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NEBRASKAland

December 2012



Set of 1909 Captain's Quarters decorated for the season at Fort Robinson State Park near Crawford in Dawes County. Photo by Eric Fowler.

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Owls from the Arctic 32

Christmas at Fort Robinson 14

Fishing Water that is Open or Ice 20

Bighorn Sheep Prosper in the Pine Ridge 22

The Highest and Lowest Points in Nebraska 38



NEBRASKAland

Volume 90, Number 10, December 2012

FEATURES

14 Christmas at the Fort

Celebrating Christmas at Fort Robinson is an annual tradition still being carried on. By THOMAS R. BUECKER

20 Frozen or Flow - Fishing in Winter

No matter what the temperature, there's always a place to catch fish in Nebraska. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DARYL BAUER

22 Alberta Bighorn Herd Growing in New Home

Catching up with Nebraska's newest bighorn herd. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER

28 A Very Special Christmas

Two brothers, both members of the military, share a special Christmas with their dad. By DOUG CARROLL

32 Owls of the Arctic

While neat to see, last winter's snowy owl invasion meant bad news for these beautiful birds.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL FORSBERG

34 Making a Difference

Last summer's Nebraska Youth Conservation Program was a win-win for everyone involved. By DOUG CARROLL

38 Highs and Lows

The highest point in Nebraska may surprise you.

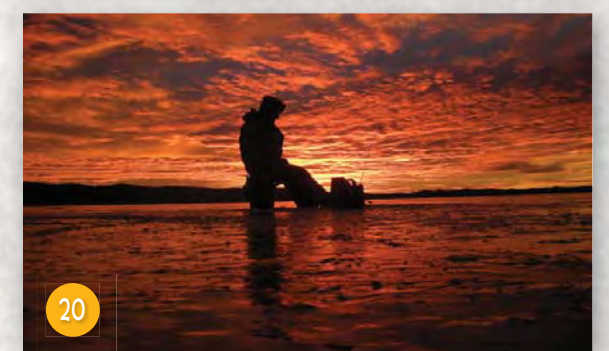
TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER

DEPARTMENTS

Comment.....	4
Mixed Bag.....	6
In the Field.....	40
Parks and Places	41
Classifieds.....	42
Portraits from the Past	44
Page 49 (even if it's on page 45!)	45
The Last Stop.....	46
2013 NEBRASKAland Gift Collection.....	47

Cover: Uncommon visitors to Nebraska, a snowy owl sits on a fence post along the Nebraska-South Dakota border last January. (see story on page 32). Photo by Michael Forsberg. **Opposite:** North America's only marsupial – the Virginia opossum (*Didelphis marsupialis*) – seen close up. Photo by Chris Helzer.

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Summit Splendor

What an unbelievable summer and fall we had this year, and Summit Lake couldn't be any more grandeur.

In late-September my husband Dennis and I visited to try our luck again – Dennis with a fishing pole and I with my camera. I couldn't get over the color of the surrounding area and the calmness of the lake. We also noticed some work has been done to attract more campers – it looks like the camping area will be double in size next season.

I don't know if you have any use for these photos but I thought you might enjoy them.

Marion Ball
Arlington, Nebraska

Catch the Fever

I just read Jeff Kurrus' article about

archery deer hunting in the October 2012 *NEBRASKAland Magazine*. Very nice!

I especially liked the photo of the young deer hunter. With golden tones it definitely captures the fall atmosphere.

I am sure you will probably help some new hunters catch the fever. Thanks.

Mike Reid
Via e-mail

NEBRASKAland Visitor Letters

We want to thank all 31 readers that sent e-mails and letters for last issue's visitor, an immature **antlion** that was on **page 16** (see page 13 for the winner, rules and this issue's hint). Here are some of the wonderful responses we received:

The visitor for this month is an

antlion found on pg. 16. Antlions are an awesome addition to my science classroom. Students love to watch them pull wandering ants to their death like a waiting ground sniper. The antlion (*Myrmeleontidae*) is also called a doodlebug based off the trails they leave in the sand. The adults are sometimes mistaken for damselflies, but upon closer inspection have different morphological attributes. Thanks again for another cool addition.
Jason Obermiller
Loup City, Nebraska

The insect in the November *NEBRASKAland Magazine* on page 16 is an "antlion," which is the larval stage of a version of a lacewing in the order *Neuroptera*.

Paul Timm
Lyons, Nebraska

On page 16 there is an immature lacewing (commonly called an ant lion) crawling into the taxidermy tools. A neat insect to observe in nature. Ever thrown an ant in its sand cone?

Also a comment on Jeff Kurrus's Travelogue – I would be remiss to not point out that he is missing a PRIME event on Football weekends – Single Barrel and the Side Track Band at 10th and P Street! The place rocks with more than 1,000 people on game days. Of course I could not be prejudiced just because my son opened the event center last year. (Did you get a commission from Misty's and Buzzard Bill's?) Jeff obviously has not tried the Single Barrel Burger or the steaks with locally grown produce!

Ron Macomber
South Sioux City, Nebraska

This month's visitor is on page 16. Looks like he plans on taking up taxidermy. Have no idea what type he is. Thanks,

Steve Tyler
Omaha, Nebraska

The visitor in the November issue is on page 16 on the taxidermy kit (which is the same kit Theodore Roosevelt used as a kid, I believe!).

The visitor is an ant lion, I believe.
Ryan Armbrust
Lincoln, Nebraska

Have you ever noticed small, cone-shaped pits in the dry soil around your house or in an old barn? Those were probably the homes of the ferocious-looking antlion, a member of the order Neuroptera, which also includes lacewings and dobsonflies. The large jaws, or mandibles, of the immature antlion aren't just for show – this insect feeds on other insects. The antlion larva digs its pit in dry, loose soil, moving backwards and using its head as a shovel to toss the soil from the pit. Once the pit is deep enough, usually about 1-1½ inches, the antlion hides under loose soil in the bottom. As other insects walk along the edges of the cone, those edges crumble and cause the insect to fall to the bottom, where the antlion quickly grabs it with its jaws. It injects the prey with venom that dissolves its insides, which is then sucked out by the antlion.

Adult antlions look nothing like their larvae. In fact, they look more like damselflies, related to dragonflies, in the order Odonata. Adult antlions have slender bodies with delicate, veined wings. They are weak fliers, and can be found flying near outside lights at night. Antlions are not harmful to plants or humans, and because they feed on other insects, are considered beneficial.



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

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

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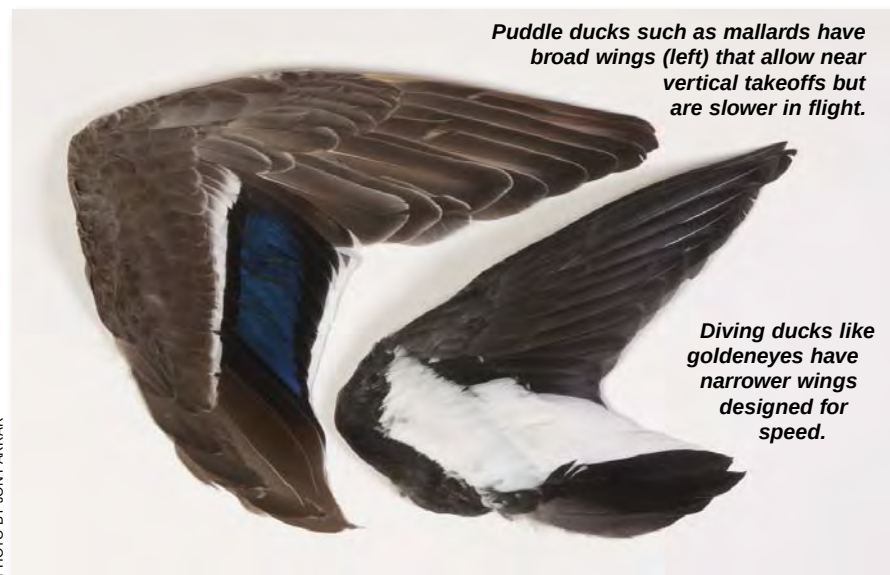
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See You Out There



www.OutdoorNebraska.org





Puddle ducks such as mallards have broad wings (left) that allow near vertical takeoffs but are slower in flight.

Diving ducks like goldeneyes have narrower wings designed for speed.

Duck Wing Shapes

Jon Farrar

The size and shape of duck wings are good examples of how species evolved to prosper where they live and how they make their living. Ducks are often sorted as diving ducks such as redheads, or puddle ducks (also called dabblers) like mallards. Diving ducks need to run across the water to get airborne, puddle ducks can execute near vertical liftoffs. Diving ducks usually frequent big waters – lakes, rivers and coastal bays – while puddle ducks are most often, particularly when feeding, found in shallow waters such as ponds, sloughs and marshes.

The explanation for different wing designs falls in the realm of aerodynamics, one aspect of which is “wing loading” – the weight of the bird divided by the surface area of the wings. Puddlers can stay aloft because their broad wings have enough surface area to lift their weight even when the wings are beating relative slowly, something that is called “low wing loading. Diving ducks, on the other hand, have narrower, shorter wings, which results in a smaller wing surface relative to their weight. Thus they have “high wing loading” – they have to beat their wings more rapidly in order to stay airborne. That rapid wing beat is the reason you hear diving ducks passing in the dark or on foggy days. The wings of diving ducks are also relatively flatter than those of puddlers. A simplified way of saying that is puddle duck wings push against more air with each stroke, so require fewer wing strokes than divers to be airborne. There are, of course, other wing design characteristics and tactics involved in flight.

While the relatively large surface area of puddle duck wings allows them to literally leap into the air, they are less efficient in sustained, high-speed flight. But because of their wing design puddle ducks are more maneuverable, allowing wood ducks, for example, to careen through tree branches along streams they frequent, particularly during the nesting season; and for teal to execute incredibly fast, twisting and dodging flight. The limit to increasing wing surface area to support ever more body weight in the waterfowl world is reached in swans, which need to run across the surface of water to get airborne. Were they a duck, Canada geese would fall somewhere between the flight strategies of puddlers and divers as far as wing load. Like puddlers, they feed by dipping and tipping-up, but like divers they require a running start across water or land to get airborne.

These differences between the wing design of puddlers and divers also, in part, explains why mallards feed in grainfields but divers do not. Divers are designed to dive when feeding, sometimes several feet deep, and so their legs are farther back on their bodies for the same reason submarine propellers are at the rear. Diving ducks did not evolve to spend much time on land and so seldom stray far from water.

Upcoming Events

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

December 1

Fort Robinson State Park's 18th Annual Historical Christmas Dinner
Enjoy a family style meal prepared straight from the original menu. Caroling and the “Light up the Fort” begins at 6 p.m. Tickets go on sale Nov. 5, 2012 at 8 a.m. Park entry permit required. Call (308) 665-2900 or ngpc.fort.robinson@nebraska.gov

December 1

Songbird Field Identification
Free of charge and can be attended by adults and children. Groups are welcome. 9 to 11 a.m. Call (402) 332-3901 or tony.korth@nebraska.gov

December 8

Bowring Ranch State Historical Park Holiday Evening Meal
Park entry permit required. Call the visitor center for more information and to purchase your tickets for the event. Call 308-684-3428 or diane.burress@nebraska.gov

December 14

Ponca State Park Annual Christmas Bird Count
Park entry permit required. For information call (402) 755-2284 or ngpc.ponca@nebraska.gov

December 20-23

“Christmas at the Codys”
Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park 5:30-8 p.m. Enjoy beautiful decorations and lighting at this historical park. Participants can make their own ornaments, and Santa Claus and Buffalo Bill will be on hand. Roasted chestnuts, hot apple cider and cookies will be available, as well as draft horse-drawn hay rack rides, weather permitting. Admission is \$5 at the door, children 12 and younger are free. Park entry permit required. For information call (308) 535-8035

December 29

Ponca State Park Winterfest
Rekindle wintertime family traditions at Ponca State Park's first-ever Winterfest, featuring a yule log hunt and bonfire, holiday hayrack rides, crafts and activities. For information call (402) 755-2593.

