



Horses graze along the ridge north of the fort buildings at Fort Robinson State Park in the Pine Ridge. From 1919 through World War II, Fort Robinson was a remount depot where horses and mules were processed for the cavalry and artillery. Horses were received, examined, cared for and eventually issued to mounted units. By 1943, there were 12,000 horses at Fort Robinson. The horse herd was gradually surplused. Photo by Chris Helzer.



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NEBRASKAland

August-September 2008

Bug-eyed Portraits in the Tallgrass Prairie

Michael Forsberg gives
us a closer look at Nebraska's
insect diversity

Lake Maloney

The little lake
with big benefits

From Blossoms to Jelly Jar

Taking Nebraska's
wild plums
from the thicket
to the table

PLUS

- how to hunt GROUSE smarter
- ARCHERY for NOVICES - part two
- prairie PLANTS and WILDLIFE
- AMERICAN GAME MARSH - a gift to duck hunters



4th Annual Missouri River Outdoor Expo Ponca State Park September 20 and 21, 2008



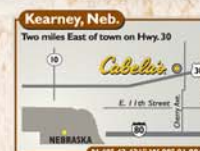
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NEBRASKALand

Volume 86, Number 7, August-September 2008

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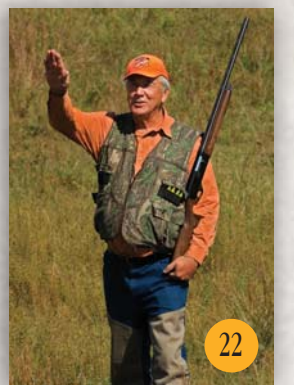
Cover: Inhabiting moist meadows and wetlands, the gladiator katydid (*Orchelimum gladiator*) is so named because of its armour-like exoskeleton formed of overlapping plates. See story on page 12. Photo by Michael Forsberg. **Opposite:** Canada wild rye sparkles in the early morning sun on the bottomland at Ponca State Park in Dixon County. Photo by Eric Fowler.



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Comment



Turtle Egg Question

The beginning of June brought out the large snapping turtles that live in our one-acre pond. We relocated an approximately 12-inch in diameter female snapper laying eggs in the landscaping right next to our house, then the next day I witnessed a large pair breeding in the pond, with another large “bystander” waiting in the shallows.

When three of my small children came running to tell me about a turtle digging in the landscaping, I immediately checked it out, hoping it was not another snapper. It turned out to be this female painted turtle and I was able to watch her finish covering up her freshly laid eggs.

If you have any information about how long it takes for the eggs to hatch, I would appreciate it – not everyone gets the opportunity to watch newly hatched turtles emerge from the earth!

Thanks.

Krystal Keiser

Waterloo, Nebraska

Western painted turtle eggs hatch approximately 10 weeks (70-80 days) after being deposited, and the hatchlings are about the size of a quarter when they emerge from the roundish, leathery egg shell.

Interestingly enough, the average temperature of the eggs during the

incubation period has a great effect on what sex the young turtles will be: If the eggs are 82 degrees F or lower during the incubation period, then 2/3 of the turtles will be males. If the eggs average 86 degrees or higher, then most of the hatchlings will be females. If the average temperature is somewhere between, then the sexes will be fairly evenly split.

-Editor



Rare Find

Jennie Gates and myself were out May 1, 2008 west of South Sioux City conducting a wetland delineation and came across an amazing sight – a woodcock and chick hunkered down in a patch of scouring rush. I hope you share these with your readers. There was no zoom lens involved – we actually got this close in both sets of pictures.

Stacey L. Froscheiser

Omaha, Nebraska

Comment



Caught on Camera

While on some land I own near Page, Nebraska this spring, I came across a pair of very young fawns. One went wandering off through the trees, but the other hid in some tall grass and I was able to get a close-up picture of it without disturbing it too much. Thought you might like to share it with your readers.

Ron Spangler

Kearney, Nebraska

Correction: In “Transplanting a Rare Orchid” (NEBRASKAland, June 2008), Tim Janssen was misidentified in the photo on page 39.

-Editor

*Send your comments to:
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Please include your postal address
and telephone number.*

*Letters may be condensed and edited
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PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Bald eagles may soon be removed from the state's list of threatened and endangered species.

Bald Eagle De-listing

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is initiating the process to remove the bald eagle from the state list of threatened and endangered species. This follows the species' June 2007 de-listing from the federal list of threatened and endangered species. State de-listing is the final hurdle for a species to be considered fully recovered in Nebraska.

In 1983, a recovery goal of 10 breeding pairs was set for Nebraska in the federal Bald Eagle Recovery Plan. Breeding bald eagles had been extirpated from the state in the late-1880s due to unregulated hunting. The first documented occurrence of nesting in more than 100 years occurred in 1991, and by 1996 the recovery goal was achieved. In 2006, 45 active nests were documented in Nebraska and in 2007, the number jumped to 51. The number of nest reports continues to increase. "We may close in on 60 active nests when all the reports come in for 2008," said Joel Jorgensen, the Commission's nongame bird program manager.

If the bald eagle is de-listed by the Commission, it will remain a conservation priority. Federal protection changed little with federal de-listing. The species remains protected by the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA). It

still will be illegal to hunt, shoot, harm or disturb bald eagles. Bald eagles also remain protected by state law.

The Commission is seeking public input regarding the recommendation to de-list the bald eagle. A series of eight public meetings will be held throughout the state through August, and written comments will be accepted through August 18. To learn more about the bald eagle's recovery in Nebraska, public meeting details, or to review documentation to support the Commission's action, visit www.ngpc.state.ne.us/wildlife/bald_eagle.asp.

Missouri River History Conference

Nationally-known historians and steamboat experts are coming to Ponca State Park on September 4-7 to discuss the history of Missouri River steamboats. Topics include wrecks and recoveries, navigation along the Missouri River, Native American reflections and perspectives, economics and transshipments of the American Fur Company and the Bertrand Recovery Project. Breakout sessions include options of touring the North Alabama steamboat wreck, kayaking along the Missouri River, and/or viewing artifacts on display within the park's education

center.

Cost of the entire conference, including meals, is \$80. One-day registration is \$50 and a half-day session is \$25. Separate charges apply to breakout session options. Musical entertainment will be provided for no additional charge after the evening meals.

The event is sponsored by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Nebraska State Historical Society, Missouri River Institute/University of South Dakota, Better Ponca Foundation and the National Park Service.

For more information and registration, please contact Ponca State Park at (402) 755-2284 or jennifer.wolff@ngpc.ne.gov.

Trail Fund Grants Available

The American Hiking Society is now accepting applications for its 2009 National Trails Fund, an effort to preserve community hiking trails

across the nation. Since the grant program's inception 10 years ago, 89 different hiking trail projects have received a combined \$340,000. This year, Nature Valley's Save the Trails program donated \$50,000 to double the size of the 2009 National Trails Fund. This means that 10 applicants will each be awarded \$5,000.

Nonprofit organizations may apply for a 2009 National Trails Fund grant by visiting www.wheresyours.com or www.americanhiking.org. In addition to the written proposal, applicants are required to upload video or images. Applications are due August 15, 2008. On September 30 the American Hiking Society will post its top 20 submissions on www.americanhiking.org for public voting during the month of October. The top 10 entries, announced in April 2009, will each receive \$5,000 to repair their respective trails. For more information, contact Abram Shanedling at (612) 455-1775 or ashanedling@psbpr.com. ■

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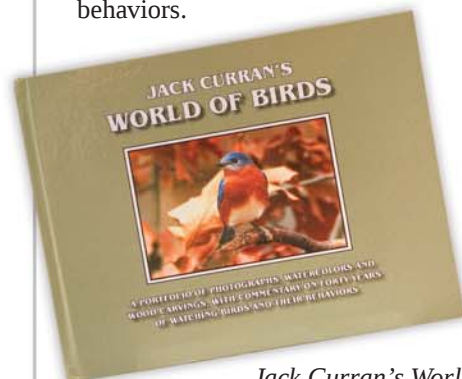
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A Lifetime of Birds

Doug Carroll

Jack Curran, former *NEBRASKAland Magazine* art director and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission employee, has published a portfolio of his photographs, watercolors and wood carvings with commentary on forty years of watching birds and their behaviors.



Jack Curran's World of Birds is a 144-page hardcover volume that showcases his work and thoughts as a “true bird watcher, not just a birder and not a lister.”

Born in Omaha in 1935, the author currently resides in Bella Vista, Arkansas. To find out more about the book or see examples of his other work, visit www.jackcurran.com. Copies of his book are available at www.amazon.com or by e-mailing the author at jcurran@jcurran.com.

Heron Spear-fishes Carp

Bill Hager

I photographed this great blue heron in



PHOTO BY BILL HAGER

early May 2008 in Cherry County.

The water level in the complex of lakes I had been working was higher than I had seen in many years. Some of the lakes had water flowing between them across what is usually pasture ground. While watching a flock of white pelicans on one of the lakes, I noticed a single great blue heron standing out in the meadow.

I shifted my attention to the heron and watched as he slowly maneuvered around the meadow in ankle-deep water. After about 15 minutes, he became very still and focused all his attention in the grass just to his immediate lower right side. With one swift movement he reached down and grabbed something that was in the grass.

A few seconds later he raised himself back to an upright position with a large grass carp impaled on his beak. Shocked by the size of his catch, I continued to record images for the next 90 seconds until the fish was completely swallowed by the heron.

Looking back at the metadata for the digital images I had captured showed that 15 seconds after the heron captured the fish he had him off the beak and headed down his throat headfirst. Some 90 seconds later the fish was swallowed. With a pause and a couple drinks of water, the heron started to stalk through the grass again.

Thomas Creek WMA

Julie Watts

“Wild and Scenic” may be the portrayal of the Niobrara River as it flows through north-central Nebraska, but it is also an accurate description of the surrounding countryside. Deer, turkey, grouse and waterfowl inhabit the rivers, grasslands and forests of one of the largest stabilized dune fields in the world. And Thomas Creek Wildlife Management Area in Keya Paha



PHOTO BY JULIE WATTS

County encompasses 1,154 acres secluded in the midst of these Sandhills.

Steep canyons drop down from the prairie, and from the north parking lot you can hike your way to the main canyon, where Thomas Creek flows. According to a local farm/rancher, Thomas Creek is named after William C. Thomas, a Civil War veteran who lived in the area and is buried nearby. The creek runs year-round, although the headwaters move farther down the canyon later in the summer. The trek through the trees may seem like a square dance at times as you do-si-do your way around dense growths of cedar.

On a recent trip, streams of last year's leaves flowed over large moss-covered boulders and down the canyon as I made my way to the headwaters and past two tributaries to Thomas Creek before it got boggy enough to turn back.

When visiting, wear insect repellent for ticks and mosquitoes and long-sleeved shirts and pants for poison ivy and scratches from the underbrush and cedar. This is definitely a hike for the adventuresome, with steep banks and obstacles. Finding your way through won't be easy, but is well worth the effort.

For directions, hunting regulations and more information on this area, go to www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

Twin Bighorns Born

Bob Grier

Visitors to Nebraska's first state park this year may have the chance to see another Nebraska first – twin bighorn sheep lambs that were born last spring.

Rana Tucker, a wildlife technician tracking bighorn sheep in western Nebraska almost every day, observed a pair of lambs nursing one of the radio-collared ewes from the Barrel Butte bighorn herd and repeated observations confirmed the first birth of bighorn twins in Nebraska.

According to Dave Kinnamon, Chadron State Park (SP) Superintendent, the opportunity to view the twins and other bighorn sheep within the park is exciting but completely random. “We've seen the sheep using the rocky butte above the group shelter on the park interior road as well as feeding in the open just above the parks trail ride stables. Park visitors have also seen the bighorns occasionally from the Black Hills Overlook road that crosses the U.S. Forest Service pastures bordering the park.”

Bighorn sheep evolved in the Arctic and normally produce only one lamb each year following a short gestation period. Research indicates that twin lambs are extremely rare in bighorn sheep.

Wildlife enthusiasts, photographers and observers should avoid approaching or otherwise affecting bighorn sheep, deer and other wildlife. Bighorn ewes with lambs will protect their young if approached too close. Binoculars, spotting scopes and moderate telephoto lenses will be very useful for bighorn observations and photographs. Visitors in vehicles on the park loop road and elsewhere in the region should be careful as they slow or park to observe wildlife.

The bighorns moving on Chadron SP are from the Barrel Butte herd released on the Bighorn Wildlife Management Area (WMA) west of Chadron SP. The herd is scattered in the Pine Ridge between the Ponderosa WMA near Crawford and Chadron SP,

Four Steps for Improved Dove Shooting

Tom Keith

Here are four things you can do between now and September 1, dove season's opening day, to greatly improve your shooting abilities and add more birds to your bag.

First, pattern your shotgun. You must know where your gun is shooting and the density of the pattern it throws. Try different brands of shells and different loads to determine which perform best in your gun and use them for both practice and hunting.

