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AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2024

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See page 14

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magazine

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In the middle of August, sumac fruit start to turn crimson. GETTY IMAGES



There will be a supermoon on Sept. 17. A supermoon is when a full moon occurs at the closest point to Earth.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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Jakob Oates, Denver, Colorado
From Our Antelope County Farm

Gordon Warrick, Valentine
Wild Honeysuckle



Mat Custer, Omaha
Barred Owl



Marquene Koontz, Ogallala
Lake Ogallala

Correction: On pages 10-11 of the July issue, the photo was incorrectly attributed. It was Justin Haag's image of swamp milkweed. We regret the error.

Correction: On pages 4-5 of the May issue the photo was identified as western wallflower — it is, in fact, a hairy puccoon. We regret the error.

Send your comments and photos to:
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Please include your postal address and telephone number. Letters may be condensed and edited. Photographs are also welcome.

HEADING SOUTH

A painted lady butterfly, the most widespread butterfly species on the planet, feeds on a Maximilian sunflower at Lake Wanahoo in Saunders County. Like the monarch, painted ladies migrate, and in years when populations are high, the late summer, southerly migration can be spectacular.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Angelo Becerra of Omaha hunts doves with his sons, Angelo Jr. and Adrian, in a food plot planted with sunflowers at Helmuth Marsh Public Access Area in Lancaster County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

INCREASE YOUR DOVE HUNTING SUCCESS

By Julie Geiser

Dove hunting is one of the most challenging hunts around; these fast-flying acrobats of the sky can outmaneuver some of the best wing shooters. Here are a few tips to increase your dove hunting success.

Pattern that Shotgun

The first item on your to-do list is to pattern your shotgun. This important step allows shooters to gain knowledge on how their shotgun shoots while using different brands of ammunition at different distances and with different chokes. For doves, most hunters use lead shot size 7 to 9; if you're hunting in an area that requires steel shot, use No. 6. Most dove hunters use an improved or modified choke for doves at ranges 25 to 35 yards. Pattern your shotgun using different combinations to find what works best for you.

When you determine which brand, load and shot size produce the best pattern at the distance you normally take most of your shots, buy a few boxes of those shells and head for the practice range.

Practice Shooting

Shooting sporting clays is probably the best way to increase your accuracy for doves, as these clays are fast moving and can change direction. It will also allow you to correct mistakes in form and technique and learn to estimate leads at various angles and distances.

Scout for Birds

Scouting for birds is the next step for success. Finding watering holes, food sources, roosting areas and flyways frequently used between each of these areas will help you pattern doves. Scout several locations before the season so you can move from place to place. Too much hunting pressure in one area can quickly ruin the hunt. Always ask for permission on private lands.

Stay still and hidden once you find a location to hunt. Dress in camouflage that matches the location. Doves can quickly flare at movement and colors that don't fit in the terrain. Find cover by using the landscape, vegetation and shaded areas to conceal yourself.

Decoys

Use decoys to put birds at ease and bring them in range for a shot. Clip decoys to sunflowers, fence wires or tree branches for a realistic setup. Set decoys at different distances to help you determine whether a bird is close enough to shoot. One tip: If you can see a dove's feathers and they appear dark, the bird is most likely in range. If the bird is a light gray blur, it's probably too far out.

Last, hunt later in the season. Once other dove hunters have stopped hunting, a new set of doves may come to use an area. A good cold spell in northern areas can send birds migrating south, giving hunters another chance at doves before they migrate onward.

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Trophies awarded at the Nebraska Youth Smallbore Silhouette Invitational at Pressey Wildlife Management Area.

JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

NEBRASKA YOUTH SMALLBORE SILHOUETTE INVITATIONAL

By Julie Geiser

Bullets will travel downrange at steel targets of chickens, rams, turkeys and pigs at the 48th annual Nebraska Youth Smallbore Silhouette Invitational on Sept. 28. The youth .22 competition is set in the rolling hills of Pressey Wildlife Management Area, where young shooters from across the state will participate for free. Established in 1977, this competition is the longest-running organized youth shooting event in Nebraska.

The competition is open to all youth ages 11 and older who have successfully completed Hunter Education and have not yet graduated high school. Shooters are grouped into classes according to age, rifle weight,

sight type and experience level. They may compete individually or as part of a team. The competition consists of 40 rounds fired in two five-round stages at silhouette targets at 40, 60, 77 and 100 meters. Competitors must shoot their rifle unsupported at each steel silhouette target.

The event is lauded for its family-friendly atmosphere and the camaraderie among youth and their families and friends.

Pressey WMA is located 17 miles south of Broken Bow in Custer County. For more information about this event, contact Matthew Haumont at 308-527-3403 or nebraskasilhouette@gmail.com.

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NATIVE AMERICAN GROUSE ‘TACOS’

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

One of the latest cookbooks I’ve acquired is called *The Sioux Chef’s Indigenous Kitchen* by Sean Sherman with Beth Dooley. A James Beard Award winner, Chef Sherman’s book is a modern reclamation of Native American cooking in the Dakotas and Minnesota regions. One recipe that stands out is “Indigenous Tacos.”

Using fried corn mush rounds as base, Chef Sherman tops his tacos with bison meat, which he seasons with native flavorings such as juniper, sage and sumac. He also drizzles the tacos with a fruit sauce called wojape, which he prepares with seasonal berries such as chokecherries, blueberries, raspberries and elderberries.

I piled these tacos with Nebraska sharp-tailed grouse and wojape made with prickly pears, which grow wild in the western part of Nebraska where I hunt sharpies, and also mulberries, which my husband and I gather and freeze every summer.

Servings: 2

Prep Time: 20 minutes

Cooking Time: 1 hour

Ingredients:

- 4 sharp-tailed grouse breasts, boneless (2 birds)
- 8 juniper berries, finely ground
- Dried sumac, to taste
- Salt, to taste
- 2 to 3 tbsp. of duck fat or oil, plus extra
- 1 medium shallot, finely minced
- 1 to 2 tbsp. apple cider vinegar
- ½ cup brown or yellow onion, chopped
- Small bunch of sage leaves, chopped

Corn Cakes

- 3 cups of water



Grouse meat, sage, onion and wojape on corn cakes. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

- ½ tsp. fine sea salt
- 1 cup coarse grind yellow cornmeal or polenta

Fruit Sauce

- 3 large prickly pears (about 1½ cups of flesh)
- 1 cup mulberries
- 2 tbsp. honey, or to taste

1. Set out grouse breasts on the counter for an hour prior to cooking. To make the corn cakes: In a medium saucepan, bring 3 cups of water to a boil. Gradually whisk in cornmeal and sea salt, and stir to get rid of all lumps. Turn heat to low and cook covered for 30 minutes, stirring often to prevent scorching. When cooked, set corn mush aside to cool.

In a small bowl, combine minced shallot and vinegar, and set aside to soak. Note that Native Americans do not traditionally use vinegar in their cooking.

2. Meanwhile, make the fruit sauce: Slice off prickly pear ends, slice down the skin and peel. Chop the seedy flesh and place in a small saucepan with the mulberries. Crush the fruit with

a potato masher, bring to a simmer and cook for 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in honey to taste. Then run fruit and juice through a fine mesh strainer or food mill, squeezing out as much juice as possible. Discard pulp and seeds. If needed, return juice to the saucepan and continue to simmer to thicken. Set aside to cool.

3. To prepare the meat: Season grouse breasts with salt, finely ground juniper berries and generous sprinklings of sumac. Heat duck fat or oil in a pan over medium-high heat and sear on both sides. Remove breasts and loosely cover in foil to finish cooking and to keep warm. In the same pan, sauté chopped onion and sage to soften over medium heat with a pinch of salt.

4. With your hands, form corn mush into cakes about 3-4 inches in diameter and ½-¾ inch thick. Heat fat in a pan over medium-high heat, and brown cakes on both sides until golden and crispy. Chop grouse into small pieces. Serve meat on top of corn cakes with drained “pickled” shallot, onion and sage, fruit sauce and finishing salt. Eat them with your hands.

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Functional Fashion

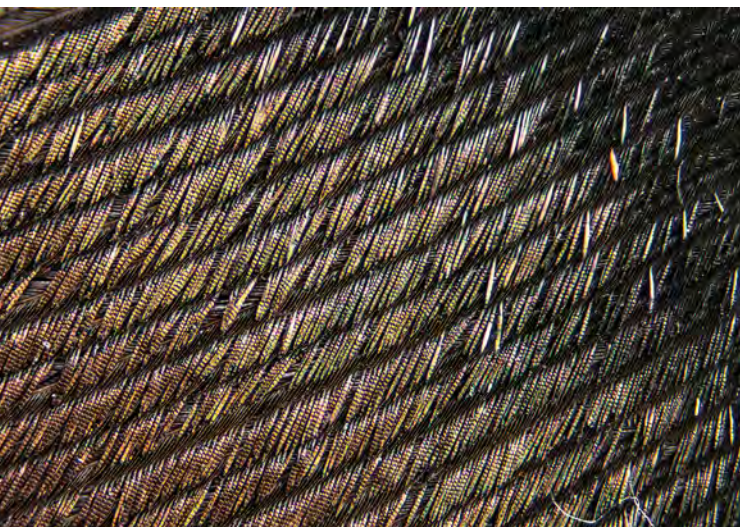
In Wildlife

Story by Lauren Salick
Photos by Alex Wiles

Like a trusty, utilitarian pair of cargo shorts, the “accessories” genetics gifted to wild animals not only provide style but also varying adaptations for survival. Animals use their functional body adornments to protect themselves from predators, acquire food, navigate their environment, thermoregulate and even attract mates. While cargo shorts aren’t exactly the human ideal of “sexy,” many species use functional fashion to display messaging of strong genetics and lineage to prospective partners. Animal “fashion” is the perfect intersection of function. And many of these adaptations exist at the microscopic level.

