six-pound female that had already spawned and told of fish up to 10 pounds he has caught at Merritt using these same techniques, in water that could be accessed from a boat or by a very determined bank angler in a nice pair of hiking boots or waders.

By the end of the day with Isom, walleye fishing was beginning to look like something a bass angler like me could learn.

Early Summer Trolling

For the bluegill, catfish or even bass angler, trolling forces thoughts of wide-open water and true depth finder knowledge. Yet, once again, a novice walleye angler can often overthink this summertime technique.

PHOTO RIGHT BY ANDREW SODERSTROM. PHOTO OPPOSITE BY JEFF KURRUS



Soderstrom catches big female walleyes during the spawn on multiple Salt Valley lakes each year, including Stagecoach. He releases all of the larger females.



This time of year, walleyes begin to move away from the shore into cooler, deeper water, where the forage base is nomadic, moving seasonally throughout a reservoir as well as being affected by changes in weather and wind. For the new troller, “wind” and “realistic expectations” are where you start.

For the beginner troller, determine what bank is the most windblown and start working there – the wind will help concentrate algae in the water, and baitfish that feed on the algae will follow it. If you find bait, you will have a better chance of finding walleyes. But this is also where realistic expectations come into play. “Don’t begin your trolling career at 30,000-acre Lake McConaughy,” said longtime walleye angler and *NEBRASKAland* contributor Doug Steinke. “Starting smaller will burn you out much slower.” Steinke takes his own advice and often starts trolling at 2,200-acre Johnson Lake SRA near Lexington.

“We look for active fish after the spawn still making their way to deep water, even earlier than most traditional trolling takes place,” said Steinke. Working water two to five feet deep with crankbaits, Steinke is most comfortable when he sees carp running the shallows. “If we’re not accidentally snagging an occasional carp, then we’re not in the right spot,” he said. “And that’s still in May.”

“You can find fish shallow until late-June, maybe even early July,” said Bauer. “But once it’s the middle of the summer, fishing gets very tough. Most walleyes go offshore and follow shad in most of our waters.” This is the time of year when the novice walleye angler will need some help, and patience, to succeed in finding fish (see Walleye Fishing 202 sidebar).

However, some fish can still be found relatively close to the bank. “Last year at Lake McConaughy,” Steinke said, “I’d be fishing in 40 feet of water in timber 35 feet tall under the water. We hunted walleyes like people hunt

“I’ve seen many anglers have great success at Lake McConaughy using a variety of techniques,” said Doug Steinke (pictured with a Lake Mac walleye). “So never think you’re limited to one method.”

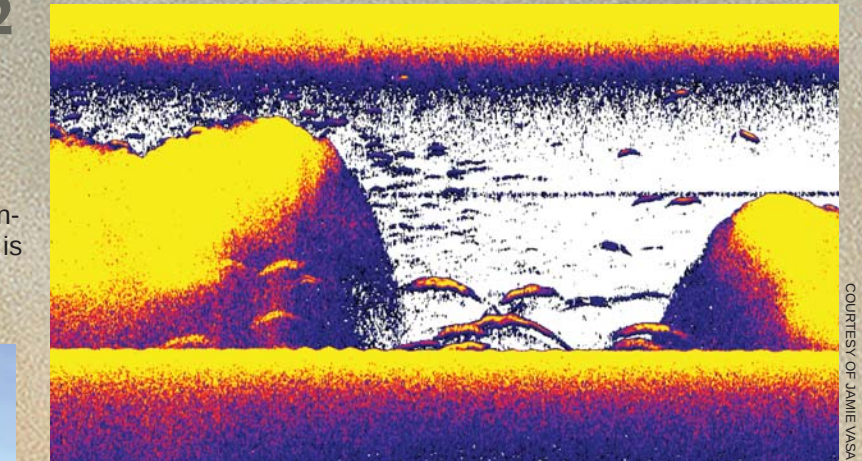
PHOTO LEFT BY DOUG STEINKE

Walleye Fishing 202

To a novice, open-water walleye fishing sounds like a daunting task, but these tips from a few of my new friends may help.

• **Jamie Vasa:** The first trick to open-water walleye fishing in the summer is finding fish on your sonar. If your sonar doesn’t show fish, then don’t fish that spot. I know a lot of people who look at their sonar and don’t trust it. They see fish on the screen and then if they don’t catch any, they say their fish finder doesn’t work very well. Sonars can’t lie – they only display what they see. Interpreting what the sonar is showing on the screen is where the learning curve begins. Read the manual, research online forums and further educate yourself about your electronics. You’ll be the much better walleye angler for it.

• **Doug Steinke:** I fish Lake McConaughy in the summer, and look for walleyes in 30 to 80 feet of water. What dictates my movements are previous success, conversations with other anglers and bait shop owners, and accessing online chat forums. Also, if we start to catch big catfish and wipers, then we’re close to where the big walleyes are. Quite often a lake’s predators are reacting to baitfish similarly to each other, so when you locate these fish you’ll locate walleyes. Once you find bait, place your lures right above the bait balls on your sonar. Walleyes usually strike from below and this gives you a better opportunity to catch fish. And if fish are actively feeding, they will be right in the middle of the bait balls. At large waters like Lake Mac, your main purpose is to stay flexible. Some walleyes at Mac are keying on alewives and some are keying on gizzard shad, so you already have a couple of bait options. Plus, some fish are near the dam and some concentrate near all the new flooded timber in



COURTESY OF JAMIE VASA

Understanding your sonar is the key to open-water walleye fishing. The large objects on both sides of this readout are bait balls, a very welcome sight for walleye anglers. The small “arcs” within and between those bait balls are walleyes.

the lake, so be ready to make adjustments.

• **From Todd Consbruck:** Unfortunately, the odds start to tip in the favor of the walleye in late-June or July, when anglers have to compete with “real” forage and less hungry fish. Therefore, novice trolling anglers should understand a few things: One, both color and action do matter – if they didn’t we wouldn’t have so many different lures that we’ve had excellent days with. Experiment with sizes, actions and coloration. Think subtle and natural in clear, cooler water and the opposite in warm, stained water. Two, trolling success is highly dependent on boat speed, line diameter, weight and the lure used. There is a lot to learn – do so step-by-step and understand that it all won’t make sense when you start. Three, repeatability is the key with trolling. Catch a fish, and go right back to the exact spot with the same amount of line out at the same speed. Make this even easier with GPS. Four, troll downwind if you can. It makes everything easier, especially for the newcomer. And lastly, once you’re comfortable with the basics of trolling, purchase *Precision Trolling* by Mark Romanack. This book shows the depth that lures dive at certain speeds and with various lines, and also explains many trolling methods and concepts.



whitetails. We were looking for points, flats, and little holes through these trees all year. But trolling in those trees begs for precision. It’s a good way to lose a lot of lures, especially after an 8- to 10-hour day.” Bottom line for newcomers: look at smaller water bodies like Johnson or open-water areas where

you can get your trolling feet wet.

Jigging at Lewis and Clark

After spending a lifetime casting and reeling, jigging over the edge of the

boat didn’t seem like a very profitable, or thrilling, way to fish – until I was introduced to this technique last fall at Lewis and Clark Lake by longtime walleye tournament angler Mike Polak. Now I’m wondering what I’ve been missing all these years.

“We’re fishing in 30 feet of water,”



PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

Above: Catching walleye with a jig and a minnow is one of the easiest walleye fishing methods to learn and is an effective way of catching fish during the late summer and early fall. Opposite: Mike Polak holds a late-day “eater” from Lewis and Clark Lake after a day of vertical jigging.

