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Cover: Fallen leaves float in an intermittent stream at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park in Cass County.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

This page: The still water at Fort Robinson State Park's Grabel Ponds reflects the colors of fall.
See story on page 22. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland
magazine

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As days become cooler, boxelder bugs are seeking shelter, often in buildings, such as houses or garages.

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Pheasants Forever and
Quail Forever of Nebraska
2021-22 Event Dates



Youth Mentor Hunt Dates

Table with 3 columns: County, Chapter, Date. Lists youth mentor hunt dates for various counties from 10/9/2021 to 10/16/2022.

Table with 3 columns: County, Chapter, Date. Lists youth mentor hunt dates for various counties from 10/16/2021 to 10/2/2021.

Banquet Dates

Table with 3 columns: County, Chapter, Date. Lists banquet dates for various counties from 9/18/2021 to 3/19/2022.

Table with 3 columns: County, Chapter, Date. Lists banquet dates for various counties from 2/26/2022 to 10/23/2021.

Check for additional events and find an event near you at
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Great Plains Toad



Jes Mikoloyck, Scottsbluff
Rainbow over Dome Rock



Karen Kutz Smith, Omaha
Indigo Bunting

Corrections: On page 60 of the August-September issue, we mistakenly identified the name "Loren Petersen" with Loren Petersen Green." We apologize to Mr. Petersen and Mr. Green.

Send your comments and photos to:

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or email Jeff.Kurrus@Nebraska.gov

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

SHOEMAKER MARSH

A natural area featuring saline wetlands and Little Salt Creek north of Lincoln in Lancaster County. The area features hiking trails and is important habitat for birds and the endangered Salt Creek tiger beetles.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Sallie Doty of Pierre, South Dakota, snagged this 34.5-inch paddlefish near Gavins Point Dam. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

PADDLEFISH SNAGGING

By Kirk Steffensen

Every October, anglers get the opportunity to catch one of Nebraska's largest fish species — the paddlefish. Paddlefish snagging can occur in the unchannelized part of the Missouri River that stretches from Gavins Point Dam to the confluence of the Big Sioux River, with most anglers snagging directly below the dam. During this time of year, paddlefish aggregate in this area, providing bank and boat anglers relatively high success. The current snagging state record for paddlefish is 113 pounds, 4 ounces.

Applications for snagging permits are open the first two weeks of July, and approximately 50 percent of applicants are successful in obtaining one of the 1,600 permits issued annually. In addition to this big game permit, anglers also need to keep their fishing permit current.

Because paddlefish are filter feeders, they don't take bait and catching them by traditional fishing methods is not feasible. Paddlefish don't feed on macroinvertebrates or other fishes. Instead, they actively feed on plankton by "filtering" out microscopic organisms. The most effective way to catch paddlefish is by snagging. Snagging requires casting a hook into the river and aggressively pulling it through the water, with the hope that your hook will attach into the paddlefish's body.

Snagging requires specialized gear: a rigid pole — generally 8 to 10 feet long; a baitcaster reel; and heavy 6- to 10-ounce

weights tied to braided line, 1 to 2 feet below a treble hook. There are a lot of snags below Gavins Point Dam, so bring extra hooks and weights.

Anglers generally cast as far out as possible perpendicular to the bank, which helps avoid crossing others' lines. After casting, continuous big, sweeping motions and reeling are needed to snag into a paddlefish. When you do, which could happen on your first cast or after your hundredth, the fight can be variable based on the size of the fish and where in the body the fish is hooked. Snagging is physically demanding, so be prepared to work and take breaks as needed. Constantly casting and jerking your line through the water is strenuous on your arms and back, and fish are rarely caught quickly.

Snagged paddlefish have a protected slot of 35 to 45 inches; fish in this size range are the most productive breeders, which are critical to maintaining this unique fishery, and need to be released. Only one hook per line may be used, and the snagging hook can only have a 1/2-inch gap between the hook tip and shank.

Although paddlefishing requires a fair amount of work, your time and effort could result in landing one of Nebraska's most unique fish.

Kirk Steffensen is the Missouri River program manager at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

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When buying waterfowl decoys, knowing where you're hunting is a huge driving factor. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

THE RIGHT DECOY FOR YOU

By Todd Mills

I grew up hunting in the '70s and, at that time, only a couple of decoy manufacturers existed. As a teenager on a tight budget, I decided to make my own — probably not my best idea. I used white bleach bottles with cut-out plastic heads, and I painted them, too. Man, I was proud. However, I don't remember shooting a duck over them, and most of them sank after a couple of hunts. The jabbing I took from my older brother and his buddies convinced me that decoy design probably wasn't in my future.

Choosing the right brand of decoys can be downright frustrating. Cruise down the aisles of your favorite sporting goods store or flip through pages of the latest hunting magazines, and you'll see all shapes, sizes and prices — all promoting a unique difference in their decoy and why their decoy is more effective.

But does brand and style really

matter? And if so, which is best for your hunting crew? While working hunting shows for a number of years and repping one particular brand, I was amazed by how many waterfowl hunters didn't have a clue on which decoy they should choose. Even the more seasoned hunter was looking for that certain edge — something that would make ducks fall at the sight of the decoy.

Decoys on a Budget

Decoys can be expensive, and let's face it, not everyone has the budget for high-quality brands. Do you save to get a half dozen fully flocked decoys or go with a cheaper brand? I'm a big believer in quality over quantity, so do your homework before buying. Check online forums and reach out to others in the waterfowl world who no longer hunt and are looking to unload decoys.

If you're looking to add numbers,

particularly for goose setups, don't be afraid to add some nice-looking silhouette decoys. I've used them with great success, particularly late in the year. Whatever direction you go, keep in mind quality over quantity. You want all the advantages you can get with wary, late-season birds.

Hunting Terrain Matters

The type of hunting you do should correlate with decoy choice. For example, if your hunting is primarily walk-in, choose a light and durable decoy. If you usually hunt a private spot, choose a decoy that will last and matches the duck you are pursuing. Early-season setups are different than late season. Make sure you have options for both and change as the migration develops. And if boat hunting is your choice, you'll need a decoy that can hold up to the beating it will take. Be prepared to adapt as you go.

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Plum jelly flavored with habanero pepper and ginger. GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

DUCK CAMP JELLY

By Gerry Steinauer

In September 2020, my friend Scott Wessel of Bloomfield invited me on a late fall Sandhills duck hunt. Scott is not only an avid duck hunter, but also a connoisseur of wild plum jelly. With a harvest of wild plums ripening on our kitchen counter and in appreciation of the invite, I decided to make a plum jelly apropos for duck camp.

But how should I flavor it? Early mornings at duck camp and sitting in a blind can be cold, so including a tinge of habanero pepper for warmth was a must. Although habaneros are a super hot pepper, in jelly, their heat is moderated. They also enhance the fruit flavor while leaving pleasant lingering heat on the tongue.

What else should I add? Whiskey! At a Wessel duck camp, sipping whiskey during evening cribbage games is tradition. This flavor would be appreciated by my fellow hunters, and the taste of bourbon on their breakfast toast might provide the kick needed to stir groggy hunters to life. I called

Wessel for advice. He recommended I use Jim Beam, saying, "If your jelly is a flop, at least you'll still have a decent bottle of whiskey to drink."

Lastly, I needed a spice to bring it all together. I pondered cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger and then went online for input from fellow jelly makers. On one site, a gentleman raved about the unique flavor of his domestic plum, whiskey and ginger jelly. Also, I recently read that in folk medicine, a dose of ginger is recommended to relieve flatulence. Perhaps, including this spice in my jelly would help maintain a pleasurable ambiance in the confined duck blind. Ginger it would be.

With a plan in place, I went to work. With a bit of water in a pot to prevent scorching, I boiled the whole, ripe plums for about 30 minutes at a moderate heat until the skins split open and the plums had formed a thick pulp. I then ran the pulp through a colander to remove the skins and pits

and ended up with 6 cups of thick juice. The juice was returned to the pot and brought to a rolling boil. I then stirred in 5 tablespoons of pectin and about two-thirds of a habanero pepper, finely chopped and seeds excluded. After a minute of boiling, I stirred in 3 cups of white sugar and 2 tablespoons of powdered ginger.

After an additional 4 minutes at a rolling boil, with occasional stirring to prevent scorching, I added 1/2 cup of whiskey and boiled the jelly for another minute before taking it off the burner. The piping hot jelly was immediately ladled into canning jars. The jars were sealed with lids and boiled in a water canner for 10 minutes.

I must admit, the jelly was pretty darn good. The ginger and whiskey flavors came through and the habaneros added an enriching warmth. It was duck camp worthy.

Gerry Steinauer is a botanist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

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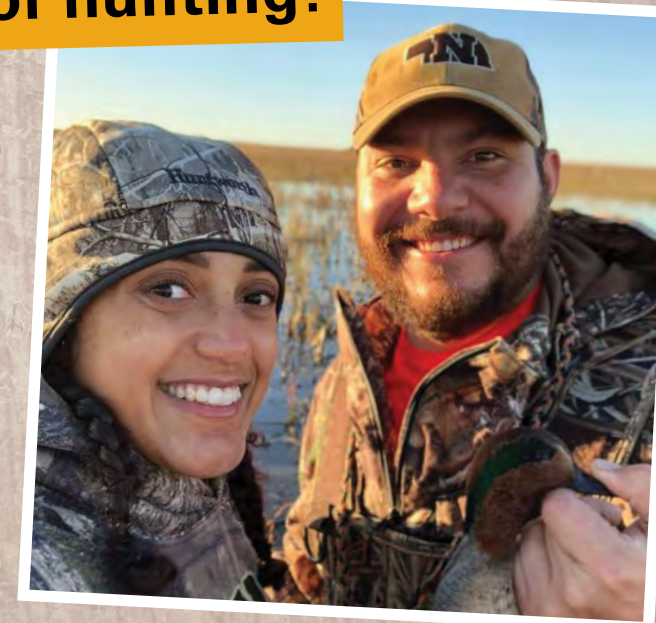
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Brian Baskerville and his son, Harrison, of Lincoln shoot on the outdoor archery course at the Director's Take Aim Games at the Nebraska Outdoor Education Center. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

LEADERS IN CONSERVATION — DIRECTOR JIM DOUGLAS

THE THREE R'S

By Jeff Kurrus

Recruitment. Retention. Reactivation. What is known throughout the conservation world as R3 represents the efforts of conservation agencies and partners to increase participation in outdoor activities. And in the Cornhusker State, there hasn't been a more stalwart supporter and facilitator than Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Director Jim Douglas.

