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DECEMBER 2025

The Next Generation of Hunters

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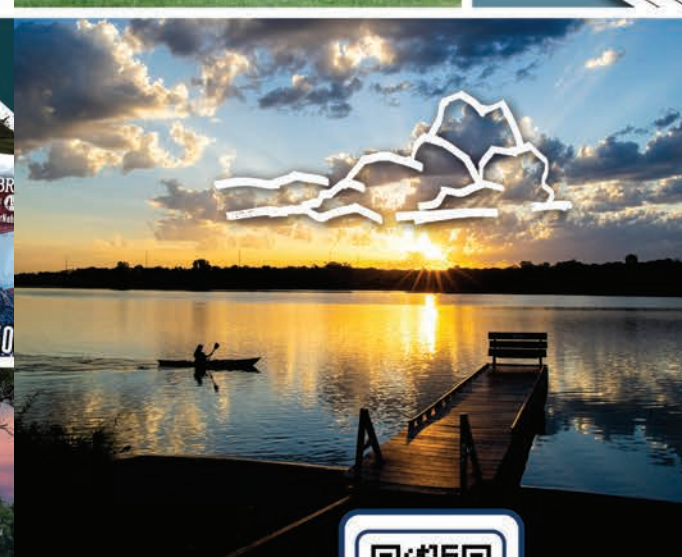
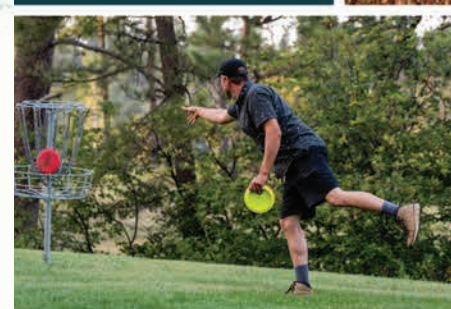
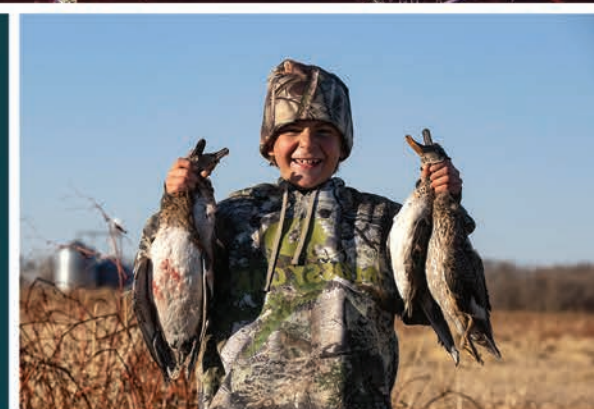


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Cover: Hunters, including Alexa Sedlak of Gretna, are utilizing modern technology and social media — tools not available to previous generations — to improve hunting and fishing success. See story on page 14.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

This page: Sunset at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in Cherry County.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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Published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission since 1926. The Commission is dedicated to the conservation and protection of all the state's natural resources and the people who use them.



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Headquarters/Southeast District Office
2200 N. 33rd Street Lincoln, NE 68503
Phone 402-471-0641

Northeast District Office
2201 N. 13th St. Norfolk, NE 68701
Phone 402-370-3374

Southwest District Office
301 E. State Farm Rd. North Platte, NE 69101
Phone 308-535-8025

Northwest District Office (temporary)
1317 W 3rd St., Alliance, NE 69301
Phone 308-763-2940

Bassett Office
524 Panzer St., Box 508 Bassett, NE 68714
Phone 402-684-2921

South Central District Office
1617 First Ave. Kearney, NE 68847
Phone 308-865-5310

Schramm Education Center
21502 W. Highway 31 Gretna, NE 68028
Phone 402-332-3901

Omaha Office
8495 Frederick Street, Omaha, NE 68124
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Magazine Staff

Communications Director Christy Firestone
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Editor Jeff Kurrus
Associate Editor Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley
Regional Editors Eric Fowler, Julie Geiser, Justin Haag
Contributing Editor Michael Forsberg
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Art Director Tim Reigert
Graphic Designer Mel Severin
Videographer Nick Sauvageau
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Advertising
For advertising information, contact: Shane G. Gilster, 402-742-0125 shanegilster@solotreemedia.com



River otters begin breeding through April. JON FARRAR, NEBRASKALAND

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Jeff Kurrus, Editor
Nebraskaland Magazine
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Photographs are also welcome.

ON THE MOVE

As large snowflakes fall, a mule deer courts does northeast of Chadron. A tumbleweed accentuates one of the buck's antlers.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



HOW THE NEXT GENERATION HUNTS AND FISHES

By Jeff Kurrus

“Why are you on your phone?” It’s a 21st century question countless parents have asked their teenage children.

“Checking the Reveal, Dad,” my 13-year-old said.

My tone changed entirely. “Seeing any bucks?”

The “Reveal” is our cellular camera that watches the woods we hunt in eastern Nebraska. It’s one of many trail cams on the market that sends pictures back to a hunter’s phone. It’s become a game-changer for those wanting constant intel about the areas they hunt. But it’s not the only way the next generation of hunters and anglers are accessing the outdoor world these days.

Online Forums

Angler Ryan Glatter, who catches as many big fish in Nebraska on public water as anyone I’ve recently encountered, lives on online forums. Starting with nefga.org, he listens to what other anglers say about public and private waters throughout Nebraska.

Even if users are posting about private waters, Glatter studies this information to catch fish on public waters. “I’ve seen posts where people are catching catfish and even used that information to catch largemouths in the same depths and locations on a lake.”

There’s another key to these forums as well: You need to add to the discussion, too. The more information anglers share, the more other anglers will be willing to share.

“I pay a lot of attention to these forums,” Glatter said. “These forums and using your online lake maps can help you become a really good stick.”

Weather

“My buddy, Carl, has 20 weather apps on his phone,” said longtime Nebraskaland contributor Todd Mills. “These apps decide so much of what we do when waterfowl hunting.”

Knowing the wind is crucial for waterfowl, Mills said. “It is the most important for us. Carl will send me wind graphs the night before we’re hunting, and he also passes along moisture information.”

This knowledge helps them decide hunting locations

and even decoy placement. “One of most important apps, Tempest, links us to the closest weather station in the area we’re hunting. Because the weather changes so quickly, this allows us the most up-to-date information.”

But there is no one-stop shop. “Each of these apps has its specialties,” Mills said. For example, Accuweather is great at giving long-term forecasts, he said, so he can see when there might be a migration push in the next couple of weeks. But it’s not that good if you want the best weather details 18 hours from now. He also has an app that tells them where the snowline is, which they will find and hunt just below it.

And these apps aren’t specific to waterfowl. “When the humidity is high, we’ve found that pheasants seem to

sit tighter.” This would then allow a hunter to manage their pointer or flusher when chasing these upland birds.

onX

“OnX has changed everything for me,” said Quail Forever Journal Editor Ryan Sparks. Known for listing public and private lands and who owns these lands, this app does so much more. “The first thing I do when planning a trip is check onX,” Sparks said.

The app allows users to include waypoints for hunting stands, for example, even offering suggestions on what locations should be hunted regarding moon phases, barometric pressure and wind.

“I can also use it to plant food plots,” he said. With a feature that can mark the path of the user, Sparks will drive the perimeter of a plot and learn the area’s total acreage, allowing planting to be that much more efficient.

“Plus, they put their money where their mouth is,” Sparks continued. “They’re a huge supporter of conservation and have helped open up hundreds of thousands of acres of land through Pheasant Forever’s PATH program, including Nebraska Community Access Partnership land in Nebraska.”

These technologies — and what’s around the corner — will continue to re-shape the next generation of hunters and anglers.



JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



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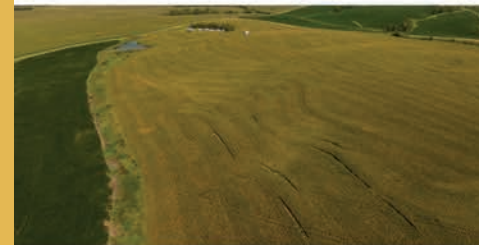
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Sometimes the holes that have already been cut are a hint as to where you can find fish that day, like these rainbow trout at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park's CenturyLink Lake. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

ICE-FISH WHERE YOU'VE NEVER FISHED BEFORE

By Julie Geiser

After ice-fishing a couple of sandhill lakes last winter with no luck, I thought about what I could have done differently to catch fish. If you're like me, you have limited time to fish, and every bit of information and preparation can help make trips on the frozen water more successful.

First off, I should have checked the Fishing Forecast and used the interactive maps on the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission website. These resources alone would have helped me target species in a particular waterbody as well as locate possible structures and lake depths.

Here are more ideas to make your trips more successful, ones I should have paid more attention to.

Mark the Spot

In previous years, I ice-fished in the same places I fished in the warmer months. I didn't get to that this year, and a little homework at these sandhill lakes would have done me some good before ice-over. Marking GPS locations of where you've caught fish is helpful for finding them during the rest of the year.

Also, downloadable lake maps from LakeMaster, Humminbird, Omnia Fishing, onX Fish or Navionics can help you find places to fish before you even leave the house.

At the least, take photographs so you can refer back to landmarks to re-create a great trip from the past.

When and Where to Fish

Fish during peak feeding times, like mornings and evenings, and in front of fronts. Pay attention to barometric pressure as well and the fish's response to these conditions.

Fish finders can also make ice-fishing a lot easier than simply guessing where the fish might be under the ice. But if you have to fish blindly, look for other anglers and fish nearby but not close enough to intrude. If no one is around, look for previously made holes and hope the maker had some luck in those spots. If someone is around, ask if they have had success.

You can also ask locals or baitshops and marinas about locations to fish. And if none of these options pan out, it might be time to purchase a fish finder.

Other Equipment

Bring tip-ups and several ice fishing rod/reel jigging combinations so you're prepared to catch larger fish such as catfish, bass and northern pike, along with smaller species like bluegill, perch and crappie.

Move when the fish aren't biting and be prepared to change lure and bait depth. Try different lures and bait for different presentations. You never know which presentations fish will like on any given day, so bring different lures and legal bait to switch things up if needed.