PHEASANTS FOREVER & QUAIL FOREVER State Habitat Meeting

February 2, 2013

Ramada Inn • 310 2nd Ave • Kearney NE

SEMINARS FOCUSING ON SUCCESSFUL PHEASANT AND QUAIL MANAGEMENT
AS WELL AS A WIDE RANGE OF WILDLIFE, YOUTH AND HABITAT MANAGEMENT

2013 Topics Include:

- Prairie Grouse Ecology
- Landowner Success Stories
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- Managing Oak Woodland for Diversity
- WETLANDS: Habitat for UPLAND game birds
- Simple Activities to Engage Children in the Outdoors
- Farm Bill Conservation Programs, updates for 2013
- Spring 2012 Crow Count Survey in South-Central Area
- A Tough Year: A look at habitat conditions - Panhandle of Western NE
- Landowner Help Desk and many more.

For more information or to register:

Register at www.NebraskaPF.com or by calling 308-428-3062

\$30 per person, \$40 per person after January 29, 2013. Registration includes noon meal



If you have an interest in learning more about how to increase wildlife numbers on your property, this is the one meeting you must attend!

Travelogue by Jeff Kurrus

12 Days of Christmas

Saturday, December 1 – Watch Santa Claus arrive by fire truck in downtown **Schuyler** at 10:00 AM. Kid activities abound throughout the afternoon.

Sunday, December 2 – Visit **Minden**, Nebraska's "Christmas City" and its 12,000 lights, and watch the 11/24, 12/2, or 12/9 reenactment of the traditional Christmas story at 7:00 PM. Bring your blanket and family.

Wednesday, December 5 – Tour 5 private homes decorated for Christmas in **Nebraska City** from 11:00 AM to 6:00 PM. For more information call (402) 873-3000.

Saturday, December 8 – Take the family to the **Lincoln Children's Zoo** today for a holiday train ride and to, once again, encounter the man in red.

Thursday, December 13 – Witness the Old Fashioned Christmas at **Elwood's** downtown area and civic center. There will be special sales and goodies, a pancake feed in the evening, horse and buggy rides, rides with Santa on the fire truck, caroling and Chamber drawings. For information call (308) 785-2548.

Friday, December 14 – Watch the Gala Christmas Show at the **Brownsville Concert Hall** at 7:30 PM. Tickets are \$12 and \$17. The show can also be seen on the 15th and 16th. Visit <http://brownvilleconcertseries.com/> for more information.

Saturday, December 15 – Attend the **Stuhr Museum's** North Pole Express at 9:30 AM, 12:30 PM, or 3 PM to hop aboard the Florence and Cripple Creek rail car for a children ages 3 and up Christmas activity. Museum members are \$25 and non-members are \$30. Pre-registration is required. For more information, call (308) 385-5316. Or, simply visit the Museum's Fantasy of Trees from November 23 through December 30.

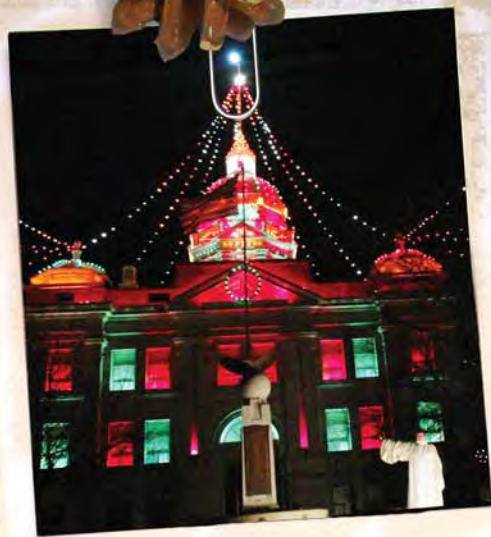
Tuesday, December 18 – View the "Christmas at the Cody's" celebration at **Buffalo Bill State Historical Park** in **North Platte** from 5:00-9:00 PM from the 18th to the 23rd. For information call (308) 534-3315.

Thursday, December 20 – Celebrate the way different ethnic groups celebrate the holiday season at the Winter Festival of Prairie Cultures at **Homestead National Monument** in **Beatrice**. Displays are open from 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM throughout the entire month of December. For more information call (402) 223-3514.

Saturday, December 22 – Watch the "Christmas Carol" production at **Divots** in **Norfolk** from the 20th to the 23rd at 7:00 PM each night with a child matinee at 1:00 on the 23rd.

Monday, December 24 – Forego last-minute shopping and visit the **Omaha metro**. First see the region's largest indoor Christmas tree at the **Durham Museum**, then head to **E.T. Mahoney State Park** to ice skate at the activity center or sled down the toboggan run.

Saturday, December 29 – Participate in Ponca State Park's first-ever Winterfest, featuring a yule log hunt and bonfire, holiday hayrack rides, crafts and activities. For more information call (402) 755-2593.



Minden Courthouse

PHOTO BY AMY ROH



Skating at Mahoney Park

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



Hunters Helping the Hungry

Nebraska deer hunters began donating deer to the Hunters Helping the Hungry program at the beginning of this year's November rifle season. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has contracted with several meat processors to accept and process the donated deer.

Hunters Helping the Hungry combines cash donations and donated deer to produce ground venison that is then distributed to Nebraskans in need. Game and Parks, not the hunters themselves, pays for all of the

processing costs.

Hunters and nonhunters alike are encouraged to make cash donations to help fund the program, which uses no permit or tax dollars. Donations can be made while purchasing a deer permit over the counter at a Game and Parks permitting office or online at OutdoorNebraska.org. People wishing to make a donation can also mail a check made out to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, with Hunters Helping the Hungry in the memo field. The checks should be sent to: Hunters Helping the Hungry, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, P.O. Box

30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370.

Available funding will allow Game and Parks to pay to process at least 260 deer this year. Each meat processor will have a quota of deer it may accept. Processors will accept only the deer that can yield a good volume of pure ground venison.

Once quotas are met, hunters may consider using the free Deer Exchange program to find and contact people who would like to receive venison.

Visit OutdoorNebraska.org for more information on Hunters Helping the Hungry and the Deer Exchange, as well as to purchase permits.

Show Your Colors This Christmas

Eric Fowler

You can buy Christmas lights in a multitude of sizes, colors and shapes, including shotgun shells. But if you are a hunter or shooter and a do-it-yourselfer (as well as cheap like me), you probably have what you need to make a string of shotshell lights for much less.

This idea came courtesy of Commission employee Leslie Hershberger. Simply start with a string of lights of your desired length and an assortment of shotshells in the color of your choosing. Red Winchester AAs and green Remington Sport Loads were my choice. I started with cheap, red Winchester field loads, but they looked pink so I sacrificed

some once-fired AAs.

Drill two 1/4-inch holes opposite each other near the crimped end of a plastic hull, then use a utility knife to cut a slit from each hole to the open end. Slip the light into the hull, the wires through the slits and you're done.

I ran the hulls through my reloader to pop the primers out so rain and melted snow could drain. You could also skip the drilling and simply close the crimp down around the wire to make them more weatherproof.

The lights look good at night, and the hulls add color to your home or office during the day.

Merry Christmas, and I hope Santa brings you a new shotgun so you can empty more hulls and make more lights next year.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

See You Out There... But Where?



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

Wildflower Guide Wins Book Award

The Nebraska Book Awards program, sponsored by the Nebraska Center for the Book, recognizes and honors books that are written by Nebraska authors, published by Nebraska publishers, set in Nebraska or concerning Nebraska.

In the 2012 competition, (for books published in 2011) *NEBRASKAland Magazine* Senior Editor Jon Farrar's *Field Guide to Wildflowers of Nebraska and the Great Plains* won the Nonfiction: Reference category.

Out of print for 21 years, this popular field guide was reprinted in 2011 and can be ordered online at NebraskalandGifts.com or from the 2013 *NEBRASKAland* Gift Collection printed in the back of this magazine.



Hunters Helping The Hungry

Help reduce hunger in Nebraska
Consider a donation today

Hunters and nonhunters alike can donate to this program, which provides funds for processing of donated deer to feed some of Nebraska's less fortunate.

Learn more about this program by visiting our website...

www.OutdoorNebraska.org

NEBRASKAland Flashbacks



Rancher Garould Fairhead with the Great Stone Face he found in a fenceline on his ranch near Merriman in 1954.

In the June 1971 issue of *NEBRASKAland Magazine* was a standard feature titled "Where to Go." In this issue it focused on "Windmill State Wayside Area" and the "Great Stone Face" found in 1954 by Garould Fairhead. Fairhead was out in the pasture of his ranch north of Merriman repairing fences. While digging a posthole, the blade struck something hard about two feet down. He then unburied a stone from the wet sand and left it propped against a fencepost. A week later, he noticed that the sand had dried, revealing a rock carved in the form of a head.

The stone weighs 50 pounds; is 19 inches long; has a squared-off hole in the back and a small, deep hole in the base. It was carved from a piece of tufa, a form of calcified or petrified moss found in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Both the Nebraska State Historical Society and the Smithsonian Institute have examined the head. It is not known who made it, where it came from, or how it got there.

Nebraska High School Anglers Qualify for Championship

Blair High School anglers Matt Neiburg and Zach Madsen teamed up to win the High School Southern Conference Fishing Championship held October 6 at Arkansas' Lake Dardanelle.

Neiburg and Madsen, who won the Nebraska high school tournament at Summit Lake on July 28, advance to the national tournament to be held next spring. The date and location for that event has not been determined.

Neiburg and Madsen, both seniors, won the conference tournament with a five-bass limit weighing 15 pounds. The team's boat captain was Bill Warrick of Blair.

The Nebraskans defeated teams from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas and Louisiana.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is one of the organizers of high school fishing tournaments in Nebraska. For more information, call Larry Pape at (402) 471-5447.

MAHONEY Grille

The Mahoney Grille is open 365 days a year (except Dec. 25th) at the Peter Kiewit Lodge at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park

Hours: Mon-Thur 7am to 9pm
Fri-Sat 7am to 10pm
Sun 9am to 9pm

Phone: (402) 944-2979
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Officer's Notebook

Serving and protecting Nebraska's Wildlife and Natural Resources since 1901

Paranoid or Just Being Safe?

Several times over the years I've contacted hunters in the field who don't seem to have the safest gun-handling habits. Most are very conscientious about gun safety, but I've contacted a few pheasant, waterfowl and deer hunters who are hunting with their guns fully loaded (naturally) AND the safety in the "fire" position at all times. Some hunters turn away and unload their guns when approached by an officer; some hold them under their arm and wave them around while attempting to find their hunting permits that I've asked them to display.

In most cases, I appreciate them safely unloading their guns. However, when hunters are hunting doves or waterfowl, we are usually interested in how many shells are in the guns and what kind of shotshells they're using. In those cases, we may want them to unload the guns safely in our presence so that we can determine if they are using the correct kind and number of shells.

Most conservation officers love to work during the hunting seasons and are accustomed to contacting people with guns, knives and arrows, knowing that most of these hunters are not interested in harming us. We usually work alone, sometimes in remote areas where law enforcement backup could be a long time in coming. Other law enforcement officers often see firearms as an immediate threat, which is often the case in non-hunting situations. In our contacts with the public as conservation officers, we constantly need to assess the people and the situation by observing the demeanor and gun-handling actions of the armed people we come in contact with.

Legal hunters are generally happy to show us their harvested game and hunting permits and then tell us a few hunting stories. Hunters who know or think they have violated a game law are often nervous and worried that they may get a ticket. This nervousness doesn't necessary evolve into an intentional threat to us, but may lead to unintentional threatening situations. At one time or another, all conservation officers have had guns pointed at them – mostly by nervous or otherwise unsafe hunters. Those situations may cause conservation officers to become defensive.



Because of unsafe gun-handling by some hunters, I've become much more likely to tell hunters to turn to the side and safely unload their guns when I approach them to check permits and bag limits. A few years ago, I told a group of pheasant hunters to do just that because I could see that one of them was walking with his safety off, he hadn't unloaded his shotgun, and was swinging it around pointed down at knee-level toward me and his fellow hunters. His response to me was, "What, do you think I'm going to shoot you?" My response to him, "Probably not on purpose, but being accidentally shot probably wouldn't feel any better than being shot on purpose."