"Our efforts in recruiting, retaining and reactivating current and future generations of sportspersons is one of the most important efforts Nebraska Game and Parks and other state fish and wildlife agencies are working on right now," said Douglas. "Nebraska has been very successful recruiting new participants, and retaining our other sportspersons, through partnerships, outreach, educational programming, passionate staff, and engaged hunters, anglers, and parkgoers."

It's because of Douglas' attention to the issue that those successes have followed. "Jim will forever be known for developing plans to get things done," said Jeff Rawlinson, communications assistant division administrator, who has seen Douglas' R3 accomplishments firsthand.

Jim led those efforts when Nebraska became one of the first states to develop an R3 plan nearly 25 years ago. The plan laid out strategies to introduce people to the outdoors, then developed programs and avenues to support them in pursuing

those activities. Included in those were ways to foster the growth of people's outdoors and shooting skills, but also ways to introduce participants to the outdoors for the first time.

Take, for example, two outdoor exploration events, the annual Missouri River Outdoor Expo at Ponca State Park and the Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo, which regularly draw thousands of students from classrooms around the state, and thousands more guests from the public. Each is drawn to the opportunities to learn about camping, hiking, wildlife viewing, outdoor cooking, fishing, shooting and more.

Equally important are the efforts to engage hunters and anglers and keep them excited about what Nebraska has to offer. In 2018, the Commission tapped into that excitement by introducing programs that challenged hunters and anglers to take a novice with them during their hunting and fishing trips. Take 'em Hunting and Take 'em Fishing offered a grand prize incentive for participants — and saw wild success.

More than 10,600 fishing trip photos have been entered in the Take 'em Fishing challenge for a shot at winning one of three grand prize boats from Cabela's/Bass Pro Shops and the Game and Parks Foundation. Take 'em Hunting created more than 4,000 hunting trips for beginners. Each hunter who submitted a picture and story has had a chance to win one of

three John Deere gators from AKRS Equipment, along with other prizes from Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever. The goal of both programs is for people to share their passion and bring along a new generation of hunters and anglers.

"Everyone who is hunting and fishing had someone who took them out for the first time," said Douglas. "That is why I felt it was important to introduce Take 'em Hunting and Take 'em Fishing ... to get people excited about taking others along and showing them how fun it can be."

Douglas also has thrown his support behind efforts to offer additional outdoor skills training opportunities. After he became director in 2012, one of his first accomplishments was providing full support to the creation of the Nebraska Outdoor Education Center in Lincoln. "He took a realistic look at what was needed in Lincoln for shooting sports and educational facilities," said Rawlinson, "and moved it to the front of the line for construction."

Since its 2014 opening, the Education Center has hosted thousands of sports teams and participants from across the region, outdoor enthusiasts honing their archery and firearm skills on the indoor and outdoor ranges. Other educational shooting parks have been constructed across the state under Douglas' leadership, including at Platte River State Park, Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area and Chadron State Park. As part of the Nebraska Shooting Range Plan, developed by Douglas and his team, the Killdeer Wildlife Management Area Sight-in Range and Sherman Reservoir State Recreation Area archery ranges were created.

The Commission also is in the process of developing plans for a shooting range at Cedar Valley Wildlife Management Area near North Platte and at Buffalo Bill Ranch State Recreation Area. Once participants are introduced to shooting, Douglas has sought ways to keep them afield through programs and information on places to hunt and fish.

The Next Steps mentoring program, a collaboration with Pheasants Forever, is one of those. This program capitalizes on the PF youth mentoring program by establishing partnerships with privately owned Controlled Shooting Areas across the state to host hunts.

"The original concept of the Next Steps program came from Jim Douglas," said Kelsi Wehrman, state coordinator for Pheasants Forever. "It's been a huge support for youth."

Kids who graduate from the program are offered up to three additional pheasant hunts with their mentor and an adult guest at a Controlled Shooting Area. "We've had traditional mentor hunts, but Jim wanted to provide more," Wehrman said. "These Next Steps hunts do that while also helping to create a bond between the mentor and the kid."

The program also fostered partnerships between the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Pheasants Forever and the Controlled Shooting Areas throughout the state, another of Douglas' goals. "There weren't a lot of partnerships with our organizations and these CSAs," said Wehrman. "But Jim saw the need to create additional assistance for young

hunters after their youth mentor program. It has helped provide the support these hunters need."

Douglas has become known for his ability to see the needs of R3 and for sharing a vision to address them. Nationally, he has been instrumental in revamping the Midwest Associations of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' R3 committee into a tactical workgroup that has increased grant funding to aid R3 issues throughout the country. In Nebraska, R3 efforts continue to be a top priority for the Commission. The agency is working with some of the best partners in the industry to develop a new R3 plan, which will be expanded to include boaters, park recreationists and other outdoor enthusiasts, while continuing to focus on hunters and anglers.

"Jim recognizes the importance of Nebraska's rich outdoor heritage and the critical role it plays in the quality of life for outdoor enthusiasts," said Dave Chanda, vice president of the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation and former director of New Jersey Fish and Wildlife. "As a result, he's engaged the entire agency to take an active role in angler/hunter recruitment, retention, and reactivation efforts. It has been my honor and pleasure to work with him on these R3 initiatives."

Regardless of what project is being carried out, Douglas will forever be known for developing plans to get things done. "If you don't have a plan, you are likely to become part of someone else's plan ... and you may not like it" has long been his mantra, and a code that will live with those he's worked with long after his retirement.



DIRECTOR JIM DOUGLAS



The Take 'em Hunting program challenges experienced hunters to take a novice with them. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraska's Fishing State Park?

Story and photos by Justin Haag

When discussing Fort Robinson State Park, fishing may not be the first thing that comes to mind. Perhaps it should be.

Pat Bell and Valerie Miller, both of Crawford, fish at the north Ice House Pond at Fort Robinson State Park.

Tall buttes rising over pine forests and sweeping grasslands. Herds of bison, pronghorn, bighorn sheep and other megafauna. Historical architecture. Theatrical performances, weekly rodeos, two museums, cookouts and an indoor swimming pool. More than 120 miles of trails suited for horse hooves and hiking shoes.

With so much to see and do at Fort Robinson State Park, it is understandable that whatever is below the surface may get overshadowed. Those inclined to carry a rod and reel,

though, have long known it is wise to divert attention from the park's terrestrial sights to see what swims in the 10 fishing ponds and coldwater streams in or near this 22,000-acre Pine Ridge playground in the northwestern corner of the state.

Al Hanson, fisheries supervisor for Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's northwestern district, bestows Fort Robinson a lofty ranking among the eight state parks. He refers to it as "Nebraska's fishing state park."

"Some of our other state parks have excellent fishing opportunities, but none offer anglers what Fort Robinson

does," he said.

Having said that, Fort Robinson anglers should leave their big motorboats — or any gas-powered watercraft, for that matter — at home. This is a place for those who prefer to fish from foot, belly boat or kayak. Whether it be families with small children and elderly anglers, or adventurous fly-fishermen, an array of aquatic species are on tap to provide a tug of the line.

Game and Parks has made a great thing even better by investing in major enhancements to about half of those ponds, with the first phase of a \$2.8 million renovation project completed in spring 2020.

Major improvements have occurred at the Grabel Ponds, Cherry Creek Ponds and the Ice House Ponds, and more are planned at other locations.

The most obvious changes to the ponds are structures such as fishing piers and ramps for launching kayaks and canoes. Workers deepened a number of the ponds, replaced water control structures, created fish habitat features, and developed access points for anglers. Where anglers battled steep banks and thick vegetation before the renovations, they now enjoy casting from wooden piers, angler access pads and gently sloping shorelines near artificial structures, gravel beds and rock piles that attract fish.

The improvements were funded from the sale of Aquatic Habitat Stamps, required by most anglers, and matched by federal Sport Fish Restoration Program dollars generated from taxes on fishing equipment and grants from many sources including the Nebraska Environmental Trust.

The renovations have provided the opportunity for Game and Parks to restock waters with a goal to develop populations best suited for habitat and usage. Anglers can often find both coldwater and warmwater species by taking a short walk.

All four species of the state's Trout

Slam — brook, rainbow, cutthroat and brown — can be caught in the park or nearby, as well as the brown-brook hybrid known as tiger trout. Largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, rock bass, bluegills, channel catfish, crappies and yellow perch also swim waters of select ponds.

As the fish continue to grow, surely too will tales of fishing success by those who visit Fort Robinson.

Larry Olson of Crawford has developed a love of the area's fishing opportunities over the years, first during his time as a student at Chadron State College, then as a father and now as a grandfather. Olson said he and his family are looking forward to the smallmouth bass, brook trout and panfish recently stocked in the renovated waters to grow in coming years. There is plenty to keep the family busy in the meantime, though.

"The ponds with trout are always well stocked," he said. "There are

plenty of small panfish in Carter P. Johnson Reservoir to keep anyone busy with just a bobber and a worm. The streams offer quality trout fishing whether it be with a fly rod or spinning tackle. There are some real lunker bass and catfish in some of the ponds that can test your tackle."

Fort Robinson, by Pond and Stream

Joe Rydell, a fisheries biologist for the Game and Parks Commission's northwestern district, has played a key role in the planning and execution of the aquatic habitat and access projects at Fort Robinson State Park. A guide for those looking to explore the depths of Fort Robinson's fishing opportunities, with Rydell's insights, follows.

Ice House Ponds

At the western edge of Fort Robinson, the Ice House Ponds are situated just one-half mile from U.S.

Highway 20. From a gravel parking lot, anglers access the ponds by crossing a footbridge over the White River, which receives the overflow from the ponds. With depths approaching 12 feet, the ponds required no excavations during the renovations.