Feathers

Whether pokey or soft, colorful or camouflaged, feathers generally come in seven unique “styles” — wing, down, tail, contour, semiplume, filoplume and bristle. Each type of feather supports the bird in unique ways. Stemming from a firm, yet supple central pillar called the rachis are thin

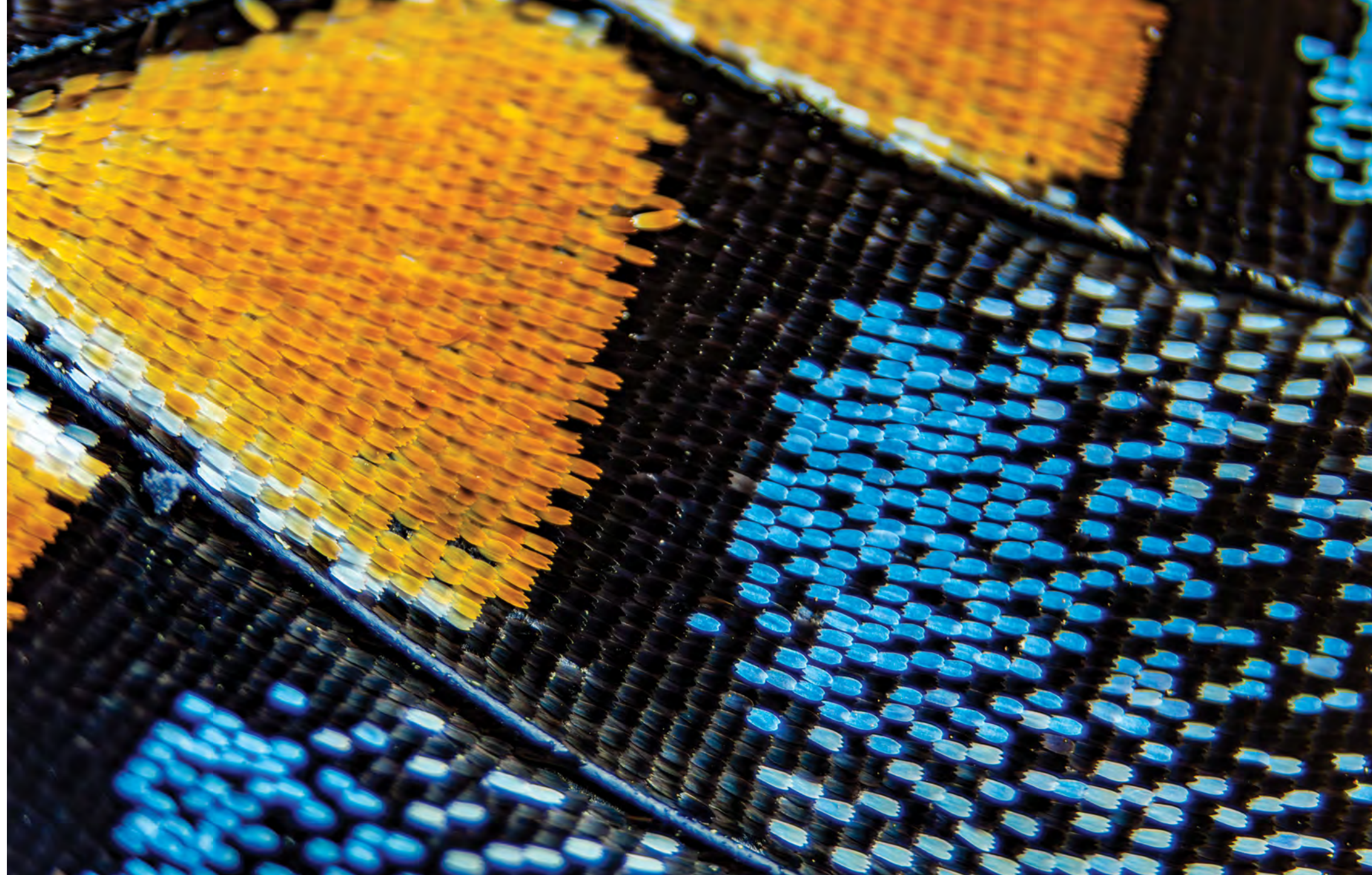


The interlocking barbule segments on a wild turkey's contour feather show slight iridescence under light.

filaments called barbs, which branch further into barbules. Zoomed in, these teeny-tiny barbules possess interlocking structures that hold the barbs “zipped” together, creating tension to ensure a smooth surface for air or water to glide across — such as on a “wing” feather.

Yet some feathers are less uniform: Down feather barbs billow in chaotic fashion, trapping warm air closer to the body of the animal. A bristle feather, by contrast, sports a few barbed filaments at the beginning, and then a towering, naked rachis. These hair-like feathers are often found around a bird's eyes and beak, offering contextual sensory information to the animal in whisker-like fashion.

While some feathers sprout from the bird's skin, others, such as the primary wing feathers, will actually grow out



The fragile, overlapping scales on the wing of a black swallowtail butterfly under a microscope. The delicate veining in the bottom left corner carries air for structural support of the wing, not blood as with other types of veins.

of, and be attached to, the bird's wing bones. These stout feathers are filled with pulp as they grow. When the pulp recedes back into the bone, it leaves the hollow, quill-like feather, long used by humans as writing instruments.

Wing Scales

Lepidoptera, the taxonomic order that makes up butterflies and moths, means “scale wings” in Latin. While the surfaces of butterflies and moths' wings look smooth and uninterrupted to the human eye, it is actually adorned in thousands of colored, microscopic scales. The entire wing is also veined with delicate, air-filled structures that provide

support and strength. When we take a closer look, these delicate structures are easily rubbed off and give these winged insects their brilliant colors and patterns. Anyone who has caught a butterfly and come away with fine, dust-like particles on their hands has experienced this personally.

Physically, the scales are made of overlapping pieces of chitin — a strong natural biopolymer — layered on top of two thin membranes that create the wing, fed by even smaller veins. Together, they make brilliant patterns of spots, stripes, swirls and colorful blocking — making some wings real runway showstoppers and others, more demure and camouflaged.

But scales are not just a flashy accessory. These shingle-



Some snakes have an apex-like ridge on the middle of their scales called the keel, while others are smooth. The skin from a black rat snake as shown here has a slight keel.

like structures can also help the insect stay warm. On sunny days, you might see a butterfly basking with its wings open, its darker pigmented wing scales soaking up the solar radiation.

Other types of specialized scales possessed by some male

butterflies called androconia release provocative pheromones for breeding. Some scales affect air flow, reducing drag, as the insect flies aiding in its aerodynamic abilities. Some species' scales are even hydrophobic — capable of shedding water and dirt.



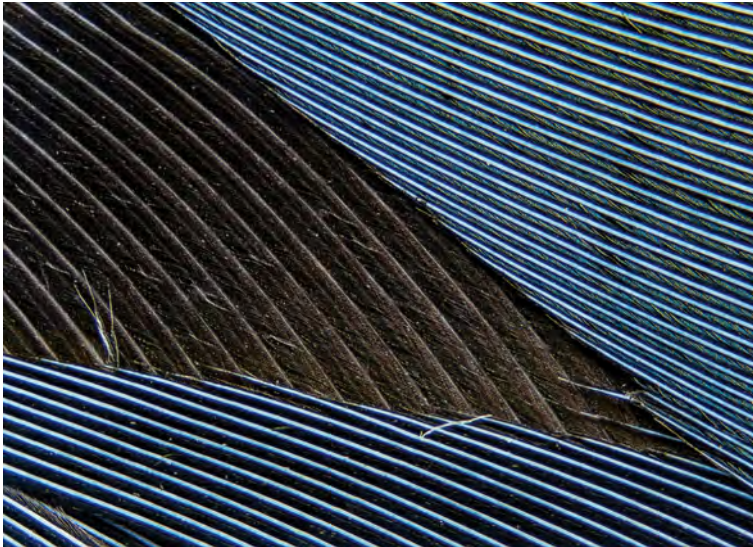
Images of the tip of an albino North American porcupine's quill. The cuticular "scales" seen extending away from the tips act as barbs, embedding in the skin as the victim attempts to pull out the quill.

Quills

Quills are a type of modified hair armor-plated in sheaths of keratin. While they're not "shot" from the animal like urban legend might claim, quills do often possess irritating backward-facing barbules near the tip that ensure difficult removal from the skin of a would-be predator. Nebraska's sole quill-wearer, the North American porcupine, has quills approximately the diameter of an 18-gauge hypodermic needle, but only requires half the amount of force to break the skin barrier than said needle.

A fine protective coat, animals also use quills to send a message of warning. This is known as aposematism, or deterring predators with color or body coverings. Flaring them wide or rattling them together, a porcupine can deter an animal it deems a threat in an intimidating display. Often, the quills used in this acoustic form of aposematism are hollow for enhanced noise-making, such as those on African species of porcupines.

It's important to note that quills are different from another pokey accessory — spines. Quills are a type of spine that fall out easily and have different shapes and lengths depending on where they are located on the body. "Spine" is a generalized term for any hardened, keratinized modified hair, encompassing even those that are deeply embedded into an animal body — such as with the hedgehog. Both of these spines evolved separately in different species and are thus an



While not always seen while swimming or on the ground, the pastel blue of a blue-winged teal's upper wing coverts are distinctive in flight.

example of convergent evolution.

Convergent evolution happens when animals that are not closely related, such as porcupines and hedgehogs, or do not share a common ancestor, adopt similar features or characteristics on their bodies to meet a similar need — in this case, for protection.

But could this "fashion" be fatal? Porcupines climb trees, and as they are not the most agile of animals, often



While some barbules are "zipped" up tight, others, like that in the tail feather of a ring-necked pheasant, are more softly interlaced.



The neon-colored rachis, or central pillar, of a yellow-shafted flicker feather — the meaning of its namesake.



The delicate pennaceous branching of a bristle feather of a wild turkey near the beginning of the rachis (closer to the body of the animal).



In this photo, you can just visualize the scaled keratinized cuticle, lining the outermost layer of the hair, in the coarse guard hairs of a Virginia opossum.

subsequently fall out of them. Dislodged quills can embed themselves into the porcupine’s skin in a luckless condition known as “self-quilling.” It turns out these reclusive rodents have a plan for that, too — studies have shown that North American porcupine quills are covered with free fatty acids, providing antibacterial properties that prevent infection from self-inflicted stabs.

Functional Fashion - Always in Season

Like humans and clothing, animal body coverings are a genetic response to their ecology and habitat. Carefully curated over generations, feathers, fur, scales and quills represent the dominating phenotype that is most successful for survival. If a fish’s scales are the “cargo shorts,” then a phenotype is the outfit — or a set of observable characteristics, including the fins, gills, coloration and other adornments on an animal’s body. While one species may have varying phenotypes, there is generally one that is predominant — and this “trending” outfit became popular not via the runway, but by fitness in an animal’s environment.

While fanciful feathers, embellished scales and rattling quills may seem analogous to the fripperies of haute couture — when we take a closer look, animal fashion serves much more than just for show. Exciting discoveries and inventions

inspired by animal body coverings are sure to continue in our future. [N](#)

Lauren Salick is the education director for Nebraska Wildlife Rehab, dedicating her career to fostering respect and harmony between humans and wildlife. Alex Wiles is the creative director of NEW Multimedia.