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HOLIDAY PARTY CONVERSATIONS

By Jeff Kurrus

In my personal experience of holiday gatherings going back 30 years, the topic has always turned to hunting with friends, family and soon-to-be hunting partners whom I just met that night.

But those new friendships can only be made if, when talking about our favorite outdoor pastimes, we have a decent idea of where to start the conversation.

It's good to know, therefore, that the Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports has done some of this work for us. In a recent survey conducted with 2,212 participants from across the country, the Council was able to gauge the public's views on hunting and shooting, not only providing critical information about these activities but also allowing folks who are trying to read the room exactly where to begin their conversations.

The first thing you should know is that an overwhelming majority of people, 73%, agree with legal hunting and 74% agree with legal recreational shooting. I've witnessed this as well. Whether I'm visiting schools, talking to someone on either side of the political aisle, or introducing myself at a community event, I've never been scorned for my love of hunting.

What I didn't know, however, is that folks do have their limits on what they deem acceptable. Unless you really know your audience, you might want to hold off on that story about the African elephant you shot. You're not going to get a lot of support in most rooms you enter. But deer ... 72% of folks you come across will be OK with you sharing your passion. Even more if you're in a small town across America or a Midwestern state like Nebraska.

But, this too comes with some considerations. While photographs of the big buck you shot seem like they would be the driving force to make a new friend, it might be more sensible to share your latest venison recipes or how you process your own harvest.

What if you're a bird hunter? As long as it falls within the

wild turkey or duck categories, you'll have a decent shot to win the room over (72% and 64%, respectively), but you're not going to attract a lot of new hunters to shoot doves (38% approval rate). More and more birders are entering the outdoor landscape these days, and many see this songbird as being exactly that, not a gamebird.

If you're hunting a high fence area, don't expect a lot of ooohs and aaahs. Only about 30% will approve, next to 40% for hunting over bait. But if you use a bow and arrow



Sharing the story of your latest duck-hunting trip will go a lot further with a holiday gathering audience than relaying details of your latest dove-hunting adventure.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

or a firearm when hunting (73% and 70%, respectively), judgment will be minimal.

Males approve of legal hunting more than females (85% vs. 63%), folks who live in rural areas (86%) are more approving than people from urban areas (65%), and people ages 35-54 (75%) approve more than those 18-34 years old (72%).

What do you do with these numbers? It's pretty simple. Be respectful of people's differences and remember what your goal is: to get others as excited about your passion as you are.

You don't do this with the photo of the 160-class Boone & Crockett you shot this firearm season, but you might just get another hunter in the field with the venison medallion recipe you just created.

For more information about the survey, visit cahss.org.

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GOOSE BOLOGNESE PASTA

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Bolognese is the meat sauce of all meat sauces. It’s hearty and rich, made by slow-simmering ground meat with a bit of milk for creaminess. This recipe is about concentrating and building flavors — and being patient. If you can, make the sauce a day ahead. It will save you from scrambling on the day you plan to serve it, and the overnight resting will improve the flavor. Bolognese also freezes well.

Serve this pasta with a dry red wine, such as Sangiovese or Barbera.

Servings: 4-6
Prep Time: 10 minutes
Cooking Time: 3 hours and 30 minutes
Ingredients:

- 1 pound of ground goose or duck
- 1 tbsp. olive oil
- 2 ribs of celery, chopped
- 1 carrot, peeled and chopped
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 3 ounces of pancetta, finely chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 cloves of garlic, minced
- 1/3 cup of tomato paste
- Pinch of nutmeg
- Pinch of red pepper flakes*
- 1 cup of dry white wine
- 2 cups of low-sodium chicken stock
- 1 cup of whole milk
- 1 pound of pappardelle pasta
- Grated Parmesan cheese, for serving
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

* If you have it, substitute red pepper flakes with 1 teaspoon of Trader Joe’s Italian-style Soffritto Seasoning.

1. Pulse celery, carrot and onion in a food processor until finely chopped.



A rich meat sauce made of ground Canada goose. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Set aside.

2. In a heavy-bottomed medium pot, heat 1 tablespoon of olive oil over medium-high heat. Break up ground goose into large chunks and add them to the hot oil. Allow this first side to form a nice crust before breaking up the meat with a wooden spoon and cooking through. Season with a pinch of salt and then transfer meat to a plate and set aside.

3. Lower heat to medium and add finely chopped pancetta to render and crisp. Then add the finely chopped vegetables and cook until most of the moisture has evaporated, and it starts to stick to the bottom of the pot, stirring often. Next, add bay leaf, minced garlic, tomato paste, nutmeg, red pepper flakes and a pinch of salt. Cook for 2 minutes, stirring often.

4. Return cooked goose to the pot. Pour in 1 cup of dry white wine and cook, stirring often, until the wine

is nearly completely evaporated, meanwhile using a wooden spoon to break up the meat as finely as you can. Drink the rest of the white wine.

5. Add 2 cups of chicken stock and 1 cup of whole milk. Bring to a simmer and then cook on low, uncovered, for 2 hours and 30 minutes or longer, until the meat is completely tender. Stir occasionally. Add more stock or water as needed to prevent the bottom from scorching. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

6. It’s best to cook only as much pasta as you’d eat at one sitting: Undercook pappardelle pasta in salted boiling water. In a pan, add sauce to taste and heat on low. Transfer undercooked pasta to the sauce, adding a bit of pasta water to loosen up the sauce to toss. The pasta will cook the rest of the way during this time. Season to taste. Serve immediately with lots of grated Parmesan cheese.

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Chasing the Lights

Photos and story by Erik Johnson

This example of the aurora borealis, also known as the Northern Lights, was taken near an old schoolhouse near Tekamah.
April 24, 2023.





A faint display in the winter sky near Crawford.
Dec. 30, 2016.

For much of my life, I believed that witnessing the Northern Lights was only possible at the farthest reaches of the world, where the ground stays frozen and the winter nights are long. I grew up seeing photographs in textbooks and viewing the shimmering lights on PBS documentaries, but I never imagined it could be a Midwestern experience. It wasn't until 2015 that I discovered, camera in hand, that on rare occasions we can witness the magical beauty of the lights right here in Nebraska.

To be fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of the aurora borealis, a few key components need to be at play.

First and foremost, the right mix of solar conditions must be present. The lights are caused by charged particles released by the sun that penetrate the Earth's magnetic field and interact with molecules in our atmosphere, causing a release of light.

In short, the lights are most common in the days following a large solar flare or storm on the surface of the sun. On some occasions, local news outlets will report an increased likelihood of seeing the lights, but many times these solar events go unreported by mainstream media. As such, I use a variety of forecasting resources found online, such as spaceweather.com and

softservenews.com, which report the current and future forecasted "KP" number.

The KP is simply a numerical scale for measuring geomagnetic activity that spans from 0 to 9; 0 being no activity and 9 being a major geomagnetic storm with strong auroras likely. It's also possible to sign up for alerts from these sources to receive an email or even text message if conditions are favorable. In my personal experience, I've found a KP of 6 or more is necessary to have a chance of visible auroras this far south.

The second most important data point to check is the "Bz," or the north-



Strong colors and a beam of green light were reflected on a small pond near Lakeside.
May 25, 2024.



A flashlight was used to illuminate my truck near Valentine. May 28, 2022.

south component of the interplanetary magnetic field (IMF). If the Bz is south (a negative number), the IMF is pointed southward and the orientation strongly couples with Earth's northward magnetic field, allowing solar wind particles to stream in and fuel auroras. If the Bz is north (a positive number), it generally blocks solar wind from entering Earth's magnetosphere, and

you might have a bust regardless of the KP number. In addition to the right atmospheric ingredients, a dark sky, free of moonlight and clouds, is crucial. This also means being far away from city light pollution that will drown out the night sky. I've had the best luck witnessing the lights in the Sandhills, far from any major cities. And, of

course, you'll want to look due north. The website darksitemap.com can be helpful to pinpoint locations that are untouched by city lights. My first aurora "chase" was spawned by a news report on June 22, 2015, which indicated the increased likelihood of activity the following two nights. The next evening, I set out with my camera and drove north of Lincoln

until I finally traded pavement for gravel near the town of Bee. Looking for a subject in the countryside to frame in a photograph, I eventually came upon a lone windmill in a cornfield and waited for the twilight to fade. As stars began to emerge, I noticed what seemed to be a vehicle's headlights cutting through dust over the horizon and heading in my

Camera Tips

A long camera exposure is one of the key ingredients in capturing the northern lights with a cellphone or digital camera. A long exposure allows the camera to "soak up" more light over time, making faint objects become brighter and visible, while also revealing more color and detail.

You can set exposure time manually on most smartphones. When in the dark, try setting the exposure to 5-10 seconds and holding the phone as steady as possible. Any movement during the exposure period will cause motion blur and potentially an unusable photo. The photos shared here were all taken with a Nikon digital camera and a tripod to keep the camera still.

With my camera, I prefer to set the lens' aperture as large as possible (the smallest f-stop number), turn the ISO up to 1,000+ (but not too high to avoid introducing too much grain into the image), and use a 5-10 second shutter speed. If the lights are moving rapidly, I might even opt for a 3-5 second exposure to help prevent the lines of color from blending into one another.

Sometimes, even if the aurora isn't visible to your eyes, you can take a photo of the night sky, and your camera will capture color invisible to the naked eye. I've had my camera register red or green hues in an otherwise "black" sky. It does take some experimenting and trial and error, but with a little practice, anyone can take breathtaking photos worthy of sharing.



An unexpected display on a friend's ranch near Hyannis. May 26, 2017.



The lights reflect in a windmill stock tank near Valentine. The long camera exposure also captured the movement of the windmill's blades. April 22, 2017.

direction. As the beam continued to rise vertically, I realized it wasn't the glow of human-made lights. I was witnessing the Northern Lights for the very first time in my life.

The single beam turned into several vertical lines that moved in unison from horizon to horizon. While the lights appeared white and pale green to me, my digital camera was able to pick up much deeper colors with a long exposure. I continued to photograph

the lights until the early hours of the morning when things finally began to quiet down.