A couple of days ago, I contacted two firearm deer hunters who were hunting without permission – hence a little nervous. As they came to me, I told them to turn away and unload their rifles. One unloaded his completely; the other removed the round from the chamber. After discussing the violation with them, we agreed to go to the home of the nearby landowner for contact with him. I gave them the option of walking or riding in my truck. They opted to ride, so I told them again to make sure their rifles were unloaded. One checked his and showed me that it was safe. The other knelt down, pointed the rifle away, and worked the action to remove the three remaining cartridges from the gun's magazine. As he did so, I turned to his partner and immediately heard a loud BOOM beside me. The kneeling hunter had thought the gun was empty when he closed the action and apparently had a finger on the trigger. He had just blasted a three-foot trench in the ground about eighteen inches from the barrel. If he had been facing us, one of us could very well have lost a foot or worse.

So, if you're hunting and are approached by a conservation officer, or any other law enforcement officer, don't be offended if you're asked (or told) to unload your firearm and/or place it in a safe position. We just want to keep the situation safe so that we can keep on doing our job and you can keep on hunting without getting hurt.

We're not being paranoid, just safe.

– Levi Krause,
Conservation Officer, Louisville



Send Us Your Trail Cam Photos!



Rick Hoffmann sent us this photo of a bobcat with a rabbit walking by a mineral block in Nemaha County. The photo was taken December 14, 2010 at 6:34 a.m.

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

Nebraska Bull Elk Harvest Sets Record

A record 105 bull elk were harvested in Nebraska in 2012. The 91 percent success rate is also a record, according to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. That compares to 90 bulls harvested and a 79 percent success rate last year.

The bull elk season was September 29-October 28. Thirty-one cow elk were harvested in the first half of the cow elk season, which ran concurrently with the bull elk season. The remainder of the cow elk season runs from December 1-31.

There were 303 elk permits sold for this year's season, but refunds were given on 19 (seven bull and 12 cow) permits because of concerns about access due to the Pine Ridge wildfires, which occurred just before the season opener.

Elk harvest by management unit was: Ash Creek – 14 bulls, two cows; Bordeaux – 26 bulls, nine cows; Box Elder – six bulls, three cows; Boyd – none; Hat Creek – 27 bulls, 10 cows; Niobrara – seven bulls, three cows; North Platte – 22 bulls, four cows.

Bulls also were harvested by the two auction permit holders and the one lottery permit holder.

Successful elk hunters are reminded to send in elk tooth collection envelopes to Game and Parks.



Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

This time I'm not going to get in trouble. These are not the wife's clothespins. I bought these and I have the receipt for them. This is to help you archers trailing that blood trail or even you rifle hunters. I've spray painted them with a fluorescent paint so they'll work at night or in the daytime. Just throw a couple of them in your pocket and use this as your reference on the last blood spot you saw. Put one there ... go 5 or 15 feet or 20 yards and find another spot ... put a clothespin there, pick this one up ... keep leap-frogging those clothespins and they'll help you establish a deer trail.

"Diiiick, are those my clothespins?" yells Mrs. Turpin.

"These are not your clothes pins, I have the receipt dear!" (First time in my life I ever heard her speechless). ■



NEBRASKAland Visitor Winner and Hint

Last issue's winner of the Visitor drawing was Delores Colburn, of Valentine, Nebraska, who found the **antlion** on page 16. Readers are encouraged to contact **NEBRASKAland** within 10 days after this issue's publication with the correct page number and name of this issue's "Visitor" – a bug found in Nebraska that just happened to find its way onto one of the pages.

We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a **NEBRASKAland Magazine** mug. To enter each month, write:

NEBRASKAland Visitor
2200 North 33rd Street,
Lincoln, NE 68503.

Or e-mail:

Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov
with "Visitor" in the subject line of the message.

HINT: This issue's visitor is not on page 4, 5, or 36.



Christmas at the Fort



“CAPTAIN SANTA CLAUS.”

NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

“The Laughter of Happy Voices are Heard Everywhere”: Christmas at Fort Robinson, 1874-1948

By Thomas R. Buecker

Christmas was always the greatest of holidays for the soldiers of our armies. This was especially true for the army men in the west during the 19th century. Christmas celebrations were a welcomed break in the monotony of garrison routine and gave the soldiers a day of relaxation and recreation. They provided a particularly good morale boost for soldiers and their wives and children at isolated forts. For 74 years, Christmas celebrations were an annual tradition at Fort Robinson, a tradition that is still carried on.

Christmas observances at Fort Robinson began with the establishment of the post as Camp Robinson in 1874. On the first Christmas, General Order No. 40, issued December 24, set forth that “Tomorrow being Christmas all labor (except the necessary fatigue) will be suspended for the day.” The tradition of taking the day off continued over the years; and eventually the relaxed holiday season was extended. By 1881 it was reported that all drills and work were suspended from Christmas to the New Year, and “the troops enjoyed a week of uninterrupted rest.”

Christmas dinners were prepared and served in the mess halls of every company or troop in garrison. Savings from company funds were used to purchase fresh oysters, salmon, fruits, nuts, and other delicacies not regularly seen on mess hall tables. Pies, cakes, cookies, and other desserts were baked in abundance. Hunting details were sent out for deer, pronghorn, elk, ducks and grouse, all of which provided a welcome break from the regular beef ration.

In 1886, post commander Lt. Col. James S. Brisbin boasted, “I doubt if anywhere in the United States there are better Christmas dinners than in northwestern Nebraska.” He added, “... the laughter of happy voices are heard everywhere.” Barrack mess halls were decorated similar to one in 1883 with “bunting, flags, and mountain pine covering the log walls with a mass of color, relieved here and there by strips of evergreen.” Soldiers invited their company officers, family members, and civilian guests to join them. Although often aloof and distant from the enlisted ranks on a daily basis, company officers spent a part of Christmas Day in the barracks with their men.

During the evening hours, company units held elaborate balls or hops in vacated barracks squad rooms. The first recorded ball was held on Christmas night 1876, with the weather outside at 30 degrees below zero. In the early 1880s there was a lively rivalry between the companies in the garrison on which could hold the best ball. The ball held by Troop H of the Fifth Cavalry was crowded from the

opening march at half past eight, until early in the morning. Fully two hundred guests were entertained, including every officer of the garrison and their ladies. A late-night supper was followed by a promenade and then “the dancing was resumed and continued until nearly reveille.”

When a post chaplain was assigned to the post, special Christmas Eve services were held in the post school or hall. After hymns were sung by a small choir, the chaplain gave a special sermon on the importance of the day. With a small garrison at the post in 1880 and no other entertainments planned, a special dinner after the service was supplied by the officers and their wives for the enlisted men. Events like this provided the frontier soldier with a needed connection to a more peaceful time and a more settled region.

The most popular decoration then as now was the Christmas tree. Christmas Eve always brought the lighting of the post tree. Nicely decorated and lit with wax candles, the 1880 tree for post children presented “a beautiful appearance.” During the illumination, the children were presented with books and other gifts. In 1889, a grand Christmas tree for all the children in the garrison to enjoy was put up in the post amusement hall. After the tree was lit, presents were again distributed to all children attending. In 1895, 90 children were on the tree list. Oftentimes, through donations or the post fund, gifts were purchased for soldiers not expecting to receive any.

The men of Fort Robinson were soldiers first, and the holiday season did not preempt field service. For soldiers on campaign, Christmas was just another day. On Christmas Eve 1874, a dispatch rider arrived with orders for Captain Guy V. Henry to mount an expedition to the Black Hills to expel illegal miners. Christmas Day at the post was spent preparing men and animals for a field deployment



Fort Robinson, located in northwestern Nebraska, is Nebraska's largest state park.



Christmas menu for troop G, Twelfth Cavalry, stationed at Fort Robinson from February 18, 1911, to March 12, 1916.

during one of the most severe winter seasons on record. On Christmas Eve 1876, Camp Robinson troops were in camp near the Pumpkin Buttes in northeastern Wyoming, as part of a winter campaign against Crazy Horse and his followers. During the day the troops had marched 20 miles; that night the temperature dropped to 42 degrees below zero before the thermometer froze. For his Christmas celebration the next day, First Sergeant James B. McClellan, Third Cavalry, recalled he “blew himself to a drink at 75 cents” at the post trader’s wagon.

Fort Robinson troops were in camp at the Pine Ridge Agency on the Sioux reservation on Christmas Eve 1890 during the Ghost Dance uprising. That afternoon, Major Guy V. Henry had received orders to move his Ninth Cavalry squadron north toward the dancers’ stronghold. With cheers of “A Merry Christmas!” from their comrades remaining behind, Henry’s troops moved out. By the time they reached the stronghold, one of his troop units had covered 53 miles in 21 hours, all in severe winter cold.

In the early years Camp Robinson (re-designated Fort Robinson late in 1878) was an isolated location. All supplies and mail for the post had to be brought in by freight wagon from either Cheyenne, Wyoming (152 miles distant), or Sidney, Nebraska (119 miles distant), both located

on the Union Pacific Railroad. Winter weather occasionally delayed the receipt of freight shipments for days, even weeks. This included the delivery of special order Christmas foodstuffs and presents ordered by parents or sent by friends and relatives back east. Late arrival due to weather delayed the 1881 celebration until mid-January 1882.

Because the delay of presents had postponed Christmas for weeks the year before, everyone at Fort Robinson was anxious for Christmas of 1882 to occur on date. On December 10, Corporal Martin J. Weber of the Fifth Cavalry and a driver with a six-mule wagon were dispatched to Sidney to pick up the goods. Six days later they arrived at Sidney, but then had to wait two days for the freight to arrive by train. On the nineteenth the men loaded the wagon and headed north for Fort Robinson.

On the second day out of Sidney a fierce blizzard struck. After spending the night at the North Platte Bridge, Corporal Weber and the driver decided to push on, determined to get the presents to the post. After a hard struggle they reached



Christmas celebration for the post’s Hospital Corps in 1912.

the Niobrara River crossing on the night of the twenty-third. Early the next morning they followed a stagecoach that broke open the road over the Pine Ridge and down to the fort. As the men triumphantly rode into the post, the children were out on the boardwalks for the first time in days. The corporal later recalled “When they saw me they began to shout ‘the Christmas wagon has come!’” The children all had Christmas on time, and as a reward, Corporal Weber received his sergeant’s warrant.

With the completion of the Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley Railroad across northern Nebraska, winter transport of supplies to the fort was eased. By 1885 goods for the post could be picked up in Chadron, a much shorter trip than down to Sidney. After the establishment of Crawford, fort residents could shop in town.

The late 1890s brought the Spanish-American War and Philippine Insurrection. As a consequence, all stateside army posts were stripped of their garrisons, and the men



Remount mess hall decorated for Christmas 1920.

sent on overseas duty. In 1902 the troops returned, and Fort Robinson again had a full complement of soldiers. The new garrison consisted of eight troops of the Tenth Cavalry, one of two all-black cavalry regiments.

The 1904 Christmas season was typical of those celebrated in the early 20th century. Many activities were carried over from earlier celebrations, but a few new traditions were instituted. A post chapel built in 1893 provided a specific building for religious and school purposes. In 1904 more than 200 people attended Christmas Eve services there, followed by a tree party for the children in the post amusement hall. By this time Santa Claus had begun making an annual appearance, usually in the form of a jovial volunteer. That year an officer dressed as Santa was reported to have appeared from behind the tree with a sack of presents “much to the delight of the little people.”

Having a regimental band stationed at post was always a benefit and plus at Christmas time. Christmas Day morning began with a serenade of seasonal music by the

Tenth Cavalry band. Dinners were served in the various troop mess halls in the early afternoon, and K Troop had its own orchestra, which played while the men and visitors, including all three troop officers, chatted. Dinner featured oyster soup served with four entrees, plus 11 desserts, followed by cigars and coffee while the men reminisced about Christmases past. The day was capped by services led by Chaplain William T. Anderson in the chapel.