The mottled plumage of a common nighthawk. The stark contrast of colors work together to provide camouflage for the animal when seen as a whole plumage.

Wild Indigos

Exceptional Native Ornamentals

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

Ask any horticulturalist what wildflowers make good ornamentals, and wild indigos are usually near the top of their list. Fortunately, Nebraska is home to three native wild indigos — plains, blue and white — all of which are easily started in greenhouses and transplanted as seedlings into flower gardens or established from seed or transplants in backyard prairies.

For many, the most appealing aspect of wild indigos as ornamentals is their bush-like shape and tall, colorful spikes of spring-blooming flowers. I am a fan of their large, inflated seed pods that remain attached to the spikes well into fall; they add a unique touch

to our small backyard prairie in Aurora. But best of all, once established, these deep-rooted, hardy perennials require little care and will add beauty to your landscape for years to come.

Nebraska's Wild Indigos

Belonging to the pea family and also known as false indigos, our state's three wild indigos inhabit tallgrass prairie in southeastern Nebraska. Cattle tend to avoid grazing wild indigos, so they are usually more abundant in grazed pastures compared to un-grazed or hayed prairies.

Plains wild indigo (*Baptisia bracteata*) is our most common and

widespread species. It is a much-branched, stout plant reaching a foot in height and coated throughout in short, velvety hairs. Its large, creamy-yellow flowers begin blooming in early May, somewhat earlier than our other wild indigos. The flower spikes spread outward with their tips often touching the ground, and their oval seed pods reach 2 inches in length, tapering to a sharp-pointed tip.

In contrast, blue wild indigo (*B. australis*) is the rarest of our wild indigos. Botanists speculate that prior to Euro-American settlement, it grew in Nebraska only on limestone soils in Jefferson County. In the mid-1900s, many crop fields in southeastern Nebraska were replanted with prairie grass seed harvested in Kansas, where the plant is common. It is likely blue wild indigo seed was occasionally harvested along with the grass seed, establishing additional populations of the wildflower.

Blue wild indigo plants are 1 to 2 feet tall and, unlike plains wild indigo, have stems and leaves that are hairless, but unlike white wild indigo, they are not waxy. Their upright flower spikes are adorned with intense blue to blue-violet blooms, which begin to open in late May. The oblong seed pods have a sharp-pointed tip and reach 2 inches in length.

White wild indigo (*B. alba*), perhaps the most grazing-tolerant of our wild indigos, can survive even in heavily-



Plains wild indigo adds beauty to a flower garden in Aurora. With their bushy growth, large flower spikes, long lifespan and low maintenance, wild indigos are appealing ornamentals.



Plains wild indigo blooms in a tallgrass prairie in Lancaster County.

grazed pastures. Typically reaching about 3 feet tall in prairies, it can tower to over 5 feet in gardens. The wildflower has smooth, waxy bluish-green stems with many ascending branches, each plant producing one to several flower spikes that stretch to an impressive 18 inches in length, rising well above the foliage. The white flowers, which bloom from late May through June, are about an inch long and have a distinct purple spot at the base of the uppermost petal. In mid-summer, the inch-long, short-beaked,

oval seed pods ripen from a vibrant chartreuse green to a light charcoal black.

Greenhouse Seedlings

Bob Henrickson, Horticulture Program coordinator for the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum in Lincoln, has been growing and selling wild indigos for over 20 years. While heartily promoting the natives, he avoids cultivating the many wild indigo hybrids and crosses, such as “Screamin

Yellow,” which has over a 100 flower spikes per plant, or “Dutch Chocolate,” which has dark brown flowers. “People are smitten by the hybrids’ colors, but I see more bumblebees on the flowers of the native wild indigos,” said Henrickson. Bumblebees, the primary pollinators of wild indigos, may prefer the natives over the hybrids because they provide more nectar and pollen for them to consume. The Arboretum annually grows and sells several hundred white and blue wild indigo plants.

“They go fast,” remarked Henrickson. He collects the seeds for growing white indigo plants from a prairie in Cass County, while the blue indigo seeds are harvested from garden plants originating from Kansas seed. The plants are too few and far between in Nebraska to support seed collection.

Henrickson only occasionally grows plains wild indigo. This is because, in most years, he cannot collect enough seed from local wild populations to grow greenhouse plants due to the baptisia seed borer. This tiny black weevil with a long snout lays its eggs inside plains wild indigo pods, and the maturing grubs consume nearly all the seeds. The borer prefers this species and is far less attracted to white and blue wild indigo pods, allowing them to consistently produce seed.

Before planting, Henrickson scarifies the hard-coated indigo seeds by placing them in a coffee can, adding hot water just below the boiling point, and letting them sit overnight. The heat breaks down the seed coat, allowing germination. He then plants the seeds in small containers filled with potting soil and places them in a cooler for a month.

Wild indigo seeds, and those of most other native plants, must undergo a period of cold temperature to germinate. This prevents them from germinating in their first summer or fall and exposing their tender seedlings to the harsh winter cold.

In late February, after stratification,

Henrickson places the containers in a warm greenhouse, and the wild indigo seedlings are ready for sale and transplanting in May. The first-year seedlings are rather scraggly with few leaves, which turns off some customers, but these plants will survive transplanting. Second-year seedlings are more robust, and the plants often bloom in their third year.

“People need to be patient with wild indigos; the payoff takes time,” said Henrickson.

He recommends transplanting the seedlings into well-drained soil in full sun. Wild indigos can survive in partial shade, but their foliage and blooms will be less vigorous. Once established, the mature, deep-rooted plants will not survive transplanting.

A Top 10 Native Ornamental

Based on their showiness, hardiness and ease of care, Henrickson ranks wild indigos among his top 10 favorite



Blue wild indigo flowers in a prairie restoration in Hamilton County. This species has endured in this restoration for nearly 45 years.



White wild indigo seed pods adorn a backyard prairie in Aurora. The pods remain attached to the flower spikes through the fall.



A greenhouse-grown, four-month-old plains wild indigo seedling is ready for transplanting.

wildflowers for use as ornamentals. In addition to their beauty, he admires their pest resistance, hardiness and drought tolerance. He has planted wild indigos in gardens as far west as Scotts Bluff County, where they do well with watering. In eastern Nebraska, mature plants require little to no watering.

He also appreciates that the plants are long-lived. Case in point, a friend of mine still enjoys the plains wild indigo he planted in his Lincoln flower garden over 20 years ago. In my backyard prairie, the white wild indigos I seeded nearly 25 years ago are still thriving.

Lastly, another important reason

for using wild indigos as ornamentals is that they are native plants. Unfortunately, many non-native ornamentals introduced from Europe, Asia and other distant lands, such as yellow flag iris, Amur honeysuckle and ox-eye daisy, have escaped cultivation and invaded wetlands, woodlands and prairies, displacing native plants. Wild indigos pose no such threat to Nebraska’s landscapes.

In conclusion, if you’re looking to enhance your landscaping, I strongly encourage you to go native and plant wild indigos. Ornamentals don’t get much better than this. 

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

These transitional months are a great time to stay active outdoors. Take advantage of fall hunting seasons, and try your favorite outdoor activity at a Nebraska state park! [N](#)



Participate in archery deer season

Sept. 1 – Dec. 31, 2024
Statewide

Hunting deer with a bow and arrow is an intense experience, said Aaron Hershberger, a hunting and shooting sports outreach coordinator with Nebraska Game and Parks. You'll get to see deer up-close, sometimes just yards away. Plus, the season is a long one, offering diverse experiences and a range of settings to choose from for your hunt. Hershberger recommends scouting ahead of the season. "Know where those deer are and where they're finding food," he said. "Once you know that they're there, get out whenever you can."

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Fish for channel catfish at Merritt

A peak time is August and September
Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area

It's late summer, and fishing can be tough. However, catfish can still be caught; they're a warm-water species, have finished spawning and are feeding now to get ready for winter. While you might catch more catfish in other places, you've got the best chance at big catfish at Merritt Reservoir, up to 20 pounds and maybe more. You can fish from either a boat or the bank, and blood baits are a favorite this time of year. DARYL BAUER, NGPC FISHERIES



Try the Go Ape ropes course

Dates vary; generally Fridays to Mondays in August and September | Eugene T. Mahoney State Park

Whether you're looking for a fun afternoon with family or friends, a team-building activity or a rush of adrenaline, you can find it with this treetop experience — the only one like it in Nebraska. This high-ropes adventure course features suspended obstacles, breathtaking zip lines and incredible views. A less-intense course, Treetop Journey, is available for kids, while Treetop Adventure is designed for adults. Make a reservation or learn more at GoApe.com/location/Nebraska-Ashland or by calling 1-800-971-8271. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Attend the Enders Fall Trail Ride

Sept. 28, 9-11 a.m. | Enders Reservoir State Recreation Area

Saddle up your horse for two-and-a-half to three hours of riding through gorgeous scenery and seeing wildlife such as deer, turkey and pheasants. The park has hosted a spring and fall trail ride annually for three years now. "The biggest thing people can experience [at the event] is new friendships," said ride leader Dayna Scherbarth. "You get to meet other people who love horses just as much as you do." See additional details at Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Look for cicada killer wasps

In Nebraska, time frame to see them is July and August | Statewide

While these insects have an intimidating name — and even an intimidating appearance, thanks to their large bodies and the stingers that females have — they are not aggressive toward humans, and usually only sting people if directly handled or threatened. Spot them around lawns, sidewalks, driveways, golf course sand traps and garden beds. Females are busy hunting and capturing cicadas for their nests, which serve as food for the larvae. Cicada killer wasps help control insect populations and assist in pollination, so rather than fear them, be thankful for them! JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND



50 Years Educating Hunters



Conservation Officer Larry Elston teaches firearm safety to a young student during a Hunter Education class in 1981.

JACK CURRAN, NEBRASKALAND



used for Hunter Safety training programs, giving states the funding needed to hire staff to manage the programs, recruit and train volunteers and provide classroom materials.

“Without that funding source, we would have established a program, but would it be as robust as it is today? Probably not,” said Jeff Rawlinson, an assistant division administrator at Nebraska Game and Parks who oversees Hunter Education staff and has been involved in the International Hunter Education Association for many years. “Federal funding was crucial.”

The Nebraska Hunter Safety Program was launched by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in September 1972.