After my first encounter, the most memorable experience I've had viewing the Northern Lights happened during an unexpected encounter on a friend's ranch near the town of Hyannis. As I settled in for the night in my truck's camper topper, I looked up into the darkness and thought the sky seemed far too bright for being

long past twilight. Allowing my eyes to adjust for a few brief moments, I realized the source of illuminance was moving fluidly through the sky, with picket-fence-like lines moving above the horizon from west to east. Being completely caught off guard only added to the excitement, and I could only imagine the awe that civilizations throughout history might have experienced when seeing the unexplained and unexpected anomaly.

The past few years have brought increased activity and many exciting opportunities for first-time viewers across our state. This is most likely twofold: The first, and most important, factor is that we are heading into the "solar maximum," or an 11-year cycle of solar activity that the sun undergoes.

During the solar maximum, there are more sunspots, solar flares and coronal mass ejections, which all contribute to more opportunities for bursts of

charged particles to make the journey across our solar system. I believe the second factor is wider access to improved technologies to capture these events.

Older cellphones did not have the ability to capture long exposures at night. Many phones can now be set to take 10 or more second exposures, which allow for capturing photos in dimly-lit environments that had previously been impossible without

the use of a digital camera.

This has led to a flood of stunning photos being shared on Facebook and other platforms after a night of aurora activity, and a fine time for a new photographer to introduce themselves to the Northern Lights. [📷](#)

Erik Johnson is a Lincoln-based photographer, often joined on adventures by his yellow Lab, Khloe. See more of his work at [@erikjohnsonphoto](#).



An old home near Crawford under a vibrant curtain of light. The KP index on this night reached 9 and is considered to be the strongest solar storm on Earth in the last two decades. May 24, 2024.

Outdoor Nebraska

By Tim Reigert

Step outdoors this holiday season. There, you can find multiple learning opportunities for young and old, archery for college students and hiking into the night with naturalists. [N](#)



Wildcat Hills Homeschool Programs

Dec. 18, 10 a.m. | Wildcat Hills Nature Center, Gering

The Wildcat Hills Homeschool Programs will meet once a month at 10 a.m. Mountain Time at the Wildcat Hills Nature Center. Certified staff lead various programs on ecosystems, animals, adaptations and habitats found only in western Nebraska. Activities focus on hands-on learning and observations. The programs are free, but a state park vehicle entry permit is required. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Contact the Nature Center at 308-436-3777 for more information. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Christmas Bird Count for Kids

Dec. 29, 10 a.m.-Noon | Schramm Education Center, Gretna

Learn more about the birds that call Schramm home during the winter while participating in the longest-running community science project in the country. During the event, participants can choose to help count birds indoors near the bird feeders, or on a 1-mile hike in the prairie or down to the Platte River. Participants who choose to hike should dress for the weather, as they will be going out in rain, snow or sunshine.

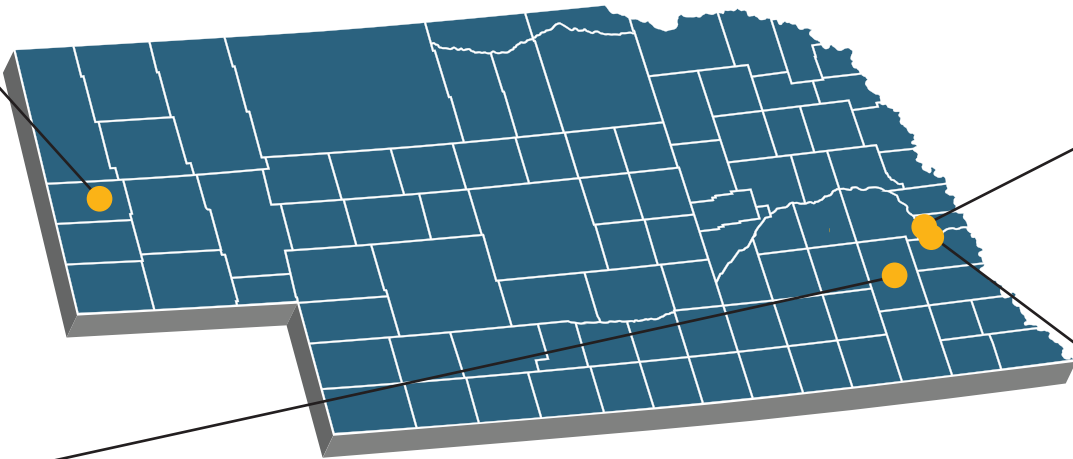
Participants are encouraged to bring their own binoculars, as a limited number of binoculars are available for loan. The cost to participate is \$5 per person (ages 3 and under free), which includes the program and admission to the Schramm Education Center after the program. Schramm Family Pass Members participate free. A state park vehicle permit is not required. JOEL JORGENSEN



Wise & Wild - Animal Tracks and Signs

Dec. 9, 2:30 p.m. | Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, Ashland

What happened here? Even though animals tend to avoid people, we can see the clues they leave behind. Nature enthusiasts ages 55+ are invited to attend the Wise & Wild program at Eugene T. Mahoney's newly renovated James Family Conservatory and Nature Center. This program is designed for seniors who love the outdoors and want to enjoy time in the parks. Join us on your own or bring along friends of any age. These programs are free, but a state park vehicle entry permit is required. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



College Night on the Range

Dec. 2 and 9, 7-9 p.m. | Turpin Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

College Night on the Range provides opportunities for college students to connect, unwind and explore shooting sports in a safe and friendly atmosphere. No experience with a bow? No problem. Instruction and equipment are available. Registration is not required, but students must show their ID. Check-in closes at 8 p.m., and the \$5 fee includes equipment use. NGPC LIBRARY

Night Hike at Schramm Park

Dec. 11, 7-8 p.m. | Schramm Park, Gretna

Join Schramm naturalists on a hike in the forest after nightfall. Meet at the pond trailhead and bring a flashlight or headlamp. Participants will hike for about one hour and walk about 2 miles from the Pond Trailhead along the Hackberry Trail to the full Red Cedar Trail loop. There are stairs at the trailhead and some elevation change. This is a free program, but a state park vehicle entry permit is required. GETTY IMAGES



THE VALUE OF Black Walnuts

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

My earliest memory of black walnuts is the sharp crack of a hammer striking their shells.

My dad loved black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) nutmeats in his brownies, a taste he likely developed during his childhood in Pawnee County, where this native tree is common. As a kid, sitting on the driveway, I would crack the nuts' tough shells with a hammer and dig out the kernels from their tangled chambers to fulfill my job in brownie making. Not all the kernels made it into the brownies; I ate plenty right out of the shell, savoring their sweet, earthy flavor.

In college, I lived with friends in Vermillion, South Dakota,

where tall walnut trees shaded the backyard. On autumn weekends, while grilling on the porch, we gathered fallen walnuts in their green husks and hurled them at a metal garbage can 30 yards away, scoring points for landing a walnut in the can or hitting the outside. It was great fun.

Later in life, as a botanist, I came to know black walnuts in a more professional light. During plant surveys and prescribed burns at Indian Cave State Park, I was awed by the occasional giant growing in deep, moist, never-logged ravines along the Missouri River bluffs. Their massive, branchless trunks, the envy of loggers, filled my mind with thoughts of primeval forest.



The morning sun highlights black walnuts in Walnut Grove Park in Millard. The grove was planted in the late 1800s and used as a picnic spot by the early 1900s.



Black walnut nutmeats, freshly removed from the shell.

Black walnuts are common in eastern Nebraska forests, providing food and habitat for wildlife. People especially prize their rich nuts and dark, beautiful wood.

The Walnut’s Delectable Nut

In eastern Nebraska, black walnuts grow in rich, moist forests along stream bottoms, low bluffs and upland ravines of the Missouri River and its lower tributaries. The species extends westward into central Nebraska along the Republican and Niobrara river drainages. On prime lowland sites, the trees can reach 100 feet in height, though 40 to 60 feet is more typical. Black walnuts have also been planted in groves for wood production and as yard trees, prized for the graceful beauty of their wide-spreading branches, dark bark and large, frond-like leaves.

The walnut’s wind-pollinated flowers appear in May alongside the leaves. Male blooms grow in drooping green



In spring, male walnut flowers appear in long, drooping clusters known as catkins.



In early autumn, walnuts ripen in thick green husks that fall to the ground and split open to release the nuts.

catkins 3 to 5 inches long, while the female flowers are smaller and less showy, appearing singly or in clusters of two to five. By October, the nuts, encased in thick green husks, ripen and begin to fall, often to the dismay of anyone with a well-manicured lawn. On the ground, the husks dry and decay, turning chocolate brown or black. Inside is a ridged black nut, and within that, a creamy to golden-brown kernel.

Squirrels flock to the crop, feasting on some nuts and burying the rest for the cold winter ahead. Woodpeckers, mice, other rodents and even black bears can pry or chew through the hard shells for the rich reward inside.

People have also long valued walnuts. Archaeologists often find nutting stones at Native American village sites. These flat stones, with shallow, small, bowl-shaped depressions carved into the surface were once used to hold walnuts or

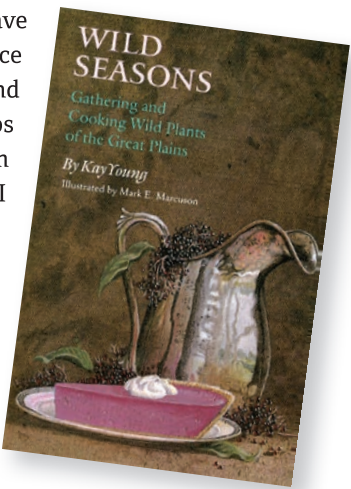
other nuts while they were cracked with another stone. Some tribes boiled the walnut meats and skimmed the oil for cooking or ate them raw, roasted or ground into meal for breads and porridges. In Nebraska, the Pawnee, Omaha and Ponca ate them raw, mixed with honey or stirred into soups.

Among Euro-American settlers, nutting parties were both a social event and a way to fill the pantry. On pleasant autumn days, neighbors and friends gathered in walnut stands, the adults collecting nuts while visiting, and the children playing beneath the yellowing trees. Many nuts were eaten on the spot, while the rest were taken home, likely in bushel baskets on the back of a wagon, and stored to be savored in cakes, pies and candies over the coming winter.

