

Nebraskaland
magazine

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Nebraskaland

October 2020

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Nebraskaland

Volume 98 • No. 8
October 2020

Cover: A close-up photograph of pheasant feathers reveals the myriad of colors they feature. Story on page 22. Photo by Gerry Steinauer.

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PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

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Table with 6 columns: County, Chapter, Date, County, Chapter, Date. Lists hunting dates for various counties from Adams to Washington.

2020/2021 FALL/WINTER BANQUETS

Table with 6 columns: County, Chapter, Date, County, Chapter, Date. Lists banquet dates for various counties from Adams to York.



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

FORGING HISTORY

Blacksmithing tools at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park during Heritage Days in October.

PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY



THREATENED AND ENDANGERED: THE FINESCALE DACE

By Melissa Panella



PHOTO BY ALEX ENGEL

The finescale dace (*Chrosomus neogaeus*) is considered to be a “glacial relict” fish, because the species expanded into Nebraska when glaciation was shaping the landscape during the Pleistocene era. The fish species was then left behind as the glaciers retreated. Finescale dace live in small coolwater streams of Nebraska’s Sandhills. These minnows prefer clear water, often in headwaters of small creeks or in spring-fed marshes and beaver ponds.

The finescale dace is small enough that it could easily fit in the palm of your hand. The female of the species typically grows a bit larger than the male. The fish’s tiny scales give it a slick, shiny appearance, and it has a distinct stripe that runs along each side of its body. Breeding males are the most colorful with yellow fins and a red-orange belly.

This pint-sized predatory minnow feeds in an interesting way by using its pharyngeal teeth to grind and crush food in its throat rather than in its toothless mouth. Finescale dace consume plankton, algae and small invertebrates such as aquatic insects and fingernail clams that are in

fact smaller than a person’s fingernail.

Finescale dace are listed as threatened in Nebraska. Not only do they have a restricted distribution in the state, but they are also vulnerable to extended, severe drought conditions combined with stream dewatering, reduced water and habitat quality, and predation by and competition with predatory fish species.

Finescale dace can continue to survive in Nebraska’s Sandhills as long as their current populations are not severely impacted. The conservation of the species depends on maintenance of quality areas along the streams where they occur, adequate beaver populations to create pond habitat and restrictions on the introduction of fish predators. It is most important to conserve finescale dace where they are, because they need exceptional coolwater habitats provided by groundwater and are reliant on the special conditions in the Sandhills that resulted from the last ice age.

Melissa J. Panella is a wildlife biologist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

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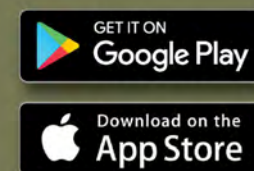
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MONARCH BUTTERFLY ON A SWAMP MILKWEED IN A SARPY COUNTY GARDEN
PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

MILKWEED IN THE CLASSROOM

By Julie Geiser

Thanks to a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust, a new habitat education program was initiated by Pheasants and Quail Forever, the University of Nebraska and the Prairie Plains Resource Institute: Milkweed in the Classroom was created for classroom use across Nebraska.

Milkweed in the Classroom was developed to address the current decline of monarch butterfly populations and the need to educate students about the importance of pollinators and their habitats. The program encourages students to take an active role in creating their own pollinator habitats, while utilizing conservation practices that can positively impact soil, water, air and wildlife.

Participating classrooms will receive a kit that includes everything they need to grow native milkweed plants from seed. Teachers will have access to step-by-step online training videos that cover a range of topics, including instruction on how to monitor the project and successfully incorporate the program into their school's curriculum to meet national science standards.

The three-month program starts in February with planting seeds in the classroom, followed by weeks of growing the plants alongside activities designed to educate students on the role pollinators play in producing many of the common foods we eat. Students will learn about the positive impacts that pollinator habitats and milkweed plants provide, including cleaning our water and air, as well as providing

habitat for other wildlife species such as pheasants, quail and songbirds.

In early May, the milkweed plants should be ready to plant on a site dedicated to the establishment of a milkweed garden, preferably on school property. Pheasants Forever chapter volunteers and staff will provide support to classrooms on growing and planting milkweed. Once the garden is established, students will take a survey to evaluate their knowledge of milkweed and plant ecosystems, pollinators and knowledge on conservation issues.

Teachers will have the opportunity to monitor milkweed gardens and gather data on these sites that will be used to populate the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Monarch Conservation Database, which tracks the progress of planting 1.6 billion milkweed stems by 2038.

This year, the program is looking for pilot classrooms in Nebraska that can help grow milkweed plants and create pollinator habitats. Milkweed in the Classroom hopes to reach a minimum of 500 students. Through these efforts, the program aims to establish at least 2,000 new milkweed stems in our state and further develop the curriculum and training materials for future use.

For more information about Milkweed in the Classroom, contact Drew Larsen, director of education & outreach at Pheasants Forever, Inc. and Quail Forever, (308) 293-1194 or dlarsen@pheasantsforever.org.

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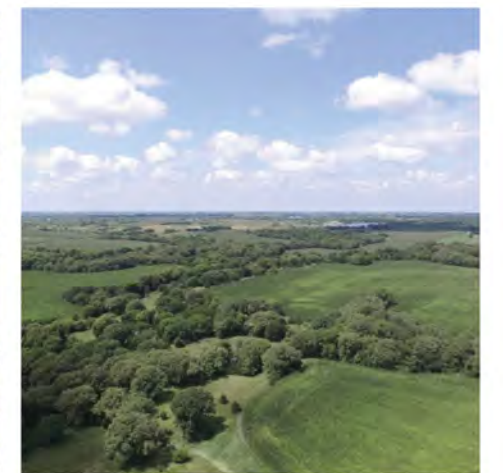
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PHOTO BY JONATHAN NIKKILA

SURF SCOTER

By Joel Jorgensen

Autumn means duck season for many Nebraskans but there are a few duck species that most Nebraska hunters will never bag. The reason may have nothing to do with skill nor where one hunts, but rather because there are a small number of ducks that rarely occur in our state. Among these rare ducks is the surf scoter.

Often referred to as a sea duck, surf scoters breed in northern boreal forests in Canada and Alaska and primarily migrate and winter along the coasts. However, a small number of surf scoters can migrate through the interior United States, including Nebraska. Most reports occur in the fall, usually involving immatures whose general appearance is far less spectacular than their adult counterparts.

Surf scoters are large ducks sporting big bills. Young birds appear mostly blackish with contrasting paler areas on the head and face. Females appear similar to immatures. Adult male surf scoters are also black overall, but possess ornately multi-colored bills and clean white markings on the head. The appearance of

males has led some people to call these birds “skunk heads,” “clowns” or “candy corn bills.”

Adult males and spring migrants are exceptionally rare in the state. Mid-October to mid-November is the peak period when one might find a surf scoter, especially on the heels of a cold front. Birders specifically search large reservoirs, lakes and even sewage lagoons to look for this species and other rarities. Most sightings in Nebraska involve single birds, pairs or trios, but occasionally small flocks totaling 5-20 birds are discovered.

By mere chance and happenstance, Nebraska hunters do occasionally harvest surf scoter. If this has happened or will happen to you in the future, consider yourself among a lucky few. However, preparing a sea duck for the table might require some additional research since they are not considered the best-tasting fare.

Joel Jorgensen is the nongame bird program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

A vertical banner for the Nebraska Duck Slam. It features four ducks in water: a surf scoter on the left, a mallard in the top center, a green-winged teal in the top right, and a cinnamon teal on the far right. In the center, there is a white logo of a duck in flight with the text "NEBRASKA DUCK SLAM" below it. At the bottom, the dates "September 5, 2020 - January 27, 2021" are displayed in large white text. Below the dates, it says "Add an extra challenge to your waterfowl hunts this year – see if you can complete the Nebraska Duck Slam." and "Harvest four of our most popular duck species in one season and claim flyway bragging rights - and four tasty meals." At the bottom right, it says "Check out details at OutdoorNebraska.org/DuckSlam". At the very bottom, there are two logos: "NEBRASKA - GAME PARKS -" with a small circular logo, and "DUCKS UNLIMITED" with a duck head logo.



WIND TURBINES SPIN AT TWILIGHT ON THE NEBRASKA PUBLIC POWER DISTRICT'S WIND FARM NEAR AINSWORTH
PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY

BETWEEN DAY AND NIGHT

By Martha D. Shulski

My two favorite times of the day are dawn and dusk — twilight — that space between day and night. The sky is transformed in these hours: The landscape becomes highlighted by changing colors, and we get to start anew. Animals certainly respond to twilight as some become active and others come in to roost or bed down.

What defines twilight is the angle of the sun below the horizon when the sky is still illuminated, and there are three defined categories. After the sun has dipped below your horizon (sunset), civil twilight starts and is the brightest category of twilight. The human eye can distinguish landforms and terrestrial objects, though the sky is dark enough that Venus can be seen — sometimes called the morning or evening star. It is the perfect time to capture those animals with your camera lens.

A few shades darker is nautical twilight, defined as such

when the sun is 6 to 12 degrees below your horizon. As the name implies, it is the time when one can use the stars for navigation and the horizon is distinguishable, assuming clouds are not in your way.

When the sun is 12 to 18 degrees from your horizon, astronomical twilight occurs. The dimmest stars can be visible with the naked eye, though some may find it difficult to distinguish this faintest of twilight from the dark of night. How long do we have to capture twilight? About 90 to 120 minutes, varying a bit by time of year. We can thank our atmosphere and all the particles and gasses therein for these hours of dawn and dusk. They illuminate our sky by scattering the light of someone else's day.

Martha D. Shulski, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is the director of the Nebraska State Climate office.

