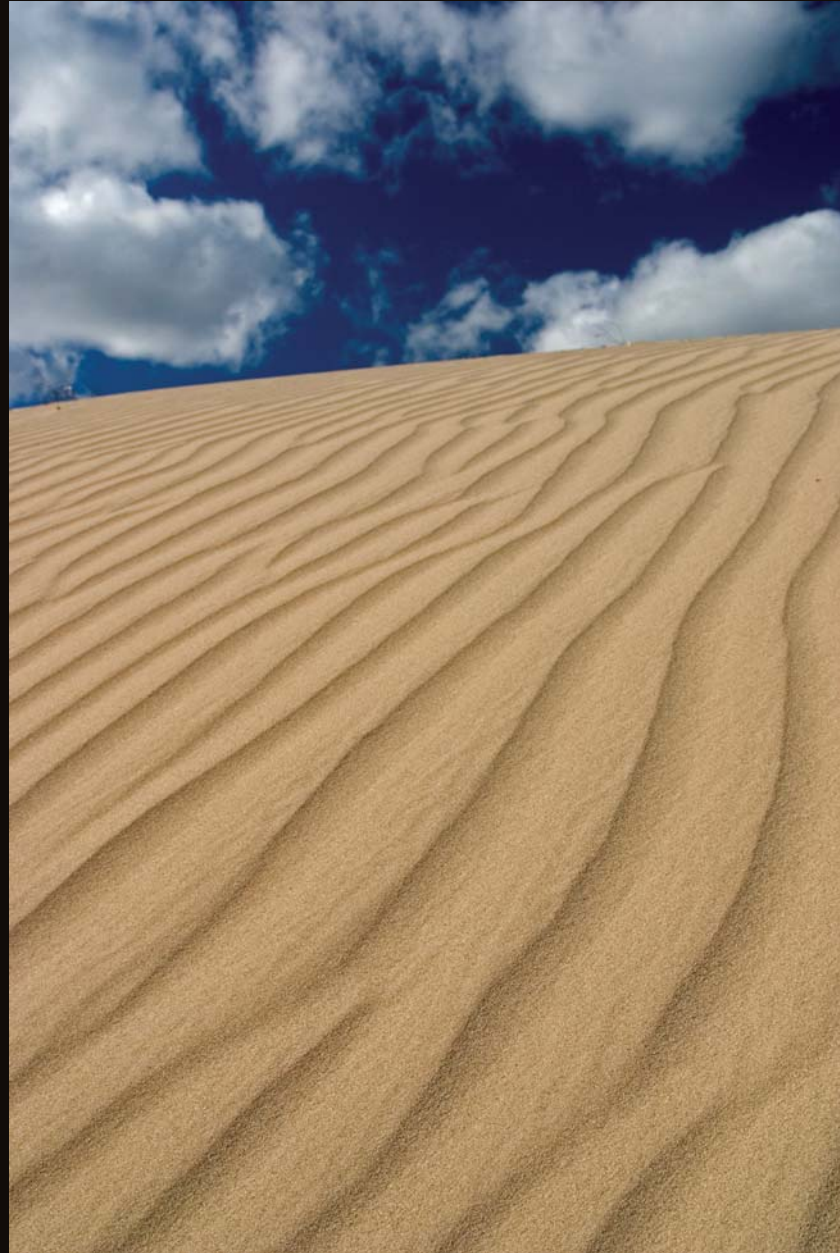




The rolling ridges of a blowout point up to a beautiful Nebraska sky in the Sandhills of Thomas County. Photo by Doug Carroll.

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NEBRASKAland

June 2009

The Art of the Creel

Doniphan's Ken Haggard
does more than repair
old baskets

PLUS

Cordilleran Flycatchers • In Defense of Grasshoppers
Kill or be Killed • A Sandhills Trip
Rock Creek Trail Days • Kids on the Loup

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NEBRASKAland

Volume 87, Number 5, June 2009

FEATURES

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Doniphan's Ken Haggard does more than repair old baskets – he's a creel maker preserving fishing's history for the future. By JEFF KURRUS

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Youngsters near Genoa are proof that some kids still play outside during the summer. PHOTOS AND TEXT BY ERIC FOWLER

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A weekend of living history celebrates the colorful past of Rock Creek Station State Historical Park. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER

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These rarely seen or heard birds in Nebraska successfully reared a trio of young in western Sowbelly Canyon last summer. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BOB GRIER

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Life in a Nebraska farm pond is an evergoing challenge. There seems to be 1,001 ways for a fish to die, which makes landing a Master Angler trophy that much more special. By JEFF KURRUS

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Their diversity and complexity make them important to grassland ecosystems. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CHRIS HELZER

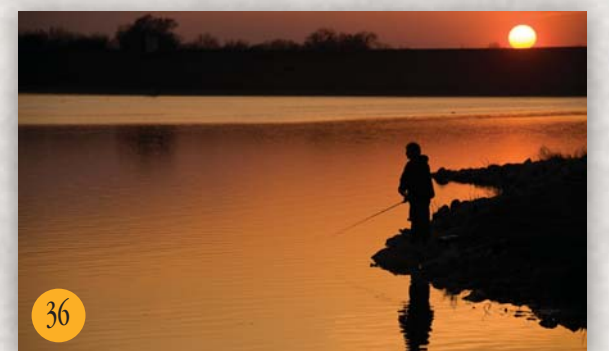
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Cover: Creels have a long history related to fishing, and Doniphan creel maker Ken Haggard is trying to assure that one of fishing's most recognizable items survives into the future. See story beginning on page 12. Photo by Jeff Kurrus.

Opposite: A snapping turtle crosses a gravel road on a June afternoon near Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area. Photo by Jeff Kurrus.

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Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Roger Kuhn, Kirk Nelson, Sam Sidner
Information & Education Administrator:
Doug Bauch

A photograph showing a red fox and its four pups in a field of dry, harvested corn stalks. The adult fox is on the right, looking towards the camera. The four pups are on the left, huddled together. The ground is covered with dry corn stalks and some patches of bare earth.

A young boy in camouflage gear is holding a rifle and standing next to a large turkey in a field. The turkey is lying on the ground, and the boy is smiling at the camera. The background shows a field with tall grass and some trees.

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Red Headed Woodpecker, Pheasant, and Gold Finch photos courtesy of Don Brockmeier



Feather Colors

Jon Farrar

We think of colors as coming from pigments such as those used in paints. The plumage colors of some birds are the result of pigments in their feathers, but other colors are produced by the structure of their feathers. This is also the case with colors found on some fish, reptiles and insects.

Three pigment groups produce colors in birds. The presence of melanins result in colors ranging from black to browns to pale yellows. In addition to providing color, feathers containing melanins are more resistant to wear, probably explaining black on wing margins (which are most subject to wear) of otherwise white birds such as the American white pelican, white-phase snow geese and whooping cranes. Carotenoids are pigments birds obtain from eating plants, and account for the brilliant red of male cardinals and the vibrant yellow of American goldfinches. The third pigment group is the porphyrins, produced by modified amino acids and creating many pinks, browns, reds and greens seen in bird plumages.

Feather color can also be created without pigments by the refraction of light. White light is actually composed of all the colors of the spectrum – something easily observed when it passes through a prism and is separated into all the colors of the rainbow. Such “structural colors” are created by the arrangement of specialized cells in feathers – some colors of the spectrum are absorbed and some reflected. Nearly all blue feathers are created in this way. If a blue jay feather is crushed, disrupting or destroying the feather structure, the blue color vanishes and it becomes brown.

Iridescent colors, as seen on mourning doves or the speculums of ducks, are created in a similar fashion. That is why the color of iridescent feathers changes relative to the direction of light and angle of the viewer to it; why a drake mallard’s head appears emerald green when viewed from one angle, almost black from another. Some colors found on birds are a combination of pigment color and structural color. Nearly all birds with greens, such as hummingbirds, owe their hues to a combination of yellow pigment blended with blue structural color.

So, the next time you view a bird through field glasses, do not be so sure what you are seeing really exists – even the most vibrant colors may be no more than an optical illusion.

Woodland Pinedrops

Julie Watts

Pinedrops (*Pterospora andromedea*), rarely seen in Nebraska, have knee-high reddish stems covered by ivory-colored balls which hang like small ornaments. Native to North America, they are most commonly found in the western half of the continent, and are part of the *Monotropaceae* family. Growing one to three feet tall, the spikes (or racemes) grow in clusters in the heavy soils of coniferous forests. Stems arise from a tight ball of roots, producing flowers at about four weeks, the first usually opening in June. New shoots can be produced throughout the growing season. The sepals appear hairy and have a sticky feel. In late July and August, anywhere from 20 to 128 fruiting capsules are produced, each bearing up to 4,800 wind-dispersed seeds. Even though these plants are perennial, they may not appear above ground every year. The color of pinedrops is due to their lack of chlorophyll. The plant forms a mycorrhizal relationship, which is a mutually beneficial association of a fungus and plant root, to obtain nutrients.



PHOTO BY JULIA WATTS

NEBRASKA Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever LANDOWNER HABITAT TOURS

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WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS FROM ACROSS THE STATE WILL BE HOSTING A SERIES OF HABITAT TOURS THIS YEAR. TOURS ARE DESIGNED TO DEMONSTRATE HABITAT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES, AVAILABLE CONSERVATION PROGRAMS AND HOW TO CREATE THESE RESULTS ON YOUR OWN PROJECTS.



MAY 7, 2009 9:00 TO 2:00 MST
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PAXTON - OLE'S STEAK HOUSE

JUNE 9, 2009 12:00 TO 4:00
RANGELAND MANAGEMENT AND CEDAR CONTROL

CURTIS - CURTIS CATTLE COMPANY

JUNE 10, 2009 10:00 TO 2:00
QUAIL MANAGEMENT AND GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT

FRANKLIN - FRANKLIN COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS AG PAVILION

JUNE 18, 2009 11:00 TO 3:00
QUAIL MANAGEMENT AND PRAIRIE WILDFLOWERS

ST. PAUL - THE GATHERING PLACE

JUNE 19, 2009 9:00 TO 2:00
WETLAND RESTORATION AND MANAGEMENT

ST. PAUL - THE GATHERING PLACE

JULY 16, 2009 10:00 TO 2:00
IMPROVING HABITAT FOR PHEASANTS

ALMA - ALMA CITY PARK

JULY 21, 2009 10:00 TO 2:00
IMPROVING HABITAT FOR PHEASANTS

HICKORY RIDGE WMA - EAST PARKING LOT

JULY 23, 2009 10:00 TO 2:00
IMPROVING HABITAT FOR PHEASANTS

BRANCHED OAK WMA - DOG TRIAL AREA

JULY 24, 2009 11:00 TO 3:00
QUAIL MANAGEMENT

ST. PAUL - THE GATHERING PLACE

AUGUST 21, 2009 9:00 TO 3:00
RANGELAND MANAGEMENT

BROKEN BOW - HUCKLEBERRY'S HIDEOUT

SEPTEMBER 16, 2009 4:00 TO 6:00
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For more information on rare plants in Nebraska, log on to <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer/>. NatureServe compiles information about plant and animal distribution and conservation, and identifies pinedrops as 'imperiled' in Nebraska. They can be found in the pine woodlands/forests in the Pine Ridge, Wildcat Hills and along the Niobrara River.