By Eric Fowler

Nebraska has always had a proud hunting tradition, but by the 1970s, an increase in the number of incidents in the field was becoming a big concern. Some incidents had deadly consequences. Additionally, many hunters didn't know the game laws or how to hunt ethically.

Many factors could have played into the increase. The state's population was growing rapidly, and baby boomers were taking to the field. The population also was becoming increasingly urban, so more kids were growing up on playgrounds instead of hunting rabbits on the farm after learning how to safely use the .22-caliber rifle they got for Christmas. Most of the incidents involved young, inexperienced gun handlers.

Regardless of the cause, the need to teach people how to hunt safely was real. In 1974, the Nebraska Legislature recognized this need and passed a bill requiring youths ages 12 to 15 to pass a Hunter Safety course before they could hunt. The results have been what was hoped for and expected: The number of accidents began to decline, a trend that continues to this day.

The Need

The roots of Hunter Education stretch to 1949, when the National Rifle Association worked with the state of New York to develop the nation's first Hunter Safety training program to address a problem: Many hunters knew little about firearms, hunting or how to hunt safely.

That program served as the basis for programs now taught and required, in some form, in every state. A few other states followed New York's lead and launched Hunter Safety programs. Elsewhere, including in Nebraska, there were voluntary programs taught by NRA members, sportsmen's clubs and 4-H groups.

In 1970, a major change was made to the 1937 Pittman-Robertson Act, which distributes federal excise taxes collected on firearms and ammunition to states for wildlife management and restoration work. Through the Dingell-Hart Act, a portion of a new excise tax on handguns could be



Hunter Education teaches hunters, especially youths, how to be safe as they begin their time in the field. It is required for anyone age 12 to 29. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Jeff Rawlinson, outdoor education specialist and education manager with Game and Parks, speaks to volunteer instructors during the Nebraska Hunter Education Conference at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park in 2023. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Libby Badtke of Omaha hunts with guide Pat McCloskey of Elkhorn during a mentored youth hunt at Pheasant Haven Shooting Preserve near Elkhorn in 1996, the second such hunt hosted in the state. KEN BOUC, NEBRASKALAND

In the year prior, the agency had recruited and trained 200 volunteer instructors. The program, however, was voluntary.

When the Legislature passed its bill in 1974, Game and Parks immediately boosted its efforts to recruit and train instructors in every corner of the state, ensuring those required to take the class were given the opportunity. By the time the full bill took effect in 1976, 2,900 instructors were on board and 17,439 youths had taken the in-person, classroom course. Many schools offered the class as well.

At the core of the program is firearm and hunting safety, things like safe gun handling and situations when it is or isn't safe to shoot at game. These are topics that youngsters, especially 12-year-olds, might not understand or appreciate. But Hunter Education is so much more. It covers the game laws and regulations and why they exist, the importance of being a responsible and ethical hunter — things that students might not learn at home. The class also teaches the basics of how to hunt and how to track and care for game. And it delves into wildlife identification, behavior, management and conservation, helping foster a greater appreciation of the species the youths will pursue.

"We wanted hunters to have more knowledge, skills and abilities," Rawlinson said. "So that's been the premise of the program, and from that comes safety and compliance."

The Mentored Youth Hunt Program Endures

by Eric Fowler

Some kids grow up hunting with their parents, grandparents or other family members. Others become interested through other means, be it a friend, something they read, or something they saw on TV or the internet.

Both are required to complete a Hunter Education class. When that task is complete, one of those kids can head back to the field. The other might have no place to hunt, and no one to take them.

Since 1995, Game and Parks and its partners have been helping Hunter Education graduates take that next step with its mentored youth hunt program, allowing them to spend time in the field with experienced hunters.

The program began in March 1995 at Pheasant Haven Shooting Preserve near Elkhorn. Announcements were sent to 800 recent graduates, and 300 youths applied for 45 spots, illustrating the need for such a program. They learned about pheasants, shot clay targets and had a chance to hunt live birds.

That December, five youths were selected to participate in an archery deer hunt on the Lincoln Water System well field near Ashland. Wes Sheets, then wildlife division administrator with Game and Parks and a Hunter Education instructor since 1974, helped organize that first deer hunt and has been mentoring young archers ever since. Last fall, he mentored youths on nearly 50 hunts at the age of 84.

Sheets remembers some youths who would beg to go hunting 25 times a year. He still hears from some of the young hunters he mentored, some just calling to let him know about a recent hunt or the bird dog they got and trained.

"When those stories come along, you just love them



Since 1974, instructor Wes Sheets has been mentoring students like Grant Stutzman, shown here with the buck he harvested in 2022 on City of Lincoln property.

because you know you had an impact by putting them in a tree stand a bunch of times," Sheets said. "Some of the best days of my life have been building relationships with those young people."

The mentored hunt program has grown substantially since. Hunter Education staff continues to organize archery and muzzleloader deer hunts. Pheasants Forever, a partner in that first mentored hunt, has had more than 16,000 youths

attend its youth mentor pheasant and dove hunts since 1996. More recently, it has offered a Next Steps program to pair young hunters and a family member with an experienced hunter to pursue wild birds. Game and Parks conservation officers have organized many turkey, waterfowl and other hunts. Several National Wild Turkey Federation and Ducks Unlimited chapters offer learn-to-hunt programs, as well.

"These programs let Hunter Education graduates put to use what they learn in the course in actual hunting situations," said Aaron Hershberger, mentor hunt coordinator. "For the ones who don't have the contacts or resources to do it on their own, that's really important."

Now the mentoring program has expanded to help another type of Hunter Education graduate take their first steps in the field: adults. LearnHunting.org, an innovative program developed by Nebraska and other states, pairs new hunters with certified Hunter Education instructors who teach them more outdoor skills, including things like setting up a tree stand, field dressing game and taking them hunting. "These people have the knowledge, skills and abilities to mentor and to be some of the best mentors in the world," Rawlinson said. "Some instructors are really liking that. It's almost hunter ed in its truest form, taking someone hunting."

Safety and Ethics

Hunting incidents didn't only involve city dwellers.

Russ Mort of Nebraska City has been a Game and Parks conservation officer for 47 years. Like many of his classmates at Pawnee City High School, he grew up on a farm, had

experience with guns and spent time hunting.

His father, however, wouldn't let him hunt with other kids. "He was always scared of me getting hurt," Mort said. "He said, 'I doubt if you will shoot yourself, but your friend might shoot you.'"



Volunteer instructor Dave Haumont of Broken Bow teaches David Anderson of McCook how to shoot a .22-cal. rifle during a Game and Parks-sponsored Youth Outdoor Skills Camp at the Nebraska State 4-H Camp in the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey in 2003. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Mentor Tom Lanz shows Christian Gates a deer scrape during the first mentored deer hunt near Ashland in 1995. KEN BOUC, NEBRASKALAND

Mort was among the first graduates of Game and Parks' new Hunter Safety program, passing the course in 1972 while in high school. His father sat through the class with him. "To be honest, he grew up not realizing things were illegal," Mort said. "I'm sure he learned that and he wanted to bring me up correctly."

"I know when I took hunter ed, I learned a lot of stuff that I didn't know before. I learned why there are laws, and you understand the need for laws. I think that's huge."

After becoming a conservation officer, he saw hunters' knowledge and compliance with game laws grow, and he believes Hunter Education played a big part in that. "That's about the only education we have nowadays, because a lot of the parents, they don't hunt anymore," said Mort, who helps teach classes.

When he sees Hunter Education graduates violate game laws, it is often because they are hunting with someone who doesn't respect the laws and is bowing to peer pressure. But it also goes the other way. "Kids will influence their parents, too," Mort said.

"The hunter ed card is pretty important to the kids. That's one of the first things they pull out of their billfold. It definitely affects how they do things."

Joe Bober – 50 Years and 10,000 Safe Hunters

by Jeff Kurrus

"Dead is dead."

"Just because it's legal doesn't mean it's right."

"I almost killed one of my friends."

The quotes roll off volunteer Hunter Education instructor Joe Bober's tongue like he has said them a time or two before. A good guess would say that's probably true since this is Bober's 50th consecutive year as a Hunter Education instructor and he has certified more than 10,000 students and 100 future instructors.

Having taught that many students, another fair assumption would be that Joe simply likes to give back. But it's more than that. "I'm a very selfish person," he said. "I want them to be safe and knowledgeable. I do it for me. It makes me feel so good when I turn off the light at night because I know that the people I taught are going to be safe, responsible hunters."

A not-so-safe situation is one of the main reasons Bober became an instructor in the first place. In his early 20s, during a pheasant hunting trip with his friends, it started pouring rain. Bober and his buddies quickly climbed into their vehicle, guns still loaded.

Bober attempted to unload his shotgun, but his wet hand slipped and the gun went off when he closed its action. He blew a hole through the roof of the car, and powder burns covered his friends in the back seat. It scared Bober so much that he almost quit hunting, but it did trigger a desire to help educate others around him.

Over the next few years, Bober began running AKC field trials. He met a number of people, many of them affiliated with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Among them was Dick Turpin, the first coordinator of Nebraska's Hunter Safety program.

"He was just starting to get the program off the ground and, in

December of 1974, he certified me to teach," said Bober, who hasn't missed a year since.

"After I taught my first class, I figured out I wasn't as smart as I thought I was," Bober said. He also admitted he learned something new from every class he has instructed. "It's not about hunting. It's about right and wrong," Bober said. "If you got a covey of quail



JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

and it's 3:30 in the afternoon on a really cold day, is it right to break them up when they might not be able to get back together before nightfall? It's not illegal. But is it right?"

His classes are a mix of hands-on instruction and videos, a reminder of how some things have changed through the years. "When I started, we were using 16mm reel-to-reel film. I got really used to fixing it. Then we went to the VCR. Then the DVD. Now it's the iPad and laptop."

Technology has changed the way classes are taught. "When someone didn't understand something in 1974, they asked Uncle Jake or Aunt Sally," Bober said. "In 2024, they type it in the iPad. That's a great thing. But there's also a drawback because people go to YouTube and learn the wrong way. But students do come in more prepared."

Bober has also adapted to

online Hunter Education classes, something he vehemently opposed initially. "I teach with passion," he said. "I explain why I teach. How you can never bring a person back."

He tells a story about a young girl he knew who was accidentally shot in the spine with a pistol and spent the rest of her life unable to take care of herself. He asks his classes: What would it be like if they had done this to their brother, sister or best friend? How would they feel? "This is when I see the class turn," he said. "The light bulb comes on. This just isn't about hunter safety."