I usually gather walnuts about a month after they fall, giving the husks time to dry and darken. This is a gamble: If

the crop is small, squirrels may leave few behind. To husk them, I place the nuts on a brick or concrete and give the dried husks a few light taps with a hammer to loosen them before peeling them away. Then I crack the shell with firmer blows and pick out the nutmeats. It is slow work, but I find it relaxing and a bit nostalgic.

In “Wild Seasons: Gathering and Cooking Wild Plants of the Great Plains,” author Kay Young notes that the husk’s strong, pungent juice can seep



through the shell and alter the nut’s flavor. She removes the husks as soon as the nuts fall, while still green. Her method is simple: Put on old rubber-soled shoes, roll each walnut underfoot on a flat rock or concrete and then remove the husks by hand. Wear gloves, as the husks’ juices will stain your hands a lasting, ghoulish green-black. After husking, she allows the nuts to dry and cure for about a month before cracking. For those who want to skip the work, shelled black walnuts are available online at a reasonable price.

The taste of black walnuts is not for everyone, as they have a stronger flavor than the mild, store-bought English walnuts. Young finds they pair well with baked squash and yams, fresh or cooked fruit and yogurt-based salad dressings. Her book includes recipes for black walnut caramels, fudge, toffee, bread pudding and cookies, all fitting autumn and holiday treats.

The Beauty of Walnut Wood

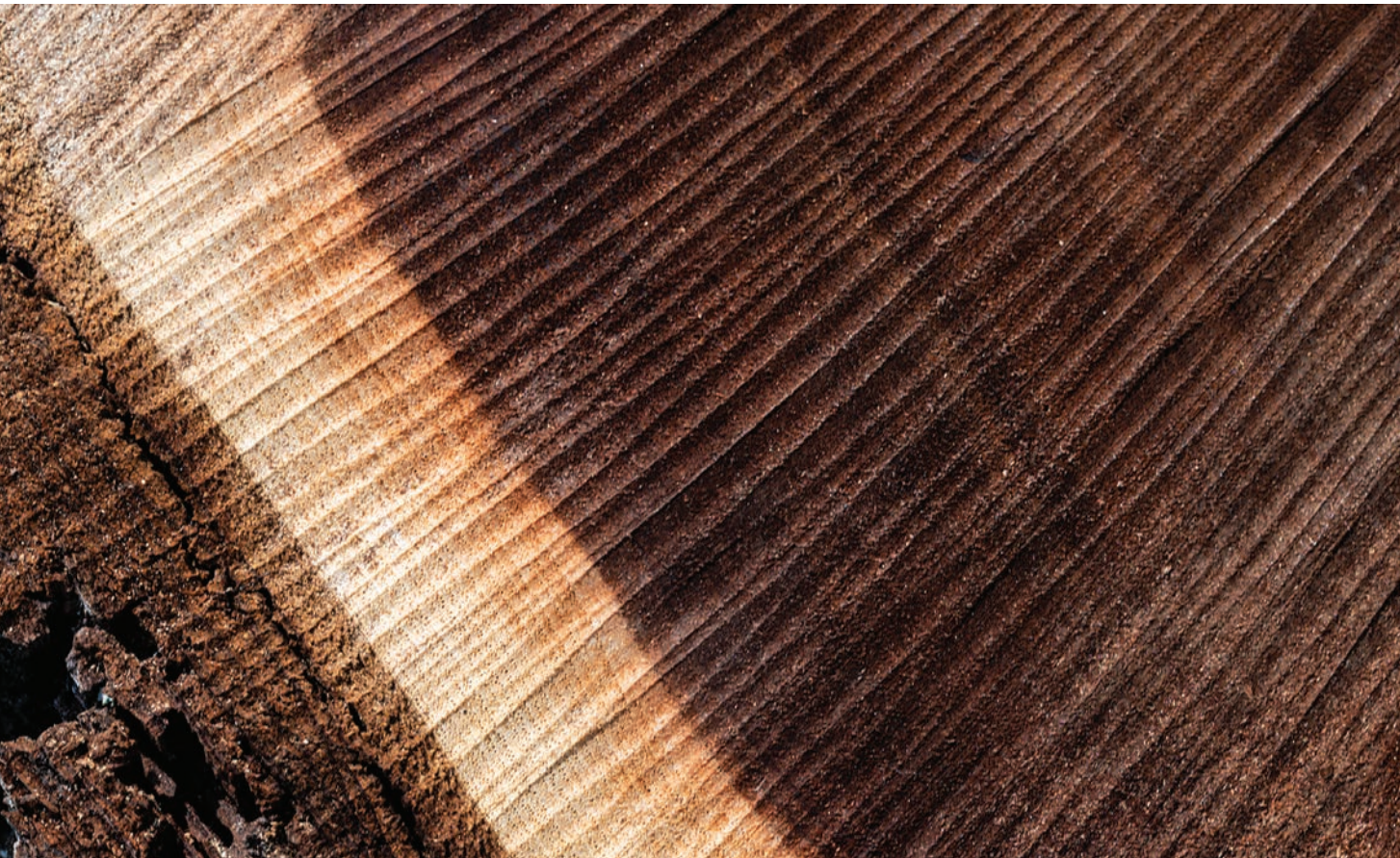
As early as 1610, colonists were shipping walnut logs from Virginia to England to be made into solid-wood furniture, which was often painted. Like the English, early Americans had little appreciation for walnut’s fine wood. They felled trees for more practical uses: fence posts, railroad ties and firewood. By the mid-1800s, when furniture styles improved and walnut was finally valued for its fine grain and rich color,

lumber-grade trees had already become uncommon in settled regions of the country.

During World Wars I and II, demand for walnut wood surged because the wood is strong, shock- and warp-resistant and easy to work with. Walnut was used to produce millions of rifle stocks, propeller hubs and other precision parts for the war efforts. Government workers went door to door in rural areas of the Midwest, including Nebraska, to locate and harvest trees. They struggled to find enough, and during World War II buyers roamed as far west as the Little Blue River and Sandy Creek valleys in south-central Nebraska, far beyond walnut’s prime range in the state. By the end of that war, harvestable walnut had become even scarcer, prompting foresters to encourage landowners to plant walnut groves for future harvest and as an investment for their grandchildren.

Steve Karloff, a Nebraska Forest Service district forester based in Omaha, said Nebraska’s oldest planted walnut groves now have trees with trunks 16 to 18 inches wide and are not yet ready for harvest. Unfortunately, many groves were planted in poor locations, such as dry uplands or worn-out farm fields, resulting in exceptionally slow growth.

He explained that Nebraska’s finest black walnuts for harvest grow in native forests on stream terraces along the eastern edge of the state, where rainfall is highest and soils are moist but well-drained. Competing fiercely with other



A cut trunk displays the walnut’s rich, dark heartwood, highly valued by woodworkers, along with the whitish sapwood and rough outer bark.



A fox squirrel, determined to reach the nutmeats within, gnaws its way through a tough walnut shell.

trees, forest-grown walnuts shoot straight and tall in a race to reach the canopy and sunlight. In the shade below, their lower branches receive little light, die and eventually fall away.

Trees prime for harvest have straight trunks for at least the first 18 feet, with few branches, knots or other defects, and are at least 24 inches in diameter a few feet above the ground. These rarities can bring landowners \$2,000 to \$3,000 apiece. The most valuable walnuts Karloff has seen in Nebraska grow in Hummel Park in north Omaha along the Missouri River. The largest of these giants have trunks 30 inches in diameter, and a logger once valued a single tree at \$10,000.

Most walnuts in Nebraska, however, are not prime quality and bring far less value. For example, an elderly neighbor of mine had about 40 walnut trees in a woodlot outside Aurora. The best of them had straight, branchless trunks for about the first 12 feet and were 15 inches in diameter. Most had narrower, crooked or knotty trunks. He contracted with a logger to cut the trees and was paid only a few thousand dollars, a price I thought was well below their habitat and aesthetic value.

Not long ago, when working with woodland owners, Karloff completed 10 to 12 walnut timber appraisals a year,

relying on a few southeastern Nebraska loggers to harvest the trees. Many of those loggers have since retired and not been replaced. Today, he does only three or four appraisals annually, with loggers now also coming from Iowa, Missouri and Kansas. He requires that loggers cut only a few of the larger, high-quality trees, leaving some for the future. Some low-quality, less valuable trees are also harvested.

Woodworkers have long favored walnuts from the drier Great Plains, where slower tree growth produces tighter rings and darker wood than in wetter regions to the east. There, faster growth yields wider rings and lighter-colored wood. Dark walnut is especially prized for veneer, a thin slice of wood applied to a base material such as plywood to give the appearance of solid walnut in furniture and cabinetry. Most prime American walnut logs, including those from Nebraska, are shipped to Europe and Asia, where they are highly valued and processed into veneer. Lower-quality logs from the state are milled locally into lumber for furniture, cabinets, gunstocks and other uses.

With no woodworking skills, my connection to black walnuts is personal. I admire the fine grain of my shotgun stock on autumn hunts, enjoy walks beneath the sprawling old trees at Walnut Grove Park in Millard and still crack and eat walnuts on my driveway. 🌰

Did the Sheriff Commit the Crime?

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

Who is the “bad man” in the two photos below? Is it the man in the striped overalls? Or is he just playacting while Buffalo County Sheriff Walter Sammons (in vest) and Kearney Police Chief John Trindle (in dark suit) congratulate themselves for roughing up suspicious characters?

Photographer Solomon Butcher said he made this photo in 1905. Nine years later, one of the men pictured was involved in a sensational trial that shocked the community.

Walter Sammons was elected Buffalo County Sheriff in November 1905. Twenty-seven years old, he was respected

as a tough and fearless deputy. He was also a Nebraska National Guard officer and a Spanish-American War veteran.

As a deputy, Sammons chased criminals and harassed suspicious characters. One day, he and Police Chief Trindle “picked up a couple of extremely suspicious young fellows at the Union Pacific depot,” said the Kearney Hub on April 15, 1905. In their pockets, the men had some ads for companies dealing in explosives. Since “neither of them could exhibit as much as a nickel,” a local judge sentenced them to 30 days in jail for vagrancy.

In those days, suspicion was often enough for an arrest. The

photos below look more like summertime but are probably based on similar circumstances.