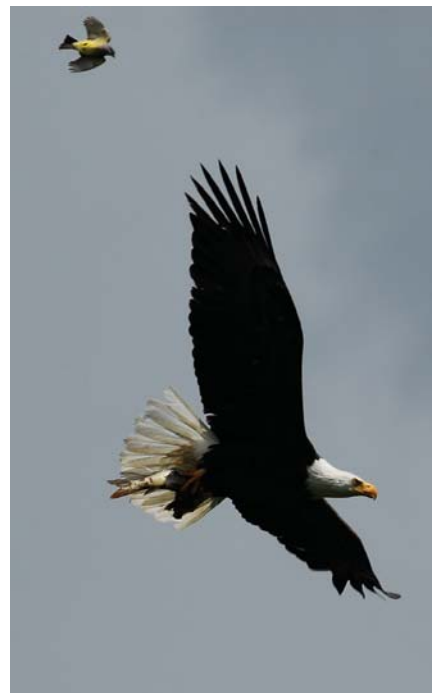


PHOTO BY BILL HAGER

Chasing Raptors

Jeff Kurrus

On a recent drive near Lincoln, I saw a familiar but confusing sight – a small bird chasing away a larger raptor. Curious as to what exactly was occurring, I spoke with Joel Jorgenson, a Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biologist. "Passerines often chase larger raptors when they are in the vicinity of their nests/young. Western kingbirds, eastern kingbirds and red-winged blackbirds are often the usual suspects and species such as red-tailed hawks and bald eagles (pictured) are the ones at the receiving end. Sometimes the smaller passerine will make contact and even appear to 'ride' the hawk." Because these smaller birds have such great maneuverability when in close proximity, larger raptors are less likely to be able to quickly retaliate.



Outdoor Message Plates

Doug Echtenkamp of Lincoln has been fly-fishing across Nebraska and the country since picking up his first fly rod while at Kearney State College in 1971. He's advertised his passion on his license plate for about eight years.

If you have a unique message plate you would like to share, or know someone who does, e-mail a photo (.jpg format only, please) to eric.fowler@nebraska.gov, along with your name and hometown, how long you've been active in your hobby and how long you've had your message plate.

Fishing's Top 10

Recently, the American Sportfishing Association (ASA) announced their top 10 list of "Products That Transformed an American Pastime" over fishing's last 75 years. The list was determined by members of the Anglers' Legacy Ambassadors, in collaboration with ASA, regarding their thoughts on fishing's most instrumental products.

- Original Floater Minnow (1936) remains one of the most successful and widely copied hard lures in sportfishing's history. Original and current manufacturer: Rapala.



- Spring-loaded Bobber (1947) made suspending a baited hook at a desired depth simpler and easier. Even today this item is in virtually every angler's tackle box. Original manufacturer: Nibble Nabber. Current: Various companies.

- Mitchell 300 (1949) was the first commercially successful spinning reel, and is still one of the most common reels used today. Original manufacturer: Mitchell. Current manufacturer: Pure Fishing.

- Creme Plastic Worm (1949) changed the sport forever as the first – and still famous – long-lasting artificial worm that both looked and felt real.



Original and current manufacturer: Creme Lure Company.

- Closed-face Spincast Reel (1949) made fishing easy and affordable to everyone regardless of age, size, gender and expertise.

Original manufacturer: Zero Hour Bomb Company.

Current Manufacturer: ZEBCO Brands.

- Lowrance Fish Lo-K-Tor (1957),

the "Little Green Box" introduced anglers to the use of sonar in locating individual fish.

Original Manufacturer: Lowrance Electronics.

Current: Lowrance/Navico.



- Monofilament Line (1958) improved the durability, affordability and casting ability of fishing line while reducing its visibility to fish.

Original manufacturer: DuPont Stren. Current manufacturer: Pure Fishing.

- Minn Kota Trolling Motor (1958) was the first electric, gear-driven trolling motor that gave anglers the ability to quietly maneuver and position their boats.

Original manufacturer: Minn Kota. Current manufacturer: Johnson Outdoors.

- Fenwick High Modulus Graphite Rod (1972), with its super-sensitive carbon (graphite) fibers, revolutionized the method of making fishing rods and how anglers fished.

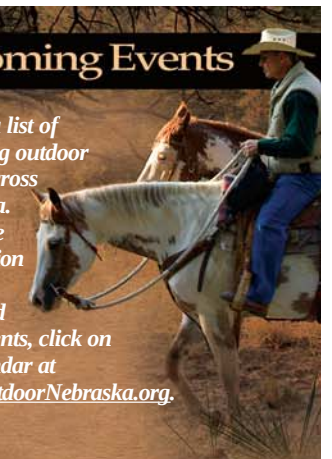
Original Manufacturer: Fenwick. Current Manufacturer: Pure Fishing.

- Shakespeare Ugly Stick (1976), with its special construction, this fishing pole created an affordable, unbreakable and dynamic fishing rod that's still in use today.

Original and current manufacturer: Shakespeare.

Upcoming Events

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



May 30

- Niobrara SP Buffalo Cookout

June 2

- Family Fishing Night – Prairie View Lake, Bennington

June 6

- Calamus Carp Tournament
- Victoria Springs SRA "VIK" Day

June 6-7

- Rock Creek Trail Days, Rock Creek Station SHP
- Muzzleloading demonstrations and trail maintenance at Indian Cave SP
- Fort Atkinson SHP living history demonstrations

June 9

- Family fishing night, Holmes Lake, Lincoln

June 11

- Pony Express Reride at Midnight, Fort Kearny SHP

June 12

- Star Gazing Party, E.T. Mahoney SP

June 12-13

- Ash Hollow Pageant, Ash Hollow SHP

June 13

- Niobrara SP Buffalo Cookout

June 17

- Family fishing night, Halleck Park, Papillion

June 20

- Pawnee Storytelling, Fort Kearny SHP
- Father's Day Fossil Hunt, Ponca SP
- Chadron SP 88th Anniversary
- Calamus SRA bike tour

June 24

- Family fishing night, Bowling Lake, Lincoln

June 27

- Carp-O-Rama, Pawnee SRA

June 28

- Bowring Ranch Sod House Sunday, Bowring Ranch SHP

Officer's Notebook

Casting Stones

During the summer months, conservation officers have to patrol the campgrounds of the state. One of the major problems we have is alcohol consumption. When I first started in 1992, alcohol was allowed on our campgrounds, and during summer weekends large parties would take place. Domestic violence and child abuse/neglect were a problem in the campgrounds and local rural volunteer fire departments were constantly being called to the campgrounds for unresponsive individuals. A few incidents of drunk drivers running into tents also occurred, so in 1994 alcohol was banned in state parks.

Some people still question why they cannot enjoy a beer while they fish or camp, but because we have no way of knowing if a person will drink just one beer or consume a case and be a problem later in the day, we have to treat everyone the same.

Early evenings are the best time to patrol a campground to see where there might be a potential problem later. You can see where there are large groups that might have alcohol, which campsites have large dogs, which groups are glad to see you and which ones are not.

Conservation Officer Mike Luben and I were patrolling Pawnee Lake one evening and as we pulled into the electrical campgrounds, we noticed a small, gray car full of teenage boys who looked at us hard out of the corner of their eyes as they went by. We wondered what they were up to.

I was driving slowly, and near the end of the campsites, we observed four elderly gentlemen sitting in lawn chairs. One stood up when he noticed me and waved me to stop. As he approached, I observed he was carrying a can. I said to him "That better not be a beer your carrying up to my vehicle." While his buddies grinned, the man turned around, walked to a tree, and "hid" the can behind the tree. I guess he believed since I no longer could see it, it didn't exist.

The gentleman approached my vehicle again and said, "There are four boys in a small, gray car speeding all over the place. They are going to hurt someone." I smiled, remembering the look I got from the boys, and stated, "Well, that's ironic! Four boys in a small, gray car just stopped me to tell me there are four old men up here drinking beer." The man just stared at me, but his buddies almost fell over in their chairs laughing.

Please try not to be breaking the law when you decide to point out that someone else is.

— Dina Barta, Conservation Officer, Lincoln



High School Bowhunter 3D Championships

The 2009 Nebraska High School Bowhunter 3D Championship will be held June 6 at the Prairie Lake Archery Range outside of Hastings.

Hosted by the Cottonwood Archery Club and sponsored by the Nebraska

Game and Parks Commission, this free event is open to all 12- through 18-year-old students who attended school or were homeschooled in 2009 and have completed a Bowhunter Education course.

Individual competitors will compete in two divisions – senior, age 15-18; and junior, age 12-14. There will also be a

team competition, composed of four-member teams representing the same school or 4-H club. Classes for the competition are traditional – long bow, recurve or bare bow; freestyle limited – no releases allowed, finger shooters only; and freestyle – release aids allowed.

For more information or to pre-register, contact match director Darryl Parde, (402) 984-7270, greatplatte@alltel.net; or Mark Eggers, (402) 368-5588, mjegggers@cableone.net.



Centaur with a Straw

Fran Higgins

Hummingbird moths (*Hyles lineata*) enjoy sweet nectar at dusk, hovering to feed on phlox, lilac, clover, petunia, honeysuckle and other varieties. In North America they mostly inhabit the deserts of the west, but also range throughout the country, including city gardens like mine in Omaha.

Except for their quick, darting movements, these cute, furry-bodied insects almost blend with the plants they pollinate – their wings beat so fast they're practically invisible and the pink bands on the back of their wings match the flowers they feed on. Wingtip to wingtip, they're about 2½ to 3 inches wide, much larger than the regular moths we see banging into lamps outside at night.

Hyles means "of the woods" but was also the name of a centaur in Greek mythology: half man, half horse. Equally enigmatic, these moths in flight appear to be birds and at rest they look like butterflies, yet they are neither. Hence, they are also known as hummingbird moths or hawk moths. The species name, lineata, describes the lines on the forewings, and although their colors are muted, the markings are quite striking.

The long, whip-like proboscis – or

feeding tube – can apparently exceed 10 inches in some species, allowing them to sip from a distance like a person with a soda straw.

Herpetology Workshop

A free, hands-on herpetology workshop will be held June 12-13 at Lake Ogallala. Herpetological experts will bring live native specimens to the workshop for observations and study, and participants will also explore local habitats in search of local herpetofauna. The workshop is designed for biologists, teachers and naturalists, but anyone wanting to learn more about Nebraska's snakes, frogs, turtles, salamanders and lizards, as well the conservation issues involving them, is welcome to attend. Workshop space is limited to the first 30 participants who sign up. For more information and to register, contact Amanda Keep at amanda.keep@rmbo.org, (308) 220-0052; or Jeanine Lackey at jeanine.lackey@nebraska.gov, (402) 471-5581.

Focus on Forever

The 2009 Focus on Forever workshop will be held July 17-19 at the Holiday Inn in Grand Island.

Hosted by Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, this workshop is designed to give participants the information and tools they need to develop future stewards of the land by providing outdoor adventures that connect youth and their families to wild places and the wildlife that live there.

Some of the seminar topics at the workshop will include: teaching wingshooting skills to kids, reading the landscape with a GPS unit, improving youth mentor hunts, introducing youth to archery, starting a local shooting team, and teaching plant identification skills to kids.

The cost of the workshop is \$250, which includes workshop registration, instructional materials and meals. A limited number of scholarships are available to cover the workshop's cost.