Bober learned that, even with the online course, his passion would come out when he got those students in an in-person Hunt Safe session. "One of my prize moments," he said, "was when I had four University of Nebraska-Omaha students show up to class. But they had no desire to get their Hunter Education certificate. 'Our professor had his son take your class,' they said. 'How you teach with passion was why we were sent here.'"

Because of his passion, Bober has no plans to stop teaching anytime soon, and the quotes keep coming with each lesson he provides.

"The only person I've ever seen with eyes in the back of their head was my mother. And that is why you have to have proper shooting zones."

"Hunting is the only sport you play with no referees. You have to know right from wrong."

"Whether you're 11 or 73 years old, you are an adult when you have a gun in your hand. So you and your buddies need to act like adults."

Every once in a while, even after thousands of hours in the field and in front of students, Bober runs across a question he can't answer. "No problem," he said. "If I can't answer it, I know someone who can."

Brenda Fulk – Not Just for Boys

by Justin Haag

Brenda Fulk of Mitchell has long known that hunting is not just for the boys.

“More women are hunting and shooting than 25 years ago,” she said, thinking back to when she was certified as a Hunter Education instructor in 1999.

Statistics back that up. An estimated quarter of hunters in the U.S. are now women, and they’re often referred to as the pastime’s fastest-growing demographic. When Fulk started, only 3 percent of Nebraska’s Hunter Education instructors were women. That number, 28, has since doubled. The 56 women teaching Hunter Education in the state today represent 11 percent of the total.

Game and Parks welcomes female perspectives in the classroom and on the range. Of course, we’ve known that women are as capable shooters as men since Annie Oakley became an international sensation, but anatomical differences make the process dissimilar between genders.

“Women hold firearms a bit differently and the sights sometimes don’t line up,” she said. “The male instructors don’t always understand that.”

She knows one of the male instructors well. Her husband, Brad, has attained the title of master instructor. The two have



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRENDA FULK

taught courses at sites throughout the Panhandle, passing on the knowledge they’ve learned in the field. That knowledge and love of hunting was also passed on to their four now-adult sons.

One harrowing experience stands out in Brenda’s mind and

has prompted her to emphasize teaching the budding hunters in her classes to be prepared.

In September 2012, she was hunting doves with her youngest son and his friend when they discovered the body of a man who had been missing for four days in a canal that crosses their Sioux County ranch.

She said it was a traumatic experience, but she uses the experience in the classes to this day, stressing the importance of being aware of location and surroundings, having ample supplies, and having a plan to contact help in an emergency when in the field.

“I talk about how rural of an area we live in. You cannot put our address in GPS and get to our house,” she said, illustrating the necessity of these lessons and how every hunter should take them seriously.

Her memories of the outdoors and the classroom are positive. Brenda said she and Brad are teaching the children of those who took their classes years ago. The couple doesn’t have plans to stop doing it anytime soon.

“We will keep teaching until we can’t anymore,” she said.

New Requirements, Same Outcome

The Hunter Education program has undergone changes over the past 50 years, including increases and decreases in classroom instruction time, how it is offered, who must take it, and even the name, which has evolved from Hunter Safety to Hunter Education.

One of the major changes was the addition of a mandatory Bowhunter Education program in 1993, addressing a need to educate hunters in a growing sport that required a slightly different skill set.

In 1996, new regulations required anyone born on or after Jan. 1, 1977, to pass a firearm or Bowhunter Education course, a move that would eventually require all hunters to have completed training, as was already the norm in some states. In 2008, recognizing that this requirement might cause those unwilling to invest the time to take a course

to simply forgo hunting altogether, and that the majority of accidents involved hunters under the age of 30, the law was changed to require hunters ages 12 to 29 pass a course before hunting. An exemption certificate was also created in 2008, allowing those who have not completed a course to hunt with an experienced hunter, a change made to provide opportunities for individuals who get a last-minute invite to hunt from a friend or family member, possibly helping recruit a new hunter.

In 2001, as youths were becoming more involved in sports and other activities, an independent study course was offered as an alternative to classroom work. In 2013, online courses were offered to meet the requirement for those age 16 and older, and hybrid courses for youths ages 12 to 15 were added. This included an online course and a two-hour Hunt Safe session that emphasizes firearm, archery and tree stand



Justin Herbig and his mentor, Tony Morrow, both of Elba, scan the countryside in Boyd County for turkeys during a mentored hunt for recent Hunter Education graduates sponsored by the Central Nebraska Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation in 2001. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

safety, and includes shoot/don’t shoot scenarios.

“Here in Nebraska, we felt kids still needed to get in front of an instructor and handle firearms,” Rawlinson said. “That was a very radical way of looking at Hunter Education.”

Some states have gone entirely to online classes. Studies have shown that even with fewer hours in the classroom, the goal of the program — producing safe hunters — is being met. The IHEA has a set of minimum standards each state meets, but the states develop their own courses and methods of delivery. Since the 1970s, states have informally agreed to honor certificates issued in other states. This reciprocity, important to those wanting to travel, is now being formalized.

A Vital Component

The key to the success of the Hunter Education program has been the volunteers who teach the classes, giving up their free time during evenings or weekends to do so. Throughout its history, there have been thousands of instructors, coming from all walks of life. Twenty-nine of them have been at it for 40 or more years.

“They’re dedicated and passionate and give back to the system, and we couldn’t do it without them,” Rawlinson said. “They’re the most important part of the whole deal because they give thousands of hours every year of their time and talent.”

The involvement of the instructors stretches well beyond the classroom. “The cool thing was when we started Hunter



Visitors stop at the Hunter Safety booth at the Nebraska State Fair in Lincoln in 1978. DICK TURPIN, NGPC PHOTO LIBRARY

Education, you all of a sudden started getting these volunteer instructors that had incredible hunting and outdoorsman-type skills,” Rawlinson said. “They became part of the hunter ed family and are an integral part of all of our outreach programs.” The volunteers have always been among the first to step up and help out at shooting ranges at the Nebraska



Dick Turpin, shown here in 1989, became the state's first Hunter Education Coordinator in 1973 and is widely considered the father of the program in Nebraska, training many of the first instructors. The Turpin Outdoor Education Center in Lincoln is named in his memory.

from the truth, as hunter ed is going to continue to evolve,” Rawlinson said.

While they spend less time teaching in the classroom, instructors have come to appreciate the ease of setting up a Hunt Safe session and that students arrive knowing the

State Fair, Outdoor Skills Camps, Outdoor Expos, mentored hunts and more. “They carry a huge load in Nebraska because they’re just that type of person,” Rawlinson said.

The move to online classes has posed challenges. Some instructors felt the move would cheapen the program, and others felt they were no longer needed. “That

basics, allowing them to focus on key safety elements.

Volunteers have also been key in getting LearnHunting.org off the ground. The program pairs adult Hunter Education graduates with volunteer instructors, who serve as mentors. More than 60 instructors are participating, with more coming on board each year. That program is one of many that are part of the nationwide R3 efforts to recruit, retain and reactivate hunters, something states hope will increase and diversify participation. These goals are critical as it is hunters who, through their purchase of permits and the taxes they pay on guns, bows and ammunition, are the primary source of funding for wildlife conservation and management in the United States.

The hours volunteer instructors contribute are the state’s match to acquire federal funding to support the Hunter Education program. Hours spent teaching Hunt Safe sessions and participating in the Learn Hunting program count toward the hours they need to work to retain their certification each year.

It Works

From 1958, the first year records were kept in Nebraska, to 1977, an average of 20 hunting-related incidents occurred each year, four of them fatal. During the past 10 years, that average has dropped to five incidents and less than one



Instructor Jade Wawers teaches a Hunt Safe session at the Dick Turpin Outdoor Education Center in Lincoln in 2023.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Jade Wawers – Teaching the Next Generation

by Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Every hunting season since Jade Wawers was born, she’s been out in the field with her parents chasing deer, pheasants or waterfowl. The eldest of four girls, Wawers caught the hunting bug the hardest. She began working at the Dick Turpin Education Center at age 17 and, at the time, knew she wanted to make a career of studying wildlife and helping future hunters.

“The second I turned 18, I was asked to become an instructor. I knew about hunting and hunter safety,” Wawers said. “It was a great way for me to get more involved with the agency and what they do for hunting and hunters.”

Wawers, now 25, keeps busy as a master’s student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln working on a wild turkey monitoring project. Her research often pulls her to western Nebraska, sometimes as long as seven months out of the year. She’s conducting a trail camera study to evaluate the distribution and composition of mesopredator communities in Nebraska and how they affect wild turkey populations.

Turkey also happens to be her favorite game to hunt. “I hear a lot of people say that turkeys are dumb — that they’re a stupid bird,” Wawers said, “but try hunting them and you see how smart and clever



JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

they can really be.”

Although Wawer’s job as a UNL wild turkey technician keeps her busy, she continues to teach Hunter Education one to three times per year, from two-hour Hunt Safe sessions to the longer 8-hour classroom courses. She prefers the longer format, as it allows time for students to practice on the firearm or archery range. They’ll also practice crossing fences, and she might even simulate a blood trail or do a mock pheasant hunt to get students engaged.

In 2022, she recognized a need for an adult-only classroom and organized a Hunter Education course for college students and other prospective hunters age 18 and older. Most prospective hunters her age don’t necessarily want to take a class with a “bunch of 11-year-olds,” she said. Not only was the adult class well-received, it was also one of her more memorable experiences as a hunter education instructor.

“I love teaching adults because they are capable of going out and hunting after the class, so you can keep up with their success stories. They’ll send me pictures of their first deer, first turkey ... It makes me so incredibly happy and proud to see them going out,” Wawers said. In contrast, she doesn’t necessarily receive the same follow-up from younger students who attend classes under the mentorship of their parents.

Hunter Education instructors aren’t paid for their time. Wawers says she teaches because she wants to be a part of bringing along the next generation of hunters.

“Safe hunting is something that can be overlooked,” she said. Hunter Education should be taught early, and sometimes, parents need the reminders, too.

fatality.

“The proof is in the performance for Hunter Education,” said Kyle Gaston, coordinator of the program. “The number of yearly hunting incidents has decreased dramatically. That is the main goal of Hunter Education. It has succeeded.

“It is one of the most successful and scalable educational programs state wildlife agencies have ever offered.”

Visit HuntSafeNebraska.org to learn more about the program. Interested in becoming an instructor? Contact Kyle Gaston, Hunter Education coordinator, at 402-471-6134 or Kyle.Gaston@Nebraska.gov.

