



Prairie violets bloom at Griffith Prairie, a Prairie Plains Resource Institute preserve, in Hamilton County. Photo by Chris Helzer.

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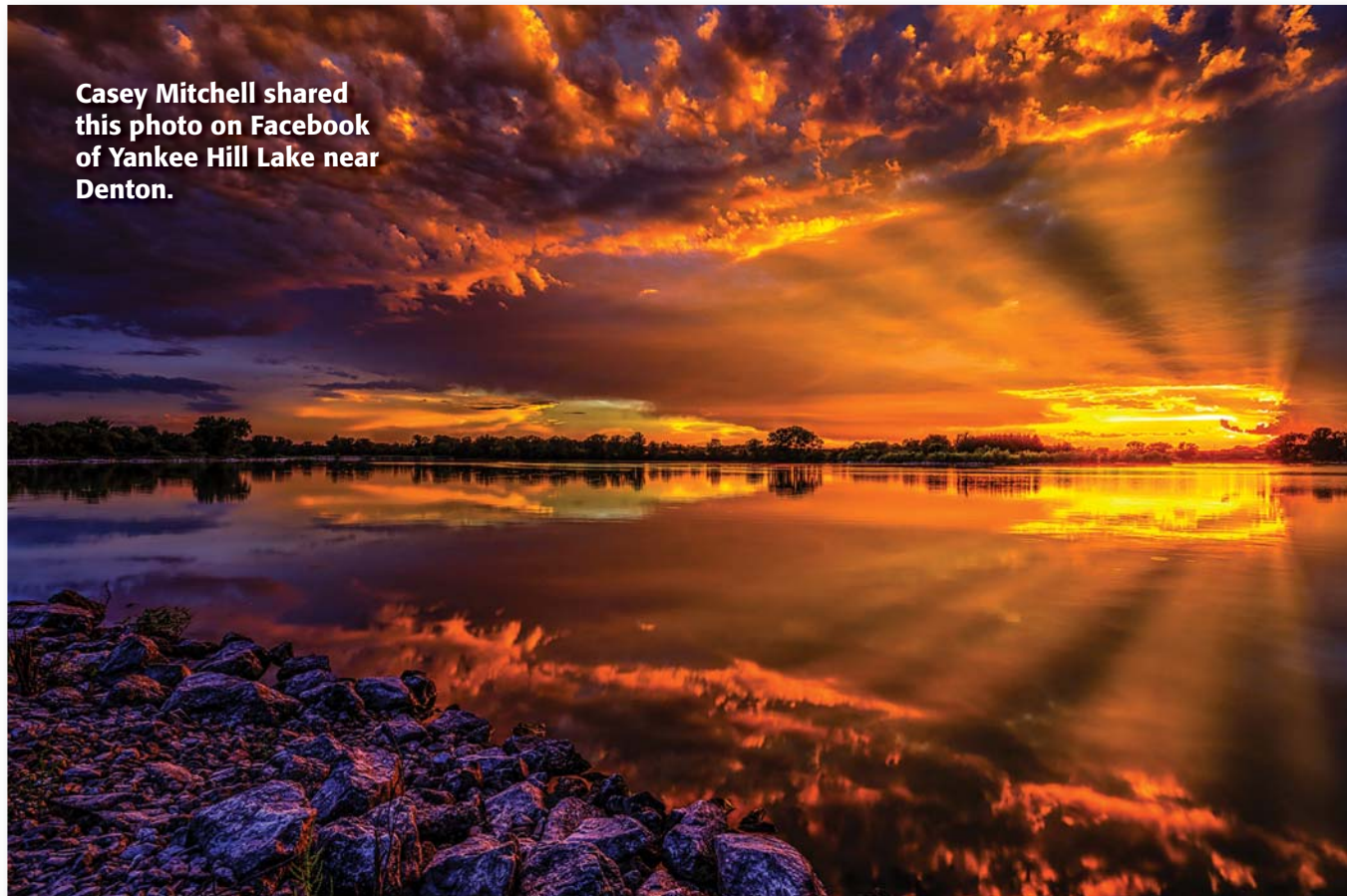
Cover: The sun rises over the pine-studded rocky terrain at Chadron State Park. In its 95th year, Nebraska's first state park continues offering breathtaking Pine Ridge scenery. See story on page 22. Photo by Justin Haag.



Zach Hanson sent this image of Schramm Park State Recreation Area taken at midnight in late February.



Jennifer Swain photographed this bobcat behind her house southeast of North Platte.



Casey Mitchell shared this photo on Facebook of Yankee Hill Lake near Denton.

Deer Carcass Disposal

Mark Kimball of Callaway, Nebraska, recently sent Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Big Game Program Manager Kit Hams a question about where hunters could legally dispose animal carcasses after a hunting trip. Here is Kit's response:

Mark,

Once you have taken a carcass home, the only legal method of disposal is on private land with permission of the landowner or in your trash can, assuming your commercial trash hauler will take it. The local landfill is usually an option also, which I have routinely used in Lincoln.

Private land disposal is legal with permission of the landowner. However, once you take a carcass home from public land you cannot take it back to any public area.

With small carcass remains (turkey, deer leg bones for example) I just bury them in my garden. They eventually break down, but the leg bones last many years. (They make good row markers!)

When I harvest a deer, I usually leave the spine, ribcage and hide where I killed it and carry the quarters and head out to my vehicle as is legally required. I usually try to hide the ribs, spine and skin from view (not visible by a road or trail and not in a creek). Coyotes usually find the parts and consume much of the remains. This method is both legal and natural and generally good for soil, birds, scavengers, insects, microorganisms and vegetation.



Richard Jones took this photo of a barn and star trails at Haythorn Ranch in Maxwell.



Kirk Noller caught this coyote on a trail camera in February northeast of Kearney.



Brent Rising sent in this image of a stare-off between a white-tailed deer and a raccoon from a trail camera in Douglas County.



Kathy Chase submitted these two photos from her travels across Nebraska. The top image is Robert Knapp of Ord, also known as "Mr. Bob," at Fort Hartsuff State Historical Park. The windmill image below was taken in Valley County south of Ord.



Outdoor Plates

Dennis Coats of Hastings can fish, as his plate implies, and he does often with his son, both close to home in sandpit lakes along Interstate 80 and occasionally in far flung locales such as Mexico, Canada and Alaska, more so now that he's recently retired.

If you have a unique outdoor message plate you would like to share, or know someone who does, e-mail a photo of it (high-resolution, JPEG format only, please) to Eric.Fowler@Nebraska.gov, along with your name, hometown and a brief description of the interests expressed on your license plate.

Free Fishing and Park Entry Day!

Don't forget that on May 21 there are no fishing permits or park entry permits required. So go out to a park and fish ... for Free!

Correction: On page 6 of our April magazine, we incorrectly captioned a photo by reader Gary Panzer as two bull elk in a field north of Scottsbluff. These should have been labeled as mule deer.

-Editor

Send your comments to:

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or e-mail Jeff.Kurrus@Nebraska.gov
 Please include your postal address and telephone number. Letters may be condensed and edited. Photographs are also welcome.

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A Mammal Brief

Fox Squirrel

By Lindsay Rogers

Sciurus niger

Named for their large, bushy tails – reminiscent of a red fox's tail – fox squirrels are found across Nebraska in a variety of habitats. They prefer open forested areas, but are often found in urban areas.

Although fox squirrels are a true tree squirrel, they spend much of their time on the ground searching for food. At any sign of danger, they will immediately seek refuge in nearby trees. They feed on plant material such as buds, bark and nuts. They are distinguished from other tree squirrels, such as the gray squirrel, by their larger size and color. Fox squirrels are typically more rusty colored with orange underparts while the gray squirrel is more gray with white underparts; both fox and gray squirrels have black morphs.

Lindsay Rogers is an outdoor education specialist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

PHOTO BY ROCKY HOFFMANN



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Travelogue

By Julie Geiser

Gothenburg

The town of Gothenburg brings visitors to one of the most interesting displays of history in miles. Dubbed the Pony Express Capital of Nebraska, it is loaded with glimpses of times past.

The Pony Express consisted of relays of men who rode horses carrying saddlebags of mail across a 2,000-mile trail for faster communication with the west during the threat of the Civil War. The service opened April 3, 1860, and only lasted until Oct. 24, 1861, when the Pacific Telegraph line ended the need for the riders. Gothenburg has two **Pony Express stations** - the **Midway** on its original ranch site south of Gothenburg and the **Sam Macchette station** in **Ehmen Park**. The station in the park was used as a fur trading post and ranch house along the Oregon Trail southwest of Gothenburg before it was used as a Pony Express station.

Named after Goteborg, Sweden, this small town is noted for its Swedish heritage, founded in 1882 by dreamer Olof Bergstrom, a minister from Goteborg. The **Gothenburg Historical Museum** offers visitors the opportunity to see the town's beginnings with railroad displays, photos, and memorabilia. The **Sod House Museum** is a time capsule of pioneer life featuring an authentic replica of an early sod home reflecting hardships faced by pioneer families.

In the early 1890s a 10-mile canal was dug from the Platte River to create a reservoir named **Lake Helen**, which provided water-powered electricity and in return brought a brass foundry, flour mills and other factories to Gothenburg. After 1893 the industry boom days ended and the lake was primarily used for agricultural irrigation. Today the newly refurbished lake and recreation area has excellent fishing, a 2.5-mile exercise trail, and a **Veteran's War Memorial** to commemorate local residents who gave their lives in WWI, WWII, and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Lafayette Park, adjacent to Lake Helen, provides campsites and showers under a shelter of trees with scenic views of the lake.

Traveling through Gothenburg visitors may drive on part of the original **Lincoln Highway**. The coast-to-coast roadway connected New York to San Francisco; at Gothenburg the highway crossed the river bridge and followed a narrow road, which is still visible, as it continued west on the south side of the river. In 1930 the Lincoln highway was rerouted onto what is now Highway 30. The Lincoln Highway is one of Nebraska's nine scenic byways and can be traveled today from Gothenburg to North Platte.

After a day of discovering all the history in this small city, relax with a round of golf at **Wild Horse Golf Club**. A nationally rated 18-hole course open to the public, the links feature a driving range, putting and chipping green, a pro shop and snack bar. When it's time to retire for the day Wild Horse has new, four-bedroom cabins available by reservation.

Other places to visit include the **Ehmen Park Arboretum**, the **annual rodeo**, the **Swedish Crosses Cemetery**, **Walker's Steak House** and **Nebraska Barn and Grill**. Plan your trip by visiting Gothenburgdelivers.com.



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Wild Horse Golf Club



A pontoon bridge (also known as a floating bridge) that crossed the Missouri River near Nebraska City. The V-shaped portion could swing open for boats or flowing ice.

A Brief History Nebraska City's Pontoon Bridge

From the Nebraska State Historical Society

Rivers were major travel barriers for most of human history. Crossing a large river meant an expensive ferry ride, or driving a team across the ice in winter, and there was no crossing at all during floods or the spring breakup of the ice. One of the more creative attempts at a solution occurred in Nebraska City in the late 1880s.

Congress chartered the Nebraska City Bridge Company in the early 1870s, but by summer 1888 only the new Burlington Railroad bridge spanned the Missouri River there. Everybody else still had to use a ferry. A man named Col. S. N. Stewart of Philadelphia proposed to build a pontoon toll bridge if the community would subsidize its construction. Local leaders agreed.

The pontoon bridge was estimated to have cost about \$18,000 and opened to much fanfare on Aug. 23, 1888. Not only was it said to be the first pontoon bridge across the Missouri River, but it was also the largest drawbridge of its kind in the world. The pontoon section crossing the main channel was 1,074 feet long with a 1,050-foot cribwork approach spanning a secondary channel between an island

and the Iowa shore. The roadway, including two pedestrian footways, was 24.5 feet wide. Opening the “draw” (the V-shaped portion that could swing open for boats or flowing ice) provided a 528-foot-wide passage.

While the bridge operated successfully during ice-free months or when the river was not unusually high or low, the capricious Missouri soon created problems. It became increasingly clear that a permanent wagon bridge was still needed. In the spring of 1890 city leaders began planning an election to vote bonds to build one. Stewart responded by threatening to remove the pontoon bridge.

Voters approved the bridge bonds in July; the courts initially upheld them against a series of legal challenges mounted by the Burlington Railroad. The Burlington claimed it had acquired the Nebraska City Bridge Company’s original charter to build the railroad bridge and, therefore, the railroad was entitled to the bonds. Stewart then announced that he had sold the pontoon bridge to parties in Atchison, Kansas. On Nov. 13 the pontoons were sent down the river toward the bridge’s new home. A month later, the U.S. District Court ruled the bridge bonds invalid, and Nebraska City was back where it had started.

In 1891 the Burlington laid planks beside the tracks across the railroad span so it could be used as a toll bridge for non-railroad traffic. Nebraska City’s dream of a permanent

vehicular bridge was finally realized on Oct. 14, 1930 with the opening of the Waubonsie Bridge. Long gone, but not entirely forgotten, was the innovative pontoon bridge that had briefly seemed the answer to the Missouri River problem at Nebraska City. ■

Visit the Nebraska State Historical Society’s website at Nebraskahistory.org.



Near the pontoon bridge, the Burlington Railroad bridge was not open to wagons or pedestrians.

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A Wildflower Walk

By Paula Hoppe

It's time for a walk. The winds of winter, which held us captive with their bite, have been subdued by the bluster of spring breezes. All around the browns and grays of the late winter landscape are melting into the greens of spring, and flowers have begun to cast aside their winter blankets of dry leaves and grasses.

• Amble down the woodland path and you will find Dutchman's breeches, with their delicate fern-like foliage, and flowers resembling small pantaloons hung out to dry. May-apple rises from the forest floor; its single blossom nodding beneath two leaves. Tiny delicate fawn lilies linger, and downy blue violets abound, the latter being the



May-apple



Fawn lily



Plains wild indigo



Prairie larkspur

only food source for fritillary butterfly larvae.

• A little diligence may be needed to find the plants blooming in prairies this month. Plains phlox hugs the ground, and Rocky Mountain pussy-toes in west and central Nebraska rarely eclipse 6 inches. The plainleaf pussy-toes found in eastern portions of the state, however, may rise to a respectable 15 inches. Also blooming this month are white and plains wild indigo, prairie larkspur, and ground plum. The 5-inch yellow flower of the Plains evening primrose portends warmer days to come, its ephemeral blossom reflecting the sun in miniature.

• Wet soils, creek banks and sloughs yield their own beauties, including the rare small white lady's-slipper orchid,

meadow anemone and marsh-marigold. The tall arching stems of Solomon's seal are easily found statewide. White and yellow water-crowfoot grow with their feet in the water, the cup-like flowers rising above the surface.

So, take a stroll, smell the moist spring earth and discover the diverse blooms of May. ■



Marsh marigold



White water-crowfoot

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Growing Pumpkins

By Sarah Kocher

Pumpkin pickers and Goldilocks have one thing in common: everything has to be just right. Because the right size, color and texture for each pumpkin picker is so important, choosing the right pumpkin can be quite a task.

Imagine, then, trying to grow enough perfect pumpkins for hundreds of guests.

As a strictly October squash, commercial pumpkins are 10 months of work for two months of payoff. As soon as one Halloween is over, the next is already on the radar.

According to Helgoth's Pumpkin Patch owner and grower Chuck Helgoth, the winter is spent ordering seed for the next year. At Helgoth's, located in Saint Libory, Nebraska, this includes ordering 28 varieties of pumpkins, including eight standard varieties as well as 20 "ornamentals," ranging in color, size and shape. Seeds cost the Helgoths between \$150-200 per acre.

The ground is prepared for these seeds in May, and soil samples are taken to ensure its composition is favorable for pumpkins. Like any plant, the pumpkin requires a certain soil pH to grow properly, usually between 6 and 7, and fertilizer is used to bring the soil closer to a point that pleases pumpkins.

"You've got to treat it kind of like a corn crop," Helgoth said. "We don't just throw the seed around and walk away."

The Helgoths also plant in the month of May and run through the first week of June. Connie Hintz, owner of Poppy's Pumpkin Patch in Norfolk, plants several different times during the spring window. After all, with such a relatively short and specifically defined period of time in which to sell the product, the pumpkins need to be ready at different intervals. Plant them all too early and they'll spoil before Halloween. Plant them all too late and the customers will have to choose between green and greener pumpkin preemies. With an even spread, the pumpkins can mature at different times, offering patch customers



PHOTO BY SARAH KOCHER

Many pumpkins in Nebraska are planted this month in preparation for Halloween.

ripe pumpkins throughout the duration of the fall season.

July and August are maintenance months: for the Helgoths, this means spraying the pumpkins with fungicides and bug sprays, fertilizing them, weeding the fields and irrigating. Hintz and her family mow, weed and hoe their land by hand. When September and October roll around, the vines dry and the patches open for customers to snip off and take home tokens of 10 months of work.

It's not all vines and easy times, though. Both the Helgoths and Hintzs grow pumpkins in three separate fields to ensure hail doesn't damage the entire crop. Additionally, the sheer manpower of growing pumpkins can be a challenge.

"Every one gets clipped by hand," Connie said. The stems have to be just right, so each pumpkin must receive individual attention when it's time to cut them off and haul them to the patch.

Finally, there's the competition factor – not between humans and humans, but between humans and crows, raccoons and cows. The cows, perhaps, come out on top; according to Hintz's grandson and worker Jared, when the crows and raccoons ruin the pumpkins for sale, the cows get the leftovers.

Eventually, though, pumpkin season arrives, and we will have plenty to choose from. Hintz cultivates 8 acres of pumpkins, and the Helgoths have a

40-acre spread which in a good year yields 20,000 pounds of pumpkins per acre.

If you're doing it right, you'll choose one this fall that's firm and solid with a stem that's thick, green and sturdy. If you're in it for a jack-o'-lantern, don't buy too early, and don't park it on the concrete – the pumpkin will suck up the moisture housed in the concrete and rot faster.

For the Goldilockses of pumpkin pickers, the effort required for the perfect pumpkin is worth it. The same is true for the Helgoths and the Hintzs; growing pumpkins is a labor of love that, in the end, can't be squashed. ■



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

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This Month is for the Birds

By Lindsay Rogers

What's on your to-do list today? How about biological control of mosquitos, grasshoppers and other insects? Or, seed dispersal of numerous plants including raspberries, cedar, ground plum and prairie rose? Maybe you plan to provide food for hundreds of different species across Nebraska. If you are like me, none of these critical ecosystem services are on my to-do list today (or any day). Thankfully we have birds to do all this important work.

Without birds, many of our ecosystem functions would fail. We rely on birds to keep food webs, seed dispersal, pollination and biological control working – all for free. So, let's take a moment to celebrate these critical species. May is designated as Nebraska Migratory Bird Month, and across the state, conservation organizations and agencies have worked together to plan events, classes

and festivals for all Nebraskans to attend. Join us by finding an event in your area on the Nebraska Migratory Bird Month website, Nebraskabirdmonth.org.



Pelicans stand along the shore of Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area.

PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

The 2016 Nebraska Passport Travel Program

The Call of the Road

In its seventh year, the Nebraska Passport program is continuing to grow and capture the curiosity of travelers. In a state with plenty of space to explore and discover, the Nebraska Tourism Commission has once again selected 80 stops to help you connect to the place we call home. Some of these stops are well-known institutions such as the Joslyn Art Museum, Scotts Bluff National Monument, and Chimney Rock. However, other stops will find you uncovering some hidden gems in the state – small businesses such as Corner Nook in Blue Hill or The Swiss Baker in Doniphan, cultural hubs such as the Pawnee Art Center in Dannebrog, and communal gathering places such as Joe Camera in Alma or 4th Street Coffee House in Stromsburg – each with a unique story to tell. You'll find yourself in places you've never been before, because this year, the program features 23 new communities.