For more information about the workshop or scholarships, contact Aaron Hershberger at aaron.hershberger@nebraska.gov, (402) 471-6144; or

Rich Wissink at rwissink@pheasantsforever.org, (715) 722-0286.

Project WILD Workshops

Project WILD workshops will be held in Neligh and Loup City on June 29 and June 30, respectively, for people interested in becoming certified to teach the program's activities.

Project WILD is a conservation and environmental education program that uses hands-on, inquiry-based activities to help students develop problem-solving, decision-making, observation, classification and research skills. Participants in these free workshops will receive hands-on instruction from environmental education specialists, Project WILD certification and Project WILD K-12 curriculum and activity guides. To register or find out more information about the Neligh workshop, contact Jamie Bachmann at (402) 370-3374, prairiemama@gmail.com. For the Loup City workshop, contact Jeanine Lackey at jeanine.lackey@nebraska.gov, (402) 471-5581. The workshops are limited to the first 25 people who register. ■

A Look Back- June 1969

Jeff Kurrus

Forty years ago this month, *NEBRASKAland Magazine* focused on the rodeo boom town of Nora in Nuckolls County, Toadstool Park in the Badlands, and the northern grass-hopper mouse. An article entitled "Zany Patents" recounted outdoor-related inventions with names like Gun In the Hat, Two Men in a Cow, and Curved Gun, all amusing, and easily imaginable, concoctions that reflect the article's subtitle: "When men strive to outfox game or fish, odd inventions are result."



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From the Past, for the Future

Nebraskan does more than repair baskets

By Jeff Kurrus

They are among us. Collectors and fashioners of yesteryear. And their fishing lures, shotguns, shotshell boxes and fly reels are safely guarded by glass at local outdoor retailers and antique shops. They are the baseball card collectors of the outdoor world, wondering if it's better to hold on to a 1951 Mickey Mantle or a 1954 Hank Aaron if forced to make such a gut-wrenching decision.

Rarely, however, do we see the fashioners of tomorrow's antiques, the wooden decoy and handcrafted turkey calls that will grace collectors' shelves in future years. Even rarer is to meet a person who works with materials that are so familiar to the active sportsman, yet also so foreign.

Doniphan resident Ken Haggard restores fishing creels, a not-so-commonly used piece of fly-fishing gear in today's world. Used to store caught fish, maybe even a sandwich and drink for the day,

creels graced the hips of fly anglers in years past but have probably graced the shelves of art collectors for just as long.

Haggard has collected creels since 1978, but upon retirement from a Grand Island bank in 2005, he shifted his attention to restoring them. "I was given *The Art of the Creel* and thought, 'I can do this,'" said Haggard. Haggard had several objectives he wanted to accomplish with his work – he wanted to work with vintage baskets that were 65 to 100 years old and in good condition, and he wanted to use premium, oil-dyed leather for the tooling, carving and hand sewing he would be doing.

Haggard is no basket maker, as he will tell you, but there is more to a creel than its basket. "On an average creel, I'll use six to eight square feet of leather," Haggard said, standing in his home-based workshop. "It will take me about two weeks per creel, working five to eight hours a day. At least one

day to prep the basket by removing old leather, cleaning, re-shaping, bleaching and performing minor repairs, then two days to tool, carve and emboss the leather. The dying process is another day, followed by the leather highlighting and protective sheen process which takes two more days. Hand-sewing the leather to the basket then takes at least three more days.

"By the end, after spending \$300 to \$400 in materials, I'm not making much more than minimum wage," he laughed. While Haggard has seen contemporary creels sell for \$1,600 to \$3,600, his run between \$1,200 and \$1,500. "It's a labor of love," he said. "I'm definitely not getting rich."

Haggard's clients come in all sorts – the 97-year-old man who asked Haggard to re-leather his creel for his son; or the gentleman that asked him to replace the basket and rework the 1910 leather of his family creel, making it look and smell like new. Custom orders have also come from creel collectors and interior decorators for the home, office or cabin. "There are a lot more lure and rod collectors than there are creel collectors," Haggard said, "but what people are starting to desire is having a high-quality heirloom that can be handed down to family members."

Customers have many decisions to make regarding their creels – how many and what type of fish should be engraved in the leather? What type of thread and stitching should be used? What color? How large? "There is blood in every creel from that freaking awl," said Haggard, smiling. "There's also some cussing." Because of all these choices, no two creels are ever the same.

Like most other existing creels, Haggard's are seen as collectibles. He attends antique shows throughout the country, and more than once has sold out of his product before a show has



PHOTO BY KEN HAGGARD

Above: Haggard fashions creels with a variety of features, including knife sheaths. Right: Carved and buck-stitched trout highlight Haggard's "Trout Supreme" creel.

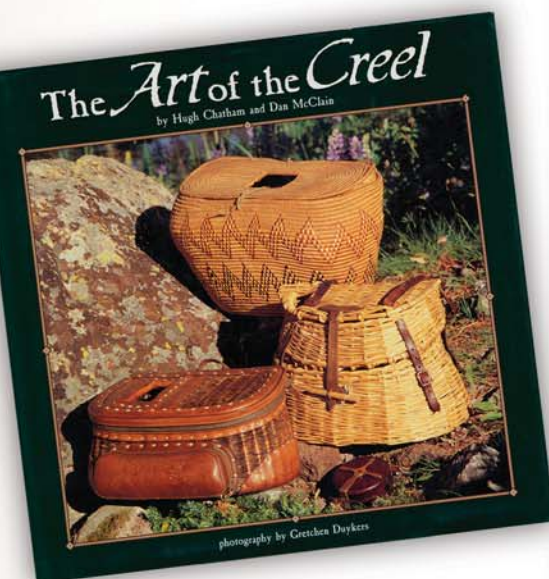


PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

even begun. He's been approached by companies wanting him to make more creels and to make them faster, but Haggard doesn't want an assembly-line business – he wants a passion he enjoys, and he wants to put as much time, and blood, in each creel as he can.

Even though he knows his creels probably won't stay on the front lines of fishing, his job is to make sure they remain in the consciousness of fishing history. "Mr. Haggard, don't get your feelings hurt," one client recently told him, "these *are* going to get used." Haggard knows the reality, however, and he's okay with that.

Fishing is now too often seen as broadcasting the biggest and the brightest. Without those like Haggard, we would be left with only the current nylon and plastic representations of yesteryear's creels – they might still adorn shelves, but they would be seen in miniature, mere facsimiles of what they once were. Current makers of creels, the very few that exist, are assuring that history is preserved. Even if these items, so steeped in angling lore, never again carry a newly caught fish. ■



ABOVE: Considered the authoritative guide on creels, *The Art of the Creel* by Hugh Chatham and Dan McClain gives a history of fishing creels made throughout the world. Organizing creel makers by both name and geographic region, the authors provide a pictorial history of these artifacts, explaining how art was such an important aspect of creel development.

RIGHT: Creel maker Ken Haggard fly-fishes while one of his self-made creels hangs at his hip.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

A Brief History of Creels

They are a symbol of fishing, both on the mantle and in the language itself. Our fishing limits are often referred to as "creel" limits, and it is nearly impossible to view outdoor-related decorations without seeing creels. As said in *The Art of the Creel*: "The creel, the basket to hold fresh fish, has become the icon of the modern fly fishing industry. Creels appear as part of the logos of smart shops, advertising agencies use them for props, decorators put flower pots in them to decorate homes, window trimmers utilize them in department store windows and the cover paintings on old hunting and fishing magazines show creels in use. But one hardly ever sees them on a stream, in the use for which they were intended."

Stream anglers once used creels while fishing as portable and handy storage. Because of its permeable design, air could circulate through it to keep fish cool, and its top kept flopping fish from escaping. Their form

is standard: flat bottomed, shaped to fit the curve of the body, with a lid and a hole to drop fish through. A shoulder strap was frequently used. Creels were made with willow, split bamboo, rattan, palm, ash, oak, bass and other trees. Some were even made out of metal.

Creels were originally fashioned, in their current form, around 1665, when a willow creel was first pictorially referenced in Robert Venables' *The Experienced Angler*. Other sources suggest that creels have existed since 1250, and it has been recorded that creels have been made throughout the world, including Japan, the rest of Asia and Europe.

In Europe, specifically, leather creels became fashionable during the 17th century. Yet by the middle of the 18th century, the popularity of creels, comprised mostly of leather, had faded.

Exporters, however, began sending creels to the American colonies. From there, creels were fashioned according to the availability of local goods and the style of a particular culture.

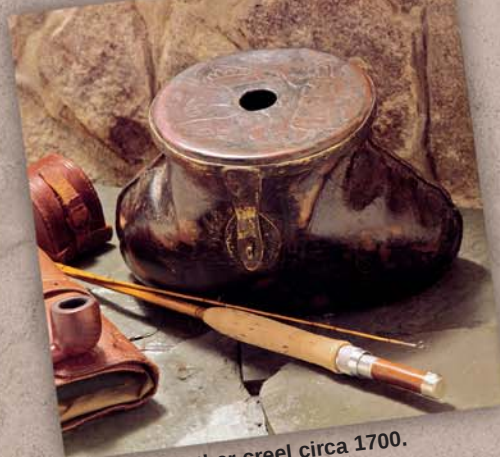
Makers along North America's west coast constructed creels from baleen, which is the flap of a whale's upper jaw. Both Native American and Euroamerican groups east of the Mississippi were known for their eastern woodland creels and their checker-woven basket style. Watermelon creels were made throughout the country from grape vines and oak splints. Leather-reinforced creels were first practical in their usage and became popular in the

American West because creels used along that region's rougher rivers needed reinforcement to keep them from breaking. The George Lawrence Company is synonymous with the leathered creel, and at least 10 different Lawrence styles were available at the beginning of the 19th century.

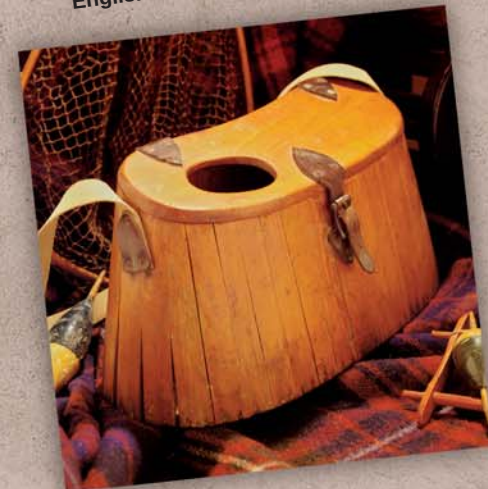
In addition, the work of other U.S. creel makers was distinguished by a variety of factors, including the leather work and how they were hinged, stitched and embossed. Creel makers McMonies, Clark, Peters, A.E. Nelson, Turtle and Whitney Sporting Goods were known for their distinctive styles, and creels were sold throughout the country by various outdoor retailers, including Abercrombie & Fitch.

Following World War II, however, the American production of creels lessened considerably. Currently, there's a small number of artists working with them, which makes the work that Haggard and his contemporaries do that much more important to preserving the history of creels. ■

For more information about Haggard Creels, visit Customcreels.com.



English leather creel circa 1700.



Cedar creel.



Eastern Woodland creel.



George Lawrence Company creel.

CREEL PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAN MCCLAIN



Outdoor Kids

They still play outside in Genoa

Photos and text by Eric Fowler



*K*ids don't play outside as much as they used to. At least that's what some people say. They're inside playing video games, watching the tube or surfing the net instead of playing at the park, splashing in the gutter during a warm summer rain or exploring the "crick." Of course, that's not the case with every kid in every town. Especially in one like Genoa.