North Pond (2.5 acres) — The first pond anglers encounter after the short hike over the bridge is a dandy. To complement the existing largemouth bass and bluegill population, Rydell said stockings of yellow perch, channel catfish, rainbow trout and crappies are planned. Three angler access pads and a canoe-kayak launch were added during the recent renovations.

Middle Pond (1.4 acres) — As with the north pond, the middle is managed for warmwater species and has a similar population of species and stocking plan. Note that in fish stocking reports, the middle pond is referred to as the Ice House Diversion Pond.



The colorful tiger trout is among the species that swims in and near Fort Robinson, as do browns, brooks, rainbows and cutthroats.



A hidden fishery at Fort Robinson is Crazy Horse Pond, downstream from Carter P. Johnson Reservoir. While choked with vegetation now, plans are to renovate the pond and make it a premier hike-in fishing spot.



The 20-acre Carter P. Johnson Reservoir, Fort Robinson State Park's largest impoundment, and Crazy Horse Pond, at right, are located on Soldier Creek. Improvements are scheduled for both.

South Pond (0.5 acre) — As the farthest pond from the parking lot, the south pond requires a hike of about a half-mile over a trail that was cleared by a bulldozer during the renovations. Because it is directly fed by cool water from the spring, it is being managed for brook trout only and has received two years of stockings. Rydell said many of those fish have had some time to grow and some should be more than 12 inches long.

“It’s a pretty challenging fishery. It has brushy terrain, and no angler access features. It’s more for the experienced angler,” Rydell said.

Cherry Creek System

By turning east from U.S. Highway 20 at the entrance of the park’s main campus and traveling gravel road for 1.2 miles, visitors encounter the Cherry Creek ponds, both of which were drained and renovated in 2019-2020.

Cherry Creek Pond (2.6 acres) — The main pond sits near the road, so anglers can have their line in the water after a short walk from the vehicle.

Since renovation, the primary goal has been to establish a smallmouth bass population, with yellow perch and bluegills also on the stocking schedule for this year. If those species do well enough, the plan calls for adding channel catfish and black crappies.

“Until the smallmouth grow a little, there’s not much worth fishing for in Cherry Creek. It will take a few years to get those populations established,” Rydell said.

Regardless, it is not too early for a visit to its new boardwalk pier or a float from one of its two canoe-kayak launches.

Cherry Creek Diversion (0.5 acres) — Nestled just behind the Cherry Creek Pond to the west is its diversion pond. Directly fed by the cold water of a spring, the pond is being managed for trout. It already has had two stockings of brook trout. Rainbow stockings also are in the plan, mainly to alleviate fishing pressure on the brookies, Rydell said.

“Even with two-fish bag limit on brook trout, we anticipate that pond getting a lot of pressure,” he said. “It

is sure to be popular among anglers working on the Trout Slam.”

Grabel System

About a mile southeast down the road from Cherry Creek Ponds are the three Grabel Ponds. Fed from a spring that originates nearby, the water becomes warmer as it travels northward through the ponds. Through the years, five ponds have been consolidated to three. The south and middle ponds were the subject of extensive renovations in 2019-2020. Amply stocked, these ponds provide promise to anglers of many skill levels.

Grabel South (1.75 acres) — Similar to Cherry, the first pond in the system is directly fed by cold spring water and is managed for trout. Moreover, because the pond was deepened, it can hold more fish than before. Rainbows, brookies and tigers have been stocked so far, and cutthroats are in the plan. Recent improvements to the pond included a handicapped-accessible covered pier and concrete canoe-kayak launch.

Grabel Middle (2.3 acres) —

Similar to the south pond, the middle was deepened and supplemented with habitat structures. Rainbow and tiger trout have been stocked. Plans call for the addition of smallmouth bass, rock bass and bluegill. Visitors also are enjoying new angler access pads and a canoe-kayak launch.

Grabel North (1.7 acres) — It is the one pond in this series that was not renovated, and unfortunately, a broken dam board this spring caused devastation to the fishery as almost all of the water drained from the pond. Prior to that, the pond challenged anglers to catch largemouth bass, bluegills, crappies and channel catfish from its stump- and cattail-laden banks. The pond has now been added to the final phase of the aquatic habitat project, and officials are sure it will once again complement the park’s superb fishing opportunities after renovation.

Carter P. Johnson Reservoir

Located 3.2 miles west-northwest of U.S. Highway 20 on Soldier Creek Road,

the 20-acre Carter P. Johnson Reservoir is the largest of Fort Robinson’s impoundments and features the most diverse fish population. It has long received annual rainbow trout stockings and has a sizable population of largemouth bass, many of which are lunkers, in addition to bluegills.

Other species include rainbow trout, cutthroat trout, channel catfish, crappies and rock bass. A wooden pier serves anglers of many ages and abilities, and the unpaved gradual slope on the east end of the pond serves as a ramp for small electric-powered boats, kayaks and other non-motorized watercraft.

The reservoir, which was created by damming Soldier Creek, has been scheduled to receive a major renovation during the second phase of the aquatic habitat project. Construction was delayed, however, when the Department of Natural Resources reclassified the 480-foot dam as high-hazard and in need of fortification because of danger to campsites downstream along Soldier Creek.

Funding has since been secured to include dam improvements in the project and officials hope the construction can get underway next year. If so, the lake will be drained and salvaged fish will be moved to other sites within the park.

Crazy Horse Pond

Located one-half mile east-southeast of Carter P. Johnson Reservoir is the 1.4-acre Crazy Horse Pond. As it stands, it is not considered much of a fishery. It has not been stocked, and fishing opportunities are almost exclusively limited to the largemouth bass and bluegills that make their way downstream from Carter P. Johnson Reservoir.

Phase two of the Aquatic Habitat Plan calls for transforming the pond to a prime destination for anglers willing to hike. The plan calls for developing a half-mile non-motorized trail from the Carter P. Johnson Reservoir parking lot.

“It’s already one of our most scenic ponds and will be quite an attraction when finished,” Rydell said.



Stringers with rock bass hang from kayaks at Carter P. Johnson Reservoir.



The Wood Reserve Ponds, situated along the Middle Fork of Soldier Creek on U.S. Forest Service property west of Fort Robinson, reward anglers who don't mind a hike.

White River

This waterway, which begins as a clear, babbling coldwater stream west of Fort Robinson, assumes an entirely different appearance before its turbid waters enter South Dakota north of Chadron and flow into the Missouri River 220 miles later.

Those wanting to target trout in the White River would be wise to visit the Open Fields and Waters sites along White River Road west of Fort Robinson. Brooks, rainbows, cutthroats and browns all reside in those waters.

Downstream, within the park, Rydell said anglers find brown trout and an occasional channel catfish, along with white suckers and creek chubs. Rydell said the White River's trout habitat ends in Crawford, where anglers can access the river at the city park. East of there, think catfish, suckers and chubs.

Soldier Creek

Three branches of this creek, which exist on the federal Soldier Creek Wilderness, merge into one before entering Fort Robinson.

Both the middle and south forks,

with reproducing populations of browns and brookies, are popular among anglers. They can be accessed from the parking and camping areas about 6 miles from U.S. Highway 20. Cutthroats also have been stocked where the forks unite.

"The further upstream you go, the better chance you have to get into brook trout," Rydell said. "The browns kind of outcompete them in the lower stretches of each of those branches."

He noted the south fork is a little easier to fish than the middle, with more pools and accessible spots void of overhanging vegetation.

The fishing opportunity for the 5-mile stretch of creek from the Carter P. Johnson dam to the confluence of the White River is limited to whatever fish may escape from the reservoir, he said, and it is not as popular of a destination as the upper end on the Wilderness.

Wood Reserve Ponds

When visiting Soldier Creek Wilderness, it is worth the hike to these five ponds, each less than a half-acre, which are heavily stocked with trout — rainbows, tigers, cutthroats



In and near Fort Robinson State Park's 22,000 acres are many opportunities for anglers. They include the park's 10 fishing ponds, Soldier Creek and the White River. TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND

and brookies. A parking area is located at the end of Soldier Creek Road, 6.25 miles from U.S. Highway 20. The hike is another mile, as the crow flies, along the Middle Fork of Soldier Creek.

Lake Crawford

Another site on Fort Robinson that shows up on maps is Lake Crawford, which is located between Grabel Ponds and the community for which it

was named. If it is fish you seek, do not bother. The outlet structure was long ago damaged and removed, so nothing remains but a marshy area void of game fish.

Other destinations

Within a short drive of Fort Robinson's headquarters are even more fishing opportunities. They include Squaw Creek at Ponderosa

Wildlife Management Area (9.9 miles), Whitney Reservoir (17 miles), Sowbelly Creek at Coffee Park (28 miles), Monroe Creek and a pond at Gilbert-Baker Wildlife Management Area (29 miles), and numerous ponds on the Oglala National Grassland. If one seeks permission, there are other coldwater stream fishing opportunities on private lands in the region.

Whatever the choice, anglers are sure

to come away from "Nebraska's fishing state park" with tales of success. And don't worry: On the rare occasion the fish are not biting, there are plenty of other things to see and do. **N**

Fort Robinson's Fishing History
Just as rich as the fishing opportunities at Fort Robinson is the history of its ponds. Make plans to read about their storied past in the November issue.

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

As trees change and Halloween celebrations get underway, take some time to enjoy the crisp, fall air and all that the outdoors has to offer, from wildlife viewing to fishing, hunting and park events. [N](#)



Fish for trout at Long Pine Creek

Throughout the month | Between Bassett and Ainsworth

This small, coldwater stream provides trout habitat year-round, and its beauty, with canyons and ponderosa pines, also makes it an attractive spot. Bring your favorite bait and give it a go! JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



View bats

Throughout the month
Statewide

Bats get a bad rap, but they're actually beneficial, allowing farmers to use less pesticide because of the number of pests they eat. This month, appreciate them. Head outside and wait patiently until just after the sun sets. Watch for something that makes fast turns and beats its wings rapidly — it's probably a bat!