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PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY

TANDOORI QUAIL

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

I don't own a tandoor oven. You probably don't have a tandoor oven. Good news, your background charcoal or wood pellet grill will work just fine. Inspired by tandoori chicken, a well-known Indian dish, these grilled, curried quail make delicious appetizers or finger food. Thanks to the flavorful yogurt marinade, the birds come off the grill tender and juicy.

If you've had the Indian dish before, you might wonder about the lack of red coloring on my quail. Tandoori chicken's signature bright red color is usually achieved by food coloring, although bolder recipes might get their color from generous amounts of cayenne and red chili powder. I skipped the food coloring and the screaming hot peppers — you're welcome. The teensy amount of cayenne pepper is adjustable.

Turmeric stains, so be aware.

Servings: 4

Prep Time: 4 hours

Cooking Time: 10-15 minutes

Ingredients:

- 8 whole quail, skin on
- 2 tablespoons of vegetable oil, plus extra
- ½ teaspoon of coriander
- ½ teaspoon of turmeric
- ½ teaspoon of cumin
- ½ teaspoon of cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon of onion powder
- 1 tablespoon of sweet paprika
- 2 teaspoons of garam masala powder
- Juice of half a lemon
- 3 cloves of garlic, minced
- 2 inches of ginger, peeled and minced
- 1 teaspoon of kosher salt
- ¾ cup of plain yogurt

1. Using kitchen shears, cut open

each quail down the back. Turn each bird breast-side up and press down with the palm of your hand to break the wishbone to flatten birds, and set aside.

2. In a non-reactive bowl, whisk together the rest of the ingredients. Add the quail to the marinade and coat each bird. Cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours or overnight.

3. Remove birds from the refrigerator one hour prior to cooking. When ready to cook, prepare grill for medium-high heat cooking.

4. Brush hot grates with oil. Remove quail from marinade and shake off excess. Grill on each side until birds become golden, slightly charred and cooked through, about 5-7 minutes on each side. Serve immediately.

Photographed are blistered shishito peppers tossed with olive oil and kosher salt.

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September 1, 2020 — January 31, 2021

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NEBRASKA
— GAME  PARKS —



FEATHERS

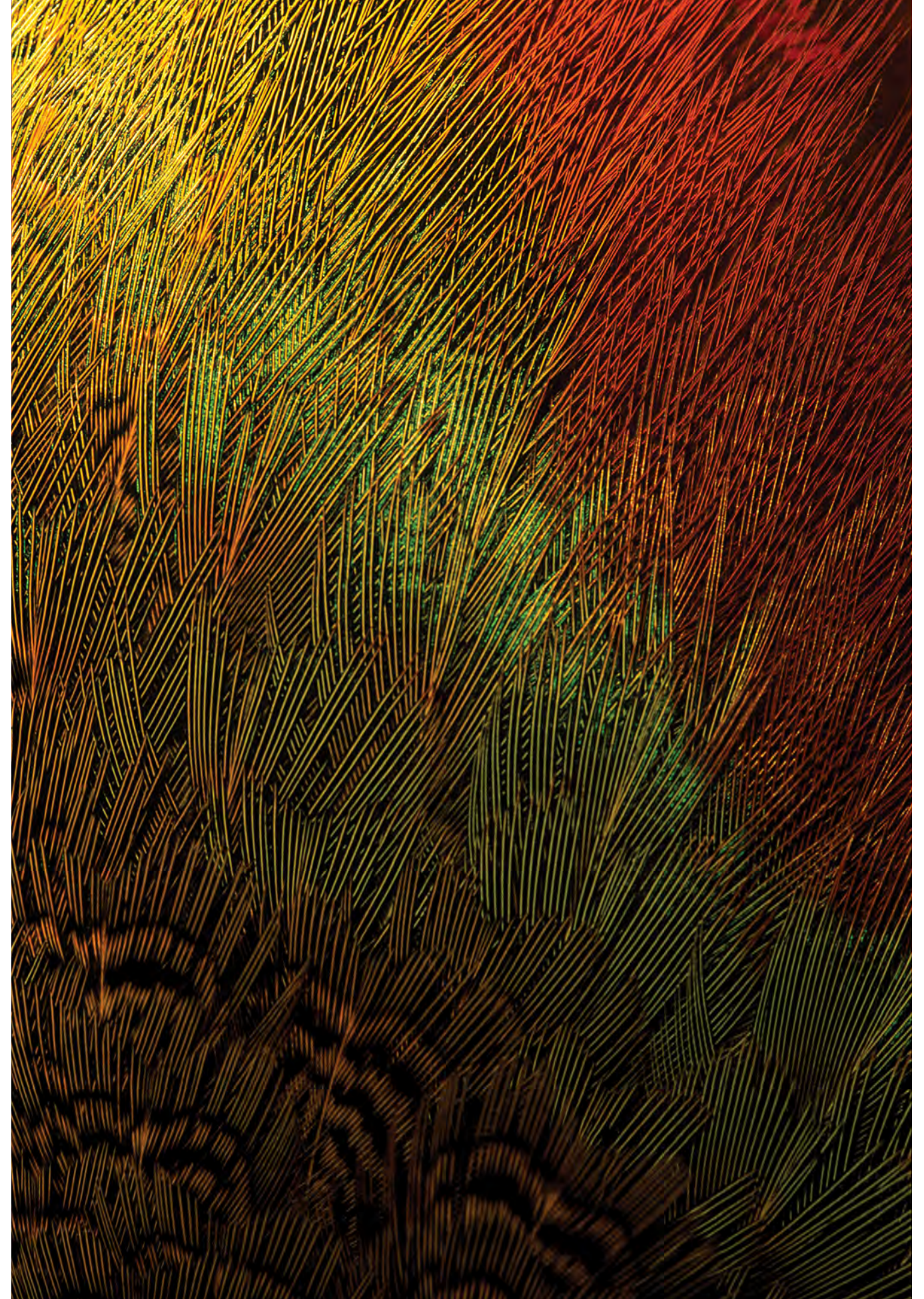
Nature's Abstract Art

Photos and story by Gerry Steinauer

About 20 years ago on a Sandhills hunt, I was arranging a few harvested grouse for a classic “I shot my limit” photo when I noticed something far more enticing — the feathers on the bird’s back accentuated in warm sunlight. After taking the photo, I was immediately hooked and have been photographing feather close-ups whenever the opportunity arises.



ABOVE: Sharp-tailed grouse feathers bathing in warm sunlight. OPPOSITE: Showy rooster pheasants decked out in an array of iridescent colors.



For bird hunters, feathers to photograph are easy to come by. Gaudy rooster pheasants are decked out in an array of feather colors and patterns, and waterfowl, prairie chickens, sharp-tailed grouse, quail and turkeys each have a unique plumage.

Non-hunters seeking feathers need not fret: Ask a friend to save you the plumage of their harvested birds, which can be easily preserved and photographed later. I stretch and pin the skins of fresh-cleaned birds, feather side down, to cardboard. Then I sprinkle borax on them and rub it into any remaining flesh or fat on the skin. Two weeks later, shake off the borax, and the preserved, odorless plumage is ready for a photo shoot.

Though illegal to possess non-game, native birds, such as cardinals or robins, or their feathers, I photograph these in place when finding recently deceased birds. For example, the unfortunate blue jay that flew into our picture window became an ideal candidate. Single feathers, say from the wing of a sandhill crane or tail of a yellow-shafted flicker or tom turkey, gracefully perched in nature, are also photogenic.

I photograph feathers in the early morning or evening, when low-angle sunlight best refracts iridescent colors from the feathers and long shadows can add interesting detail (see page 27 for more on refracted colors). If needed, I use a lens brush to smooth the feathers and remove distracting flecks of dried skin or other debris. In my backyard, I place the bird or



The long neck feathers of male greater prairie chickens are flared upward during courting displays, resembling horns.



Northern shoveler wing feathers.

Feather Biology

Feathers are an engineering marvel. Composed of the protein beta-keratin, they have a central rachis (stem) that branches into barbs and then barbules. The latter have hooklets that interlock, like Velcro, with nearby barbules. Modifications in the branching pattern allow feathers to serve a variety of functions.

Fluffy down feathers have flexible barbs and long barbules that trap air and insulate birds. Baby ducks, for instance, are born with a complete coating of natal down to protect against cold air and water. Due to their tightly interlocking barbules, long wing feathers are stiff, flat and air-proof — allowing birds to fly. They are also anchored to wing bones by ligaments for precise maneuverability and strength. Bristles, often consisting of only a stiff rachis, are the simplest feathers. These frequently occur on the head where they serve as protection or are uniquely colored or shaped for display.