Left: Elli and Conner Johnson of Osceola run through the shallows of the Loup River south of Genoa. Above: Walker Olson, Brennan Reeg, Devon Korth and Caleb Brezina rig their poles at the Loup Power District canal on the edge of town.

Drive south from this small, east-central Nebraska town and there's a good chance you'll see kids outside doing something. Which makes sense, considering there is so much to do on the edge of town. They're often fishing for drum and catfish in the Loup Power District canal or wading and skipping rocks in Beaver Creek. When they're old enough and have earned the trust of their parents, they can hop on their bikes and pedal less than two miles farther south to swim in the Loup River. If they haven't reached that point, they beg their parents for a ride to Headworks Park west of town. When their parents tell them they can't stay out all day, they ask "Why not?"



Left: Mike Johnson and his children, Elli and Conner, swim in the Loup River alongside Don Dworak Wildlife Management Area.

Above: A fishing trip to the canal is a short bike ride from home for boys in Genoa.

Right: Walker Olson wears the evidence of a day of playing in Beaver Creek.

"We come down here to fish until we're out of bait," said Genoa's Caleb Brezina. "Once we run out of bait, we take a day off until it rains and go nightcrawler hunting. We've got a ton around here."





Brezina, Olson, Reeg and Korth ham it up with part of their seining haul from Beaver Creek.

They don't care that the water isn't filtered or disinfected with chlorine. Or that the activities aren't organized, like so many are these days. "I like the peace and quiet," Brezina said. "It gives you time to think." About what, girls? "Sometimes. I think about what I'm going to do with my life. I think about big fish ... and the ones that got away." Said Brennan Reeg, "We're the only ones who can catch the big one."

To see them out there, getting dirty, sunburned and bug bitten, and having so much fun doing it, is like being transported to a time when that's what kids did. It makes you think how lucky they are to live near so much. And wish you were a kid again, living in Genoa or some other town blessed with a crick. ■



Occasionally, a check of the seine would bring calls of "Ahhh! The motherload!"



Reeg and Korth help free Olson from knee-deep silt in Beaver Creek.

Rock Creek Trail Days

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

A weekend of living history celebrates Rock Creek Station State Historical Park's colorful past.

While it's not always the case, often there are indeed, as the old saying goes, two sides to every story. In some cases, including the story of the shooting of three men at Rock Creek Station in 1861 by "Wild Bill" Hickok and others, there are many more.

At Rock Creek Trail Days, held the first weekend in June each year to celebrate the history of what once was an Oregon Trail outpost and Pony Express Station and is now a state historical park southeast of Fairbury, visitors get to learn several sides of the story of the fight turned deadly firsthand from reenactors.

The story begins in 1857, when S.C. and Newton Glenn established an Oregon Trail trading post on the west side of Rock Creek. Two years later, David McCandles, who had fled North Carolina to escape embezzlement charges and was on his way to the goldfields of Colorado, arrived at the station. By the time he did, he'd already crossed paths with disgruntled gold seekers who had failed to strike it rich and were headed back east. McCandles could have trudged on or turned tail, but instead he bought Glenn's trading post and traded his dreams of gold for ranching and business.

McCandles and his family built a



In the sensationalized version of the story he told to *Harper's Magazine*, Hickok said he single-handedly killed 10 members of McCandles' gang despite being stabbed and shot repeatedly. Reenacting the tale at Rock Creek Trail Days in 2008 were (clockwise from bottom) Jerry Carlson as James Wood, April Prall as Horace Wellman, Dave Prall as Hickok and Jerry Ayers as James Gordon.

house on the east side of the creek and a toll bridge across it, offering westward travelers an easier crossing than the rugged ford that had been battering their wagons since the early 1840s. In 1860, he leased the station property on the east side of the creek to the Overland Stage Company for its Pony Express, a 10-day mail service between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California. In March of 1861, an Overland employee who would go on to Wild West fame arrived: James Butler Hickok.

A month later, Overland agreed to purchase the buildings on the east side of the creek from McCandles. They paid him one third of the price up-front and

would cover the rest in installments. The Pony Express, however, was a financial failure that would close its brief but colorful 18-month run that fall, and Overland quickly fell behind on payments. In June, McCandles demanded payment from the station manager, Horace Wellman, by July 1. When that deadline passed, McCandles again demanded payment from Wellman, who agreed to get the money from the line superintendent in Brownville while he was there for supplies. When Wellman returned, he carried only news that the company was bankrupt.

On July 12, McCandles, his 12-year-old son Monroe, cousin James Woods



Stagecoach rides around the reconstructed buildings on the park's East Ranch are a highlight for many visitors, young and old. Old West wares are on display in the cabin (below) in the West Ranch Cabin.





Sam Reedy of Blue Springs takes aim at the bad guys while on a stagecoach ride.



Susan Hughes of the Turkey Creek Regulators demonstrates mounted cowboy action shooting for park visitors last year.

and friend James Gordon went to Wellman's house to demand the return of the property. They were met at the door by Wellman's wife, Jane. When Wellman refused to come out of the house and McCanles threatened to come in and drag him out, Hickok stepped into the picture.

According to Monroe McCanles' account of the events 54 years later, Hickok shot his unarmed father dead and then shot and wounded Woods and Gordon when they ran to see what happened. Hickok, Wellman and J.W. Brink tracked down and killed Woods and Gordon. Monroe ran for the creek and escaped unharmed.

Hickok, Wellman and Brink were arrested three days later, but in Gage County's first criminal case, the charges were dismissed on grounds of self defense. No records of the proceedings have ever been uncovered.

The story didn't end with the trial. In 1867, the myth of "Wild Bill" Hickok was born on the pages of *Harper's Magazine*, in which the writer relayed the melodramatic version of the story as told by Hickok – how he single-handedly killed 10 members of McCanles' gang despite being stabbed and shot repeatedly. The story made Hickok a celebrity, which he parlayed into stints as a sheriff, marshal and performer in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West shows, and a life of gunfights, drinking and gambling. But it may have also led to his early death at age 39. In 1876, while playing poker in a Deadwood, South Dakota saloon, he was shot in the back of the head by Jack McCall, a transient, for reasons that remain unclear to this day. Legend has it that Hickok held two pairs – aces and eights – when he was shot. A hand now known as the dead man's hand.

As years passed, more stories of the McCanles-Hickok skirmish emerged, and questions still abound. Did McCanles initiate the fight and Hickok shoot him in self-defense, or was McCanles unarmed and shot in cold blood? Did Hickok even fire the shot that killed McCanles or was it Wellman? Was a conflict over McCanles' mistress the real reason behind the shooting?

Regardless of what happened, reenactments of two sides of the story – Monroe McCanles' version and

Hickok's, as told in *Harper's Magazine* – make for good theater at Rock Creek Trail Days. And they certainly added a colorful chapter to the history of Rock Creek Station.

The living history demonstrations are centered around buildings that were reconstructed in the early 1980s following archeological excavations and with the help of an 1860 photo of the station that was discovered in the California State Library in Sacramento.

The Burlington Northern Foundation Visitor Center houses artifacts found in the excavation and a wealth of history about the Oregon Trail, the Pony Express and the Hickok-McCanles affair. Outside the center and on other parts of the park's 350 acres, visitors can step in ruts cut by the covered wagons that

carried a half-million emigrants west.

The adjacent 40-acre Rock Creek State Recreation Area (SRA) includes 25 RV campsites and 10 additional primitive sites. There is also a horse camp, where visitors can camp and corral their horses. Six miles of marked and mapped trails are open to hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders on the historical park and the adjacent 706-acre Rock Glen Wildlife Management Area.

The three Commission properties include wooded creeks and draws, unbroken tallgrass prairie and abundant wildlife. Primitive yet pristine, visitors have plenty to do when they're done soaking in the park's history during Rock Creek Trail Days, or any other time of year. ■



Like Hickok, Belle Star, who earned the nickname "Bandit Queen," was sensationalized in dime novels. Though unrelated to the history of Rock Creek Station, reenactors Norma Long and Curtis Spilker show the crowd what likely would have happened if Starr and another Old West outlaw, Cole Younger, were in a shootout: She would have shot him in the back long before he covered 10 paces.

Rock Creek Trail Days June 6-7, 2009

Two full days of living history are planned for Rock Creek Trail Days at Rock Creek Station State Historical Park (SHP) near Fairbury June 6-7.

The Old West Theater Company will reenact the famous incident in which James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok killed David McCanles and began his bloody career as a gunfighter at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. on June 6 and at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. on June 7 at the park's East Ranch, the site of the shooting.

Other activities planned for Rock Creek Trail Days, held the first weekend of June each year, include black powder shooting demonstrations, Oregon Trail living history, Dutch-oven cooking, blacksmithing, knitting, frontier survival skills, Pony Express reenactments, stagecoach rides and more.

A buffalo stew cookout and evening program will be held Saturday night at 7. Tickets for the cookout are \$9 for adults and \$6 for children age 13 and younger. All other events are free and open to the public, although a Nebraska Park Entry Permit is required for all vehicles entering the park.

Roads to Rock Creek Station SHP, located southeast of Fairbury, are well marked. To reach the park from Fairbury, take the PWF Road east 4½ miles, turn right on 573 Ave. and go south one mile, and then turn left on 710 Rd. and go 1¼ miles east. From Beatrice, take Hwy 136 west to Jansen, turn left on 573 Ave. and travel south 4½ miles, then turn left on 710 Rd. and go 1¼ miles east.



The Trip

Photos and text by Bill Hager

Darrin's memories and e-mail conversations with me of our trips to the Sandhills were an important source of comfort during his months spent flying over a different kind of sand as the crew chief of a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter in Iraq. With his military commitments now met, it was time for a weeklong kitchen pass to visit old friends and even older tales.

A generation back, my father Jack and his friend Butch introduced Darrin and I to this region of Nebraska. Eventually Darrin, another of Dad's friends, and I started making the trips by ourselves. Our trips originally were tied to hunting – grouse, ducks and deer in the fall. Through the years, however, fewer and fewer trips were made with weapon in hand. We began making trips for brandings, spring calving, fishing, motorcycle camping and photography.

Our kinships with the locals began over coffee, the same place we learned about the amazing blend of educated knowledge and common sense that Sandhills people have. Solving problems and fixing things is what they do everyday. Combine that ability with the network of neighbors in this region and one can easily see how they've survived for generations without a national discount store or Quick Shop on every corner.

Originally, most of our trips were sandwiched between Friday afternoon and Monday morning. Yet the more places we discovered, the harder it became to visit them all in a single trip. By the time Darrin returned from Iraq, however, any place in the Sandhills would be good enough for him – he just needed to be among friends. As an added bonus, this time we planned to spend at least a week on our trip.

We began our trek in October, accompanied by Troy, a close friend. Eventually the River Road led us to the protection of a wall tent and wood-burning stove along the Niobrara River near Sparks. After many of our Nebraska stories had been told, Darrin started sharing some of his from Iraq. Around the campfire Troy and I listened as he talked about some of the medivac missions he had flown on and what it was like to be shot at.



Above: Sunlight cuts through the smoke from the woodstove on the first morning in camp on the Niobrara River. Left: Five whooping cranes – four adults and one juvenile – were a rare sight. The group had spent the night resting on a shallow sandbar in the river. The stopover was part of the fall migration from Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada to their wintering ground in Texas.