In the words of 2015 Nebraska Passport participant Keri McLandsborough, "Thank you for 80 more reasons to debate anyone who claims we live in fly-over country!"

We look forward to seeing you on the road this summer,

enjoying the 2016 Nebraska Passport program. Drive on.

To order your passport booklet, email info@nebraskapassport.com with your name, mailing address, and the number of passport booklets requested. For more information, visit Nebraskapassport.com. ■



Black Cow Fat Pig restaurant in Norfolk on the Order Up! Tour.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM

VISIT Cheyenne County

Sidney Dalton Gurley Lodgepole Potter

For more information on all that Cheyenne County has to offer, contact the Cheyenne County Visitors Center
658 Glover Rd., Sidney, NE (308) 254-4030 / (866) 545-4030
www.sidneycheyennecountytourism.com

OFFICIAL PASSPORT TRAVEL PROGRAM — STATE OF NEBRASKA —

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Upcoming Events

by Jerry Kane

Contact the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at 402-471-0641 or visit OutdoorNebraska.org for more information. Visit HuntSafeNebraska.org for a list of hunter education classes and BoatSafeNebraska.org for a list of boating safety classes.

April 30-May 1

Living History Fort Atkinson State Historical Park (SHP), Fort Calhoun

May 1-22

Roger G. Sykes Outdoor Heritage Education Complex open on weekends, Platte River State Park (SP), Louisville

May 2

Archery Paddlefish Permits remaining following draw available for sale

May 2, 16

Hunt Safe Session Roger G. Sykes Outdoor Heritage Education Complex, Platte River SP, Louisville

May 3

Women's Introduction to Handguns Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

May 3, 10, 17

Outdoor Skills Club Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

May 3, 17

Ladies Day at the Range Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

May 3, 10, 17, 24

Best Shots Rifle Marksmanship Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

May 4, 11, 18, 25

Beyond BOW Handgun Class Roger G. Sykes Outdoor Heritage Education Complex, Platte River SP, Louisville

May 6-7

Toast Nebraska Eugene T. Mahoney SP, Ashland

May 7

Archery Fun Shoot Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

May 7

Take Pride in America Day Cleanup at Verdon Lake State Recreation Area (SRA), Verdon

May 7

Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo Fort Kearny SRA, Kearney

May 7

Critter Corner Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

May 8

Mother's Day Buffet Fort Robinson SP, Crawford; Ponca SP, Ponca; Platte River SP, Louisville

May 8

Family Fishing Event Zoo Pond, Scottsbluff

May 11

Introduction to Shotguns and Trap Shooting Roger G. Sykes Outdoor Heritage Education Complex, Platte River SP, Louisville

May 14

Hooked for Life Kids Fishing Event Red Willow SRA, McCook

May 14

Bio Blitz 2016 Niobrara SP, Niobrara

May 14

Rimfire Steel Plate Challenge Fun Shoot Roger G. Sykes Outdoor Heritage Education Complex, Platte River SP, Louisville

May 14-15

Becoming an Outdoors-Family Camp for the hearing impaired Platte River SP, Louisville

May 21

Free Fishing and Park Entry Day no fishing or park entry permits required this day

May 16-June 3

Eligible landowners may apply for one elk permit

May 21

Kids' Fishing Event Fremont SRA, Fremont

May 21

Free Fishing and Park Entry Day event at Lake 6, Fort Kearny SRA, Kearney

May 21

Free Fishing Clinic Platte River SP, Louisville

May 21

Free Park Day Barbecue and Kids' Fishing Day Fort Robinson SP, Crawford

May 22

3-D Archery Shoot Red Willow SRA, McCook

May 24

Family Fishing Event Holmes Lake, Lincoln

May 26

Fishing Formula for Success Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

May 27

Fort Robinson Inn Restaurant opens for season, Fort Robinson SP, Crawford

May 27

Take Aim at Summer Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

May 28

Migratory Bird Day Indian Cave SP, Shubert

May 28-30

Living History Fort Kearny SHP, Kearney

May 28-Aug. 14

Roger G. Sykes Outdoor Heritage Education Complex open daily, Platte River SP, Louisville

May 31

Spring Turkey seasons close



By following a few simple guidelines, your boat will be ready year-round.

Keep Your Boat Ready

By Brian Robinson

We all know how weird Nebraska weather can be, regardless of the month. Some anglers, like myself, will fish year-round. Therefore, keeping your boat ready at all times is critical to fishing success.

The first, and most obvious, part of this equation is keeping your motor at the ready. After every use, clean, drain and dry your motor completely. I will trim it up and down several times to make sure the motor's drained and also pull the drain plug so the boat drains. If ever in cold water, always keep your motor in the water to prevent freeze up.

The other major aspect is treating the fuel system. I will add carefully measured fuel stabilizer to the tank whenever fueling up to make sure all system components are treated. You never know when it may sit longer than you planned due to weather.

Right before it gets cold in the fall, I also like to check my lower unit oil too, to make sure it's lubricated properly.

Last, keep your batteries charged throughout the year, and you'll be ready whenever it's time to fish. And if you stay on top of these larger issues throughout the year, winterizing your boat will be a breeze when the time comes. ■

Public Access on the Platte

By Evan Barrientos

The Platte River fascinates me. Maybe it's my instinctive attraction to water. Maybe it's the languid flow that relaxes me. Or maybe I'm surprised by how beautiful it is because no one ever seems to talk about exploring the Platte. It's hard to take a trip in Nebraska without driving over the Platte, yet how often do we stop and see what's below those bridges?

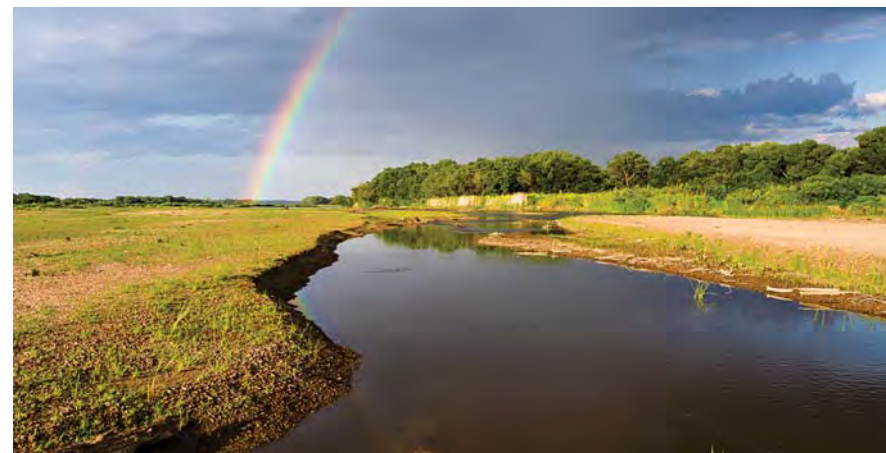
Part of the problem is that there's so little public access to the Platte. I know of a few observation decks and two tiny trails along its banks, but the vast majority is private property. Although the watercourse is considered public access, the minute you put your foot on the riverbed you are trespassing! This is such a shame because in my opinion the Platte is one of the greatest recreation opportunities Nebraska has to offer. On a sunny weekend its banks are my favorite place to sit and read, and every time a friend visits I make sure to bring him or her to a sandbar for a picnic. I have access to private land along the river, but most people aren't so lucky.

Fortunately, if you don't own a section of the Platte the best recreation opportunity is still available to you: kayaking. I kayaked on the Platte twice last summer and it remains one of my favorite Nebraskan memories. When there's enough water for a decent flow you can cover 20 miles in an afternoon while hardly paddling. And boy was I surprised by how beautiful the scenery was! I expected the river to be bordered by corn fields, but the section between Gibbon and Wood River is actually surrounded by trees, creating the feeling that you are far, far away from it all. No other place in southern Nebraska has given me that feeling of peace and solitude. Kayaking the Platte requires having two cars to shuttle and renting kayaks if you don't own them, but it is well worth the trouble.

The Platte River has a long history of sustaining Nebraska's society and agriculture, yet we alter it, diminish its flows, and ignore it. But if more people had a meaningful connection to it maybe we would treat it better. I challenge you to find your own special place or activity on the river. Get to know this wonderful resource if you haven't yet. The Platte deserves it. ■

Public access to the Platte:

- Louisville State Recreation Area, Louisville
- Platte River State Park, Louisville
- Two Rivers State Recreation Area, Waterloo
- Platte River Landing, Valley
- The Crane Trust Visitor Center, Alda
- Alda Road and Shoemaker Island Road (observation deck), Alda
- Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary, Gibbon
- Lowell Road and Elm Island Road (observation deck), Gibbon
- Buffalo Bill State Recreation Area, North Platte
- Cody Park, North Platte
- Riverside Park, Scottsbluff



NEBRASKAland Visitor



Last issue's winner of the Visitor drawing was **Ronn Hampton** of Omaha, Nebraska, who found the **water strider** on page 74.

Readers are encouraged to contact *NEBRASKAland* within 10 days after this issue's publication with the correct page number and name of this issue's "Visitor" – a critter found in Nebraska. We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a *NEBRASKAland* mug. To enter each month, write:

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

Or e-mail:

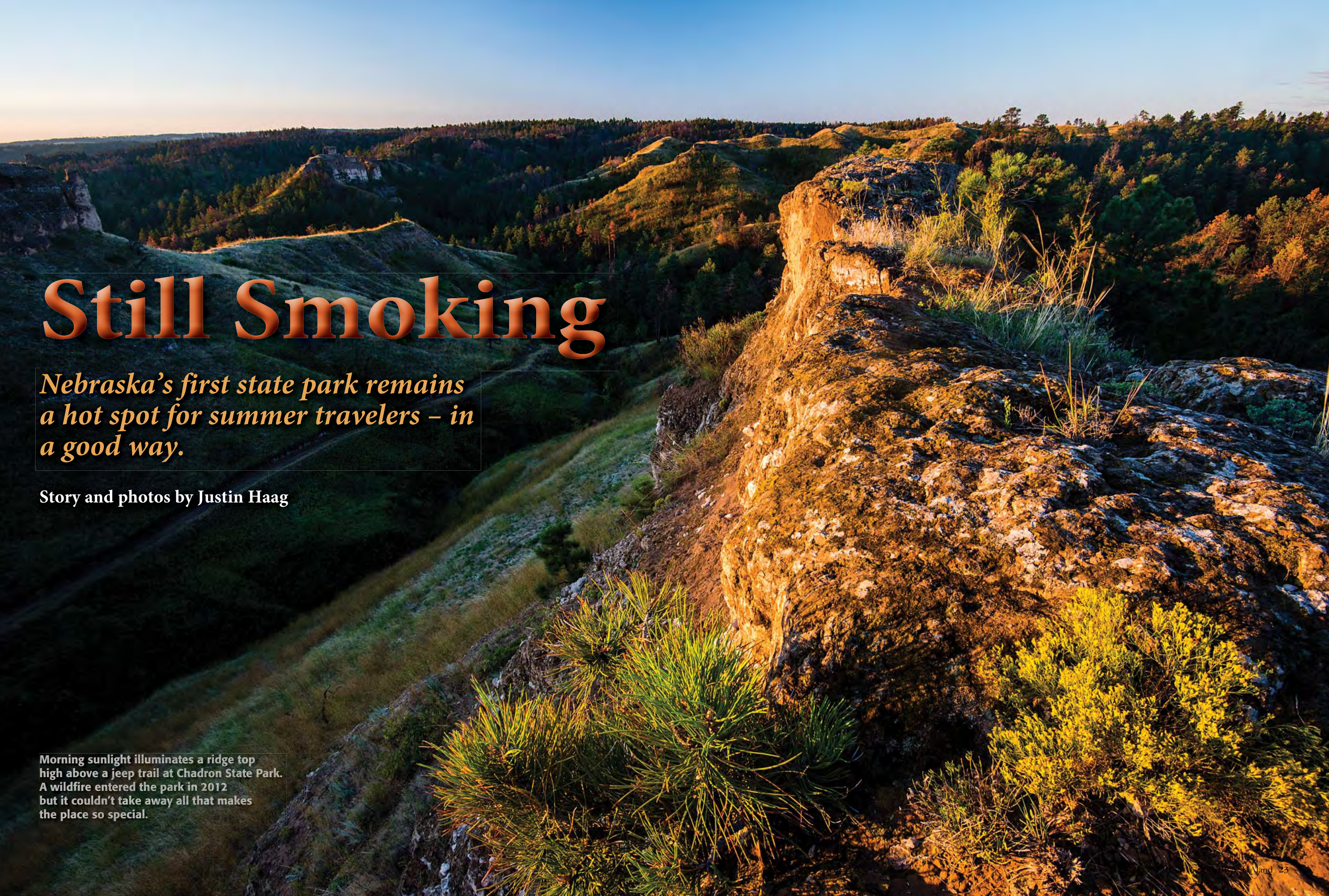
Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov with "Visitor" in the subject line of the message.

HINT: This issue's visitor is not on pages 17, 21, or 77.

Water striders (Family Gerridae) are a familiar sight to anyone who has spent time near a farm pond or quiet stream. These insects appear to skate along the surface of the water, immune to gravity. Water striders have thousands of tiny, water-repellent hairs on their toes, or tarsae, which prevent the insects from breaking the surface tension of the water, keeping the insects high and dry. Water striders are predators, hunting for insects and spiders as they glide across the water surface. They may appear to have only four legs, but like all adult insects, they actually have six. The front pair of legs are relatively short, held under the head, and used to grab prey. The longer middle and hind pairs are used for locomotion, and are easy to see spread out on the water surface.

Special thanks to Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture.





Still Smoking

Nebraska's first state park remains a hot spot for summer travelers – in a good way.

Story and photos by Justin Haag

Morning sunlight illuminates a ridge top high above a jeep trail at Chadron State Park. A wildfire entered the park in 2012 but it couldn't take away all that makes the place so special.



A rainbow serves as the backdrop to ponderosa pines in Chadron State Park which survived the 2012 wildfires. The area in the distance burned by wildfires in 2006.

It's easy to see why this site along U.S. Highway 385 was chosen to be Nebraska's first state park 95 years ago. Nestled in the Pine Ridge along what is now known as the Gold Rush Scenic Byway, the 1,000-acre Chadron State Park boasts of rocky ridges overlooking pines in one of the state's most scenic regions. From the moment highway travelers catch a glimpse of the pond fed by a cold-water stream, they are often lured by its serenity. Once discovering the park's many other attributes they're sure to stay and return often.

Not every moment of the park's storied past have been a model of tranquility, however. In 2012, wildfires roared across the Pine Ridge, charged into the park and scorched a majority of its signature ponderosa pines. As those fires worked to incinerate much of the character of the Pine Ridge, many worried about the fate of Nebraska's first state park. Selling the park to visitors after the fires became more challenging. After hearing media reports, a lot of people were under the impression that Chadron State Park was ruined and planned their summer travels to different locales. Most of the visitors to the park shortly after that incident were just arriving out of curiosity.

In the spring following the fires, however, the lush green of native green grasses replaced the charred turf and served as a harbinger for better days ahead. While the fire no doubt took its toll on the forest, many healthy towering ponderosa pines remain, and previously unseen vistas have become visible where blackened trees have been removed.

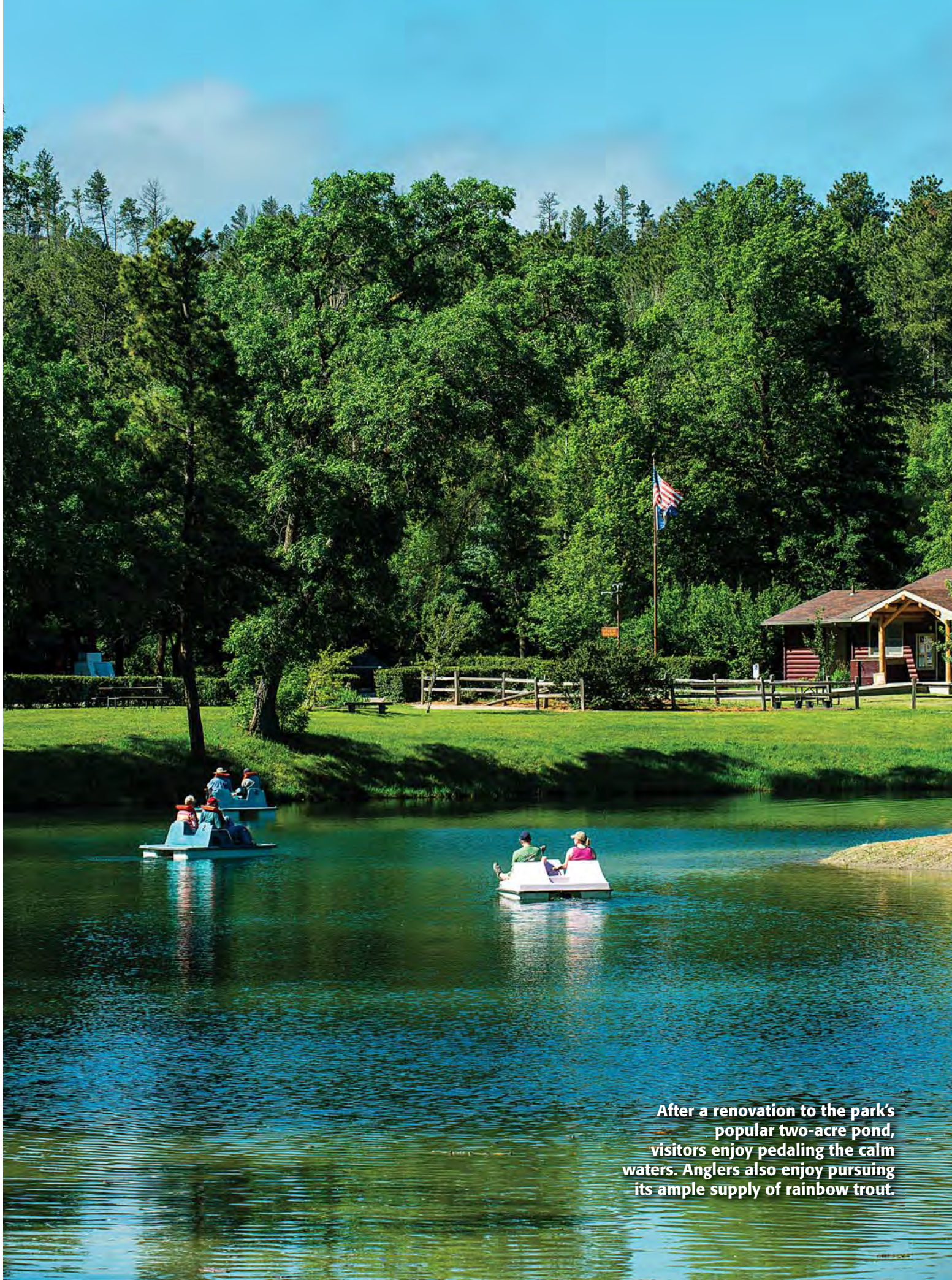
Furthermore, the park still offers a wide range of amenities and activities for travelers. Those visitors who came out of curiosity were soon returning for recreation.

"A lot of visitors are surprised to see the park doing as well as it is when they come here," said Gregg Galbraith, the park's superintendent since 2014. "It really is thriving. We have just as much or more to do here as we always have and the park still has incredible aesthetic value."

While workers have been cleaning up blackened timber from areas of the park, they've also been busy making it attractive to visitors in other ways.

Staying Busy

Perhaps the most noticeable improvement to the park is to its two-acre pond. The lagoon's dilapidated outlet structure prompted officials to drain it in fall 2013, and it remained empty until April 2015. Many park visitors were upset about the pond remaining dry for that long, but you won't hear many complaints now that the project is complete. As a remedy to decades of sedimentation, the pond was deepened from 4 to 14 feet. Since the water and fish were reintroduced to the pond last spring appreciative anglers of all ages have walked the banks of the pond casting for its ample supply of rainbow trout – not to mention the occasional brown or brookie in nearby Chadron Creek. Families not only have enjoyed fishing pursuits but have pedaled on the park's paddleboats.