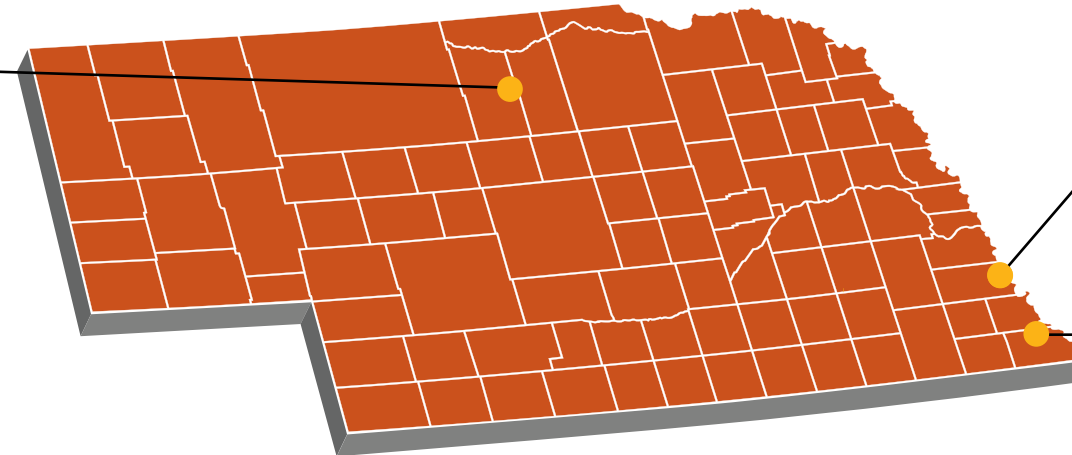
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Attend Arbor Lodge's signature centennial event

Oct. 1-2 | Arbor Lodge State Historical Park

As Nebraska's first state historical park, Arbor Lodge is a fitting place for the final signature event celebrating Nebraska's state park centennial. Saturday will be a family day, with educational stations, tours of the lodge, living history reenactors, scavenger hunts, tree tours and more. See [Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://calendar.outdoornebraska.gov) for details. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

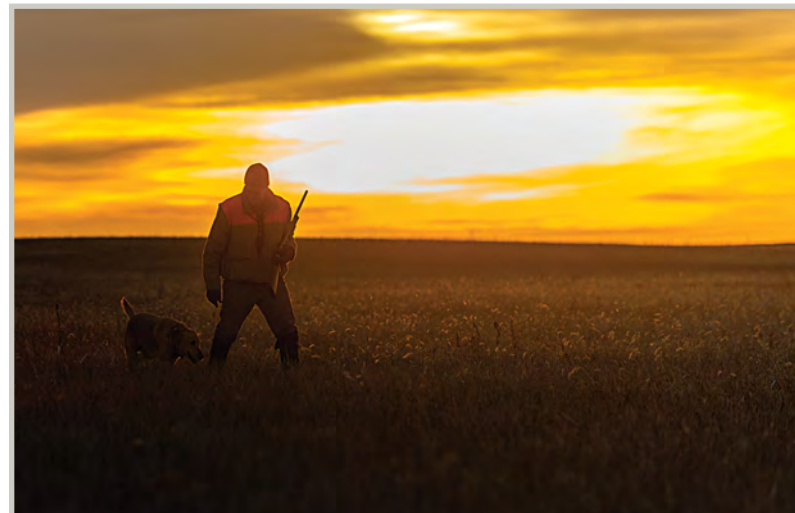


Enjoy the pheasant season opener

Oct. 30 | Statewide

Gather friends and family and experience the fun of a frosty October morning pheasant season opener. For a statewide view of upland hunting conditions, as well as advice on areas with the best potential for a successful hunt, check out the 2020-2021 Upland Game Bird Hunting Outlook at OutdoorNebraska.org/Upland.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Hunt for edible mushrooms at Indian Cave

Throughout the month
Indian Cave State Park

With good rainfall and tree diversity, Indian Cave State Park is a great place to hunt mushrooms. Search for hen-of-the-woods and chicken of the woods, which both like oak trees, and oyster mushrooms, which grow on a variety of hardwood trees year-round in this park. For help with identification, check out *Mushrooms of the Midwest* by Michael Kuo and Andrew S. Methven.

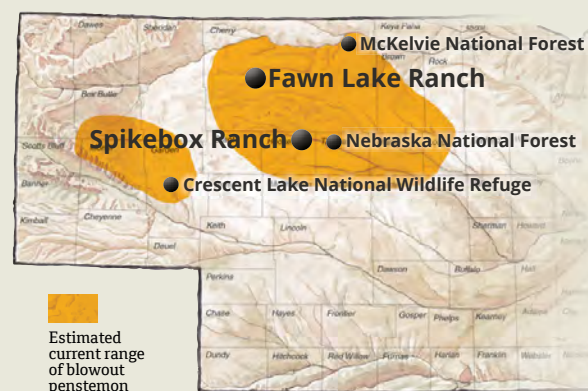
JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND



Restoring the Endangered Blowout Penstemon on Turner Enterprises’ Spikebox Ranch

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

“Blowouts are sort of like anchovies — you either love them or hate them,” wrote the late Nebraskaland writer Jon Farrar. Among the blowout lovers are “ranch children who for generations have slid down a blowout’s steep



This map illustrates blowout penstemon’s range in Nebraska and where penstemon work mentioned in this story has been conducted.

TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND



A blowout penstemon flowers on the leeward side of a recently created blowout in the Hunt Pasture on Turner Enterprises’ Spikebox Ranch.

GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

sandy slope [and] artifact hunters who currycomb them hoping to find an 11,000-year-old Clovis projectile point exposed by the wind.” Among the blowout haters are “Most ranchers [who] wage war on their blowouts. To some, they are seen as unsightly, maybe hint at poor range management such as overgrazing and as lost grazing. ... To some ranchers blowouts are like dandelions in an urban lawn.”

Blowouts are wind-excavated, bare sand depressions in Sandhills dune prairie and the sole habitat in our state for the endangered blowout penstemon (*Penstemon haydenii*). Since settlement, blowouts have become extremely rare, resulting in the penstemon’s decline. In 2017, Turner Enterprises, Inc., undertook a project to restore this rare plant in a pasture on their Spikebox Ranch located in Cherry County. Breaking Sandhills grazing tradition, they intensively grazed bison to create blowouts in which they, along with state and federal partners, planted blowout penstemon.

The project has been challenging to say the least. More than once during the planning phase, the partners stood gathered atop a high grassy dune, hands in pockets, boot heels worriedly scratching the sand, pondering how they

could push bison grazing to the point where the sod-binding grasses lost their tight grip on the sandy soils, allowing the wind to set them to blowing. Also troubling was the thought of how neighboring ranchers would respond to their intentionally creating blowouts.

Despite the obstacles, the project appears to be on the road to success: This past summer, blowout penstemon flowered in the pasture, possibly for the first time in more than a century.

The Endangered Blowout Penstemon

Blowout penstemon grows in the Ferris Dunes in Carbon County, Wyoming, and the Sandhills of north-central



Blowout penstemon seeds have a hard coat allowing them to survive for decades buried in sand. GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraska — and nowhere else on Earth. The species cannot tolerate competition from other plants, thus its predilection to grow on bare, mostly un-vegetated sand. A short-lived perennial, it often forms multi-stemmed clumps reaching up to 2 feet in height. Its pink to milky blue flowers, which have a sweet fragrance reminiscent of vanilla, grace the open sands from late May through June.

In the early 1900s, blowouts were abundant in the Sandhills, and a botanist described blowout penstemon as “one of the more common and typical species” of this habitat. At the time, perhaps millions of plants grew scattered across the dunes, but remarkably, by 1940, the

plant was thought to be extinct. A wetter climate beginning in the early 1900s, coupled with settlers’ control of wildfires and their later use of conservative grazing practices with lower stocking rates and cattle rotated between pastures, had eliminated most blowouts.

Fortunately, blowout penstemon was re-discovered in 1968; however, surveys conducted through the early 1980s located only 600 plants. Soon thereafter, it was listed as federally endangered. By the mid-1990s, botanists had located a few thousand additional plants in the Sandhills and discovered the Wyoming population, consisting of about 8,000 plants.

In the late 1980s, ecologists began planting greenhouse-grown blowout penstemon seedlings into blowouts on national wildlife refuges, national forests and private ranches in the Sandhills. At the time, establishing populations from seed was deemed infeasible due to lack of an abundant seed source. Plus, the hard-coated seeds were thought to take decades to germinate in the wild. In the greenhouse, seeds were acid-treated to break down the seed coat and stimulate germination.

Hand-planting greenhouse-grown blowout penstemon had limitations. Growing the seedlings was time-consuming and expensive, and many of the seedlings did not survive transplanting into blowouts. The greatest issue, however, was that most blowouts today are inactive with little blowing sand. Stable sands meant that over time prairie grasses and wildflowers invaded the blowouts and out-competed the planted penstemons, leading to their decline. Staff at the

Sandhills Blowouts

Over millennia, grass cover on Sandhills dunes has waxed and waned in response to climate, grazing pressure and fire. About 8,000 years ago, for example, a 3,000-year-long mega-drought descended upon the Great Plains, withering the dune-stabilizing grass. The sands set to blowing, and Sahara-like naked dunes slowly rolled across the land. After the drought ended, vegetation re-stabilized the dunes.

By comparison, the 19th century was a period of relative dryness, with wildfires and roving bison herds still active on the land. The dunes were stable, but grass cover was sparse compared to today. J.H. Snowden of the 1857 Warren Expedition wrote that the dunes were “much broken by and cut by winds, supporting a very scant vegetation.” Blowouts were common in the Sandhills.

Euroamerican settlement of the Sandhills, which began in the late 1800s, brought dramatic changes to the landscape. Wildfires were extinguished quickly, the bison were extirpated, and, later, conservative methods of cattle grazing were implemented. These factors, along with a wetter climate beginning in the early 1900s, has led to dense grass on the dunes and to very few blowouts. The dunes are now at a level of stabilization where only extreme, prolonged drought would cause widespread blowouts.

Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Garden County and other conservation lands tried to stimulate blowing sand by intensely grazing cattle and using heavy equipment to scrape grass off blowouts. These efforts mostly failed. If the blowout penstemon was to survive in the Sandhills, a practical method of creating and maintaining blowouts was sorely needed.

The Spikebox Ranch Project

On a summer day in 2016, I was with several Turner ranch managers and biologists on their 142,000-acre Spikebox Ranch. As we contemplated bison lazily grazing a high dune having a few scattered blowouts, our conversation naturally drifted to bison and blowouts. Based on years of observation, the managers suggested that if one was inclined to create blowouts through heavy grazing, bison might be better suited to the task than cattle.

They explained that unlike cattle, which favor low ground, bison prefer grazing and loafing on high dunes where blowouts tend to develop. On top the dunes, bison can scan for approaching predators and, with luck, they catch a breeze to ward off flies. Compared to cattle’s broad, flat hoofs, bison have sharp-edged hoofs that more easily cut through sod. The staff surmised that if a bison herd were confined



A recently created, active blowout in the Hunt Pasture.

GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

to a pasture with high, loose-sanded dunes for an extended period, blowouts would likely develop.

I mentioned the blowout penstemon’s decline and its need for blowouts. The lead manager ran with the thought and by day’s end, we had a handshake agreement to intensively graze bison in a pasture on the Spikebox Ranch to create blowouts in which we would plant blowout penstemon.

By the following year, a plan was in place. A 250-acre section of the Hunt Pasture containing old, grassed-over blowouts was fenced to facilitate the project. The pasture’s size was thought to be small enough to allow bison, over time, to eliminate the grass cover and start the sand blowing. Key to choosing the Hunt Pasture was its central location on the ranch, so that if the blowouts slowly migrated in coming decades or centuries, they would stay confined to the ranch.

“Before we could start the project, there were issues we had to get our heads around,” said Carter Kruse, director of conservation for Turner Enterprises. “What were the ecological pros and cons? The production consequences? Fencing and water needs? And especially concerning for the then Spikebox manager, Terry Purdum, how do we keep bison in a near grassless pasture long enough to create blowouts without over-stressing them?”

Kruse said their biologists were excited about the project from the start; but Purdum, who is a member of the local cattle ranching community, was worried about how neighbors and friends would perceive Turner Enterprises for creating blowouts.

Partners in the Spikebox project included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, which all shared expertise in blowout penstemon ecology and restoration. The Forest Service donated penstemon seed harvested from populations on the Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest and grew penstemon seedlings for the project in a greenhouse at the Charles E. Bessey Tree Nursery at the Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey. The



Bison grazing Sandhills dune prairie on the Spikebox Ranch. BOB GRIER, NEBRASKALAND

Turner Enterprises' Nebraska Ranches

Turner Enterprises, Inc., established by entrepreneur and conservationist Ted Turner, owns five Nebraska Sandhills ranches totaling 445,000 acres, on which they run 9,000 bison. Its ranches are managed primarily for Plains bison conservation and production, but also for hunting, fishing and conservation of imperiled species and plant communities. "We sometimes will compromise bison production for conservation, but overall our management is a balancing act," said Carter Kruse.

Recently, the corporation formed the Turner Institute of Ecoagriculture, Inc., a public charity and agricultural research organization whose mission is to research, develop, practice and disseminate sustainable strategies and techniques for conserving ecosystems, agriculture and rural communities. This past June, the 80,000-acre McGinley Ranch, which straddles the Nebraska/South Dakota border, was the first of the Nebraska ranches to be donated to the Institute. Entry into the Institute ensures the long-term conservation of these biodiversity-rich grazing lands.

Although the Institute qualifies for tax exemptions, all taxes will continue to be paid and the lands will remain working ranches. "We'll keep striving to be good neighbors and good stewards of the unique Sandhills landscape," Kruse said.



Greenhouse-grown blowout penstemon seedlings stand ready for planting in the Hunt Pasture. GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Brooke Stansberry (left) and U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist Greg Wright harvest blowout penstemon seed on the McKelvie National Forest. GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

Fish and Wildlife Service and Game and Parks funded the growing of the seedlings.

"We appreciate the help of our conservation partners," said Kruse. "Our ranches must fend for themselves financially, and partnerships help us implement our conservation efforts faster, at a larger scale and with a greater chance of success."

In 2017, the modified Hunt Pasture was grazed for the first time. A herd of several hundred bison was kept in the pasture until little grass remained, at which time they were moved to other pastures. When grass returned, the bison were moved back. When forage was especially sparse, usually in winter, the bison were supplemented with hay and mineral that was

strategically placed to force them to trail through forming blowouts in their journeys from food to water.

In the fall and winter of 2018 and 2019, the partners sowed a total of five pounds of penstemon seed in Hunt Pasture blowouts, and in May of 2019 and 2020, they planted several hundred greenhouse-grown seedlings in the blowouts.

The Penstemon Returns

Surprisingly, blowout creation in the Hunt Pasture was more difficult than anticipated because the project had taken place during several of the wettest years in recorded Sandhills

history, which caused grass growth to outpace bison grazing. About half the pasture remains prairie-covered; in the remainder, however, grazing has stressed the deep-rooted grass and strong winds have sculpted the exposed sand into blowouts with bare sand slopes to their leeward side.

During the summer of 2021, Turner Enterprises' ecologists surveyed the Hunt Pasture and found 60 flowering blowout penstemon plants and 40 seedlings. To flower, the penstemon must be at least two years old. The flowering plants were located in areas where seed was sown, but no greenhouse seedlings were planted. It appears that few, if any, of the greenhouse plants survived the winter of 2020-21; excessive

Blowout Penstemon on McKelvie and Bessey

For more than two decades, the U.S. Forest Service has been reintroducing blowout penstemon on the Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest and the Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest, both located in the Sandhills. Twenty-eight acres of active blowouts within the forests' expansive dune grasslands now support roughly 30,000 penstemon plants. "Our livestock permit holders help us create small blowouts for the penstemon by manipulating their cattle to congregate near or trail to certain water tanks where the plant is growing," said Greg Wright, a Forest Service biologist. "Private ranchers could use this method to restore the penstemon on their lands with no measurable loss of grass or grazing production."

Before 2016, the McKelvie and Halsey penstemon populations were established using only greenhouse-grown seedlings. In that year, Wright, out of curiosity, scattered seed leftover from starting greenhouse plants, into a blowout on McKelvie. To his surprise, when he returned to the site the following summer, he found seedlings. Wright then harvested more seed and sowed it into other blowouts. Through this effort, he discovered that successful germination and seedling establishment depended on placing the seed in parts of the blowouts with extensive blowing sand. The sand's abrasive action wore away the seeds' hard coat, speeding germination.

Wright then evaluated the effectiveness of using seed versus greenhouse plants. He found scattering seeds was more cost effective in large blowouts and less reliant on a person's knowledge of where exactly to place greenhouse seedlings to ensure their survival. He stressed that using seed works only in blowouts with active blowing sand and will not work in small, inactive blowouts, such as those found on many ranches. Wright's discoveries have made large-scale blowout penstemon restorations, such as those occurring on the Spikebox Ranch, far more economically and ecologically practical.

"This is a plant we really need to conserve," said Wright. "If extreme drought ever sets the dunes to blowing, seeding blowout penstemon might slow the dunes' progress. It's one of the very few plants adapted to growing on blowing sand."

blowing sand either uprooted or buried them. The partners have learned that in extremely active blowouts, the better approach to establishing the blowout penstemon is to scatter abundant seed and let nature decide when and where seedlings sprout and take hold.

Although fewer penstemon plants than expected have



A drone photograph shows the Hunt Pasture as it appeared in July of 2021. DAKOTA ALTMAN AND ETHAN FREESE, PLATTE BASIN TIMELAPSE

established in the Hunt Pasture, Greg Wright, a wildlife biologist with the Forest Service with extensive experience restoring the penstemon, remains optimistic. "I think we are seeing the beginning of an exponential growth curve for the penstemon population in the Hunt Pasture," he said. Wright believes that there is a "sweet spot" for blowing sand — enough to scarify and then bury penstemon seeds to allow them to germinate, but not so much to cover or uproot seedlings.

Heavy grazing in the Hunt Pasture will continue for another year or two, until more blowouts are created, and this may prevent seedlings from flourishing. In the meantime, more penstemon seed will be sown, and once more blowouts are established, grazing will be reduced, slowing the movement of sand, and the penstemon will hopefully thrive. In the future, when prairie plants begin to move back into

the blowouts, the managers will again use intensive bison grazing to re-initiate sand movement.

To date, Spikebox staff have received no negative comments regarding the Hunt Pasture blowouts, even though they are clearly visible from a county road. "I understand why ranchers have worked to reduce blowouts, but, in all honesty, we're glad to have these blowouts back on the ranch," said Kruse. "Blowouts are a vital part of the Sandhills ecosystem and could be important habitats for reptiles, insects and other organisms. We just don't know." He added that because the Hunt Pasture occupies a minute fraction of the ranch and that it continues to be grazed, the project has had no affect on the ranch's bison production or economics.

Turner Enterprises has begun a second blowout penstemon project at their Fawn Lake Ranch, also located in Cherry County. This past winter, intensive bison grazing began in

their 300-acre Hayden Pasture. Once open sand appears, blowout penstemon seed will be scattered. Greenhouse plants will not be used.

"This project is a unique challenge for me," said Fawn Lake Manager John Halstead. "Such intense grazing to promote blowouts is a total paradigm shift from how the Sandhills have been grazed in recent history and is counter to everything I have been taught about range management. Still, I'm excited for the chance to work with such a special plant."

The project partners hope that the Fawn Lake and Spikebox ranch projects will increase awareness of the blowout penstemon, encourage other ranchers to become involved in its conservation, serve as a model for future penstemon projects and, most critically, help ensure an endangered plant's survival. 📍

Sarpy County's Namesake Was “A Legend In His Own Time”

By David L. Bristow, *History Nebraska*

The namesake of Sarpy County, Peter Sarpy (1805-1865) was an important trader whose career spanned Nebraska's fur trade and territorial periods. This 1852 portrait by St. Louis artist Manuel Joachim de Franca is part of the Nebraska History Museum collections.