Recent fossil finds in China suggest the first feathers appeared about 250 million years ago in reptile ancestors of the dinosaurs. The early dinosaurs likely had simple feathers

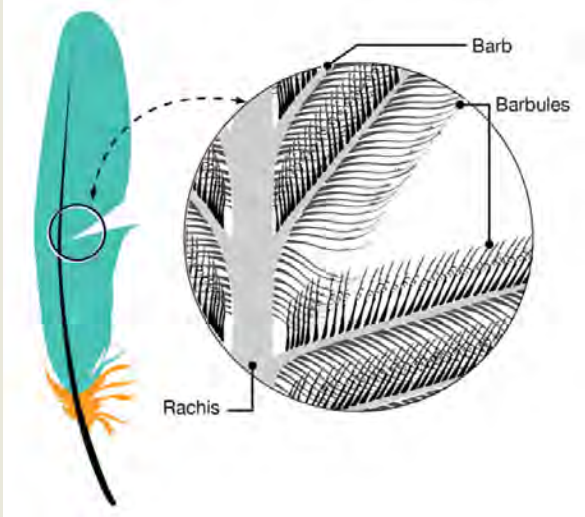


ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW LEACH, CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY ACADEMY. ALLABOUTBIRDS.ORG

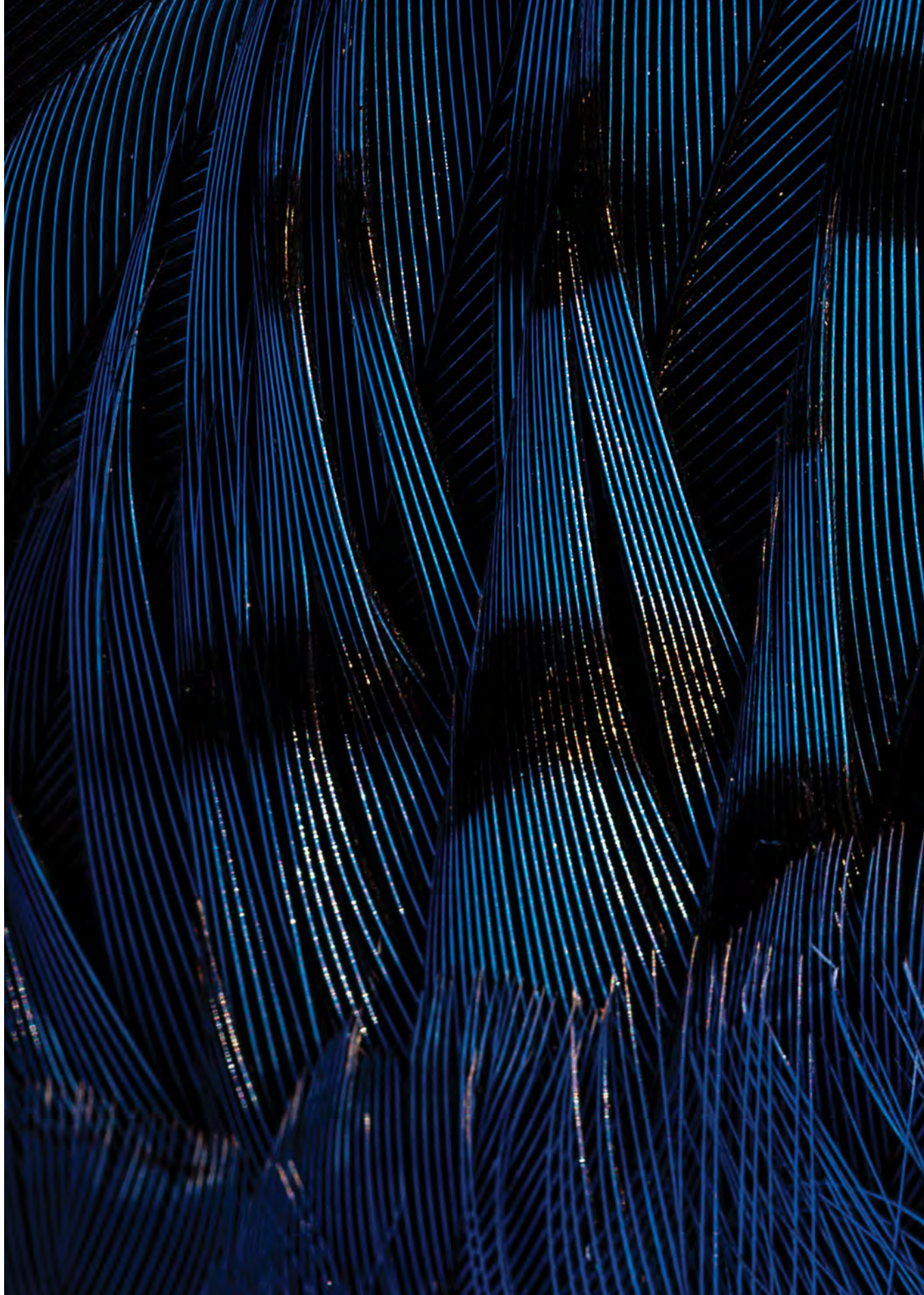
composed of hollow tubes, which served to insulate and, if colored, to show off or camouflage the warm-blooded creatures.

Feathers further evolved during the age of dinosaurs. The tubes formed into clusters of barbs, the base of these then fused to form the rachis. Eventually barbules and hooklets developed. Archaeopteryx, evolved from a small flying dinosaur about 150 million years ago and believed to be the first bird, arrived to the party decked out in a diversity of feather types.



GETTY IMAGE

Though well-feathered and capable of flight, it is unknown whether Archaeopteryx was a flapper or a glider.



The blue of blue jay feathers is a structural color. A layer of air-filled cells near the feathers' surface reflect blue light waves, while black pigments located just below these cells absorb all other colors of light.

feathered skin on a low stump and shoot from a tripod using a 105 mm macro lens. Since the feathers are stationary, I usually use a smaller aperture for greater depth of field and a low ISO. The latter provides more detail and color saturation and less noise, which makes for a better print, especially at large scale.

With intricate designs and iridescent colors, feather

photographs can approach the abstract. Hanging on your wall, your photos might leave your sophisticated friends asking, “That’s cool. Is it a Richter? A Pollock?” 

Gerry Steinauer is a botanist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. He is a regular contributor to Nebraskaland Magazine.

Feather Colors

Earth’s 10,000-plus bird species are decorated in an assortment of colors that are formed in two primary ways: various pigments in a feather reflect specific colors of light, or a feather’s structure refracts specific colors. Reflection is when light bounces off an object, such as a mirror or pigment, whereas refraction is when light is bent when passing through an object, such as a prism or a feather’s barbules, producing shifting iridescent colors. Feather color sometimes results from a combination of reflection and refraction.

Pigments are colored substances found in both plants and animals. In feathers, they consist mainly of carotenoids, melanin and porphyrins. Carotenoids reflect red and bright

yellow-colored light, melanin reflects pale yellows, browns and black, while porphyrins reflect a wide range of colors including pinks, reds, browns and greens.

The iridescent colors of many birds, such as hummingbirds, are a result of the refraction of incoming sunlight by the microscopic structure of the barbules. Refraction works like a prism, splitting the incoming light into its component colors, such as reds, yellows and greens. As the viewing angle of the eye or camera lens to a prism or feather changes, it sees different components of this color spectrum — a shifting array of iridescent colors.

In the below photo, the normally black turkey breast feathers appear red and silver not because of camera trickery or Photoshop, but due to refraction of the sunlight by the barbules into its component colors. A simple shift of the lens angle captured these colors.

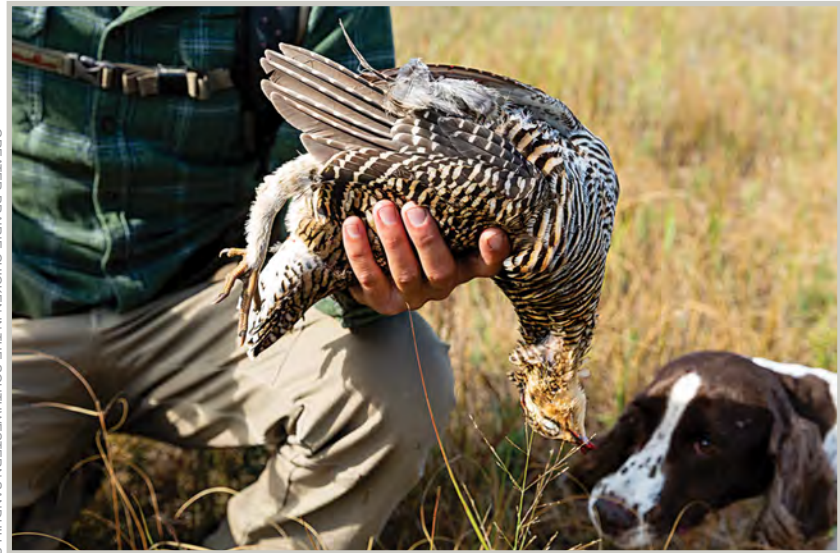


The iridescent, normally black, color of turkey breast feathers appear red and silver with a change of viewing angle.

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

From Halloween to harvest and pumpkin-spiced everything, what isn't there to love about October? With great weather and fall color, it's also a prime time to get outdoors. Here are some fun things to try. [N](#)



GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKEN IN THE SOUTHWESTERN SANDHILLS
PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY

Hunt for prairie grouse in the Sandhills

Throughout the month

With great public access set in a timeless landscape, the Nebraska Sandhills offers a good adventure for grouse hunters. Seek out areas with choppy hills and put the wind to your back; birds are often loafing just on the leeward side of the ridge. Be ready to cover some ground and look for flocks of grouse flying to and from feeding spots.

Fish for walleye and wipers at Elwood Reservoir

Throughout the month

Elwood Reservoir is consistently one of the best for walleyes and wipers, especially in recent years. And October is a great time to be out fishing, with fewer anglers on the water and beautiful weather. Try vertical jigging — as straight below the boat as possible — to take full advantage of the fall bite.



ELWOOD RESERVOIR IN GOSPER COUNTY SEEN FROM ABOVE
PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER



OYSTER MUSHROOM TACOS. PHOTO BY RYAN SPARKS

Cook fall recipes

Throughout the month
Statewide

Autumn brings with it the rich flavors of wild game and fall produce, waiting to be enjoyed. You can find a selection of fall recipes by local chefs and cooks, including venison steak tartare, bobwhite quail and oyster mushroom tacos, at NebraskalandMagazine.org — just search “The Nebraska Table: Autumn Recipes.”