Polak said that day as he set me up with a jig and bucket of minnows. “Lower your bait down until you feel the bottom, reel up two feet and start jigging.” For the next eight hours, that’s what we did, and what a fun day it became.

We fished drop-offs all day, and Polak used his sonar equipment some, but not as extensively as a summer troller might. Instead of looking for bait balls, he eye-balled depth changes, and made sure our baits consistently found those areas. It was as simple as that.

And for the lifelong largemouth angler, some of the strikes were just as savage as a spring-time bass bite. My preconceived notion of the soft-hitting walleye was all but erased entirely that day.

Fishing for walleye is not a good beginner thing – that’s what anglers new to walleyes usually think. Yet what I saw, very clearly, was that walleye fishing can be a beginner activity as long as anglers have a few technique options once they get on the water and have a little bit of common sense to use with these techniques.

Any type of fishing, including going after those “rough fish” walleye anglers refer to as largemouth bass, can become complicated. When in doubt, check out *In-Fisherman’s* 500-page largemouth fishing manual or any one of the thousands of largemouth articles written every year concerning this “easy to catch” species.

Walleye fishing has always been known for its complications, but fishing for this species doesn’t have to be. Simply use one of these techniques listed above, either during the time of year specified or the one you are the most comfortable using, and give walleye fishing a try. I wouldn’t even worry about buying new tackle – crankbaits, jigs and even spinnerbaits are used to catch walleyes at different times of the year. Use what you have right now. There will always be time to increase your walleye fishing lure arsenal. Believe me.

By that time, you might just learn that you never were a largemouth, wiper or crappie angler per se, but instead you liked casting, trolling or vertical jigging for anything that would strike – even if you’re relegated to some of those ole’ nasty tasting walleyes ... just kidding. ■

Exit 426

By Pasquale Mingarelli

Want to get away? Do the kids want to come too? What if you could hike down a quiet path and suddenly find a pair of green wolf eyes staring at you through the trees? How about sitting inside the cockpit of a classic World War II bomber making an imaginary run somewhere over Germany? If all this sounds a bit too adventurous for you, how about spending a simple evening in a quiet ridgetop cabin listening to the crackle of wood burning in a fireplace?

What if you could easily do all three activities in one day? They sound like they're worlds apart, but they're not – you can take part in these experiences (and more) within a mile of Interstate 80 Exit 426 in eastern Nebraska. Heading south will bring you to the Lee G. Simmons Conservation Park and Wildlife Safari. Exiting north will bring you to both the Strategic Air & Space Museum and Eugene T. Mahoney State Park (SP).

The wildlife safari is 440 acres of land that give visitors the opportunity to see native fauna in a natural,

wide-open environment. Here herds of bison, elk and antelope roam the Nebraska prairie. A four-mile-long road winds through the rolling hills, bringing families up close to these historic stalwarts of the American West. Visitors will pass by plenty of other indigenous critters on their trip as well.

Perhaps the most exciting part of your visit happens midway through the park. As you exit your car at the designated parking area, you will be greeted by shrieks from a bald eagle aviary before you journey down a trail toward either black bear territory or wolf country.

At wolf canyon you'll encounter a pack of wolves roaming a three-acre enclosure and interacting just a few feet from you. Sometimes you can even hear them howl.

Because part of the park's mission is to educate the public, park superintendent Gary Pettit says if your children want to learn a bit more about the animals, there are educational opportunities for youth in the form of campouts and outdoor classes.

Crossing back over I-80 will take



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



PHOTO BY TIM REIGERT

A suspended helicopter hangs from the ceiling at the Strategic Air Command (SAC) Museum. Girl Scouts try the flight simulator during one of museum's overnight stay programs.

you to the Strategic Air & Space Museum and Eugene T. Mahoney SP. The museum has more than 30 different aircraft in its fleet, and Mahoney SP is consistently rated just behind Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo as one of Nebraska's most visited attractions.

Upon entering the museum, you are greeted by an impressive SR-71 "Blackbird" suspended in air. According to Tom York, the museum's director of operations, this former reconnaissance aircraft once reached speeds of 2,193 mph and is one of the museum's most prized possessions.

There are plenty of other jets and vintage aircraft to examine in the main exhibit area, which looks like an airplane hangar that transports you through time. There are bombers and fighters from various eras of flight, such as the B-17G Flying Fortress, a famed World War II bomber; and a Cold War-era MIG-21F Fishbed-C used by the North Vietnamese in the Vietnam War.

The plentiful, detailed and informative displays also include one about Clayton Anderson, the only Nebraskan to visit space. Not only do the displays satisfy the soul of any history buff, the younger generation benefits from educational programs and overnight adventures put on by the museum.

Kids looking for a bigger thrill can check out the museum's two simulators, where flight can be "experienced" in a military helicopter or weightlessness in a simulator used to train astronauts. Be warned – the latter is not for the faint of heart or stomach, as the museum staff team affectionately refers to it as "The Bone Crusher."

Perhaps the most popular attraction off Exit 426 is E.T. Mahoney SP. It's a perfect place for a fun day out, a weekend getaway or a family reunion. Whether it's summer, winter, spring or fall, those who like the outdoors will always find plenty to do.

In the summer the park's signature attraction is the family aquatic center, which features a wave pool and two 200-foot-plus water slides. Those who like water but want to stay dry can also enjoy paddleboat rentals and plenty of fishing opportunities. Other summer (as well spring and fall) activities include miniature golf, a driving range, tennis and basketball courts, softball fields, horseback trail rides, crafts, picnicking and hiking.

Mahoney SP superintendent Brian Schmidt says the park continues to stay busy throughout the winter. The area's cabins can provide cozy lodging for up to 16 guests and come complete with heat and air conditioning, as well as a

fireplace, TV, refrigerator, range, microwave and outdoor deck and grill. The cabins are great for families making a winter weekend getaway to experience the park's recreation opportunities. These include ice skating on an outdoor rink, along with sledding and cross-country skiing. If the kids get cold, there is plenty to keep them busy indoors at the park's indoor playground, which has lots of tunnels and slides.

The park also has something to offer for those who just want to relax. There are 40 rooms in Peter Kiewit Lodge, which overlooks the Platte River, and slower-paced activities include watching plays at the Denman and Mary Mallory Kountze Memorial Theater or taking walks through the James Family Conservatory.

So if you really want to get away, staying in Nebraska is clearly a great option and Exit 426 will provide fun for the whole family. ■



Exit 426 is located west of where Interstate 80 crosses the Platte River between Lincoln and Omaha.



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

The wave pool at E.T. Mahoney SP's family aquatic center is one of the main summer attractions near Interstate 80's Exit 426.

Upcoming Events

The attractions at Interstate 80 Exit 426 can make for a fun, year-round family getaway. Upcoming events include:

- **March 26-27** Indoor Air Show (Strategic Air & Space Museum)
- **April 2-3** Platte River Art Show (Eugene T. Mahoney State Park)
- **April 2-3** Opening Weekend (Lee G. Simmons Conservation Park and Wildlife Safari)
- **April 23** Easter Egg Hunt (Museum)
- **April 24** Easter Buffet (Mahoney SP)
- **May 8** Mother's Day Buffet (Mahoney SP)
- **June 11** Bird Watch (Wildlife Safari)
- **June 19** Father's Day Buffet (Mahoney SP)
- **July 23** Annual Helicopter Day (Museum)
- **August 13** "Going Buggy" (Wildlife Safari)
- **September 10** Sounds of Fall (Wildlife Safari)
- **September 10** Moonshell Storytelling Festival (Mahoney SP)
- **October 1-2** Autumn Harvest Art Show (Mahoney SP)
- **October 16, 17** Haunted Safari (Wildlife Safari)
- **October 21-23** Holiday Craft Show (Mahoney SP)
- **October 29-30** Closing Weekend (Wildlife Safari)



Elk spar at the Lee G. Simmons Conservation Park and Wildlife Safari south of Exit 426.