After a renovation to the park's popular two-acre pond, visitors enjoy pedaling the calm waters. Anglers also enjoy pursuing its ample supply of rainbow trout.

This bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) ram is among the park's frequent visitors.



The pond isn't the park's only water attraction receiving recent improvements. The swimming pool, with its high vantage point on one of the park's hillsides, has long provided a respite to visitors looking to cool off in a relaxing setting. Visitors returning to the pool this summer will notice fully renovated bath houses, which have been modernized and follow guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The park's disc golf course, added in 2013, is developing a great reputation among players. Designed by Jake Rodiek, an assistant superintendent at the time who was once a junior world champion disc golfer, the course capitalizes on the park's naturally rugged terrain and open greenspaces. It will soon be expanded from nine to 18 baskets, providing an ideal location for both casual play and tournaments.

Also in the works is an archery trail with 14 targets. Archery has long been



Jayce Hoffman of Chadron rides the lead "thoroughbred" in the Hippy-Hop Horse Race near the park's Trading Post. The race is a popular children's event during the park's annual anniversary celebration each June.



Under a summer sun, the author's daughter Kiera leaps from a diving board at the park's swimming pool. Recent upgrades to the pool's bath houses will make it an even more popular attraction this summer.



Children enjoy an afternoon of sledding at Chadron State Park. The park’s newly designated sledding hill attracted visitors throughout the winter.

available at the park’s activity center, the Trading Post, and the new course will build upon that popularity.

After the snow falls families have begun congregating at the park’s upper elevations where staff last year cleared a hillside especially for sledding.

“The sled run was really a hit this winter,” Galbraith said. “Because the terrain was naturally suited for such an activity, it didn’t cost us a lot of money to create. We just cleared the area, put up signage and the people came.”

Active visitors also enjoy facilities for tennis and sand volleyball, as well as a vintage baseball field. Walkers

and runners can often be seen on the park’s paved roads or its system of about 15 miles of trails. The park may be explored by guided horseback rides, mountain bikes or foot. In the winter, cross-country skiers take to the trails.

The park also features playground equipment, shelters and grills, making it a great place for dining outdoors.

Bedding Down

Whether “roughing it” in the tent or kicking back in a fully furnished cabin, visitors to Chadron State Park enjoy a wide range of options for

a good night’s rest. The furnished cabins constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps early last century have hosted generations of visitors. Those looking for more modern facilities often stay in the park’s duplexes. A group facility nearby provides a place for a wide range of get-togethers, including meetings, family reunions and weddings.

Last but not least is the park’s campground, which has developed a reputation for its laid-back relaxing atmosphere. It has sites with and without electrical hookups, as well as showers, laundry facilities, playground

equipment and a dump station. Half of the sites may be reserved online while the others are first-come, first-served.

Back to Nature

While the forest may not look like it did five years ago, Chadron State Park still features numerous islands of green pines and a healthy stand of hardwoods along the creek bottom. Each spring brings green grass and blooming wildflowers among some of the state’s best scenery.

Thinning efforts, in conjunction with the Nebraska Forest Service,

have made much of the forest within the park a lot healthier than it is in other areas of the Pine Ridge where suppression of wildfires has resulted in thick stands of ponderosa pines susceptible to catastrophic damage. The park in the 1990s was one of the first places to take an active approach to thinning, and that work has received a lot of credit for firefighters being able to stop the flames of the 2012 wildfires from traveling farther east.

While some trees have been planted

by Boy Scouts and park employees, foresters are hopeful they can maintain the islands of green pines – somewhat of a challenge. Many of the battle-weary trees have become susceptible to destructive Ips beetles, for instance.

More welcomed creatures have also moved back into the park, however. It’s common for park visitors to get a look at bighorn sheep which love the high country west of the park. Other common visitors are white-tailed deer, wild turkeys and mallards and a wide



Shell-leaf penstemon (*Penstemon grandiflorus*) blooms on a rocky ridge top in the park. Hikers of the park’s extensive trail system are sure to enjoy natural wonders of various shapes and sizes.



western Nebraska's prime attractions, and with its location just nine miles from Chadron, is a great place to set up camp or visit for the day. Nearby are the wealth of Pine Ridge attractions, such as the expansive Nebraska National Forest and Fort Robinson State Park. South Dakota's Black Hills

are just an hour's drive to the north. Despite a setback or two, Chadron State Park remains a favorite destination for families looking for a relaxing getaway in the beautiful Pine Ridge. With so much going for it, no wonder its flame continues to burn bright. ■



ABOVE: The park's campground provides modern amenities in a serene setting. The park also has cabins to rent.

LEFT: Amanda Filipi of Gering, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission education specialist, presents a program on Dutch-oven cooking. A summer series of educational programs gives park visitors an opportunity to learn outdoor skills and natural history.

OPPOSITE: A pair of tom Merriam's turkeys look for hens from a high point in the park. As a location for an annual bird banding station, many smaller feathered species have been documented in the park.

range of other bird life. Each fall, the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies operates a banding station from the Sawmill Shelter, capturing scores of red crossbill, spotted towhees and other species that are common in the park. The first-ever dusky flycatcher to be banded in the state was processed there in 2013. Prized species such as mountain chickadees, pine warblers, red-naped sapsuckers, Stellar's jays and lesser goldfinches also have been captured by the banders. The park also has a new butterfly garden and naturalists provide informative programs throughout the summer.

Still a Hot Spot

Regardless of the challenges Nebraska's first state park has faced in its first 95 years, it remains one of

Cabins and Camping at Chadron

Chadron State Park has overnight accommodations to suit a wide variety of travelers. It offers reservations for cabins and half of the electrical campsites up to one year in advance.

The remaining campsites are available first-come, first-served. Guests can plan vacations, check for availability and make their reservations online 24 hours a day, seven days a week or can call the Nebraska State Parks reservation call center at 402-471-1414, Monday through Friday between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. CT.

- 22 cabins available for rental. They are air-conditioned, heated and furnished with blankets, towels, stoves, refrigerators, silverware and cooking utensils.

- 70 camping pads with 20- and 30-amp electrical hookups, as well as 18 primitive sites. Amenities for campers include showers, dump station, laundry, picnic tables, grills and a playground for the kids.



Chadron State Park is located 9 miles south of Chadron.

Time Well Spent

What to Do in May

By Renae Blum

May is a prime month for outdoor adventure. School is nearly out, and activities at Nebraska parks are in full swing. Read on to learn how you can be part of the fun. For a full list of events and descriptions, visit Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov. ■

Free Park Entry and Fishing Day

May 21

Statewide

Enjoy a Saturday of fishing or state park activities without the need to purchase a fishing or park entry permit for the day. See the online calendar for all park events scheduled for this day.

Stay in a Cabin

If interested in lodging, contact 402-471-1414 or visit Nebraskastateparks.reserveamerica.com for availability.

Parks with Cabins:

- Chadron State Park
- E.T. Mahoney State Park
- Fort Robinson State Park
- Lewis and Clark State Rec Area
- Niobrara State Park
- Platte River State Park
- Ponca State Park
- Two Rivers State Rec Area
- Medicine Creek State Rec Area

If you visit a park, don't forget that you'll need a park entry permit.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo

May 7

Fort Kearny State Recreation Area

Join Fort Kearny in celebrating the Expo's 10th anniversary. Participate in sports such as archery, kayaking, fishing and target shooting. Other activities include a lumberjack show; historic reenactments; a fishing kayak and bow package giveaway; and presentations on falconry, outdoor cooking and antler scoring. All activities are free with a valid Nebraska park permit. More information is available at OutdoorNebraska.gov/FortKearnyOutdoorExpo.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Toast Nebraska Wine Festival

May 6-7

Eugene T. Mahoney State Park

Sample wines and hard ciders from more than 200 Nebraska wineries while enjoying live music, wine education sessions, and a variety of food, artisan and craft vendors. To buy tickets, visit ToastNebraska.com. A limited number of Mahoney cabins, lodge rooms and campsites are available for guests; call 402-882-2448 to book your stay.

BioBlitz

May 14 and 21

Various Locations

Team up with other community members on guided walks to find and identify as many species of flora and fauna as possible. Be prepared to tromp through weeds and forest and get muddy in streams. Data collected will be used by scientists and citizen scientists for various conservation research projects in Nebraska. Get details at OutdoorNebraska.gov/BioBlitz.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

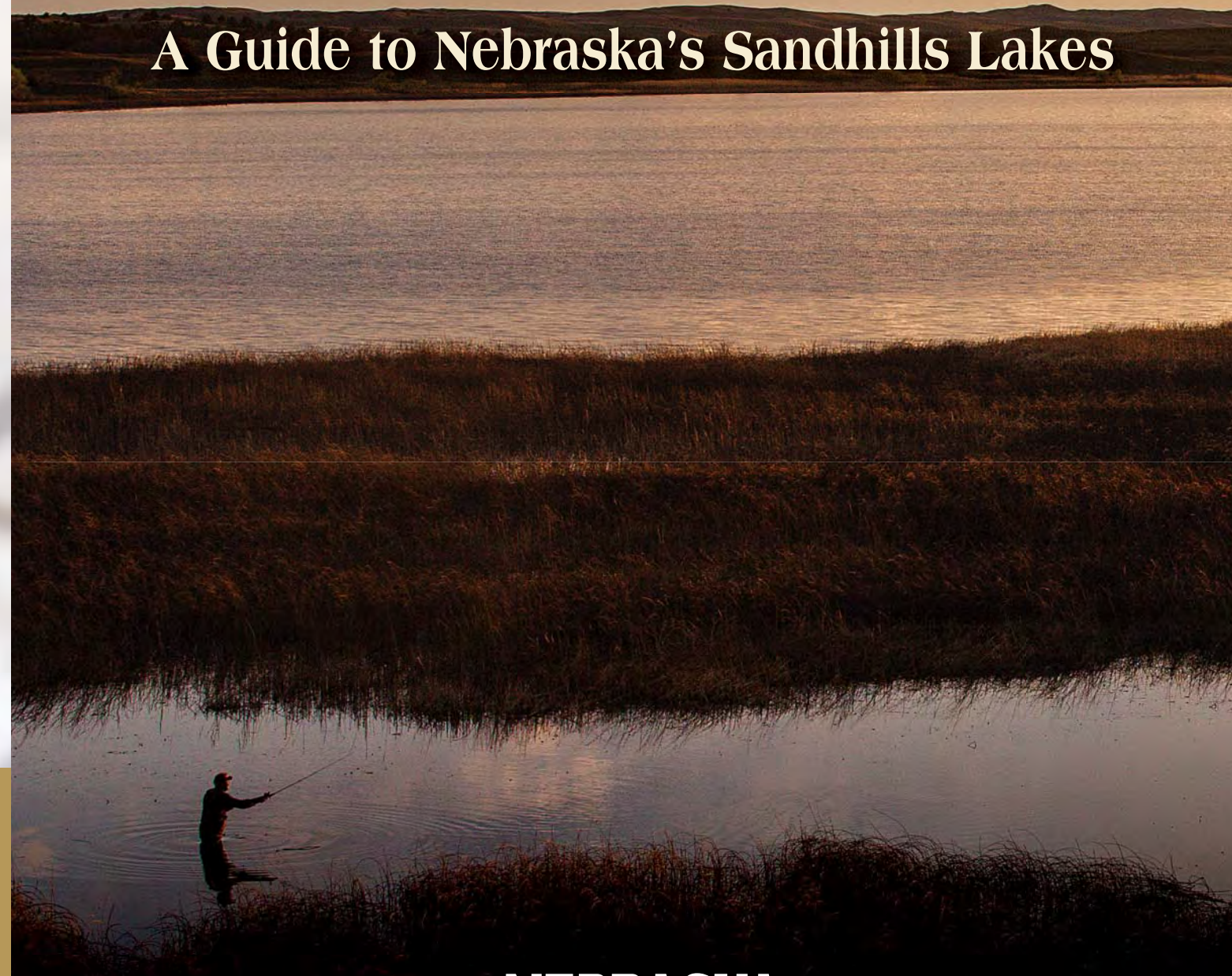
Everyone wants to get away when they go fishing, but who would have thought the fishing could be this good in the middle of nowhere?
— Joe Rydell, Alliance, Angler and Nebraska Game and Parks
Commission Fisheries Biologist, Fisheries Division



Bluegills and other panfish are what draw many anglers to Sandhills lakes, whether they're fishing open water or through the ice.
Photo by Eric Fowler.

NEBRASKAland Magazine's Fishing the SANDHILLS

A Guide to Nebraska's Sandhills Lakes



NEBRASKA
— GAME  PARKS —

Talk to anglers who have fished them, and they may tell you that Sandhills lakes are like no other lakes you’ve fished. And while the words may literally be true, as the makeup of these lakes is truly unique, the reasoning behind the words can vary widely, even if it applies only to the fishing.

For some, the draw is northern pike. While not all Sandhills lakes hold pike, these shallow waters are some of Nebraska’s best habitats for the toothy predator, and the only waters where they can consistently reproduce. For other anglers, it’s both the size and number of largemouth bass the lakes can hold. Still others are drawn by the size and number of panfish. As with pike, Sandhills lakes are the only in Nebraska that contain self-sustaining populations of yellow perch. Perch, bluegills and crappies can grow fast and fat in these lakes, which are as fertile as any lake on the planet.

There are, indeed, no lakes like those in the Sandhills in this hemisphere and perhaps in the world. They are natural lakes, but they aren’t fed by surface runoff like ponds and reservoirs elsewhere in Nebraska or natural lakes found in other states. Nearly every drop of rain that falls in this 19,000-square-mile area of grass-stabilized sand dunes goes straight down into the Ogallala Aquifer. These lakes, and countless wetlands, are simply locations where the landscape dips below the surface of the aquifer.

Rarely will you find water deeper than 10 feet in a Sandhills lake, and in some the maximum depth might be only 3 feet. Of the 1,640 lakes 10 acres or larger, 86 percent are too shallow or alkaline to support fish. In the ones that do, the year-round movement of groundwater keeps the water fresh, preventing winter and summer kills due to loss of oxygen that hamper fish production in other types of lakes that are this shallow, and also keep the lakes cool enough to support fish like pike and perch. The lake levels, and often the fish populations, follow those of the water table. When it drops, die-offs can and do occur in Sandhills lakes. When it rises, good fishing will follow.

Shallow, clear water also allows sunlight to reach the bottom of even the deepest parts of most Sandhills lakes, producing an abundance of zooplankton and phytoplankton, the tiny animals and plants that are the foundation of the aquatic food web. It also promotes the growth of smartweed, pondweed, coontail and other aquatic vegetation. These

plants are the basis for the abundant invertebrates such as damselfly and dragonfly nymph, snails and leeches that panfish and young bass and pike feast and thrive on. Most lakes are ringed by marshlands, with dense stands of cattails and bulrushes rising from the shallows.

These features are what make Sandhills lakes produce fish in both quantity and quality, especially panfish, which

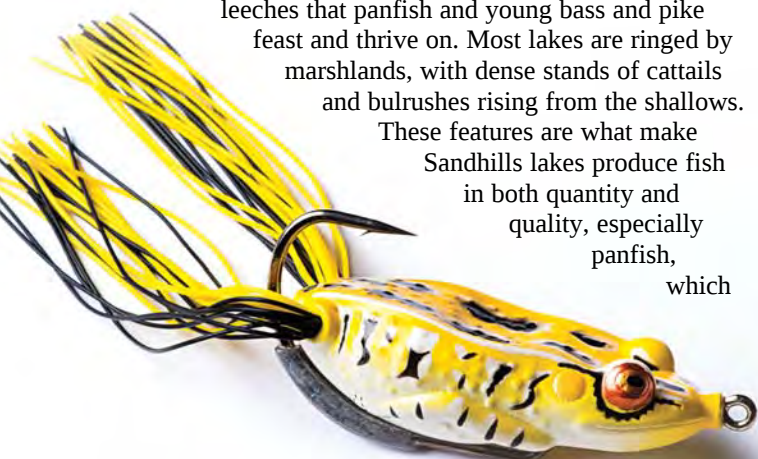


PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Pockets of open water behind the cattails that ring most Sandhills lakes are almost always worth a cast with a topwater lure or spinnerbait, including this one Steve Frederick of Scottsbluff is fishing at Hackberry Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge. Extremely fertile by their nature, Sandhills lakes produce panfish, including bluegills (below), in quantity and quality, making them popular among ice anglers.

thrive with the abundant food and cover. Unlike reservoirs and ponds, which have a narrow band of highly productive water around their shorelines, nearly every acre of a Sandhills lake supports fish.

Anglers may curse the abundance of aquatic vegetation found in Sandhills lakes, especially in the summer when it is seemingly impossible to retrieve a lure without it becoming fouled by weeds, and frequent stops to clean the vegetation from the props of “weedless” electric trolling motors are required. But those anglers need to remember that when they fish other waters, they target these “weeds” because they know that’s where the bass, pike and panfish are most often found. In Sandhills lakes, the target is simply much bigger. If you can’t handle the weeds, fish early, from April to June, and come back in the fall, when weeds start to die back and fish are gorging themselves for winter.

The ring of vegetation that surrounds the entire shoreline of most lakes makes bank fishing impossible. Those who don waders can reach the outside edge of the cattails, or pockets of water within them, on several lakes, but footing can be difficult and in some cases the bottom is too soft to wade. When winter arrives, however, ice-up is the great equalizer that opens a lake to all anglers. And because

of the shallow nature of the lakes, they are quick to freeze, providing ample opportunity. On many lakes, the heaviest pressure and harvest of fish comes in the winter.

Many anglers are drawn to the Sandhills by the obscurity and isolated nature of the lakes. While only 40 are open to public fishing, they see far less boat traffic than you will find on most Nebraska reservoirs. There are no marinas, no shorelines ringed by cabins, and only a handful of lakes even have campgrounds. Roads are sparse and often rough, and you will see far more cattle than cars and people. All but two lakes have a 5 mph speed limit, and some allow only electric motors, so you won’t find yourself listening to the drone of Jet Skis and speed boats all day. Wildlife is abundant. Spend the night and you will swear you’ve never seen so many stars. And while the broad vistas and absence of trees bother some Easterners, many people find the view from the top of a ridge, where you can seemingly see forever, exhilarating. Even if you don’t have a lake to yourself, which you sometimes do, the peace, quiet and solitude breeds a sense of having your own private fishing hole in the middle of the wilderness.

Between that and excellent fishing, you now have two reasons to visit.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

How to Fish the Sandhills

Northern Pike

Pike fishing picks up at ice-out, but can start slow. While the fish will take lures, they are often sluggish in the still-cold water, making smelt fished on the bottom or under a bobber, a good approach. As the water warms, weedless spoons, such as a Johnson Silver Minnow and spinnerbaits in yellow, black, chartreuse or white are the favorite lures of many anglers. Large Mepps spinners and Daredevil spoons, both staples for pike anglers elsewhere, and shallow-diving crankbaits will work early in the year before vegetation becomes too thick, or in deeper water where the weeds don’t reach the surface. Soft plastics, including swim baits, rubber worms and creature baits, can be effective when pike are finicky.

Tooth-proof leaders are recommended whenever you’re fishing for pike. While steel leaders are most commonly used, they can affect the bite when water is clear, which it often is early in the year before algae blooms begin. In that case, lighter wire leaders are best. While pike can still bite through heavy fluorocarbon line, its use can be the difference between getting bites or not. Baitcasting rods and reels and strong, braided line can be invaluable when you want to keep hooked fish out of the vegetation.

Anglers should start their search for pike near vegetation, especially isolated stands of bulrushes, cattails, smartweed

and pondweed. The weeds may not be immediately visible. Early in the year, pike might be lurking in the tops of 2-foot tall weeds in 6 feet of water waiting for dinner to swim by. Don’t be afraid to spend time casting to what may appear to be “open” water to search for these fish. As spring moves towards summer, when pike are in search of cooler water, they may be found in these weeds even farther from shore.