After completing three terms as sheriff, by 1913 Sammons was working as a claim adjustor for the Union Pacific Railroad and had risen to lieutenant colonel in the Guard. He had a wife and 5-year-old daughter at home but spent part of Christmas Day drinking in a local bar with his buddy Delbert Smith.

Smith was a clerk at the local post office. He mentioned that a special package had arrived containing a \$5,000 bank transfer. It sat in the post office safe until the banks opened after the holiday.

**HINTS OF SCANDAL
IN SAMMONS TRIAL**

Testimony Charges Defendant with
Talking of Getting Friend
on the Jury.

SPOKE OF FIXING PROSECUTOR

Story of Witness Arnold Webbert
Temporarily Ruled Out by Court
on Theory that it Does Not
Relate to Issues.

Omaha Daily Bee, Nov. 20, 1914.



“A new fad of the Kearney sheriff and Chief of Police Trindle when a bad man strikes the city.”

Photo by Solomon D. Butcher, 1905. NSHS RG2608-0-2935

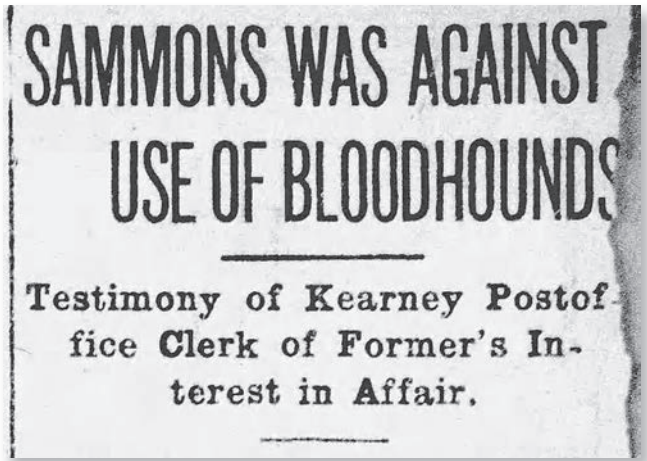


Another view with a different “bad man.” Butcher was known to stage photos re-enacting events, which he would then sell as postcards. NSHS RG2608-0-2935A



Sammons' trial was held in the Omaha Post Office, which doubled as a federal courthouse and office building. Built in 1898, the landmark building at 16th and Dodge streets was demolished in 1966. NSHS RG3348-6-388

But when the post office opened, the money was gone, a window was open and there were footprints in the snow. Sammons quickly volunteered to help. He spent six hours a day with postal investigators, advising against the use of bloodhounds, and suggesting a half dozen local residents as suspects.



Evening World-Herald, Nov. 19, 1914.

Postal inspectors thought the footprints and open window were red herrings. It looked like an inside job. Sammons named several post office employees but did not mention Smith.

Smith's wife noticed that he wasn't eating or sleeping. On Jan. 4, he confessed but said he had not acted alone. Sammons, he said, had asked him for the office key and safe combination and said they'd split the money.

Sammons was arrested later that day, but it was November before his case came to trial in federal court in Omaha. Out on bond, he assembled a powerful legal team led by a former U.S. senator and assisted by two judges.

The trial was a sensation. It seemed that half of Kearney was filling downtown Omaha streets, cafes, theaters and hotels. The defense said Smith stole the money himself, but multiple witnesses vouched for his whereabouts. And the footprints in the snow were too small to have been made by Smith but not by Sammons. Other witnesses cast doubt on Sammons' alibi.

Sammons remained cool. He testified that he had confronted Smith, appealing "to all that was good and manly in him to exonerate me by telling the truth." Smith, Sammons



Kearney Post Office under construction in 1907. Today the building is home to the Museum of Nebraska Art and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. NSHS RG2608-0-2455

claimed, began crying and said, "They made me tell that story, and I'm afraid to change it now for fear they'll hang me."

One witness said he'd overheard Sammons saying he didn't think Smith "would squeal on me." Then it came out that Sammons' team had paid at least one witness. Another defense witness was charged with perjury after lying under oath about his criminal record. Sammons was even accused of jury tampering.

The 10-day trial ended on Thanksgiving morning.

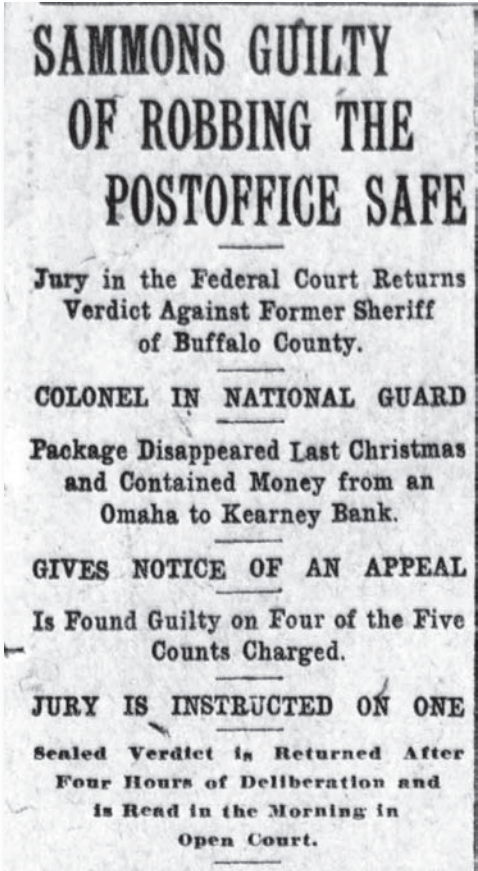
"I feel pretty good," Sammons said. The jury had deliberated only a few hours; that probably meant acquittal. But he turned pale and gripped the edges of a table when the verdict of "guilty" was read.

Smith had already pleaded guilty and said he was anxious to atone for his part. Most Kearneyites believed his story. Smith was sentenced to six months in jail and a \$500 fine. Students at the Kearney teachers' college offered to board with his wife to help her make a living while Smith was in prison. No such offer was made for Sammons.

Sammons' request for a new trial was denied. Thanks to his status and connections, he had been granted every presumption of innocence, along with the sort of legal representation that ordinary defendants could only dream of. Unlike the poor drifters he used to harass, he didn't look like a "bad man."

The former sheriff was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas. He died in California in 1942. 

Visit the Nebraska State Historical Society's website at history.nebraska.gov.



Omaha Daily Bee, Nov. 27, 1914.

Still Making Memories

A Family Tradition

Story and photos by Jeff Kurrus

“I once dated a girl who lived in that house,” Justin Stofer said from beside me as we drove the back roads of Fillmore County to our next bird-hunting spot.

The statement wasn’t braggadocios. Nor longing. It was simply information shared from my bird hunting guide last season.

But when he said it, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

While I consider myself a nonnative native of Nebraska, having lived here for more than 20 years, I grew up driving

the back roads of a township of sorts north of Memphis, Tennessee, named Shelby Forest. As a kid-turned-teenager-turned-adult, friends and I drove these back roads hunting and fishing on any number of public and private lands.

This past winter, I had the good fortune of re-visiting this area with my son, pointing to fishing holes that I remember fondly that he’ll never remember again and even taking him to our public duck hole that I hadn’t seen in 25 years.

So, when Justin made that simple throwaway statement as we drove the gravel roads of his youth, I began to listen



Justin Stofer, his German shorthair, Mojo, son Teegan, Soren Frahm, pudelpointer Penny and Shane Frahm after a day of hunting in Saline, Thayer and Fillmore counties. PHOTO COURTESY OF JUSTIN STOFER

Justin's German shorthair pointer, Trapper, retrieves a pheasant during a hunt near Geneva.





Ella Stofer, Justin's daughter, has continued the family's hunting tradition by deer hunting with dad each year and trapshooting. PHOTO COURTESY OF JUSTIN STOFER

even more intently, because I knew what it was like to have these memories. Yet, having not grown up here, I couldn't get enough of Justin's nostalgia that returns to him every hunting season.

"As a kid, one of my grandfathers was a gunsmith and the other owned a mechanic shop in Geneva," Justin said. "Dad says the only time he would shut the mechanic shop down was the opening day of pheasant season. It's been a long-standing tradition for us."

As a kid, Justin walked alongside his brother, Jon — 7 years older than him — on many bird hunts throughout the county. Being part of the farming community, where Justin eventually worked as a teenager, everyone knew everyone, and having places to hunt was easy.

"We hunted all the time," Justin said.

Like all hunters seem to have, Justin and his family nicknamed their frequently traveled areas. Farmer's, the Milligan Ponds, the Big Pasture, Konzak's and more. The same roads he traveled then are the same ones he travels now.

And the memories constantly resurface, like when the



Justin walks by a patch of sunflowers on an upland hunt in Fillmore County. Having adequate food and cover is crucial for the long-term health of Nebraska's upland bird populations.

family became dog owners for the first time.

"My buddy and I were driving out near Sandpiper WMA," Justin said. "I worked on a farm near there, and a Brittany [spaniel] came out of the ditch. No collar. No nothing. Either someone had dumped her or she got lost hunting. So, we loaded her up, took her to the vet and put up signs. But nobody claimed her.

"She had no training. But was a fantastic dog." Justin hunted that dog through his teens and 20s,

eventually buying a German shorthair and hunting over that breed since. But his shorthairs, Mojo and Trapper, aren't normal shorthairs.

They're gigantic. "The shorthairs came out of Minnesota from the Minnesota Horse and Hunt Club," Justin said. "As the story goes, the owner of the club went to Germany and grabbed the No. 1 stud there and brought him back to America. My dogs trace back to him. They're just bigger."

When we hunted, it was clear why he loves these dogs so much. They cut through habitat — regardless of height — with ease, and they can hunt long. This is beneficial to Justin because he can walk — I mean, really walk.

As I trailed him with a camera through field after field near Geneva, he reminded me of the 6-foot-5 hunting partner I had as a kid, working field edges and plum thickets for quail just like he does here.

In each instance, keeping up is the primary goal.



Justin hunts many of the same places he did as a kid. This season, because of the weather conditions throughout the spring and summer, he has high expectations for Nebraska's upland hunting.

“This year we put on 18 miles at the Sharptail Shootout,” he said, the most unsurprising fact of the day. Each year, that number grows into the hundreds of miles. And he and his friends have most of the ground to themselves.