The Facts

Through June 1, 2024, 383,715 people have received their Hunter Education certificate. In 2023, about 400 volunteers donated 7,394 hours to teach 313 classes and certify 5,371 students. Of the current volunteer instructors, 29 have 40 or more years of service, and five have 50 or more.

Shown here is the first Hunter Education patch given to students in 1972.



Velvet Bucks

The science of antlers and when to harvest a buck

By Brian Peterson

In 2014, at the request of hunters, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission opened archery season Sept. 1 so hunters could have an additional opportunity to harvest a velvet-antlered buck. Nebraska is one of a handful of states that offer an archery season early enough to provide this opportunity, but what is the likelihood there will still be velvet bucks in Nebraska when the season opens? And what biological factors are at play that hunters should know about?

Growing Antlers

Growing antlers is a complicated process that involves a number of

factors, as well as pitfalls, for bucks. The growing process lasts about six months. Deer antlers are one of the fastest-growing living tissues on Earth, typically reaching one-quarter inch per day for white-tailed deer, and more in larger deer species, such as elk and moose. However, growing antlers is energetically costly and causes bucks to enter a state of temporary osteoporosis as they demineralize skeletal bones, primarily from their ribs, to acquire large amounts of essential minerals, such as calcium and phosphorus, to feed antler growth.

Antler development is a highly metabolic process during the velvet stage. Velvet covers and protects the



An example of a buck in the process of shedding his velvet while rubbing on a wooden post. COURTESY BRIAN PETERSON



A white-tailed buck's antlers are wrapped in velvet near DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge in Washington County during a summer evening in late July. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

tissues that contain blood vessels and nerves as the bone forms. It is sensitive to touch, and bucks will learn to avoid physical rubbing or contacting trees and other obstacles in their environment. An injury to the antlers during the velvet stage can affect the growth, final size and shape of antlers.

Newly-grown antlers remain covered in velvet until testosterone levels are high enough to cause blood flow to stop. As blood flow ceases, the

velvet covering begins to dry, crack and peel away from the fully formed, hardened antler bone.

Triggered by shorter days that come as fall approaches, the shedding of velvet occurs during a short window from late August into September. Bucks accelerate shedding by rubbing and thrashing antlers on trees, bushes and other vegetation. The process can take anywhere from a few hours to several days. Bucks then carry their

hard, calcified antlers for the remaining six months of the antler cycle.

Fuzzy to Calcified

Recently, researchers at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, including undergraduate Bodin Wilson, graduate Logan Dietrich and me, conducted a study to determine the time frame in which white-tailed deer in Nebraska shed their velvet, and compared velvet shedding

between younger and older bucks. Our focus area included the South Loup and Platte rivers in central Nebraska.

We strategically placed 33 trail cameras in areas with high deer density from July through October 2022. We found no detectable differences between river drainages. White-tailed bucks shed velvet during a 35-day window, with the earliest observations of complete velvet shedding occurring by Aug.



University of Nebraska at Kearney fisheries graduate student Garrett Rowles harvested this mature buck still in velvet on Sept. 2 a few years ago. COURTESY BRIAN PETERSON

22 and the latest date deer were seen retaining velvet Sept. 25. By Sept. 1, the beginning of Nebraska's archery season, more than 12 percent of bucks had already shed their velvet. By Sept. 15, 67 percent of bucks had shed their velvet and by Sept. 20, 90 percent had done so. On average, we observed older deer completely shed velvet 13 percent, or three to four days, sooner than younger bucks.

Opposite: The best representation of our research as it is the same individual based on antler configuration and split ear within the same location. It shows the deer in full velvet in July and 100 percent clean antler by Sept. 5, which aligns with our findings.

COURTESY BRIAN PETERSON

Even with our intensive efforts, we only observed a few individuals in the process of velvet shedding, indicating this process occurs during a short time frame for individuals. Our study represents a snapshot of bucks during a single season.

Best Opportunities

Based on our findings in Nebraska, the best opportunity to harvest a mature, velvet-antlered white-tailed deer is during the first seven days of the archery season, with around 50 percent of males still retaining velvet. By mid-September, just 20 percent of the more sought-after mature bucks still retained velvet.

From my experience, bucks tend

to be easier to pattern during early September. So, if you want a chance to harvest a velvet-antlered deer, you had better grab your license and bow or crossbow, play the wind, endure the heat, ticks and mosquitoes, and give it your best effort early in the season. [N](#)

Brian Peterson is a biologist at the University of Nebraska at Kearney and coordinates the M.S. Biology Online Program. His research focus is white-tailed deer antler metrics. For more information, please contact petersonbc@unk.edu. He would like to thank the many landowners for allowing access to their properties, and Bodin Wilson and Logan Dietrich for their contributions to the research findings.

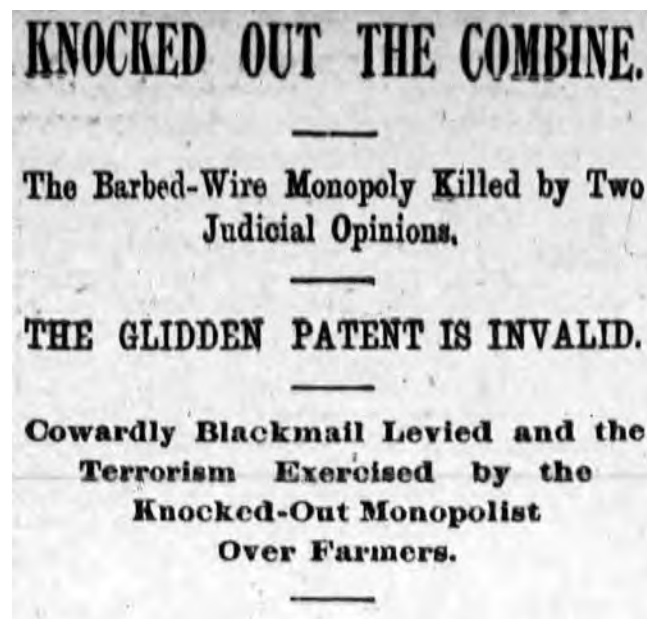
Fencing the Plains

By David L. Bristow, *History Nebraska*

It takes a good fence to keep livestock out of a farmer's crops or garden. In the heavily wooded eastern United States, this was often done with split-rail fences. But how do you build a fence on the plains, where trees are scarce?

Nebraska historian Everett Dick wrote that pioneers used to hobble or tether horses to keep them from wandering, but controlling herds was a bigger problem. Until Nebraska's 1870 herd law, it was your responsibility to fence your neighbor's livestock *out*, and not the stockman's responsibility to fence them *in*.

Osage orange hedgerows were once popular in southeastern Nebraska. Seedlings were planted close together and their branches carefully intertwined to grow into a hedge that was



Barbed wire marked the end of the free-range cattle era. Undated Solomon Butcher photo, probably Custer County.

HISTORY NEBRASKA RG2608-0-1756-B

Omaha Daily Bee, May 19, 1890.

“hog tight, horse high, and bull strong.” Daniel Freeman's circa-1875 hedgerow still remains at Homestead National Historical Park near Beatrice.

But hedgerows were too thirsty for much of Nebraska. The opening of lumberyards (and railroads to supply them) created more options, but a small landowner might have to

pay more for fencing than for the land itself.

Barbed wire transformed Nebraska. Invented in Illinois in the 1870s, it solved a huge problem for prairie farmers, but also sparked controversy. One manufacturer tried to establish a monopoly by claiming patent rights. Until the courts intervened, the company threatened to sue farmers

who bought from its competitors unless they paid a license fee.

In cattle country, some big ranchers used barbed wire to illegally fence public land for their exclusive use. One night in 1885, Custer County settlers cut 15 miles of barbed wire fence around a local ranch.

The Robinson Wire Reel




Figure No. 1 illustrates taking up wire. Figure No. 2 putting it out. No more moving wire by hand as the machine takes it up, winds it on spool in good shape as fast as team walks, and plays it out at same speed, making the hard job of moving fence one of ease and pleasure. For price list of reel, territory, and terms to agents, address J. M. ROBINSON, Kenesaw, Adams County, Neb.

The Nebraska Farmer, Oct. 7, 1892.

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Hastings Journal, Feb. 19, 1880.



Omaha residents needed strong fencing to keep roaming hogs out of their gardens. The view is east from the old capitol grounds (present site of Central High School), 1868. HISTORY NEBRASKA RG2341-2-P06



Wilbur Irvin Cram family at their sod house in Loup County, 1886. Cattle liked to rub against sod houses; a good fence kept them away. HISTORY NEBRASKA RG2608-0-1059



A strand of barbed wire protects University of Nebraska grounds in this photo taken between 1887 and 1900. University Hall, the original building on campus, was razed in 1948. HISTORY NEBRASKA RG2758-1-24

Entrepreneurs, meanwhile, made barbed wire easier to use. “Any boy 12 years old can operate the machine,” boasted Josiah M. Robinson of Kenesaw, describing his patented wire reel. Robinson soon moved his manufacturing operation to Hastings and sold his product for several years in the 1890s. He is an example of a long Nebraska tradition: the farmer-inventor-entrepreneur.

Livestock-proof fences weren’t only for farms. They also protected property in Nebraska’s 19th century cities, where residents commonly kept chickens, milk cows and even hogs.

“Has the University no rights that cows are bound to respect?” asked the University of Nebraska student newspaper in 1879. “A number of these quadrupeds may be seen every day watching around the corner of the building to pounce upon the first blade of grass that makes an appearance. Have ’em before the discipline committee!”

Groundskeepers planted a hedge and strung barbed wire, and in 1892 enclosed the campus with a wrought iron fence (which now lines O Street beside Wyuka cemetery). But by then the fence probably had more to do with controlling humans than cows. [N](https://www.history.nebraska.gov/)

Visit History Nebraska’s website at [history.nebraska.gov](https://www.history.nebraska.gov/).

Fish Ladders

Something Could Mean Everything

Photos and story by Eric Fowler

Most everyone knows fish can jump. But there are few species swimming in rivers and streams in Nebraska that can launch themselves 3 feet from a pool into a culvert that runs under a roadway and continue swimming upstream.

Yet in a test run to study the effectiveness of fish ladders installed to bridge that gap, a western blacknose dace, a rare native minnow, was able to navigate a 3-foot drop and keep swimming up Willow Creek north of Newport. The results there and on two other streams that feed the Niobrara River in northeastern Nebraska have Game and Parks Commission fisheries and wildlife staff looking to do more to reconnect streams fragmented by barriers, especially culverts.