The Other Side of Flooding

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

When rivers flood, the news reports are typically of doom and gloom: Houses, businesses and crops lost, roads and bridges closed or washed out, lives disrupted. All of that certainly happened along the 14 rivers in Nebraska where the water measured at or above flood stage on U.S. Geological Survey river gauges last summer.

Fish and wildlife biologists look at things through different colored glasses, however, and know something the news reports seldom include: For fish, wildlife and the habitat they occupy in and along rivers, floods are good. They

are nature's way of resculpting and revitalizing the landscape, pumping nutrients into the system that are vital to fish and other organisms that live in the water, which in turn provides a boost to the terrestrial species that depend on them.

This is especially true in meandering rivers such as the Elkhorn, which last June saw flooding worse than any on record. Nebraska's largest meandered river, the Missouri, also flooded last year, but the results were much different. The difference between the two is simple: the Missouri is the state's most engineered river and the Elkhorn one of the least.

Meandering Rivers

Meandering rivers twist, turn and carve their way through the landscape, constantly taking material from one spot and putting it in another.

On the outside of each bend, the river chews away at the bank. Here the current is often the swiftest and the water the deepest, with holes that provide homes for catfish. Trees growing near the riverbank are undercut and topple into the river. Some stay where they fall, while others drift downstream before snagging on the bottom. In either case, they create cover for fish, as well as a substrate that supports a variety of aquatic insects which become food for other organisms.

The river carries sand and soil eroded from the cutbank downstream and deposits it on the inside of the next bend, building a point bar with a gradual slope that supports a variety of aquatic and terrestrial creatures, as well as plants. On the downstream side of a point bar, shallow slack water provides nursery areas for fish and abundant aquatic insects attract shorebirds. As the point bar grows, it is colonized by sand-loving vegetation, including cottonwoods and willows. The result is concentric rings of varied habitats, a continual succession ranging from bare sand to annual grasses and forbs to pioneering woodlands to mature cottonwoods.

Between the bends, in the middle of the channel, sandbars provide roosting areas for waterfowl. Throughout the river, fish can find the habitat they prefer among the highly varied water depths and velocities.

Through time, what started as a



Above: When Missouri River floodwaters receded from Schilling Wildlife Management Area near Plattsmouth last July, the splayed pattern created by the foot of sand deposited by water flowing out of the area's reconstructed chute (bottom right of photo) was plainly visible. High water limited or prevented access to Schilling and other Nebraska Game and Parks Commission areas along the Missouri into fall. Opposite: Heron, raccoon, deer and nightcrawler tracks crisscross the road at Wood Duck WMA near Stanton. Taken six days after the Elkhorn River fell below flood stage, water was still retreating from much of the floodplain.





The scouring power of the Elkhorn moved tons of sand and unearthed bison bones buried by the river more than 100 years earlier, possibly up to 1,000 years earlier.

gradual bend in a meandering river, somewhat of a bump in the road, becomes more sweeping. The sharper the bend, the greater the rate of erosion. Eventually, the river will loop back on itself and, when the opportunity presents itself, will take a shortcut – the path of least resistance – and plot a new course across the neck of the bend. Left in its wake is an oxbow lake or backwater. These slack water areas can serve as nursery areas for river fish like sturgeon, which can come and go at will in connected backwaters or seasonally in oxbows that reconnect to the river only during high flows, and also are home to species such as bass and crappies that won't thrive in the current. Water-loving, wildlife friendly plants such as cattail, arrowhead and duckweed colonize such areas, adding to the diversity of habitats available to fish and wildlife,

including wood ducks, a common nester in these habitats along the Elkhorn River. What might start out as a lake will change greatly with age, filling with silt and turning to marsh.

The continual erosion that occurs on meandering rivers provides nutrients vital to the base of the aquatic food web. But equally important is the seasonal flooding that occurs on all rivers, caused either by the melting of snow or heavy rains falling on the plains in the spring, or by snowmelt runoff from distant mountains in the summer. Whether the water rises only enough to simply cover a vegetated point bar or tops the high bank and spills onto the floodplain, these periodic high flows wash grasses, leaves and other materials into the river which decompose rapidly, feeding microscopic organisms at the base of the food web which, in turn, explodes.

“When that vegetation decays, those nutrients are recycled throughout the system,” said Gene Zuerlein, Missouri River Program manager with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. “That’s why the floodplain is important, for that energy and the process that moves things down the system.”

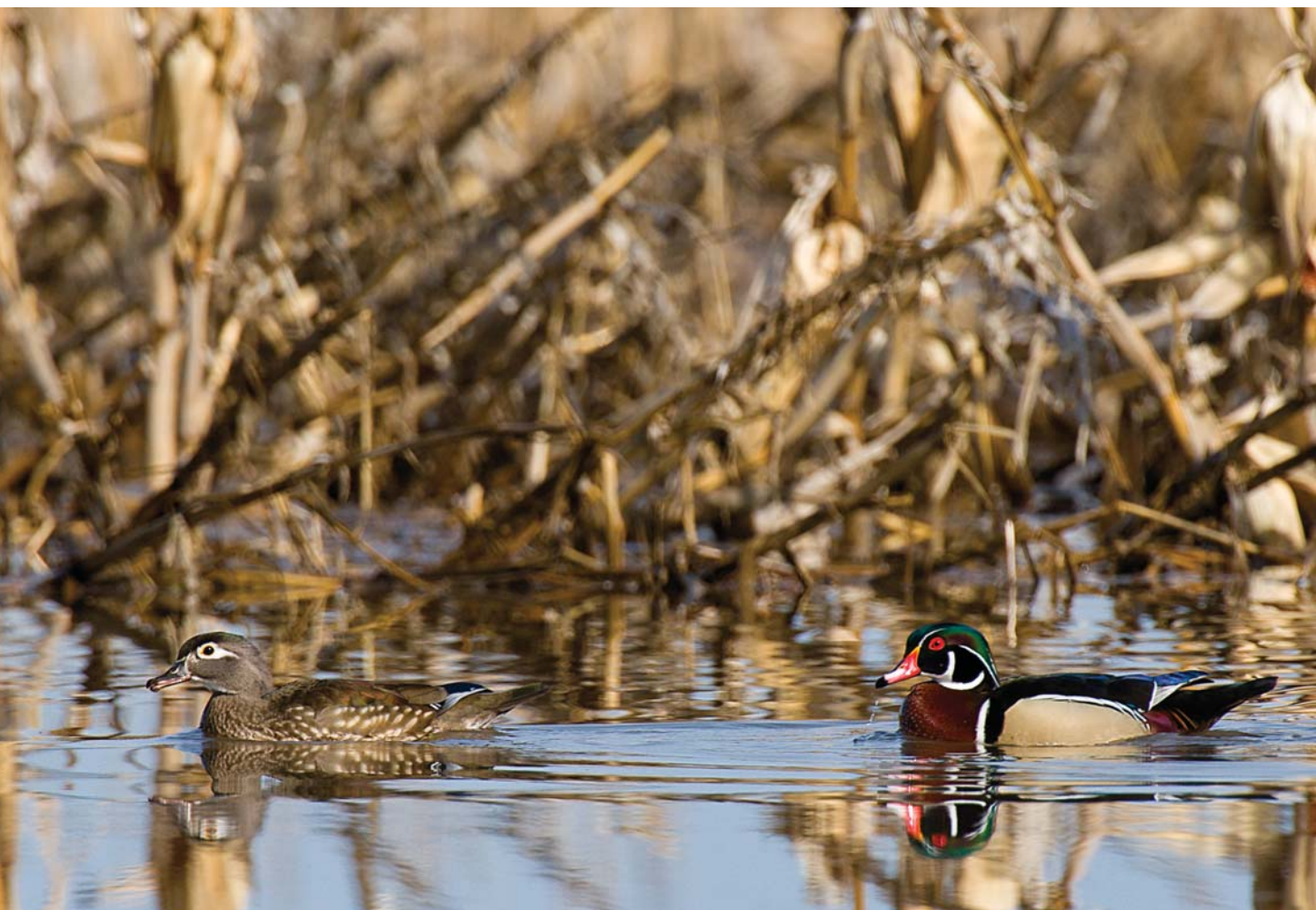
Some species of fish, such as pallid sturgeon in the Missouri River, rely on rising water in the spring as their cue to spawn. Other opportunistic species spawn on the floodplain, taking advantage of abundant food.