“You’ll see a few guys hunting early in the season,” he said. “But I can tell you that before Covid, no one was hunting. Now, you have to be at your spot at 4:30 or 5 a.m. on opening morning.

“You’re an hour and a half from Lincoln out here,” he continued. “A lot of guys will even come without a dog. But once you get later in the season, there’s no pressure.”

Those are the times that Justin and his buddies begin their own management strategies. “We won’t hunt coveys under

10 birds,” he said. “And we’ll stay in touch with each other to tell what we do at a certain place.” This ensures that, given good weather and no further loss of habitat, there will be birds around the following season.

“The last three to four years have been really good on private ground,” he said, “but plum thickets are still being taken out on places. This is great habitat that has to stay. A couple of years ago, public ground was great.”

Habitat remains the crucial linchpin to everything Justin loves to do each fall. “Since I was a kid, our spots have been cut in half for production ag. Those days, you could drive down the road and see birds in the ditches. We had more milo around. Better habitat. Better cover. And fencerows getting

torn out makes a difference.”

But the weather has remained in his favor. “We had a good summer,” he said. “We were dry in early June. That allowed chicks to hatch, and they didn’t have to fight the cold, damp rain every day. And not a ton of hail. But we had plenty of rain the rest of the year to help with grass for cover and bugs for food.”

Because of these conditions and the fact that hunting remains such a huge tradition in his family, Justin knows he won’t be the only hunter in the field this fall. He will continue to hunt with his brother and his English pointer throughout the season, and his 73-year-old dad will still run blocker for their group.

Plus, there are the additions of his 16-year-old daughter, Ella, and his 14-year-old son, Teegan. “We started them as soon as they could come and walk,” he said. “Then we started youth hunts.” They were put on wild birds immediately, and Ella and Teegan have even taken shooting a step further by trapshooting for the Ashland Gun Club and even competing in the state championship in Doniphan.

Just like the days when his granddad would shut down the mechanic shop in Geneva to hunt on opening day, Justin has kept his family’s hunting tradition alive. Each opening day is a holiday. Each gravel road is a reminder of an old memory and a chance at a new one, just like every bird that rises from the point of one of his dogs. 🦋

Walleye Movement at Lewis & Clark

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

A 4-year study of walleye and sauger in Lewis and Clark Lake and the Missouri River above it confirmed what biologists had suspected: A high number of larval and young fish, and some adults, are flushed through Gavins Point Dam. It also revealed some interesting movement patterns of adult fish and the importance of deep-water habitat in the reservoir to wintering walleyes.

The study was a cooperative effort between South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Will Radigan, who conducted the field research for his doctoral study in UNL's School of Natural Resources, implanted transmitters into the abdomens of 136 adult walleyes and 82 saugers captured in four segments of the 69 miles of river and reservoir between the Fort Randall and Gavins Point dams. He then tracked their movements from 2021 to 2024 by placing 16 receivers every 5 miles throughout the system.

Radigan found the movement of the tagged fish varied according to sex, species and where they were tagged. Of particular interest were some walleyes tagged below Fort Randall Dam that had migrated in the fall to deep water near Gavins Point Dam, where they overwintered before swimming back

upstream in the spring. One tagged fish made that round trip twice.

"What we saw with the science mirrored what the fishing guides saw just going out there and fishing every day," Radigan said. "They catch fish there, and our telemetry told us the fish are going right there in the winter, too."

Other findings included:

- Many walleyes gather to spawn below Fort Randall Dam and in an area near Santee.

- Up to one-third of the sauger tagged in the delta in the upper end of Lewis and Clark Lake never left the delta and seemed to spawn there as well, indicating that they have the food and habitat they need there.

- Approximately 22% to 30% of walleyes and sauger were site residents, moving less than 6 miles from where they were tagged during the study.

- Sauger used up to 43 miles of the study area.

- Female walleyes tagged below Fort Randall used more of the study area than males.

- Walleye tagged near Santee utilized more of the study area (approximately 39 miles) than walleye tagged elsewhere (18 miles).

- Two fish tagged in the same location exhibited opposite behaviors: One moved between the dams, and one



University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate student Will Radigan pilots a boat as his assistants cast a trawl net to sample larval fish in the spillway below Gavins Point Dam.

stayed close to where it was tagged.

Additionally, 12% to 19% of the tagged walleye and 10% to 15% of tagged sauger were harvested each year, rates similar to what has been documented in studies on Lake Oahe.

"I had one fish that got caught by anglers 3 or 4 different times, which is kind of crazy because I didn't tag that many fish," he said.

Just six of the 218 tagged fish passed

through Gavins Point Dam. "That surprised me," Radigan said.

However, using trawl nets set at various depths weekly between May and September below Gavins Point Dam, Radigan also found that roughly 8 to 16 million larval fish of 18 species were flushed through the dam each year. Of those, 90% were freshwater drum, and 14,000 to 75,000 were walleye and sauger. Radigan said that

was 10 times higher than the number of fish flushed through Fort Randall Dam, which has a lower exchange rate and releases water from greater depths.

That confirmed what biologists in both states already knew: Lewis and Clark Lake is a wide spot in the Missouri River, with the volume of water being replaced, on average, every seven days. With that water goes

some fish. During historically high releases in 2011, turnover occurred every 1.5 days. That figure was nearly matched during the flood of 2019. With high flows, the number of fish flushed through the dam is much higher.

"We find that when we have high water years, where releases through Gavins are over 30,000 or 35,000 CFS, our gill net catch in Lewis and Clark Lake drops, and there's a pretty



Mike Hamsa of Yutan holds a walleye he caught on Lewis and Clark Lake. Hamsa was one of several fishing guides who helped Radigan locate, or even catch, walleye to tag for the study, as was the case with this fish.

Fish Tagging

While the receivers were removed from the system at the end of the study and transmitters no longer work, there are still up to 180 tagged fish swimming in the reach. While some of those may have lost the metal jaw tags they received, anglers might find a transmitter while cleaning a fish. Those who do can still report it to the Game and Parks fisheries staff in the Norfolk office, SDGFP staff in Chamberlain, or by emailing Will Radigan at wradigan2@huskers.unl.edu to learn when and where the fish was tagged.

significant relationship to that over the last 25 or 30 years,” said Jeff Schuckman, district fisheries biologist for Game and Parks. Conversely, when releases are low, biologists catch more fish in their sampling nets in the fall. That was the case in the mid- to late-2000s when releases from the dam averaged less than 20,000 CFS, and biologists sampled 3 to 6 times more walleye than they did from 2011 to 2021.

Releases were below normal during the study, and it appears that fewer adult fish move through the dam during those conditions. “It’s hitting them when they’re little larval fish and the young of the year,” Radigan said. “It’s the cumulative effect through all of the different life stages that is the big deal.”

The study reinforced a decision by both states to stop stocking walleyes

in the system. From 2014 to 2023, more than 40.3 million walleye fry and 9.2 million fingerlings were stocked in the lake to help it recover from the 2011 flood. Sampling showed those fish contributed little to the population.

“We had one year where the stocked fish contributed heavily, and normally it’s during a high water year, but most years we have more than enough natural reproduction up there to supply our recruitment,” Schuckman said.

The study won’t lead to any changes in how either state manages the river or reservoir. Movement data showed that biologists are sampling in locations that accurately measure the subpopulations of walleye. It did show that it will be difficult to accurately count sauger, many of which remain in the delta.

“If we could figure out the logistics

on that, it might be a good way to get some information, but boy that’s difficult,” Schuckman said, pointing to the braided nature of the river in the delta and the area it covers that makes it hard to cover with gill nets or electrofishing.

Schuckman said he was most surprised by the number of fish that moved out of the reservoir to spawn in the delta or beyond, a fact that explains the difficulty they had helping Radigan capture fish to tag

there during the spring. “In most of our reservoirs in the state, you go to the dam in the spring of the year and it’s full of spawning walleye,” he said. “That is not the case in Lewis and Clark Lake.”

Radigan said area fishing guides were instrumental in the study, helping Radigan catch fish to tag with rod and reel or telling him where they could catch them with electrofishing gear.

With low releases in recent years,

biologists’ catch rates have improved significantly, as has the fishing. “We’re building numbers, and fishing in 2025 is indicative of that,” said Schuckman. “Life is good. They caught a lot of limits of walleye out of Lewis and Clark Lake this spring.”

Radigan and Schuckman agree anglers need to enjoy catching and keeping those fish now. “We’re one high-water year away from losing a bunch of them again,” Schuckman said. 



Game and Parks biologists Jeff Schuckman and Phil Chvala wait as Radigan sutures a walleye after implanting a transmitter for his study.

Addicted to Eagles

Ogallala woman enamored by bald eagle photography

Story by Eric Fowler, Photos by Teri Elmshauser

Unlike her husband, Jake, Teri Elmshauser can't wait for Lake McConaughy to freeze over. For Jake, the ice means there will be no more walleye fishing until spring. For Teri, it means she will soon be making the short drive to the spillway below Kingsley Dam, where she can feed her "addiction" — photographing bald eagles.

Elmshauser lives 15 minutes from Lake Ogallala, which, in the coldest of winters, can host hundreds of bald eagles. On any given morning when the eagles are around between December and March, you are likely to see her there, sitting in her shiny red photo blind, a Jeep named Rubi. With her huge camera and lens resting on

a sandbag in the open window, and a heated blanket in her lap and slippers keeping her warm, she waits for the action: eagles swooping down to feed on fish that are flushed through the dam's hydroelectric plant. If you frequent Nebraska photography sites like Nebraska Through the Lens on Facebook, you've seen her work.

Her interest in photography began as a child in Lincoln. "Grandma used to waste a lot of money on those little 110 cameras and film," she said. Her interest faded growing up, but was rekindled in 2006, when she bought a basic DSLR with a basic 300mm lens and took a photography class. Soon after, she became enamored with eagles but is quick to say those first



Teri Elmshauser of Ogallala spends every winter morning she can sitting in her red photo blind named Rubi photographing bald eagles at Lake Ogallala.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



A pair of bald eagles fight over a walleye one caught in the spillway below Kingsley Dam.