Making It Back Upstream

There are more than 16,000 miles of rivers and streams in Nebraska. And 194,000 miles of roads. The two cross more than 110,000 times. Exactly how many of those crossings impede fish movement isn't known: There has not been a



A creek chub previously captured by biologists and given a red mark on its side was recaptured below the fish ladder on Willow Creek.



Fisheries biologists Kali Boroughs and Hunter Swanson use electrofishing equipment to sample minnows in Willow Creek below a culvert fitted with a fish ladder in Rock County.

formal study.

At most of these intersections, the rivers and streams flow freely beneath a bridge: There are an estimated 55,000 to 75,000 bridges in the state. On the smaller streams, however, it is often culverts, large or small, that carry the water under roads. Whether they are round sections of corrugated steel or square box culverts made of concrete, culverts are much more economical to install and maintain. When they are installed level to the stream's flow, fish can swim through them freely. Some, however, are level on the upstream side and drop a few inches to a few feet on the downstream side. When culverts are too small, increased velocities, even under normal flows, can erode the streambed on the downstream side and leave a culvert perched.

Some fish, including larger creek chubs, are capable

of making the jump and continuing upstream. For most, however, it is the end of the road. Even when water levels rise to the level of the culvert during heavy rains, stream velocities can be too swift for small fish to navigate.

While some fish spend their entire lives in one section of stream, others need to move to reach spawning or feeding areas. "Most of our minnow species have an innate pull to go upstream, to the extent that they're able, to find new habitat or for spawning," said Cassidy Wessel, a Game and Parks wildlife biologist in northeastern Nebraska.

Some are pelagic spawners, releasing their eggs to drift downstream. If those eggs drift through a perched culvert and the young are not able to make it back upstream, it can affect the overall population.

Fragmentation is one of several reasons nine of the 30

native fish found in cool-water streams in Nebraska are listed as endangered, threatened or at risk.

Fish Need a Ladder

The impetus for the study came a decade ago, when Wessel led a survey of at-risk species, such as the northern redbelly dace, on three streams from their headwaters to their confluence with the Keya Paha River.

"We just ran into a lot of potential barriers," Wessel said.

And there are more barriers today following historic flooding in the spring of 2019, and another round of localized flooding on Long Pine Creek and others in the fall of that year. "Those floods just accelerated what was happening slowly in a lot of streams," Wessel said. "We were looking around and thinking, 'My gosh. Is there any way we can help?'"

John Lorenzen, a student at South Dakota State University, was a technician on that survey. Later, for his master’s thesis, he tested several fish ladder designs on perched culverts in the lab and on streams in eastern South Dakota and the Black Hills. What he found was a Denil-type ladder, with a series of flat-topped baffles that allow fish to ascend a short rise and then rest, was the most effective. In lab studies, all 14 species stocked in tanks were able to move up the ladder, and in the field, 23 species did so.

Wessel had followed his work with interest, and in 2020, with funding from the Game and Parks cool-water stream program, had a machine shop in Hartington build a ladder based on Lorenzen’s design, and then installed it on a culvert on a branch of Bone Creek south of Ainsworth, simply as a proof of concept. “Until people can put eyes on it, it doesn’t seem like it’s a real option for them,” Wessel said.

In 2021, Wessel and fisheries biologists identified three stream and road crossings where the ladders could be installed on culverts with varying levels of drop: Bone Creek west of Ainsworth and Willow and Oak creeks north of Newport. That year, they used electrofishing equipment to survey fish populations 150 meters above and below the culverts and then installed the fish ladders with traps at the top to see if any fish ascended them during a one-week period. Heavy

rains caused the fish trap on Oak Creek to fail. Just two fish, including the western blacknose dace, were found in the trap on Willow Creek, but that site, with a 3-foot drop, would have been the most difficult for small fish to navigate. On Bone Creek, where the ladder was installed on a 1-foot drop, they found 93 fish. Most of those were white suckers and creek chubs, which have more jumping ability than other small minnows. “Did they jump up the 12-inch drop or did they go up the ladder? I don’t know,” said Joe Spooner, a fisheries biologist. “Regardless, we still caught fish utilizing them. So that answered the question: Will they actually provide the opportunity? Yes.”

Realizing the site on Oak Creek could be problematic, another site was chosen on Sand Draw, a stream northwest of Ainsworth, with a similar 2-foot drop.

Biologists sampled the streams in the spring, summer and fall in 2022 without fish ladders attached, and again in the spring of 2023 before attaching the ladders. Fish received a yellow mark on their side if they were captured above the culvert and red mark if caught below. Without fish ladders, 13 creek chubs and white suckers marked below the culverts were found above them.

Before the ladders were removed in the fall of 2023, sampling found three marked fish that had moved upstream:



Biologists Cassidy Wessel, Joe Spooner and Hunter Swanson sort, measure and record the number of fish sampled below a culvert fitted with a fish ladder on Bone Creek west of Ainsworth.



Biologists Emily Clark, Kali Boroughs and Marcila Goblen sample fish below a culvert on Bone Creek west of Ainsworth.

a creek chub on both Bone Creek and Sand Draw and a western blacknose dace on Willow Creek. The latter, Spooner said, could only have moved via the ladder.

“That’s not to say that fish moved and didn’t continue on up the stream out of our sampling site,” Spooner said, noting that fish may have also swam up the ladder and returned downstream. “I think these fish we were sampling move a lot more than we think throughout the seasons, so the chances of recapturing them was minimal at most.”

More Studies, More Questions

The effects of stream fragmentation on native fish are being studied throughout the world, but Wessel said there is still much to be learned about fish in the Great Plains. Studies like this one, she said, leave biologists asking questions, like why were the fish trying to go up stream, what triggered the movement, and how different would the fish communities be on these streams if everything could get upstream that wanted to?

It also has them asking which fragmented streams could benefit most from fish ladders. Wessel and Spooner are now looking for those streams, as well as stream restoration projects to address erosion below barriers. Work will likely focus on the Niobrara River basin, which is home to a high percentage of both cool-water streams and imperiled fish species. A stream with rare native fish, and lacking non-

native species, where several barriers could be bridged with ladders to reconnect several miles of streams, would be ideal. South Dakota State has resumed fish ladder research and is looking at ways to use pit tag readers to monitor fish movement that would provide more reliable data.

Facilitating fish movement throughout fragmented streams could become increasingly important as climate change progresses. Warming temperatures could increase the use of groundwater, which is the primary source for all of the state’s cool-water streams. Further declines could reduce stream flow and increase water temperature. If a section of stream were to dry up above a perched culvert, there would be no way fish could repopulate it on their own, Spooner said.

“I’ll guarantee we’d be very, very hard pressed to find any stream in Nebraska that doesn’t have two or three significant barriers along it somewhere,” Wessel said. “Some fish are going to be able to make those small leaps, but we have some that are probably just quite terrible jumpers. Even where it is just a small drop, that can still mean something for some species.”

And for species like the blacknose shiner and Topeka shiner, listed as endangered in Nebraska, the threatened finescale and northern redbelly dace, or the northern pearl dace, western blacknose dace, plains topminnow and other species at risk of making those lists, something could mean everything. 📍

NERD OF THE MARSH

By Joel Jorgensen, Nongame Bird Program Manager

Nebraska’s birds possess so much beauty. Whether it be the elegance of an American avocet, refinement of the black-necked stilt, charm of an eastern bluebird, grandeur of a whooping crane or grace of the Forster’s tern. For all the aesthetically magnificent birds in the state, there are also those species that were absent on the day when admirable attributes were being handed out. Chief among the species that fail to inspire awe in us humans is the American coot.

Often found among several dapper duck species in marshes and wetlands, coot flocks can dominate a wetland but usually fail to attract attention. Its sooty gray color does not compare to the green-headed mallards or amber-headed canvasbacks. It plods along in the marsh making squawking noises. And perhaps the oddest appendage is revealed when this bird clumsily takes flight. Unlike the webbed feet of waterfowls that are delicately tucked close to the body when they take flight, the green feet with lobed toes of the coot dangle haplessly below its body. However, like most creatures not burdened by beauty, there is often more to the indomitable coot than its appearance.

Perhaps the most entertaining aspect of the American coot are the territorial quarrels they engage in during spring. Males defend territories and fend off rivals by raising their wings and extending their necks over the water and charging toward each other. Actual physical contact is not infrequent, and their awkward feet are used as weapons to claw at each other. These scuffles can be constant on marshes with favorable habitat when males are establishing territories in spring. Occasionally, the turf battles can result in death of the weaker bird.

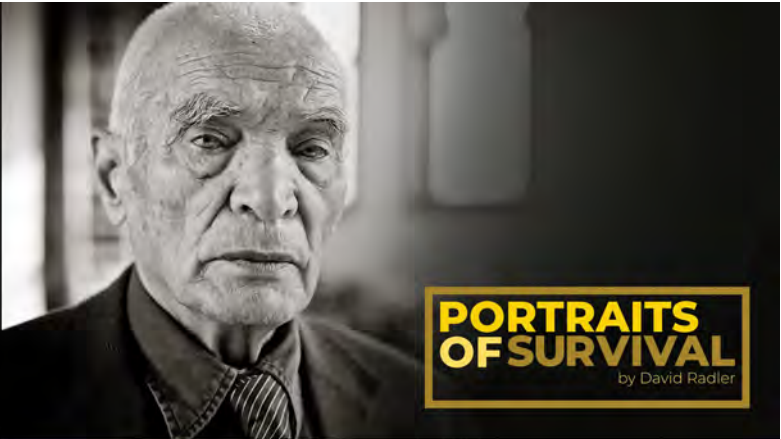
Outside the breeding season, coots will often form dense flocks on just about any water body. Sometime these flocks will make landfall, and birds will move onto shore where they will graze on vegetation. If they are approached by a perceived predator, including humans, they will collectively sprint back to the water in an exercise of organized chaos. While coots may be the Rodney Dangerfield of the bird world, they also represent an important part of our state’s birdlife, and unlike Rodney, they *can* get plenty of respect and appreciation.



An American coot takes flight at Conestoga State Recreation Area in Lancaster County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



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SIGHT IN YOURSELF

By Jeff Kurrus

“Don’t let someone else sight in your rifle,” is the advice many new shooters hear when they buy their first gun. The main reason to take this opportunity yourself is the fun of shooting. You bought the rifle to squeeze the trigger, so do so.

In most other cases, said Outdoor Education Specialist and Education Manager with Game and Parks Jeff Rawlinson, having someone else sight-in your scope can work but it’s not ideal for all shooting. “When using a rifle sighted in by someone else, any consistent differences to the shooting process will result in misses.”