Listen to Mel Gibson. In the film “The Patriot,” Gibson's character reminds his sons to “aim small, miss small.” Although he was talking about firing a flintlock rifle and blowing the button off a redcoat's tunic with a 50-caliber roundball rather than surrounding a fast-flying dove with a pattern of No. 8 shot, the theory is just as valid – don't shoot at the whole target, concentrate on just a small spot – its eye or beak -- and your accuracy will greatly improve.

Shoot bluerocks as often as possible prior to opening day. Shoot from the same positions that you will assume in the field and at different distances and angles. Practice focusing on the leading edge rather than the whole spinning bluerock.

Train yourself to wait to mount the shotgun until the dove is in range. Watch the bird approach, focus on its eye or beak, then in one motion, start the swing with your body as you bring the gun to your shoulder, swing through the bird and pull the trigger.



ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REICERT

with some movement of bighorns seen east of U.S. Highway 385.

Bighorn sheep and their lambs can be seen on and near Fort Robinson SP near Crawford, as well.

Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

Few things are as revolting as opening the lid to a sour-smelling cooler.

You folks that camp a lot know what I'm talking about, when



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

that cooler gets to the point that when you open it up, you don't want to eat 'cuz it smells so bad.

Good tip here, from Coleman as a matter of fact: Get bleach, water it down...a tablespoon to a gallon of water is probably plenty...soak a rag up...wipe that thing down...it'll kill the bacteria and help the smell. Also for the smell problem, get another rag...soak it with some vanilla...wipe the cooler out or leave the rag in it overnight for a day or so...then take it out and that smell will impregnate your cooler and make it smell a lot better.

When you open up your cooler and it looks like little baby rabbits have been born in there – those little gray fuzz balls – that's the time to do this treatment. ■

Bug-eyed Portraits in the Tallgrass Prairie



**Text and photos
by Michael Forsberg**

In “Horizontal Grandeur” Bill Holm writes: “A woods man looks at 20 miles of prairie and see nothing but grass, but a prairie man looks at a square foot and sees a universe.” If the prairie really is a universe, then the majority of its citizens are insects.

The insect world makes up 90 percent of all life on the planet. The class *Insecta* contains 26 orders, nearly 1,000 families and more than 750,000 described species – one-tenth of what scientists conservatively believe may actually exist on Earth. Insects are a vast and complex collective of tough, highly mobile, genetically adaptable creatures that can be found on water, land and in the soil. They wear their skeletons on the outside, their three-part body designs can stretch our wildest imaginations and their myriad forms truly match their specialized functions.

One of the most species-rich places to find insects in Nebraska is the tallgrass prairie along the eastern



A walking stick bug caught in a net at Audubon’s Spring Creek Prairie near Denton.

shoulder of our state. Up until the early 20th century, the tallgrass prairie was a sea of grass that stretched from eastern Nebraska to Illinois. Containing 800 indigenous plant species, it was one of the most highly diverse ecosystems on the North American continent. Today, tallgrass prairie has been reduced by as much as 98 percent, but scientists believe more than 5,000 insect species still exist in the scattered remnants left today, which makes them important insect strongholds for the future.

Insects are the main consumers of plants on Earth, and compose the largest group of all grassland herbivores. Insects feed on plants by piercing, sucking, rasping, lapping, sponging, siphoning and gnawing with their mandibles, tongues, beaks and other mouthparts. Their lives are not mere self-indulgence, however: They give the prairie its shaggy and patchy look



BLACKSPOTTED PROMINENT



GOLDENROD CRAB SPIDER



CLOUDED CRIMSON



ABOVE: BROWN STINKBUG. OPPOSITE: GLADIATOR KATYDID, TOP LEFT: ASSASSIN BUG



BLACKHORNED TREE CRICKET



SNOWBERRY CLEARWING LARVAE



OBSCURE BIRD GRASSHOPPER



SILVER ORB BANDED GARDEN SPIDER



PICTUREWINGED FLY

by constantly shaping the vegetation, which helps maintain its diversity. They also provide the base of the food chain, providing food for predacious insects such as beetles, ants and mantises, as well as spiders, rodents, birds and even mammals.

Insects also play a critical role in

pollination in a kind of sex for food trade-off. Unlike grasses, which primarily self pollinate or pollinate by the wind, many flowering plants, such as wildflowers, are pollinated by insects such as moths, butterflies, beetles, bees and wasps that inadvertently transfer pollen from the anthers (male organs)

to the stigmas (female organs) of flowers as they travel from plant to plant seeking out nectar and pollen. So the next time you eat a piece of fruit or marvel at a wildflower, you can thank an insect.

Insects are seldom shown gratitude, however, and get far too little respect or attention unless they are crawling up someone's leg, eating a farmer's crop or munching on grandma's backyard tomatoes. The truth is, few insects are considered pests – the vast majority is beneficial to humankind and we would be hard pressed to live without them.

Which led to my idea to help make their case: I and a small squad of volunteers (bribed with free lunches at Runza) would go out for two days in early September to Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie near Denton armed with sweep nets, plastic peanut butter containers and mason jars, and try to capture as many different kinds of insects and other invertebrates as we

could manage. We would search up high in the prairie canopy and down low in the thatch, on hilltops, side slopes and near water, in brush and on bare soil. Once captured in the net, we would put our subjects in jars, bring them inside to do portrait photography in assembly line fashion on a makeshift table-top studio, then release them back into the areas of the prairie from which they came. The result would be a beautiful and comprehensive portfolio of insect life on the tallgrass. Easy.

No. Not easy. Outside on the prairie it was hot, muggy and, of course, "buggy." Insects were hard to capture, nets tore and jar lids wouldn't stay on. Mosquitoes bit and shoes got stuck in the mud. Inside in the studio, insects refused to look toward the camera,



CAROLINA GRASSHOPPER



CRAB SPIDER NYMPH



REDLEGGED GRASSHOPPER



COMMON MEADOW KATYDID



SAYS STINK BUG



LARGEHEADED GRASSHOPPER



DIFFERENTIAL GRASSHOPPER



CUDWEED GRASSHOPPER



SWORDBEARING CONEHEADED KATYDID

would walk off the set or, worse yet, fly away. A few refused to leave their jars, and some insects decided to eat other insects while they were waiting in line to be photographed.

I also learned after the fact that most insects have multiple life cycles, and that the emergence of larvae and adults is staggered throughout the seasons and is different for each species. Many species are timed to emerge coincidentally with the emergence and/or blooming of a particular plant species or species group. In other words, it was impossible to photograph at one time all the species that live in a particular prairie.

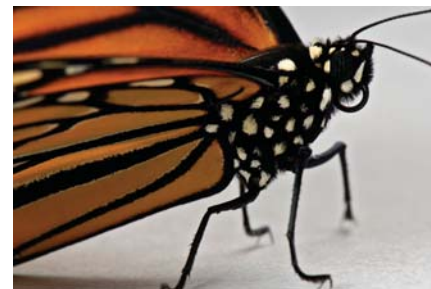
Our two-day adventure gave me

a great appreciation for portrait photographers: It's nerve racking, meticulous and exacting work. My photos turned out to not be high art, and we only captured about 30 different insect species – roughly .006 percent of the 5,000 or so insect species that may have been out there – but all was not lost.

The lavish portfolio that I had envisioned turned out to be more a scrapbook of sorts – a brief glimpse at a single page of bug-eyed portraits out of a very thick high school yearbook, a glance at the diversity of life in the constantly changing cast of characters we call insects that are found in the



WOODLAND MEADOW KATYDID



MONARCH BUTTERFLY



ALFALFA BUTTERFLY

prairies and other grasslands near our home. Perhaps a scrapbook is more appropriate anyway. That is how most of us in our everyday lives experience nature – getting a glimpse here and there whether we take a hike, go on a hunt, cast a line or wade a stream. We never see it all, but what we see we appreciate.

So if you walk into a grassland and are constantly bugged by the insects you encounter, know that you are probably in a very healthy grassland and give thanks, for these tallgrass prairie remnants are true Nebraska treasures, the last of the few that somehow survived “progress,” and the insects they protect in turn help anchor the web of life that sustains us all. ■

The author would like to give special thanks to the University of Nebraska Entomology Lab and Extension Services for species identifications of the insects seen in these photographs.



MONARCH BUTTERFLY CATERPILLAR

Prairie Plants and Wildlife



PHOTO BY GERRY STEINAUER

Brad Krohn conducts a prescribed burn on a prairie restoration at Funk Waterfowl Production Area in Phelps County.

**By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission**

Using seeds gathered wherever and however possible, biologists are trying to restore and improve wildlife habitat by bringing back the plants that evolved here.

European farmers who settled Nebraska had little appreciation for the prairie they encountered in such seemingly limitless abundance: They plowed under much of the native grasslands that covered the state and planted species from their homeland that they believed superior to native species.

This bias continued into the 20th century, as exotic species were planted for forage, landscaping, erosion control and wildlife habitat. Many of these plants proved to be aggressively invasive, spreading into prairies,

displacing native plants and degrading wildlife habitat. In recent decades, wildlife managers have come to recognize many native prairie species as superior to introduced species both in hardiness and as food and habitat for wildlife.

Since 2000, Brad Krohn, a biological science technician with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's Rainwater Basin District, and coworkers have planted more than 2,800 acres of prairie restorations on Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) in south-central Nebraska. Additionally, they

have interseeded prairie forbs (broadleaf plants that die back to the ground each year) into more than 1,000 acres of existing grasslands. Prairie chicken, pheasant, quail and other grassland bird numbers on these WPAs have since increased, and Krohn believes the plantings are in large part the reason why.

Prairie plants provide upland game birds and grassland birds needed habitat. Quail, for example, prefer the stiff, upright growth of native warm-season grasses for nesting, particularly mid-height species such as little bluestem and sideoats grama. These native grasses conceal nests from predators and are green and growing during the nesting season, reducing the temperature and increasing humidity around the nest. Some biologists speculate these conditions may increase egg hatchability. Nonnative, cool-season grasses such as smooth brome that now dominate many

Nebraska grasslands are entering summer dormancy by mid-June and provide less favorable nesting microclimates.

Brood-rearing habitat, where chicks forage for insects, is as important to grassland birds as nesting habitat. Good brood-rearing habitat has overhead cover to protect chicks from aerial predators and is open below, so chicks can easily move and forage for insects. Prairie forbs with narrow bases and spreading canopies provide such habitat. Dense, tall stands of grass limit chick movement and foraging, and are not suitable for brood rearing. Brood-rearing habitat is best located near nesting cover – if chicks have to travel long distances from nests to brood-rearing habitat, they are more susceptible to predators.

Annual weeds, such as some ragweeds and sunflowers, dominate in young prairie restorations and provide excellent brood-rearing habitat. Quail and pheasant populations often peak during the first three or four years of a restoration then decline as weedy annuals give way to perennial grasses, this reducing the quality of brood-rearing habitat available. Seeding patches of only prairie forbs can provide lasting habitat for young birds.

In winter, dense stands of native grass provide upland game birds and other wildlife with cover from predators and harsh weather. Tall grasses reduce wind velocities at ground level and their dried, reddish-brown leaves add warmth by absorbing sunlight. Exotic cool-season grass leaves dry to a grayish color and absorb less winter sunlight.

In winter, pheasants and quail using Krohn's WPAs feed primarily on soybeans and corn in adjacent crop fields. However, he has found prairie forb seed, primarily deer vetch and sunflower seeds, in the crops of hunter-harvested birds. The seeds of a number of prairie forb species are high-quality wildlife foods with a long period of availability and high nutritional value. Domestic grains are high in energy but lack some amino acids needed by game birds, so feeding solely on grains may reduce the birds' reproductive success. Although land managers commonly plant corn and sorghum food plots for pheasants and quail where access to other cropland is poor, areas where cropland is abundant would probably

benefit by replacing traditional food plots with prairie forbs to provide food and brood-rearing habitat. Winter food should be close to heavier cover (particularly shrubs for quail) to minimize daily movements by birds and reduce their exposure to predators.

Local Ecotype Seed

Each year Krohn uses a combine to harvest 8,000 to 12,000 pounds of native grass and forb seed from prairies and restorations to plant on WPAs and other conservation sites. The seed is supplemented with hand-collected seed of selected species. His plantings include seeds of 80 to 120 species of cool-season and warm-season grasses; sedges; and early to late-blooming annual, biennial and perennial forbs. This variety of plants provides diverse food and habitat resources for wildlife.

"We believe using native, local ecotype seed is the right thing to do," said Krohn. "It provides the best habitat for what we are after and grows well on our WPAs' various soils. The diverse grasslands resulting from the rich seed mix are also more resilient to invasive plants and climatic extremes, such as drought, than low diversity grasslands, and therefore provide more stable habitat. The prairie restorations fulfill a management directive for the WPAs of providing 'historical conditions that benefit multiple species of plants, animals, and insects.'