“Sarpy's life is not easy to chronicle for he became a legend in his own time,” writes historian John Wickman.

Sarpy was born to a French Creole family, probably in St. Louis. His early life is poorly documented, but it appears that at age 19 he traveled up the Missouri River to present-day Nebraska. He worked at the American Fur Company's trading post near Bellevue. The company brought manufactured

goods upstream by keelboat, traded for furs with local Native American tribes and sent the furs back to St. Louis. Later, he operated his own trading post, eventually trading with white settlers arriving in the area and operating ferries across the Missouri, Elkhorn and Loup rivers.

Young Sarpy was known for his fierce competitiveness and was loyal to his employer, John P. Cabanne. Acting on Cabanne's orders, in 1832 Sarpy and others illegally seized a competitor's keelboat. The action got Cabanne and Sarpy temporarily kicked out of the territory. Sarpy spent time in Colorado and returned home to St. Louis for several years.

Court documents digitized by the St. Louis Freedom Suits Legal Encoding Project revealed what today is the most shocking chapter of Sarpy's life. While in St. Louis, Sarpy enslaved a man named Andrew. But Andrew was legally a free man. In 1839, Andrew's mother, Celeste (also legally free), appeared in court on Andrew's behalf to sue Sarpy for trespass and false imprisonment. The complaint alleged that Sarpy had “with force and arms assaulted the said plaintiff ... and beat and bruised and ill treated him and then and there imprisoned him ...”. Andrew feared that Sarpy would take him out of Missouri, where, presumably, it would be even more difficult to prove his free status. By then, Sarpy had already built another trading post at Bellevue.

Sarpy disputed the charge and the case dragged on until Feb. 2, 1841, when the court found Sarpy guilty, freed Andrew and (presumably) awarded the \$200 in damages Andrew had sought.

Back in Nebraska, Sarpy became known for his ability to gain the respect of Native tribes in the region. He was in contact with tribes within several hundred miles of Bellevue. Like many fur traders, he married a Native woman. This certainly helped solidify his trading relationships — Peter and Nicomi remained married for the rest of Sarpy's life.

As a businessman, Sarpy adapted to changing times. By the 1850s he was operating a ferry across the Missouri River, serving a growing number of emigrants heading west along the trails. In 1854, the year Nebraska Territory opened to Euroamerican settlement, Sarpy bought a 165-ton



The 1852 portrait of Sarpy at the top of this page is shown after its 2011 restoration by paintings conservator Kenneth Bé at History Nebraska's Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center. History Nebraska 292P-1



This 1894 oil painting by Ad Albrecht is based on an 1850s sketch by Stanislas Schimonsky. It shows Bellevue near the end of its trading post days, but the Missouri River bluffs seem to have grown to legendary proportions in the retelling — much like Sarpy himself. History Nebraska 300P

steam ferry and played a prominent role in negotiating land cessions by the Omaha and Oto tribes. In 1857, the Nebraska legislature named Sarpy County in his honor.

“Sarpy lived the life of a minor frontier baron,” writes John Wickman, who says Sarpy was known for his hospitality and for his love of “fast horses, fine hunting dogs, and a considerable interest in the pleasures of liquor.”

Throughout his life, Sarpy cultivated a reputation for both generosity and ruthlessness. Missionary Samuel Allis described him in ways that reveal as much about the time and place as about the man himself. Allis said that Sarpy, “although sometimes rough and uncouth, was a high-toned gentleman, who exerted a great influence among the whites as well as the Indians. He was particularly generous to white men of distinction and wealth, also to the Indians when it paid well, but exacted every penny of his hired men and others who earned their living by labor. Still he was generous to the needy ... He was all that could be wished for a man of the world, except the habit of intemperance.”

These sources say nothing about Sarpy's 1841 conviction for false imprisonment. Perhaps the story didn't follow him out of Missouri. Peter

Sarpy died in Plattsmouth in 1865. His body was returned to St. Louis for burial, but it's said that his wife Nicomi remained in the Plattsmouth area. [N](#)

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



Bellevue, Nebraska Territory, from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, June 5, 1858. Contrary to the caption, there is no evidence that the Bellevue trading post existed prior to 1823. History Nebraska 13000-50



Mike Schrad, a master naturalist volunteer, leads a small mammal trapping effort at the Nature Conservancy's Platte River Prairies in Nebraska. Also assisting are Sarah Lueder and Kate Nootenboom (Hubbard Fellows, left and right) and volunteer Laura Connelly (background).

CHRIS HELZER, THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

A Second Chance

A Retired Wildlife Ecologist Gives Back

by Renae Blum

At first sight, a plains pocket mouse makes a lasting impression.

There's only one word for it: cute. It's tiny and delicate-looking, with small ears and fur-lined cheek pouches. Retired wildlife ecologist Mike Schrad can identify one in seconds, as he does on this cool October morning, striding through a restored prairie near Wood River, Nebraska.

He lifts one from a live trap baited with oatmeal and birdseed, and hands it me to warm in my palm while he takes notes. My hand cups easily around it.

This creature is one of five small mammals Schrad will find and release out of 80 traps on this particular morning (better

than average numbers, he tells me). The plains pocket mouse is of particular interest, though. The eastern subspecies is an at-risk species that relies on prairie habitat, and Schrad is helping document its presence in Nebraska, along with other small mammals.

His work could inform future management practices statewide and help conservationists understand what kind of habitat Nebraska's small mammals need to thrive. Schrad also is finding plains pocket mice in places they've never been documented, adding to our understanding of this elusive species.

But Schrad, age 71, isn't your typical researcher. While he's



A plains pocket mouse caught during small mammal trapping at the Nature Conservancy's Platte River Prairies.

CHRIS HELZER, THE NATURE CONSERVANCY



Schrad records data about one of his finds on a foggy October morning at the Platte River Prairies, located in south-central Nebraska. EVAN BARRIENTOS



One of the Sherman live traps that Schrad puts out overnight, baited with oatmeal and birdseed.

RENAE BLUM, NEBRASKALAND

doing professional-level work for several organizations in the state, it's all for free, on his own time.

It's fun for him, Schrad said, and he enjoys being outdoors. But that's not his only motivation.

"When I retired, I wanted to get back to field work," Schrad said. "I was looking for an organization I could volunteer for, and that's when I found the Master Naturalists."

He's referring to the Nebraska Master Naturalist Program, which offers training and volunteer opportunities to anyone interested in the natural world. As part of his training, Schrad sat in on a presentation about Nebraska Game and Parks' Natural Legacy Project, a blueprint for conservation of Nebraska's at-risk species.

Kristal Stoner, the program manager at the time, told the group that they were in need of volunteers willing to help them find and record these species. "That kind of rang a bell with me," Schrad said.

He approached Stoner, and they realized his skills would be a great match for one of the program's needs: monitoring Tier 1 species of small mammals, or those identified as species of greatest conservation need — including the plains pocket

mouse.

Currently, Schrad traps three times per year, in spring, summer and fall, typically for four nights each season. He arrives at first light the following morning to inspect the traps and record data. Then, Schrad uses those numbers to calculate results, including species diversity, species richness and relative abundance.

"And then we use those numbers to see if it answers our questions," Schrad said. "For example, the management question — are there differences in these numbers when you hay a pasture, or burn it, or manage it strictly by grazing."

He has probably saved Nebraska Game and Parks tens of thousands of dollars for surveys, said Melissa Panella, Game and Parks' wildlife diversity program manager and program manager for the Natural Legacy Project. Game and Parks has limited funds to pay for surveys and monitoring, so Schrad's work fills an important gap, she said.

Seven years in, Schrad has volunteered with multiple groups, including Pheasants Forever, the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the Nature Conservancy, and he's placed about 5,000 traps.

"He's very generous with his time," said Chris Helzer, the director of science at the Nature Conservancy, who has worked with Schrad since the beginning. Their particular project looks at how small mammal populations differ between two areas, a 60-acre remnant of virgin prairie and a 100-acre tract of restored prairie next to it.

So far, the plains pocket mouse seems to prefer the virgin prairie, but other small mammals appear to like the restored prairie better. To Helzer, it's further evidence that through prairie restoration, we can expand isolated patches of virgin prairie into larger areas benefiting a diverse range of species.

"Our property is pretty small and insignificant by itself," Helzer said. "But we've shown, I think, that the potential is there for de-fragmenting prairies anywhere we want to work on this in Nebraska."

Both he and Panella see Schrad as a unique volunteer, someone with subject matter expertise who approached them first, looking to help with no expectation of pay. Someone like this is a rare and incredibly helpful find: Panella looks back to a recent time that Game and Parks needed help documenting the state's river otter population, before removing river otters from Nebraska's threatened species list.

"We didn't have a volunteer; we ended up bringing on a graduate student for a two-year project," she said.

That's a typical length of time for surveys like these, but Schrad is committed for the long term. He envisions another 10 years of documenting the plains pocket mouse and at least five more years with the Nature Conservancy.

"Anytime we have an opportunity to do a long-term monitoring project, that's a huge benefit," Panella said.

"That's much more informative than just that snapshot in time."

For Schrad, his small mammal work has meaning beyond personal enjoyment and the valuable data it's yielding. It's something he once never imagined he could do.

Sixteen years ago, Schrad was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer, with a dim prognosis. Today, for reasons he can't explain, he's cancer-free and enjoying retirement to the fullest. He has a message for other cancer patients: Never give up.

"They should always have hope," he said. "And if it's not hope to survive for 50 years, hope that you can make it to somebody's next birthday, or whatever it might be. Just keep plugging away."

Which he plans to continue doing for as long as possible. 



Mike Schrad records data on a vole he collected at the Nature Conservancy's Platte River Prairies in 2013.

CHRIS HELZER, THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

Start Them Young

By Eric Fowler

When you take children hunting, you better have a checklist.

Warm clothes? Check.

Warm boots? Check.

Snacks? Check.

Diaper bag? Excuse me?

Baby food? Beg your pardon?

Pacifier? Are you nuts?