Elmshauser traveled to Alaska to capture this photo of an eagle feeding on carrion.

photos weren't great. "I have taken so many bad pictures, it's unbelievable," Elmshauser said. "I used to be happy to get them just sitting in a tree in sharp focus. But you just keep going.

"It's been a slow progression of better equipment, getting a little bit more comfortable with camera settings and learning."

Following her most recent camera upgrade, Elmshauser now refers to herself as an amateur with professional equipment. "It's embarrassing, a little bit, but it's OK," she said. "I work hard and spend my money on stuff like this. It's my hobby."

The camera is only part of the equation. Through many winters, countless hours and thousands of images, Elmshauser has learned how to track the birds in flight, anticipate their next move and capture tack-sharp images of eagles or, in their absence, gulls snatching fish from the water. "Lots of good practice comes

from the gulls," she said.

The result is beautiful photos of eagles, some perched, some in flight and some snatching fish from the water, filling the walls of her home. Elmshauser prefers wildlife photography to landscapes. On weekends, when the eagles are done feeding for the day, or when they aren't around, she cruises backroads between Lewellen and Paxton looking for subjects.

During the summer, she and Rubi cruise the beaches at Big Mac watching the "different kind of wildlife" that flocks to the lake. And with her husband, she has traveled to photograph elk in Rocky Mountain National Park, sandhill cranes on the Platte River and bears and eagles in Alaska.

Only Alaska tops Lake Ogallala for eagle photo ops, which is why, in the winter, she stays close to home. "It's kind of hard to venture out when you've got this," she said.

Most weekday mornings provide good photo opportunities, Elmshauser said. She arrives before sunrise and stays until she goes to work. She would come after work, too, if it wasn't already dark. She will go out on weekends, but they usually aren't as good, partly due to people coming and going from the eagle viewing center, including some who ignore the signs and walk the banks of the spillway, deterring birds from feeding. She once saw people try to climb a tree that eagles were sitting in. "You can't pet the eagles, and they're not going to stay there, so I'm really not sure what you're doing," she would've liked to tell them.

Every day is different, be it the light or the action, which is part of the appeal. The best action, by far, is when water and fish are flowing through the hydroplant, producing what must sound like a dinner bell to the eagles.

"It's unexplainable what happens when the water turns on and it's

cold like this," Elmshauser said last February. "They just go crazy feeding."

With so many eagle photos in hand already, she tries to limit her exposures to the best action. But Elmshauser said a successful day has little to do with getting the perfect photo or the keeper rate for the day.

Seeing high interest rates and the cost of living take their toll on everyday people in her job as a loan officer at a local bank can be stressful, she said. Being outdoors and engaged with nature helps her let go, even if it is just for an hour before work. "Photography is my check-out zone, if you will," she said. "It's why I go out in the mornings before my 8 to 5 and on weekends. It gets my mind in the right place to tackle the day. "A sweet photo is just the cherry on top." 🍒



An eagle lands in a dead tree next to Lake Ogallala.



An eagle rides its 6-foot-plus wingspan as it scans the spillway for fish.



An eagle is reflected in the spillway as it snatches a freshwater drum from the water.

Eagle Viewing at Lake Ogallala



Visitors watch eagles and other fowl from the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District eagle viewing facility at Lake Ogallala. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

During the winter, eagles roost in cottonwoods around Lake Ogallala at night. They take flight in search of fish in the spillway before sunrise, and again in the evening before returning to roost. When they aren't feeding, eagles rest in trees or on the ice around the lake, and on Lake McConaughy above it.

You will find the most eagles at the lake during the coldest winters, when lakes and rivers are frozen and the spillway might provide the only open water in the area. The best viewing and photo opportunities occur when the Central Nebraska Public Power and

Irrigation District hydroelectric plant is running and both water and fish are flowing through the dam. That schedule, however, is highly variable during the winter when the district is holding back water to refill Lake McConaughy for the next irrigation season.

Central's eagle viewing facility overlooks the spillway. It is open on weekends, typically beginning in late December through February. Binoculars and spotting scopes are available, and educators can answer questions. For more information, go to CNPPID.com, or call 308-284-2332.

An eagle examines an alewife it plucked from the spillway.



STAKE SAVER

Securing hunting blinds on hard ground

By Justin Haag

As proficient as hub-style blinds are at providing concealment from wildlife, the stakes tasked with keeping them from blowing across the prairie are often no match for the hard ground encountered at certain times or places in our region. A hammer helps drive the stakes into hard ground, but too often mangles them in the process. Using the same concept as a drivers used to pound metal t-posts, a simple, easily-constructed tool can relieve stakes from the abuse of pounding. First, find or buy a length of threaded metal pipe and a screw-on cap to match. Then, get a 3/8-inch steel rod that is at least 6 inches longer than the pipe. After screwing the cap

over one end of the pipe, insert the rod into the other. Grasping the pipe and slamming it up and down over the steel rod creates a pilot hole for the stakes. After nearing a depth the length of the stake, or reaching softer soil, the rod can be removed and the stake inserted in its place. Secure it by tamping with the cap end of the pipe. The size of the driver largely depends on user preference. A big, heavy pipe will make for quick pounding, but will not be transported as easily as a smaller setup. By keeping the lengths shorter than that of your blind's bag, you can slip it in there for easy carrying. When cutting the rod to length,

grind one end to a sharp point to make for easier driving. A case made of capped PVC pipe will ensure the two pieces stay together and that the rod's point does not pierce the bag's fabric. Of course, the pounding does make noise that may scare wildlife, just as a hammer would, so set the blind out in advance when possible. Whether trying to harvest a deer over frozen ground in winter, or a pronghorn on hard, dry clay in late summer, the concealment provided by a hub-style ground blind is surely advantageous. By carrying this tool, hunters can ensure their stakes are deep enough that the blind will stay where they put it.



Use a metal pipe and steel rod to create a pilot hole before securing stakes on hard ground. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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SETTING BIG GAME SEASONS A BALANCING ACT

By Eric Fowler

Though big game seasons are still open, Nebraska Game and Parks wildlife biologists have been collecting information for most of the year that will help them set the 2026 deer, elk and pronghorn seasons.

Biologists use the information gathered from many sources, including hunters and landowners, to formulate Big Game Recommendations, the guidebook for recommended permit quotas, bag limits and unit boundaries. These recommendations are then considered and approved by the Commission each April.

Biologists rely heavily on data gained from mandatory harvest reporting during the previous seasons, including whether there were meaningful changes in hunter harvests in a particular unit.

They also factor in buck-doe and doe-fawn ratios observed during annual roadside surveys of pronghorn in August and mule deer in December, and whether disease or weather has adversely affected any species.

Input from landowners, who carry the burden of crop or property damage when deer, elk or pronghorn numbers are high, is also a factor in setting the seasons.

“We’re 97% privately owned land in Nebraska, so landowner input is always going to weigh heavily,” said Luke Meduna, Game and Parks’ big game program manager. “In general, landowners are going to want fewer animals, and hunters are always going to want more.”

“We have to try and balance those desires.”

Meduna noted that balance can be difficult to achieve, as even landowner preferences “can change drastically by fence line. Some landowners want tons of deer and tons of elk, and the neighbor next to them wants zero.”

Everyone — landowners, hunters and interested parties — can share their feedback for consideration in big game

recommendations during one of 12 in-person or virtual meetings hosted in December and January. (Find a meeting at [Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://calendar.outdoornebraska.gov).)

Following those meetings, agency staff in each district discuss the data, the input they received and their observations throughout the year.

“They boil that all down and formulate their recommendations for each of our units and each of our permits for deer, elk and antelope,” Meduna said. They may suggest permits increase, decrease or stay the same to support populations, age or sex ratios in each big game species.

Their recommendations are then considered during the annual Management Council meeting. Over the course of three days, conservation officers, wildlife managers and permit staff review recommendations for each of the 44 deer, elk and pronghorn management units and settle on quotas to be advanced to the Commission. These are published in the Big Game Recommendation booklet, which is made available to the public in March at [OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://outdoornebraska.gov).

The public can provide input on these recommendations

prior to the Board of Commissioners’ vote at their April meeting.

“It’s hard to make everybody happy,” Meduna said. “Sometimes if both sides are mad at us, we know we’re probably about where we need to be.”

For those experiencing wildlife damage issues to their crops or other property, Game and Parks is here to help. Depredation biologists work with landowners to mitigate problems, Meduna said. But when numerous landowners are experiencing an issue in one area, biologists know harvest numbers likely need to be adjusted.



A bull elk chews on a young ear of corn, one of many he pulled from the stalk in a field in Garfield County.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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NEBRASKA
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COLORFUL WINTER SKIES

By Grace Gaard, Outdoor Education Specialist

If you've stepped out into a cold winter evening just as the sun is dipping behind the horizon, you may have found your breath catching at the sight of the colors in the sky — hazy purples and blues along the edges of the landscape, fiery pink and red beams arcing across the clouds.

The vibrancy of these winter sunsets isn't your imagination. Science can explain this fiery phenomenon.

The Why Behind the Colors in the Sky

We all know that the sun shares its warmth and light with us throughout the year. Each ray of that light contains all the colors of the rainbow within it.

As these rays of sunlight travel through the Earth's atmosphere, they come into contact with various molecules — such as nitrogen, oxygen and other particles — in the air.

These "collisions" cause the light rays to ricochet in unique ways depending on their colors and wavelengths. This is called Rayleigh scattering, and the wavelength essentially determines how far the color needs to go for us humans to be able to see it. This is why not all colors will reach the ground in the same concentrations.

When blue and violet light come into contact with the Earth's atmosphere, their light scatters more readily in all directions above us, leading to lower concentrations of blue and violet light reaching Earth. This is why our sky looks blue and the Earth appears sheltered by a blue dome from certain angles.

When the sun is setting, our planet is rotating away from the sun, meaning light must travel *even farther* to reach our eyes. Coming into contact with more molecules in the atmosphere leaves blue and violet light scattering away from our eyes, while colors like red, orange, pink and gold steal the show.

Ingredients for a Colorful Winter Sunset

Nebraska's outstanding winter skies are created by a

few key elements: the weather, Nebraska's location in the Midwest and the angle of the Earth.

The weather in Nebraska can be unpredictable, but as we head into December, the consistency of those cooler temperatures evens out. By January, the air is dry and cold. This lower humidity, combined with less dust and pollen

particles compared to warmer days, produces a crisp sky with minimal barriers for light and color to pass through.