"In the past we have used nonnatives, such as smooth brome, intermediate wheatgrass, and sweet clover, but they've proven to be a challenge due to their aggressive nature," said Krohn. "The brome and wheatgrass usually take over and the plantings have to be torn up and replanted every 10 years or receive some other serious management."

Many seed companies still promote and sell nonnatives, such as New Zealand white clover, sericea lespedeza and dwarf essex rape, for wildlife plantings. Their sale ads sometimes include grandiose

claims, such as "provides the proper nutrients to grow gigantic racks on the bucks." They fail to mention the negative aspects of many non-natives. Sericea lespedeza, for example, a native of eastern Asia, was first planted in eastern Kansas in the 1930s for erosion control and later for wildlife cover and food. Today it is a noxious weed in Kansas, having spread to prairies and displaced native vegetation. Sericea lespedeza has few of its proclaimed wildlife benefits, has few disease or insect threats in North America to check population growth, and is difficult to control with fire, grazing, or herbicides. It has now been found in eight southeastern Nebraska counties and may soon be listed as a noxious weed.

Sources for local ecotype seed in Nebraska are limited. Most native prairie grass and forb seed sold by seed dealers are from cultivars – plant varieties bred for specific characteristics, such as large, showy flowers or aggressive growth. Prairie restorationists generally avoid planting cultivars as they can outcompete more desirable species and can spread to native grasslands,



PHOTO BY CHRIS HELZER

Grasshopper sparrows are one of many wildlife species that use prairie restorations.



PHOTO BY CHRIS HELZER

Jake Hart of The Nature Conservancy collects Canada milkvetch seed pods (*Astragalus canadensis*) for future planting from a prairie restoration project at Deep Well Wildlife Management Area in Hamilton County that provides excellent wildlife habitat.

contaminating native plant gene pools.

In several neighboring states, seed dealers grow and sell local ecotype seed. If Nebraska's wildlife enthusiasts begin to demand local ecotype seed, our growers may fill this niche.

Planting and Management

Krohn broadcasts seed for prairie restorations into existing cropland in winter. The restorations are up to several hundred acres in size. He also interseeds prairie seed into existing, human-planted warm-season grasslands and highly degraded native prairies. These grasslands are burned prior to seeding to reduce thatch and provide good seed-to-soil contact. They are grazed the spring and summer after seeding to

further incorporate the seed into the soil and to reduce competition from existing grasses. Due to competition, often only the hardiest prairie species establish in interseedings – plants such as prairie clovers, Canada milkvetch, sunflowers, goldenrods and yarrow.

When restoring cropland, prairie plants will eventually outcompete annual weeds that sprout from the soil seed bank and dominant young plantings. Krohn does not mow these weeds, although he conducts prescribed burns on the restorations if weed thatch threatens to shade out prairie seedlings. Seeded prairie species are usually well established five or six years after planting, at which time Krohn begins grazing or haying the restorations.

Proper management is critical to maintaining the health of a prairie and quality wildlife habitat. Without periodic

fire, grazing or haying, prairies stagnate, accumulate thatch, become susceptible to non-native species invasion, lose plant diversity and, ultimately, wildlife habitat degrades. Fire, grazing and haying can be used to remove thatch, control nonnative species, stimulate native plants, control woody vegetation and provide the variety of vegetation heights and densities needed by wildlife.

A new grassland management practice called patch-burn grazing may help provide diverse wildlife habitat. In patch-burn grazing, one-fourth to one-third of a pasture is burned each year. Cattle have access to the entire area, grazing the nutritious regrowth on the burned patch about 75 percent of the time and keeping the vegetation short. Unburned areas of the pasture are lightly grazed and the vegetation

an area with heavy thatch, and the grazing focus shifts to this patch. For a year or two after being burned and heavily grazed, and while perennial grasses and forbs recover, these affected patches have a lot of bare ground, little thatch and a flush of annual and biennial forbs. Cattle weight gains on patched-burned pastures are comparable to those of other grazing systems in certain grassland types.

It is human nature to look over the fence and see something that appears to be better. Such has been the case with our native grasslands. Under the feet of pioneers was a diverse grassland, a mix of plants perfectly adapted to our soils and climate, a plant community perfected over thousands of years. It supported a full complement of wild creatures, including vast herds of grazing animals. Even though it has taken more than a century, Nebraskans are beginning to realize that the value of these native plants, not just for wildlife but as pasture for our domestic livestock, was better than what we created. ■

Methods for harvesting and planting native seed and managing prairie restorations are detailed in A Guide to Prairie and Wetland Restoration in Eastern Nebraska available online at PrairiePlains.org or PrairieNebraska.org. More information on patch-burn grazing is available online at FireEcology.okstate.edu.

remains taller and denser. The following year a different patch is burned, usually



PHOTO BY GERRY STEINAUER

Seeds of native prairie plants such as Illinois tick-clover (upper left), Canada milkvetch (upper right), compass plant (lower right) and Illinois bundleflower (lower left) are a valuable food for many wildlife species.

Of the thousands of insect species that inhabit Nebraska's prairies, most are generalists, using several to many native plants as food and habitat. Some, though, are specialists, relying on one to a few plant species. Regal fritillary butterfly (*Speyeria idalia*) caterpillars, for example, feed only on violets. This monarch butterfly-sized, orange and brown butterfly is now rare over most of its range due to habitat loss, but still common in eastern Nebraska prairies. In Nebraska adult fritillaries feed on the nectar of several prairie forbs, including butterfly milkweed, whorled milkweed and leadplant.

Even more specialized, the small snout beetle (*Tychius liljebladi*) lays its eggs only in the young seedpods of Canada milkvetch, a prairie forb found throughout much of Nebraska. The larva feeds on the developing seeds and in late-summer bores through the pods, crawls down into the soil and overwinters as a pupa. Without Canada milkvetch plants, the snout beetle would vanish.

Insects are vital to the health of a prairie, serving as decomposers, soil formers, pollinators and critical wildlife food. The diet of many prairie mammals, birds and reptiles is composed of insects during the spring, summer and fall. The fast-growing chicks of grassland birds and upland game birds feed almost exclusively on high-protein insects (the dry weight of grasshoppers, for example, a favorite food of many birds, is 50 to 70 percent protein). Adult meadowlarks may capture more than 100 grasshoppers per day when feeding chicks.

After insect-killing frosts, many birds and small mammals switch to a seed and fruit diet. Prairies can provide as much as several hundred pounds of edible seeds and fruits per acre depending on prairie type, climate, and other factors. Not all prairie seeds and fruits are eaten by wildlife – some are too small, such as the pinhead-sized seeds of prairie cinquefoil, while others are nutrient poor or mechanically or chemically protected against herbivory.

In selection trials of tallgrass prairie seeds, meadow voles and other small mammals preferred large, nutritious, unprotected seeds, such as those of rosinweed and compass plant. Small mammals, however, rejected the large nutritious seeds of Illinois bundleflower (38 percent protein), perhaps suggesting they had an unpleasant taste. Another study found no toxins in bundleflower seeds and that birds readily ate them. When grown in pure stands in the Midwest, bundleflower can yield nearly 1,100 pounds of seed per acre, similar to soybean yields. In addition to being an excellent plant for wildlife, bundflower has potential as a crop for human consumption, and efforts are underway to develop tasty, high-yielding varieties.

The foliage of many prairie plants are valuable forage for wildlife, from leafhoppers to deer. Illinois bundleflower foliage, for example, is nearly 20 percent protein, comparable to alfalfa. Such nutrient-rich prairie forbs can support an abundance of insects and, therefore, more insect-dependent wildlife.

Never Too Old for Grouse, Never Too Young to Hunt Smarter

Text and photos by Jon Farrar

A few years back I was loitering in the Big Alkali Fish Camp office south of Valentine in early October. Three young fellows walked in, probably in their early 30s. They were in conspicuously top-flight physical condition – less than eight percent body fat was my rough estimate, wiry muscles under sweat-soaked T-shirts. I believe they were Air Force men stationed in Colorado. After a bit of small talk I asked how they had done grouse hunting. One quickly expressed his exasperation with the poor hunting on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge. “I walked 13.4 miles today, measured it on my pedometer, and never shot a bird.” I suppose he had done the math, and 13.4 miles of walking the hills entitled him to 2.61 grouse in his game pouch. “Did you see many birds?” I asked. “Oh, we saw a lot of birds, but wild, flushing a hundred yards ahead of us.” At that moment I had a glimpse of myself 25 years younger. Back in those days I also believed there was a correlation between miles walked and birds bagged. That was before I hunted grouse with Len McDaniel, and learned successful grouse hunting is not a mathematical equation.

Hunting Like a Coyote

I first met McDaniel in the late-1970s when he came to work as a biologist on the Valentine refuge, but years passed before we hunted grouse together.

McDaniel was one of the best field biologists in Nebraska, sort of a throwback to game biologists of the 1940s and 1950s, spending as much time as possible in the hills and on the marshes, learning everything he could about the plants and

animals he was managing. Before coming to the refuge system he had been a government hunter and trapper. Some of what he learned over those years was evident once we climbed 350

feet above the valley floor to the two-mile-long ridge we would hunt. That day was a grouse hunting epiphany for me.

The first mistake most grouse hunters make, McDaniel said, is thinking Sandhills vegetation is the same

everywhere.

Grouse know it is not, and to be successful, hunters need to know it is not.

The quality and quantity of vegetation varies with range management practices. Grouse like good cover, so the best pastures are

those not grazed during the spring and summer, pastures set aside for winter range or otherwise being rested.

Within Sandhills pastures are different plant communities, each providing

something different for grouse – food plants here, shade plants there, loafing cover in the patches of prairie sunflowers in the little dishes on the dune ridge. North-facing slopes, especially northeast-facing slopes, are less exposed to desiccating summer sun and winds, hold soil moisture better, and consequently have thicker and taller vegetation. Grouse hold better in good cover, so the north sides of dunes are generally more productive hunting range than the south sides that have sparser vegetation. McDaniel looks for hills with a good diversity of plants,

especially forbs such as sunflowers that provide seeds for grouse and woody plants such as poison ivy, snowberry and wild rose that bear fruits.

After recognizing Sandhills grasslands are not uniformly cloaked in vegetation, the next step is for hunters to understand the daily habits of grouse and predict where they will be at different times of the day under different weather conditions. McDaniel prefers to hunt from about noon until 3:30 p.m. During the morning, grouse are scattered and feeding and may not return to loafing areas until late-morning. “They are

usually in more open areas in the morning where they’re hard to approach,” he said. “Usually, you get closer shots when you hunt them in the middle of the day when they’ve settled into loafing areas.”

Weather plays an important role in determining where grouse loaf during the midday hours. “The wind really affects their activities,” McDaniel explained. “They don’t like to be where it hits them directly unless it is a warm day.” So, on windy, cool days, look for them in heavier cover, on wind-protected slopes or in pockets and swales. On

warm days, grouse “usually are in some shade and where they can catch enough breeze to stay cool,” McDaniel said. On days when the grass is wet, grouse often loaf in more open cover, but they are difficult to approach. McDaniel prefers not to hunt grouse on windy days, particularly days with northwest winds. “I like a nice clear day, about 65 degrees, calm or just a light breeze, a steady one, preferably out of the south.” McDaniel rarely hunts grouse during the warm days of September, mostly for his dog’s comfort and his own.



Len McDaniel of Valentine reloads as more grouse decoy while his yellow Lab, Lass, returns with a sharptail shot minutes earlier.



McDaniel makes his sharp-tailed grouse decoys from the tough cardboard used on cases of canned soft drinks.

If we hadn't come out here this year, you know, we'd just be home kicking the dog. We look forward to it that much. – Steve Jauron

When a hunter can recognize the Sandhills's plant communities, and understands a grouse's daily routine, all that is left to be a proficient hunter is learning how to not flush grouse until within shotgun range. McDaniel does not so much "walk for grouse" as he stalks the places grouse should be.

The first time I hunted with McDaniel, I watched him move through pockets and along little ridges on the high dune. He hunted slowly, zigzagging back and forth, staying off the hilltops and crater rims where grouse would see him, popping over the rim of little grassed pockets and, if not flushing grouse, dropping down and slipping along the slope to check the next likely place. He hunts grouse the way a coyote hunts grouse.

On cool days, when grouse want out of the wind, McDaniel hunts with the wind at his back if possible. That way, when he tops a ridge the wind-protected slope where the grouse should want to be is right below him and any birds there are within shotgun range. On warm days when grouse want shade and a place where they catch a breeze, they will be on wind-exposed slopes or hilltops and he tries to hunt into the wind. Obviously there are not enough grouse per square mile that there will be birds everywhere a grouse should want to be, but by using McDaniel's technique, hunters will flush more grouse within shotgun range and not need to cover as many miles to do it. Hunters not proficient at predicting where grouse should be can learn by watching where grouse flush and stalking similar sites.