In the winter, the use of tip-ups for pike can be both effective and entertaining. Countless variations allow a smelt and a treble hook to be held on or near the bottom directly beneath the hole. When a pike grabs the bait and swims off, a flag is tripped by the free-wheeling spool of line, eliciting a call of “Flag up!” among friends and a race to the hole. Pike typically cruise slowly around the lakes in search of food all winter. A line of tip-ups extending from the shore towards the middle of the lake can intersect their route.

Largemouth Bass

Largemouth bass take a bit longer to become active than pike, but a warm spell will send them into action early in the spring. Look on the north bank first. Bass spawn in the weedy shallows of Sandhills lakes when water temperatures hit the mid-60s in May. Getting to them can be a challenge. Look for pockets of open water tucked in the cattails that ring the lakes.

The rest of the year, bass are often found around the edges of the lakes, especially in gaps in the cattails, but they can also be found anywhere there is an isolated patch



Northern pike, like this one caught at Clear Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, can be caught in many Sandhills lakes.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

Albert Allen of Ainsworth admires a largemouth bass he landed from his kayak at Tower Lake on Yellowthroat Wildlife Management Area.

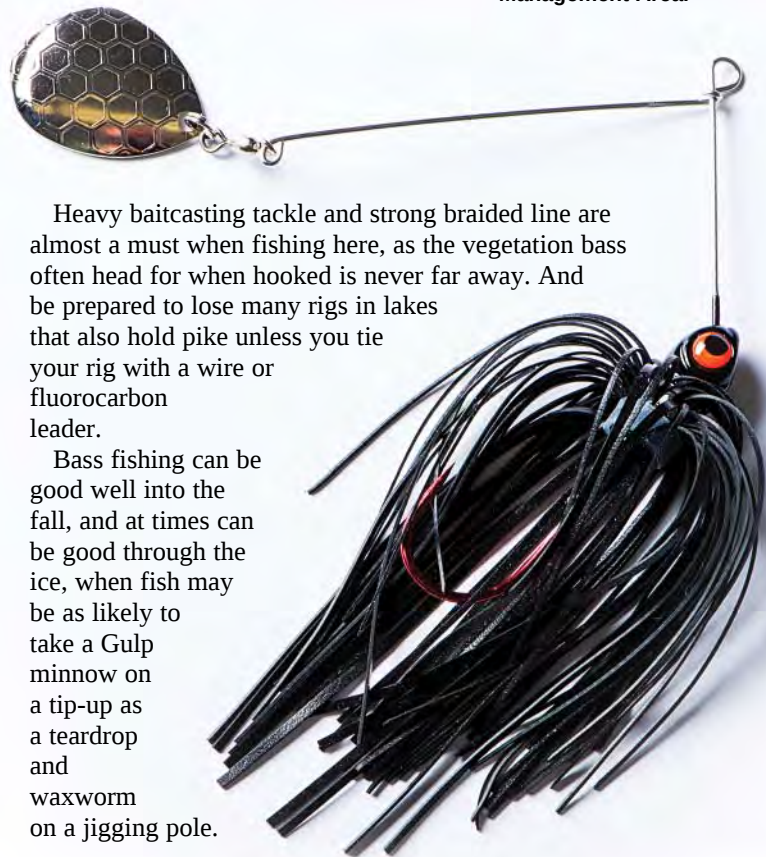
of vegetation, be it a stand of bulrushes or a patch of smartweed or pondweed.

Soft plastics, such as Texas-rigged rubber worms fished through the vegetation on the bottom can be extremely effective. While the lakes are shallow, these rigs may require a half-ounce weight – more than most people normally use – to get through the thick vegetation.

Spinnerbaits can be retrieved through or just above lighter vegetation, or along the edge of it. Shallow diving crankbaits, such as a Mann’s Baby-1 Minus, are also just as useful here as they are on other waters if you can find edges and pockets of open water where they can be effectively fished. Topwater poppers and plugs can work well in the spring and later in the year when fished along weedlines or in open pockets.

In heavier vegetation, topwater frogs, Johnson Silver Minnows and other weedless lures are the only baits you can possibly fish, but ones that bass will readily take. Skilled anglers might even be able to keep a buzzbait on top of the weeds.

Lure color selection for bass is similar to pike. Dark colors work best on soft plastics, and yellow, black, chartreuse and white are typically the best colors for spinnerbaits and buzzbaits. Tip those or your Silver Minnow with a plastic or pork trailer to add scent and action and to allow for a slower retrieve if fish aren’t overly aggressive.



Heavy baitcasting tackle and strong braided line are almost a must when fishing here, as the vegetation bass often head for when hooked is never far away. And be prepared to lose many rigs in lakes that also hold pike unless you tie your rig with a wire or fluorocarbon leader.

Bass fishing can be good well into the fall, and at times can be good through the ice, when fish may be as likely to take a Gulp minnow on a tip-up as a teardrop and waxworm on a jigging pole.

Bluegill



Yellow Perch



Black Crappie



Panfish

Bluegills, yellow perch and crappies grow fast and fat in Sandhills lakes and are the main draw for many anglers.

Bluegills in Sandhills lakes spend most of their time in cattails, bulrushes, smartweed, pondweed and other vegetation, where they have the most cover from hungry bass and pike and plenty of food. Use Mepps spinners, Johnson Beetle Spins or Blakemore Roadrunners to search for fish along the edge of the vegetation. If you find fish, toss out a jig tipped with a piece of nightcrawler or PowerBait worm or waxworm under a bobber and you may be able to pull several fish from a school.

Bluegill spawning beds are harder to find in Sandhills lakes than elsewhere due to the thick vegetation that rings most lakes. But if you find an open patch of sandy shoreline in late May, be sure to fish it. During this time of year and at other times when water is clear, a high vantage point from your casting deck and polarized sunglasses can allow you to sight fish for bluegills.

Yellow perch can be caught using the same tactics as bluegill through much of the year. They are,



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER



Guided by their dog, anglers cast toward the shoreline on a calm spring morning on Dewey Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge.

however, a more nomadic species and more likely to be found in deeper water that may even be free of vegetation. Crappies will spawn in the shoreline vegetation in May and fishing during this time can be excellent. The rest of the year they are found near vegetation in deeper, open water. Minnows aren't allowed in many lakes, but where permitted they are the preferred bait for crappies and perch.

Light spinning or spincasting tackle or a fly rod is sufficient for panfish in the Sandhills. Weedy lakes aren't unfishable, they just require a change in tactics. When vegetation gets thick, a fly rod allows you to cast a dry fly to places you'd never be able to retrieve a jig through. A long cane pole or spinning rod can also be used to probe the weeds for panfish. Drift or motor slowly across the thick vegetation and cast a fly or drop a jig and crawler into any hole in the weeds big enough to fit one in, and it will often hold fish. You can also cast a slip-bobber to these holes. If you catch one fish from a hole, you're likely to catch more.

Don't limit your search to the shoreline. In the summer, you may find larger pockets of open water in the middle of a lake. These deeper spots might also offer the cooler water fish are looking for in the heat of summer.

The search for bluegills through the ice begins where it always does: near vegetation. Early in the winter they may be found in shallow water near cattails. Later, they may move to deeper water. Look for patches of bulrushes poking through the ice or for the leaves of pondweed frozen in the ice. A teardrop and waxworm is the best bait through the ice. Finding fish is the hardest part. If you're not catching fish, move.

Other Species

A handful of Sandhills lakes hold other species, including channel catfish, muskellunge, walleye, sauger and saugeye. The tactics you use for those species won't differ much from

what you use in other waters.

Walleye and sauger have done well in some Sandhills lakes through the years, and biologists are now stocking saugeye, which like sauger tend to do better in turbid water, to see if they do better. While anglers often target those fish on drop-offs and points in large reservoirs, those underwater structures are much more subtle in the Sandhills. Anglers often catch them when targeting perch or crappies with jigs or live bait rigs. Those targeting walleye sometimes fan-cast small perch-colored crankbaits along weedlines at sunrise and sunset, as perch are the main prey of this species in these lakes.

Muskies can be caught in much the same way as northern pike, but these fish are few in number and harder to find.

Lakes with harder bottoms support channel catfish. A nightcrawler and stink or blood bait fished on the bottom work as well here as in other reservoirs. If the lake bottom is weedy or mossy, use a bobber to keep your bait just above it.

The Sandhills Region

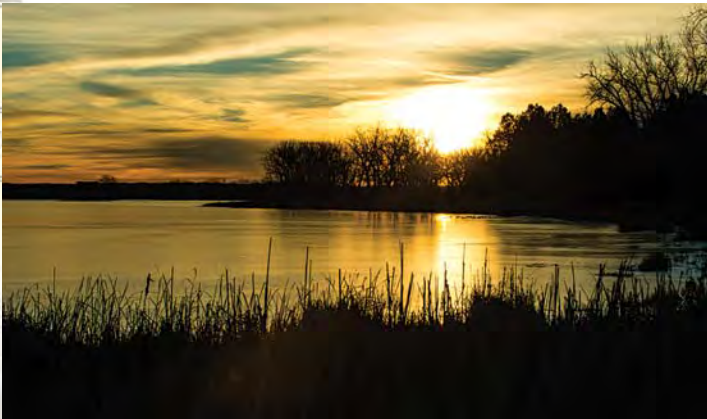
Public Sandhills Lakes

Public Sandhills lakes are scattered throughout north-central Nebraska. The following list details them by county from west to east. Unless otherwise stated, boats are limited to 5 mph and can leave no wake.

1 Walgren Lake SRA

113 Acres. Sheridan County, 3E, 3S of Hay Springs. Bluegill, Bullhead, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

While this lake isn't technically a Sandhills lake, it looks, acts and fishes like one, and you can see the Sandhills from there, so we'll include it. The lake filled in 2015 after a dry period sapped its water level. It offers good perch, bluegill and bass fishing, and with a hard bottom, an excellent population of channel catfish. A few big flathead catfish, survivors from fish stocked years ago, still swim there, too. The east half of the lake is private and no bank access is allowed. Wheelchair-accessible fishing pier, concrete boat ramp, primitive campground, stone picnic shelter, pit toilet.



The sun rises over an ice-covered Smith Lake.

2 Smith Lake WMA

290 Acres. Sheridan County, 23S of Rushville. Bluegill, Bullhead, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

Smith Lake has long been an excellent panfish lake, producing big bluegills and bass and abundant perch. An Aquatic Habitat Program project in the late-1990s used a dredge to provide depths of 10 to 12 feet in the center of the lake, lessening the likelihood of winterkill. Like other lakes with good water quality, Smith has always had abundant vegetation. That took a new turn recently when curly-leaf pondweed appeared at the lake in 2015, the first occurrence in the Panhandle. Common in eastern lakes, this submersed vegetation thrived at Smith, covering all of the lake in depths of 6 feet or less and making boating and fishing difficult. Handicap-accessible concrete boat ramp, primitive camping, pit toilet.

3 Shell Lake WMA

160 Acres. Cherry County, 3N, 4E, 8N of Gordon. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.



The Sandhills is a 19,000-acre area of grass-stabilized sand dunes that covers one fourth of Nebraska and is rich in ranchland. Between the dunes, wetlands fed by groundwater cover 1.3 million acres, including about 1,600 natural lakes 10 acres or larger, 225 of which support fish.



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

Kayaks are an excellent way to fish Sandhills Lakes, including Tower Lake on Yellowthroat Wildlife Management Area.



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

Kiera Haag of Chadron holds a bluegill she caught from Cottonwood Lake State Recreation Area near Merriman.

Shell Lake is an excellent fishery and as such gets fished hard. It holds good pike, a few crappies, small bluegills and perch. An Aquatic Habitat Program project in the late-1990s used a dredge to deepen a portion of the lake to up to 9 feet, lessening the likelihood of winterkill. With no carp and excellent water quality, it also has abundant aquatic vegetation and is very difficult to fish in the summer. It gets plenty of pressure through the ice in the winter. Primitive boat ramp, primitive campground, pit toilet. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.

4 Cottonwood Lake SRA

34 Acres. Cherry County, ½E, ½S of Merriman. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Hybrid Bluegill/Green Sunfish, Yellow Perch.

This is one of two Sandhills lakes with no speed limit for boats. Aquatic vegetation hampers summer fishing. Primitive campground, pit toilets, playground and shelter.

5 Cottonwood-Steverson Lake WMA

680 Acres. Cherry County, 30N, 2E of Hyannis. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Muskellunge, Saugeye, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

With a maximum depth of 20 feet, Cottonwood Lake is one of the deepest in the Sandhills. Steverson is more typical, with depths of up to 7 feet. Connected by a narrow channel, the pair are practically one lake. The lakes were acquired in 1997 and renovated soon after, but carp found their way back in and have reduced water clarity and the amount of vegetation. Still, a few walleyes persist, and there are a few muskies and abundant small crappies. Concrete boat ramp, primitive camping on Steverson Lake. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.

6 Home Valley Lake

220 Acres. Cherry County, 30N, 2½E, 1N of Hyannis. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

Part of Cottonwood-Steverson WMA, there is no road to this lake so access is limited to those wanting to portage from Cottonwood Lake. In the summer, that could mean dragging a kayak or float tube over a narrow ridge. The lake gets much more pressure in the winter, when ice anglers are allowed to take snowmobiles and ATVs across the ice on Cottonwood and Steverson lakes and over the hill to Home Valley. The lake holds a decent perch population and some nice bass, but also has carp and is turbid.

7 Lord Lakes (U.S. Forest Service)

15 Acres. Cherry County, McKelvie National Forest, 9W of Merritt Reservoir. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

These three small connected lakes offer quality bass. A primitive boat ramp is found on the east side of the east lake. The other two lakes are accessible by foot and best fished in waders, float tubes and kayaks. USFS Steer Creek Campground and Merritt Reservoir SRA campgrounds nearby.

8 Frye Lake WMA

243 Acres. Grant County, 1N, 1½E of Hyannis. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

Since it was renovated in 2002, this lake has become one of the better panfish lakes in the Sandhills, producing good numbers and size of perch, crappies and bluegills. With abundant vegetation and the food that comes with it, fish are well fed. Fishing can be excellent in May and June. No live baitfish can be used or possessed. Primitive boat ramp, primitive campground, pit toilet.

9 East Hyannis Lake (Avocet WMA)

120 Acres. Grant County, 1E of Hyannis. Yellow Perch. There is no boat ramp on this shallow lake, where aquatic vegetation hampers summer fishing. Primitive camping.

10 DeFair Lake WMA

70 Acres. Grant County, 1E, 2S, ½E of Hyannis. Black Crappie, Yellow Perch.

Boat access is difficult on this shallow, weedy lake. Primitive boat ramp, primitive camping.

11 Long Lake SRA

155 Acres. Brown County, 8½W, 21S of Ainsworth. Bullhead, Channel Catfish, Common Carp, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

Long Lake can be good for catfish, but has plentiful carp and few other gamefish. With little use and limited recreational opportunities, the Commission long ago suspended maintenance at the 80-acre State Recreation Area on the south side of the lake. Access road is accessible by trucks only. While primitive camping is allowed, there are no amenities.

Embrace the Weeds

One of the attributes that makes Sandhills lakes such great fisheries can also make them extremely difficult to fish in the summer: weeds.

The shallow depths and excellent water quality of the lakes typically leads to an abundance of aquatic vegetation. Cattails, bulrushes, smartweed, pondweed, coontail and other plants host a myriad of snails, insects and other critters panfish such as bluegills and yellow perch feed upon. Where there are panfish, big predators such as northern pike and largemouth bass can also thrive.

Some lakes, however, can have so much vegetation that by mid-summer it can be almost impossible to motor a boat or retrieve a lure through it all. But that doesn't mean they are unfishable. There will almost always be an edge to the weedline, or at least small pockets in the weeds, that you can pull a fish out of. And you can always use weedless topwater lures or a fly rod to fish on top of the vegetation. As for getting to those spots, if your electric motor won't pull you through the weeds, try using a push pole to get around. A kayak or canoe will skim over the top of even the thickest vegetation, and well timed strokes will keep your paddle weed free.

And if all that is too much for you, go early or late in the year. The most vegetated lakes don't get overly choked until June or July. And in the fall, when temperatures cool, weeds start to die back. That also happens to be the time when fish are feeding hard to get ready for winter. And many places offer the opportunity to do some grouse or archery deer hunting early in the fall, or waterfowl or pheasant hunting later.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Vegetation at Goose Lake near Bartlett.

12 Clear Lake

200 Acres. Brown County, 19S, 9W, 1N of Ainsworth. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This private lake has a long history of excellent fishing and has been home to a fishing club for decades. The need to eradicate carp that found their way into the lake in 1999 led to a unique partnership between the Game and Parks Commission, New Clear Lake Club, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), North Central Resource, Conservation

Boat Ramps

The shallow nature of Sandhills lakes, and the variability of water levels from year to year, makes constructing boat ramps that function a challenge.

Wherever possible, the Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manage the Crescent Lake and Valentine National Wildlife refuges, have built concrete ramps. These may be poured concrete, or an articulated design that links concrete blocks with cables. Where the accompanying list notes there is a primitive ramp, rock or gravel has often been added to shore up the sandy lakebed. In some cases, however, including several on the Valentine Refuge, a launch is nothing more than a gap in the cattails that is wide enough to back a boat trailer into.

When water levels are high, it is possible to launch larger boats on even some of the primitive ramps. When levels are low, however, the shallow nature of the lakes make it a challenge to get even a small boat in the water on the best ramps, and four-wheel-drive vehicles are required. In these cases, smaller is better, and light boats that can be thrown in the back of a truck or winched onto a tilt trailer from a foot of water are not only your best bet, they're your only one. Many who have found themselves backing 20 yards into the lake hoping to find water deep enough to float their boat have also found themselves looking for someone with 20 yards of chain or tow rope.

In some lakes, getting to the boat launch might even require four-wheel drive, or at least a vehicle with high clearance, as some lakes are at the end of a two-track trail road. Which isn't a bad thing.



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG
The primitive boat ramp at Shell Lake near Gordon.

13 Willow Lake WMA

400 Acres. Brown County, 18½S, 12¼W, 1N of Ainsworth. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch, Walleye.

Willow Lake was renovated in 2013 and has seen very high growth rates for perch and is producing quality bass and bluegill as well. Walleye were stocked in 2015. With depths of up to 10 feet, it is one of the deeper Sandhills lakes. Primitive boat ramp, primitive camping. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.

14 Tower Lake (Yellowthroat WMA)

75 Acres. Brown County, 12½S, 1½E of Ainsworth. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-owned lake is consistently one of the best fisheries in the region, producing some big crappies, perch and bluegills and excellent bass. The west lake is open to ice fishing only and the east is open year round. Boat access is via a primitive ramp in a ditch connecting the lakes. Access can be difficult in low water but is better since the ditch was dug out in recent years. Electric motors or non-powered boats only. Daytime access only.

15 Cozad Lake (South Pine WMA)

80 Acres. Brown County, 11S, 2W of Long Pine. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

Drought and low water have hampered this lake and its normally good bluegill population in recent years, but it still holds some big largemouth bass and some perch and bluegill. Deeper water is found in the east half of the lake. The west half is private, but anglers can float across a fence line dividing the lake to fish from a boat (no bank fishing is allowed on west half) when water levels are high enough. Concrete boat ramp, primitive camping.

16 Twin Lakes WMA

North Lake: 105 Acres. South Lake: 82 Acres. Rock County, 16S, 2½E, 2S of Bassett. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

These lakes are hampered by abundant carp, but work to install fish barriers and renovate the watershed and lakes should be complete in 2016. Twin Lakes has provided excellent perch, crappie, bass and pike fishing in the past, and is expected to do so again when that work is done. Planning is underway to construct new boat ramps on both lakes to replace the primitive launches. Primitive camping.