We have pretty clean air in the Midwest. When a polar vortex comes through, icy, clean air makes its way southward. That clear atmosphere means that light has fewer barriers, and more colors will reach our eyes.

Finally, the angle at which the sun sets

is different in the winter, especially near the winter solstice. During this time of year, the Earth's Northern Hemisphere is tilted away from the sun. Though winter nights come sooner and last longer, this tilt of the Earth results in the rays of the sun stretching out across the sky longer. Essentially, the setting of the sun lingers, which adds to drawn-out sunsets.

One last feature that makes these sunsets even better: clouds. With the right blend of temperature gradients and cloudy systems moving off to our west, these winter skies can become the perfect tapestry of texture and light, a colorful display that sends us into the dark night with the warmth of those colors in mind.

See for Yourself

A little research into when the sun sets in your location, humidity levels and cloud cover can indicate if the conditions will be just right for a colorful winter sky.

However, if research doesn't appeal, who doesn't love walking out to the surprise of a saturated sky as they leave work or the grocery store?

On these long, dark nights, find solace in the sky. Though the weather is cold and the days are short, the gift of a winter sunset can carry us through.



A sunset where the Oglala Grasslands meet the Pine Ridge. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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WHERE INSECTS MEET THE LAW *A look at forensic entomology*

By Erin Bauer, Entomology Lecturer, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Throughout history, insects have interacted with humans in several beneficial ways, including as pest predators, pollinators and even in pop culture. They can also play an important role in many legal proceedings in estimating time since death or postmortem interval, manner and location of death, and environmental factors related to human or other animal victims found at a death scene.

The life stages of insects, such as blow flies or carrion beetles, found on a corpse can give clues about how long the person has been dead and help build a timeline of the crime. Insects may also provide clues about other aspects associated with an investigation (i.e., fly specks, suspect DNA). The study of how insects and related arthropods can aid in legal investigations is known as forensic entomology.

The use of insects in homicide or other death investigations comprises a category of forensic entomology known as medicocriminal entomology. This is what many people are most familiar with (often from watching shows like CSI) and likely imagine when they hear “forensic entomology.” However, this area can also include missing person cases, abuse or neglect cases (e.g., maggot infestations of wounds in nursing home patients), sudden death cases, traffic

accidents with no immediate cause (e.g., a wasp released into a car before the victim drove it), and the criminal misuse of insects, such as in biological warfare.

In addition, forensic entomology can also apply to civil investigations, such as urban or stored product entomology. In urban entomology, a forensic entomologist might get involved in civil lawsuits involving structural or other pest insects. Examples might include termites or carpenter ants affecting the value of real estate, stable flies breeding in feedlots and biting livestock, or maggot infestations in mortuaries.

In stored product entomology, a forensic entomologist may be called in to investigate disputes over insect or insect parts found in food or food products like cereal or flour. Examples of this often include claims that insects found in food products resulted in a person's illness, resulting in lawsuits against the food production company. This area may also apply to complaints of insects found in canned or frozen goods, maggots or other insects discovered in restaurant fare, or insects planted fraudulently.

Overall, forensic entomology encompasses many diverse areas where insects and the law intersect in both civil and criminal cases.



Insects such as carrion beetles lay their eggs on dead organisms to rear their young, therefore contributing to the decomposition process. Development of insect larvae can help estimate time since death in homicide cases. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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HOW ANIMALS FIND FOOD IN WINTER

By Monica Macoubrie, Outdoor Education Specialist

Although the chilly months can be harsh, the resourcefulness of Nebraska’s animals is to be appreciated.

Hoarding and Stashing

Species such as squirrels, moles, birds and shrews get ready for winter by storing food in the warmer months, a behavior known as “caching.” Gray squirrels, for example, collect acorns, walnuts and other nuts, burying them in various spots. Impressively, they rely on memory and scent to recover hidden food, even months later.

Another mammal that stores food, though in a different way, is the short-tailed shrew. They mostly hunt insect larvae, and their saliva contains a toxin that, when injected through a bite, paralyzes the prey, allowing shrews to store it in their nest for later meals.

Foraging Through the Snow

Deer and elk remain active year-round and continue to search for food even when snow blankets the ground. Their broad hooves allow them to dig through the snow to uncover food underneath. When their usual food sources, such as grasses and shrubs, are no longer accessible, they switch to browsing on tree bark, twigs and woody plants.

Similarly, many bird species in Nebraska have adapted to winter foraging by altering their diets. Birds like the northern cardinal and downy woodpecker feed on seeds from trees and shrubs that remain accessible during the colder months. Other birds, such as the black-capped chickadee, forage for insects found in tree bark or logs that can still be uncovered on the frozen landscape. During winter, many birds also visit bird feeders where people provide seeds and suet, helping to supplement their diets.



Mule deer forage under a blanket of snow north of Hay Springs. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



A black-capped chickadee searches for remaining seeds near Chadron. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Coyotes and red foxes are opportunistic feeders. In addition to hunting small mammals and birds and scavenging carcasses, they may also turn to fruits, berries and other plant matter when animal food sources are scarce.

Hunting in Winter

Hawks, owls and foxes rely on their sharp senses and hunting skills to catch prey. Red foxes use their acute hearing to detect voles and mice moving beneath the snow. With precise calculation, they leap into the air and dive headfirst into the snow, breaking through the frozen surface to snatch their meal. This hunting method, called “mousing,” is a spectacular display of agility and accuracy.

Great horned owls are master hunters of the night. Their exceptional low-light vision and near-silent flight allow them to find and ambush prey undetected.

Red-tailed hawks remain active during the day. With their keen eyesight, eight times sharper than that of humans, they can spot a vole or rabbit from great distances.

Human Assistance

Bird feeders stocked with seeds and suet can be a lifeline for species like chickadees, finches and woodpeckers. However, it’s important for people to feed wildlife responsibly.

Don’t leave out food for deer or other mammals, as large gatherings of animals can spread disease and attract predators. Instead, create a wildlife-friendly backyard with native plants and shrubs to support wildlife through the winter. Seed heads on plants like coneflowers and black-eyed Susans provide food, while brush piles give shelter for small mammals and birds.



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BILL KOLEY



Walleye fishing near Lexington, 1983 ►

Pictured is my good buddy, Grant Wood, from Lincoln. We both decided to skip work on a Friday in May and make it a three-day weekend to fish Johnson Lake near Lexington where my dad, Wilbur Simmons, owned a place on the lake. The three of us went out in my dad's boat and fished the "hump," an old roadbed, in Johnson. We caught several nice walleyes on little Joe spinners and nightcrawlers. Although 40 years later, we still fish together.
— Kim Simmons, Bellevue



Pheasant hunting near Cumro, 1985 ▲

I am from Indiana and graduated from Kearney State College in 1984. I returned to Nebraska the following winter to hunt pheasants and waterfowl. That was, to this day, one of the greatest weeks of hunting I have ever experienced. My yellow Labrador, Beauregard, was 8 months old at the time and grew up fast, but for some reason our dogs did not make the photo. Pictured back at "the ranch" south of Kearney with a 15-bird limit we shot in snow-covered milo fields is, from left, Ev Terrell, myself, Mike Lothamer and Todd Glandt, with Jay Westesen taking the photograph.

— Drew Armstrong, Ogallala



Pheasant hunting near St. Paul, 1960s ▲

Pictured from left are Orville DeBoer, Ivan TeSelle, my dad Tom Liesveld, Ralph Vandergriend and my dad's cousin, Paul Liesveld. They were all from the Holland, Firth and Panama areas.

— Ron Liesveld, Lincoln

Pheasant hunting near Elsie, 1996 ►

Pictured from left is Gregg Madsen, Benson the chocolate Lab, and Monte Madsen. Photo taken by Gail Madsen.
— Gail Madsen, Maxwell



Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, Nebraskaland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to Jeff.Kurrs@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. PLEASE SEND ORIGINALS IF POSSIBLE FOR BEST REPRODUCTION.



A red fox pauses during a rabbit hunt near a plum thicket on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's East Campus.
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

STRIKE ONE

By Jeff Kurrus

The fox was locked in. As I drove my vehicle out of the parking lot at Nebraskaland Magazine headquarters on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's East Campus, the red-furred beauty had only one focus — the cottontail rabbit in the thicket right next to the street.

The fox would enter, zig-zag its way over and beneath the constant barrage of limbs, and emerge from the other side. Then the hunter would do it again.

I had seen various animals hunt like this before, but this particular documentary playing out in front of me involved the quarry as well.

The pursuit of the fox remained one step ahead the entire time. When the fox went left, the rabbit emerged right. By the time the fox exited, the bunny had doubled back, re-entered the thicket and was gone again.

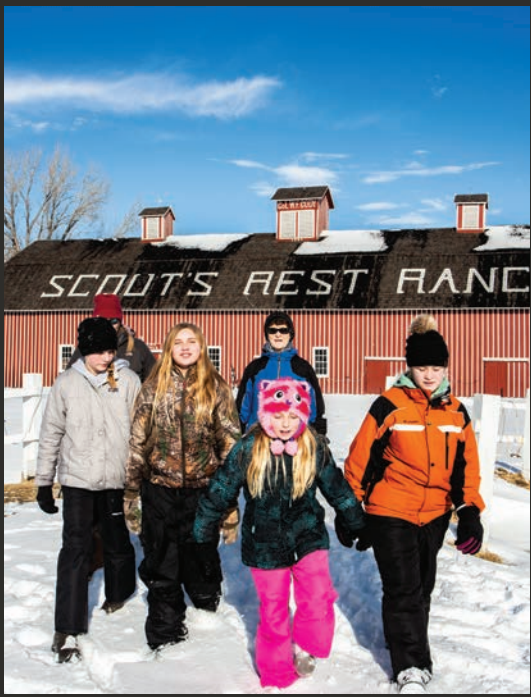
While this was going on, I watched from my vehicle, camera hanging out of the window, driving back and forth as the fox repeatedly entered the thicket.

Eventually, nearly nightfall, the fox gave up its pursuit of the rabbit. The predator crossed the street and disappeared into a grove of trees, well aware that its hunt for that day's meal was just beginning.

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