As swift-moving floodwater spills onto the floodplain it slows, depositing the sediment it carries across the landscape. The heaviest sediment, mostly sand, settles out first. Farther from the river, a layer of silt and clay might cover the land when the water recedes. “Different species of plants take to the soils and the wetness of the individual sites, so that’s what keeps a plant community diverse and why disturbance is, in fact, a good thing,” said Scott Luedtke, district manager for the Commission’s private lands programs in southeastern Nebraska.

The more diverse the habitat, the greater the variety of species that occupy it. And with water, wetlands, riparian forests, wet meadows and other habitats, the number of species found along meandering rivers can be incredibly diverse.



The Elkhorn River gobbled up acres of pasture and 1,100 feet of the Cowboy Trail west of Clearwater last year, as well as several bridges downstream. Officials are still sorting out their options for fixing the trail, most notably the cost that will be involved.



A pair of wood ducks swim through a flooded cornfield at Langdon Bend WMA near Brownville in March 2010, flooding that was caused by heavy runoff from melting snow in Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota.



At the crest of the Elkhorn River flood on June 18, water four feet deep lapped at the base of the windowsills of the shelter at Dead Timber State Recreation Area near Scribner. Built by federal work crews during the Great Depression, the shelter sits on an oxbow lake one-half mile from the river.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



Riding flows coming off the floodplain six days after the peak of the flood, a grass pickerel fingerling struggles to make its way across a sandbar just feet from a newly created oxbow near Stanton. Fish are free to move back and forth between rivers and ponds during floods, which can lead to the unwelcome introduction of common carp and other rough fish.

River Science 101

The majority of Nebraska's rivers are of alluvial form, flowing through a flat landscape comprised of sand and soil deposited by tributaries flowing from higher ground on either side of the river valley.

Most are meandering rivers, with beds and banks that are often easily eroded, allowing the river channel to migrate back and forth across the valley. There are exceptions in reaches of some rivers, such as the Niobrara and Snake rivers, where water flows over rock, more common in bedrock rivers in mountainous regions. Other Nebraska rivers, most notably the Platte, are braided streams in which the river takes a relatively straight course but whose waters twist and turn within a high bank, leaving a maze of sandbars and channels when flows are low.

While rivers mostly stay within their high banks, they periodically spill onto the floodplain, which stretches from the banks to the edge of the valley through which the river flows. Many species of fish and wildlife have adapted to take advantage of these annual events.

Man's efforts to dam, straighten, channelize and stabilize rivers for irrigation, navigation and flood control have removed the natural meandering function of some rivers and the annual flooding once experienced by others.

Much Different Results

Other than their size, the Missouri and Elkhorn rivers are very similar. At least they used to be. That was readily apparent last summer, when these meandering rivers flooded.

The flooding on the Missouri lasted for months, yet did little more than inundate adjacent farm fields before finally slipping back into its highly-engineered banks. The Elkhorn was above flood stage for just five days. In that time, however, the river resculpted the landscape in and adjacent to the river, diversifying and revitalizing the habitats available to fish and wildlife, even creating a new course in places.

Cutoffs can occur gradually under normal flows on any meandering river, even groundwater-fed Sandhills rivers such as the Calamus, where there is little flow variation. They can also occur abruptly during high flows, as was the case last June on the Elkhorn, where at least four cutoffs were made in the 50 mile stretch of river between Stanton and Clearwater.

While meander cutoffs aren't an

everyday occurrence on the Elkhorn River, fly above the river in an airplane or look at it on Google Earth, a free, downloadable software, and you will see how common they are. "That signature of the river spreads all over the place and at one time the river flowed in a lot of different places," said Tom Welstead, district wildlife manager in the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Norfolk office.

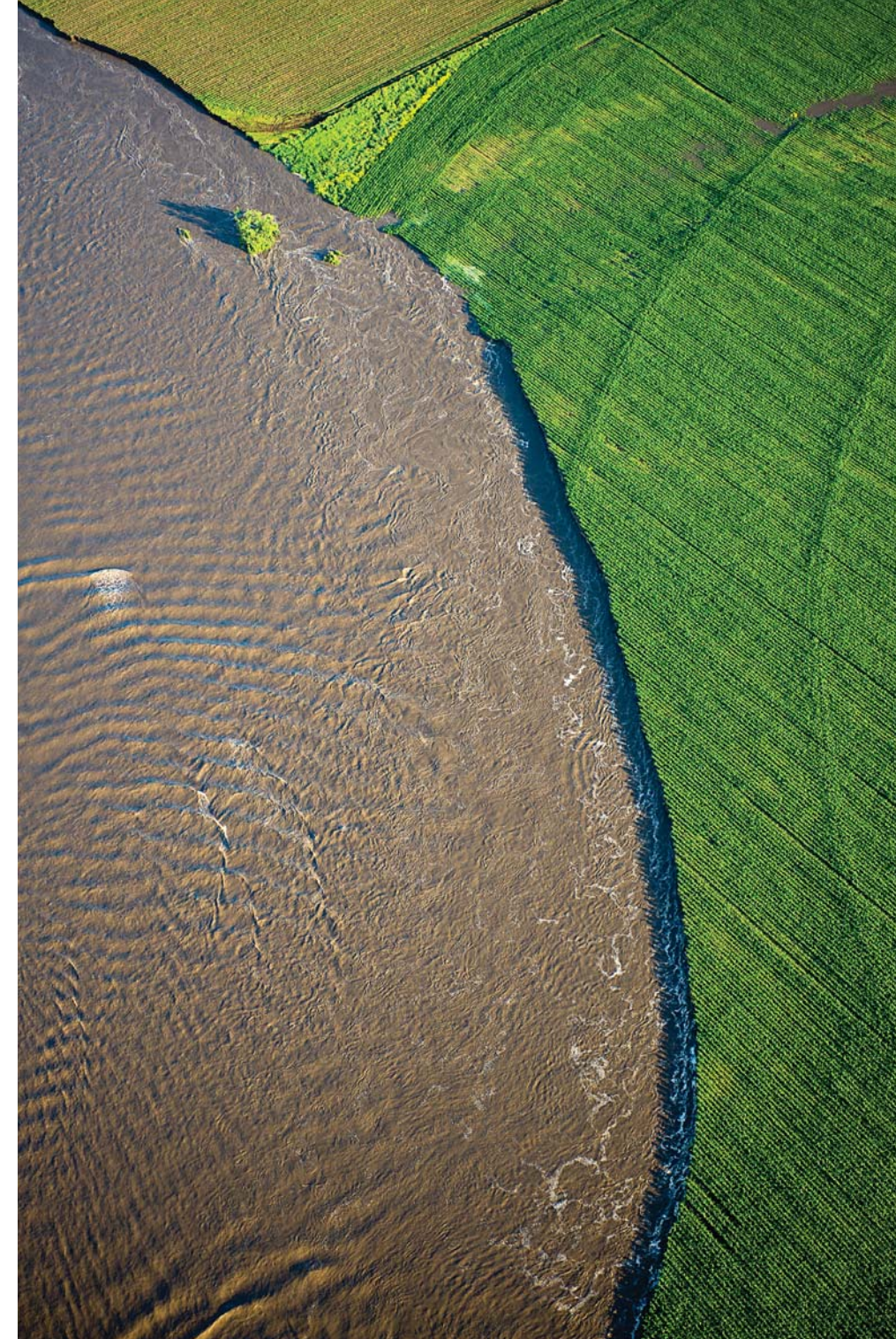
A feature on the newest version of Google Earth easily answers the question others couldn't: How often do cutoffs occur on the Elkhorn? In the same stretch of river where four cutoffs formed last summer, two were made in the 1990s, likely during the previous record high flows in 1995. Other cutoffs were formed in upstream and downstream reaches of the river.