Very quickly Troy and I figured out two things – Darrin had to tell his stories, in this place and time, but it was also necessary for him to hear the same old tales that we had been spinning for years. That first night ended too soon. Before we knew it, it was morning and time for a canoe trip from Cornell Bridge to Smith Falls State Park. Darrin was floating the river for the first time, so I told him about the route we would take and where wildlife might appear along the way. Within the first mile, we saw a pair of bald eagles perched in a tall birch on the shaded south bank of the river. Neither of them moved a muscle as we floated by. Continuing down the river on that 70-degree day, I took pictures of low-flying Canada geese and, later that evening, of a group of migrating whooping cranes.

A stop in Valentine for a few supplies and lunch at the Pepper Mill allowed time for more stories with friends Robin and his wife Theresa. Then it was on to a southern Cherry County ranch. Driving along Nebraska Highway 97 as it weaved along Merritt Reservoir's east side, we enjoyed another fine October day with the windows rolled down. Cottonwood and ash trees in fall color complemented Merritt's blue water. At Cedar Bay Campground we stopped to see if the shower house was open. It wasn't, so we took a dip in the lake to wash off the dust. It was cold, but effective.

A brief sit-down with Pat and Wanda at the ranch allowed us to catch up with what was going on in each other's lives and confirmed that we were welcome to camp at a favorite spot near some lakes on their ranch. Many miles from the ranch



Top left: Darrin Divis paddles the canoe on a warm fall day on the Niobrara River.

Above: Steam rises from the Niobrara River near Brewer Bridge on a cool autumn morning.

Right: Early light on a Cherry County lake near camp gave full view of a diverse population of waterfowl. The chatter and call of those same birds was present each morning and throughout the day, as calm winds and warm temperatures slowed the fall migration for a few days.





Over the next couple days, Troy, Darrin and I watched the fall migration in full swing. The small lakes around our camp were filled with mallards, wood ducks, redheads, goldeneyes, Canada geese and trumpeter swans. The birds didn't seem to mind that we were there, as low-level fly-bys in front of the tent were the norm. In fact, you could set your watch each morning to the swans that flew by at sunrise.

One afternoon we watched sandhill cranes land by the hundreds in the meadow near our tent, then take off after a two-hour rest. During the evenings we viewed an ever-increasing number of deer through our binoculars, with several of the bucks beginning to show pre-rut behavior. When we weren't watching the wildlife, we were cutting wood, tending to camp chores or visiting our rancher friends in the area.

We woke on the last morning to the sound of machine gun fire as each of us emerged from our sleeping bags with squinty eyes – a northern flicker was pounding his breakfast out of a tree limb above our tent. We all started laughing. Darrin smiled, shook his head, and said, "Thank God I'm home."

As the week closed, we were forced to leave the two-track road and reemerge onto the single lane, oil-and-dirt road that would then connect to a two-lane blacktop. Before long, we all knew, that blacktop would turn into four-lane interstate and the Sandhills would be far behind us. Yet only if you measure in terms of miles. ■

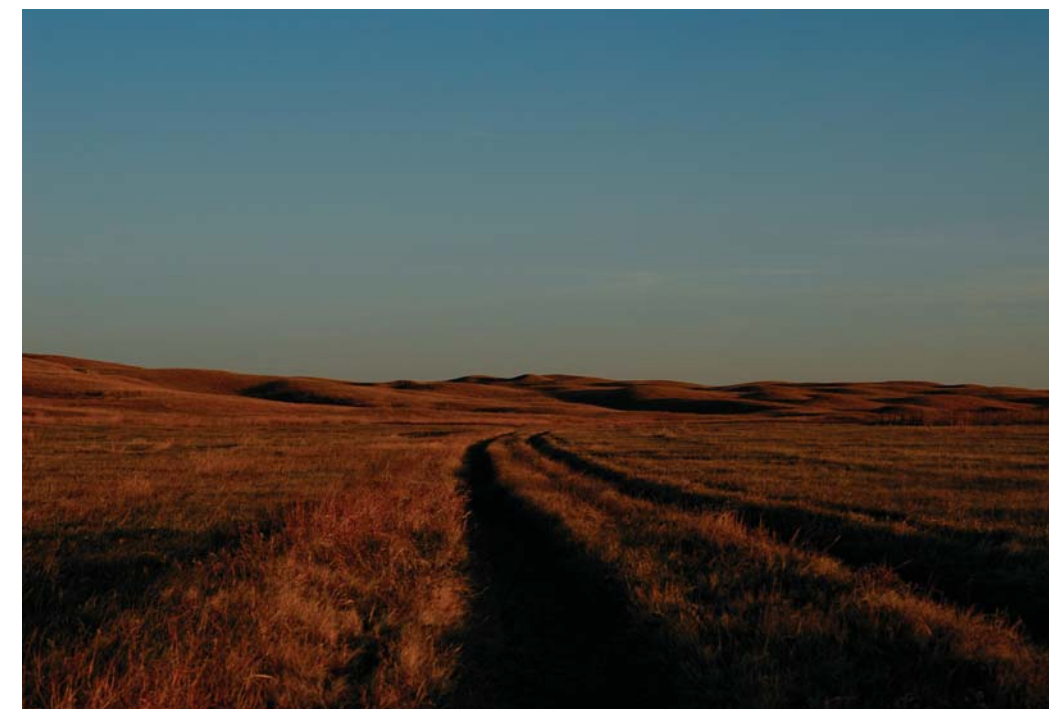


house, our tires rolled down a two-track windmill road through pastures absent of cows and closed gates, where views of lakes, meadows and hills filled the palette. Under some golden cottonwood trees we set up camp, fifteen yards from one of the lakes. This would be our base camp for the remainder of our trip. With a full moon rising, and supper on the cookstove, it was hard to imagine life could be any better.

Above: A view of base camp in the cottonwoods at three in the morning. Throughout our trip, clear nights allowed the moon to illuminate the colorful fall landscape.

Left: Darrin and Troy gather wood near camp.

Right: This innocent trail, which goes on for miles through the meadow and over the hills, gives no hint of the landscape and wildlife at the other end.



Cordilleran Flycatchers

Text and photos by Bob Grier

Rare nesters in Nebraska, and rarely seen or heard here period, a pair of these diminutive birds successfully reared a trio of young in western Nebraska's Sowbelly Canyon last summer.

Because Wayne Mollhoff's directions were so accurate, finding their nest was the easiest part of photographing a pair of cordilleran flycatchers last summer. Perhaps one of the country's most active birders (see "An Inordinate Fondness for Birds" May 2004), Mollhoff's e-mail message to me last June had carefully described the flycatcher nest in Sowbelly Canyon northeast of Harrison and noted how he had used a small length of blue



In 2008, avid birder Wayne Mollhoff discovered nesting Cordilleran flycatchers in western Nebraska's Sioux County.



Three almost fully feathered chicks call for more food as a female cordilleran flycatcher flies away from her nest. While rare east of the Rocky Mountains, cordilleran flycatchers are slowly expanding their breeding range into western Nebraska.

balancing twine from the nearby Sioux County road surface to mark the base of a tree near the "somewhat difficult to find" nest. While very rare, nesting cordilleran flycatchers (*Empidonax occidentalis*) in Nebraska have been documented by birders several times since a nest with four young was discovered in the upper reaches of Sowbelly Canyon by Richard Rosche in 1974.

The cordilleran flycatcher is small – approximately six inches in length with wingspans approaching nine inches – with pale-yellow wing bars and rings around each eye, and pale-yellowish underparts, similar in coloring to the more numerous, and even smaller, pine siskin (*Carduelis pinus*). The cordilleran flycatcher's head is topped with a short peak and crown at the rear, and the bird's lower bill is yellowish-orange to pinkish compared to its darker, upper mandible.

Both sexes in the adult appear similar. Feathered young are similar to the adults as well, although researchers can often identify young-of-the-year flycatchers by their "rough" or "buff" wing barring.

Before 1989, researchers and scientists believed that both cordilleran and Pacific-slope flycatchers (*Empidonax difficilis*) were a single species known as the "western" flycatcher. Research continues to better identify range boundaries for both species, as well as examining the possibility that one Pacific-slope subspecies (*E. d. insulicola*) may also be a distinct species.

The Pacific-slope flycatcher and the cordilleran flycatcher divide their ranges approximately along a north-south line through the Cascades and Sierra Nevada mountain ranges, with the Pacific-slope species found at least as far north as several British Columbia islands and south to breeding and wintering grounds along the west-central coast of Mexico and the lower Baja Peninsula.

The cordilleran flycatcher is found primarily east of the Cascades and Sierra Nevada from British Columbia and Alberta southward along the Rockies and into Mexico. Most of the published range maps for the species do not include the plains east of the Rockies and into Nebraska, but since

the 1974 nesting discovery in Sowbelly Canyon, researchers have documented flycatchers nesting at locations on Monroe Creek north of Harrison and birders have noted that the eastward expansion continues, with recent nests or breeding adults seen in the Squaw Creek drainage southeast of Crawford and eastward to the vicinity of Chadron State Park. The only known Nebraska nesting away from the Pine Ridge was a nest discovered near the Wildcat Hills Nature Center south of Gering in 2003. Nesting has been documented in the Black Hills of South Dakota as well.

Nesting in Nebraska occurs primarily in June and July, but migrant cordilleran flycatchers may be seen anywhere in the Panhandle from mid-May to the first week in September as they travel to and from their wintering grounds in Mexico. Migrants have also been seen at the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge south of Valentine.

"So far in Nebraska, at least in my experience, the nests have been found in the bottom of canyons, usually not far from water," said Mollhoff. "Nests have been most often on



a rock outcrop, but one was under a bridge on a beam and another was in a rotted-out pine snag. I've also seen a cordilleran flycatcher nest in Colorado atop an outside light on a porch, like house finches often do."

Mollhoff said he found the Sowbelly nest last summer by sound: "I was too close to the nest and the non-incubating bird was yelling at me when I first became aware of it."

The cordilleran flycatcher's vocalizations or song is represented as a "*pseet, ptsick, seet*," with a higher-pitched first syllable on the initial *pseet* and *ptsick* notes. These higher-pitched syllables are the only recognized difference between the Pacific-slope and cordilleran flycatchers' songs.

Like Mollhoff, I too had difficulty hearing the high-pitched vocalizations, but after a few minutes sitting quietly and watching the location Mollhoff had described from his earlier trip to Sowbelly Canyon, I noticed a small, nervous bird – obviously annoyed by my presence – attempting to hide behind a twisted pine snag and woody vegetation near the nest site. The bird, later identified as the female flycatcher, would dart toward a small rocky area before quickly returning to the screening vegetation.

A second bird, which I eventually determined to be the male, made its presence known, at one point landing within a yard or so – barely far enough away for my telephoto lens to focus on it. As I watched and photographed the closer bird, which had a reddish-colored insect held firmly in his bill, the female made several flights along an exposed rock face nearby, only to dart quickly back to her hiding place. Looking in the direction the female was attempting to move, I eventually noticed a possible nest, or more accurately, a small bit of grass in a narrow rock cleft. The nest was little more than a small amount of vegetation.

My retreat to a more distant observation point brought more movement by the female as she increased her distance from her hiding spot three or four times before finally landing on the rock ledge next to the nest. During nearly an hour's observation, both adults made repeated trips to the nest and I could see several small, pin-feathered chicks appearing at times above its rim.