17 Overton Lake

135 Acres. Holt County, 21S, 5E of Newport. Common Carp, Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This shallow, private lake is leased for ice-fishing and open December 1 - March 15 only. Fishing is currently poor due to carp entering the lake during high water in 2011 and winter-kill caused by low water in 2013. Biologists are considering renovating and restocking the lake, but no timetable has been set. All other access by permission only.

18 Swan Lake

235 Acres. Holt County, 26S, ½W of Atkinson. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

A renovation in 2006 removed the carp from this private lake leased for fishing, and it has historically been a good bass and panfish lake. Biologists suspect a winterkill in 2014-15 is the reason behind reduced numbers of fish and have been restocking perch, bluegills and bass to help the populations recover. While it does have significant algae blooms in the summer, its depths of 10 to 12 feet keep areas free of submersed vegetation throughout the summer. A four-wheel-drive is recommended for the primitive boat ramp located on the lake's north shore. All other access by permission only.

19 Goose Lake WMA

237 Acres. Holt County, 18N, 5E of Bartlett. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch. While it was one of the first lakes purchased by the predecessor of the Game and Parks Commission, Goose Lake didn't shine as a fishery until renovations removed carp in 1990 and again in 2003.

The troublesome carp have once again found their way back into the lake, and fish populations and angler success have declined enough in recent years that another renovation

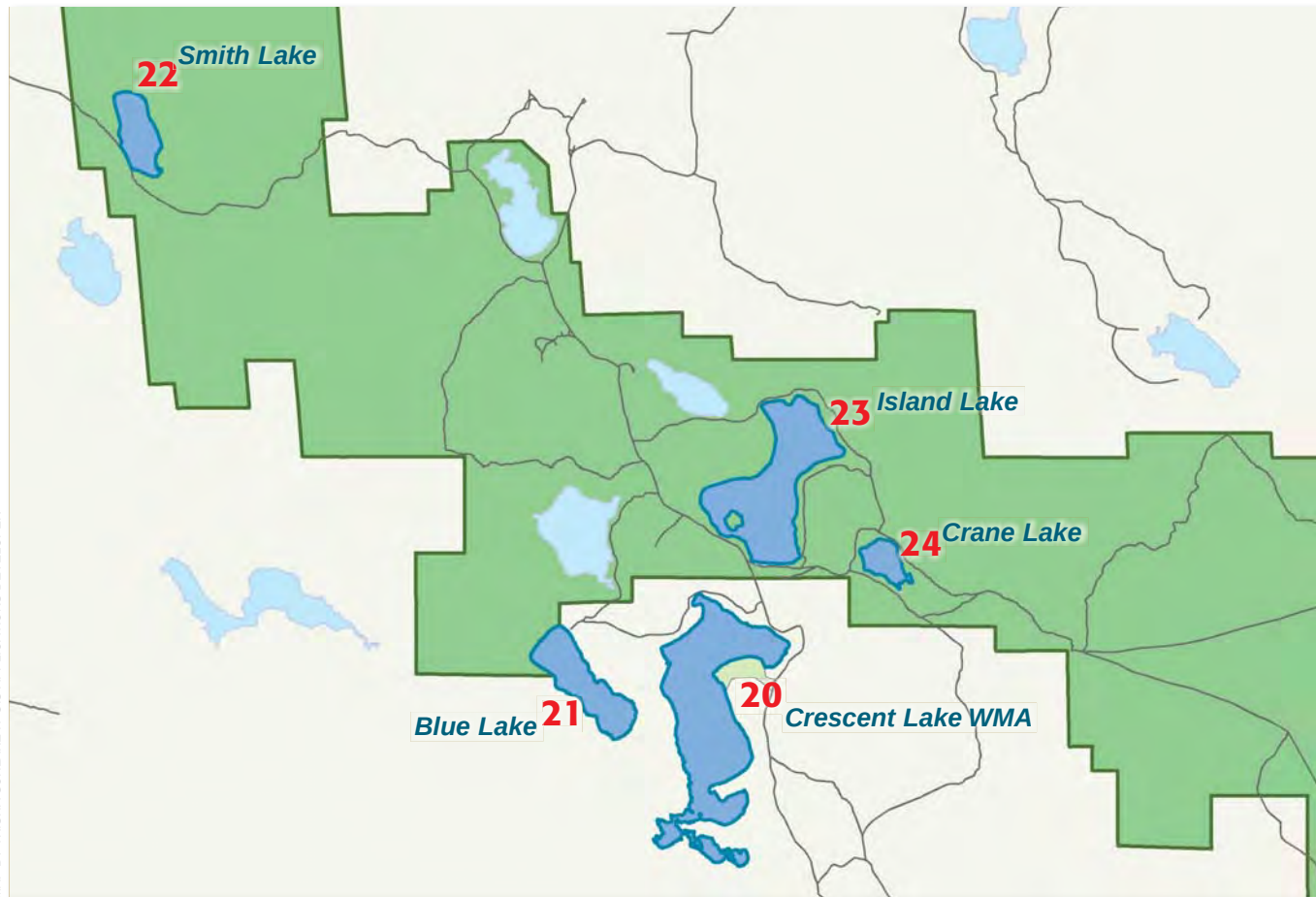
is planned, possibly as soon as 2016. Until that happens, anglers can still find a few northern pike and panfish. After it does, fishing is expected to be excellent once again.

The south arm of the lake is shallower than the main lake. An island and several points expand the amount of shoreline vegetation anglers can ply for pike and bass. The lake doesn't suffer from low water problems like other Sandhills lakes thanks to a well that can be used to maintain water levels when needed. Northern pike between 28 and 34 inches in length must be released, a protected slot limit designed to keep pike in this heavily-fished lake.

Abundant vegetation makes the lake nearly impossible to fish in the summer. In 2015, another aquatic plant, Eurasian watermilfoil, found its way into the lake, making it even worse. The non-native invasive plant, which spreads rapidly, forms dense mats, hampers fishing and can grow from a small fragment of stem or leaf. To prevent its spread to other waters via boats and trailers, which is likely how it arrived, the lake was closed to the public in the fall of 2015. Biologists plan to use chemicals to control Eurasian watermilfoil in 2016, but the effectiveness of the effort will determine when the lake reopens to summer fishing. (It did open to ice fishing in 2015-16). Concrete and primitive boat ramps, primitive campground. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG
Jake Perkins of Alliance shows off one of the big bluegills he caught at Smith Lake Wildlife Management Area south of Rushville.



Crescent Lake Area

The three lakes on the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge open to fishing have long been worth the drive on miles of bumpy roads for anglers. But because they were a long way from everywhere, many looking for more than a day trip crossed them off their list because camping was not allowed. That changed when the Commission opened Crescent Lake Wildlife Management Area on the south edge of the refuge in 2011, and with it, public access to Crescent and Blue lakes. Anglers are now making Crescent Lake WMA their base camp on multi-day trips to the area, allowing them to hit any or all of the lakes in search of the best bite. Lodging is also available at Blue Creek Lodge, 7 miles south of the lakes.

Unlike their neighbors on the refuge, Crescent and Blue lakes allow live baitfish and gas motors with a 5 mph, no-wake limit. Only electric motors and non-powered boats are allowed on Island Lake. No boats, kayaks or even float tubes are allowed on Crane and Smith lakes. Dead smelt is allowed.

The refuge is open one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset. For more information on the refuge, visit FWS.gov/Refuge/Crescent_Lake.

20 Crescent Lake WMA

982 Acres. Garden County, 22N of Oshkosh. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Muskellunge,

Northern Pike, Sauger, Saugeye, Yellow Perch.

The second largest of all Sandhills lakes, Crescent Lake and the adjacent Blue Lake opened to the public in 2011 after a long-running effort to lease land access to these public waters. The lakes were renovated in 2008 to remove carp that had left the lakes void of vegetation. That effort wasn't entirely successful and, combined with a partial winterkill of gamefish in 2012-13, carp have regained a foothold. Biologists are hoping to control the carp by stocking more northern pike, muskellunge, saugeye and sauger, and the lake is expected to offer good fishing for a number of years. Primitive camping is allowed in the upper parking lot. Concrete boat ramp, pit toilet.

21 Blue Lake

311 Acres. Garden County, 22N of Oshkosh. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This private lake is open to the public thanks to an easement across private land via a 2.7 mile trail road. The lake has been producing quality panfish since it opened to the public in 2011. With depths of up to 20 feet, it won't be choked by vegetation in the summer. While some carp found their way into the lake during high water in 2010, fishing is expected to be good for at least the next 10 years. The lake is open only to fishing and only during daylight hours. The access road, which is closed at times due to snow or wet or dry conditions, requires a four-wheel-drive. No camping,



An aerial photo shows Crescent Lake and the Crescent Lake Wildlife Management Area (at right), Blue Lake (left) and Island Lake (top right) and others on the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge north of Oshkosh.

hunting, ATVs, horses, fires or littering are allowed. The area is closed to access during the November firearm deer season. Please stay on the road, follow the rules and close all gates to ensure the landowners renew the lease. Primitive boat launch, small boats recommended. For questions on road conditions, call 308-763-2940.

Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Garden County, 24N of Oshkosh.

22 Smith Lake

225 Acres. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

Open to fishing November 1 - February 15, this lake is popular among ice anglers and a few hardy souls who wade fish for big largemouth bass before ice-up.

23 Island Lake

711 Acres. Bluegill, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

This shallow lake is the only lake on the refuge that is open year round. Named for the island in the south half of the hourglass-shaped lake, it offers good fishing for bass and panfish. There are three primitive boat launches on the lake, and the main ramp on the south side also includes a wildlife viewing deck.

24 Crane Lake

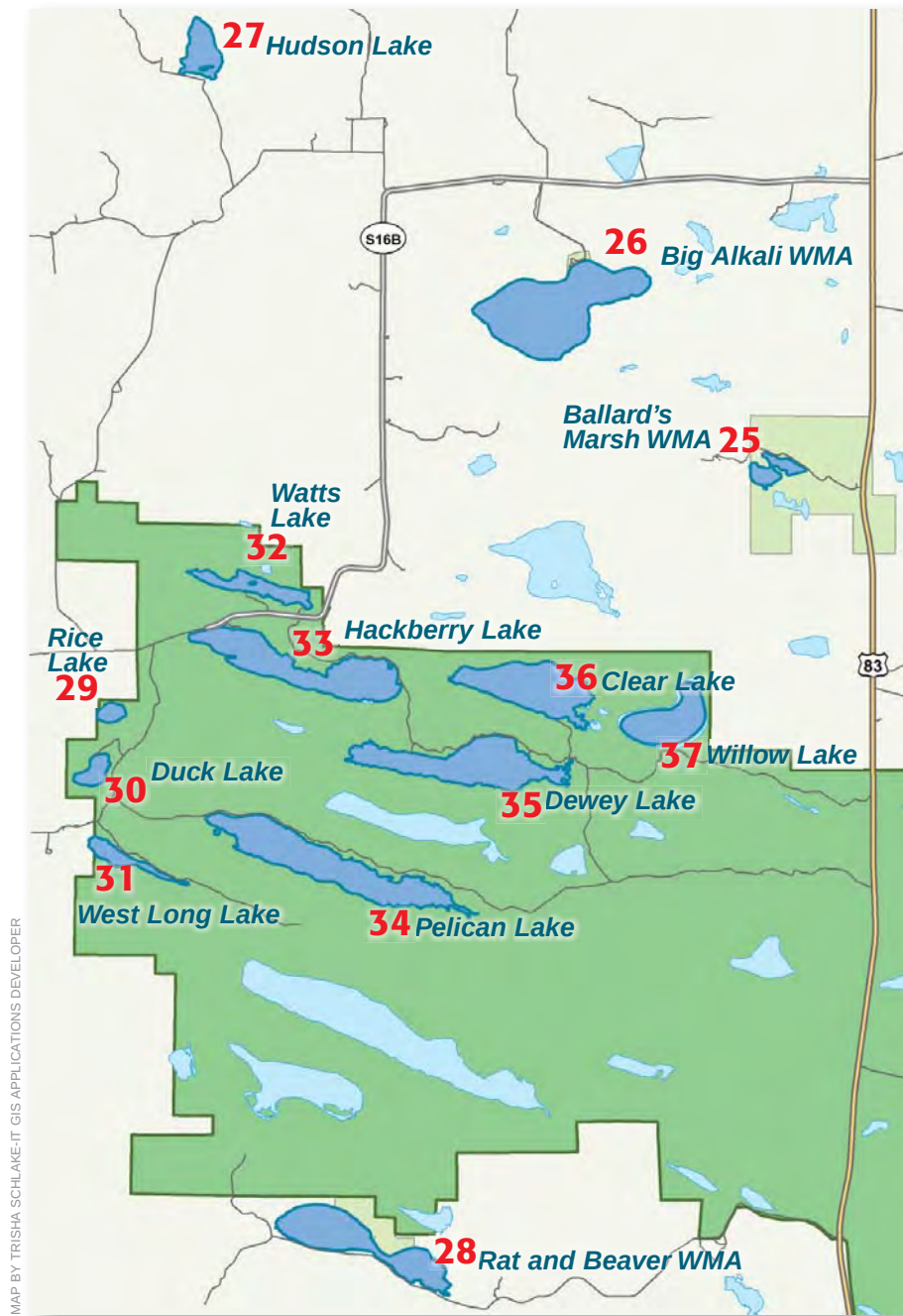
128 Acres. Yellow Perch.

Open to fishing November 1 - February 15 only, this shallow lake is popular among ice anglers but regularly suffers from winterkill and did recently. The Commission



Ben Shaw of Parks pulls a perch through the ice at Blue Lake.

plans to stock yellow perch and possibly black crappie in the lake in 2016, and it should produce keeper-sized fish by 2019 if water levels stay high and it doesn't suffer another die-off.



Valentine Area

Nine lakes on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge are open to fishing. Four more public lakes – Ballard's Marsh, Big Alkali, Rat and Beaver – are located adjacent to the refuge. For many Nebraska anglers, that variety and the chance to catch northern pike and big panfish makes "the refuge" the place to fish in the Sandhills.

A few of the lakes on the refuge are large by most standards: Pelican Lake covers 798 acres and is more than three miles long. Considering only electric motors are allowed, they can seem much larger if your battery gives out or you push your luck and don't get off the water when you see a storm approaching. Anglers need to keep this in mind or risk getting stranded on the wrong side of the lake. Gas



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

motors are allowed on Big Alkali, Rat and Beaver lakes and Ballard's Marsh, giving anglers an option if they're up for the weekend and the wind is too much for their electric motor to handle. Big Alkali is one of two Sandhills lakes, and the only one in the Valentine area, that doesn't limit boats to 5 mph.

The refuge is only open from sunrise to sunset, and camping is not allowed. Camping is available nearby at Big Alkali Lake WMA, Ballard's Marsh WMA and Merritt Reservoir SRA. Cabins are available at Big Alkali Fish Camp, Lord Ranch Resort and Merritt Trading Post, and there are several motels in Valentine.

Use and possession of live baitfish is prohibited on all of the lakes in the area except Big Alkali. Dead smelt is allowed. On the refuge, possession of fish not taken from refuge waters is unlawful. Where there are northern pike on the refuge, only fish 28 inches or shorter may be kept.

For more information, visit FWS.gov/Refuge/Valentine.

25 Ballard's Marsh WMA

70 acres. 20S of Valentine. Crappie, Northern Pike.

With more cattail marsh than open water, this shallow, heavily vegetated lake is better known for its duck hunting. But it also holds some pike and crappies and can be fished early or through the ice. Primitive boat ramp, primitive campground, pit toilet.

26 Big Alkali WMA

842 Acres. Cherry County, 16S, 4W, 1½S of Valentine. Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Common Carp, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Saugeye, Walleye, Yellow Perch.

Big Alkali Lake has an excellent channel catfish population, and has a few big crappies, walleyes and northern pike. The Commission stocked saugeye in the lake in 2015, hoping to provide yet another predator to help control carp and to provide additional angling opportunities. Primitive campsites are strung along a portion of the north shore of the lake, but for decades anglers and hunters have also been enjoying the rustic cabins at Big Alkali Fish Camp. The resort also offers an RV campground, showers, fish cleaning station, a small store and a battery charging service. The cabins and other facilities were renovated in 2006 by the Commission, which leases the site to an operator. A concrete boat ramp is protected from south winds by a breakwater. Pit toilet. Snowmobiles and ATVs allowed on ice.

27 Hudson Lake

160 Acres. Cherry County, 15S, 8W, 1N of Valentine. Bluegill, Bullhead, Green Sunfish, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This private lake is open to the public for daytime ice fishing from December 1 - February 29 only.

28 Rat and Beaver WMA

450 Acres. Cherry County, 30S, 7W of Valentine. Bluegill, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Redear Sunfish, Yellow Perch.

Rat and Beaver lakes were renovated in 2014 and with

Camping and Other Amenities

The distance between the home of many Nebraska anglers and the nearest Sandhills lake often begs for a multi-day trip. Due to the remoteness of most of these lakes, however, there are often few, if any, amenities available, including those for anglers willing to camp.

Camping is allowed on all Nebraska Game and Parks Commission state recreation areas and wildlife management areas. SRAs are typically more developed, with picnic tables, water hydrants, pit toilets and mowed campsites. A few WMAs offer some or all of those same amenities, and are mowed periodically to make them more tent-friendly, and even include a fire ring or two and some picnic tables.

At most WMAs, however, you will simply pitch your tent next to the parking lot, or park your camper in it, and fend for yourself. This is what you can expect if you're visiting one of the lakes in the accompanying list that offers "Primitive Camping," so plan on bringing everything you need, including water for drinking and dishes.

Areas with more amenities include Ballard's Marsh, Big Alkali Lake, Frye Lake, Goose Lake, Shell Lake, Smith Lake and Willow Lake WMAs and Cottonwood Lake and Walgren Lake SRAs. Big Alkali Fish Camp is the only resort on the banks of a Sandhills lake offering a campground with RV hookups. It also offers primitive cabins and showers, or campers can rough it in a few primitive sites along the lakeshore adjacent to the resort. While these areas may offer a few campsites with picnic tables, someone may beat you to them if the bite is on, so it's still a good idea to pack heavy.

Big Alkali also offers something you won't find at any other lakes in the Sandhills: a place to charge your deep-cycle trolling motor battery. Anglers should bring a spare battery or two for a weekend trip.

Open campfires are allowed only where the Commission has provided fire rings. Apart from that, fires must be contained in stoves, grills or fireplaces.

Camping isn't allowed on either of the National Wildlife Refuges, however, or on any of the private lakes on this list that are open to public fishing.

Those who don't like roughing it do have other options. Cabins are available near several Sandhills lakes, and a town with a motel is typically within 30 miles.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

The primitive campground at Big Alkali Lake near Valentine.



Because of the invertebrates they support, bluegills and other fish are often found in and around aquatic vegetation in Sandhills lakes, which in this photo includes pondweed and coontail.

carp removed and barriers constructed to keep them out, the lakes now boast excellent water quality and vegetation is returning. The fish are growing and reproducing rapidly and should reach keeper-sized proportions in 2017. A 12-inch minimum length limit placed on yellow perch should provide trophy potential, but it may be 2018 before fish reach that size. Monitoring in the years to come will determine if the regulation is successful and will remain in place. The lakes are connected by a narrow bottleneck. Beaver, the western lake, is the deeper of the two, reaching 12 feet in places, compared to 6 or 7 feet on Rat. A primitive boat ramp serving both lakes is located on the south side of Rat Lake on land leased from the Rat and Beaver Sportsman's Club, and anglers are asked to park within the designated areas only. While the WMA includes 240 acres of public land, all of it is located on the north side of the lake and only accessible by boat. The entire south shore is private land, and no bank fishing or other access is allowed.

Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Cherry County, 16S, 6W, 8S of Valentine.