Cutoffs were also common on the Missouri River before dams erased the river's biannual peak flows. Several persist as oxbow lakes today, including Carter Lake in Omaha, formed when the river changed course in 1877.

But except where they have been rebuilt to restore lost habitat, backwaters and side channels are gone on the lower Missouri. These habitats once provided storage for floodwaters. Now levees contain overbank flows on a fraction of the floodplain. But where the levees are close together, they can also cause water to back up and flood points upstream.

Below the mouth of the Platte River, which feeds a heavy sediment load into the Missouri, the riverbed has risen. According to a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers report, flooding now occurs at Nebraska City with half the flows of what it took 40 years ago. Last year's flooding below the Platte was the second in three years, and the deposition of sediment along the river has further reduced the amount of water the levees can contain.

While high flows may now lead to more severe flooding, in most years the channelized Missouri River still rarely connects with its floodplain below the Platte and does so even less frequently above it. With less habitat and food, there are far fewer fish in the river than there were historically. And while mature cottonwoods are abundant along the river, regeneration and young trees are almost nonexistent because



The Elkhorn River carves away at a farm field, shifting the riverbank more than 100 yards inland from its former location. Farming on the floodplain comes with the risk of floods taking land or drowning crops, as well as the rewards provided by fertile soils.

the species' fluffy, air-borne seeds rarely find silt-covered sandbars left moist by receding floodwaters, conditions vital to germination. Cottonwoods are an important component of riparian forests, which are home to countless bird species, and biologists now worry what will happen when these old-growth cottonwoods disappear.

Unless something is changed, flooding problems will worsen on the Missouri below the Platte. Biologists and conservationists are asking that an erodible corridor concept be adopted on the river. Money that has been spent to bail out flood victims could instead be used to purchase flood-prone lands, and the river could be left to act like a meandering river between the levees,



Above: The Elkhorn River cuts a new course across the neck of a mile-long meander near Stanton on June 16, the crest of the flooding. Below: In the upper end of the oxbow lake left by the cutoff, the river created a massive sandbar covering 40 acres and measuring six feet deep or more in spots, as seen in this photo taken November 2.



which could even be moved back in places to give the river more wiggle room. Not only would this increase flood storage and reduce downstream flooding, it would also create needed fish and wildlife habitat, which in turn, would draw hunters, anglers, wildlife watchers and the money they spend.

“Give the river some time and space to heal itself and it will create the habitat we want,” said Zuerlein.

Life on the River

When meandering rivers are left to do what they do, there are winners and losers. Austin Funk of Stanton lost quite a bit when the Elkhorn took a shortcut across his property last June. The river cut off a meander and created a mile-and-a-half-long oxbow lake. But in the process it also took a sandpit chock-full of crappies, an irrigation

well, a grain bin, a small vineyard and 14 acres of farmland.

Funk and his wife only recently moved to the property to escape the big city life in Denver. They converted part of a pole barn into a cabin that is home for now and will be their hunting cabin when a new home is complete. From the cabin they watched the river carve away at their property, closing the distance between their door and its banks from what had been more than 200 yards to just 50 or so.

“We knew it could happen, but we were hoping it wouldn’t,” said Funk, who said he’s always been drawn to riverbottoms since growing up in Minnesota, and understands the risks involved with living on a river.

Funk now has to get permission from a neighbor to access some of his land, which now lies on the other side of the river channel. Before the flood, Eldon Taake of Battle Creek had to ask the same of Funk in order to access land he owned on the inside of the meander. “It did me a lot more good than harm for being as bad of a flood as it was,” said Taake, a winner in the flood.

Taake had purchased the property primarily for the deer, duck, turkey and pheasant hunting, as well as the fishing it offered. “It was tough to [duck] hunt the river there, it was so deep and fast,” he said. Now not only will hunting be easier, it will likely be better. The same might be said for his fishing.

Man went to great lengths to ensure that the lower Missouri River no longer changes course. Funk didn’t take such drastic measures, but he did try to slow the river’s migration, feathering and riprapping the bank and seeding it with grasses to prevent erosion. He’ll do so again, this time adding trees and shrubs to the mix. “And if we get lucky, we may go several years without any serious floodwater and we might be ok. It might just hold it,” he said. “But if we get another (flood) like last year, all bets are off.”

Because whether the river is naturally free flowing like the Elkhorn, or engineered like the Missouri, floods will happen, no matter how hard man tries to prevent them. That’s nature, however, and that’s okay. “You hope it doesn’t [flood],” Funk said. “But that’s the river and there’s nothing you can do about it.” ■

How Wet Was It?

The flooding that occurred last year on the Elkhorn, Missouri and other Nebraska rivers was triggered by a very wet June. Omaha saw the seventh wettest June in more than 120 years of records, and the 10.71 inches of rain – 6.46 inches above normal – that fell in Norfolk made for the area’s fourth wettest June on record.

But the stage was set when rains saturated the soil in the fall of 2009 prior to the freeze. When the heavy snows that piled up in Nebraska, South Dakota and Iowa last winter began to melt, most of the moisture ran off. That boosted flows and caused some lowland flooding along the Missouri and its tributaries, including the Elkhorn, in March. At Nebraska City, the Missouri was above flood stage for 88 days. At Rulo, it was out of bank for 106 days. It was the second time in three years this reach flooded.

Six large reservoirs on the Missouri River in Nebraska, North and South Dakota, and Montana can capture runoff from melting snow on the plains and the mountains, but there is nothing to hold back runoff below the reservoirs. And that’s where the rains fell last June. Norfolk was in the midst of a band stretching from the center of Nebraska across Iowa that saw two to three times the normal rainfall in June. One storm after another dumped rain on eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. Once soils were saturated the water had only one place to go, leaving rivers and streams brimming, even in the Sandhills, where rivers primarily fed by groundwater washed out several low dams.

The flooding on the Elkhorn River was historic, with record rains pushing river levels at gauges in Ewing, Norfolk and Pilger to two or three times the previous recorded high. Experts categorized the flooding on the Elkhorn as a 200- or even a 500-year flood event. Put another way, there is a .5 to .2 percent chance of such a flood happening in a given year.

The river spread far beyond its banks for much of its reach between O’Neill and its mouth near Gretna, flooding cities, farms and farmland and closing or washing out roads and bridges. One man was killed when a railroad bridge he was inspecting near Norfolk washed out. Damage to public property totaled more than \$10 million.