What To Do in October

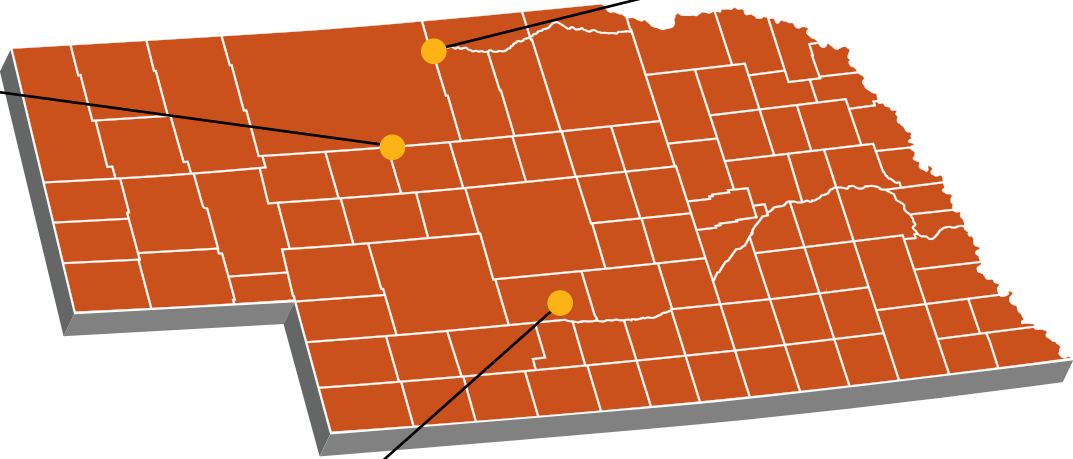


THE NIOBRARA RIVER VALLEY
PHOTO BY GERRY STEINHAUER

Enjoy fall color in the central Niobrara River Valley

Early October

When you think “fall color,” the central Niobrara River Valley may not spring to mind. But the scenery in this rugged canyon is second to none. An array of colors can be seen: red sumac, vibrant yellow ash and cottonwoods, and purplish hues in Sandhills grasses. To enjoy views from the water, plan a floating trip with a Valentine outfitter.



View and photograph cedar waxwings

Year-round | Statewide

These beautiful, berry-loving birds are migrating through Nebraska on their way to the southern United States and beyond. You can find them on berry-laden trees and shrubs where they will feast before moving south. Look for juniper, dogwood and wild cherry trees.



CEDAR WAXWING EATING BERRIES
GETTY IMAGES

Ducks on the Delta

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER

In the dark of the early morning, navigating the delta in the upper end of Lewis and Clark Lake in a duck boat can be intimidating if you haven't been there before. Or even if you have.

But the maze of channels, backwaters and chutes separated by dense stands of bulrushes and phragmites are a mecca for hundreds of waterfowl hunters from across the country each year, drawn by abundant public land and spectacular flights of migrating ducks and geese.

Terry Kostinec has been there before, plenty of times. The Fremont native first hunted the area in 1983 while he was a student at Wayne State College and has been back nearly every year since. He keeps coming back for the same reason the birds do. "From the air it's very attractive. When the birds

are migrating through this area, you've got these winding back channels and marsh after marsh after marsh, and it's appealing to the birds following the Missouri River," Kostinec said. "You're always going to see birds along that stretch of the river."

A resident of Vermillion, South Dakota, Kostinec shares a cabin in Running Water with a friend a mere 200 yards from the ramp where he most often launches his duck boat. He also hunts with friends who have a cabin in Santee, and sometimes sets out from the ramp there. From either location, he has plenty of spots to choose from in this massive marsh that stretches more than 19 miles from just above the mouth of the Niobrara River into Lewis and Clark Lake.

The western portion of this reach



ABOVE: Steve Wilson of Lincoln puts the finishing touches on a decoy spread as the sun rises above the Missouri River delta above Lewis and Clark Lake. **LEFT:** Terry Kostinec of Springfield, South Dakota, takes a drake mallard from his black lab, Blue, while hunting the delta.



is still a river with sandbars, but also with plenty of cattail marshes and backwaters, Kostinec said. In the eastern portion, which Kostinec and others who frequent the area call the "head end of the lake," the river spreads out into braided channels and chutes dotted with sandbars and potholes.

Picking a good spot to hunt begins with getting off the main channels, which is swift and can be 20 to 30 feet deep.

"Most of these ducks want shallow sheet water with smartweed and cocklebur and different things growing in it," Kostinec said. "You're going to

look for areas with slack water and shallow bars, what they call slicks, where the birds want to sit out of the wind."

While you might find some good spots right off the main channel, some of the best hunting is often well off it, Kostinec said. Getting to those spots is easier than it once was thanks to mud motors, which handle shallow water and obstacles better than conventional outboards, but it is still tricky.

"You've got to find ways to shoot these little chutes," Kostinec said. "Once you spend some time on the river you can figure out how to read the water to get back into those back

chutes, and sometimes that's where the birds are hiding.

"When old birds won't work a spread on a sandbar tip, you've got to go back somewhere in the middle of a sandbar or sand flat. They just avoid spreads and they go back and look for hiding places. They're going out looking for short grass to hide in, some kind of marsh grass, bulrush, sedges or whatever else."

Finding those spots in the dark can be a fruitless, not to mention dangerous, search. That's why most hunters, including Kostinec, spend plenty of time scouting during the day. After identifying areas they want to hunt,

they leave a track on their GPS on the way back to the boat ramp that they can follow out to their spot in the dark the next morning and not have to second guess themselves on where those sandbars or logs are in the river.

Those obstacles are known to take out lower units or steering cables and even leave hunters high and dry. "In some ways it's nice," Kostinec said, referring to the hazards of the area. "It keeps the amateurs out of this area, although I've had to pull people off of sandbars before that got rammed up on them for not knowing how to read the river." He's been there, too, and has a list of people he can call if



Kostinec and Blue wait for the next flight of ducks to come from Lewis and Clark Lake while hunting the tip of the delta.

he gets in trouble, which isn't hard to do considering the river is changing constantly. "Every year you get out in the river and you just erase all of your marks and trails from the year before because everything's different. You've got to start all over, learn the river."

Wise hunters pick several spots, knowing that some will be better than others depending on the wind. They also know that early risers might beat them to their first choice, or even second or third, especially on a November weekend in the peak of the migration. All of this marsh is public land. It was a hidden gem until

it appeared on hunting shows and videos in the 1980s. Since then, on prime weekends, hunters can expect to see long lines of rigs with license plates from across Nebraska and the Midwest and overflowing parking lots at the boat ramps. Kostinec has seen hunters from as far away as South Carolina and Louisiana.

Most of the locals would rather not talk about hunting the area, worried that even more people might come. But Kostinec doesn't blame them for coming, and thanks many of them he sees at the Ducks Unlimited banquet in Niobrara in mid-November, where

roughly 80 percent of the attendees are from elsewhere.

"It's harder to get permission these days in a lot of areas, and public water just draws people," he said.

Kostinec still chooses to wake up well before the rooster on some mornings to beat the rush and up the odds of getting his preferred spot. But he and others have found sleeping in and heading out at first light can lead to an equally successful hunt. The direction of the wind often determines which side of the river bottom birds fly when moving between their roost, be it in a pocket on the marsh or rafted

what he and his college buddies did when they started hunting off the old Ferry Landing Road on Bazile Creek WMA near Niobrara in the 1980s. Back then, they would sleep in tents, in the back of a pickup, or, when it was really cold, rent a mobile home for \$20 a night from a gentleman they met at the bar in Niobrara. They would wake up early, throw on their waders and pull a canoe or bag full of decoys through the shallows to a good spot.

"Back then, there was a lot of mud," he said with a laugh.

While sand has filled some of those areas and the bottom is more conducive to wading, Kostinec said that other than a few young and energetic high school kids, he doesn't see many people hunting the river that way these days. Commission conservation officers who work the area say they don't see many people hunting from shore either, but they do see some hunting from kayaks, and there is plenty of room for either type of hunter.

Kostinec has only missed hunting the area one or two years since his college days. With the COVID-19 pandemic scratching his annual trip to Canada, he plans on spending more time there this fall. He will be there when teal season opens. And unlike most years, he will be there in October when that first big push of small ducks comes through. He might even mix it up and find a backwater he can hunt from his kayak. He'll be back in November when the shallow waters in the Dakotas start to freeze and the big push of mallards arrives. And he'll watch plenty of other birds of various shapes and sizes pass, too.

"The neatest thing about it is there's always a migration going on the Missouri River, starting with the shorebirds in August and the teal in September," he said. "You've got little birds and you've got sandhill cranes occasionally coming through there. It's just a migratory corridor. Even if you're not shooting birds, you're seeing birds migrating. That's what makes it fun." 



During the peak of the migration, the delta can provide a mixed bag for hunters. On this hunt in 2019, Kostinec and his partners harvested three goose and six duck species.

Hunting the Delta Marsh

The marsh and delta on the Missouri River between the mouth of the Niobrara River and Lewis and Clark lake stretches 19 miles and covers more than 20,000 acres of Missouri bottomlands.

The size of the marsh, nearly all of it public, and the hunting opportunities it provides draws hundreds of waterfowl hunters from near and far each fall. Tom Curran, operations project manager with the Corps at Gavins Point Dam, has hunted the area since the 1990s and said the number of hunters using the area has increased dramatically in that time.

A survey of more than 1,500 hunters using the boat ramp at Santee during the 2008 waterfowl found more than three-fourths of them were from other states. Many of the out-of-state hunters launch their boats at Santee due to differing regulations between the states that share this border water: South Dakota limits the number of nonresident waterfowl hunters that can use the area and Nebraska does not.

The Santee ramp is one of four that hunters typically use to access the marsh from Nebraska. Another is located north of the village of Niobrara. Niobrara Confluence WMA offers a primitive ramp. And Game and Parks staff hopes to repair the Bazile Creek WMA access road, damaged by flooding in 2019, by waterfowl season so the ramp there can be used. There are several boat ramps on the South

Dakota side of the river and delta between Running Water and the lake. Hunters with resident Nebraska hunting permits can use these ramps to access this border water.