Rather than stringing out in a line and marching up and down grassy dunes, large parties of hunters would have better success breaking into pairs and hunting different hills. Hunting alone is even better, as there is no need to keep a partner's pace, but two compatible hunters soon work out a system that is safe and efficient. In addition to being a more successful technique for hunting grouse, slowly stalking choppy hills is tailor-made for those of us not as physically finely tuned as were the three Air Force fellows. The large dune ridges of the Sandhills can be a mile or more long, but once on top they easily offer several hours of hunting without strenuous climbs.

Hunting Low Hills

For older hunters with years of bratwursts and beers under their belts and no longer inclined to take on the high hills, there are grouse hunting options only requiring a

reasonably sound set of legs. Walking slowly and pausing often – a wise hunting technique for most upland game bird hunting – can compensate for diminished lung capacity and too many pounds-per-square-inch on old feet.

While sharp-tailed grouse prefer the high hills, greater prairie chickens are tallgrass prairie birds native to low-relief grasslands and were once found across eastern Nebraska. Prairie chickens are more inclined to occupy grasslands near cropland and to feed on waste grain than are sharptails. With most of Nebraska's tallgrass prairie long-ago turned under the plow, prairie chickens are found today in restored grasslands, in

the tallgrasslike prairie of the eastern and southern Sandhills, and on lush meadows and the low hills bordering them in the Sandhills interior. This habitat preference translates into relatively easy walking for grouse hunters.

Last September I tagged along with now-retired conservation officer Bob Kelly of Albion; conservation officer Pat George stationed at O'Neill (the only young fellow in the bunch, recruited to administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation as required), and three Iowa hunters – Steve Jauron, retired Iowa conservation officer, and Don Haahr and Bill Anderson, both who work for county park systems in Iowa.

The Iowa hunters have come to chase grouse with Kelly for 30 years. Discounting George, this was not a hunting party of young roosters. Haahr and Anderson were well on into their 50s, Jauron about to turn 61. Kelly was almost 65, had hip replacement surgery seven years before and kidney stones shattered only two weeks earlier.

We met over coffee at the Bartlett cafe, and the hunt was underway by 11 a.m. in a pasture of low rolling hills abutting an unpicked cornfield. The grass cover was good, the walking easy and the weather almost too nice. Less than 100 yards from the pickups, two prairie chickens flushed and more

continued to flush with surprising regularity. By 1 p.m. we were sipping soft drinks on tailgates with six chickens in game bags. All but one were young-of-the-year birds and most were flushed as singles, many from nearly flat pastureland bordering the cornfield.

Talk turned to how grouse hunting had changed. Kelly said that when he moved to Albion in 1969, pastureland surrounded Bartlett and there were only sharptails. All that began to change in the 1970s as cornfields under center pivot irrigation systems proliferated and the country became a patchwork of grain fields and grassland, habitat favoring greater prairie chickens at the



Steve Jauron, a retired Iowa conservation officer, recounts how a grouse flew off after he missed. He has been grouse hunting in Nebraska for 30 years.



Jauron and his hunting partners have found the relatively low relief of the eastern Sandhills easier walking for older legs.



Bill Anderson of Iowa found prairie chickens in grasslands bordering a cornfield.

expense of sharp-tailed grouse. The second pasture hunted had not been grazed during the summer, and the grass had grown lush with abundant spring and summer rains. There was a small range of higher hills, but of small relief compared to the massive dunes of the central Sandhills region. The hunting strategy was loosely drafted as the hunters spread at liberal distances from one another and made a swing around the section of grass. Every now and then each hunter caught a glimpse of the hunter to his left or right, usually 200 yards or more away, so each was free to reconnoiter likely grouse coverture in grassy pockets on hilltops or swales. They hunted slowly and at their own pace. Back at the trucks less than two hours later, there were six more prairie chickens in the bag and Kelly had the morning’s birds field-dressed and in a cooler. In four hours of hunting the five hunters were three birds short of a daily limit, and Kelly only hunted the first pasture. Anderson commented that “the hunting was not as good as most years,” a remark intended to needle Kelly. A gracious host, Kelly did not comment on the number of easy shots missed at close-flushing birds. None of the hunters

reported how many miles were recorded on their pedometer. “Two years ago we hunted two sections way back in the hills,” Kelly said. “Some absolute mountains out there, always a lot of birds, and I’m sure they are still there. They are going to be there as long as they want to be, but we’ve just given up those demanding hunts. We’re saving those big-hill grouse for the young hunters.” “It’s kind of funny,” Jauron commented while sitting on a tailgate. “The Sandhills is different for us. To be able to take off and walk as far as you want, not a farm building or piece of machinery in sight. It’s really different than hunting in Iowa. If we hadn’t come out here this year, you know, we’d just be home kicking the dog. We look forward to it that much. We start planning the trip in August.” The secret of success for these older hunters was hunting smart. The pastures had good grass, good numbers of birds, relatively low relief and they hunted at their own pace. Most carried lightweight 20-gauge shotguns and no unnecessary equipment. The two springer spaniels were valuable assets finding downed birds in thick cover. All of the hunters agreed that winged

grouse seem more inclined to run than they did years ago, had become more like pheasants in that regard, and the dogs were worth their weight in gold. One chicken triangulated down by two hunters was found by one of the dogs more than 100 yards away. With grouse hunting this good, why is the number of grouse hunters declining? “No recruitment of young hunters,” Kelly said. “You could see it happening over the years, fewer and fewer young people coming with their dads and grandpas to hunt grouse. School activities take up more of their time, and the dads and grandpas are hunting deer and turkey now, not grouse.” Kelly said another factor perhaps contributing to the decline is that hunters seem reluctant to knock on a rancher’s door and ask permission. “They’ll do it to hunt deer or turkey, but not grouse,” he said. Because there are more absentee landowners in the eastern Sandhills than 30 years ago, it sometimes is difficult to find them to ask permission, Kelly said, but not so difficult it should discourage hunters. Most landowners are more inclined to give permission to hunt grouse than they are deer because there are more deer hunters than grouse hunters, most probably have already granted permission to hunt deer or are saving it for family and friends, and because grouse hunting, a hunter with a just a shotgun, is low impact.

Flatland Grouse

Even easier on older legs than low rolling hills like those Kelly hunts are meadows and the edges of meadows. In years when hay crops are put up in early summer, and summer rains are abundant enough to send up a luxurious aftergrowth – some years half way to a hunter’s knees – grouse, particularly prairie chickens, come to these meadows to feed on green vegetation. Huge meadows are common in the eastern Sandhills, to a lesser degree in southern counties in the region, and found in the central and western Sandhills where they are usually hemmed in by high, long-running dune ridges. Hunting grouse in tall grass on meadows, unlike hunting them in sparse upland cover, is best during their feeding periods in early morning and

late day, as grouse usually move back into the hills to loaf in midday. Unlike when hunting uplands, a wide-ranging pointing dog that hold points is valuable. When the hunting season is new, most grouse are young-of-the-year birds and more inclined to hold for a dog than older birds, or any birds in sparse upland cover. Even in years when the aftergrowth is modest, grouse come to the meadows to feed. With such short cover, though, they are virtually impossible to approach within shotgun range. While sharptails are more apt to fly between high hills and meadows, prairie chickens are often close to the meadows all day, so the band of low, rolling pastureland between the meadow and the high hills is the best bet from midmorning to midafternoon. Passage of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) as part of the Food Security Act of 1985 has provided yet another flatland grouse hunting option. The program was primarily designed to help farmers take erosion-prone land out of crop production but has also

been a boon for wildlife, including grouse. Currently there are about 1.2 million acres enrolled in Nebraska. Statewide it has almost single-handedly brought grouse back to parts of the state where they had not been for many decades, and increased their numbers where remnant populations were hanging on, particularly prairie chickens. Just as introducing cornfields into grasslands in the eastern Sandhills benefited prairie chickens, albeit at the expense of sharptails and other grassland wildlife, so too has establishing grasslands where formerly there were only grain fields. Making CRP land even better for hunters has been the Management Access Program (MAP) established in 1997. The program allows hunting access without permission on CRP land enrolled in the program. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission publishes an atlas showing the location of these sites that is available at Commission offices and permit vendors. While “erosion-prone land” implies landscape relief, most CRP fields are

not difficult walking, other than those choked with dense stands of tall grass, and those fields, or those parts of fields, are the least likely places to find grouse anyway. The best CRP fields for grouse are areas with a good diversity of plants, including forbs such as sunflowers, and where vegetation is more open, typically on higher ground. Recently retired Commission wildlife biologist Dan Rochford of North Platte worked with the CRP and MAP programs in his area and frequently hunts them for pheasants, quail and grouse. “I think September and early-October are probably the best times to hunt grouse in CRP,” Rochford said. “Once it cools off, when you get into November, they start to bunch up and it becomes more difficult to get within shotgun range. On average, the best time of day to hunt them is from midmorning into late-afternoon.” South of the Platte River, Rochford said, “grouse hunting on CRP is almost entirely for prairie chickens, but in the Panhandle counties hunters are as apt



Don Haahr waits for a prairie chicken to clear his springer spaniel. Young-of-the-year grouse hold tight early in the grouse season.



PHOTO BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

Some of Dan Rochford's most productive grouse hunting spots are the grassed corners of cornfields under center pivot irrigation.

to flush sharptails.” Rochford said the time of day that grouse use CRP fields depends on the cover in that field, land-use surrounding it and the weather. Where there are only cornfields and CRP grasslands, grouse will probably be found in the grasslands throughout much of the day, especially early in the season when weed seeds and insects are available. Once the corn is out and the weather turns colder, they will leave the CRP in early morning and late afternoon to feed on waste corn. In many places in southwestern Nebraska there are not only cornfields nearby but also native grass pastures. If there are native grasslands nearby, grouse may loaf there during the midday, particularly during mild weather from late-September well into October, but roost in the heavier cover on CRP land.

“I look for CRP with a diverse mix of plants,” Rochford said when asked how he selects fields to hunt. “I don’t hunt fields that are just dense stands of grass, like switchgrass. Grouse may use the heavier vegetation in CRP fields when the weather is harsh, but otherwise

they prefer more open cover, particularly if there are forbs interspersed with the grass. That is where they find weed seeds and insects, there is bare ground for dusting and, when it is warm, a bit of breeze at ground level. I don’t try and cover an entire field, but hunt the places that look like grouse should be there at that time of the day and season. Especially early in the season, they seem to like higher ground in CRP, little knobs with a good mix of vegetation.”

Even small patches of CRP grassland can hold prairie chickens. Some of Rochford’s consistently good grouse hunting spots are grassed corners around center pivots over corn. “On average,” Rochford said, “most hunters will take fewer grouse off CRP land than they will hunting the Sandhills where they are more abundant, but if you live close to CRP with grouse and not the Sandhills, why not take advantage of it?” For more on hunting opportunities in CRP, see Rocky Hoffmann’s article, “Much More than Pheasants” in the October 2004 issue

of *NEBRASKAland*.

Nebraska grouse hunting seasons are divided into east and west zones. East of U.S. Highway 81, a limited number of permits are issued, allowing each hunter to shoot three prairie chickens during the season. The permits are offered on a first-come, first-served basis. Permit requests are accepted by phone, by mail or in person at the Commission headquarters beginning August 1. Hunting prairie chickens in eastern Nebraska is really in the realm of a trophy upland bird hunt.

Pass-Shooting

It was late-December when I again tagged along with Bob Kelly on a totally different kind of grouse hunt. His partner that day was Marvin Koch of Petersburg. Koch is retired from his agricultural supply business and runs a gun shop and unofficial museum of outdoor curiosities such as antler chandeliers, old shotshell boxes and mounted rattlesnakes. It is on Petersburg’s main street and worth a stop.

“There is a range of hills out here that is fairly narrow, pretty rough and with cornfields and bean fields around them,” Kelly told me in September. “Grouse come out of those hills every morning and every evening to feed on the waste grain. You can almost set your watch by them. It’s not uncommon to have 200 to 500 grouse move out to feed. All you have to do to shoot grouse is watch them long enough to figure out their flight pattern and position yourself along it.”

It was 17 degrees when I met Kelly in Albion at 6:20 a.m., and we drove to Petersburg to pick up Koch. There was a skiff of thin clouds in the east and only a light west wind. The forecast was for sunshine, the wind shifting to the west-southwest and growing to no more than 10 miles an hour. There had been heavy snow a few days earlier, and the wind had gathered it from the flats and piled it in drifts two to three feet deep in low areas or where there was some obstacle to slow it down.

We were situated and ready for grouse before sunrise on a piece of Koch’s land, and it was the perfect layout for waylaying prairie chickens. We hunkered down on the east end of an east-west running shelterbelt of red cedar and pines no more than 10 feet tall, where a fence ran north and south. To the east was pastureland, to the northwest a cornfield, and to our south CRP grassland and another cornfield. Kelly and I nestled into cedar trees on buckets, but Koch, even at 66 years of age, was one of those Sandhills pacers and at best hunkered down now and then behind a fence post to our north. Being fully hidden or camouflaged, Kelly and Koch said, is not particularly important when pass-shooting grouse, as grouse do not seem to look on the ground for danger when on the wing.