Flows from the Elkhorn, Loup and other rivers sent the Platte so far above flood stage that its flows alone would have been enough to cause flooding along the Missouri, but the Platte was far from the only

Missouri tributary that was swollen. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cut releases from Gavins Point Dam for a short time to alleviate problems downstream, but was forced to increase flows when the lake’s level came within inches of topping the floodgates.

From the mouth of the Platte River south, the Missouri spilled over the rip-rapped banks of its narrow, 600-foot-wide navigation channel, nearly topping some federal flood levees that parallel most of its course, and washing out several smaller levees. On the landward side of those levees, tributaries backed up and caused additional flooding. At Rulo the floodwaters stretched for five miles across the riverbottom.



The rising water that flooded much of Langdon Bend WMA between the levee and the Missouri in March was but a precursor of things to come.



While the overall benefits to fish and wildlife are good, there is collateral damage caused by flooding, as illustrated by this egg floating in Elkhorn River floodwaters at Wood Duck WMA near Stanton.

EXPLORE WITH EDGERTON

Nebraska-born Dr. Harold E. Edgerton (1903-1990) was the inventor of high-speed stroboscopic photography. A museum stands in his honor in Aurora.

By Kelsea Nore

The Edgerton Explorit Center sits on the south side of Aurora in a brick building less than five minutes off the Interstate. The day I visited, the center was fairly quiet, especially for a Saturday – the result, I assume, of the day’s cold temperatures and gray skies. A group of men arrive shortly after my friend and I do, and I overhear one of them mention working as an engineer. The handful of children visiting the museum that morning are making joyful noises, dashing from one hands-on exhibit to the next with happy cries of “Hey c’mere, this is so cool!” Although the engineer’s group spends far more time reading the histories written on the walls of the center and is more subdued, their interest is just as obvious and enthusiastic.

The robotics station is popular, and there’s fairly constant motion around the green phosphorescent wall that

freezes one’s shadow in place, courtesy of a bright flash. Outside the busy, colorful room of exhibits is Strobe Alley – part biography, part exhibition and all in celebration of the life and work of Dr. Harold ‘Doc’ Edgerton, a man who *National Geographic Magazine* named “one of most influential scientists of the twentieth century.”

Edgerton is often known for his photographs, many of which are featured in the center. During my trip, I see one boy staring up at one of the more famous images, “Coronet (Milk Drop),” and his small face scrunches up with curiosity. “How did he do that picture?” he asks his mother, “How did he know it dropped?” Similar questions have crossed many minds when admiring the work of this native Nebraskan scientist.

Harold Eugene Edgerton was born in Fremont in 1903. His father, Frank, was a lawyer, journalist, author and orator and served as the assistant attorney general of Nebraska from 1911 to 1915. Harold grew up in Aurora, but also spent some of his childhood years in Washington, D.C., and Lincoln. As a high school student, Edgerton split his free time between work in his uncle’s photography shop and the Nebraska Power and Light Company, two places that heavily influenced Edgerton’s later work. In 1925, after graduating from UN-L with an electrical engineering degree, Edgerton moved east to Schenectady, New York to take a

research position at General Electric.

While there, Edgerton worked hands-on with the era’s latest technology, electrical generators. Whenever one of the machines experienced a glitch, it was hard to assess the problem without running the machine and harder still to find the exact location while the machine was in motion. Edgerton noticed that a bright flash of light from the tube used to send power surges appeared to capture the motion, to hold it still for just a moment, forming an

idea that would eventually change science.

Dr. Edgerton began studies at MIT in 1927 and completed his Masters of Science a year later. His work at this point focused on the electronic stroboscope and motors, but at the encouragement of his colleague, Charles Stark Draper, Edgerton used his knowledge in combination with photography. What would later become some of his iconic images, such as a

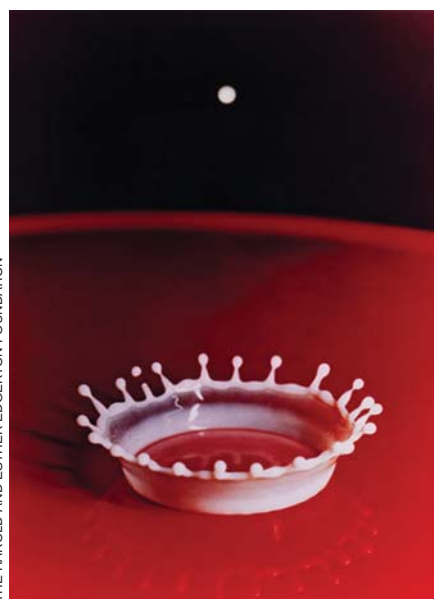


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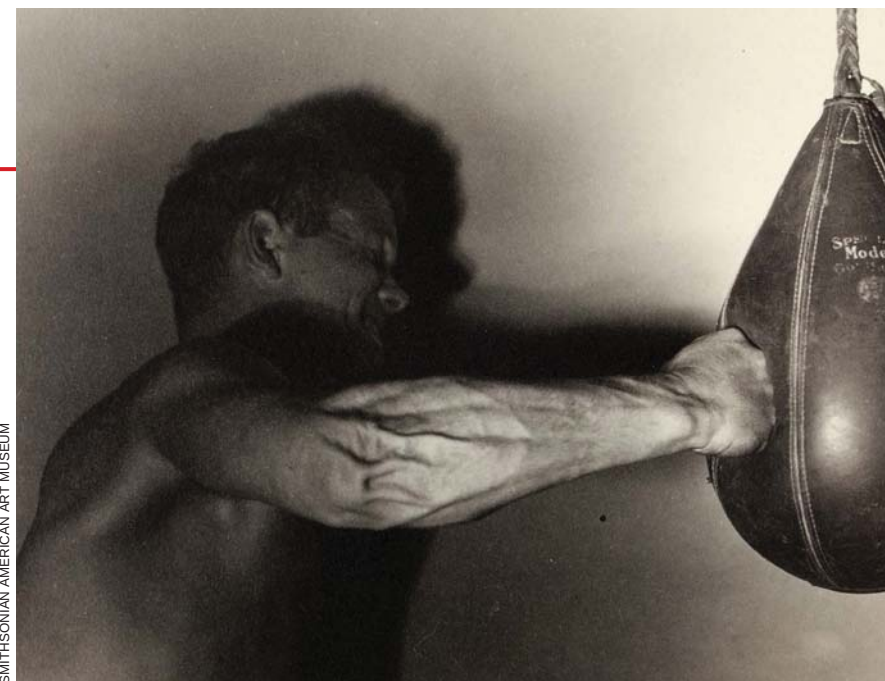
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Cutting the Card Quickly, 1964



Milk Drop Coronet, 1957.

THE HAROLD AND ESTHER EDGERTON FOUNDATION



SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

Unidentified boxer punching bag – ca 1930.

golf swing and a bullet slicing through a playing card, were captured using a multiframe strobe light. For the first time, high-speed motion could be captured. Edgerton’s photographs were extremely popular with the public and he even won an Oscar for his work on a short film entitled ‘Quicker ‘n a Wink.’

Edgerton’s illustrious career also included crafting a large quartz flash lamp that allowed WWII pilots to take nighttime photographs of enemy territory. Another of his inventions, the rapatronic camera, was used to capture atomic test explosions in the 1950s.

Edgerton was contacted by *National Geographic* regarding underwater photography. His work in this field earned Edgerton the nickname ‘Papa Flash’ from Jacques Cousteau; the two became lifelong friends shortly after meeting. Edgerton took several voyages in the Calypso and created sonar and echo transmitters (‘pingers’ and ‘boomers’) that relayed important information about ocean depths, information that was then used to craft the cameras and flashes necessary to film oceanic landscapes.