While most of the area is public, a large portion stretching from Niobrara to Springfield is managed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as Bazile Creek and Niobrara Confluence wildlife management areas or South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks as Running Water Game Production Area, known locally as Springfield Bottoms. These areas are open only to hunters licensed in the states that manage them. The remainder of the marsh, primarily the delta, is managed by the Corps and open to hunters from both states.

All hunting on the river and in the delta is now first come, first served. A program allowing a limited number of permanent blinds was discontinued in 2019 due to compliance issues and increasing conflicts between hunters. All blinds and decoys must be removed each day.

The river and delta are not for novice boaters. Constantly shifting sandbars and other hazards that lurk beneath the water can wreak havoc on boats and motors. Scouting hunting locations in the daylight and creating a trail on a GPS is recommended. Spotlights will be needed to navigate the river in the



The delta at the upper end of Lewis and Clark Lake is a maze of river channels and backwaters separated by acres of bulrushes and phragmites.



Kostinec scans the delta for ducks at sunset the evening before a hunt.

dark. Life jackets are highly recommended.

Hunting the river section with deep, swift channels, can be especially precarious. "It's not like hunting a little marsh," Curran said. "It's dangerous. And I've known people who have just about lost their lives stepping off sandbars into the current."

The water level in the river is dictated by releases from Fort Randall Dam. In most years, flows are reduced at the end of November, but that reduction can come 10 days earlier in drought years or 10 days later in wet years, Curran said. When flows are reduced, it can affect access at some boat ramps. Hydropeaking, daily fluctuations that are the result of the timing of hydropower production at Randall that could drop the river and strand unknowing hunters, is not occurring as it once was due to changes in power production, Curran said.

Ice can also be a hazard. When temperatures drop, shallow backwaters and basins at boat ramps can freeze and slush ice will form on the main channel. When conditions are right, things can change in a hurry. In 2013, the Nebraska State Patrol needed a helicopter to rescue eight hunters in two parties when the river, free of ice in the morning, froze so quickly they couldn't make it back to shore.

Ice can also be an issue on boat ramps, where water draining from boats and trailers when hunters pull out can freeze and coat the concrete with a sheet of ice. When that happens, tire chains are required.

Despite these challenges, the area has and will always be a draw for hunters and waterfowl.

How the Delta was Formed

The Missouri River in Knox County once bent back and forth between the bluffs on the South Dakota and Nebraska shorelines, with farm fields and wetlands filling the land between the bends. Gavins Point Dam, the farthest downstream of six massive dams built on the river, was completed in 1955 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, inundating some of this land.

The creation of the reservoir also slowed the river's flow, allowing the 5.1 million tons of sediment in the river, most of it sand from the Niobrara River, to settle and accumulate, forming the delta. This process also raised groundwater levels, forcing the relocation of the village of Niobrara in the mid-1970s and Niobrara State Park in 1987.

Each year, the delta grows by roughly 400 feet, more during floods like those seen in 2011 and 2019. That means more marsh for hunters, but less water for boaters in the lake. The reservoir is 8 miles shorter than it once was and has lost 30 percent of its storage capacity. Experts estimate it will fill with sediment in 150 years.

Falling Down a Well ... and Surviving

By David L. Bristow, History Nebraska

F.W. Carlin survived a 143-foot fall down a well, but then he had another problem. Nobody knew he was there, and no one was likely to come looking for him. If he was to make it out alive, he would have to do it on his own.

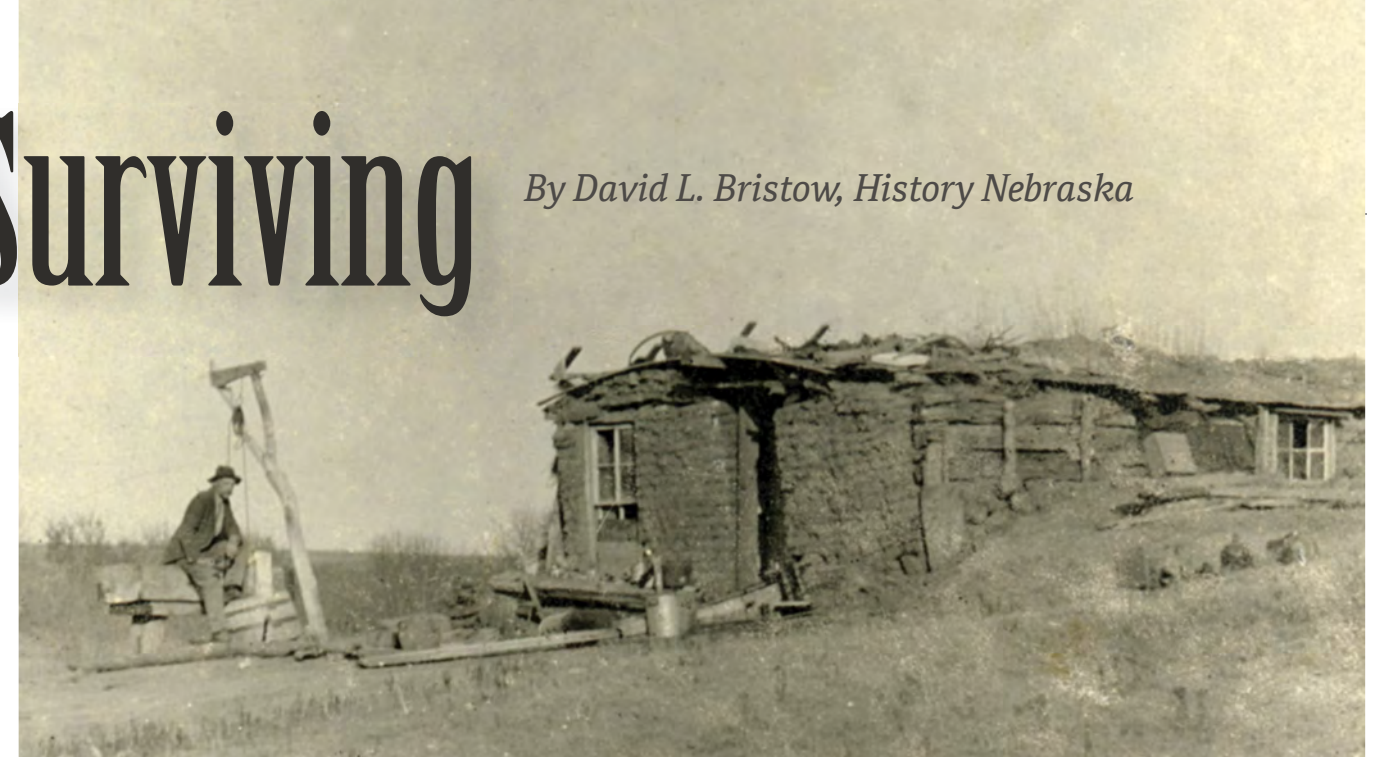
These photos show some other Nebraska wells in the 1880s through about 1900. Well digging was a vital, difficult and dangerous task on the high plains. Shallow wells could be dug with an auger, but on tablelands a well might have to go down 100 or even 200 feet. Before hydraulic drilling, sometimes the only way to do it was to go down the hole yourself and have a man to raise and lower the rope.

Professional well-diggers learned their trade by experience. It wasn't just the digging. Sections of a well might also need to be "curbed" with wooden boards to keep them from caving in. There were a lot of ways to die: cave-ins, falling buckets,

or asphyxiation from "the damp" (carbon monoxide).

Abandoned wells could be dangerous, too, as Mr. Carlin discovered in 1895. Historian Everett Dick told the story in *Conquering the Great American Desert*, published by the Nebraska State Historical Society (aka History Nebraska) in 1975:

"The danger from these deep wells was not confined to well diggers and those who went down to repair curb or water-raising equipment. After the great exodus of settlers from western Nebraska in the 1890s, vast expanses of the country lay unoccupied. Many homesteaders had either abandoned their claims, allowing them to revert to the government, or had mortgaged them to Eastern loan companies, which left their Nebraska property unoccupied. This meant hundreds of old, deteriorating wells remained on these abandoned claims



Mortimer Kress is seated by his well. His sod house was said to be the first in Adams County. History Nebraska RG2035-0-65

— an invitation to disaster to someone who might by chance fall into one. The best known instance of such an accident was that of F. W. Carlin, which is widely known in Nebraska history. While Carlin was on business 15 miles north of Broken Bow late in the evening, he inadvertently took the wrong road, which led to some old sod buildings. When one of his horses stopped, Carlin got out of the buggy and walked along beside it to see what was the matter. In the twilight, he stepped into one of these unused wells.

"A well man himself, Carlin immediately realized his predicament. Placing his feet together, he uttered a prayer: 'Oh God have mercy on my soul!' When he struck the water 143 feet below, he was stunned, a rib broken, and an ankle painfully sprained, but the water was only chest deep. On examination he found that it was a square well curbed with wood; and by sheer nerve, indomitable will, and ingenuity, he was able to whittle footholds with a pocket knife and otherwise devise means of scaling the difficult walls. After two days and nights of effort, he reached the top where he grasped some large sunflower stalks, pulled himself out, and lay exhausted on the ground for a time. Then he knelt and thanked God for his deliverance. With a sprained ankle and a broken rib, he could not walk, but crawled painfully toward the only house in the whole country, a mile and a half distant. Famished, he pulled seed pods off wild rose plants along the road and ate the red meat as he inched his way along to the house, where he found help."