Flycatcher feeding activities continued throughout the morning hours and I took advantage of the shaded nest location and the breeding adult's growing acceptance to set up a camera closer to the nest. By midday, sunlight began to illuminate the nest and the female began brooding her chicks to protect them from the direct, warm sunlight, signaling the end of the photography opportunity at the nest site itself until at least that evening, when the sun would drop behind the high cliffs on the western rim of the canyon.

From a more remote location, however, I could still observe and photograph the male as it continued to capture insects flying near his usual perch on nearby chokecherry branches. Cordilleran flycatcher feeding activities include leaving their perch to catch airborne insects as well as



Left: The male flycatcher pauses on a nearby branch before bringing an insect to the nesting female. **Above:** The female watches for danger during a feeding trip to the nest. The characteristic light-colored ring around the birds' eyes can be seen in both photographs.

gleaning insects from plants and other vegetation. There seemed to be a variety of insects caught during my observation period and several times I watched the male attempt a mid-air capture only to come away empty-handed. When he did catch an insect, he usually carried it to the nest and fed the female.

After the sun finally dropped behind the western cliffs, the female began to move away from the nest for longer periods, usually returning with insects. As an adult approached the nest, each of the chicks would present themselves for their share of the catch. On several occasions, one of the young would climb over a sibling to stand outside the nest on the narrow rock ledge. After feeding their young, the adults would occasionally dip their heads into the nest to collect and remove the youngs' fecal sacs.

Feeding activity slowed as evening approached and the canyon began to cool, so I packed up my gear and headed home. On subsequent trips I found out three chicks occupied the nest, but a return to the nest site in mid-July found the nest abandoned for the year.

This diminutive flycatcher is quiet both in its vocalizations and its habits. If most breeding pairs' nest sites are similar to the one I photographed last year, they will remain rarely seen and heard. But for those lucky enough to hear the *pseet, ptsick, seet* song or notice the small bird leaving its perch to catch insects, the cordilleran flycatcher will have found a new friend and admirer. ■

Kill or Be Killed

Life in a Nebraska Farm Pond

By Jeff Kurrus

For the inhabitants of a Nebraska farm pond, the ability to survive seems miraculous when analyzing how many different ways a fish can die.

On a calm spring or summer afternoon, Nebraska farm ponds look anything but treacherous. They are peaceful places to take a kid for an afternoon of bobbers and hooked fingers, or to steal an afternoon nap on the water's edge. Below the surface, however, ponds are a place of death

and destruction where mothers and fathers eat their own children and survival on a daily basis is close to miraculous.

Just as it is on land, there is a pecking order to the underwater world – adult bluegill are bigger than minnows, adult bass are bigger than bluegills, etc – but the limited types of food sources and

the accompanying competition for them often muddies this pecking order. Young fish of all species compete against each other to eat the same plankton they require until they grow large enough to eat other foods, and young fish of even the largest species are fair game for almost any other fish that happens to be bigger at a given time.

However, each year reports emerge from around the country about enormous largemouth bass, some in the 20-pound range, being caught. While bass in Nebraska do not grow this large – the state record weighed 10 pounds, 11 ounces, and a five-pound largemouth bass is recognized by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as a “Master Angler” trophy – there were still 374 Master Angler largemouth bass reported to the Commission in 2008 and probably many more caught that were never reported. Quite often, many anglers even fail to take a picture of a lunker largemouth or, for that matter, any other trophy species they catch.

Yet it takes, on average, 10 years for a Nebraska bass to reach Master Angler size. Ten years of survival in a habitat that can be quite inhospitable at times. For purposes of illustration, the following uses largemouth bass to examine the daily struggles all fish have in their attempt to reach adulthood. Only by learning about and understanding these struggles can an angler truly appreciate the trophy fish that is caught, whether it be a six-pound bass, 1½ pound bluegill or 20-pound channel catfish. If anglers knew how rare those catches were, and what each of those Master Angler fish had to do to grow to that size, they would report every catch, release every trophy back into the water, and consider themselves quite fortunate to have spent a few

Left: A white egret holds a golden shiner in its beak. Egrets and other birds, including great blue herons and cormorants, pose big threats to individual fish.

Right: It is unknown what caused the death of this Master Angler-sized largemouth bass in Sarpy County. What is known is that there is a long list of potential suspects.



PHOTO BY PASQUALE MINGARELLI



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

seconds with a species who has excelled in the “fish eat fish” world of survival of the fittest (and luckiest).

The Top-Tier Prey

In *Largemouth Bass*, by Don Oster, the author states that between 5 and 10 bass are likely to survive to reach 10 inches in length from a nest that hatches between 2,000 and 12,000

eggs. Largemouth bass typically nest once per year after they reach 12 inches in length, which in Nebraska may not happen until their second or third year of life. After they hatch, bass fry feed primarily on zooplankton and insect larvae, but they do so in direct competition with a variety of other fish species, most notably bluegill.

As they grow, largemouth bass are not very selective with their prey choices



Because both bluegills and largemouth bass prey so heavily upon young catfish (pictured), catfish must be repeatedly stocked in farm ponds to maintain populations.

PHOTO BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

and can thrive in a variety of waters. This flexibility allows the species to survive in 49 states, from canyon reservoirs in the western United States, brackish tidal sloughs in Louisiana, to Nebraska’s farm ponds. Bass eat insects, crayfish, frogs, lizards, snakes, other fish, baby birds and ducks, mice or anything else they think they can fit in their mouth. They can swim at speeds up to 12 miles per hour in short bursts, five times faster than an angler can retrieve a crankbait. Simply stated, they eat whatever food is available. Despite their voracity, however, they are also prey for other animal species. Six years ago I was walking down the edge of Louisville SRA’s Lake No. 2 and saw a two-pound bass pivoting above a nest of eggs as a group of bluegills, at least a dozen, surrounded the nest-guarding male on three sides.



Even catch-and-release anglers can pose a threat to fish if they fail to handle their catch properly.

A bluegill would dart toward the nest from the right, and the bass would swim toward the intruder, ushering it away while one, if not more, bluegills from the left would move in and start eating eggs. For each egg the largemouth tried to save on one side, he lost three more on the other. Within an hour the bass was gone, as were all the eggs he had been guarding.

Bluegills are one of many species that will feed upon other young fish. Northern pike, crappie, flathead catfish, channel catfish and largemouth bass will attack other fish species as well as their own. In addition, multiple bird species, including American pelicans, ducks, terns, grebes, egrets, great blue herons and kingfishers, eat largemouth bass. Cormorants, for example, can consume three to five pounds of fish per day. Even more threats come from



Largemouth bass are the top-tier predator in most Nebraska farm ponds.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



PHOTO COURTESY OF TIM REIGERT

Catching and releasing lunker largemouth bass was not a common practice in years past. Currently, however, most anglers carefully return Master Angler-sized largemouth back into the water, one positive for trophy bass trying to survive in a Nebraska farm pond.

land – turtles, snakes, minks, raccoons, otters and bullfrogs will all feed on fish if given the chance.

All of these predators help to account for the small number of largemouth bass that will survive to reach 10 inches. However, in research previously

chronicled in the *In-Fisherman* book *The Largemouth Bass*, it was reported that largemouth bass most commonly consume prey that is 20 to 50 percent of their own length, and sometimes up to 70 percent. That means that some of these “safe” 10-inch largemouth bass could be eaten by their 20-inch brethren.



Even though this largemouth bass recently ate, he still struck a fishing lure.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Weather Death

Aside from the predators in and around a pond, largemouth bass and other fish species must also contend with Nebraska’s chaotic weather. A summerkill can occur in shallow ponds that contain a large amount of decomposing organic material and excessive algae blooms. This organic material can enter the pond from the surrounding watershed as well as through duck, goose and grass-eating carp excrement, which, in large amounts, can raise the nutrient levels of a pond and create an algae bloom. While algae produces oxygen during the day, algae uses it at night or when the sun is not shining, lowering oxygen levels.

Winter can be just as dangerous. During this time of year, ice prevents

atmospheric absorption of oxygen, so all the available oxygen has to come from plant photosynthesis or from oxygen already stored in the water. In order for that to happen, however, clear or even cloudy ice is needed to allow enough sunlight to penetrate down to the plants. If the ice is too thick or is blanketed with snow for an extended period of time, the plants may not receive enough sunlight to produce sufficient oxygen, resulting in a fish kill.

Three inches of ice, covered by five inches of snow, will block 99 percent of incoming sunlight. Remove snow from 30 to 50 percent of the pond surface or just in shoreline areas where submergent vegetation would be located beneath the ice, and fish have a much larger chance for winter survival.

The Ultimate Predator

While anglers love to catch big bass, many also love green yards and bug-free gardens. Insecticides, herbicides, fertilizers, petroleum products and domestic sewage often find their way into nearby ponds, lakes and rivers, and

can result in fish kills. In addition, heavily-grazed pastures and row crops can allow silt to enter a body of water and increase its turbidity, making eating hard for largemouth bass and other sight-feeding fish species. Excessive amounts of sediment can also smother eggs in a nest when it is stirred up and then settles.

If fish can survive this multitude of variables, they can also die in the hands of an angler – either intentionally and ending up on a dinner plate, or unintentionally. Fish secrete a protective mucus coating which helps prevent fungal and bacterial infections. Anglers who do not wet their hands when handling fish decrease that fish’s chance for survival by making it more susceptible to infection.

Just Right

Added to the already long and varied list, fish species can also succumb to extreme pH levels, spawning stress, and other bacterial infections. Mortality can also occur during the early spring when a fish’s disease resistance is low due to winter and pre-spawning stressors. In addition, if a pond is too shallow, fish will likely perish every winter. Yet if there is not enough shallow water in a pond, there will also be a lack of spawning areas for fish to reproduce. Simply put, there are a lot of ways to kill a fish.

Survival is a numbers game. If enough young largemouths can survive their spawn, using their coloration as camouflage and a pond’s aquatic vegetation as a hiding place, they may have a chance to reach adulthood. Once they reach adulthood, they may have the opportunity to reach Master Angler size if they win life’s lottery. At that point, they deserve two things: One, snap a couple pictures before releasing the fish and don’t be so worried about getting the next cast in the water as quick as you can. Two, release the fish. Of the 374 Master Angler largemouths reported in 2008, 48 were not released back into the water. Five-pound largemouths don’t fillet very well anyway, and they deserve to swim again. They have definitely earned the right. ■

“MSY versus OSY”

By Daryl Bauer, Fisheries Biologist

Any population of fish in any body of water is capable of supporting a certain level of harvest. That harvest could be expressed in pounds of fish harvested per year or “yield,” a number that can be supported over a period of years without the population being endangered. That would be the **Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY)**.

When fish populations are managed under a MSY philosophy, the goal is simply the sustained harvest of fish, which is typically obtained by allowing those fish to reach sexual maturity and then harvesting as many as possible. Under an MSY philosophy, no consideration is given to producing bigger or older fish, or for managing the fishery for any other qualities.

A more recent fisheries management philosophy is **Optimum Sustainable Yield (OSY)**. In contrast to the MSY philosophy, the OSY philosophy emphasizes some other quality of the fishery besides the maximum harvest of fish fillets. For example, under an OSY philosophy, a management priority may be to provide bigger fish, high catch rates or even an attractive location where folks want to fish. Most of our recreational fisheries in Nebraska and elsewhere are managed with an OSY philosophy. Or are they?