29 Rice Lake

47 Acres. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.
Rice Lake is only 6 feet deep when water levels are highest and extremely prone to winterkill when drought

takes up to half of that depth. The drought in the 2000s killed the lake, but it was restocked in 2010 and 2011 and is now producing keeper-sized fish. Access is by foot only from the parking lot at Duck Lake, a three-fourths of a mile walk. Anglers generally fish Rice Lake with waders, float tubes or through the ice.

30 Duck Lake

66 Acres. Bluegill, Bullhead, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.

This lake is blessed with exceptionally clear water and can be a very productive panfish lake, boasting bluegills 10 inches or longer and yellow perch 12 inches or longer.

31 West Long Lake

62 Acres. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

This long, narrow lake has always provided quality bluegill and perch fishing, especially during the winter months, as it does have excessive vegetation during the summer.

32 Watts Lake

230 Acres. Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch.
This lake was renovated in 2015 and the response by vegetation and fish was rapid. Anglers can expect to see keeper-sized panfish in 2017. Biologists did not stock

Down with Carp

The common carp has been making a mess of lakes, reservoirs, rivers and streams since it was first brought to the United States and later Nebraska from Europe in the late 1800s. Once established, they can ruin a fishery, and have done just that to many in the Sandhills.

Carp are bottom feeders that stir up sediments and cloud the water. The aquatic vegetation that is the base of the food web doesn't grow well, if at all, in muddy water. And sight-feeding gamefish like pike, bass, bluegill and perch, unable to find what little food is left, grow slow and stay skinny. Eventually, there will be few gamefish left. Some Sandhills lakes have been infested with carp for so long that not even cattails grow in the shallows. Without vegetation, the lakes are also of little value to waterfowl and other wildlife.

For decades, the Game and Parks Commission's fisheries division has been using rotenone to remove carp from lakes. This chemical kills gill-breathing organisms, including gamefish, but by the time biologists choose that route, few gamefish remain. With carp removed, waters clear quickly, aquatic vegetation rebounds and the gamefish stocked into the "new" lakes grow fast and fat.

Unfortunately, it can be hard to kill carp in the Sandhills. These natural lakes are fed by groundwater, and springs bubbling up from a lake bottom can provide a refuge from the chemical for carp. It is also difficult to get the chemical mixed into every ounce of water that permeates the cattails and marshy areas around the lakeshore. Also, many of these lakes are connected by small streams and man-made ditches that run out of one lake, through a wet meadow or marsh and into another lake and eventually a river. Carp first found their way into some lakes by swimming up or down these streams during times of high water, and often do so again following a renovation.

Biologists have understood this fact of life in managing Sandhills lakes, but feel that even if they have to re-treat a lake in 10 or 15 years, the good fishing in the interim makes the effort and expense worthwhile. Often, they stock lakes with predators like northern pike, muskellunge or walleye, which have been shown to help control carp populations, extending that timeline.

In recent years, however, biologists have brought engineering to the battle in hopes of making the next renovation of a lake the last. Barriers that allow water but not carp to pass are being installed on streams below lakes to keep carp from swimming back up. And when lakes are renovated, so are their watersheds, ensuring that carp won't come downstream.

Water control structures built to keep water in lakes often allow managers to let water out, or can be modified to do so. With lower lake levels, water and carp are drawn out of the shoreline vegetation, ensuring none escape the



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

While carp are bad news for gamefish and some anglers search for lakes without them, others, including Joe Rydell of Alliance, appreciate the fight carp put up when they hook one while fishing for other species, as he did at Blue Lake. Still, other anglers target carp with their fly rods or with bow and arrow, and a growing number are making trips to the Sandhills in search of the non-native fish.

rotenone and allowing biologists to use less of it. Where structures aren't present, managers use high-capacity pumps to lower a lake prior to a renovation, or wait until drought lowers the levels naturally.

Work is underway on several of these types of projects in the Sandhills, the largest of which is at the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge. Nine of the 36 lakes on the refuge are open to fishing. Six of them, along with another lake not open to fishing, are connected, including the five largest fishing lakes, covering nearly 3,500 surface acres combined. A joint project between the Commission, its Aquatic Habitat Program and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is underway to improve existing or build new water control structures between the lakes to prevent movement of carp between them. A major piece of the puzzle – a new fish barrier below Willow Lake, the last in the system – is in place. When other barriers are completed, the partners plan to perform a systematic top-down renovation of the lakes, timing it so anglers will always have several lakes to fish.

Another major project is installing barriers to keep carp out of Twin Lakes WMA in Rock County, which were renovated in March 2016.

There is no guarantee any of these extra steps will work. Historic rainfalls sent water over the barriers installed at Goose Lake WMA prior to a 2003 renovation, allowing carp to re-enter the lake. It is tentatively set to be renovated again in 2016. And unbeknownst to some anglers, that bucket of crappie minnows they buy at the bait-shop often includes young carp, which is why the use of live baitfish is prohibited at newly renovated lakes.

Even without guaranteed success, the return on investment for fish and anglers, as well as hunters and fowl, is high enough that biologists will continue to do whatever they can to get carp out of Sandhills lakes and keep them out.

northern pike or muskie in Watts following the renovation in hopes of making it a quality panfish and bass lake.

33 Hackberry Lake

680 Acres. Bluegill, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

Hackberry was renovated in 2004, but carp have found their way back into the lake. While it remains a fair fishery, it could be renovated in the near future to remove carp, as it is at the top of a series of lakes. Marshy areas on the north bank, especially in the eastern third, can be difficult to get a boat in but often hold bass and can be fished with waders and from a kayak. Restroom at refuge sub-headquarters.

34 Pelican Lake

798 Acres. Bluegill, Bullhead, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

The longest of the refuge lakes at more than 3 miles, Pelican is very productive and holds trophy bluegill, perch and pike. Like Hackberry, Pelican lies at the top of the system and may be renovated in the near future to remove carp.

35 Dewey Lake

550 Acres. Bluegill, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

The east half of this lake is deeper than the west, which gets choked with vegetation early in the summer. An island and stands of cattails form a peninsula that separates the two halves. That area and the marshy areas on the east and west ends of the lake can be productive.

36 Clear Lake

425 Acres. Black Crappie, Bluegill, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

This lake holds some big pike but is hampered by carp. It is the deepest of the lakes, reaching 14 feet when at full pool. Deep water can be found along the north bank, and the marsh on the east end can be productive.

37 Willow Lake

353 Acres. Black Crappie, Bluegill, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch.

A road was built around the east end of this lake in 2015 to construct a water control structure and fish barrier to replace one that washed out years ago. However, plans currently call for that road to be for maintenance only, meaning anglers will still have to walk in from a parking area on the south side. An abundance of carp and low water levels have left few gamefish in this lake, but once renovated it should provide excellent fishing, as it has in the past, and be worth the effort to drag in a kayak or float tube. ■

To Pike or Not to Pike?

Commission biologists don't stock northern pike in every Sandhills lake. While some anglers love fishing for these toothy, hard-fighting predators, the presence of pike in a lake may hamper panfish populations, which makes other anglers despise them. Studies have found that pike can reduce both the abundance and size of yellow perch. Pike don't have as great of an effect on bluegills.

Pike are sometimes stocked in lakes to help control common carp, and according to studies on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, are fairly good at it, able to keep the fish from overpopulating and ruining a fishery.

Yet in cloudy water, this sight-feeding fish isn't at its best and can appear skinny. Nebraska being on the southern edge of the species range also affects its longevity, and while some fish reach trophy size, most don't live long enough.

When Commission biologists restock a lake following a renovation, they look at several factors when they decide whether or not the stocked fish will include pike. Often, it comes down to geography. If there is a good pike lake nearby, the lake may only get bass and panfish. That provides something for all anglers.



Author Eric Fowler with pike caught at Dewey Lake near Valentine.

PHOTO BY STEVE FREDERICK

This guide was written by Eric Fowler, with assistance from Nebraska Game and Parks Commission fisheries biologists, many of whom are directly involved in managing Sandhills lakes, including Al Hanson, Joe Rydell, Zac Brashears, Andy Glidden, Jeff Schuckmann, Phil Chvala, Daryl Bauer and Dave Tunink. Past work on fishing the Sandhills by longtime NEBRASKAland Magazine staffer Ken Bouc was also an invaluable resource.

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For more information, contact Commission fisheries staff in Alliance, 308-763-2940, Bassett, 402-684-2921, or Norfolk, 402-370-3374. Additional copies of this publication can be requested by calling the Commission's Fisheries Division at 402-471-5552. Cover photo, Hackberry Lake, Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, by Jeff Kurrus.

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Rendezvous by the River

Niobrara State Park in Knox County will host its fifth Outdoor Education Rendezvous on May 6.

By Jenny Nguyen

Since 2011, the Outdoor Education Rendezvous at Niobrara State Park kicks off with a resounding shot from a muzzleloader rifle, while volunteers from the Ponca Tribe bless the day by drum, prayer and song. About 700 children arrive per year, hailing from schools as far west as Butte, east as Hartington, south as Tilden, and as far north as Bon Homme, South Dakota. This year, 22 schools are expected on May 6. On this gorgeous spring day by the Niobrara River, children, alongside parents and teachers, will enjoy a fun day of hands-on outdoor learning, exercise, sun and fresh air.

The Rendezvous is about creating firsts: introducing kids to the outdoors and keeping them there, said Niobrara

State Park Superintendent Mark Rettig. Judging by the melted marshmallow-and-chocolate-smears each year, the students heartily approve. Outside of the Rendezvous, many of these students don't receive much opportunity to engage in activities such as fishing, pellet gun shooting, archery or riding a horse.

"We try to encourage parents and guardians to participate, too. We want to kick start the interest in kids getting outdoors but it really helps when we can trigger that in the adults, too – lots of these kids don't have driver's licenses," Rettig said.

Kids running freely up and down the hills, shrieks of excitement after catching their first fish, the proud looks on faces after successfully shooting at 3D targets with a

Elle Brazel (left) and Lillie Grashorn, both of Wausa Public School's pre-kindergarten class, visit Jon Morgenson's table of skulls and rocks at Niobrara State Park's Outdoor Education Rendezvous.

PHOTOS BY JENNY NGUYEN



Before fishing in Niobrara State Park's pond, students first learn how to tie knots and cast a fishing pole.

bow and arrow, and the amazement in flying a kite for the first time – these are all sights that make an outdoor educator proud. The students are eager, and at each station they gather 'round and listen intently to

local volunteers and educators who come to share their knowledge on the prairies and wetlands; archaeology; American Indian history; mammal, bird, amphibian and insect biology; woodcraft; early American folklore and

much more. The Rendezvous welcomes all grade levels.

“We don’t select a particular grade, such as only fourth-sixth grade or just junior high. We feel like we have enough to offer to everybody,” Rettig said.

Lisa Muhs, kindergarten teacher at Pierce Elementary School, has taken her students to the Niobrara Rendezvous for many years. She appreciates all the age-appropriate activities offered and the event’s laid-back setting. The Rendezvous does not lock down schools to specific schedules – groups are free to choose activities as they please.

“Some of our favorites have been flying kites, riding horses, shooting pellet guns, hiking the trails, and last year, watching the live bird release and listening to the Ponca tribe sing and dance to the beat of their drums,” Muhs said. “This absolutely free event features staff and presenters who have always been extremely helpful, organized, friendly and informed. We have never been disappointed when attending the Niobrara Rendezvous, except for the fact that we can’t stay longer.”

Similar to other events that happen

at state parks, the Rendezvous relies heavily on staff and volunteers, especially those in the northeastern district. It’s an all-hands-on-deck kind of event, each year requiring about 120 bodies to run programs, set up, teardown, prepare lunches, provide security, other support, first aid, and more. Wildlife and fisheries biologists and law enforcement from all corners of the district, and some from other districts, come to offer their services, while employees from other parks leave their stations for a day to help out. Volunteers from nearby Niobrara are also crucial to the Rendezvous’ success. All work tirelessly, though they do not go unrewarded.

Dan Sutherland, park superintendent at Willow Creek State Recreation Area, has helped with the Rendezvous since day one. He sees it as an opportunity for staff to positively impact the next generation and to pass on a little bit of what they know and love.

“I have never felt so rewarded for being so tired,” Sutherland said. “Seeing the pure joy on a young face after they’ve caught a squirming trout or after having shot a bullseye with a bow and arrow or pellet gun for the first time is time very well spent.”

Offering over 40 master naturalist programs taught by local talent, Rettig is comfortable with the current size of the Rendezvous. However, parking is an issue on this busy day, and he and staff are working to improve parking so the event can expand. Averaging 700 kids now, Rettig hopes attendance will reach 1,000 in the near future.

“It’s all about getting kids back outdoors, getting unplugged from their computers, and taking advantage of that swing set in their backyards or state park or a wooded area or getting out fishing. The Niobrara Rendezvous is a great place to make family memories. It’s something that they’ll remember forever – the first time they went fishing with mom and dad, grandpa or grandma,” Rettig said.

The Rendezvous is a safe and encouraging environment for kids to pick up new outdoor hobbies, and with all the different programs offered – from fishing to outdoor photography to wetland and grassland programs – staff and volunteers ultimately hope to introduce these young students to different career paths in wildlife conservation for the future. ■



A young girl winces at her first catch – a bluegill.

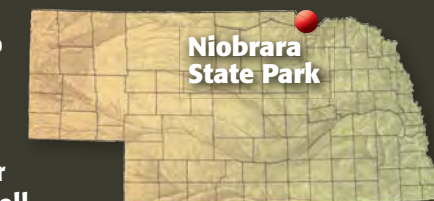


Horseback riding is offered at Niobrara SP's Outdoor Education Rendezvous. Summer wranglers return to help at the May event to kick off the new park season.

If your school would like to be included on the Outdoor Education Rendezvous invitation list, contact Niobrara State Park at 402-857-3373.

Lodging and Amenities

All 20 cabins at Niobrara State Park have undergone major renovations, including new carpet, doors, windows, siding, and roofs. New TVs have been put into every cabin. The lodge is available for rental, whether for weddings or family reunions. The Buffalo Cookout Pavilion may soon be open for rental as well.



PEELING AND RUSTING

THE OLD AND FORGOTTEN

Photos and story by Jon Farrar

Some years back I spent most of a day with a rancher in the middle of Cherry County, probably as far away from any town as is possible in Nebraska. We walked fencelines and talked about hedge posts – crooked and skinny line posts, five- and six-inch corner and gate posts, and how long they last before rotting – and then we went to the kitchen, a kitchen as well-kept as the ranchstead, for coffee and cookies. The conversation drifted. The rancher said he could not understand why magazines, including *NEBRASKAland*, published photographs of dilapidated barns and rundown ranchsteads rather than well-kept farm and ranch buildings. I knew the answer, my answer – a photograph of a barn with a door hanging on one hinge and most of the paint peeled off is visually more interesting to the eye than a sheet-metal pole barn. Old barns and other old buildings are awash with patterns and compositions. But I didn't say what I thought was the answer to his question.

Metal machine sheds replace barns because they are cheaper and easier to maintain and few, if any, farmers need a hay mow

any more. Today, farms run on diesel fuel, not the labor of horses. Few farms have milk cows. The days of a patch of this crop here and patch of that crop there are gone. There are horizon-to-horizon fields of corn and soybeans. Gone are cob and coal sheds, cotton cake sheds and hen-houses. Some farmers and ranchers keep their old barns out of nostalgia, or respect for their parents or grandparents who were proud of their barns. Perhaps some remember stories their grandparents told of wedding dances in swept-clean hay mows that went on until the sun was rising, and of children wrestling in the so-soft prairie hay left in the corners until they fell asleep. A few old barns and houses are lovingly restored at a cost in the thousands of dollars. But most old barns are long gone or rotting, sagging, leaning, waiting for a wind to push them over – even propped up by long two-by-fours. There are broken windows. Pigeons have moved in. Maybe there is a barn owl nest in a corner of the mow. The galvanized-tin cupola on the roof's ridgeline with a crowing rooster weathervane is askew. Or there is no crowing





rooster at all – it went to an antique store and was sold.

Some barns, when they were beyond saving, were burned – cremated – the remains pushed into a hole and covered. Some were burned by small-town fire departments for practice. Structural lumber was salvaged from the best of them – better quality lumber than sold today. Was wood harder then, denser, more pounds per two-by-eight, not fast-grown lumber from tree farms? Or did it harden with age?

Why are photographers drawn to deteriorating, rusting, rotting and decaying old buildings? Are they a metaphor for our own lives? Our inevitable decline? I’ve known old couples who saw they could make it to the end without painting their house one more time. Perhaps it was a new house when they moved in. They were so proud to own it, along with the bank. Perhaps it was their first house. Where they raised their children. Where babies were born and

old people died. Where once it was “home.” Where grown children and their families returned for large and raucous Fourth of July and Christmas celebrations. Where there were more places to hide Easter eggs than the grandchildren had who lived in town. Now the hinges on the screen door to the mud-porch are rusted and squeak because no one has oiled them for years. The door handles children once kept polished by their constant comings and goings are dull.

It’s much the same with small towns – slowly dying. Buildings rotting and decaying. Towns that once had three service stations, a feed-and-seed store, a car dealership, two grocery stores, hardware store, lumberyard and other businesses sold just about everything small-town people and farmers or ranchers needed. And now the towns have a bank, tavern, and convenience store. Even the main street buildings are neglected. There is no new paint. The building’s protective shells are



wearing away as an act of erosion. The structure of the building is starting to fail – soaked by years of rain and snow and sun. Big black carpenter ants chew studs into pulp. Nails that once held the frame together are rusted down to hardly anything. Box elder bugs gather on September days where there is rot around windows and doors. Basking in the last warmth of summer, probing for a breach in the wall so they can move inside for the winter.

Once, almost every small town had

a crib-style wooden grain elevator protected by sheet-metal exteriors. If they did not perish in a fire they were invincible against the weather and aging. But once one nail and then another rusted and the corner of one of the metal sheets opened a small gap, the wind relentlessly pried, pried until another nail and another nail gave free and eventually the sheet was shed. And then another sheet. And then another sheet, exposing the stacked two-by-eights or two-by-sixes to rain and rot.



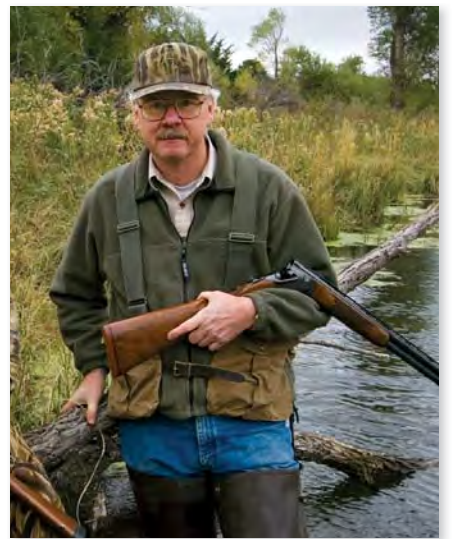
Eventually they were torn down and a part of the rural Nebraska landscape vanished, replaced by rows of concrete tubes.

Huge advertising signs painted on the brick sides of warehouse district buildings are faded so they can hardly be read anymore. Vines crawl up the unpainted stucco exteriors – their tendrils creeping into any crevice and opening the wall to moisture, freezing and thawing. They pry apart the concrete – just as plant roots can split a granite boulder given an opening and time.

Some used to say that each wrinkle on a face and each gray hair on a head

was earned by passing through life – enduring hardships, manual labor, raising a family on not enough money, suffering great disappointments and losses. Perhaps it is the same for old barns, old houses and old small-town buildings, in their own sort of way – their peeling paint, cracked wood, rusting tin and moss-covered wooden shingles. They served their purpose. ■

Jon Farrar was senior editor at NEBRASKAland Magazine when he retired after 42 years with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. He is now writing historical Sandhills fiction.