Professor Dick says that the incident prompted the state legislature to pass a law requiring owners of abandoned land to find these wells and fill them. Not only did this remove a hazard, but it also provided employment for the poverty-stricken settlers who remained. 📖

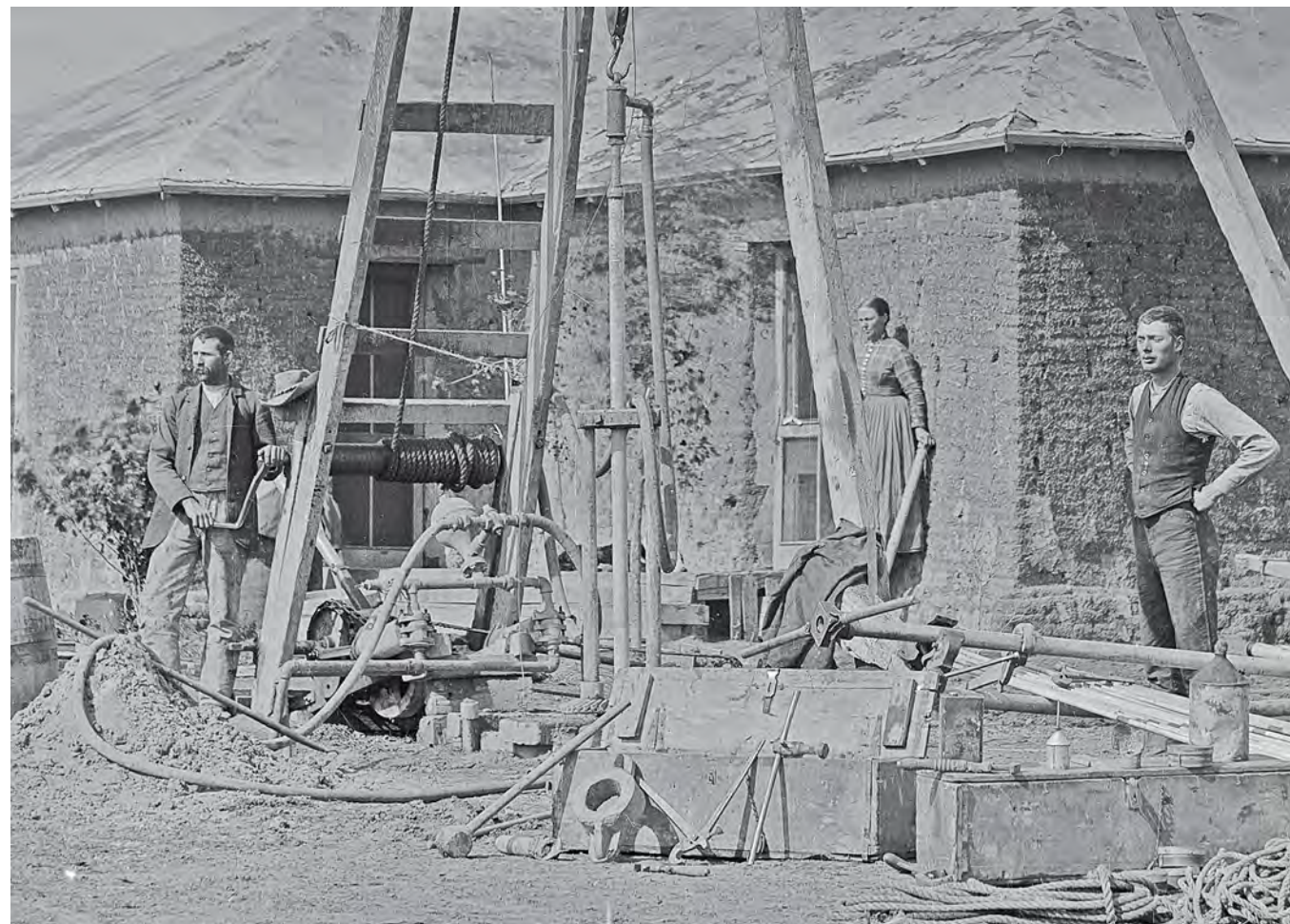
Visit History Nebraska's website at history.nebraska.gov.



The well at Len Bisco's place in West Union Township, Custer County, 1886. History Nebraska RG2608-0-2207-c



Digging a well near Cliff Table, Custer County, in 1890. History Nebraska RG2608-0-3537



Another Cliff Table well, 1889. Photographer Solomon Butcher noted that wells on the high tableland "were from 350 to 400 feet deep." History Nebraska RG2608-0-3537

Hallowfest

Celebrate Halloween at Ponca State Park

*Photos and story by
Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley*



For more than two decades, Ponca State Park's Hallowfest has thrilled guests of all ages. The park modeled its event after Indian Cave State Park's festival, starting out with just one weekend of haunted hayrack rides in 1998 and expanding its offerings to two weekends full of Halloween activities. This fall festival has become a tradition for families, many of whom begin booking their cabins and campsites a year in advance.

Hallowfest 2020 falls on Oct. 10 and 17. Guests may begin making reservations for the haunted ride on Oct. 5 at 8 a.m., but be forewarned, tickets usually sell out within an hour. This popular 40-minute tour gives parkgoers the experience of Ponca State Park after dark, but with the added element of spooky scenes and surprises. Although there is no age limit, parents should use their discretion in bringing children under 10 years old. (See page 47 sidebar for changes due to COVID-19.)

Daytime attractions are fun for the whole family, and they require no reservations. During a typical year, activities may include take-and-go crafts, fortune telling, maze, yard games, pumpkin carving, pumpkin rolling, "creepy crawly" animal programs and more. Guests and their pets are encouraged to come in costume.

The campground-decorating contest is another favorite activity at Hallowfest. Take a stroll near the cabins and campsites, and you'll quickly see how much parkgoers love this holiday. Interestingly, the park owes the creation of this contest to its guests.

"We are unsure of when this fun began," said Lynn Mellick, event coordinator at Ponca State Park. "Guests took it upon themselves to decorate their campsites, and they also began trick-or-treating in the campgrounds." In 2012, the contest became an official part of Hallowfest, with prizes awarded to best-decorated campsites and cabins.

Kick off your holiday season by celebrating Halloween at Ponca State Park. Come enjoy the fall colors, and immerse yourself in the autumn season and all this time of year has to offer. For more information and/or to make reservations, contact Ponca State Park at (402) 755-2284. [N](#)

Mike Taylor and his son, Ethan Taylor, of Fort Calhoun carve a pumpkin at Ponca State Park's Hallowfest in 2017.



LEFT: Skeleton funeral procession in the park.

BELOW LEFT: The pumpkin rolling obstacle course is a family favorite at Hallowfest. Although it will not be offered in 2020 due to COVID-19, rest assured that the attraction will make a comeback.

OPPOSITE: Eden Boko of O'Neill shows off her carved pumpkin.





ABOVE LEFT: Spooky scenes are scattered all over Ponca State Park during Halloweenfest.

BELOW LEFT: Raelynn and Chris Reed from Iowa dressed up their dog, Daisy, as a devil.

LEFT: The mammoth target at Ponca State Park's atlatl range gets a makeover into a circus elephant during Halloween.

ABOVE: A decked-out mini-lodge welcomes trick-or-treaters at Ponca State Park.

COVID-19 Changes

Due to COVID-19, the park will offer haunted drive-thrus instead of hayrack rides in 2020; guests will self-drive the route in their own vehicles in order to maintain social distancing.

Confirmed activities include take-home crafts, "creepy crawly" animal programs, pumpkin sales, and campground and cabin decorating contests. The pumpkin rolling obstacle course will not be available this year. The pumpkin carving contest is to be determined.

For the most up-to-date information on Halloweenfest, contact Ponca State Park at (402) 755-2284.

Barn Owl Rescue

An Act of Devotion

By Julie Geiser



Barn owls found in the loft of the Roskos family barn near Sutherland.

PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER

Nebraska Game and Parks district offices get many calls about wildlife. The call I received about stranded baby barn owls was no exception.

A rural family was getting ready to tear down a dilapidated barn on their property when they noticed a baby owl peering over a ledge near the rafters. True stewards of wildlife, they called their local Nebraska Game and Parks office to find out what they could do. Typically, this type of information is forwarded to a volunteer at Raptor Recovery, but at the time, no one was available to respond. Since I had some experience with barn owls, I decided to go.

At the location, I heaved my ladder up to the barn's mow, or loft, and propped it up against the aging and collapsing barn wall. I could see the young owlet as I made my way up the rungs, and when I reached the top, I was surprised to find three owlets peering back at me. Getting the owlets down



The author feeds one of the owlets by hand before the owls are transported to Raptor Recovery.



This young owl just finished eating some meat to keep it healthy and hydrated after being rescued from the barn.

was fairly easy, but also loud; the noise they made when scared or alarmed was one that those observing me rescuing the owls will not soon forget. These owls didn't have all the appropriate feathers that they needed to fly, and it would be another three to four weeks before they were fully fledged and able to fend for themselves.

When threatened, barn owls will go on their backs and protect themselves by clamping down on their perceived predator with sharp talons. That's exactly what they did to my heavy-duty leather gloves as I reached for them, one at a time. Once they clamped down, I carefully picked them up and covered their wings so they wouldn't try to fly, which could injure them while being transported. Carrying them down the ladder was fairly easy, but I still needed to pay attention to their sharp beaks.

Once secured in an enclosed box, I needed to figure out what to do with the owlets. Sometimes placing the young owls near their hatching site where the parents will hear them call for food can be successful. Near the barn was a grain bin with several openings for parent birds to gain access to the owlets, while giving the baby owls protection from predators such as raccoons or foxes. If the adult birds could find their young, this would be the first option to try.

But after two days, there were no signs of any mice being brought to the youngsters by their parents, as barn owls will often stockpile mice to feed their young. The owlets didn't cast any pellets, which was another indication that they had

not been fed. The landowners were also keeping an eye out for the adult birds, but no sightings were made.

The young owls' next journey would be to the Raptor Recovery Center in Elmwood, a move that would depend on a relay of devoted volunteers who could transport them to the center. But until they could be taken, they needed human care so they wouldn't get dehydrated or hungry. Luckily, I had access to some game meat in my freezer.