The flight only lasted about 45 minutes. During that time as many birds flew to the cornfield to the south as past us. The largest, close flock, about 20 birds, passed just beyond the range of Koch’s shotgun. Most left the hills as singles, doubles or in small groups of four to five birds. Kelly killed two young-of-the-year males and Koch a grand old man chicken with long ear pinnae feathers covering the yellow-orange air sacks on his neck.

Both Koch and Kelly said the

morning’s shooting was poor compared to the average. Koch told of days when four or five shooters killed their limits within an hour. Part of the reason the morning was not up to snuff was there was only two shooters spread along the flight line, but both believed that the crusted snow cover in the cornfield reduced the number of birds coming

to feed. Had there been less snow, or cattle in the cornfields to break the snow cover and expose waste corn, more birds would have passed within shotgun range.

Kelly and Koch started pass-shooting in the early-1970s, but not together. Why? In the 1970s both were young men and still stomping the hills for



Marvin Koch of Petersburg watches for passing prairie chickens. Earlier he shot an adult male with long ear pinnae feathers covering the orange air sacks on its neck.



Retired Nebraska conservation officer Bob Kelly of Albion fires at passing prairie chickens in the dim light just before dawn.

grouse. “For me, it was just seeing the birds set a pattern,” Kelly said. “I was seeing them land in certain fields in the mornings and evenings, and they kept



Kelly started pass-shooting grouse in the early 1970s. It extended his grouse hunting season into December.

that up day after day. And you think, ‘Geez, if they are going to set that kind of a pattern, we ought to be able to get in between some place and get some decent shooting’ and it extended my grouse season into December.” In saying that, Kelly hit on the key to make pass-shooting work – you must spend the time observing the daily patterns of the grouse and identify their flyways. Pass-shooting requires an investment of time to select a good spot, but once it is found, it will probably be good year after year unless land-use changes. Turkey and deer hunters expend considerable time getting permission to hunt and scouting, why should a grouse hunter not do the same?

Kelly said grouse seem to “pick certain hills to winter in, usually rough choppy hills relatively close to grain fields. Once it freezes hard enough to kill the grasshoppers, once they lose their feed out in the hills, they start coming to the waste grain, especially prairie chickens, and they bunch up.” Kelly said the grouse typically leave the hills at first light but may gather in staging areas in the hills before moving to grain fields. He said after feeding on waste grain in the morning, they go back into the hills but return again in late afternoon to feed. Both Kelly and Koch prefer to shoot the morning flight.

Pass-shooting is not easy shooting

for some hunters. Grouse within shotgun range typically pass 30 to 40 yards high and are moving deceptively fast, even when gliding on set wings. “All you do is cover them with the end of your shotgun, squeeze the trigger and keep your shotgun moving with the bird,” Kelly advised. “You touch the button right and you’re going to kill them.” The worst mistake a hunter can make is to let the grouse pass and try a shot as they fly away.

Gunning Over Decoys

A refinement of pass-shooting grouse is hunting over decoys. Yes, grouse decoys. You cannot buy commercially-made grouse decoys, not yet anyway, but making your own is not difficult and ratchets up a hunter’s satisfaction when wild birds take the bait. It is not a new concept, but one rarely employed. Gene Hornbeck did it in the late-1960s when he was a writer-photographer for *NEBRASKALand*, and I remember seeing one of his two-inch-thick, hand-painted Styrofoam grouse decoys around the office when I started working there in 1970. I’ve shot a few grouse over mallard decoys (grouse are not discriminating) placed on Sandhills meadows near where male grouse come to half-heartedly display when the balance of daytime and nighttime convinces them it is the spring

courtship season, but I had never seen grouse shooting over decoys done properly until the second week of December last year. Once again I found myself learning from Len McDaniel.

McDaniel first shot grouse over decoys in the late-1970s. It was late-afternoon of the last day of the grouse season. He and his oldest son, Ronn, had been walking for sharptails and had shot three. They were crossing a mowed meadow when several flocks of birds highballed by on their way back to night roosts. “When we saw another flock coming,” McDaniel recalled, “I told Ronn and Sandy, my yellow Lab, to get down, threw the three dead birds out in front and we started to call, *cuck-cuck-cuck-cuck-cuck*. That flock landed right in front of us. We each shot one, sat back and waited for another flock. It did the same thing, and Ronn shot our last bird.”

A similar experience in the fall of 1980, the first year Canada geese were again legal game in the Sandhills after being protected for a decade during a restoration program, convinced McDaniel grouse could be decoyed. “I was hunting with my youngest son, Paul,” McDaniel recalled. “We were set up for Canada geese on a hay meadow, shooting over a dozen of those old Johnson fold-up decoys. That was before I learned they were valuable antiques. And this grouse popped right into the decoys. I kicked out my goose load, put in a trap load, flushed the bird and shot it. Then another grouse did the same thing and I started putting two and two together, and started making my own grouse decoys.”

The first morning I hunted with McDaniel, and our longtime mutual friend, rancher Dick Ballard, grouse did not exactly pour into the decoys, but the weather conditions were not in our favor. There was four to five inches of snow on the flat and drifted deeper in the cedar shelterbelt where we were hunting. The snow cover was not the problem – in fact, McDaniel prefers to hunt with it as his decoys are more visible and snow cover hinders feeding on the ground, sending grouse to feed on tree berries and buds. He said his best grouse-decoying days are after a big snowstorm that make the grouse hunker down. When it clears they are eager to feed, constantly on the move



Cherry County rancher Dick Ballard hunkered down at the base of a red cedar. While motion will flare grouse, being completely concealed is seldom necessary.

and decoying opportunities increase.

But we had fog or low clouds hanging over the hills and visibility was poor. Grouse were leaving the hills where they had spent the night and were flying to cedar trees to feed, but were doing so lower than normal and not seeing the decoys, passing 100 yards or more on either side of us. “Usually they get up high when they move in the morning,” McDaniel said. “They might fly two miles to feed. Two miles is nothing for a grouse.”

Late that afternoon we scouted for a place with fewer cedars to improve the odds of grouse seeing the decoys and

found it – a cluster of two fairly large but squatty cedars surrounded by young cedars on a hillside. To the northwest was a dense belt of cedars heavy with fruit and filled with feeding sharptails. To the southeast was a large range of hills where the grouse roosted at night. McDaniel prefers to hunt under relatively small cedar trees, especially because it allows him to place decoys in or near the treetops where they are conspicuous.

McDaniel said that grouse can be intercepted and decoyed anywhere there is a regular flight line. Early in the season grouse may be feeding on



McDaniel and Ballard deploy decoys in small cedar trees between where sharptails roost at night and feed mornings and evenings.

new growth in meadows or alfalfa fields, and later in the season in cornfields. All a hunter needs to do is find where they are feeding, where they are roosting and then a place between to deploy decoys and intercept them. The more grouse there are, the more likely some will find your decoys and pass within shotgun range or decoy.

We were hunting over McDaniel's second generation grouse decoys. His first used two pieces of corrugated cardboard, one piece cut in the shape of a grouse as viewed from the side, the

other in the shape of a grouse viewed from above. The two pieces interlocked by way of grooves cut halfway through each piece. McDaniel found those decoys too bulky, and he could not carry as many as he wanted into out-of-the-way places. His second design was essentially patterned after the old Johnson folding decoys. To make them he uses the thin, but tough, cardboard from 24-pack cases of soft drinks in cans. First he coats both sides with a gray, latex primer, then cuts two grouse profiles for each decoy. The two

halves are joined at the top with small grommets, the bottoms left free so they can be spread like a pup tent, giving the illusion of being three-dimensional. Grommets on the sides of the decoys accommodate wire stakes, with crossbars soldered near the top to spread the two halves so they can be set on the ground or a fence post, or they can be spread without stakes to straddle a cedar bough. McDaniel uses spray can primer to create an undercoat of light brown on the upper half, and a brush to apply white latex feathering detail around the eyes, throat, belly and rump. He then applies a plumage pattern with black and brown permanent marker pens. The object is to simulate a grouse, not duplicate the plumage of a grouse in great detail, but McDaniel has observed grouse for so many years he creates a remarkably lifelike plumage pattern. He uses darker decoys on the ground in snow, lighter ones in the dark foliage of cedar trees.

Before sunrise the next morning we spread about 16 of McDaniel's decoys on the boughs of cedars and on the ground. There was sign under the trees grouse had been feeding – nipped off cedar needles, cedar berries and grouse tracks in the snow. To increase visibility, McDaniel typically sets most decoys at a right angle to what he thinks will be the grouse flight line. A few, though, are randomly oriented to give the illusion of a group of live birds and for the benefit of grouse passing by in different directions than expected. The weather was almost exactly what

McDaniel prefers – cold (seven degrees at 6 a.m.) and clear. He did not like the rising wind. McDaniel does not believe wind direction or velocity effects decoying success, unless it is gale force, but he prefers to hunt mornings with little or no wind, mostly for personal comfort and because strong winds blow his decoys out of trees.

As on time as trains, sharptails began gliding out of the hills toward the big cedar shelterbelt at first light. Most things that could go wrong did, such as McDaniel still placing decoys when the first sharptails passed within shotgun range, and Ballard not having his shotgun loaded. There was the grouse that landed in our little gathering of cedar trees but on the opposite side, and the bird almost always wins in that circumstance. There were occasions when I was taking photographs and flared birds, or was in the line of fire and prevented shots, just as I had been on both hunts with Kelly. McDaniel's 11-year-old yellow Lab, Lass, had seen it all before, and cocked her head momentarily in disbelief before scanning the sky for more incoming birds.

Unlike ducks that may circle and circle decoys, grouse come straight, flashing slivery wings and bellies in the early morning sun. Once they have attained the altitude they want, they glide with only short bursts of wing flapping, or none at all if the wind direction is right. They see decoys at remarkable distances. Some sharptails turned from their flight path 400 yards out and glided in without so much as wiggling their wing tips. To attract the attention of grouse, McDaniel gives the sharptail's *cuck-cuck-cuck-cuck* call. "You hear sharptails give that call when they sit in trees," he said. "Calls other birds right in to them. Prairie chickens are not a very vocal grouse, you kick them up and they never chuckle, but I call to both and I think it works on both." McDaniel typically sees grouse moving in small flocks of eight to 10. His favorites are singles, twos and threes, fewer than the number of his decoys, birds that are looking for company. "That's our bread-and-butter," he said.

When we quit an hour later because of the bitterly cold windchill and the end of the morning flight, there were two dead sharptails. McDaniel was

disappointed. Typically, he said, if there is a good crop of birds and the decoys are in a good spot, two hunters have their limits within the first hour.

Shooting grouse over decoys is less strenuous than walking high hills, if trudging through the snow carrying all manner of gear is discounted, so it's a good alternative for senior hunters. Ballard was 69 years old, wearing a pacemaker-defibrillator and had heart valve replacement surgery several years before we hunted. McDaniel was 66 and had hip replacement two years before. Shooting over decoys not only extends a hunter's grouse season, it extends their grouse hunting years. "One of the reasons I started hunting grouse over decoys," McDaniel said, "was that I knew the day would come when I couldn't hunt them in the big hills. I haven't reached that age yet, but I sure go slower than I did five years ago. I wasn't about to give up grouse hunting. And, it is pretty darn exciting decoying and calling those birds to you."

Hunt Smart

It is hard to imagine why the number of grouse hunters in Nebraska has been on a steady decline in recent years. Nebraska is one of the best states in the nation for sharp-tailed grouse, and one of few with enough greater prairie chickens to provide hunting over a wide area. Part of the explanation, perhaps, is that Nebraska hunters today are different then they were in past decades. From the 1930s into the 1960s, ring-necked pheasants were the principle upland game bird in the state. Everyone hunted them, and nonresident hunters flocked to Nebraska to hunt them. The result was a generation, or two, of dedicated upland bird hunters, and if you hunted pheasants you probably also hunted quail and grouse.

During the 1960s, deer were only beginning to return in abundance, and wild turkey had just gotten a toehold in the Pine Ridge. As pheasant numbers began to decline with changes in agriculture, and deer and turkey became ever more abundant, hunter's tastes shifted, particularly among younger hunters. As hunters always have, they hunt what is abundant. The dyed-in-the-wool upland bird hunters, well, they grew older and hunting grouse the way most hunters do it –



When snow covers sharptail food on the ground, they feed on the red cedar berries and tree buds. Trees where they feed are excellent places to hunt over decoys.

forced marches up and down looming sand dunes – was just too physically demanding. But grouse hunting does not have to be done the hard way, it can be done the smart way, even by older hunters, and they will probably kill more birds. As for young hunters, well, there is no reason to wait until you are old to figure out how to hunt grouse smart. However you hunt grouse, it will probably be in as pristine a setting as you will find in the state, and that alone is worth the trip. ■



McDaniel's homemade sharptail decoys can be spread at the bottom to create the illusion of being three-dimensional and can be seated on tree branches.