Jesse and Casey Campbell of Grand Island aren't nuts, but that's what their packing list has included since they took their son, Harris, hunting for the first time — when he was 2 months old.

By the time Harris went on that goose hunt in February 2020, Harris already had been ice fishing. And a few weeks later, he went on his first rabbit hunt. Not quite 2 years old now, the toddler has added fishing, camping, and turkey, sharp-tailed grouse, prairie chicken, pheasant, quail and squirrel

hunting to his list of escapades. He's even been to a sandhill crane viewing blind and noodling for catfish in his parents' home state of Illinois.

His outdoor-loving parents have taken "start them young" to an entirely new level.

THE CAMPBELLS met at the University of Illinois while Casey was finishing graduate school and Jesse a bachelor's degree. Casey took

a job as a civil engineer with Ducks Unlimited and moved to Nebraska in 2014. The following year, Jesse made the move and is now the director of communications for a law firm.

Casey grew up hunting and fishing in southern Illinois and continued both of those pursuits in Nebraska. Jesse fished and camped while growing up on a small farm near St. Louis. She had wanted to try hunting, but never had the opportunity. Once in Nebraska, she began tagging along on hunts with Casey nearly every weekend, bringing

her camera for the first year. "He didn't burn me out, but he tried hard," Jesse said.

In spring 2016, she put down the camera and picked up a shotgun. "Once we had some success turkey hunting, I think she was pretty well hooked," Casey said.

Each season opener that followed,

the two headed to the field together. They married in 2018 and, a year later, their first child was on the way. That joy was accompanied by a fear for Jesse, who describes herself as an adult-onset hunter. One thing she likes most about hunting is spending time with Casey.

"When I was pregnant, I was very concerned about how our hunting lifestyle would change," she said. "I didn't necessarily want to be restricted

to being home with Harris all of the time and feeling left out because I wasn't hunting if Casey was hunting. I couldn't necessarily imagine going by myself, either."

As the due date approached, hunting seasons opened, and Jesse and Casey kept going. She was dove hunting at 27 weeks pregnant, pulling on waders and slogging through a Rainwater Basin marsh for early teal season at 29 and 30 weeks, tagging two turkeys at 31

ABOVE: Casey and Jesse Campbell, with Harris on her back, watch for incoming ducks while hunting from a blind in the Rainwater Basin last fall. **OPPOSITE:** Jesse takes a break to give Harris his bottle. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



weeks, and heading back to the marsh at 33 weeks for the regular duck opener.

By then, her body was starting to tell her to take it easy, but her mind didn't want to listen, so they found a way for Jesse to keep duck hunting. "I have the greatest husband in the world: He pulled me around in a layout boat so I could shoot ducks," she said, noting slight modifications were made to the boat to accommodate her baby bump.

They took several more trips to the

marsh early that duck season, with the last coming at 36 weeks. "My waders wouldn't fit anymore," Jesse said with a laugh. A short walk on the opening day of pheasant season that same late October week was her last hunt before Harris arrived Nov. 27, 2019, a week late. At 9 pounds, 6 ounces and 22.5 inches, he was a Boone & Crockett baby, Casey said. He joined their 6-month-old Labrador retriever, Luna, at home.

TWO WEEKS LATER, with grandparents in town to watch Harris, the two were back in the field, joining friends in their goose pit. If Harris' grandparents weren't all in Illinois, they would be happy to watch him so the couple could hunt. But they are.

So, their solution was simple: Take him along.

"I think it's becoming more of a cultural norm, where my generation is,



Harris gets a kiss from the Campbell's black Labrador retriever, Luna, while sitting in Casey's waders.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Harris inspects a grasshopper Jesse caught for him after a squirrel hunt in August. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

“Well, this is what I want to do, so my kid’s just coming with me,” Jesse said. Because this was their passion, they wanted to find a way to do it.

They talked logistics, locations, types of hunts and safety — with each other and with one of Casey’s coworkers, who has taken her two young boys hunting and fishing since they were babies. That first trip to the goose pit was a last-minute decision that required a quick trip to the local sporting goods store to find baby-sized earmuffs for hearing protection. Harris slept in his car seat in the blind that day, right through the shooting.

Before that first rabbit hunt a few weeks later, they found a used backpack child carrier online for \$20. Casey threw the pack and Harris on his back, and they were off.

AS SOON as they got started that year, most hunting seasons ended. But turkey season was just around the corner, giving Casey time to customize those bright-blue earmuffs and a new, better but still-blue backpack with a camo paint job. Casey also fashioned a bug net to cover Harris in the carrier.

At this point, Harris was still in the “potted plant stage,” not wanting to move around and sleeping more often than not, and things were fairly easy. But when he woke up, it was feed-me-now screaming.

“Of course he likes to wake up when birds are like 60 yards away and working in,” Jesse said.

That was the case on his first trip to the turkey woods, when he woke crying when a gobbler was nearly within bow range for Casey. Jesse harvested a jake

on opening day of shotgun season, but Harris woke up and spoiled dad’s chance at a tom 10 minutes later. On their next hunt, Harris woke with one gobbler at 30 yards and another at 60. “And this turkey, no joke, could not help himself and kept shock gobbling and would not take a breath,” Jesse said. “They didn’t run away probably because they’ve never heard that sound before. It was hilarious.”

The laughter, while internal, may have caused Jesse to miss the closer bird, but Casey tracked them down and harvested both. Jesse connected soon after when another tom came in while Harris was sleeping.

Plenty of fishing, camping and hiking trips followed. Harris began his first full hunting season with the Aug. 1 squirrel opener, riding on mom’s back.

They learned quickly that Harris prefers upland hunting to sitting in the duck blind. He likes being on the move, watching the world go by and watching Luna work. “As soon as you stop moving, he’s upset about it and wants you to keep going,” Jesse said.

They take turns carrying him, sometimes deferring to whoever’s back hurts less, on upland hunts, hikes, mushroom hunts or fishing trips. Last fall he weighed 21 pounds, making grouse hunting in the Sandhills a challenge. So was keeping balance when Harris started swaying back and forth while singing the E-I-E-I-O part of “Old MacDonald,” as Casey found out while slogging through a muddy field on a mushroom hunt this past spring. By last summer, Harris was 25 pounds.

They didn’t take him deer hunting in 2020, not wanting to chance Harris’ crying preventing a harvest. Instead, they took turns hunting solo or with other friends. Jesse found she enjoyed it as she became more comfortable.

They also didn’t take him out in the bitter cold, despite having enough wool base layers, mid layers and warm puffy suits to make Harris look



Jesse duck hunting at 33 weeks.



First goose hunt, age 2 months.



First rabbit hunt, age 3 months, and a successful turkey hunt (below), age 4 months.





Harris runs back to the parking lot alongside Casey and Jesse at the end of a squirrel hunt in August.

like “a marshmallow.” The exception was when they went to their friends’ goose pit, where heaters softened the cold. Harris was a hit with the other hunters. “All of them interacting with Harris while he’s hunting has been pretty funny,” Jesse said. “They all like to brag that he’s the youngest hunter they’ve ever been with.”

He didn’t go turkey hunting during the spring 2021 season either. He had been walking since just before his first birthday and sitting still in a blind is not something he wants to do. The same was true for fishing this spring

and summer. Keeping him contained is somewhat easier now that they own a fishing boat, but Harris would rather be in the water. He did catch his first fish at Keller Park State Recreation Area in June, hooking a small largemouth bass while reeling in a Hula Popper his mom had cast for him.

It has been an adventure.

“We’ve just taken him along and seen how it’s gone,” Jesse said. “Each season has been totally different, because developmentally, he’s totally different.”

“As he matures and we come across different challenges as far as taking

him to do stuff, then we’re having to come up with solutions on the fly,” Casey added.

Still, it hasn’t been easy, but Harris appears to have made things easier than other babies might have. Take a look at Jesse’s Instagram page, @jessehcampbell, and the website she created, parenthoodoutdoors.com, and you’ll see a happy baby.

But Harris sets the schedule. “There have been hunts that ended early because he’s not happy, but you just know it’s going to be whatever it’s going to be that day, and however long

you get to hunt is however long you get to hunt,” Jesse said. “We’re just happy to be out doing it.”

“That’s just kind of part of it,” Casey added. “First and foremost is just making sure he’s enjoying himself. Jesse and I can go out and shoot ducks another day if he’s not. We make the experience as good as we can for him. He’s priority one when we’re afield.”

THINGS WILL be way different this year with a walking and talking toddler. Trips to their duck blind in the Rainwater Basin, which stands

in water with no floor, are likely out unless they can find a Pack ‘n’ Play that floats, they joke. With Harris’ love for water, however, Jesse thinks it will be hard for him to understand why Mom and Dad are standing in it and he can’t play in it.

Making sure Harris keeps his earmuffs on also will be a challenge. He’s done well on that front so far. “If he forgets he has them on, it’s fine,” Jesse said. “So getting them on and then distracting him as soon as you put them on so he doesn’t rip them off is the key.”

Harris loves to point out birds, and Jesse says they are excited about having another spotter in the blind. The identification skills will need to be developed, however, as every bird he sees, no matter whether it is a duck, cardinal or sparrow, is a “duck.” And while he might not practice it, he is already learning that you must be quiet when hunting. While on vacation in Florida this summer, he was trying to catch baby geckos. “He was whispering to me, ‘Shhhhh,’ and pointing to where they were,” Jesse said. “It was super adorable.”

The Campbells did more upland hunting than ever last year, and even though Harris would rather be on his own than in the carrier, there likely will be more of that this year, Casey said. It won’t be long, however, until Harris is too big to carry and too young to walk along. They hope by that point he will be content sitting in a waterfowl or turkey blind. They are taking it one season at a time.

“I definitely wouldn’t trade it for the world, and it’s going to be interesting to see how this goes,” Jesse said.

No matter what happens, they are laying the groundwork for creating another hunter. “But at the same time, if he isn’t as passionate about it as we are, that’s kind of how it’s going to be,” Casey said. “We’ll figure out what he’s passionate about and pursue that.”