However, the owlets wouldn't eat the food I placed in their cage, so force-feeding was the next step. While one would typically give owls food with hair or feathers, since this is how they would eat food in the wild, I didn't have that luxury at the time.

Instead, I put food in their mouths when they opened them; once they figured out they were getting food, they cooperated and were eager to feed. Adult owls eat around two mice a night, and owlets usually eat as many as five mice in a single night to help them grow. This kept them alive until they could be taken to the Raptor Recovery Center.

There, the owlets were matched with a surrogate male barn owl that fed and cared for them. Nimbus was an owl that couldn't be released back into the wild, so he became an educational bird and surrogate. Dead mice were provided in the pen to Nimbus, and he in turn answered the calls of the hungry young owls and took the mice to them. The owlets imprinted on him so there was little human interaction with the birds.

Once the owlets were fully fledged, or feathered, and could fly, they were placed in a flight pen where they learned to hunt on their own like they would have in nature. Mice were placed in a large stock tank with leaves, litter and weeds so the owls could learn to search and catch their food. After learning these skills, they were ready to be released back into the wild.

In August, I received a call from Rachelle Allbery-McQuade, a Raptor Recovery volunteer, who told me that she was releasing the owls that day. She had gotten permission to let the owls go near a barn a few miles from where they hatched so they could find protection from weather and predators.

I couldn't believe how beautiful these once-scraggly owlets that I rescued had become. Their feathers had all come in, and they had put on weight and were ready to start life on their own. As Rachelle let the birds go, I felt a little sad



From left, the author's granddaughters, Lexus and Paislee, and neighbors Hunter and Jen Maseberg were curious to learn more about barn owls and to see them up close.

knowing that I might not see them again, but knew in my heart that they had a great chance at a life in nature where they belong. **N**

Owl Pellets

Owl pellets are cast through the mouth of an owl and other birds of prey. The pellets are simply the remains of undigested food, such as the hair and bones of rodents or feathers and bones of small birds. Pellets resemble a hairball and, for the curious, can be fun to dissect to see what the owls have been eating. Voles, shrews, field mice and other rodents make up the majority of an owl's diet.



Pellets of a barn owl with bones of prey included.

Jump-shooting the Rainwater Basin

An Adventure Story

Story and photos by Jeff Kurrus

I had long wanted to jump-shoot ducks in the Rainwater Basin wetlands. Growing up pursuing this midday passion in Tennessee, I wanted to get back to where it all started for me: slowly working through a slough, ready at any second for a flush. With this goal in mind, I started asking questions to folks who had hunted the area.

“Do that when it’s windy,” one hunter told me. “The birds will be pressed against the vegetation and you’ll have a shot to sneak close.”

“Go during the week if you can,” another said.

“Bring your binoculars,” another

told me.

The one thing no one told me, however, and I’ll tell you, is that even though you’re planning to jump-shoot — to stalk — you should always, always carry decoys with you as well. I learned this bit of advice the hard way.

With CRP-MAP atlas in hand, I drove to York, went south on Highway 81, then started riding gravel roads with binoculars in my lap.

I thought what I would do was glass ducks from the road then devise a plan to get to them. As I rode by the first wetland, I didn’t see a single bird. However, while glassing the second wetland, I noticed three mallards flush from the water and then put right back down.

That was exactly what I was looking for. A day that I thought might be ruled by driving gravel roads, which still would have been a fabulous day, had already produced a reason for me to wade through the muck.

Yet, this was

when I made my first mistake of the day. Because I now had the level of 12-year-old excitement flooding through me, I jumped out of my vehicle, made a quick plan, and darn near died before ever taking my first shot. Had I taken a five-minute ride around the wetland to see where my easiest access would be beforehand, I could’ve avoided that situation. Instead, I threw on my waders, hunting vest and, with gun in hand, walked south of the wetland

where the birds were.

“I’ll just work my way through the cattails until I get to the other side,” I thought. Man, I was wrong.

I started making my way through the cattails, as I had planned, but by the time I figured out that it was a terribly bad idea, I was too far in to turn around. I have never seen thicker cattails, ones where I had to lift my legs to my chest for every step before taking another. I began using my

empty shotgun as a walking stick. I contemplated climbing to the top of a clump of cattails and rolling across them, uncaring of how wet I would get.

I even turned around and checked to see how much daylight I had. It was 11 a.m., and I thought it was 50/50 that I would make it to the other side of the cattails before nightfall. Plus, I was getting dehydrated. All the while ducks continued to quack from the other side of the worst walk of my

life — and that’s saying something for some of the places I’ve hiked through.

After checking my Onyx app, a must when looking to see what lands are available to hunt, I became even more frustrated as it told me that I should be out of the cattails. My legs were shaking and burning from fatigue.

Finally, I made it into a clearing. I was past it. Without a duck in sight, I quietly loaded my gun and began to ease my way west down the line of cattails.



While I’ve had many adventures throughout my hunting and fishing career, my first trip to the Rainwater Basin will always hold special memories for me. It was mind-boggling in every sense of the word, and I couldn’t be more happy I did it.



The Rainwater Basin wetland region is a 4,200-square-mile loess plain located south of the Platte River in south-central Nebraska.



Poorly prepared, I was not ready for the massive amount of ducks trying to work their way back into the wetland where I was hunting, so I used ducks I had shot as rudimentary decoys to lure birds back to me. It worked well.

A hen pintail flushed, no more than 20 yards away, and I muffed the shot. Suddenly, a near-deafening “whoosh” filled the air to my left. When I turned, my mouth was agape as more than 300 mallards burst into the air. The sounds

of wings and calls filled my world as I pointed toward the great flock as it buzzed over me. Yet there were so many that I couldn’t even pick out a bird.

I quickly sloshed my way through

the ankle-high water toward a patch of grass on the edge of the cattails, then ducked in to see what would happen next. If I had decoys, this was when I could have quickly done some real damage.

Luckily, they didn’t need decoys to sit back down, and for the next 20 minutes, I watched greenhead after greenhead cup its wings toward the water. I was so awestruck that I didn’t even think of raising a camera to photograph or shoot video. I’m not sure I’ve ever been that mesmerized while hunting before.

When they all finally sat back down, I didn’t know what to do. Sixty yards away, they were not in shooting range and there was nothing between us. So I took a chance. I stood up and slowly walked toward them, knowing that the overwhelming majority of ducks would flush — which they did almost immediately.

However, because I’ve spent a lifetime jump-shooting ducks and mourning dove, I knew that every bird wouldn’t get up. There is always one.

This time, it was a greenhead that let me get to 20 yards before he flushed from behind a clump of grass. He was

my first duck of the day.

I grabbed him, as ducks continued to circle the entire wetland, and placed him in the biggest patch of open water I could find — an area no wider than a backyard swimming pool, and hid in the same cattails that tried to kill me earlier. A minute later, a lone drake cupped his wings straight toward my “decoy.” Soon after, I had two decoys sitting in that same open water.

The birds continued to work the wetland for the rest of the afternoon. Eventually, I had to make the longest 300-yard walk I’ve ever made because my legs were cramping with every step, and I was in dire need of water.

Once I was able to hydrate, I returned to where I had shot the mallards so I could photograph the sunset. As I did just that, I watched duck after duck roost in those same cattails.

I planned to go back the following

morning, yet a blizzard ripped through central Nebraska overnight, covering the wetlands and freezing the ground. Hard-headed, I went the next day, hoping that the water was still open. And even though it wasn’t, and there wasn’t a duck in the air, it forced me to do something very important when hunting the Rainwater Basin. I kept driving gravel roads to find other publicly accessible wetlands. I found more than I could ever need.

One of the most exciting adventures of my hunting life occurred less than 300 yards from a gravel road in sight of farmsteads and within earshot of blacktop. But when those mallards erupted from the water, there wasn’t another sound in the world. 

For the most up-to-date information on water level information, visit OutdoorNebraska.org/waterfowl-checklist/ and click on Wetland Conditions.

Basin Tips

- Bring extra clothes. Hunting the Rainwater Basin isn’t necessarily easy. I’ve gotten wet every time I’ve hunted or scouted them since this first day. I’ve stepped in over my hip boots (which I should have left at the house), slipped on muddy ground, or sweated until I was sopping wet.
- Be in shape. These can be long, difficult walks. Prepare for such.
- Don’t go alone. This was my mistake, and it could have cost me. Then, two weeks later, I went to another wetland and a similar situation happened. The problem is this: Are you smart enough to stop chasing ducks when you have to? I’m not. I should have known this. I won’t hunt these places by myself again.
- You’ll need supplies. These include food: water, Onyx app, charged cell phone, decoys (enough to fill a vest) and calls.



These cattails are an excellent reason why you should never hunt the Rainwater Basin alone. It can get dangerous fast.



To remember my first day on the Rainwater Basin, I snapped a quick photo with my phone. The flat terrain and shallow water were not indicative of how difficult a hunt it was.

PLACES WHOLLY HOLY

By Roger Welsch

When we hear a phrase like “holy place” or “sacred site” most people think of Palestine, Lourdes, Stonehenge or Chaco Canyon. Or maybe an historically memorable place like Gettysburg, the Alamo or Liberty Hall in Philadelphia. You know ... mythic places far away and long ago. Places not in Nebraska.

Well, there are places that are sacred in Native American cosmology in Nebraska, and while some are protected, closed to outsiders, kept secret to this very day, or, for the time being, lost to the past, there are sites held in reverence from the past that can be seen, visited and appreciated, regardless of the faith of the visitor. There are historically revered sites, sometimes remembered more for the tragedy they represent than a spiritual import: Fort Robinson and the site of the Cheyenne outbreak and murder of Crazy Horse, for example. Or Massacre Canyon or the Indian School in Genoa, Nebraska. Or the mass burials of repatriated Pawnee remains, also in Genoa.