From Blossoms to Jelly Jar

Text and photos by Rocky Hoffmann

If there is a need to justify a visit to the countryside early in the spring when skies hold onto winter's gray and leaves have not yet hatched from swollen buds, it's to immerse oneself in the syrup-thick fragrance of wild plum blossoms. Among the earliest trumpeters of milder seasons to come, the

American plum (*Prunus Americana*) flaunts its ivory clusters well before it unfurls its own leaves. Softly contrasted against charcoal skeletons of dense thickets, plum blossoms highlight canyon cuts and fencerows. The beckoning perfume of plum blossoms gradually builds to an olfactory crescendo as the sun warms the season.

Thickets drone with a thousand wings dragging follicle-lined legs through this wealth of early pollen. Then, with a sudden April breeze, a blizzard of blossoms scatters across the prairie. As leaves begin to drape prickly branches, evidence that bees have been proverbially busy is in the tiny almond-shaped fruit that have set. Only a severe freeze or an invasion of tent caterpillars, both of which occur with frequent regularity across Nebraska, can interrupt the fruiting cycle.

Schoolboys have two employments for wild plums, only one of which is eating. When green and hard, plums make perfect ammunition for slingshots. I suspect I may be venturing back a few years, actually quite a few years, to my generation as a youth when every country kid had a slingshot and every fencerow had a plum thicket. As plums

The ivory clusters of the American plum are often the first to be seen in spring.

ripen, they make even better ammunition, because not only do they retain their efficiency, but they also punctuate their trajectory in an admirable splatter. When plums become perfectly ripe, however, they have outgrown the leather in most slingshots and are also



Buttermilk pancakes, hard creamery butter and plum preserves ... a good start to any day.



Infestations of tent caterpillars often defoliate entire plum thickets, interrupting fruit production.



Deep shades of reds, purples and yellows, combined with soft-when-pinched flesh, indicate plum ripeness.



When fruit is plentiful and ripe, little time is required to fill a pail.

much too sweet to launch at a horse's rump.

We ate them, of course, without washing them or wiping the haze from their skins, and there is a trick to eating a wild plum. Simply score the skin on one end of the plum with your teeth and suck with all your might, while at the same time, squeezing the plum between forefinger and thumb. The pulp and syrup from beneath the skin pours forth, presenting a tangy palate. Discard the skin because that's where the pucker resides. This process does implant the pit in your mouth, which you polish and discard or, even better, use in your slingshot.

Raccoons and coyotes enjoy wild plums even more than schoolboys, but take a look around when you go for a September walk and you'll find evidence that indicates that unlike schoolboys, raccoons and coyotes don't bother to sort out the skins or the seeds. Like schoolboys, however, it is a numbers game. The more you eat, the better you feel – at least for the moment.

Short-term gratification is the usual reward when it comes to seasonal fruit. Fortunately, moms understand that while wild plums can be enjoyed in December, you'll not find one on a branch then. With a little extra time invested in the thicket in September and later over the burner of a stove, plums can be put by for when the natural pantry is bare. During those



Cut the plum in half with a sharp paring knife to remove the pit.

occasional years of bounty crops when plums hang in clusters, filling a pail is the least of the work involved. It is important to wait until the plums are perfectly ripe, a state that can be detected not only by the wealth of plums already fallen to the ground but by their saturation in color, which includes purples, deep yellows and reds. A little pinch that produces some soft denting in response is also a good indicator of perfect ripeness.

Preserves and jams that retain the skin also retain the integrity of the plum and therefore are my choices for jarring. Jam is made from crushed or ground fruit and usually has a thick consistency. Make preserves by cooking whole or large pieces of fruit in thick sugar syrup. Jelly is made from fruit juice and contains no visible pieces of fruit. It is clear, and it is firm enough to hold its shape when scooped from a jar. Clear jellies may look nice on the shelf, but it's not the looks of the topping that make a slice of fresh warm bread and cold butter a stand-alone meal. Whatever choice is made, however, the pit must be pulled, yet the task is not

too overwhelming regardless of the full bucket of plums standing in wait. Simply cut each plum in half along the seam line and remove the pit.

Then there is pectin, acid and sugar. Pectin is absolutely necessary for thickening. It is always present in fruits, but may be found in higher concentrations in some fruits than in others. It is also found commercially in powdered or liquid form. Most recipes call for commercial pectin. Acid must also be present for gel to form. If natural acid is lacking, lemon juice may be added, but this is usually not required of tart plums. Sugar also helps to form the gel. It certainly adds sweetness and is a true preservative. Low sugar fruit-spread recipes are available and produce good results. Refrigerate or freeze the final product of low sugar recipes, because non-nutritive sweeteners do not preserve and spoilage will result.

Always use tried and proven recipes from reliable sources and follow the recipe. Don't double up for bigger batches – make two. Cleanliness is always the key to food preparation and sterile cleanliness is the key to canning.

Plum recipes can be found in many cookbooks and by googling "plum recipes" online. Try this one from the National Center for Home Food Preservation.

Plum Preserves:

- 5 cups pitted, wild plums, about 2.5 pounds
- 4 cups sugar
- 1 cup water

Yield: About 5, half-pint jars

Procedure: Sterilize canning jars. Combine all ingredients. Bring slowly to boiling, stirring until sugar dissolves. Boil rapidly over high heat, about 15 minutes, almost to the jellying point, which is 8 degrees F. above the boiling point of water. Stir frequently to prevent sticking or burning. Pour hot preserves into hot jars, leaving 1/4-inch headspace. Wipe rims of jars with a dampened, clean paper towel; adjust two-piece metal canning lids. Process the jars in a boiling water canner for 10 minutes anywhere in Nebraska, because that is the process time for altitudes between 1,000 feet and 6,000 feet above sea level. ■

Lake Maloney

The Little Lake with Big Benefits

Photos and text by Rocky Hoffmann

Built as a regulating reservoir for the local public power district, Lake Maloney provides much-needed camping, fishing and watersport recreational opportunities.

For more than 70 years now, the little lake just five miles south of North Platte has provided so much to so many people. Lake Maloney is the “go to” lake for townfolk who want to run out after work for an evening of fishing or other water sports. It provides the local swimming beach and picnic spot for the summer crowd. In the fall, a few hunters anchor boat blinds on shallow flats for a chance at early flights of migrating mallards or Canada geese. Traveling humans also stop by the lake for a campsite, and many of them

vacation there either for a weekend or a week. Aside from these occasional and seasonal visitors, a sizeable community of year-round residents inhabit lakeside and off lake homes.

Owned and operated by Nebraska Public Power District, Lake Maloney serves the District as a flow delivery reservoir and was known simply as the “regulating reservoir” for the first 10 years after it was constructed. Water first trickled through the spillway into the reservoir’s dry basin in 1936, fulfilling a vision of the Nebraska Legislature through their 1933 bill that



Ron Weigel of North Platte and “Henry” fish for catfish at Lake Maloney’s Kansas Point.



Lake Maloney’s proximity to North Platte makes it a popular destination for people interested in all types of water sports.

created public power and irrigation districts. Immediately after the passage of that bill, the Department of Roads and Irrigation chartered the Platte Valley Public Power and Irrigation District. Platte Valley began construction of the Sutherland Project, including North Platte’s regulating reservoir, that same year.

Although the regulating reservoir south of North Platte was constructed first, a large reservoir was also started in an area south of Sutherland to store as much North Platte River water as possible. When built, stored water would be fed into the regulating reservoir, and releases there would provide moving

water to generate electricity at a hydroelectric plant south of North Platte. Due to severe power shortages in Nebraska, water levels at the regulating reservoir fluctuated substantially for the first decade of operation. In the late-1940s, however, work crews completed the Bellevue Steam Plant, supplementing some of the state’s electrical power needs, and water levels were maintained at a more constant level.

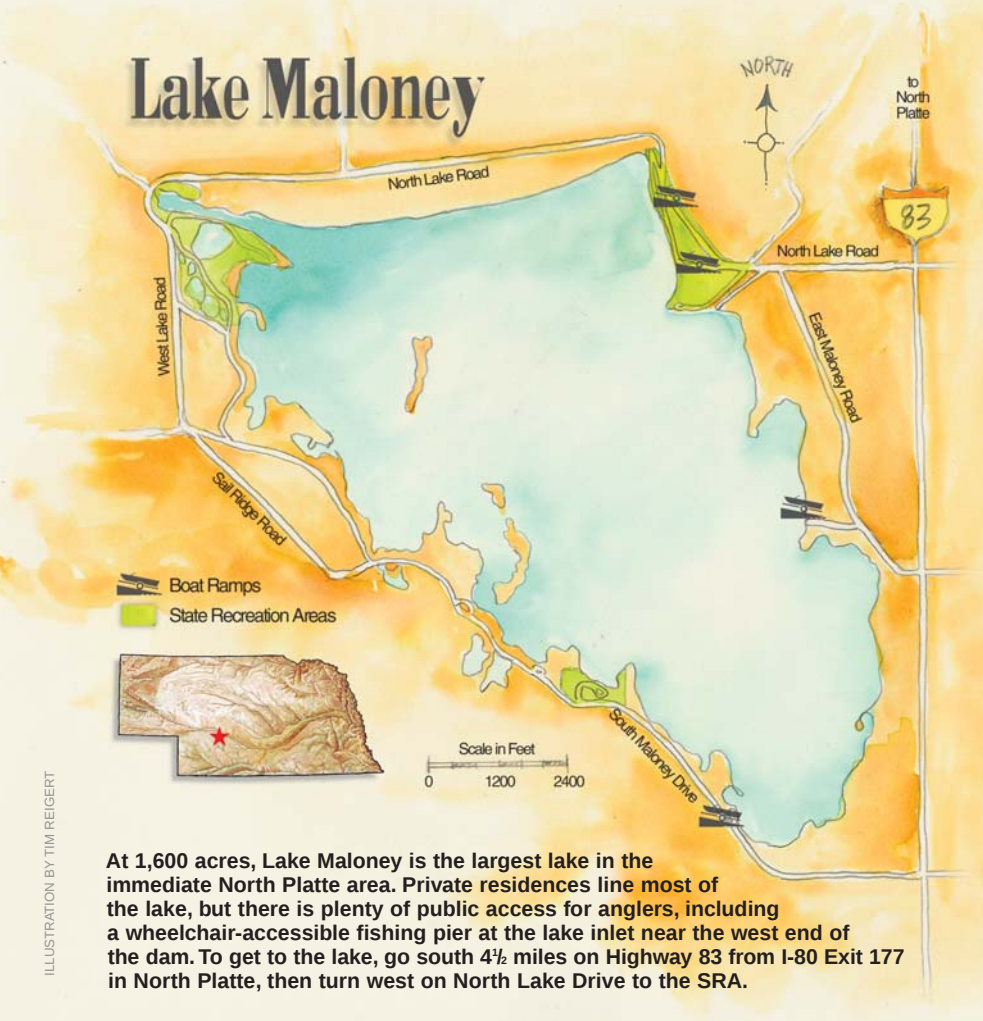
Sutherland Reservoir, when completed, failed to hold the volume of water for which it was originally designed. Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District, who own and operate Lake McConaughy, completed

Kingsley Dam in 1941, making the Ogallala reservoir the largest storage facility for North Platte River water.

Large reservoir recreational development was new to Nebraska, but the interest was obvious. As early as 1934, the District was already receiving requests for concession rights to what would become Lake Maloney. There were even some who offered to lease the entire lake for private interests. Those interests ranged from lakeside dance halls to Boy Scout camps to summer cottages to game preserves. In fact, the Platte Valley Board of Directors made application to the Game, Forestation and Parks

Commission on February 15, 1936 to create a game reserve at the regulating reservoir and all other properties under District control. No agreement was reached between the two entities, and the entire reservoir’s properties were closed to fishing, boating and hunting through 1936. In August 1937, the board rescinded its offer to the Commission, and allowed hunting, boating and fishing from then on.

The issue of lakeside lots drew considerable attention from the district, interested parties and the general public. Lots were eventually granted, and there was a rush on properties for the construction of summer cottages.



Today, only a few of the original summer cottages remain. Instead, a community consisting of lakeside, year-round homes have replaced the original cabins. Lake Maloney has all the amenities as well, including an 18-hole public golf course, a roping club, trap and skeet club, boating club, archery club, marina and restaurants, state recreation areas

and private campgrounds. The trap and skeet club is owned by the Lincoln County Wildlife Club, which early on had exceptional authority over Maloney and Sutherland reservoirs. On April 4, 1940, the District signed a lease for both reservoirs with the wildlife club, authorizing it to lease lots to private parties, allow concessions, supervise

boating, hunting and fishing, and to police the reservoir areas. It is believed that the primary reason for the 1940 agreement was so the club could act as a co-sponsor with the District in obtaining Works Projects Administration (WPA) assistance to develop recreational areas around the lake.