Jakes Hunting Toms

Story and photos by Jenny Nguyen

Eight youth hunters enjoyed a rare opportunity to hunt wild turkeys in Ponca State Park. They received one-on-one instruction and a fun weekend stay at the park.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, the National Wild Turkey Federation and Scheels teamed up again this year to sponsor a youth turkey hunt hosted at Ponca State Park in April. Eight youth hunters – five boys and three girls – received the opportunity to hunt turkeys in the park’s prime hunting grounds and adjacent lands opened up by private landowners. Dubbed the Ponca Bluffs Jake Hunt, this hunt is targeted toward northeastern Nebraska youth who have

little opportunity to hunt but show strong interest. This is the second year that Ponca State Park has opened up its forests and fields to youth turkey hunters; the first youth turkey hunt happened in April 2014.

Northeastern Nebraska conservation officers spearheaded this event, with tremendous support from Ponca State Park staff, Commission wildlife division employees and local NWTF chapter members. Conservation officers selected youth from local hunter

education class enrollments. Names of kids who showed interest in learning how to hunt but had few opportunities to do so were entered in a drawing, but only eight names were chosen to maintain safe and quality hunting in the park. A great step toward achieving the Commission’s goals of developing new hunters, the Ponca Bluffs Jake Hunt also fell in line with NWTF’s “Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt” 10-year plan to create 1.5 million new hunters.

“Our youth mentor hunts have been really effective in getting kids – who don’t have the opportunity to hunt – out in the field for a quality hunt and getting them outdoors,” said Tom Zimmer, supervisor for the Commission’s law enforcement division in Norfolk. “It’s sad to say that we can’t reach all of the kids out there who have an interest in hunting every year, but that’s what we’re working toward.”

Youth hunters had the opportunity to stay in the park’s comfortable lodges, receive one-on-one instruction on turkey hunting from mentors, and attend the NWTF chapter banquet on Friday night before taking to the field with their mentors to hunt on Saturday and Sunday. NWTF also donated one-year memberships to each participating youth, and in partnership with Scheels, the kids were sent home with their own hunting gear and clothing including hats, knives, camo shirts, masks and jake decoys to encourage them to continue hunting at home, said Dennis Conger, a regional director for NWTF in Nebraska.

Ten conservation officers worked the event, offering mentorship and behind-the-scenes support such as setting up blinds, getting meals for the weekend brought in, gathering equipment, transporting kids to and from hunting spots and being available for anything that came up, Zimmer said.

On Saturday morning, youth participated in classes on gun safety, patterning a shotgun, live shooting and turkey calling. They went out to hunt with their mentors Saturday evening and Sunday morning; any turkeys harvested would be field dressed by mentors with hands-on assistance from youth hunters. Most hunters stayed within the park’s areas, but permission was also obtained from two landowners nearby, said Ponca State Park Superintendent Jeff Fields.

In 2014, Conner Day of Newcastle and Dylan Dendinger of Hartington shot their first turkeys. Abbe Morton of Hartington and her mentor Jamie Bachmann, a Commission outdoor education instructor, had an exciting Sunday morning hunt when they called in an angry hen that brought in three other birds, including a nice tom, during the last half hour of the hunt.



Conservation officer Alexandra Thomas mentored Charlie Winkelbauer during the 2014 Ponca Bluffs Jake Hunt. On Saturday morning, hunters learned gun safety, how to pattern a shotgun, live shooting and turkey calling.

Overwhelmed with excitement, Abbe had an unfortunate miss.

“Are you disappointed?” Jamie asked.

“Well – yeah,” Abbe said, her voice lowered.

“But there are other emotions happening, too, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” Abbe said, with a pensive look on her face. “When you shoot, you don’t even feel the shotgun kick.” Her heart was beating so quickly.

“You’re going to be so hooked now because you were so close,” Jamie

replied.

Abbe nodded and said she already had plans to go turkey hunting with her father the following week.

In addition to turkey hunting, conservation officers and Ponca State Park staff have also offered December muzzleloader deer hunts to northeastern Nebraska youth. Both programs have been rewarding, Zimmer said. Some kids come in quiet and shy, but they leave with newfound confidence, pride and the spark necessary to pursue a lifelong passion for hunting. ■



The National Wild Turkey Federation and Scheels presented turkey hunting gear to youth during the NWTF banquet at Ponca State Park on Friday evening before the weekend’s hunts.

Poison Ivy

Nebraska's Most Irritating Plant

By Joe Zenter

For instigating itches, blisters, rashes and general discomfort, few plants can compete with poison ivy. Although a fortunate few persons are immune to poison ivy's deleterious effects, more than half the population experiences physical reactions after coming in contact with the plant. The unpleasant results of a "brush" with poison ivy may last for days, weeks or even months.

Poison ivy has been irritating people for a long time. In 1609, English adventurer Captain John Smith gave the plant its apt name. He thought it resembled English ivy in appearance, but went on to observe that "the plant causes abominable itchyng (sic)."

Poison ivy is a member of the Cashew family (*Anacardiaceae*). Many Nebraskans have heard of three "poison" members of this family: **poison ivy** (*Toxicodendron radicans*), **poison oak** (*Toxicodendron toxocarium*) and **poison sumac** (*Toxicodendron vernix*).



POISON IVY is identified by its three distinct leaves and can grow as a ground cover, shrub or vine.

Of the three plants, poison ivy is the most widespread and the only one found in Nebraska. It grows in most types of terrestrial habitat, including swamps, forests and fields. Poison ivy can grow in full sun, as well as in nearly full shade. Preferred habitats include forest edges and recently disturbed open fields.

Poison ivy grows in various ways. As a ground cover, it spreads outward and creates a knee-high thicket of foliage. As a freestanding shrub, it can grow as tall as two feet in Nebraska, with one stem and several side branches.

As a vine, poison ivy uses brown aerial roots to attach itself to the sides of trees or other objects. In this form, poison ivy reaches its greatest size. It is not uncommon to find vines as thick as your arm growing on trees.

"Leaves of three, let them be." This rhyme pertains to the identification of poison ivy and poison oak. Poison ivy has compound leaves; that is, each leaf is made up of distinct parts called leaflets. There is one leaflet at the end of the leaf stalk and two leaflets opposite each other below the first. This is known as a trifoliate pattern. The two lower leaflets have very short stalks and are shaped like mittens.

The shape, color and texture of poison ivy leaflets vary. Poison ivy's trademark leaf triads in Nebraska are green in the spring, and remain that color throughout the summer. Although the color of its berries is sometimes mentioned as a way of identifying the plant, fruit color is not as reliable as leaf identification. Also, the berries appear at the end of the growing season – not helpful for identifying poison ivy in the spring.

Another wild vine – **Virginia creeper** – is sometimes mistaken for poison ivy. However, Virginia creeper usually has five leaves to a branch rather than three,

and its leaves are more toothed than those of poison ivy. Virginia creeper is not only harmless, but makes for beautiful fall foliage. The second half of that last statement is also true of poison ivy. The green of the plant's leaves in summer yields to brilliant reds, yellows and oranges in the fall. Their autumnal brilliance is due to pigments characteristic of the Cashew family.

Poison ivy fruits are clusters of tiny, pumpkinlike seeds with an off-white rind. The fruits also contain the chemical irritant urushiol, but that does not stop birds from eating them. Typically, the seeds pass through avian digestive tracts unharmed, making birds agents for the widespread dispersal of poison ivy seeds.

Urushiol is far more problematic

for humans. Poison ivy rash involves allergic dermatitis caused by contact with the substance. Urushiol is a colorless oil that oozes from any cut or crushed part of the plant, including stem and leaves. Simply brushing against a plant may not cause a reaction. On the other hand, a person may develop dermatitis without ever coming into direct contact with poison

ivy. Sticky and virtually invisible, urushiol can be carried on the fur of animals, garden tools, golf balls, or on any object that has come into contact with a broken plant. After exposure to air, urushiol turns brownish-black, making it easier to spot.

Urushiol is highly potent. It's estimated that the amount needed to make 500 people itch would cover the



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

FALL FOLIAGE of poison ivy at Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge in Washington County.



POISON OAK also has three leaves, and is found on the West Coast and in states southeast of Nebraska.



POISON SUMAC is found along the Mississippi River and swampy areas in the southeastern part of the country.



JEWELWEED was used by American Indians to counteract the effects of contact with poison ivy.

head of a pin. The resin is stable and long lasting – it can stay active for as long as five years on a dead plant.

Once it touches human skin, urushiol begins to penetrate in a matter of minutes. Individuals who are highly sensitive to the chemical will experience a reaction in the form of a linear rash (sometimes resembling insect bites) within 12 to 24 hours. Blisters and severe itching will follow redness and swelling. After a few days, the blisters become crusted and begin to scale. The rash can affect any part of the body, but especially areas where the skin is thinner and more sensitive to ivy sap. Soles of the feet and palms of the hands are thicker and therefore less susceptible.

The severity of reaction varies from person to person and may also change from year to year for some people. Severe reactions include swelling in the throat, dizziness, weakness and breathing problems. If you experience extreme itching, or if infection sets in, seek medical attention. And remember: you can have an allergic reaction to poison ivy even if you never leave your house. Anything or anybody that has come into contact with poison ivy can spread it. Agents for spreading urushiol include clothing, tools, sporting goods and pets.

Contrary to popular belief, though, you cannot get a poison ivy rash from someone else’s rash or blisters. The liquid inside your blisters is not urushiol but fluids your body has produced in an attempt to prevent the worst effects of exposure. Still, breaking the blisters is not recommended because it could prevent healing and lead to scarring.

Treatment

The best preventative for poison ivy is to avoid it. Don’t touch the plant or walk through it. If you must walk through poison ivy, step on the plants with the sole of your shoe and always wear long pants.

The plant’s almost invisible oily resin sticks to most surfaces, and can even be carried in the wind or in smoke when it is burned. Standard barrier creams offer little protection against poison ivy. If you have had a brush with the plant, wash all exposed areas of your body with cold, running water as soon as you can reach a stream, lake or garden hose. If possible, also clean with soap. If you do this within five minutes of exposure, the water will neutralize or deactivate the urushiol in the plant’s sap and keep it from spreading to other parts of the body.

Jewelweed, which typically grows near poison ivy, was used by American Indians to counteract the effect of contact with poison ivy, nettles and other skin rashes. Three to five feet tall with oval, rounded leaves, jewelweed is most easily identified by its trumpet-shaped flowers, which hang from the plant like necklace pendants. The juice from crushed leaves and stems were used to help prevent a poison ivy rash or lessen its effects.

After returning home, rinse all clothing outside with a garden hose before bringing it into the house, where resin can easily be transferred to rugs or furniture. Since urushiol can remain active for months, it is important to wash all camping, hiking and hunting gear that may be carrying the resin.

If you do develop a rash, avoid scratching the blisters.



VIRGINIA CREEPER, also found in Nebraska, is not only harmless to humans who come into contact with it, but makes for beautiful foliage throughout the year, especially in the fall when it turns brilliant reds, oranges and yellows.

Cool showers will help ease the itching, and over-the-counter preparations, such as calamine lotion, help relieve mild rashes. Soaking in a tepid bath with an oatmeal or baking soda solution is recommended to dry oozing blisters.

In severe cases, corticosteroid drugs can halt the reaction to urushiol if administered promptly. A physician may prescribe a steroid cream containing hydrocortisone to be applied to poison ivy lesions four to six times a day.

Removing Plants

The most effective way to kill young poison ivy plants is to pull them up by the root or dig them up (of course, when doing so, always wear gloves). The most effective time to remove poison ivy is from May through July. Dispose of the dead plants by chopping into small pieces and burying them, and then wash the gloves that were used or dispose of them as well.

It is possible we may experience outbreaks of poison ivy infection more than ever before due to global warming. The greenhouse gas carbon dioxide is a major factor in promoting global warming. Increased carbon dioxide emissions are facilitating the flourishing of nuisance plants around the globe, including poison ivy, and also increasing urushiol concentrations and its potency.

However, removing poison ivy isn’t always necessary, especially if the plant grows where it won’t bother anyone.

Even if poison ivy grows in an area where people could come in contact with it, a prominently displayed warning sign may be the most practical measure.

The Benefits of Poison Ivy

Although poison ivy causes many of us discomfort, the plant does have some merit. For example, many birds, including warblers, woodpeckers, bluebirds, vireos, sapsuckers, thrushes and quail eat poison ivy berries. Rabbits, deer, muskrats and other mammals also eat the fruit, in addition to the stems and leaves with no ill effects. Thick stands of poison ivy provide cover for small wildlife, and the plant’s ability to thrive in disturbed habitats makes it valuable in protecting soil from erosion.

Poison ivy doesn’t have to get under our skin. With some preventive measures, we can easily identify and avoid the plant. Knowing its benefits, we can learn to coexist with poison ivy when fishing, hunting or engaging in other outdoor pursuits and even respect it as another aspect of Nebraska’s natural beauty. ■

Joe Zentner is a retired professor and a freelance writer. His articles have appeared in both regional and national magazines.

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Nebraska's Unseen Majority

The story of the Nahurac.

By Roger Welsch

I've spent a good part of my long life among my Indian friends – Omaha, Lakota and over the past 25 years the Pawnee. On occasions when the Pawnee give a traditional prayer, they include blessings for us two-leggeds, the four-leggeds who share this earth with us and often nourish us, the creatures that fly above us in the skies, those that swim in the waters and those that crawl along the ground, and – here's the part I find particularly interesting – those that live beneath us, often unseen, under our feet and beneath the earth.

I suppose the inclusion of those we seldom see (and sometimes despise or fear) comes from a perceived kinship since many tribal creation stories tell of mankind's emersion from under the earth, through specific, tribally identified canyons, crevasses and caves. The Christian story too traces our origin to the earth after all. "From dust ye came, etc." As a result, just as Native peoples often hold all creatures in high regard because of their particular perspective – the eagle, for example, from so high above or the crow always headed toward something they are determined to visit but that we can't even see – many tribes hold special regard for lowly ant hills and are careful not to disturb the tiny mounds because the small creatures that built them live a secretive, often completely unknown life deep in the soil and therefore probably know things we do not. In fact, the Pawnee like to note that the mounds of anthills are for all the world like miniature earthlodges, much like the ones the Pawnee once built here along Nebraska rivers.

Large and small, the subterranean dwellers are understood by the first Nebraskans to have special wisdom that we may well want to pay attention to, both the small like ants, worms, cicadas, snakes, and spiders, and larger, under-earth dwellers like moles, groundhogs, badgers, prairie dogs, beaver and muskrats. The Indian understanding was (and to a large degree still is) that all creatures know things we do not and should therefore be respected and learned from, but particularly mysterious are the goings-on under the earth where they are only rarely seen.

The Nahurac, or Animal Council, is believed to hold regular sessions where the very ways and workings of all life on earth are considered and decided – what the weather will be, how crops will fare, who will be victorious and who will fall, whether game will be abundant or sparse, the entire fate of individuals and whole nations. Representatives of the animal world are all in attendance at such gatherings – bear, mountain lion, buffalo, wolf, eagle and owl, crow and snake, and, yes, the creatures from beneath the earth, too,



Animal Council, sketch by G. Th. Rotman 1922.

and they all participate in making decisions that affect all life on the earth. (Some non-Indians may find it curious that animals would decide such matters but honestly, wouldn't you rather leave such things up to a wildlife conclave than to Congress?!)

And those meetings of the Nahurac are understood to be called to order deep in the earth, under specific sacred hills in Nebraska like Guide Rock on the Republican River, or the Pahuka, high bluffs, one on the Cedar River immediately north of Fullerton, another and perhaps the principal one on the south side of the Platte River opposite Fremont. Entry to the subterranean meeting place is believed to be made through a deep pool in the adjacent river or through an opening hidden behind large cedar trees at the foot of the cliff.

Do modern Native Americans really believe in such things as the Nahurac Animal Council and their meetings in deep caves far under the earth? Well, people have been known to believe stranger things. Me, I respect the people who tell me such things and besides, I've always had high regard for animals in general, even ants and I do what I can to avoid damaging their laboriously constructed earthlodges. Any of the many nocturnal and underground creatures that populate this place we've lived on the past 26 years have my respect because they are so skilled at remaining unseen.

As for other subterranean dwellers like the groundhogs that seem determined to destroy our buildings or moles that delight in making a mess of our lawn ... well, I've written here at other times what I think about them. I guess there has to be someone that troublesome and contrary in any legislative meeting including the animal council, and who knows? In the Nahurac those ne'er-do-wells may have only a 9 percent approval rating, too. ■

Roger Welsch is an author, humorist and folklorist. He has written for NEBRASKAland Magazine since 1977.





Tiger Trout in Nebraska

A new and uniquely beautiful species.

By Julie Geiser

Trou anglers across the state will now have a new quarry to hook as newly released tiger trout are thriving in Nebraska waters.

These unique and beautiful trout have been raised from eggs at Rock Creek State Fish Hatchery near Parks, Nebraska, and they have been stocked at several locations with more stockings to come.

Tiger trout have occurred naturally in Nebraska showing up in some of the Pine Ridge streams where both wild brook trout and brown trout are found. Once cross-bred a sterile hybrid is produced.

Tiger trout have the flashy copper and golden hue of a brown trout crossed with the markings of a brook trout, resulting in a uniquely patterned

and colorful fish.

The first rod and reel state record tiger trout was caught from Soldier Creek in 2006 and the current record tiger trout was taken in March 2016 from Rock Creek State Recreation Area weighing 1.19-pounds and 15 1/8 inches long.

Anglers will have a fight on their line with these fish, especially when they reach maximum size. The aggressive tigers are known to hit about any bait you throw at them. They could grow as large as 20 pounds – similar to brown trout – in the right conditions.

“We don’t know how big they will get in Nebraska,” said Hal Walker, fish production manager of Rock Creek State Fish Hatchery. “We’ll have to see as time goes on how they do in

the different locations we’ve released them.”

Walker is enthused about the widespread opportunity for everyone to catch a tiger trout. “Tiger trout are a fish that can be caught by die-hard fly anglers or spin fishing anglers. I call them a user-friendly fish. You can throw flies, spinners or jigs at them, and they’ll hit many different presentations.”

Making memories is one of the reasons for the addition of tiger trout in Nebraska waters. Tiger trout are not a common fish. They are more of a bucket-list fish and are typically an overlooked species by many anglers. Commission fisheries biologists thought it would be something different for Nebraska anglers to catch.

Stocking Tiger Trout

To date, tigers have been stocked in the following water bodies:

1/04	Rock Creek Lake	500
1/06	Blue Creek	1500
1/12	Lake Ogallala	4226
1/13	Lake Ogallala	4039
1/28	Bessey Pond	500
1/29	Lake Ogallala	2033
2/29	White River	750
3/10	Two Rivers	500
3/22	Alliance Golf Course	400
3/22	Wood Reserve Ponds	600
3/22	Rock Creek Lake	563

Future stocking locations:

Fort Kearny SRA	100
North Fork, Dismal River	1500
Blue Creek	1500

Recent tiger trout stockings at Rock Creek SRA, near the hatchery, Bessey Pond at the entrance of the Nebraska National Forest, and Lake Ogallala SRA at the base of Lake McConaughy SRA will give anglers opportunities for catching tiger trout. Eventually some tiger trout may go down the canal system from Lake Ogallala.

The triploid rainbow trout currently in Lake Ogallala that have moved down the canals thrive with plenty of forage. Tiger trout are expected to do the same, and as they grow new state records will be created. Many anglers have been fishing for tiger trout at Lake Ogallala with success.

Blue Creek near Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge has been stocked with tiger trout at several locations. Fishing on the White River can be done at Fort Robinson State Park and there are several miles of Open Fields and Water public access areas on the river south of the park.

Lake number five at Two Rivers SRA near Waterloo, Nebraska, has plenty of trout fishing for anglers of all ages. More tiger trout will be stocked in other Nebraska creeks, rivers and water bodies later this year.