At places like this, it's not unusual to find "tobacco ties," small bundles often in red cloth or ribbons tied to a nearby tree or fence, or perhaps an offering of food left as a tribute to "those who have gone before," signs that the site is held to be sacred.

Many sacred sites are recognized for their mystical or spiritual import. Many of these are carefully protected and are not open to visitors or non-tribal members, a necessary precaution considering a long history of desecration of such sites. While many of the sites are mentioned in history books and folklore studies, I won't include them here again because of that concern of desecration.

But other sites are available to visitors, and I feel that because they are indeed “sacred” they have meaning for all of us, including those who remain open to tribal ways and traditions or even to some who simply respect those traditions. Perhaps the most notable and accessible is Pahuk, a deeply sacred site for the Pawnee as well as other tribes like the Omaha and Ponca.

Pahuk is a sacred hill where tribesmen went on a vision quest or to get instruction in the secrets of tribal clans,

societies and religious orders. It is an impressive, steep precipice on the south side of the Platte River just south of Fremont. It can be seen easily from Highway 77, but it also can be visited by approaching it from the south on an access road near Cedar Bluffs to Camp Cedars, where there is a historical marker and footpath to the crest of the scarp.

The ancient belief that at the foot of Pahuk, through an opening either in the Platte or under a giant juniper tree at the base of the cliff, is the entrance to the subterranean meeting place of the Nahurac, the Animal Council, where animal representatives gather to determine the great questions of the cosmos. Pahuk is now in the protection of the Nebraska Land Conservancy; it is a spiritual treasure for all of us, and I urge the utmost reverence when visiting this site.

A less important but equally impressive Pahuk rises above the Cedar River, just to the south of Fullerton, Nebraska, and can be seen from Highway 14. It is private property and permission should be sought before visiting it.

Guide Rock on the
Republican River near the

town of Guide Rock was one of a handful of Pawnee holy sites in Nebraska and also is still held in reverence. Black, or Dark, Island, in the Platte River near Central City is uncertain; the Dark Island hike/bike trail south of Central City and across the Platte River provides easy access to the reputed area of Dark Island.

The island may no longer be there or may simply not be recognized in the maze of islands between Grand Island and Central City. I have floated the river through that area many times, and there are many islands that are covered with junipers that might very well be Dark Island, or what remains of it, and heaven knows, some of my visits to these islands have offered up surprises that would qualify them to be sites of mystery and wonder.

Roger Welsch is an humorist, folklorist and a former essayist for CBS News Sunday Morning. He is also the author of A Treasury of Nebraska Frontier Folklore and has been contributing to Nebraskaland Magazine since 1977.



A winter view in 1911 of the Platte River and Pahuk Hill, the holy place of the Pawnee tribe.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HISTORY NEBRASKA (RG2065-09-04)

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SHARE YOUR PARK MEMORIES AND PHOTOS

By Jerry Kane

Nebraskaland Magazine is seeking pictures for Parks Portraits from the Past — a spin on the magazine’s Portraits of the Past series — to be featured in 2021 during the Nebraska State Parks 100-year anniversary.

We want your vintage photos (before 2000) and your memories enjoying outdoor Nebraska activities, such as boating, camping, hunting or fishing at our state parks and recreation areas. We will give priority to unique photos or

activities.

Photos may appear in the magazine or on the Nebraskaland or Nebraska Game and Parks Commission social channels.

To submit your memories and photos, mail or email your photo to tim.reigert@nebraska.gov or fill out the form at <http://magazine.outdoornebraska.gov/parksportraits/>.

Be sure to include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken.



A unique glimpse of Indian Cave back on Oct. 28, 1905, complete with carvings and petroglyphs. Standing (right) is Emma Miller, my aunt. Standing (left) is Caroline Greenwald Miller (sister-in-law of Emma). The woman seated is a family friend, Edna Weber. All three were from Falls City and drove a buggy to Indian Cave that day for an adventure.

– Fred Miller, Walton, Nebraska

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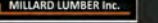
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WOMEN'S OUTDOOR SUBSCRIPTION BOXES

By Jerry Kane

A pilot program is providing Nebraska women the opportunity to purchase subscription boxes designed to help them develop and expand their outdoor skills.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission; Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism; and Iowa Department of Natural Resources have joined Becoming an Outdoors-Woman and Women in the Outdoors in creating this opportunity.

Each subscription box, which will include gear, educational resources, field guides and more, can be purchased for \$50. No long-term commitment is required. Participants pay only for the boxes they want to receive.

Box themes will change seasonally. The first box, for September, highlighted pheasant hunting. It contained game shears, a fillet knife, blaze orange hat, shotgun cleaning kit and pheasant recipes. The items were accompanied by a learning objective. Subscribers will have access to online webinars that teach skills using the tools in the box. Each quarter, a box will feature a new outdoor skill to learn. The October box will feature birding. Future boxes will highlight outdoor cooking, pollinators and fishing.



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

“We hope the purchase of these boxes will result in ladies learning a new outdoor skill, even if we can’t get together for formal in-person events because of COVID-19,” said Julia Plugge, Game and Parks outdoor education specialist. “Down the road, we hope these subscribers will purchase licenses, join outdoor-related organizations and attend events when the conditions are appropriate.”

For more information, contact Plugge at julia.plugge@nebraska.gov or 402-471-6009.



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TAKE 'EM HUNTING

By Nebraska Hunters

More than 2,175 people participated in last season's Take 'Em Hunting challenge. Here are a few of their stories, and we hope there are even more this year. Take 'Em Hunting is now open through May 31, 2021.



Blaine Bader: My daughter, Sophia, didn't want her dad to go hunting alone, so she volunteered to come with me. She did a great job handling the doe bleat call. Although we did not harvest the big buck we were looking for, we had a nice time sitting quietly in the woods.



Adam Guiffredo: It was my friend Trey's and my first time hunting. We were pretty nervous and excited. They wanted to be a part of the hunt, but wanted to see what it was like before he decided to hunt with his own tag. I decided to be the first one to try.

It was an early Sunday morning and we decided to hunt Whitetail Wildlife Management Area south of Schuyler after a recent visit to scout.

After waiting about four hours a small white-tailed buck approached the tree we were in. He had no clue we were there, and my heart was racing. I drew out my bow, and he came within 15 feet — perfectly broadside — and that's when I took my shot.

I couldn't have asked for a more perfect and ethical kill. The deer barely made it 100 feet before falling over. When we field dressed him, the arrow had perfectly punctured both lungs and the heart.

It was definitely an experience we'll never forget, and we'll definitely continue to hunt and spread the idea to others.



William Miller: Dawn is a 54-year-old grandmother who took hunter safety 21 years ago with her son, Derek, but never hunted until this year when her son bought her a permit for Mother's Day. Dawn comes from a hunting family and married a hunter. Her husband of 35 years, her son who is now 33 and her 8-year-old grandson were with her when she took her first shot, ever.



Jessica Anthony: My daughter, Norah, is 11 and loves to hunt deer. I think she loves the quality time, watching wildlife and probably eating the snacks we pack. We aren't ready to let her shoot a rifle yet, but next year, we'll get her into a safety course and let her get her own permit. This year she used the peace and quiet to sneak in a nap on my shoulder.

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My family loves your magazine. We are grown and live all over the country now, but Nebraska is home!

The year is 1974, one of many hunting trips with our father, John Morehead (not pictured). Left to right in the photo are Marc, Bruce and Karen Morehead. Dad taught us to love the land, Nebraska in particular. Hunting and conservation was one way to show it. The location is 20 minutes from Falls City, Nebraska.

I (Kristine) am one of five children to John and Amy Morehead. Photographed are three of my siblings, and we have another sister, Amalia. The hunting was on private land in Nemaha County near the Missouri River. For a couple of years we built a wax cotton canvas 'shack' and spent the nights in the field — freezing ourselves — but for some reason my dad thought this was a good idea.

At any rate, we are all hunters and conservationists to this day, and some of the best memories I have are of these days on the river.

— Kristine (Morehead) Hansen-Cain, Omaha



LEFT: In 1973, Tom Krause showed 10- to 12-year-old boys how to camp in the winter on the Elkhorn River north of Fremont. Pictured left to right are Korey Perry, Paul Swaggerty and Joe Smith. I was the photographer. Tom is the past president of the National Trappers Association.

OPPOSITE: This is me at age 14 during my first trapping season on opening day, Nov. 1. I'm holding two muskrats. These were taken at Hubbard ditch north of Fremont.

— Terry Kostinec, Vermillion, South Dakota



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 1990. 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.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

NOT QUITE SURE I PULLED IT OFF

By Jeff Kurrus

I’ve never owned more decoys in my life. Most of them came when a buddy decided to upscale his current supply and was looking for a bargain shopper.

Enter me.

Even though he was willing to easily part with them, our hunting party marveled at how green the mallard heads were compared to the ones we had been hunting over.

We already had a pile of stand-up Canada geese dekes for field hunting, but during one of our hunts, several mallards had repeatedly worked our Canadas, leading us to wonder, “What would happen if we added mallards to our set?” There’s always a reason for more dekes, we have long understood that. And this was ours.

After the purchase, we moved them into the

shed, and I couldn’t help but stare. Man, they were green. And when the light hit them just right, they shone just like they were out of the box. But did they shine bright enough for a photo? I was willing to find out.

I spent the better part of two afternoons asking my kids to repeatedly open and close the shed doors to varying degrees in an effort to make photos of my “new” decoys.

Photographers are constantly looking at scenes and imagining, with the right kind of soft, early-morning or late-day light, what that scene might look like through a camera lens.

To this day, I rearrange the decoys every time I walk into the shed just because I’m still not sure if I captured the photo I wanted.

Maybe I just need more decoys.

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