By this time all the worldly delights for soldiers were available only three miles away in Crawford. As Rudyard Kipling wrote, “Single men in barracks don’t grow into plaster saints,” and with more than 600 men in garrison, not all of them behaved themselves: Several days after the 1904 Christmas Eve, the local editor reminded Crawford residents that “when a couple hundred fighting Tenth turn themselves loose they can ‘make Rome howl’ and the night hideous.”

The last cavalry units departed Fort Robinson in 1916, and the post was virtually empty through the World War I years. In 1919 the post gained new life as a quartermaster remount depot. In this role, horses (and mules) were received, processed, conditioned, and issued to the cavalry, artillery, signal corps, or any other mounted service.

A remount station required a substantially smaller troop component – only three to five officers and 125 enlisted men were stationed there during most of the remount years. By this time, post families went to school or attended church in Crawford, and took part in holiday activities there. On post the entire enlisted component was housed in one single barracks. The tradition of Christmas dinners continued, although with fewer troops only one Christmas dinner was necessary. At each year’s dinner, the guests received a festive menu which listed all the foodstuffs offered and the names of all the military personnel stationed there.

Change came in 1929 when a battalion of field artillery arrived to join the remount detachment. Once again a large garrison filled the old post with soldiers, wives, and children. Christmas activities were planned with a few new items on the agenda: Several days before the holiday, loads of Christmas trees were cut and delivered to all post residents, and with a chaplain on post, his Sunday school put on a Christmas cantata titled “Santa’s Surprise Party” at the post theater. On Christmas Eve there was a free movie, and at 10:30 a party of carolers visited houses around the post. The next morning, Santa arrived and made calls on all quarters with children. He rode in a sled pulled by “reindeer” borrowed from the B Battery mule stables. A bugler sounded Santa’s arrival at each house, and onlookers were advised that “Kodakers will not be barred from taking pictures.”

At 9 a.m. the 76th Field Artillery Band marched through the post streets playing carols and gave a concert in front of the colonel’s quarters. The traditional dinner was served in all mess halls, which were “decorated with spruce, cedar and Christmas colors.” That evening the officers club held its Christmas dance in the theater with 75 off-post guests. The soldiers enjoyed a “layoff” from Christmas to New Years.



During the World War II years, Santa arrived in Crawford via a dog sled team provided by the Fort Robinson War Dog Training Center. NSHS RG1517-52-53



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Following a new Christmas tradition, the Fort Robinson Lodge is fully decorated for the holiday season.

By the end of 1931 the field artillery departed and the post reverted back to a small garrison. Throughout the hard times of the 1930s the post Christmas tree party tradition continued in the theater, with every child and enlisted man receiving a gift. In 1932 contributions were so liberal that a \$20 surplus was presented to the local community chest.

The pre-World War II years saw an increased work load for the remount troops and a larger population of residents at the fort. Holiday parties were still held at the officers’ club as war clouds loomed. A favorite activity was riding on a bobsled pulled by a pickup truck around the parade ground, with a stop at the club each time around for a drink and warm-up. As in years before, the quarters and mess halls were all decorated.

Christmas holidays continued during the war; Christmas dinners were still held in the mess halls and tree parties at the theater. With a U.S.O. on post and in Crawford, holiday dances and parties were available for the enlisted men. Local residents invited soldiers home for dinner, providing them with a bit of the home life they now missed.

Even German prisoners of war had a bit of the holidays in their compounds east of the fort. During the war, hundreds of German soldiers were held at the Fort Robinson camp, one of 126 that were built across the United States. Former German veterans remember the “Great Tattoo” of Christmas 1943, when they sang carols outside that evening with torches for light. The prisoners received cards and special

holiday parcels that had to be sent months ahead of time to reach the camp by Christmas. For Christmas 1944, a large program was held at the camp, which featured 16 orchestra and solo musical numbers, poetry readings, and group singing of “O Tannenbaum” and “Stille Nacht.”

Today Fort Robinson is Nebraska’s largest state park. Although no longer occupied by soldiers, one tradition of the old army continues – Christmas dinners. Held on the first Saturday of December, a different historic year is selected and modern guests partake of the exact menu that was served that year. Before and after the meal, local groups provide musical entertainment. In addition, a new Christmas tradition has begun. Each year local civic groups and organizations decorate the exterior of one of the quarters. The lights are turned on the evening of the dinner, and remain on through January first. But it is through the dinners, a time of good food and fellowship, that a time-honored tradition of old Fort Robinson lives on. ■

Tom Buecker was curator at the Fort Robinson Museum for 26 years. Prior to that he spent eight years at the Neligh Mill State Historical Site. He now lives in Lincoln and works at the Nebraska History Museum. This is his 12th historical piece written for NEBRASKALand Magazine since his first in 1979.



Frozen or Flow

Fishing in Winter

Text and photos by Daryl Bauer

Every winter it gets “cold” in Nebraska. But not every winter do temperatures drop enough to support the amount of safe ice that hard-water anglers consistently need. When this ice is available, however, all waters across the state are in play, including perennial favorites in the Sandhills.

In particular, multiple lakes at the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Crescent Lake NWR offer some of the state’s best ice-fishing for big yellow perch, bluegills, black crappies, beautiful largemouth bass

and northern pike. Pits and ponds across Nebraska are also good for some panfish, largemouth bass and maybe even some channel cats through the ice. Reservoirs across Nebraska can also provide excellent ice fishing for a variety of species – everything from yellow perch and crappies to bass, pike and even some walleyes and wipers.

Fish are “cold-blooded” creatures. In general, that means the metabolism for all species of fish slows during the cold-water period. They feed less but do not cease feeding entirely. Even warmwater species (with the

exception of flathead catfish) can be very catchable while fishing through a hole in the ice. However, because they tend to slow down and feed less or less frequently, slower, more natural and vertical presentations are the most effective way to catch fish during the winter. In most cases that is most easily accomplished while ice-fishing.

When fishing through the ice a person is fishing vertically all the time, one small hole at a time. Yes, fish will move and they may move quite a distance to come to a bait, but fishing a bait vertically keeps it in one relatively

small area and gives a coldwater fish time to react to the variety of live baits and great presentations by ice anglers.

But that does not mean that fish cannot be caught from open water during the winter. In Nebraska that will mean mostly flowing water – rivers and streams. The Missouri River in northeast Nebraska, especially the Gavins Point Dam tailwaters, have provided anglers with some mid-winter open-water fishing opportunities for as long as that dam has been there. There are also some spots above Lewis and Clark Reservoir where anglers can find some open water and catch fish during the winter. In addition, there usually is enough water flow coming out of Lake McConaughy to keep at least portions of Lake Ogallala open during the winter. In fact, ice fishing on Lake Ogallala is often marginally safe at best.

There are also a couple of power plants on Nebraska waters that have some warmwater returns that stay open all winter long, and anglers can catch a variety of species from those waters. I hear reports of anglers catching channel catfish from the “cooling pond” adjacent to Sutherland Reservoir even during mid-winter, and I have heard whispers of some anglers on the Missouri River that catch some fish from warmwater returns from power



These trout were caught from Long Pine Creek late last winter/early spring. As a matter of fact, two days previous I had caught fish through the last ice of the season, and then stopped by Long Pine Creek and caught these trout.

plants on that river as well.

Trout streams are other places that will have at least some stretches of open water during the winter and you can catch fish from Nebraska trout streams 12 months of the year. My strategy for fishing open water during the winter is to target species most active in cold water – coldwater species such as trout, and maybe some cool-water species like walleye, sauger and pike.

The coldwater trout will also slow and feed less during the winter, and in flowing water they tend to settle into some of the deepest holes and spots with the least amount of current during the winter. They will eat a variety of prey in our rivers and streams during the winter, and in general all of the typical trout presentations can catch fish in the winter as well as in the summer. Of course, matching the actual prey the fish are eating is always a good place to start.

This means going smaller for trout with more natural baits, spinners, jigs and crankbaits. Fly fishing can also be effective during the winter – a variety of beadhead nymphs are particularly good during the winter, but on a warm afternoon there might even be some hatches of midges or other small insects and a fly angler can pick up some fish on dry flies or emerger patterns.

On bigger water where a person might be targeting some walleyes or

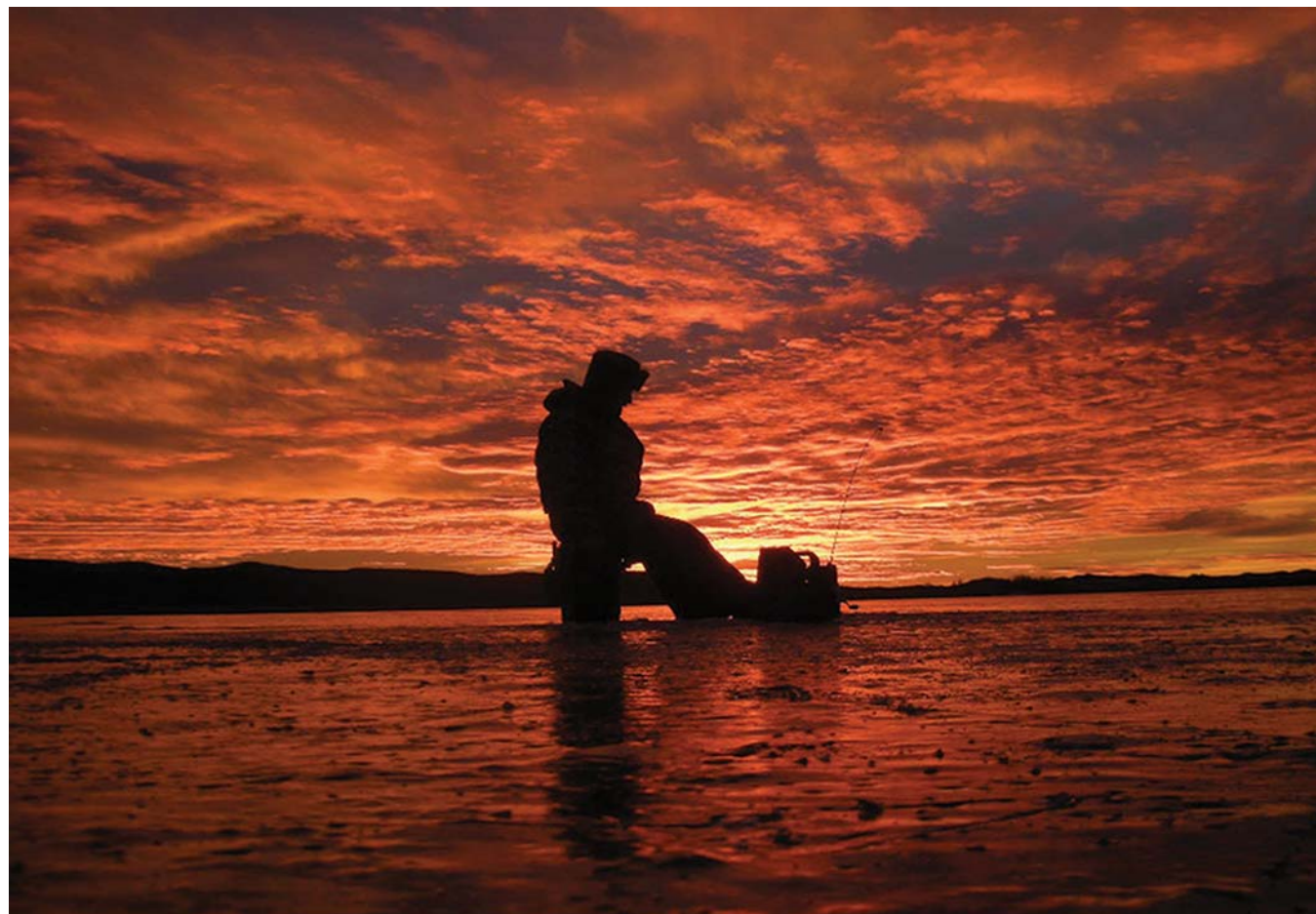
sauger, jigs and minnows or jigs tipped with the new GULP! baits are favorites during the cold water period. Other vertical presentations with spoons or blade baits, just like those used for ice fishing, can also be good during the winter.