In today’s world almost all of us fish recreationally. Very few people fish because they have to put protein on the table. One would assume that in recreational angling today, most of our fisheries are managed with OSY values. However, many of our recreational fisheries receive enough pressure from anglers that we are in fact managing those fisheries at or near a level of maximum sustainable yield.

Overharvest of fish populations can be observed in a couple of ways. In the worst case, fish populations can be harvested to the point where they cannot maintain themselves – too few adults are left to maintain the population. Rarely does harvest reach that level in any recreational fisheries, and even under an MSY harvest philosophy, populations should not be harvested to the point where they are threatened. However, overharvest can also be exhibited in populations where the fish are not allowed to reach their full growth potential.

Why is it important that anglers grasp this concept of MSY versus OSY? Each angler needs to ask themselves why they fish and how important is it to have an opportunity to catch large fish, some big specimens of whatever species they are pursuing. Fisheries biologists in a state like Nebraska are not directed to producing enough fish to feed all the citizens of the state. Our mission is the stewardship of the state’s fisheries resources for the benefit of those resources and the people. Our charge is not to manage at an MSY level, but to manage for an OSY based on people’s desires and recreational values.

I read a quote in *In-Fisherman* magazine this spring that really rang true. Gord Pyzer, a retired Canadian fisheries biologist said, “. . . it’s actually quite easy to produce quality walleye fisheries – or bass, muskie, and other fisheries for that matter. The only two questions ever are how badly do anglers really want them, and are they prepared to pay the price?”

Are we satisfied with fisheries that are managed at or near a level of MSY, or do we want more?

In Defense of Grasshoppers

Their diversity and complexity make them an important component of grassland ecosystems.

Text and photos by Chris Helzer

Grasshoppers are a much maligned insect species. Though a few species have adapted very well to row crop agriculture and have become serious pests, most are much less sinister and play important roles in the functioning of grassland ecosystems. Of the 400 known grasshopper species in the western United States, only about 20 are considered pests. While they can rival cattle and bison for the amount of

forage they eat on a per acre basis, if you see grasshoppers only as eating machines and potential competition for other animals (including cattle), you're overlooking a much more complex and fascinating story.

The story starts with eggs, of course. Grasshopper eggs are typically laid in clusters in shallow holes in the soil. The soil temperature determines whether the eggs hatch right away or stay dormant. Many grasshopper species overwinter as eggs and begin growing when soil temperatures warm up in the spring. When the embryos hatch and make their way to the surface, they then have to lie on their back or side and squirm out of their embryonic membrane. During this period they are extremely vulnerable to predation, especially by ants. Once they shed the membrane, however, the nymphs, as they are now called, can stand and hop. They look just like tiny adult grasshoppers at this stage, but with shorter antennae and no wings. Over the next couple of months the nymphs will molt up to a half dozen times, shedding their skin and emerging each time as larger, more developed nymphs, until they finally reach adulthood and have fully developed wings and sexual organs.

Regardless of their stage in life, grasshoppers are voracious eaters. Every grasshopper species has unique feeding preferences – some feed up high in the vegetation, while others rarely leave the ground. Some species eat a wide variety of plant types, while others are very selective. Either way, grasshoppers have sensitive organs on the tips of their antennae with which they can test a leaf before eating it to decide whether it is the right species of plant or even if the leaf is at the right growth stage to provide good nutrition. Most tend to eat mainly young green leaves and avoid older leaves, but some ground-dwelling grasshoppers will eat older leaves, including those felled by other grasshoppers.

Besides eating, the other critical part of a grasshopper's daily life, as with other insects, is thermoregulation. Because they are ectothermic (cold-blooded), grasshoppers have to constantly regulate their body temperature by changing their location. When the air temperature is cool, they find sunny places to feed or rest. When the day grows very hot, they have several strategies to keep cool. Sitting in the shade is one obvious technique, and you can often see grasshoppers



For some farmers and ranchers, this is the face of destruction, but the true role of grasshoppers is much less ominous.



The pallid-winged grasshopper (*Trimerotropis pallidipennis*) has pale, mottled coloration that causes them to blend in well with their habitat – such as this Platte River sandbar near Kearney.

sitting vertically on the shady side of a grass or other plant stem in the middle of a hot afternoon. In sparse vegetation, grasshoppers will climb any available plant to get away from the hot ground and will then face the sun so that only their head is exposed to the direct sunlight, minimizing exposure of the rest of their body. Some species will also fly to cool themselves off. On calm days they will mill around just above the tops of the grasses, but on windy days these flights, whether to cool off or to search for new feeding areas, can add up to distances of several miles or more throughout a season.

Few people realize that grasshoppers have a variety of ways to communicate with each other. First, like crickets, they can make sounds by rubbing their hind legs against the side of their abdomen. In addition, they can rapidly flex and snap their hind wings while flying, a process called crepitation, which can make a loud, rattling sound. Each species produces unique sounds and they can communicate a number of messages this way. Finally, grasshoppers employ a number of visual signals, including rubbing their legs against their wings, tipping, shaking or stomping their legs, and flashing their wings. In this way they can attract and recognize mates, ward off an unwanted suitor and defend territories or food sources.

While grasshoppers have a poor reputation among many people, only a small percentage of grasshopper species actually cause us problems. In Nebraska, only 14 grasshopper species are considered to be pests in rangeland and four

species in cropland. In reality, grasshoppers are a diverse and very important component of grassland ecosystems. When they are abundant, they can play a major role in nutrient cycling, particularly in grasslands with no cattle or other large vertebrate grazers. In addition, because of their size and abundance, grasshoppers are a critical food source for many grassland nesting birds, including popular game species such as prairie chickens, bobwhite quail and ring-necked pheasants. They are also eaten by a diversity of other predators, everything from insects to mammals.

Because grasshoppers eat the same plants we feed ourselves and our livestock, there will probably always be conflicts of interest between us. On the other hand, they are an essential part of native grasslands in our state. It's easy to simply lump all grasshoppers into the category of pests, but as with any other stereotyping exercise, that whitewashes over the incredible diversity among the group. Not all Texans wear ten-gallon hats, and not all grasshoppers destroy fields and pastures. In fact, some of each can be downright interesting and worth having around. ■

Chris Helzer lives in Aurora and is the Eastern Nebraska Program Director for The Nature Conservancy. He has been a contributor to NEBRASKALAND since 1994.



Patch-Burn Grazing

Using fire to benefit both ranchers and wildlife.

By Chris Helzer

This summer marks the beginning of a three-year research project investigating the effects of patch-burn grazing on private and public lands in eastern Nebraska. The study will be led by Steve Winter of Oklahoma State University, in cooperation with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Patch-burn grazing is a grassland management strategy that produces benefits for wildlife habitat, biological diversity and livestock production. Most commonly the method involves a single pasture, within which a portion (patch) is burned each year. Cattle are allowed free access to the entire pasture, but previous studies have shown that they spend most of their time grazing the most recently burned patch. After a new patch is burned, the cattle largely abandon the previous burn patch and concentrate in the new one. That allows the previous patch time to rest and recover for two years or more until it is burned again. This dynamic combination of fire, intense grazing and rest produces a variety of benefits to wildlife, livestock and prairie diversity.

From a wildlife standpoint, patch-burn grazing creates a variety of available habitat types and supports a diverse mixture of animal species, everything from tiny insects to large mammals. Recently burned patches are cropped short by cattle all season, resulting in excellent habitat for those birds and other wildlife that utilize low vegetation structure, while the patch that was burned the previous year fills with annual and biennial plants, taking advantage of the reduced vigor of

grasses recovering from a year of intense grazing. These “recovery patches” create tall weedy cover with sparse grass underneath – perfect brood-rearing habitat for birds such as prairie chickens, quail and pheasants. Meanwhile, the remainder of the pasture contains tall dense prairie vegetation, which is excellent habitat for many bird species, including nesting and winter cover for upland game birds.

Plant diversity appears to benefit from patch-burn grazing as well – the intense grazing in the burned patch weakens the dominant grasses, opening up space above and below ground. This provides new opportunities for establishment by a variety of plant species that are normally suppressed by those grasses. Within a year or two after a patch is burned, the dominant grasses are able to recover their vigor, but the periodic intense grazing allows a diversity of other plants to persist in the prairie as well. As a whole, the system provides the kind of disturbance regime that prairie plant species and communities have adapted to during thousands of years of large-scale fires and bison grazing.

The best news from patch-burn grazing research that has been done so far is that it seems to work as well for livestock producers as it does for wildlife. Oklahoma State University has tested patch-burn grazing against other common grazing systems in both tallgrass prairies and dry prairies, using both cow-calf pairs and stocker cattle. In all cases, patch-burn grazing has supported the same stocking rates as other systems and has shown nearly identical results for weight gains and other measures of livestock productivity. This management system can also make prescribed burning for the control of cedar trees and other invasives easier to implement because no cross-fencing or deferring of pastures is necessary to build up the dense grass needed to carry a fire.

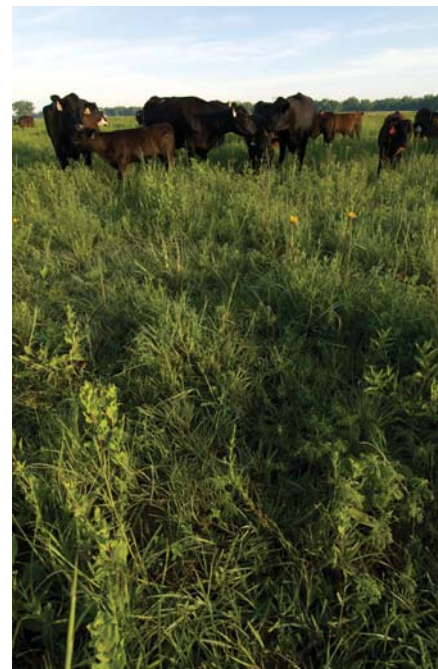
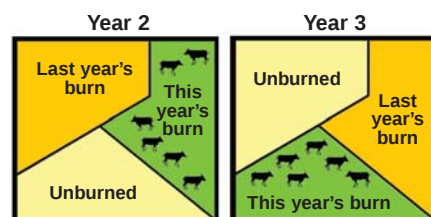


PHOTO BY CHRIS HELZER

A restored Platte River prairie owned by The Nature Conservancy showcases the plant diversity and habitat structure that can result from patch-burn grazing.

In Nebraska, patch-burn grazing has been tested by The Nature Conservancy on their properties along the Niobrara River since the early 1990s and on the Central Platte River since 2001. The Conservancy’s data supports the results from other states showing benefits to both wildlife habitat and plant diversity. The new research project in eastern Nebraska is expanding on that data with a larger number of sites and will be able to look more closely at the effects of patch-burn grazing on introduced grasses such as smooth brome and Kentucky bluegrass, both of which can have severe impacts on plant diversity and wildlife habitat. In addition, the new study will include many private lands sites, giving landowners a chance to test the idea themselves and develop a firsthand opinion of the potential application for their own operations. ■

Chris Helzer is the Eastern Nebraska Program Director for The Nature Conservancy. He lives and works in Aurora, Nebraska.



Wildwood Lake

This area’s best days are in the near future.

By Jeff Kurrus

“Fish Wildwood,” fisheries biologist Daryl Bauer told me last summer. “You’ll be impressed.”