The WPA, after initiating the project, determined that the club could not legally cosponsor recreational improvements, because it was partially made up of private membership. The wildlife club surrendered its lease, and the District took over management of all facets of the regulating reservoir and Sutherland Reservoir.

It wasn't until 10 years after the reservoir filled that a dedication ceremony was held by the District, at which time the regulating reservoir was named Lake Maloney in honor of W.R. Maloney, who served on the District's board from 1933 through 1945.

The Nebraska Game, Forestation and Parks Commission was in the process of constructing a fish hatchery at North Platte and some of the release water from Lake Maloney would be circulated through hatchery ponds. Fisheries personnel also captured spawning walleye at Lake Maloney for fry production at the hatchery. Ponds on the south and west side of Lake Maloney were also used for hatchery purposes, as well as for holding display fish for the Nebraska State Fair. Fish escaping from those ponds likely accounted for the introduction of drum and buffalo into Lake Maloney.

Over the course of the next two decades, the direction that the District would take in the establishment of recreation and public areas was debated thoroughly. It wasn't until the M.O. Steen years as director of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission that the agency accepted recreation authority at Lake Maloney. The Lake Maloney State Recreation Area (SRA) as created and is currently divided into two primary parcels: The Outlet Area is a sprawling, shaded area of primitive camping not laid out in any regimented order. Two modern boat ramps, docks and a swimming beach are positioned along the area's quarter mile of shoreline. There is also a modern restroom, shower facility and trailer dump station.

For those seeking electricity and



Traditionally known as a walleye lake, Lake Maloney also offers a variety of other fish species as well.

camper pads, the Inlet Area, locally known as Kansas Point, is the right choice. Kansas Point borders the south side of the inlet, and bank fishing is the primary activity there in the spring. Walleye, white bass, wipers and channel catfish all tend to concentrate in the inlet in the spring and fall. Two wheelchair-accessible fishing piers are located there, one at the inlet SRA and one at a commercial campsite on the north side of the inlet. Campers at Kansas Point will find fire rings and grates as well as a sand volleyball court and a horseshoe pit. There are no boat ramps or docks located at Kansas Point.

Two fish-cleaning stations are also available on the recreation areas. One is located at Kansas Point and the other is located at the Outlet Area. Those who fish from boats must launch from the Outlet Area or from a private ramp at Frontier Resort and Marina, which also has boat fuel, bait, groceries, camping cabins and a café. There also are primitive boat launches on common areas around the lake, but these sites are not recommended for large craft.

Lake Maloney has always been a walleye lake, but being a lake close to a larger town and having its own

population of anglers as well, walleye populations are usually abruptly cropped at the legal size limit. Every year, a few Master Angler category fish are taken, usually in the spring of the year and usually near the inlet or outlet areas of the lake.

A fairly good wiper fishery has also responded to stockings in the Platte River reservoir system, and Lake Maloney provides a good seasonal wiper fishery for boat and bank anglers alike.

Catfishing is excellent sport in the inlet early in the year and equally good in shallow bays during the carp spawn in June. Archers pursue Lake Maloney's rafts of carp, and each year some of the state's largest buffalo are taken there by hook and line as well as bow and arrow. In the 1980s professional netters were contracted to remove some of Lake Maloney's carp and buffalo. Thousands of pounds of rough fish were taken from under the ice, and the seining crew noted that an "extremely large fish was entangled in the net for a time, but because of its strength it escaped under the lead line." About that same time, anglers occasionally reported hooking a fish so large that it was uncontrollable and

eventually broke their lines. The monster fish of Lake Maloney got quite a bit of play in the press for a while.

Extreme low water levels two years ago, along with strong sustained winds, resulted in sand and silt from the dry lakebed drifting over a third parcel of recreation area known as J.C. Park. Commission crews recently seeded the park area with grass and restored and expanded the swimming beach. The area currently serves as a day-use area for picnics and swimming.

There is a story that goes with J.C. Park beach. In the early 1990s, on a bright moonlit night, a large body washed up on the beach. A resident could see the object from a distance rolling back and forth on the sand in the waves and, afraid of what it might be, called authorities to investigate. A huge paddlefish, weighing in excess of 140 pounds had died and washed ashore. The paddlefish was an escapee from the State Fair holding ponds that had been abandoned around 1970. It lived to a ripe old age and sported propeller and hook scars on its back and bill. Finally the mystery of the Maloney Monster that swam off with everybody's line was solved. ■



Walker Stewart (left) and Jud Gallardo of North Platte fish for bluegill at Lake Maloney.

Archery For Novices

PART II

Text and photos by
Doug Carroll

With summer winding down, now is the time to finalize preparations for this year's archery deer season and other bowhunting opportunities.

you think you're having this problem.

Another common problem are bows that are not tuned properly, usually noticed by the archer himself or by a person standing directly behind the shooter and watching the flight of the arrow as it is released. If the end of the arrow fishtails (moves side to side) or porpoises (moves up and down) after it is released, then have someone help you tune the bow properly, making sure that the arrow's fletching is clearing the arrow release properly.

One other thing to look at is how your whole arrow, including fletching, shaft, nock and point, is balanced. It's easier to get good arrow flight if 10 to 16 percent more of the arrow's total weight (including the point) is in the forward half of the arrow instead of the back half.

Broadhead Selection

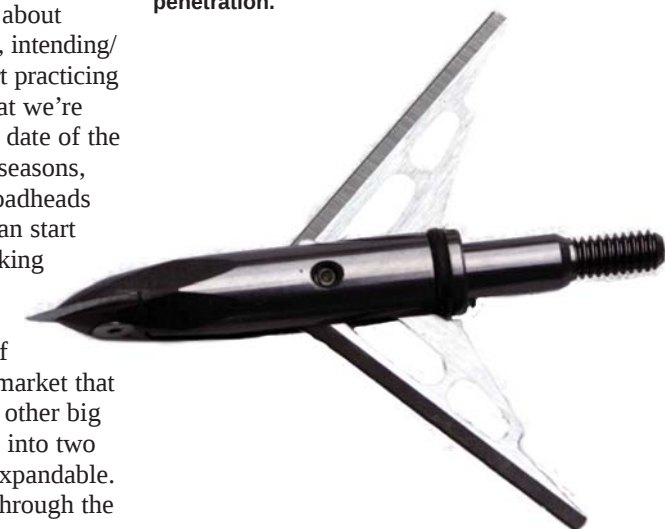
Which leads us to broadhead selection. I didn't talk much about broadheads in the first article, intending/assuming that you would start practicing with field points, but now that we're getting closer to the opening date of the archery deer and pronghorn seasons, it's time to pick out what broadheads you're going to use so you can start practicing with them and making sure they fly the same as the field points that you've been using. There are a lot of different broadheads on the market that are designed to kill deer and other big game, but they generally fall into two categories: fixed blade and expandable. Fixed blade broadheads fly through the



Fixed blade broadheads cut on contact and are a good choice for all bows, especially those with relatively low poundage.



When shot, expandable broadheads fly in a closed position (above) until the arrow hits its target, at which point the blades of the broadhead expand, creating a wide wound channel (below). Expandables may be more accurate at longer distances, but often require a heavier poundage bow to deploy correctly and achieve good penetration.



With a practice and planning, anyone – young or old, male or female – can learn to bowhunt successfully.

In the June issue of *NEBRASKALAND* we ran the first of a two-part series designed to help teach novice archers how to bowhunt successfully. In the first article we talked about choosing some basic equipment and learning how to shoot correctly. This month we'll talk about broadhead selection, practicing for real hunting situations, ethical shot selection and how to choose a good

bowhunting stand.

Arrow Spine

By now you hopefully have purchased a bow that fits you, have been practicing on a regular basis and have become fairly proficient with your bow. If you feel like your shooting form is good but you're still not able to shoot as tight of arrow grouping as you

would like, here are a couple of things you might want to check:

First, make sure the arrows you are using have the proper "spine" for the bow weight are using. Spine is the degree of stiffness every arrow has and is based on the type of material used to make the arrow, its overall length and the weight of the arrowhead used. When an arrow is released from a bow, the forward thrust of the string causes

the arrow to bend first one direction, then the opposite as it leaves the bow. A properly spined arrow will stop bending soon after the release, but arrows that are too lightly or heavily spined for the bow result in poor arrow flight and a loss of accuracy. Arrow manufacturers publish charts that match bow weights to proper arrow spine, and your local archery shop should be able to help you as well if

Camouflage

Visit any major sporting goods store or thumb through virtually any hunting gear magazine and you'll probably find more camouflage options than you ever thought possible.

While camo has its place, many experienced bowhunters feel minimizing movement helps a lot more than a fancy camouflage suit. That said, clothing that helps break up or hide your outline can be very valuable, especially if you are hunting from the ground. Because deer can't see color, the shade of your clothing probably matters a lot more than its color – try to wear medium-toned colors or patterns that roughly match the vegetation surrounding your stand, try to keep from being outlined against the sky, and limit your movements to when deer aren't looking your way.

air with exposed, razor sharp edges that begin cutting through the deer on contact. The blades on expandable broadheads fly through the air in a closed position and don't open up (expand) until the arrow strikes the target.

The advantages of fixed-blade broadheads include cutting on contact, easily sharpened and reused, and the fact that they usually don't need to be shot from a very high poundage bow to achieve suitable penetration (complete pass through of the arrow is preferable – more blood vessels cut and two holes for blood to escape, making tracking easier. Unfortunately, the design of this type of broadhead can cause the arrow to plane off course sometimes, particularly if the bow isn't tuned properly or if the arrow is shot at great speeds.

The advantage of an expandable-type broadhead is often greater accuracy, especially at longer distances and greater arrow speeds, and larger wound channels, since expandable broadheads often have longer blades than fixed-blades. However, they sometimes don't penetrate as well, resulting in the possible lack of an exit wound, since the longer blades encounter

more resistance as they go through the target.

In general, hunters using a bow with a draw weight of 50 pounds or lower are better off using fixed-blade heads, while those using a 60 to 70 pound bow could use either style of broadhead. Either way, make sure whatever broadhead you use matches the weight of the field points that you have been using, and meets legal requirements for hunting deer in Nebraska – a minimum of three inches of cutting edge and at least $\frac{7}{16}$ of an inch cutting radius.

Because you'll want to practice with your broadheads several times to make sure they fly correctly before using them in the field, you should either buy an extra set of identical broadheads to use on the target range or plan on doing a lot of sharpening after your practice sessions are over – broadheads used in the field need to be ultrasharp to help pass through the animal while cutting through blood vessels cleanly, resulting in more bleeding. Bullets kill by high-energy impact that crushes tissue and bone, while broadhead-tipped arrows create a low-energy impact that kills by cutting vital tissue, causing death either because of blood loss (hemorrhagic shock), or by puncturing one or both lungs, resulting in a loss of oxygen to the brain and other vital organs.

Much of your preseason practice should be done on life-sized 3D targets if possible to get a better idea of vital zones and various shot angles. If you don't have a 3-D target to use, buy target faces with life-size paper animal targets, or at least life-size kill zones on them to help visualize the shot that you'll see in the field. You should also practice shooting at unknown distances and under different circumstances – kneeling, sitting, from an elevated position, etc., mimicking the type of hunting you think you'll be doing most, such as hunting from a ground blind or tree stand. When shooting from above, bend at the waist and keep the bow arm raised at full draw. Practice estimating distances and walking them off to check your accuracy will give you more confidence in the field. Preseason is also the time to

establish your own personal “zone of confidence” – the maximum distance at which you can consistently place your arrow in the vital zone of an animal. After you've determined this range, don't take a shot at any animal beyond this range. Many bowhunters step off various distances around their blind prior to hunting and determine visual markers that they can refer to in deciding if deer are within range.

Shot Selection and Placement

The chest cavity is the main vital area on a deer and is the only place that you should aim for. It contains the heart, lungs and major arteries and veins that make up the circulatory system that sustains life. The best shot for deer-sized animals is a 45-degree diagonal shot that angles forward and hits the liver, diaphragm, lungs and heart. The next best shot is a double-lung broadside shot that collapses both lungs. On a quartering away shot you should aim just ahead of the opposite front leg, while on a broadside shot you want to aim just behind the shoulder closest to you, preferably while the leg is forward. Quartering toward and head-on or rear-end shots should not be taken. Set up where you can get a shot at a relaxed animal standing either broadside or quartering away within your personal zone of confidence.

Stands

Scouting for a good archery stand is much the same as any other deer scouting that you might do – try to figure out where the deer are bedding during the day and what they are feeding on, then try to intercept them somewhere along the way or at the food source, if it's at a location where you can sneak out undetected if you don't happen to get a shot. Bedding areas are indicated by bowl-shaped depressions on the ground where deer have been laying during the day, and there are usually several fairly obvious deer trails leading between bedding and feeding areas that make good ambush sites. Perhaps the



Bowhunter Education Instructor Gary Brunberg demonstrates the proper use of a full-body harness during a treestand safety course held at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park.