Crankbaits can also catch fish in open water during the winter, but typically they have to be fished very slow – just enough to get them wobbling is usually the best place to start and even then frequent and extended pauses might be needed to trigger fish. For that reason neutrally-buoyant crankbaits that maintain their depth at slow speeds or even when stopped are often some of the best baits for cold water.

Whether iced over or completely open, there is always water to fish in Nebraska. ■

Daryl Bauer is Fish and Wildlife Program Manager at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

He has just over 20 Master Angler awards taken during the winter months.



This photo shows me sitting on my favorite chair during the winter – my ice-fishing bucket. This was taken at sunset on the east end of Dewey Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge a couple of winters ago.

Safety Tips

Whether on water or ice, consider these following safety tips:

- Wear a flotation device on the bank, in a boat or on the ice.
- Dress in layers and stay away from cotton.
- Keep an extra change of clothes in your vehicle.
- Notify a friend or family member where you’re fishing and when you plan to be back.

For more information on winter fishing safety, specifically for ice fishing, visit [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...) and search “Ice Safety with Daryl Bauer.”

Alberta Bighorn Herd Growing in New Home

Photos and text by Eric Fowler

In the Pine Ridge north of Harrison, where this time last year there were no bighorn sheep and last spring there were just 40, there are now 60.

This rapid population growth in an area historically home to bighorns began with the February release of 40 sheep that were trapped in the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, Canada, and brought here by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Of the 35 ewes and 5 rams that were relocated, 38 remain – one ewe was lost to stress not uncommon in such moves. Another died after a fall (they're not always as sure-footed as they seem).

The herd grew in June when the ewes, most of which were pregnant when released, began having lambs. Of the 25 that were born, 22 have survived.

Other than a few short forays by wandering rams and the handful of sheep that have moved to the ridge west of Sowbelly Creek, the sheep have remained close to the release site near the intersection of Sowbelly and Pants Butte roads. "That may change as the rut picks up here, but we'll see," said Todd Nordeen, district wildlife manager for the Commission, referring to the breeding season now underway and which often induces wanderlust in rams.

A bighorn lamb and ewe rest in the shadows on a ridge above Sowbelly Creek in the Pine Ridge north of Harrison last July.



Nordeen said even the ewes stayed relatively close to their home range when compared to those in other herds in the Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills, some of which move miles to isolated areas to lamb. “Surprisingly, some of the ewes gave birth while there were other sheep around,” he said.

The recent forest fires in the Pine Ridge didn’t strike this herd’s range, and despite drought the bighorns have found food and water.



Left: A bighorn ram stops in a beam of sunlight in Sowbelly Canyon. The Alberta sheep were fitted with radio collars so their movement could be tracked.

Above: A pair of lambs browse on plants growing from a rocky hillside.

Right: A pair of ewes and a lamb survey the landscape atop a butte.





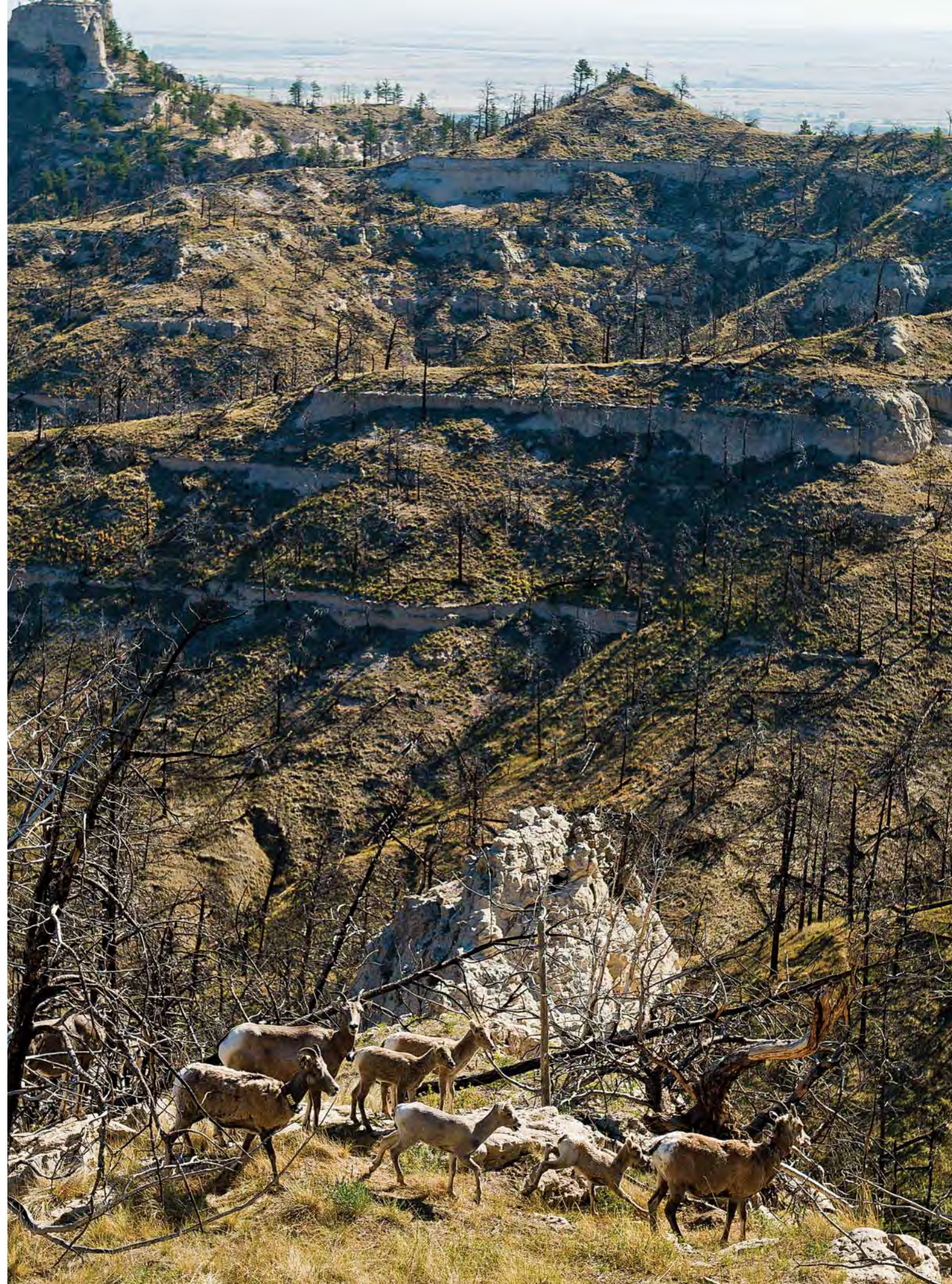
“They did well through the drought, the fires, the record high temperatures – about the worst conditions we’ve had in Nebraska since we put bighorn sheep here,” Nordeen said.

The Barrel Butte bighorn herd, which roams the Pine Ridge between Chadron and Crawford, was displaced by a massive wildfire this summer, but only temporarily. Nordeen said not all of those sheep have been accounted for, but none of the radio-collared animals were lost to the fire and all moved back into their previous range soon after the fires were out.

If you want to catch a glimpse of the Harrison bighorns, Nebraska’s newest herd, there’s a good chance you can spot them from Pants Butte Road, but take your binoculars and be sure to stay on the road, as all of the land there is private. ■

Above: A lamb tries to suckle on its mother as others play on the rocks.

Opposite: Lambs and ewes cross a point above Sowbelly Creek. While the 29,000-acre Thayer fire that burned through the area in 2006 wiped out the ponderosa pine forest, it made the area suitable for bighorn sheep.



A Very Special Christmas

Text and photos by Doug Carroll

“I’m more about having a good time with the family.”
— Codey Gerdes

Last Christmas was an especially memorable one for the Rod Gerdes family of Papillion.

It all started earlier that fall when Rod found out that his sons, Codey and Zach, were both going to be home for Christmas. Codey (28) and Zach (24), you see, are both members of the military and don’t get a chance to get home much, especially at the same time.

Which got their dad to thinking – although he and the boys had done a fair amount of fishing together and had chased pheasants and squirrels while the kids were growing up, he’d never found the time to take the boys deer

hunting. Maybe this was the year to change that.

One problem: He hadn’t hunted deer himself for more than 10 years, and the places he used to go were near Valentine – too far to go with what little time his sons would be back on leave. So around Thanksgiving he posted a simple plea on Craigslist: “Need deer hunt for 2 kids in military.”

He got his wish and more.

Craig Buescher of South Bend says it’s his wife, Marge, that deserves all the credit. After mentioning the online post to her husband and suggesting they try to help, Craig called Rod and left a message saying he might be able to help him out. The two men met, and after discussing what Rod wanted to do for his sons, Craig offered to let the boys hunt farm ground that he owned in Clay County during the late firearm antlerless deer season.

“I don’t think we’re any different than most Americans,” said Craig. “Anytime we can help those out that are in our military it’s a small price to pay for those that protect our freedom.”

“We were kind of raised that way – to help people out.”

Hopes for the special Christmas present faded, however, when Rod went online to purchase deer permits for his sons and found out were none left in the area Craig’s land was on.

“I thought we were dead in the water,” said Rod, but again Craig came to the rescue – he discovered permits were still

available in the deer unit just south of his place and found friends who were also willing to let the two military members hunt their land.

The hunt was back on.

When the brothers awoke Christmas morning and gathered with family members around the Christmas tree,

each was handed two envelopes to open. The first contained a rifle cartridge. The second contained their first deer permit.

Because the boys were kind of expecting to get a small game license as a presents, the deer permits were a big surprise. “I was really excited,” said Codey, “because I’d been talking

to Dad about it (deer hunting) for a long time.”

His brother Zach agreed: “That was a really good Christmas present. We just wanted to go hunting, but deer hunting is definitely better than pheasant hunting.”

So the day after Christmas, which happened to be the first day of the

late firearm season for antlerless deer, Rod and the boys drove to Nuckolls County and met Craig in Lawrence at Dick’s Place, the town’s popular eating establishment. With them was Rod’s brother Randy, who had come along to help guide his nephews. After a good meal, everyone headed out to make sure Zach and Codey’s rifles were



After an unsuccessful morning deer hunt, the Gerdes family and Craig Buescher head back to their vehicle.



Codey Gerdes leans against a tree as he waits patiently, hoping for a deer to appear during his first ever deer hunt.

“Now I’m one up on Codey – he can get a bigger one, but I got the first one.”
— Zach Gerdes

A successful morning deer hunting is celebrated by a good meal at Dick’s Place in Lawrence before heading back to Papillion to take care of the deer before the boys returned to their military posts.



“Now I’m one up on Codey” joked Zach. “He can get a bigger one, but I got the first one.”

“I’m more about having a good time with the family,” replied his brother. “I’m just happy to be out here with Dad. I haven’t been around him much for a long time.”

When this story was written in early November, both boys were overseas – Zach was in Turkey and Codey was finishing up a tour of duty in Afghanistan. Even though it’s months later and they are far from home, the memories of the deer hunt are fresh

in both the boys’ and their father’s memory.

“I still want to thank Craig upside down and sideways,” said Rod. “I just wanted a place to take the kids deer hunting and he went all out, far and

above what we ever expected. “These boys have not been hunting with me as much as I did with my dad, but it’s never too late to start.

“It’s the quality time you get to spend with your kids.” ■



Zach Gerdes takes careful aim and drops his first deer while watching the edge of a brushy, brome-filled waterway.

sighted in properly.

With permits still available, Rod and Randy could have also hunted but chose not to. “It’s not always about the hunt – it’s about what goes along with it,” said Rod, who had deer hunted with his brother quite a bit in the past. “This was their hunt ... it was kind of neat to experience a deer hunt without hunting ourselves, to enjoy it that way. It was fun to watch someone on their first deer hunt – your first one is the one you’ll always remember.”

After ensuring their guns were hitting where they were supposed to, the party headed out for an evening hunt that proved to be unseasonably warm as well as unsuccessful – not a single deer was seen.