However, he added, because most shooters use consistent techniques, the differences are often very small. “So this may not be an issue for an elk hunter, but could pose a huge issue for a squirrel hunter or target shooter in competition where the margin for error is extremely small.”

Like any other skill, continual practice will make you a better shooter. You’ll be able to figure out if your breathing and other pre-shot procedures are consistent — mandatory when shooting opportunities arise during a hunt.

For a complete list of public sight-in locations and days, visit outdoornebraska.gov/hunt/prepare-to-hunt/sight-in-days/.



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Leaving a lasting impact on Nebraska’s natural resources and future fisheries biologists

By The School of Natural Resources, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The legacy of preparing young scientists at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to manage fisheries in Nebraska and beyond will continue even after the passing of Rick Holland, a well-known fisheries biologist, researcher and mentor.

Holland, who died April 28, led the fisheries research program at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission for 30 years. The Nebraska alum also was actively engaged in graduate student mentoring as an adjunct graduate faculty member of the School of Natural Resources. He mentored more than 80 graduate students there and at three other universities who have landed careers in 30 states.

A graduate student scholarship has been created in his name through the University of Nebraska Foundation to support the education of future fisheries biologists. The School of Natural Resources scholarship is a testament to Holland’s commitment to natural resources management and student mentoring for the future.

“He was a staunch advocate for students to learn and gain as much experience as possible — inside and out of the classroom. He challenged students to learn how to navigate complex, real-world issues natural resource professionals often face,” said Mark Pegg, professor of Fish Ecology in SNR.

Holland designed research that involved graduate students, with the intent to develop them and gather needed data or understanding of Nebraska’s fisheries resources. Projects ranged from studying panfish in Sandhills lakes and walleye and white bass at Lake McConaughy to fish communities in the Platte and Missouri rivers. He also led long-term research



NGPC fisheries biologists and a Wayne State student and volunteer, remove scales and otoliths from bluegills captured at Stagecoach State Recreation Area in Lancaster County as part of a growth rate study of the fish. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

at Harlan County Reservoir to collect data that would justify the minimum flows needed in the Niobrara River to protect water rights for conservation and recreation.

Holland didn’t seek recognition for his role in his students’ work; he always wanted the credit and recognition going to the students and professors who were most involved, said Tony Barada, a fisheries biologist at Game and Parks and another Nebraska graduate student mentored by Holland.

That humbleness spread to awards he earned, such as the Golden Pillar from the Nebraska Coop Unit and the Distinguished Service Award and the Award of Excellence from the Nebraska Chapter of the American Fisheries Society. Those closest to him often did not know he had received them.

“In the end, what satisfied him most was seeing research products applied to on-the-ground management, benefiting Nebraska’s

natural resources while providing students valuable real-world learning experiences,” Barada said. “I think when we look around and we see the research and things going on with fisheries in the state, we’ll be able to witness Rick’s legacy live on, and that’ll be pretty cool.”

Donations to the Rick Holland Memorial Fund can be made at NUFoundation.org/rickholland.

Or gifts may be sent to the Rick Holland Memorial Fund for School of Natural Resources Graduate Student Support at the University of Nebraska Foundation, P.O. Box 82555, Lincoln, NE 68501-2555. Checks should be made payable to the University of Nebraska Foundation and include on the memo line the fund number 01167620.



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FORT HARTSUFF CELEBRATES 150 YEARS

By Michaela Clemens



A reenactor sits outside the Commanding Officer's Quarters at Fort Hartsuff State Historical Park in Valley County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

In 1874, a grasshopper plague decimated crops across the Great Plains, destroying the lives of many homesteaders, including those in Nebraska's North Loup River Valley. During the same time, the perceived threat of conflicts with Native Americans struck fear into settlers, and wildfires in previous years made wood scarce.

Needless to say, life wasn't easy. Yet because of these circumstances, the construction of one of Nebraska's most interesting military outposts — Fort Hartsuff — came to fruition. Located north of Elyria, the fort is now a State Historical Park.

Named for Maj. Gen. George L. Hartsuff, who served in the Seminole War of 1855 and the Civil War, the originally named "Post on the North Fork of the Loup River" was constructed in response to the Lakota raids on Pawnee villages near Genoa and the death of a settler in a skirmish near Pebble Creek, near present-day Burwell, in early 1874.

In September of that year,

construction began at a site along the North Loup selected by Maj. Gen. Edward O. C. Ord, then commander of the Department of the Platte. Much of the work was done by settlers from the nearby town of Calamus and elsewhere in the region, who were grateful for work that could see them and their families through the winter.

With little wood available, a lime and concrete mixture was used for the buildings. Soldiers traveled north to Jones Canyon to cut timber for roofs, verandas and trim. They also brought saplings of cottonwoods and pine to plant at the fort, which sat in the open prairie.

The infantry barracks were completed just before Christmas 1874. In mid-January 1875, a fire consumed the officers' quarters while it was under construction and work had to begin anew on that structure.

The post was originally intended to house two companies, one cavalry and one infantry. By spring 1875, orders from headquarters reduced the size of the garrison to one company

of infantry. The structure intended for the cavalry barracks became the quartermaster's storehouse. Where cavalry officers' quarters would have been built, a hospital was erected instead. The hospital, laundress quarters, bakery and guardhouse were completed in fall 1875.

The need for the fort was short lived, and it was abandoned in 1881. Thanks to their unique construction, Fort Hartsuff's buildings outlasted many other forts of the era. By the time the state acquired the site in the 1960s, nine original buildings remained, though many were in significant stages of decay. Restoration of the concrete buildings and reconstruction of other wood structures, like the blacksmith and carpenter shop, by park staff continued well into the 1990s.

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of its construction, Fort Hartsuff stands today as one of the most complete examples of the small prairie forts from the Plains Indian Wars.

Fort Hartsuff 150th

To commemorate this historic milestone, Fort Hartsuff is hosting a two-day event Aug. 31 - Sept. 1 on Labor Day weekend. The celebration will include military and civilian reenactments and demonstrations, speakers, activities for kids, food vendors and more. A detailed schedule of activities will be announced at Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov prior to the event.

Daily admission is \$4 for those age 13 and older; \$1 for those ages 2-12 and free for those 2 and younger. A Nebraska Park Permit is required.

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Deer hunting near Moorefield, 1982
 This photo shows the deer that were shot after a weekend of hunting, hanging in a windmill tower. They were hunted in pastures near Moorefield, which is near Curtis, in 1982.
 Posing with the deer are me, my brother-in-law Henry (Butch) Gunther, my father-in-law Fritz Gunther, Deloit Cross and Uncle Rudie Gunther.
 – Bob Bauer, Fairbury

Pheasant hunting near Menominee, 1999
 The best way to encourage young kids to hunt and appreciate nature is to start them young — also including them in the festivities afterward.
 Left to right: Nick Kleinschmit, Luke Kleinschmit, Kevin Kleinschmit (me), dog Mesa; James Kleinschmit, dog Buck.
 – Kevin Kleinschmit, Fordyce



Another photo of pheasant hunting at the Kleinschmit farm east of Menominee — 18 years later — same kids. Our pheasant opener lasted about 2 hours. Left to right: me; James, Nick, dogs Melvin and Sam, and Luke. The first time Luke and James shot their first turkey, they had buck fever so bad they couldn't talk from shaking.
 Many years subscribing — great magazine.



Pheasant hunting near Clatonia, 1980
 Pictured is Chris Flogstad (left), and my father Daryl Jilek and dog Jenny.
 When my dad introduced me to pheasant hunting in the '90s, he told me of a spot where he and his buddies almost always limited out! His honey hole was near Clatonia but my first experience with pheasant hunting in this exact spot was walking all morning with a .410 to only see a rabbit and a hen pheasant. But in the late '70s and early '80s, this was my dad and his buddies' honey hole. They would have a limit by noon and head to a local café for lunch and still have the afternoon to watch football. I just wish I could have seen the “heyday” of Nebraska pheasant hunting.
 – Zach Jilek, Omaha

Attention **Nebraskaland** Subscribers

We are quickly running out of submissions for “Portraits from the Past.” If you send us yours, we may be able to get it into an upcoming issue relatively soon (first-come, first-served).
 Send your originals (or good reproductions) to the address below, and we will be sure to return them.
 If e-mailing pictures, please send JPEGs scanned at 100 percent original size, at a high resolution (i.e. 300 dpi) to tim.reigert@nebraska.gov. Call (402) 471-4595 if you have questions. Please include a story about the photograph, identifying people, places and approximate date the photo was taken.

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



A group of strangers pose for a dove hunting bagshot during the 2023 season. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

DOVE HUNTING STRANGERS

By Jeff Kurrus

We didn’t hunt together. We didn’t even know each other. But the photograph says otherwise, with five hunters — including two kids — all smiles after an opening day dove hunt.

I took my son, Eli, and his hunting buddy Wes Batman on a patch of public ground in eastern Nebraska. There was one vehicle in the lot when we arrived, and we heard shooting in the distance.

We walked to the food plot, waving to another hunter as we took another spot a safe distance away from him. A bird swooped in his direction, and a bird went down. Another one flew his way, and another bird dropped.

The man continued to shoot well, killing a few more birds as we watched, while we shot a bird or two ourselves. Then he started walking toward us.

“I’m out of shells,” he said, still a couple of hours before sunset. “Why don’t you take my spot. The boys will get plenty of shooting there.”

It was a lie. There was no way he was out of shells. I remain convinced of this. I thanked him for his hospitality, and we parted ways.

For the rest of the afternoon the boys boomed and banged at passing birds, downing their fair share and missing even

more. We heard several more shots near the parking area but thought little about it.

On the walk out, we celebrated our wins and shook our heads at our losses, those “gimme” shots that aren’t ever as gimme as we seem to think they are.

In the parking lot, three guys, including the one who helped us, were chatting about their day. They asked the boys about their afternoon, intently listening to the 11-year-olds recount their hunt and then sharing their own experiences. Then the proposal:

“How about we take a picture together, all of us?” one of the guys said.

We lined the birds on the tailgate as if we were longtime friends, shot the photo, shook hands and said goodbye.

In my 40-plus years in the field, I have never taken a photograph like this with total strangers.

Hopefully, I won’t have to this year.

Instead, I’d rather run across these same guys in the field, the ones who gave up their hunting spots for a couple of young kids and stayed around long enough to see how those new hunters fared.

And maybe, if we’re lucky, we’ll simply hunt together. Then we won’t be strangers at all.

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