So do people tell them they are nuts? “All the time,” Casey said. 🐾



Camping, age 6 months.



A spring hike, age 6 months.



First grouse hunt, age 10 months.
First fish (below) age 17 months.



THE LAZY EUROPEAN

Story and photos by Jeff Kurrus

While I’m quite fond of traditional white-tailed deer shoulder mounts, European mounts — showing just the skull and antlers — are a spectacular alternative.

For my first European mount, I removed the head and as much hair as possible, boiled the “stuff” attached to the skull on the stovetop, picked the rest of the fat, sinew and meat away with a pair of pliers, then prepared to fill out my divorce papers because of the odor in the house. There had to be an easier way. And there is.

First, remove the head but, instead of trying to remove the hair, bury the skull in the ground with the antlers exposed. Then cover the antlers to protect from sun and mice damage.

Next, remove the skull from the ground in one year. The skull will not bust through the winter, and there will be no odor when you pull it from the ground. Simply wash off the mud and debris with a water hose and set out to dry.

If the antlers have faded, apply small amounts of furniture polish, starting at the base, until you get the color you desire.

The longer you leave the skull in the ground, the less work that has to be done. So if you happen to shoot a buck that you just can’t wait to show off, then you have several options. But if you have plenty of time, there’s no lazier way to show off your trophy.



The finished European mount.



Bury the head, leaving the antlers above the surface.



Cover the antlers to protect from sun and mice.



Remove the skull. The longer in the ground, the less work.



Hose the skull, then set out to dry.

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SO YOU WANT TO BE A METEOROLOGIST

By Martha Shulski

I spent part of my early childhood in southeastern Nebraska and loved watching the weather with my dad, who grew up in Otoe County. After, what was to me, a scary summer night in the basement with my family listening to the crackling sounds of a battery-powered radio issuing tornado warnings, I was hooked on becoming a meteorologist. I wanted to learn how tornados form, about all the different types of clouds and why it is so darn windy in Nebraska.

If you are this person, or know someone who is, there are some things to consider about careers in meteorology. First, it is not the study of meteors, which I’m often asked. Second, there is more to meteorology than becoming a weather forecaster. This is probably the question I was

asked most often in school when I told people I was majoring in meteorology — “Oh, so you want to be on TV?” I did not, but that is certainly one path.

There are both private businesses and public agencies that hire operational meteorologists, from television stations to the National Weather Service. Many of these positions involve weather forecasting. Energy companies have a strong interest in future weather conditions, both locally and elsewhere, to understand potential energy demand. Agricultural interests are strongly tied to the weather and some firms hire this expertise. There is an accreditation you can obtain to become a Certified Consulting Meteorologist. This way you can be an entrepreneur and develop your own specialized company.

If research is what interests you, there are multiple pathways. Often what is most helpful in these careers is education beyond a bachelor’s degree. Federal or private labs hire a range of meteorologists — from space weather to marine weather. If a doctorate is in your future, there are research and teaching careers to educate and train the next generation of scientists. Or maybe you’ll find yourself in the role of state climatologist and help run a state weather network.

It’s a pretty good gig, I must say. Regardless of career, you’ll always be able to join the venerable conversation we all have about the weather.

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



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RAPTOR MASS MIGRATION

By Joel G. Jorgensen

The term “migration spectacle” in the Great Plains usually conjures images of clouds of snow geese, swarms of sandhill cranes or hordes of red-winged blackbirds. Rarely is the term associated with a bird of prey in Nebraska. However, every autumn a mass migration of Swainson’s hawks takes place during a very brief period. If you are not in the right place at the right time, it is easy to miss.

Swainson’s hawks are similar in size and structure to our resident red-tailed hawks, but one major difference is that Swainson’s hawks undertake an extraordinarily long migration twice each year. Swainson’s hawks spend the winter in southern South America, primarily on the Pampas grasslands of Argentina.

In spring, this species migrates north through South and Central America to reach their breeding sites in the Great Plains and Intermountain West of North America. Some birds even nest as far north as the Yukon or eastern Alaska, which translates into a one-way migration of 7,000 miles or more.

As summer fades and gives way to fall, Swainson’s hawks must migrate back south to reach their winter quarters. In Nebraska, the main movement of Swainson’s hawks occurs at the very end of September or during the first few days of October, often on the heels of a cold front. On certain days, especially in central Nebraska, dozens of Swainson’s hawks may be seen overhead or in open spaces, and sometimes groups can number into the hundreds or even low thousands. The largest groups are often observed in and around recently harvested soybean or corn fields where birds settle in to roost during the



If you are fortunate enough to encounter a flock of Swainson’s hawks in the fall, take some time to appreciate the variation in plumage of these birds.
JOEL G. JORGENSEN, NEBRASKALAND

evening and are present the following morning before they continue south. Groups of these birds often will follow the combines in the hopes the disturbance exposes easy prey, such as mice, voles and grasshoppers — yes, these hawks readily consume large insects.

If you are fortunate enough to encounter a flock of Swainson’s hawks in the fall, take some time to appreciate the variation in their plumages. This species has light, rufous and dark phases or morphs. Light phase birds, which are usually the most numerous, have dark upperparts, a white belly, a brown bib on the upper breast and a white area on their head near the

base of their bill. Dark phase birds are entirely dark brown, and intermediate birds are mostly dark, but also have variable rufous underparts.

The Swainson’s hawks’ migration only becomes more spectacular as they move south, and birds are increasingly concentrated as the landmass narrows through Mexico and Central America. Like most raptors, Swainson’s hawks rely on thermals of hot air that rise as the sun warms the ground. Migration over the ocean is not an option for these birds because there are no thermals. Flocks, or kettles as they often are called, may number into the hundreds of thousands until they reach South America.

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Ice Fishing 1984. What started as a winter camping experience for my family and friends morphed into a 40-plus-year fishing tradition. Early ice derbies were held on area lakes. Area dam sites and Hanson’s Lake near LaPlatte were popular as well. For a time, good friend Basil Lazure hosted the event at his place on Beaver Lake. For the past 10 years, we returned to Hanson’s thanks to the gracious hospitality of George and Patti Flott. The winner takes home a 5-gallon bucket full of prizes.
 Pictured left is me and right is Phil Franco as we prepare our ice gear for the event.

– Bob Hladik Sr., Omaha



Dead Timber fishing 1960s. A picture of me from 1966. As a high school kid from Dodge in the 1960s, I used to drive to Dead Timber State Recreation Area to fish. One day while fishing for crappie from a small boat, a bullfrog swam out and took my red and white bobber in its mouth, and then it swam back to shore. This happened a number of times so I started fishing for them. There were so many bullfrogs at Dead Timber. This is a picture of success. The best part was the taste of Mom’s frog leg dinner.
 – Dr. Dave Mlnarik, Elkhorn



Duck Hunting on the Platte 1929.
 (Above, left) The year was 1929, and it was a bountiful one for my grandfather’s family. This photo is of my grandfather, Lester Ernst (center), and my great uncles, Roy (left) and Werner (right) Ernst, on a duck hunt on the Platte River near Duncan. The crate on the ground, directly in front of my grandfather, holds a call duck used to lure waterfowl. And as you can see, the call ducks served their purpose well, as 14 ducks were collected.
 Even though I wasn’t alive at the time of this hunt, I have had the pleasure of using live decoys on a barnacle goose hunt outside Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Just like the photo taken in 1929 indicates, the live decoys were an effective way of attracting game.
 (Left) This photo was taken on the same duck hunt in 1929. It is of my great uncle, Roy Ernst, wading through the Platte River.
 (Above) My grandfather was an avid hunter as evidenced by this photo of him just after a late 1929 goose hunt. He passed on his love for hunting to my father, Game and Parks Commissioner Jim Ernst, and me. Now, I have passed that love on to my son and daughter.
 – John Ernst, Columbus

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



CAN YOU BITE ME NOW?

By Eric Fowler

Technology, including GPS, the internet and smartphones, has changed the way we do everything. Including the way we hunt. I never imagined that technology would almost kill me, though.

Through the years, technology has given me topographic maps to find my way around the backcountry and satellite images to find good locations for deer stands and decoy spreads. And now there are apps that combine all of those.

But one thing those apps won't show you is the location of really big rattlesnakes.

In August 2019, I was on my fifth and final day of trying to fill my cow elk tag in the Pine Ridge in northwestern Nebraska. The next day, elk or not, I was headed back to Lincoln. I was beat and decided to take a power nap before taking one last walk.

I woke up, loaded my supplies and pulled up my binoculars, looking toward the edge of a draw. "Holy cow!" Elk were on the other end of this pasture!

My rangefinder said they were 1,200 yards away. My hunting app said that put them on the right side of the fence, but barely. Thirty minutes later, I was cancelling my tag.

On the way back to the truck, I pulled out my phone to look at a satellite photo and see which finger I should take out of the bottom of the drainage to get me there the quickest. It was 70 degrees, and I had a lot of work to do to get that elk on ice.

That's when I heard it: the distinctive buzz and hiss of a

rattlesnake. I wish someone would have had me on video, because I would really like to know how high I jumped. And how loud I screamed.

When I turned around, I saw the biggest rattler I had ever seen, coiled and unhappy. It had been sunning itself on bare ground. After taking a quick, really bad photo with my phone — I didn't have time to waste and wasn't about to get close enough to get a good one if I did — I was headed up the hill.

I often wondered how much trouble I would have been in had I gotten bit. I was still more than a half mile from the truck and it was all uphill. I didn't have cell signal, and who knows how far up the hill I would have had to go to get it. And I was 24 miles from Chadron, most of it on dirt, including 2.5 miles of two-track ranch roads with two gates to open.

I asked my doctor about it when I was in for a physical last spring. He said, "Probably a lot." If I didn't exert myself on the way up the hill, started driving and met the ambulance on the way, I might have made it.

I'm not sure my elk would have, but if I had found someone who could go get it, at least I could have shared the waypoint with them.

You hear of people walking into poles, holes and traffic and getting killed because they had their noses buried in their phones. I wonder if I would have been the first to die from a rattlesnake bite for doing the same. I know one thing for sure. The next time I plan a route, I will do it standing still.



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