Undeterred, the group headed to Craig’s house near Deweese, where they enjoyed a big meal of various cuts of venison and wild turkey before turning in. After a short night of tossing and turning, it was time for a quick breakfast before heading back to the same area they had hunted the night before. Again nothing was seen, so a quick deer drive commenced on another part of the property, with Codey and Zach posted in position to shoot any antlerless deer that might be pushed out of a bedding area. The only deer seen, however, were three bucks that, while they weren’t legal to shoot, did provide a memorable sight as they trotted along a trail as if on a string: “It was so pretty to see those three bucks bopping along,” said Rod. “You just

appreciate seeing them.”

“It looked like they were on a harness,” said Randy.

With time running out (the group only had a day and half to hunt before the boys needed to report back to duty), Craig started calling around looking for other places that might be holding deer. After gaining permission on another spot not too far away, Zach and Codey were posted on one end of a big brushy, grass-filled waterway when a buck and several does were pushed past and Zach was able to connect on one of them. Success!

Gathered around the fallen doe, the group exchanged congratulatory high fives and discussed missed shots and deer that had snuck past undetected. Zach teased his big brother.



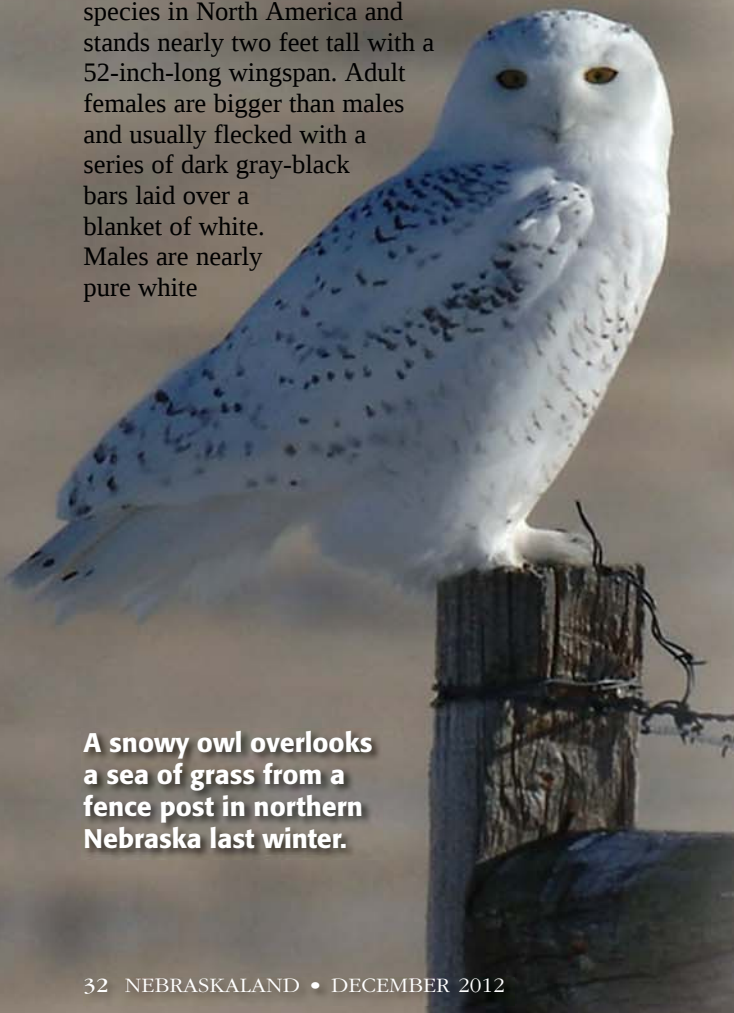
Front row, left to right: Zach Gerdes poses with his first deer with dad Rod and brother Codey. In the back row are Randy Gerdes and Craig Buescher, with his father, Don. The Buescher’s generous help made this first deer hunt a success.

Owls of the Arctic

Text and photos by Michael Forsberg

When I was a kid I marveled at the lighthouses we visited along the rugged Oregon coastline during summer vacations. Painted white and perched on rocky cliffs overlooking the Pacific, they stood as tall, proud beacons guiding mariners to safe harbor. On a day last January near the Nebraska-South Dakota border, the weak winter sun was shining on a beacon as white as any lighthouse I remember as a child, but this one was feathered and perched prominently on a hilltop fence post overlooking a prairie sea. Snowy owls, visitors from the Arctic, were irrupting into the Great Plains.

One of about 250 owl species found worldwide, the snowy owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) is a resident of the far north and nests in tundra grasslands. It is one of only a few bird species, including the gyrfalcon, common raven and ptarmigan, which can survive the harsh Arctic environment. Weighing in at four pounds, the snowy is the heaviest owl species in North America and stands nearly two feet tall with a 52-inch-long wingspan. Adult females are bigger than males and usually flecked with a series of dark gray-black bars laid over a blanket of white. Males are nearly pure white



A snowy owl overlooks a sea of grass from a fence post in northern Nebraska last winter.



Each dot on the map above indicates the location where a snowy owl sighting was confirmed during last year's "irruption."

throughout their plumage.

With needle-sharp talons and hooked beaks, owls are highly evolved hunters that primarily perch hunt for rodents and other small mammals. Their wings are engineered for silent flight and their large eyes combine binocular 3-D vision with an ability to see in extremely low light. Their heads can rotate 270 degrees to locate prey and, much like a satellite dish, their facial disc funnels sound to ears hidden behind their feathers, giving them acute hearing. Among owls the snowy owl is considered an extremely agile flyer, capable of hunting small birds on the wing.

Snowy owls are not considered traditional migrators that move between point A and point B on an annual basis, but some winters they will travel as far south as needed during times of food scarcity, triggered most significantly by cyclical plunges of lemming and vole populations, their key food source in the Arctic. When large numbers of birds move south in search of food, these movements are called "irruptions" or "invasions." The snowy owl's typical winter range extends throughout interior Alaska and Canada and across the northern tier of the U.S., but during irruptive years they have been reported as far south as Texas.

During the winter of 2011-2012, snowy owls were



With the help of licensed rehabilitators, two starving snowy owls brought to the Raptor Recovery Nebraska Center last winter recovered and were later released back into the wild.



A snowy owl stretches and builds strength in its wings in a large flight pen at the Raptor Recovery Nebraska Center last spring while being rehabilitated.

reported throughout the Great Plains. Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Nongame Bird Program Manager Joel Jorgensen and Lauren Dinan, a nongame bird biologist, compiled a total of 209 snowy owl reports in Nebraska – the most on record. Of those reports, 170 were confirmed either by recovered carcasses, photographs or description.

Although their Arctic home is a vast expanse much like the Great Plains, finding and successfully hunting new prey in unfamiliar territory and negotiating human activities they're not used to is hard on these birds. What probably has a greater effect, however, is their body condition once they get here. According to Betsy Finch, executive director of Raptor Recovery Nebraska near Elmwood, most of the snowy owls that show up in Nebraska are usually so stressed and weak from lack of food that they don't survive long enough to return to their Arctic breeding grounds. A record 16 snowy owls arrived at the center between Christmas Eve 2011 and late January 2012. Most arrived already near starvation and could not be recovered. Only four survived.

Of those four, two had sustained wing injuries and could not be released back into the wild, later finding permanent homes in New York and Oklahoma. The other two were kept in a large flight pen and monitored closely until they were capable of travel. Eventually they were transferred to The Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul, where they finished their rehabilitation and were released back into the wild late last spring near the Canada border.

Snowy owls are a charismatic species whose star has been

on the rise since Harry Potter's owl, "Hedwig," first hit the big screen just over a decade ago. More recently snowy owls have been in the news for another reason: Some scientists are closely monitoring their populations, using these big, conspicuous birds as a possible cue for gauging both Arctic ecosystem health and climate change.

Lemmings make up roughly 90 percent of the snowy owl's diet, but research suggests that the lack of sufficient snow cover the last several years due to warming temperatures in the Arctic is disrupting the natural cycles of lemmings, resulting in their populations having a difficult time recovering and even collapsing in some areas. In any habitat when prey numbers drop severely, predator populations that rely on those species usually are not far behind.

Today, there are more questions than answers on the effects climate change has on wildlife populations. One thing is certain, however – rapid changes in the environment forces species to either adapt, move or die. For the snowy owl, the question remains whether they can adapt quickly enough in a rapidly warming Arctic world. ■

Michael Forsberg is a professional nature photographer and contributing editor to NEBRASKALAND. To see more of Mike's images, go to www.michaelforsberg.com.

For more information about Raptor Recovery Nebraska, visit their web site at <http://www.raptorrecoverynebr.org/>.



Making a Difference

Nebraska Youth Conservation Program

By Doug Carroll

By all accounts, last summer's Nebraska Youth Conservation Program was a win-win for everyone involved. Participating youth earned money while learning new skills, gaining valuable job experience and getting on-the-job training in a variety of fields, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission was able to complete several needed improvement and maintenance projects that had been put on hold due to budget and manpower constraints at state parks, recreation areas and wildlife management areas across the state.

This successful program resulted from the unanimous passage of LB549 by the Nebraska Legislature in 2011. Introduced by State Senator Brenda Council of Omaha, the bill provided money from the Cash Settlement Fund of the state attorney general's office for the Commission to hire youth for a six-week summer job where they could acquire work experience and skills while learning about Nebraska's natural resources.

To that end, 16 crews of young people between the ages of 16 to 20

went to work across the state: six from Omaha, three from Lincoln, and one each from Norfolk, Grand Island, Lexington, McCook, North Platte, Ogallala and Scottsbluff. The number and location of crews were determined after soliciting project suggestions from Commission staff. Two crew leaders were hired and assigned to each group to teach the skills needed to complete assigned projects, and the Nebraska Department of Labor helped find and recruit the workers, following the guidelines set forth in LB549. Participants needed to meet one of the following criteria: come from low-income households, have the potential of dropping out of school, have had negative contact with the law, or have direct or indirect contact with physical or substance abuse.

The youth were provided shirts, eye and ear protection, hats, gloves, water bottles, lunch and snacks, and transportation to and from the work locations each day. The crews worked closely with area Commission employees to build picnic shelters; repair vault toilets; install playgrounds,

campground electrical projects and fencing; perform shoreline restoration; improve fishing access; work on docks; do painting, landscaping and trash removal; and develop and maintain trails, among other things.

Crew members earned a little over minimum wage and put in 40-hour weeks for the duration of the program, often on days where the afternoon temperatures were in excess of 100 degrees. This schedule was a bit of an eye opener: "For many of the youth in this program it was their first job, so some of the things that were learned were how to work with co-workers, punctuality, following directions, and how to thrive in a work place," said Michelle Stryker, who coordinated the program for the Commission.

Another requirement of the program was to provide educational programming about the outdoors to the youth, so half of each Thursday was reserved for some type of interactive educational or recreational activity. Crew members learned about fishing, outdoor cooking, archery, kayaking, hiking, bird watching and a variety of other outdoor activities. These opportunities also helped the Commission meet some of its Recruitment, Development and Retention (RDR) goals of introducing more youth to the outdoors.

"Some of these kids experienced things they may never have had the chance to except for this program," said Stryker. "It helped some of them get over their fears about the outdoors."

In addition to the recreational opportunities the crews learned about, the Nebraska Department of Labor also gave a presentation on other job opportunities that might be available after the program ended, and an organization called Education Quest gave a talk about how to prepare financially for college. Some of the workers were already saving their paychecks to help pay for college,



Former state senator Brenda Council gives opening remarks at Omaha North High School on the first day of the Nebraska Youth Conservation Program last summer.

PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL



Tyler Yates (left) and Nick Shelor, both of Lincoln, set a post while installing a new fence at Pawnee SRA last summer.

PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL



Brittany Woodward of Lincoln examines a grasshopper as part of the youth program's educational component..



Bradley Blaylock of Sidney (foreground), Vanessa Garza of Scottsbluff and Derek Biltjinitis of Minatare help trench in electrical lines at Lake Minatare SRA.



Members of the Fremont work crew pour concrete in the day use area at Fremont Lakes SRA.



The new boardwalk installed by youth at Schramm Park State Recreation Area will be enjoyed by visitors for years to come.

while others were using theirs to help feed siblings and help their family, said Stryker.