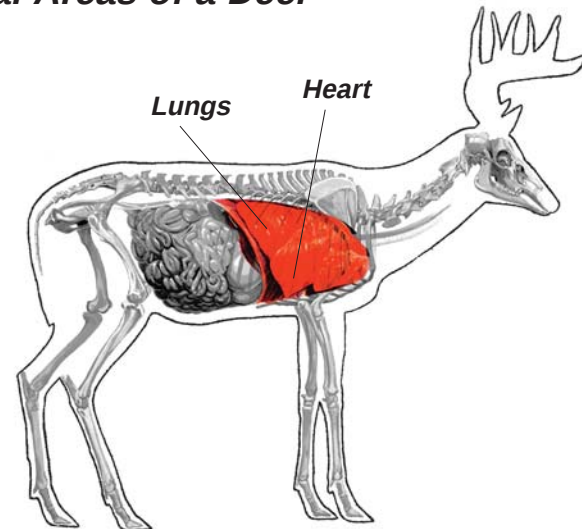
best way to find a good stand location is to simply watch the deer from afar for a few days and see where they enter and leave crop fields. The biggest difference between bow and gun hunting is the distance involved – you're better off hunting a spot where a deer or two might pass by within archery range than hunting a stand where you can see a lot of deer within gun range but too far to shoot with a bow. Once you've found a trail or other area that deer are using on a regular basis, look for a good stand location a short distance downwind from where you expect deer to walk by, based on normal prevailing winds. Make sure your stand is within shooting range, but don't set up so close that you become easily visible to oncoming deer. I like to use tree stands about 15 yards off a trail because it keeps me out of a deer's usual line of sight and helps keep my scent away. I also like to set my stand on the side of the tree opposite of where I expect the

deer to come from. That way the tree trunk helps to hide my body outline and any movement I might make getting in position to shoot, and the deer is already broadside to me or quartering away when it gets within shooting range.

Remember – safety is paramount when hunting from an elevated position. Wear a full-body harness attached to the tree whenever hunting from a tree stand and use a haul line to raise and lower gear from the stand. Use the three point climbing method when climbing or descending the tree (three point of contact with the tree at all times), and don't trust dead branches for handholds or footholds.

That's about all the help I can give you for now. The best way to learn about bowhunting is to practice a lot and spend as much time as you can out in the field. Even if you come home empty-handed or not, it will be time well spent. ■

Vital Areas of a Deer



A deer's chest cavity is its largest vital target zone. Broadside or slightly quartering away opportunities at the chest cavity are the best shots for bowhunters to take.

American Game Marsh

Although small, only 160 acres, this Brown County wetland is a jewel.

By Jon Farrar

Southeastern Brown County is freckled with freshwater lakes and marshes. They are, collectively, the headwaters of the Calamus River, and because headwaters are water-rich landscapes, the marsh is not unexpected. Still, when you drive to it from the north and top the ridge, the sight of American Game Marsh Wildlife Management Area sprawling across a broad meadow steals your breath away. There never seems to be anyone there and you wonder why, but relish it like some sweet little secret.

American Game Marsh is like many other small lakes and marshes in the north-central Sandhills. It is shallow, especially so during recent droughty years, and perhaps no more than four feet at the deepest even during times

of plentiful rain. Fed by springs, old-timers say the marsh has never been dry, even in the 1930s. Its margins are banded with cattail and bulrush, and there are phragmite islands and peninsulas, bays and necks, and groves of cottonwoods and willows on the southeastern side.

The animals found there are also expected – great blue herons stalking the shallows for small fish and frogs, American bitterns sending forth end-of-day calls from deep in cattail beds, yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds raucously squabbling over nesting territories. Puddle ducks nest, mostly mallards, blue-winged teal, shovelers and gadwall. Wood ducks are unexpectedly abundant, an uncommon species in the Sandhills only 40 years ago. Canada geese and a pair of

trumpeter swans rear young on the marsh most years.

While American Game Marsh is little different than the marsh found over the next ridge, it has a history unlike any other wildlife management area in Nebraska. The 160-acre area was purchased in 1965 for \$12,041 and deeded to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as a gift to the “ducks and duck hunters of North America” by the American Game Association, hence its name.

The American Game Association was chartered as the American Game Protective and Propagation Association on September 25, 1911, in New York City. Its founders were influential conservationists of the day and leaders of the sporting industry, the heads of companies like Peters Cartridge

Company, Remington Arms-Union Metallic Cartridge Company and the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Individual memberships were offered at \$5 annually, and county-sized chapters were encouraged. The association’s roster of officers and supporters read like a Who’s Who of American conservationists – F.W. Olin, T.C. du Pont, Theodore Roosevelt, John Burroughs, George Bird Grinnell, George Shiras, Ray Holland and many others.

The 1910s was a time when American wildlife (especially waterfowl) was on the ropes after decades of market hunting and excessive, largely unregulated sport hunting. The goals of the association were sweeping – supporting the enforcement of game laws (including hiring its own game wardens); influencing “sane game laws” at both the state and federal level, including reducing bag limits and the length of open seasons; working for uniform game laws across the country; and



A brass plaque on a red granite boulder on the northeastern corner of the area commemorates the gift of the marsh to “ducks and duck hunters.”



Most of American Game Marsh is marshy, shallow water over a mucky bottom and fringed with aquatic vegetation.

encouraging the importation, propagation and stocking of exotic game birds.

Using the considerable political influence of its members, the association played a critical role in the passage of the Migratory Bird Law in 1913 and the Migratory Bird Treaty with Canada in 1916; legislation ultimately awarding the federal government the authority to regulate migratory bird hunting and bring the wanton slaughter of waterfowl to an end. The test for the new legislation centered on an arrest made in Missouri by federal warden Ray Holland. The Supreme Court’s decision on *Missouri vs. Holland* in 1920, delivered by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, upheld the constitutionality of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Holland would later be president of the association, editor of *Field and Stream* magazine and approve the site selected to become the American Game Marsh. Over the years, the group has changed its name several times, first to the American Game Association, then the American

Wildlife Institute. It reorganized in 1946 as the Wildlife Management Institute, a privately funded, wildlife conservation organization still active today.

American Game Marsh is two miles east and 19 miles south of Johnstown, immediately adjacent a well-maintained county road. About 120 acres of the area is wetland – shallow water over a mucky bottom or impenetrable aquatic vegetation. There are only two sane ways to enjoy the marsh – by walking the uplands around the marsh or in a small, shallow-draft boat. There is no boat ramp, but a slot in the bulrush and cattail at the parking area makes it relatively easy to launch. Electric and gas motors are allowed, with a five-mile-per-hour restriction, but a rowboat or canoe is a better choice. Primitive camping is allowed. There is not enough dry land on the area to provide upland bird shooting but waterfowlers will find enough birds during the autumn migration to be of interest. There are other wildlife management areas not far to the south. ■

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Duck Hunter Survey

Survey revealed importance of Platte River and desire for late seasons.

By Jon Farrar

Last May, approximately 10,000 surveys were mailed to Nebraska duck hunters, almost everyone who indicated they hunted ducks on their 2006 Harvest Information Program (HIP) survey response. Duck hunters were asked how often they hunted (number of days per year and if every year), where they hunted and to select the season dates they preferred from five or six options in each of the state's three duck season zones. Almost 3,500 responses were received.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has always given hunters the opportunity to express their season preferences through several venues, but "this is the first time we have surveyed a high percentage of duck hunters about their season-date preferences," said Mark Vrtiska, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission waterfowl program manager. "If we don't try to match those preferences, we are not doing our jobs." Vrtiska said other factors will also be considered in setting season dates and boundaries – the hunting season framework established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, what is best for the resource in the long term, and what research and experience indicates are the best times to provide maximum outdoor recreation for the most hunters.

In addition to season dates, the survey will also guide waterfowl managers in establishing zones for future seasons. States are allowed to adjust zone boundaries every five years under federal regulations, so zone changes, if there are any, can't be implemented until the 2011 hunting season.

"I wish we had done a similar survey five years ago so we could now look at hunting preference trends, but with this survey we will at least



Responses to a recent survey of Nebraska duck hunters will be used to help set season dates and duck hunting zones in the future.

have baseline data," said Vrtiska.

While information from the survey is still being interpreted, Vrtiska did make some generalizations about what it revealed. One finding was not surprising: The Platte River is the single-most important habitat for waterfowl in Nebraska and therefore the most important water in the state for waterfowl hunters. That has far-reaching ramifications in the realm of water issues and maintaining habitat for ducks, geese and other waterbirds, Vrtiska said. The Rainwater Basin marshes of south-central Nebraska were the second most significant waterfowl hunting region in the state, in part because of the extensive public wetlands found there, followed by the Sandhills region with its extensive natural lakes and marshes. The Salt Valley lakes and watershed ponds in the southeastern counties were popular destinations for many duck hunters, again, probably because of extensive public access. The unchannelized

portion of the Missouri River along Nebraska's northeastern border, including Lewis and Clark Lake, was important but accommodated relatively few duck hunters compared to other regions of the state.

Somewhat surprising was the desire for late seasons in all zones, even in the Rainwater Basin and Sandhills where shallow waters normally freeze relatively early, usually in November, and early seasons provide the maximum number of hunting days. Vrtiska speculated hunters' desires for late seasons might be related to their preference for mallard shooting and a perception that the mallard migration was coming increasingly later in recent years. He said additional analysis of the survey data, and perhaps a follow-up survey, will be necessary to refine the findings.

The survey suggested, as have national surveys, that many duck hunters, certainly the duck hunters who reported shooting the most birds, hunt every year and hunt many days each year. Approximately 50 percent of the responding hunters reported hunting 10 days or less a season and seem satisfied with season dates of recent years.

"There will never be perfect season dates for every duck hunter," Vrtiska said. "That is just not realistic, and attempting to achieve it would result in complex and burdensome regulations. The more we carve the state up into little zones in an attempt to satisfy more individuals, the more complicated regulations become. I don't want regulations to stand in the way of hunters having as many options as possible and having an enjoyable experience."

For more information about the waterfowl hunter survey, go to www.OutdoorNebraska.org and click on "Hunting." ■

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Portraits from the Past



I ran across this photo of a fishing trip taken on July 4, 1948. I am in the middle of picture with the straw hat. There are eight or nine stringers of bass weighing 3 to 5 pounds each. They were basically caught on plugs and surface baits.

The lake is Spring Valley Lake near Hyannis. We didn't know about fishing with minnows, but the spinning reels were just on the market. I was using a Burke-Lumbe, but a 5- to 6-foot casting rod was the popular pole. We were using a five-man inflatable boat and a 12-foot aluminum craft. Lots of fun when the fish were hitting.

I look forward to the magazine as I used to be an avid hunter and fisherman.

— Homer Sargent, Scottsbluff, Nebraska

This is a photo of my great-uncle, Dr. George Gandy (right), and his friend, Dr. Novak (left), enjoying a grouse hunting trip in the Nebraska Sandhills sometime in the 1920s. They were camped near Long Lake.

Dr. Gandy was a resident of Humbolt, Nebraska.

— G. David Dorland, Greeley, Colorado



The enclosed photo is of John Schuckman (right) and myself, taken in the winter of 1945-46. It was taken at the south edge of Humphrey, Nebraska, on the now longtime vacated Chicago and Northwestern railroad tracks. The railway operated between Scribner and Oakdale. We were both residents of Humphrey.

My sister, Phyllis, who was quite interested in John at the time, accompanied us earlier in the day and returned with some pheasants. Pheasants were abundant but we only took what we could consume, and we also did some fishing and trapping together.

John became a longtime Nebraska conservation officer in the Crofton area and I lived in Omaha. Although we only lived about 160 miles apart, we have not seen each other in nearly 60 years. If asked why, I do not think we have an answer. Respectfully,

— Elmer Adams, Omaha, Nebraska



Enclosed is a picture of one of my family's hunting weekends near Halsey in the Sandhills. My sister, Vera Sautter, and her family were living in Halsey when this picture was taken. The rest were from Lincoln.

I believe they were turkey hunting, something fairly new in Nebraska in the fall of 1963. Floyd H. Pierce (far right) taught hunting skills and gun safety rules to his son-in-laws — (back row from right) Glen Starlin, John Sautter (Halsey resident in 1963), Ed Moss Sr.; grandchildren — (standing from left) Joe Starlin, Paul Sautter (kneeling), Ed Moss Jr., and (on the ground from left) Nancy Starlin and Glenda Starlin. Lady was the family's faithful Labrador hunting dog (laying on ground in front). Floyd hunted Nebraska pheasants, grouse and turkeys nearly every year and was always accompanied by family. Once and a while they would hunt deer.

— June Moss, Lincoln, Nebraska

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKALAND Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1970. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Photos will be returned.



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