Science Educator Michael Randall told me that during the week the Edgerton Explorit Center is often filled to capacity with curious children on school trips. “We’ll have two groups of 70 some days, one bunch in the morning and another in the afternoon.” It is easy



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Bobby Jones Swing Golf Club, 1938.

to imagine the facility filled with noise, movement and knowledge. “Doc was highly admired as a teacher,” Randall said, “and he gave off a very infectious energy. Edgerton was quoted as saying, ‘The trick to education is to teach people in such a way that they don’t realize they’re learning until it’s too late,’ something that is very evident when watching visitors at the center.”

The Edgerton Explorit Center is a testament to that philosophy. The hands-on, interactive nature of the exhibits and demonstrations teaches

both children and adults about the many ways that science influences our lives. Doc Edgerton would undoubtedly be delighted.

If you plan to include the Edgerton Explorit Center on your vacation, Mormon Island SRA is a mere twenty miles east on I-80, a perfect distance to hear “how did he do that picture?” from your children on the way back to your campsite. ■



Kelsea Nore is a freelance writer living in Omaha.



COURTESY OF THE EDGERTON EXPLORIT CENTER

Interactive displays and presentations entertain and teach visitors at the Edgerton Center.



Windmill SRA

Where Life Spins More Slowly

Photos and text by Jon Farrar

The credit for the string of fishing holes along Interstate-80 is generally given to Mel Steen, former director of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. In the early-1960s, as the Interstate was still being planned, Steen saw an opportunity: Uncounted yards of fill would be needed to construct the new super highway and much of that would come from barrow pits where the Interstate paralleled the Platte River. Why not make those water-filled pits the core of a string of recreation areas, a "chain of lakes?" Windmill State Recreation Area at the Gibbon interchange became one of the first. After acquiring land from Duncan E. McGregor, a staunch supporter of the project, sand and gravel was pumped in 1966 and 1967,



Spencer Price of Council Bluffs dip-nets for aquatic life during his family's rest-stop on their way to Idaho.

creating six small lakes around which the recreation area was shaped. Initially called the Gibbon Road Ranch, part of what Steen called the Platte Valley Parkway, the construction of camping and picnicking areas soon began and the area was officially dedicated on April 5, 1970. The area's name was chosen because Pawnee that once lived on the Loup River used to follow and cross the Platte near present-day Gibbon, where a trader's post with a windmill became a landmark for them. In keeping with the area's name, and with the help of local supporters, a large, Standard



windmill was acquired, restored and erected near the SRA's entrance. Two additional windmills were subsequently purchased, a Dempster (manufactured in Beatrice) and a Waupum. Today Windmill SRA provides a welcome stopping place for road-weary travelers and a great weekend or after work getaway for campers and anglers. Steen would be proud.



Above: Left to right – Parker Kenter, Baylee Rockefeller, Jade Bentley, Stacy Rockefeller, Laci Bentley and Sandy Clymer bask in the summer sun on Windmill's beach area.

Right: Mick Hutcheson of Nehawka casts for shoreline bass on one of the area's six lakes.

Opposite: Master Angler-sized bluegills are not required to bring a smile to the face of Fatima Simental of Gibbon.

For more information about Windmill SRA and other camping, hunting and fishing areas along Interstate I-80, go to: outdoornebraska@ne.gov



Big Rise at Big Mac

Lake McConaughy is expected to fill this year, which bodes well for the future.

By Eric Fowler

For most of the past decade, the talk around Lake McConaughy focused on water or, more accurately, the lack of it after drought and other issues resulted in a record low in 2004. With the lake nearly filling last year and expected to this year, the talk is now turning to there being too much water.

“Now we’ll be hearing, ‘Where’s all the beach? The water’s too high,’” Ty Grafford, superintendent at the state recreation area north of Ogallala, jokingly said of the turnaround, which no doubt helped boost the number of visitor days at the lake to just under one million, up 350,000 from 2004.

The water level at Big Mac typically falls 10 to 20 feet during the summer as water is released for irrigation in south-central Nebraska and refills the remainder of the year. In 2010, the lake dropped less than two feet during the irrigation season, a new record that came on the heels of a meteoric 30-foot rise from the end of the 2009 season.

The rise was due to inflows from the North Platte River that were 160 percent of normal thanks to above-average snowpack in the Rocky Mountains and heavy spring rains in lower elevations. Lake releases that were only 75 percent of normal thanks to high flows on the South Platte River meeting much of the irrigation demand also helped.

“This is what happens with consecutive years of good snowpack,” said Cory Steinke of Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District, which manages the reservoir.

With above-average runoff forecasted once again in the North Platte River basin, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in late-February began releasing water

from North Platte River reservoirs in Wyoming, which are well above normal levels, to make room for it. Releases were increased from McConaughy as well to insure there will be enough room for the runoff, which Steinke said should easily fill the lake if forecasts hold true. While that is good, Steinke said, high inflows may require additional releases, which could cause lowland flooding along the North Platte River between the lake and North Platte.

Boaters can once again launch their boat on either end of the nearly 20-mile long reservoir, and many spots in between. The two low-water boat ramps on the lake’s east end that served boaters during the drought are now under water, but most of the lake’s 13 ramps should be in service for all or part of this summer. The one that won’t, the bayside ramp at Cedar Vue, was damaged by erosion during the low water and the unexpected rise covered the damage before repairs could be made.

Cedar Vue campground, the lake’s largest, was once again bustling last summer. Located at the upper end of the reservoir, the campground was seven miles from the lake at its low point and rarely had campers. Grafford said last July 4th all but seven of its 117 camper pads were full. The Commission’s other modern campgrounds – Lone Eagle and Little Thunder – have stayed full on weekends in recent years, but like Cedar Vue can once again boast having campsites only yards from the water’s edge. Other public and private campgrounds areas around the lake also reported a busy summer.

Campsites on the beach – what little there was – were hard to find on busy weekends last summer and will be at a

premium this summer if the lake fills as expected. Still, there will be room for plenty of campers in the uplands and in bays above the waterline.

Walleye have been hard to find at the lake the past two years for both anglers and biologists, who sampled one-third as many walleye in their annual survey last fall as they did in 2009. That haul included not only lots of fish, but lots of trophy-class fish.

Darrol Eichner, the Commission’s district fisheries manager, knows the walleye are still there, it’s just that the lake’s water volume doubled to 1.5 million acre feet and its surface area increased 40 percent to 28,000 acres last year, giving the fish more water to hide in.

“We have more elbow room – a lot more elbow room – and all of that has a lot of submerged trees and willows,” said Eichner. “It’s tough fishing (in the trees), but it’s a very good fish-producing situation.”

Eichner is encouraged by the number and condition of young-of-the-year walleye they sampled late last summer. Those fish benefited from the explosion at the base of the aquatic food chain that occurs when vegetation is flooded. Eichner also saw excellent reproduction in channel catfish, which he says are both underappreciated and underutilized at Big Mac. White bass recruitment was good, but not great. Yellow perch, smallmouth and largemouth bass and northern pike numbers have grown from natural reproduction. Black and white crappies stocked in the reservoir last year are also expected to benefit from the added habitat.

“We’re building for the future,” said Eichner. ■

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Nebraska’s Southwest Playa Wetlands

Little Gems of the Plains

By Ted LaGrange, Wetland Program Manager, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

The car rolled to a stop on a Duel County gravel road next to what only a few weeks earlier had been a dry low spot in a farmer’s wheat field. The “low spot” was now full of water from a recent thunderstorm and was teeming with life, including snails, tadpoles and frogs. At the water’s edge, shorebirds and waterfowl were feeding in the newly flooded shallows.