By the time the program ended, the crews had worked on projects at 23 state recreations areas, one state historical park and 41 state wildlife management areas. The amount of work accomplished through this program was significant: more than 300 picnic tables were renovated or built; 184 campground electrical pedestals were installed; four playgrounds were built; 530 feet of deck and 800 feet of railing were installed at Schramm Park State Recreation Area; fire rings were cleaned at five different parks; the roofs of three different structures were repaired; two picnic shelters, five hunting blinds and five

photography blinds were constructed; approximately 90,000 feet of fencing was removed, constructed or repaired; more than 19,000 feet of trails were cleared – the list goes on and on.

Because much of the program's funding came from last's year transfer of money from the state attorney general's office, as well as grants the Commission was able to secure and money it had in its capital budget last year, it remains to be seen whether or not the program will continue.

Time will tell what long-term effect the program had on its participants, but it provided invaluable work experience, some much-needed money, and resulted in numerous improvements to public areas across the state that Nebraskans will be able to enjoy well into the future. ■



Learning to shoot a bow was just one of many things the youth got to experience.

HIGHS AND LOWS

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

If you were standing in Crawford, you might think the highest point in Nebraska was somewhere atop the nearby Red Cloud Buttes, or maybe Crow Butte. If you were in Gering, you might think it was in the rugged Wildcat Hills south of town. In either case, you'd be wrong.

Nebraska's highest point is not quite as assuming as those landscapes – Nebraska's versions of “mountains.” Yet while either area might seem logical as having the state's highest point, the Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills fall roughly 200 and 500 or so feet short, respectively, of the pinnacle.

Nope, Nebraska's highest “peak” is Panorama Point – a nondescript hilltop in a southwestern Kimball County pasture that is a tad more

than a mile from Wyoming and less from Colorado. Well, it would be nondescript if not for the stone marker placed there in 1971 and the iron box that holds a visitor log. It's elevation: 5,424 feet above sea level.

It can be quite a “climb” if you choose to park more than a few steps from the monument: Like high points in many states, Nebraska's summit is a “drive-up.” Just pop your \$3 per person entry fee in the iron ranger at the gate off County Road 5 and it's a short 1¼ mile drive. Panorama Point is on private property, part of the High Point Bison Ranch. The entry fee defrays the landowner's costs of maintaining the road, and the area around the marker is maintained by the county visitors committee. If you make the “climb”

and call the Kimball/Banner County Chamber of Commerce, they'll send you a certificate recognizing your feat. “It's kind of a spoof,” chamber director Jeanette Rabender said of the certificate, 75 of which have been sent out this year since June.

Panorama Point is not as sexy as Washington's Mount Rainer (14,411 feet), or Mount McKinley in Alaska (20,320 feet), but it's still a popular place to visit, especially among members of the Highpointers Club of America (www.highpointers.org),

“Wow, this was a hard climb. Glad I made it in my flip-flops”
– Log book entry made by Panorama Point visitor

which promotes visiting high points found in the United States. The chamber doesn't keep an official visitor count, but Rabender estimates hundreds from around the country, even the world, make the circuitous 20-mile drive from Bushnell each year to say they've been there. When I visited the site with my son in July, the current version of the log book had been in place five days shy of a month and there were already entries from 57 parties, most families, from 25 states and Austria. “Wow, this was a hard climb. Glad I made it in my flip flops,” wrote one visitor.

While there we met the Fahlenkamp family – Keith and Karen, son Brandon and daughter Brittany Yu, who stopped in the midst of a cross-country move from Washington to Virginia. Brittany jokingly told me Nebraska's high point was one of her favorites ... because she didn't have to hike. The family had just completed a three-day, 28-mile hike to summit Kings Peak in Utah. Panorama Point was the family's 30th high point in the past eight years, a tally made easier by Keith's frequent transfers in the U.S. Navy. Later in their trip, they hit high points in Kansas, Oklahoma and Arkansas, bringing the family's total to 33. Their conquests also include Mt. Whitney in California, the highest point in the continental U.S. at 14,494 feet, and 11,239-foot Mt. Hood in Oregon, which required technical climbing. Keith has also scaled Mt. Rainier. “We've been doing this since the kids were three and seven, and it's been a great way to get out and see the country,” said Karen.

Nebraska's high point was once believed to be on a knob that topped out at 5,350 feet in the middle of wheat fields in southwestern Banner County, 30 miles due north of Panorama Point. Another point in a pasture northwest of Harrison rises to 5,280 feet. All three points are a mile or so from the Wyoming line,

which makes sense considering the High Plains slopes from the Rocky Mountains to the Mississippi River.

In 1951, however, a member of an oil drilling crew took an elevation reading at his rig and found Kimball County to be higher. The new official high point was precisely located and marked that same year, and by the time the current marker was placed Highpointers were already visiting the site, stopping to sign a log book at the landowner's home before hiking to the summit. Now they can drive.

The point does indeed provide a panoramic view of the High Plains, complete with pastures; wheat, sunflower and millet fields; miles of towering, electricity-generating windmills strung across the Colorado state line; and a smattering of the windmills we're more used to seeing as they pump water to stock tanks. On the way to the site you might see pronghorn, mule deer and a variety of other wildlife – a Utah family wrote of seeing a raccoon, badger and peregrine falcon. And, of course, there is a good chance of seeing the ranch's buffalo.

If you're into visiting obscure monuments, it's a 7-mile drive from Panorama Point to the marker where Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming meet. If you can fly, it's only 1.2 miles.

A quick online search indicates that the United State's low points don't share quite the following as the highs. Maybe it's because 21 states share the same low-point elevation – sea level – and it's not an actual point but an entire coastline. Climbing mountains likely started the Highpointing craze, but it has since expanded to scaling whatever necessary to reach the highest point in any state. Even driving to a hilltop in Kimball County. ■

Directions to Panorama Point can be found at www.KimballBannerCountyChamber.com/Visitors.



Brittany Yu and her brother, Brandon Fahlenkamp, celebrate the conquest of Panorama Point in southwestern Kimball County, the highest point in Nebraska.

U.S. and Nebraska Highs and Lows

Highest Point

All of United States: 20,320 feet, Mount McKinley, Alaska

Lower 48: 14,494 feet, Mount Whitney, California

Nebraska: 5,424 feet, Panorama Point, Kimball County

Lowest Point

United States: -282 feet, Badwater Basin, Death Valley, California,

Nebraska: 840 feet, Missouri River at Kansas State Line

Highest State Low Point:

3,315 feet, Colorado, Arikaree River at Kansas State Line

Lowest State High Point: 345 feet, Britton Hill, Florida



Head southeast from Panorama Point 464 miles to where the Missouri River flows into Kansas and you'll find Nebraska's lowest point, 840 feet above sea level, a drop of 4,584 feet. The location is on private property and not open to the public.

A Snowy Pheasant Hunt

A late-season snow can be the perfect recipe for pheasant success.

By Gerry Steinauer

The alarm rings, and looking out the window on this early January morning I feel an adrenaline rush – there are several inches of fresh snow on the ground, and it is still snowing! It is a perfect day to hunt pheasants.

I eat a hardy breakfast, then load my dog Callie and shotgun into the car and drive to a favorite Rainwater Basin marsh, arriving around 9 am. Not surprisingly, no one else is hunting the public basin on this day. Dissuaded by the winter weather and the fewer, wilder late-season pheasants, most hunters have packed away their gun for the year. Too bad, as the cold and deep snow (there are an additional six to eight inches of snow on the ground from a previous storm) has likely pushed birds into the densely vegetated marsh. Though there are probably not enough birds in this marsh to satisfy a large group of hunters, one or two dedicated souls can enjoy a productive hunt.

Callie and I begin by walking the edge of the marsh next to a soybean field. This is a likely spot to find birds that have finished with their early morning feeding in the beans and are settled into dense loafing cover for the day. I prefer not to hunt too early in the morning – pheasants that are feeding

and those traveling from the roost to feeding areas are often in light cover and nervous, tending to run or flush wild when approached by hunters. When in loafing cover, they tend to hold tighter. On this day, the deep snow will help suppress their urge to run.

I soon spot pheasant tracks and Callie promptly rousts two hens and a rooster from a grassy, shallow ditch to my right. My shot wobbles the rooster and feathers fall, but the bird keeps flying, landing about 300 yards ahead. We hustle to the spot and find tracks and an iridescent red rooster feather lying on the snow. The tracks lead to a clump of tall grass and Callie again flushes the rooster. This time I drop it.

We work our way into the marsh's interior, hunting stands of thick cattail and bulrush as well as the periphery of weed patches (pheasants often forage on the high-energy seeds of giant ragweed, sunflowers, smartweeds and other weeds). In our wandering we come upon several sets of pheasant tracks. We start following the two sets of larger rooster tracks, but one is soon covered in blowing snow and lost, while the other ends in snowy wing impressions from an earlier flush.

After an hour and a half of tough walking without spooking a rooster,

we venture towards the far end of the marsh where it abuts a cornfield. Pheasants prefer corn to soybeans as food as it is more readily digested, and I favor hunting cover close to corn. Approaching the cropfield, we come upon partially filled pheasant tracks made earlier in the morning, and follow them. As the tracks zigzag through tall reed grass, in places they are erased by blowing snow and we must circle until they are found again. Callie is made to begrudgingly heel to keep her from obscuring the tracks. After 80 yards of slow trailing, the tracks enter a small clump of cattails and do not exit. I ready myself, and when Callie burrows into the cattails, there is rustling. Out jumps the rooster – flying low and into the wind, it provides an easy shot. Not 20 yards from where this rooster falls we come across a set of fresh tracks. This rooster is soon flushed and bagged. With limit in hand, we enjoy a leisurely hike to the car.

It was fairly predictable that we found pheasants in the marsh: The snow had covered or flattened much of the lighter, neighboring cover that held birds earlier in the season, and the marsh offered the best remaining roosting and loafing cover. Pheasants will travel several miles seeking good winter cover, and it's common to find more birds in a marsh in late season than in early season. The Rainwater Basins of south-central Nebraska, the expansive Sandhill marshes and floodplain sloughs all provide good winter cover for pheasant and late season hunting opportunities. So the next time it snows, grab your dog, your gun and head to a marsh. ■

Gerry Steinauer is a botanist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and has been writing and photographing for NEBRASKAland since 1990.



Covering Fort Robinson's Sacred Ground

Annual run helps Cheyenne youth connect with their history.

By Kristen Friesen

B oasting 22,000 acres of breathtaking scenery, horseback riding, swimming, a museum, reproduction buildings and the inspiring presence of buffalo and longhorn cattle, Fort Robinson has long been synonymous with “summer vacation.” Nonetheless, the work that consumed Gayle Carlson of the Nebraska State Historical Society and his crew of archaeologists 25 years ago turned up evidence of a much colder time in history.

What is now Fort Robinson began in 1874 as an effort to contain the Red Cloud Indian Agency. In late 1878, soon after “Camp Robinson” was named for the fallen soldier who’d failed to return from wood detail (coincidentally accused by Red Cloud’s people of doling out tainted meat), a band of 149 Cheyenne, led by Chief Dull Knife, showed up. They’d had their own run-ins with tainted food and diseases in what is now Oklahoma, so their mission brought them here in hopes of finding respite with Chief Red Cloud before returning to their ancestral land in northern Montana. Unfortunately, Red Cloud and his people had since been relocated to the Dakotas and the unlucky Cheyenne were greeted instead by military personnel unsympathetic to their plight.

At first the tribe was permitted to come and go freely. Over time, however, as it became clear that the uninvited Cheyenne had no intention of returning south to Indian territory, privileges were denied. The Army barracks became a prison.

So late at night on January 9, 1879, after retrieving weapons they’d thought to stash in a hand-dug pit beneath the floor during more peaceable times, Dull Knife and his people stormed the doors and climbed out windows. What followed was a deadly game of hide-and-seek which lasted nearly two weeks in and around Fort Robinson in sub-zero temperatures. Sixty-four Cheyenne and 11 soldiers lost their

lives, and 80 Cheyenne women and children were recaptured. Only a few, including Dull Knife and his family, ever crossed into Dakota Territory to meet up with Red Cloud.