If you like a fight on the line and love catching trout, now is your chance to try at a new state record tiger trout, make new memories, and cross off a bucket-list fish in the process. ■

Tiger trout swim on the rocky bottom of the White River near Crawford.



A tiger trout is stocked at Lake Ogallala in Keith County.

PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

Lakes Back in Business

Burchard Lake Leads the Way.

By Eric Fowler

Much to the delight of boat anglers who haven't been on the water there since 2011, Burchard Lake, one of southeastern Nebraska's top fisheries, is again open for business following a drawdown for an Aquatic Habitat Program project that was extended by drought.

The 8-foot drawdown of the 26-foot deep, 150-acre reservoir in Pawnee County began in 2012 to replace the 60-plus-year-old, leaking outlet structure. While the lake was down, the Game and Parks Commission built a sediment dam across the north arm of the lake to improve already excellent water quality, spread tons of gravel in the shallows to create or enhance existing spawning beds for bluegill, crappies and largemouth bass, piled rock in strategic locations for fish habitat, and spread rock in the shallows to protect and heal portions of the shoreline that were being eroded by wind-driven waves. The agency also built a new boat ramp and a large breakwater to protect it that doubles as a fishing pier, four fishing nodes that will help bank anglers get closer to deep water and a new latrine. Bass clubs, which hold many tournaments at the lake, cut and piled trees in the lakebed to attract fish.

The work was completed in July 2013 and the lake reopened to bank and kayak anglers, but it wasn't until heavy rains filled the reservoir in 2015 that boats could get back on the lake. What made it slow to refill is what makes the water quality, and the fishing, so good there: a watershed that is 80 percent grass slows runoff but keeps it clean.

Surveys last year showed fish weathered the drawdown fine, with the usual good numbers of largemouth bass, with some over 20 inches in length, plentiful bluegills with fish to 9 inches and good numbers of crappie, especially in a year class in which fish are now up to 11 inches.

The extended drawdown did have a positive effect. Trees and vegetation that grew in the lakebed are now flooded and provide additional habitat for fish and the aquatic organisms they feed upon.

The project at Burchard was one of many that have been completed, are underway or are planned through the Commission's Aquatic Habitat Program (AHP) and Angler Access Program (AAP). Using funds paid by anglers, as well as matching funds from other programs including the federal Sport Fish Restoration (SFR) and more than 60 other partners, the program has spent \$64 million to improve aquatic habitat and fishing access at 105 Nebraska waters since its inception in 1996.

Most projects rehabilitate aging reservoirs where fishing had declined and need 3 or 4 years for restocked fish to reach keeper size. Others improve access on waters where the fishing was good but boat and bank access was not. The Commission also has been heavily involved in the design of fish habitat in new reservoirs.



A new boat ramp, breakwaters, and numerous rock and tree pile and gravel beds built for fish habitat are visible in an aerial photo taken of Burchard Lake WMA before it refilled.

Ready to Fish

West Gothenburg, Brady, West Brady, West Maxwell, Fremont Slough, Birdwood and Hershey wildlife management areas in Lincoln County: AAP and SFR project. Built new handicapped-accessible boat ramps and one or more fishing nodes and/or piers, at least one of which is accessible, on these sandpit lakes along Interstate 80. Also cleared shoreline on southeast corner of Hershey WMA lake to improve angler access.

Prairie Queen Recreation Area, Papillion: New 135-acre flood control reservoir built by the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District and SFR, with fish habitat design help from Commission. Opened in 2015. Anglers will find a few 8-inch bluegills and redear sunfish and 9-inch crappies this year and lots of small largemouth bass, some reaching 15 inches.

Kramper Reservoir, Danish Alps SRA, Hubbard: New 219-acre flood control reservoir built by the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District and SFR, with fish habitat and other area amenity design help from Commission. Opened in 2015. Anglers will find a fair number of 8-inch bluegills and high numbers of largemouth bass, most in the 11- to 13-inch range with some exceeding 15 inches.

Clear Lake, Brown County: A public private partnership with help from AHP and SFR renovated this private lake late in 2012 and opened it to the public. A new public boat ramp will be completed by summer 2016 and anglers can find keeper-sized panfish and bass.

Willow Lake WMA, Brown County: Renovated in 2013 lake is producing quality bass, bluegill and perch.

Works in Progress

Work is underway or compete at the following lakes, but fish need more time to grow to keeper-sized proportions. **Conestoga Lake, Emerald; Lake Helen, Gothenburg; Rat and Beaver Lake, Valentine; Watts Lake, Valentine; Twin Lakes, Rock County; Bowman Lake, Loup City.** ■



For a list of other recently completed projects now offering good fishing, visit NEBRASKALandMagazine.com/2016/04/FishHabitat

Saving the Regal Fritillary

In Awareness of Endangered Species Day.

By Kristal Stoner

In awareness of Endangered Species Day on May 20, Nebraskans should know that we have a "royal" species that is getting harder to find. It is not a king or queen, but rather a delicate regal fritillary. The **regal fritillary** (*Speyeria idalia*) is a large orange and black butterfly that can be seen flitting above the prairie grasses in mid-summer. It can be found across Nebraska, but is more abundant in the eastern half of the state. The regal fritillary is a prairie specialist, and is even considered an indicator species of quality native prairie. This is because as caterpillars, they will feed only on violets, but as adults, they need a variety of nectar flowers to survive and thrive.

Unfortunately, the regal fritillary is declining. The regal fritillary has become so rare that on April 19, 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received a petition to list the regal fritillary under the Endangered Species Act. Their decline is largely due to the loss of prairie habitat. Most of the prairies that remain today are small and fragmented, with additional habitat loss certainly possible. These butterflies do not migrate and have limited dispersal ability, so at isolated sites when something eliminates all the regal fritillaries, that site is unlikely to become recolonized.

The regal fritillary is not alone. In Nebraska, we have 27 animal and plant species that are already listed as threatened or endangered, but endangered does not mean extinct. As more people take action to restore wildlife and their habitats, populations of these rare species can rebound.

For the regal fritillary, there is hope. In cooperation with partners, prairies are being restored with high diversity seed mixtures. Vigor and health are being restored to existing prairies through prescribed burning, removing encroaching cedar trees and avoiding pesticide use. Biologists are working on both public and private lands to restore larger, continuous blocks of



PHOTO BY GEORGE SCHADE

prairie for the benefit of regal fritillaries and many other species.

You can be a part of the restoration and conservation of this species. While habitat is improved, there is an urgent need to have a more accurate regal fritillary population count. The regal fritillary has not been listed yet, so an accurate population count will be critical as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decides if this butterfly should be considered threatened with extinction. If you enjoy a slow walk through a prairie on a warm summer day, consider conducting a regal fritillary survey. The surveys are simple, and the regal fritillary is one of the easier butterflies to identify. The information you collect will



PHOTO BY CHRIS HELZER

Top: a Regal Fritillary resting in a Gage County meadow. Bottom: Regal fritillary butterfly (*Speyeria idalia*) on hoary vervain (*Verbena stricta*) at The Nature Conservancy's Dahms Tract.

be used to determine the current population levels in Nebraska and archived to better recognize population changes in the future. Learn more at Outdoornebraska.gov about how you can be a part of restoring royalty to the prairies. ■

The Great Parks Pursuit

An annual adventure for the entire family.

By Renae Blum

If on your next trip to a Nebraska park you spot someone standing at an upright post with paper and pencil in hand, don't be surprised. This summer, thousands of people will head out in teams in search of posts like these, winning prizes and having fun along the way.

It's all part of the Great Park Pursuit, an annual challenge by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the Nebraska Recreation and Park Association. Now in its ninth year, the Great Park Pursuit encourages Nebraskans to get out and explore their home state, along with all the wonderful recreational opportunities it offers.

"Nebraska is more than flat areas you drive by on the interstate. It has tremendous recreational diversity," said program organizer Bob Hanover. "There's almost no end to the outdoor opportunities people can learn about. Bring your fishing pole or kayak or RV on an outing and experience it for yourself."

Here's how it works: Between May 1 and Sept. 16, participants are encouraged to explore as many official GPP sites across Nebraska as they wish, collecting an impression of a post located at each site. Each impression they mail in counts as an entry into a drawing for dozens of prizes. The grand prize is an outdoor recreation package worth \$1,500.

It's not just about collecting impressions, though. Great Park Pursuit sites – which range from state park areas, to NRD properties, to city and county parks, and even some federal properties – are varied and interesting spaces to explore with family and friends.

In past years, program sites have included places such as Ash Hollow State Historical Park, Pioneers Park in Lincoln and Zorinsky Lake in Omaha. These sites often encompass fun spaces like horse riding trails, swimming areas, playgrounds, hiking trails and campgrounds.

NEGPP.org has over a dozen descriptions of activities you can engage your kids in while exploring these outdoor spaces, including making leaf and flower pressings and identifying different kinds of animal tracks.

"We have great participation," Hanover said. "The average age of a participant is approximately 22, which means we're getting a great mix of families who go out on these trips together. We get a lot of couples as well who make these excursions part of their

weekend plans. We get people from all across the spectrum."

He estimates that last year about 500 teams registered, leading to more than 9,400 park visits. It's a win-win situation: guests have fun exploring new places, and their hosts get to show off new facilities and park offerings.

"There are really cool things across the state that people don't know about, and the Great Park Pursuit is an opportunity to see them firsthand," Hanover said. "We have a lot of people call us up and say they've recently added something new to their area that they want to share with others. Maybe it's a recently added handicap-accessible fishing pier, or a new educational exhibit. The Great Park Pursuit is an opportunity for towns across Nebraska to gain exposure to new projects that they're proud of."

Registration for teams is now open at NEGPP.org. Participation and registration are free. Twenty Great Park Pursuit sites are offered, along with a traveling "bonus" post marked with the program mascot, Parker the Frog. Register now, and you, too, can visit parks, be active and win prizes through the Great Park Pursuit challenge. ■



Great Park Pursuit marker at Lake Maloney.

PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER



The stone shelters at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area provide great views for a family outing. Enjoying the view is Kirk and Heather Hayes of Scottsbluff, along with daughters Atley Watson and Reagan Churchill.

PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

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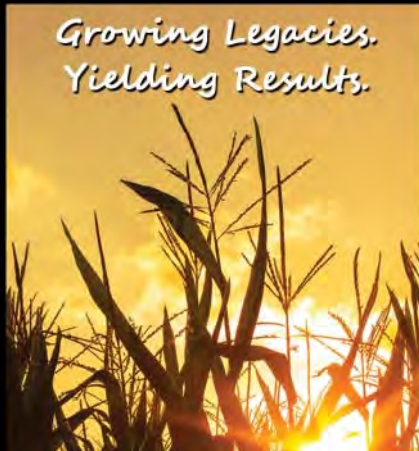
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▲ From left: Gary Aylor and dog Dina, Harlan Mertes, Gary Bedea, Ron Hollandsworth, dog Nan and Carolyn Hollandsworth. Picture taken by Harlan's wife, Beverly. Pheasant hunting around Bloomfield in Knox County in 1967. Gary Aylor's dog was one of the finest dogs I ever hunted with.
— Gary Bedea, Table Rock, Nebraska



► Pictured here are my good friends Gerald Walrath and Irwin Noble of Akron. Typical pheasant hunt in the Akron-Loretto, Nebraska, area in the late 1940s. Hens were still legal. We hunted a lot together in those days during WWII in the Sandhills area west of Petersburg. Our ranch was located one mile south of the District 18 School House on the south side of the Beaver Creek.

— Bill Hamilton, Ankeny, Iowa



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



Morel Mushrooms and Parmesan Linguine

Earthy wild mushrooms, savory Parmesan cheese, butter and fresh parsley is one of my favorite combinations in the world.

By Jenny Nguyen

I enjoy pasta, but I don't like the creamy stuff. Red sauce, I'll eat up readily, but the white creamy stuff – not my thing. Instead, I throw together a more buttery and herby pasta at home that is quick and easy, making it perfect for days when I don't have lots of time to spend in the kitchen. For the base, all you need is pasta, butter, lots of Parmesan cheese, garlic, olive oil and fresh parsley. As for the other ingredients, I throw in what I have on hand – leftover chicken, turkey, sautéed shrimp, sausage or whatever. Maybe I'll add in a little bit of fresh thyme or red pepper flakes.

This time of year, however, the morel mushroom is the star ingredient. This is one of my absolute favorite ways to prepare morels. The combination of fresh parsley, meaty mushrooms, salty Parmesan cheese and good Irish butter just sings spring to me. If you'd like your pasta a tad bit creamy, then mix in some heavy whipping cream.

Don't worry too much about measurements, though, because this recipe can be adjusted to your taste. In fact, the measurements here are just guesses. Cook to your liking and enjoy.

Prep Time: 15 minutes

Cooking Time: 30 minutes

Servings: 4

Ingredients:

- 1 pound of uncooked linguine pasta
- Morel mushrooms, rinsed and halved or quartered lengthwise
- 6 cloves of garlic, minced (or more – can't have too much garlic, in my opinion!)
- 1 large shallot, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoon of fresh Italian flat leaf parsley, chopped
- 1 tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil, plus extra
- 5 tablespoons of Kerrygold salted Irish butter (or regular)
- Grated Parmesan cheese, to taste
- Grated zest of one lemon
- Kosher salt and freshly cracked pepper

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil; add a generous

pinch of salt to the water. Follow package directions to cook pasta to al dente.

Drain pasta but reserve cooking liquid for later use.

2. In a large pan, heat up 1 tablespoon of olive oil and 1 tablespoon of butter over medium heat. Add shallot and cook until translucent, but do not brown. Turn up heat to medium-high and add morel mushrooms and a pinch of salt. Sauté until mushroom soften and have given up most of their moisture; I prefer mushrooms to be browned so I may

cook them in batches to get a better sear. Once mushrooms are cooked, add garlic and cook for 30 seconds until garlic becomes aromatic but do not brown, stirring frequently.

3. Turn down heat to medium-low. Add 4 tablespoons of butter to the mushrooms and wait until it melts. Toss in cooked pasta, Parmesan cheese, freshly chopped parsley and lemon zest. Loosen up pasta by tossing in a bit of the reserved pasta water and lots of olive oil. Add salt and pepper to taste. Heat pasta thoroughly and serve with more Parmesan sprinkled on top. ■

This recipe and photograph originally appeared on Jenny's Food for Hunters blog at Foodforhunters.com.



PHOTOS BY JENNY NGUYEN



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Buzzing About May

There's something beautiful to be found all year long in Nebraska, but few months strike the senses as much as this one does.

The late Tom Allan, a renowned Omaha World-Herald roving reporter who wrote about our state's small towns in the column Nebraska Byways for decades, once likened the imagery of Nebraska's landscape in May to a boy with a new buzz cut. Regardless of what you consider to be fashionable for hair, you have to respect Allan's sentiment which he expressed after one of his round trips from east to west. Despite an occasional late blast of winter, a journey across Nebraska in May is sure to satisfy one's affinity for eye candy.

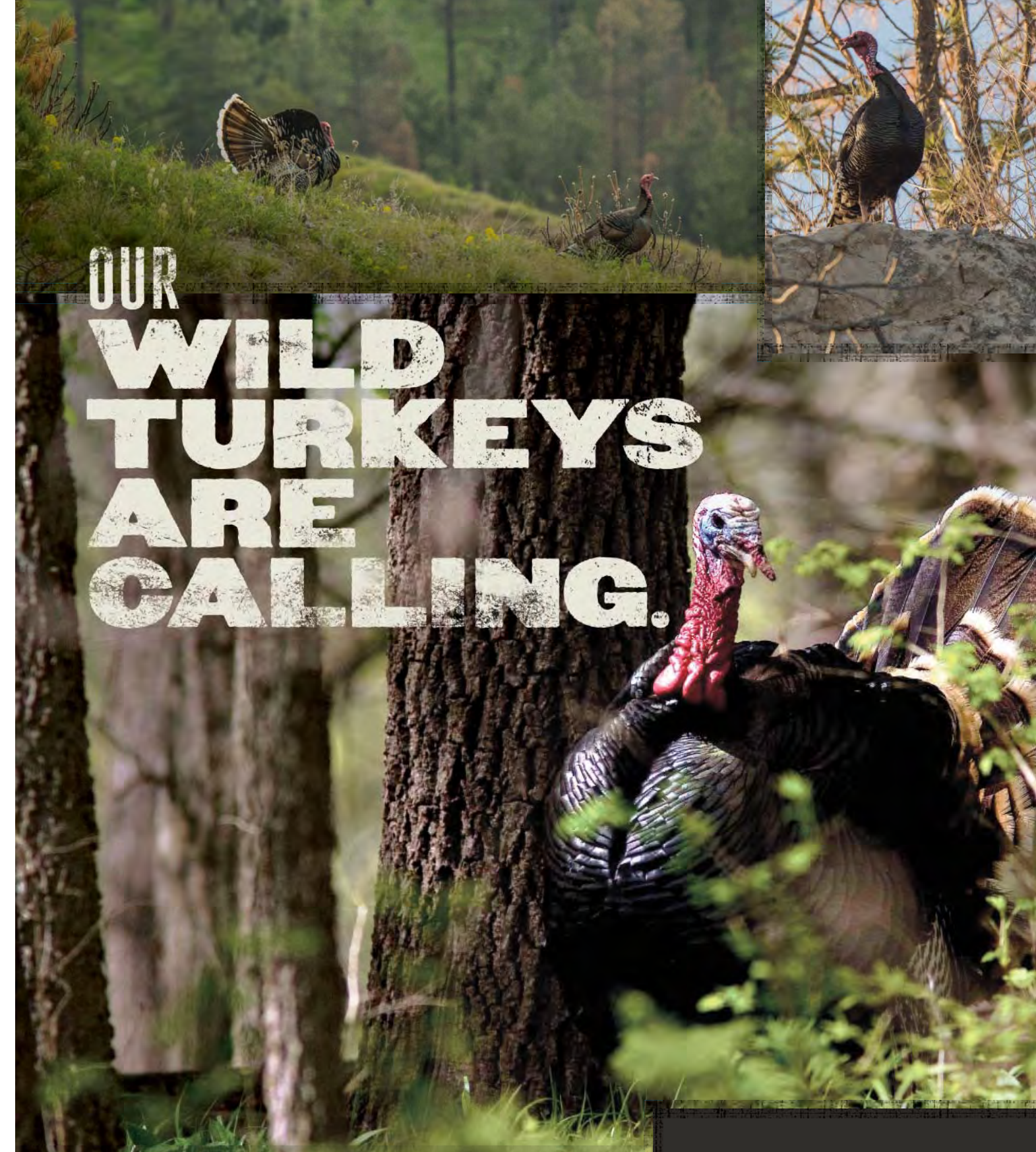
May is when Nebraska drops its shaggy coat of winter and puts on a shiny new coat – a coat warm enough on many days that you need not wear one. Vibrant colors progressively pervade the paint-by-number spaces previously filled with dormant browns. Elk and deer carry around a fuzzy set of growing antlers as green grass and a growing number of wildflowers pop up around their feet.

May is a time when many things become possible. It's when we anglers are in high gear chasing fish we've dreamed about during winter. It's when more hunters tromp the woods to bag their quarry and turkey hunters work to trick that gobbler. May compels people to leave their homes and find a park. We photographers are challenged to capture such splendor but enjoy every moment of trying. As the month goes on, it seems each step is more apt to bring something of beauty to the eye.

As the school year winds down and children – surely some of them boys with new buzz cuts – wait anxiously for that last bell to ring, we share their excitement. For many, at that point, the classroom moves from a place with four walls to a bog of frogs, and a fishing rod replaces the pencil. The month of May takes over as the teacher.

This is a month in which we should all feel like kids again. May we never outgrow the excitement that it brings, nor the desire to be outside to enjoy it.

Justin Haag
March 25, 2016



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