A week later, I topped the hill on my first trip to 103-acre Wildwood Lake, located two miles northwest of Agnew in Lancaster County and owned by the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District. Before I ever wet the first line, I knew I would like the lake.

Three rock-lined islands, a riprap dam and two coves could be seen from the boat ramp. The lake’s southwestern cove, near one of the lake’s two campgrounds, is tree-lined, and by this time of the year should have a good bit of vegetation to fish, making topwater angling for species such as largemouth bass a treat.

The lake’s other cove, a stump-infested angler’s paradise, is located on the north end of the lake. Because this cove is several hundred yards long, an angler could spend an entire day fishing this area and never see the same water

twice.

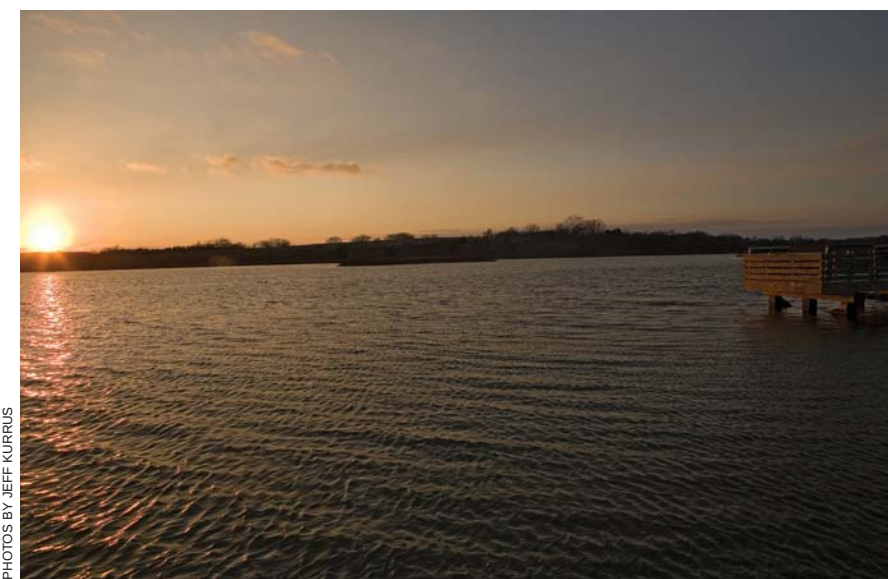
During that initial trip, fish were very aggressive near the islands and repeatedly hit topwater plugs. Later on last summer during a second trip, bluegill were the fish of choice and were easy to catch in many parts of the lake on floating popping bugs.

The lake’s best aspect is its potential. Currently, all largemouth bass and channel catfish must be released, while there is an eight-inch minimum on bluegills. Plus, no live baitfish is allowed and there is a five mph speed limit on boats. These regulations are in place to build this eastern Nebraska lake into one of the state’s premier fisheries.

Originally, Wildwood was created as a flood control reservoir 1979 as part of the North Oak Watershed Project. In 1993, a catch-and-release experiment was instituted to curb fish overharvest. In 2002, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission completed an aquatic habitat rehabilitation project at the lake,



The ground around Wildwood offers good turkey hunting.



PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

Wildwood’s 103 surface acres feature excellent bank and boat angling opportunities.



Special regulations apply to Wildwood’s largemouth bass (above) and catfish.

deepening portions of it and increasing shoreline habitat and angling opportunities, including a wheelchair-accessible fishing deck. The lake was then restocked with largemouth bass, bluegill, channel catfish and walleye. The lake did have a minor setback in 2005 because of a fish kill, but fisheries biologist Daryl Bauer has great expectations for this lake in the near future – “I expect Wildwood to hit its peak in the next two to three years.”

Wildwood also has nearly 500 acres of public hunting land. Deer, dove, pheasant, quail, rabbit, squirrel, waterfowl and turkey can be hunted on the ground surrounding the lake, and it is difficult to fish here in the early spring without hearing turkeys gobbling nearby, making Wildwood the perfect locale for a fish/hunt combo trip.

For more information on Wildwood or the Commission’s Aquatic Habitat Program, visit OutdoorNebraska.com. ■



Wildwood Lake, located two miles northwest of Agnew in Lancaster County, offers fishing, hunting and primitive camping. There is no cost or permit needed to camp.

Getting Unhung

One of fishing's most important, and nerve-racking, skills to develop.

By Jeff Kurrus

If you are really trying to catch fish, it's definitely going to happen. So don't even worry about it. But what should you do once you are snagged?

Wait, let me back up. First, if you never want to get hung up, stay at the house. If you rarely want to get hung

up, however, use only weedless lures. Scum frogs, grass mice, floating plastics, weedless jigs – all are good for throwing wherever and whenever you want. The next lure on the depth chart is definitely a spinnerbait. This lure is relatively weedless as well and can access most places. When thrown

over a limb or other obstruction, slowly reeling it back over can usually keep this lure from snagging. For all other hangups, read on.

Emergent Hangups

Say you're working a likely looking shoreline full of stumps and trees and your first cast of the day overshoots your target and gets hung up. Most people immediately give up after a cast like this and automatically head for the lure, disturbing fish they might have caught.

Sure, that's an option, but it isn't your only one and it shouldn't be your first. If you make a bad cast over a limb near the water, lower the lure to the water and twitch it on the surface. If a fish hits, it's going to absorb the lure's hooks, which would otherwise snag the lure. Then you can pull your fish over the obstruction, assuming, of course, you're using heavy line.

If no fish strikes, make a judgment call. If it's a huge tree trunk where the lure isn't visible, you'll have to pull the lure over the trunk. Raise your rod tip and experiment on how hard to jerk. Usually a simple twitch of the wrist is good enough to get it away from most

obstructions. That also allows the lure to stay close to the stump once it's back in the water. Getting untangled is not enough; turning a bad cast into a great cast is the most important part.

If your lure is hung in a tree limb and it's too high to entice a fish, get the lure swinging. Then while it's swinging away from you, use a gentle twitch to flip the lure free from the branch. However, if you surmise that swinging the lure above that limb will entangle it in another limb, let out enough line so that the lure lowers to the point where you can retrieve it by hand.

Now, a worse-case scenario of events. You throw your lure and it gets entangled in a pine tree, a piece of netting, a rope, or a crack in a boat dock. This is simple. Give a slight tug on your lure. If it won't come, go get it.

Submergent Hangups

When fishing with a crankbait or spinnerbait, watch your line. When the line stops as you continue to reel, the lure is about to go over an underwater limb. If fishing with a floating crankbait, stop reeling and allow the lure to float to the surface. If fishing with a sinking lure, such as a spinnerbait, raise your rod top and gently twitch the lure with your wrist above the obstruction. Then you can continue reeling. What if your line stops with a big fish? A possibility, yes, but 99 percent of the time the lure will make some sort of other movement such as a left or right swing when a fish takes it. Second, watch the emergent structure to guess where the submergent structure is. If fishing with a suspending or sinking lure, simply lifting the rod tip while reeling will allow the lure to move over most underwater structure.

If the lure is snagged beneath the water, you have multiple options. First, reel until the rod tip is touching the lure. Then push the rod tip away from you in the opposite direction that the lure was originally swimming. If fishing with a baitcaster, keep your thumb on the spool. If this doesn't work or if your rod tip becomes entangled with your lure, you'll then be able to release your spool to prevent your rod from breaking if the tip is bent too far in one direction.

Second, move the boat to the opposite

side of the snag and pull. This allows your lure to come out the same way it came in. This also works well if you can't reach your lure with your rod tip. If fishing from the bank, change the angle. If you can't get on the opposite side, move as far to the left or right as possible and pull. Third, there are several companies who make tools that connect to your line and slide down to free the lure from a snag. When fishing deep-diving crankbaits, this is sometimes the only way to untangle a lure without losing it.

Fourth, if fishing near riprap, use the bow technique: Tighten your line, then use your fingers and pluck at the line from the reel to the first eyelet as if you were playing a guitar. The momentum of the pluck may jar your lure loose beneath the water. This technique works best with monofilament line because of its ability to stretch.

If none of these techniques work, position the boat on the opposite side, reel down as far as you can in the water

with your thumb on the spool, and pull toward you. This will either break the limb, break the knot or straighten the hook. The problem with this technique is when fishing with braided lines that can exceed tests of over 100 pounds. You must also make sure that when pulling, you are pulling straight so the rod tip is not broken in the process. And with all of these techniques, protect yourself from flying lures – a three dollar fishing lure isn't worth losing an eye over.

The object when getting unhung is to get your lure out of trouble and put it in a fish's mouth as quickly as possible. Learning these techniques will allow you to have the confidence to make casts in areas with better structure for fish. Don't try to throw in the trees on purpose, but make sure you're not pulling back on casts that might have otherwise landed right in a fish's living room. When you start having more confidence making casts whenever and wherever you want to, you'll see your fishing success increase dramatically. ■



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Fishing crankbaits near wooded structure is manageable if you know how to untangle your lure when it becomes snagged.



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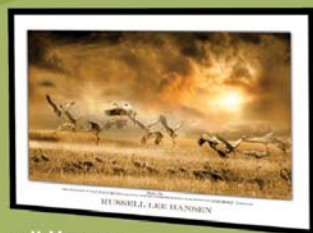
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▲ This is a picture of my brother, Sherman Johnson (left), Ordie Allen (middle) and S.E. "Pappy" Ling (right) blood testing pheasants at the Northeast Pheasant Farm, located six miles north of Madison.

Some adult pheasants were kept on the farm all year. The eggs were collected and shipped to Wilber, where they were hatched.

The baby pheasants were then returned to the pheasant farm and raised to adults. They were then released at various locations throughout the state.

The photo was taken in the fall of 1953 by Mike Kohl.

— Jan Kohl, Madison, Nebraska



▲ Growing up in Lincoln and being the son of an avid fisherman wasn't an easy situation. This obstacle was remedied by 26 cents a gallon gas, 6½-hour drives and a dad who was a TROUT fisherman.

I was taught at an early age how to read trout streams such as Nine Mile, Red Willow and the Snake. Often trips out west were timed to match the spawn of McConaughy rainbows, which interrupted my high school boys basketball attendance.

Gladly absent, my teacher taught me the art of spinning gear for these migratory wonders. This was an amazing fishery and I am so happy to see great efforts being made to protect this legacy.

My fishing partner is gone now and I miss these trips west. Your article [Nine-mile Creek, June 2008] took me back to a time in Nebraska that I now only visit through articles in magazines and family photos such as this one of my father, Gus, taken in 1963.

— Dan Riner, Lincoln, Nebraska



▲ I enjoy your "Portraits from the Past" page in NEBRASKALand each month, so I thought I'd send along this photo, which is widely distributed in our extended Reyner/Olson family. The photo dates to around 1928 or 1929, and was posed somewhere near Hyannis, deep in the Sandhills. From left: a farmhand (unknown); my great-grandfather, Gust Olson; his brother-in-law, Art Reyner; and Clarence and Marguerite Worley. Marguerite is Art's youngest sister — she and Clarence were married just around the time of this photo. Gust came from pioneer Swedish stock around Broken Bow. He ranched for some years at Victoria Springs and then in the Panhandle. Eventually he and his wife, Alice Reyner, moved to California, where he worked as a longshoreman. The rest of the family mostly stayed put.

— John Montag SJ, St. Louis, Missouri

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

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