It’s easy to forget that this serene landscape was once a battleground, and we might have except that it was the original army barracks that Carlson and his crew worked to excavate during the summer of 1987. Though no one was surprised to find buttons, bits of clothing and small kitchen utensils, evidence of the military families housed there when the barracks burned down in 1898, that was just the beginning – beneath another layer or two of windswept dirt someone discovered a glass bead. Then someone else found another. And another. Before long, the tiny testaments numbered in the thousands.

“And then there was this one spot where we found a whole bunch,” said Carlson, “as if someone had dropped a leather pouch full of beads right there. As if they’d scattered beneath the floor boards and were forgotten.”

It’s the forgetting that’s the worst. Just ask Phillip Whiteman, Jr. and Lynette Two Bulls. Since 1999, they’ve been bringing buses and vans loaded with roughly 100 Cheyenne youth, ages seven and up, from their ancestral home in Lane Deer, Montana, to Fort Robinson.

“The reason our people are all broken up is because of what happened at Fort Robinson,” said Whiteman. He points to rampant alcoholism and drug abuse, diabetes and a high suicide rate as motivation to keep bringing the youth – “not to re-traumatize them, but to help them make connections with everything.” Consequently, the Fort Robinson Outbreak Spiritual Run has become an annual event, one that not only teaches the Cheyenne youth about their brave ancestors but also lets them experience what it’s like to run 400 miles home with a cold Nebraska wind at their backs. Surprisingly, they’re

never without plenty of participants.

By design the event is seeped in tradition: On January 9, following a couple of nights in the officers’ quarters, a full day of education and the blessing of a deeply spiritual service, a mass of nervous Cheyenne youth cram into the now-rebuilt army barracks. At exactly 10:30 p.m., they burst out of the doors and begin running into the night to the accompaniment of shouts and gunfire.

Once they reach the highway, the vehicles that brought these young Cheyenne creep along beside, determined to see them home safely. Eventually tapering to a twosome, the procession continues with girls carrying a flag of the Cheyenne Nation and boys carrying eagle feathers. They run late into the night and, despite the weather, stop only to sleep and be fed by kind souls along the way.

It’s a difficult journey in more ways than one, explains Whiteman. It’s grueling physically, but even more so emotionally. “It takes 400 miles of running to process the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual pain,” he said, “and that’s something these kids really need.” An entire week will pass before these tired youth are welcomed home, each wielding a greater understanding of self, pride in their accomplishment and a sobering sense of home. Each a little more mindful of their ancestry.

There’s no doubt Fort Robinson is more than just a summer vacation or a state park. To many, it’s sacred ... a place where tiny glass beads bedded down in the dirt might very well be history rising triumphantly to the surface. A place of remembering. ■

Kristen Friesen is a freelance writer and 7th grade language arts teacher that lives in Grand Island with her husband and three children.



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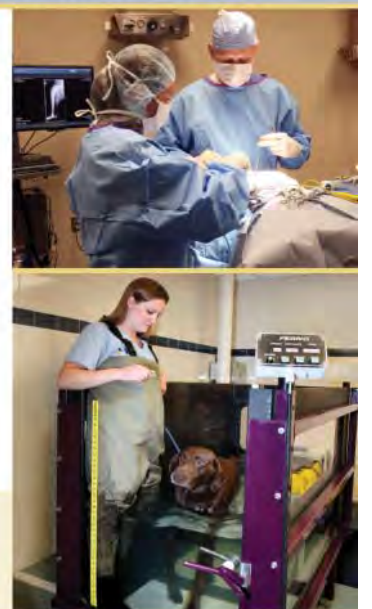
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▲ This picture was taken around 1952 in northern Holt County on the Niobrara River. Shown from left is Roy Drescher, Russell Angus and Bob Witherway. They were hunting on the Drescher and Witherway ranches.
— Gayle Angus, Lincoln, Nebraska

◀ In 1925 or '26, my family – parents Bill and Ethel (Warner) Robson, big brother Earl and I – traveled from Benedict with fellow farmers and kinfolk for a day of picnicking and fishing on the Loup River. According to Earl, I (being five or six years old) was the only successful angler that day. The photo documents my triumph. For some months this snapshot was on display in a York merchant's display window.

— Bill Robson, Maineville, Ohio



◀ This photo was taken in Emmet around 1932. Shown from left is John Conard, Emmet's postmaster; Wally Tweedale; and my father, Guy Cole, who owned the Hay Office they're standing in front of. I don't remember what Wally did for a living, but as a little girl I was impressed with the way he dressed, so he must have been selling something. When he was in town he would occasionally eat with us and frequently go hunting with my dad.

— Lois Schaffer, O'Neill, Nebraska

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKAland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to tim.reigert@nebraska.gov. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1980. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Photos will be returned.

What's In A Name?

I'll tell you what's in a name, you no-good Swine Thistle!

By Roger Welsch

I sometimes wonder about the mental state of people who burden their children with goofy names no one can ever spell right (ask my daughter Antonia Emily Celestine Welsch ... hope I spelled that right), but today as I enjoy this Nebraska springtime and wander our upland meadow I am even more bewildered by the cruelty of botanists. What kind of decent, civil human being would look at the beautiful splashes of bright yellow and pale blue I see on our hill this morning and think, "I should come up with some appropriate names for these gorgeous flowers. So let's see ... how about ... oh ... hairy puccoon ... and ... spiderwort?!"

All I can figure is that some botanists resent having to tromp around in the wild, battling mosquitoes, picking ticks off, getting sunburns and eating dust, so they take it out on the plants by insulting them with terrible names. You think I'm exaggerating – "There Welsch goes again, making a 'hoary vetchling' out of a 'lady's slipper.'" Not this time. Let's just do a nature walk and peruse the lovely "cursed crowfoot," "beaver poison," "weary Susan," or "silvery bladderpop." Lo! The "hairy four o'clock" (Linda calls it "Roger Weed"), "wedge leaf fog fruit," "apple of Sodom," "blue staggers" and recumbent "sneezeweed!" What kind of names are those?! Those are more like curses you'd yell at an umpire!

You doubt me? Well, take a look at Robert Lommasson's *Nebraska Wild Flowers* or Jon Farrar's 1990 edition of *Wild Flowers of Nebraska and the Great Plains*, where I found all of these names. (Zoe Merriman Kirkpatrick's *Wild Flowers of the Western Plains* is a good reference too, but covers only western Nebraska.)

The calumny doesn't end. Where I see lovely little flowers, someone else has seen "bloodroot," "old man's pepper," "nosebleed weed," "Indian hemp dogbane" and "fireweed." I see a pretty, silvery bush and look forward

to making a wonderfully subtle tea, but some slanderous miscreant called the same thing "leadplant" – even though there is no more heavy metal in it than there is in another one of my favorites, the deep-purple flowering, autumnal "ironweed." I see culinary treats where some grumpy plant-dubber saw only "sour dock," "goat's beard," and "clammy ground cherry." "Spotted touch-me-not," "fragrant cud weed," "devil's claw," "impatience," "crazy weed," "shame-vine," and "beggar's ticks." Okay, they're not floribunda roses but do they really deserve this level of contempt? "Dutchman's breeches," "bouncing Bet," "dame's rocket," "Joe-Pye weed," "toad sorrel," "snake bite," and "winged pigweed." (Isn't the latter an optimistic indication that the impossible is possible, that pigs may indeed fly?)

I can imagine some nit-picker taking me up on my dare and thumbing through one of the books suggested above and, in some public forum where the chances to humiliate me would be optimal, shouting out from the crowd, "Okay, Welsch, then what about 'sweet cicely,' 'blue-eyed grass,' 'heart's delight,' 'Queen Anne's lace,' 'love-forever,' 'snow-on-the-mountain,' 'nodding lady's tresses,' 'shooting star' and 'blazing star,' 'modesty,' 'butter-and-eggs,' 'field pussy toes,' 'Venus looking-glass,' or 'Venus' pride?'" Those names seem downright flattering. Well, what the botanist gives with one hand, he takes away with the other. On the same page in his book (page 30 if want to fact-check my work), Farrar shows us the sweet and gentle "small white lady's slipper," and then in a blast of botanical invective ... "bastard toad flax!"

I'm not the kind of person, however, who discovers a problem and then does nothing but complain about it, so I hereby announce the establishment of the Wild Flower Anti-defamation Society (Nebraska chapter) and invite you all to join me into righting



PRAIRIE SPIDERWORT – PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

botanical injustices. Enough of this talk of "stink flower," "witches' thimbles" and "devil's shoestrings!" In fact, I think I'll walk up on the hill right now and pay my respects to the brilliant and flowering "hairy pu..." uh, I mean "yellow ray of sunshine plant" and "spider..." Make that "Alice blue gown flowers." ■

[Author's note: I didn't make up any of the Nebraska flower names cited here. Out of my usual sensitivity I even omitted ones like "snot-weed," "cow slobbers," and "skunk scrotum." Pick up a copy of Farrar's *Wildflowers of Nebraska and the Great Plains* (reprinted last year) and prepare to be educated. And amused. And shocked. No kidding ... "cow slobbers!"]

Roger Welsch is an author, humorist and folklorist. For years he was a regular guest on CBS's *Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt*. Welsch resides in Dannebrog, Nebraska, with his wife, Linda. He has appeared in NEBRASKAland Magazine since 1977.





A Cabin in the Woods

For years I went on hunting trips where I either stayed in the closest cheap motel or slept in the truck or a small tent. Though all that worked fine I kept thinking it would be nice to have a cabin. A place that was roomy, comfortable and closer to the hunt. Along about the time I was having those thoughts, I ate dinner in a friend's wall tent. It didn't take long for the light to come on and I decided to buy a wall tent.

On the recommendation of my friend Robin (not Hood), I went to see Don Strinz of rural Milford, a master craftsman in the art of making primitive shelters. Having never owned a canvas wall tent, I had little knowledge of what to buy. My main criteria was that it didn't leak, was durable and could be set up by one person (me). I ended up with a 1790s-style Officer's Tent. Don gave me a quick lesson on how to set it up, and I was off to the races. The newest wall tent greenhorn ...

The first time I put the tent up in the field and stepped through the door I was hooked. It was like stepping into another place and time. A place where cots and stools were cool and the warmth from a fire in the stove was all that mattered. It was the perfect place to share tales of the hunt or anything else that needed to be cussed or discussed.

After 15 years my tent now sports several improvements, including carpet and a fancier wood stove. She's weathered rain, snow and gale force winds from Brownlee to Forchette Bay, while housing dogs, friends, relatives and a few Democrats.

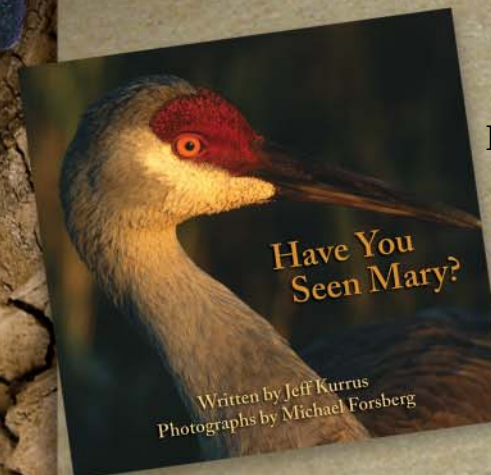
Like a favorite hunting coat or pair of boots, she goes with me every year. The best part has been sharing the wall tent experience with friends. Through all of this my tent has been my cabin in the woods.

Bill Hager
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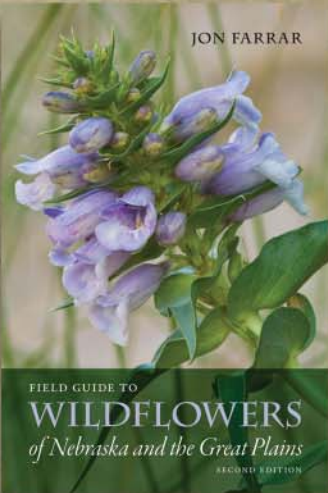
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