With me were Alison Cariveau and Lacreia Johnson, research biologists from the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO). We were stopped at a southwest playa wetland, one of about 16,000 such sites located in parts of 13 Nebraska counties, from Lincoln County in the east to Kimball County in the west. Southwest playas are small wetlands, most covering only an acre or two, that fill with snowmelt and rainfall runoff. Most have no natural outlet and hold water because of a clay layer in the soil. When the rains stop, the water disappears in a matter of weeks to a few months.

Although we had information about where these wetlands were from soil and wetland maps, we had little idea about how important they might be for wildlife, even though they are often dry and farmed. We also lacked information on what conservation measures might be needed for these wetlands. So in 2006, RMBO initiated a three-year study to fill this information gap. Realizing these wetlands were often without water, and that studying wetland wildlife in a dry wetland would not yield the information needed, we started monitoring Doppler radar returns for thunderstorm events and going where the rain fell.

The night of August 8, 2006 proved

to be a stormy one for parts of Chase and Perkins counties, as a thunderstorm dumped rain in a narrow band about 12 miles wide and 60 miles long, with some areas receiving up to four inches. After confirming that many of the area’s playas had water in them, we



Derek Hill (left) and Cliff Cordy from the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory evaluate plants found in a southwest playa wetland.

began our study and were awed at how rapidly wildlife found these newly flooded areas.

We also monitored the wetlands after a second rain event in May 2008. From these two events we counted 158,232 birds using the 558 playa wetlands surveyed, comprising 140 species, 29 of which were species of conservation concern. We also documented four species of frogs and toads using 93 percent of the playas surveyed. This information confirmed that these transient and frequently cropped wetlands were indeed important for a wide array of wildlife species, especially waterfowl and shorebirds.

Because these wetlands are dependent upon rainfall runoff, a second major component of the study was to evaluate the effects surrounding land cover had on the likelihood that a playa would fill with water. The watersheds evaluated were cropland, native rangeland and land planted to tall, dense vegetation. We learned that playas were most likely

to fill with water if surrounded by native rangeland, were less likely if surrounded by cropland, and were least likely to fill if surrounded by tall, dense vegetation.

The conservation challenge is ensuring these playas receive water, but

not sediment carried into them by runoff across exposed cropland – sediment that over time results in shallower or even vanishing wetlands. The good news is that programs are available for farmers and ranchers to address these challenges, and new program options are being developed based on the results of this study.

Our work with the southwest playas has given us a much greater appreciation of the importance and dynamics of these little gems. So if you ever happen to pass by

one of these dry, low spots, think of it as a playa wetland in waiting: Soon after the storm clouds gather in the west and raindrops begin to fall, the wetland will fill with water, a multitude of amazing life forms will quickly appear and disappear, and the playa will once again patiently wait until the next time thunder rolls across the plains, like a frog waiting to be “kissed” by the rain. ■

This study was conducted by the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory in cooperation with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Funding was provided by a Playa Lakes Joint Venture Conoco/Phillips grant and a State Wildlife Grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Additional assistance was provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. We thank the private landowners who gave us access to study their playas – their cooperation was indispensable for the success of this project.

PHOTO BY TED LAGRANGE



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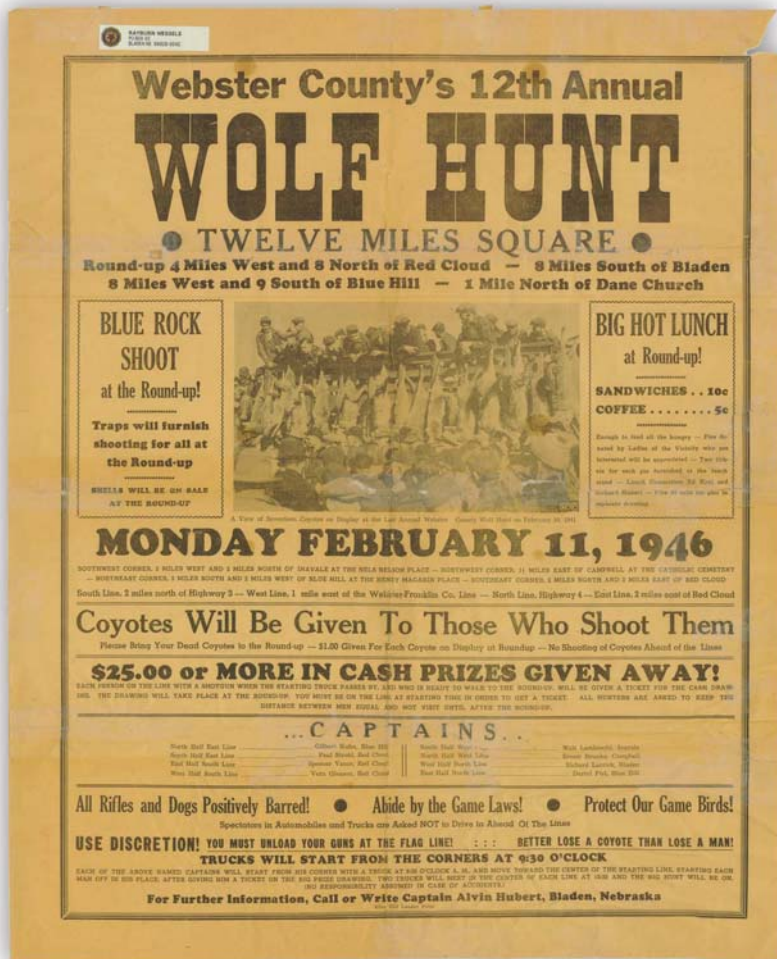


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◀ Here is poster that my grandfather, Otto Wessels, saved from back in the '40s. My dad, Rayburn Wessels, found the poster a couple years ago. I think that my grandfather may be in the photo. We all grew up in Webster County.
— Wendell Wessels, Kearney, Nebraska



▲ This was taken in 1917 or 1918 at Climax, located in the northwestern corner of Custer County. The person in the lower center is my wife's grandfather, Henry Zimmerman, and the person on the lower right is my grandfather, John Jacobson.
— C.D. Thomas, via e-mail



▲ This was taken along the Platte River east of Wann about 1946. It shows my dad, W.R. Surface, and myself with a stringer of catfish.
— Bill Surface, Republican City, Nebraska

► This photo, taken around October 1936 in Ravenna, shows my grandfather, George Nolda, his oldest son, Herb Nolda (my dad) and George's youngest son, Wilbur, called "Curly."



Grandpa had another son, Virg, who isn't with them. That's Grandpa's pride and joy, the 1936 Ford behind them. Herb was 16 and Curly was eight in this photo. Grandpa and his sons loved hunting pheasants together after they moved to Ravenna in 1934 when Grandpa secured a job working as a machinist for the Chicago, Quincy and Burlington Railroad at the roundhouse there. Curly entered the U.S. Army in 1950 and was sent to Korea. In one of his letters he wrote that he'd seen pheasants in Korea and wished he was home to go hunting with his dad and brothers. He also wrote, "But next year I'll be home, and we'll give 'em hell." He was killed in action in November 1951 and is buried in Lincoln.
— Valerie Vierk, Ravenna, Nebraska



▲ My dad, Don Anderson, is shown in 1970 with his faithful bluetick coon hound, "Blue." These coons were treed in creeks outside Newcastle near the Missouri River. That is me at four years of age hanging out of my dad's Willy pickup. We also hunted out of my parent's 1964 Ford Falcon. I am proud to say that I have owned coon hounds now and I love to hunt with my three kids. We enjoy all types of hunting and harvest about 50 coons per year.
— Deric Anderson, Newcastle, 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.

How to Tread Lightly!

Keep vehicles on designated roads or trails.

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