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April 2022



Cover: Larry Czolgos of Lincoln fishes from a kayak on a foggy morning at Conestoga State Recreation Area. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND
This page: A group of college students meet for a bonfire on a sandbar near the Platte River in Sarpy County. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

FEATURES

18 TURTLES AT HOME
IN NEBRASKA

Story and photos by Justin Haag

26 OUTDOOR NEBRASKA

What to Do in April

By Renae Blum

28 CONESTOGA

A Model Lake

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

36 FROM HIGH-WHEEL TO
SAFETY BICYCLE

By David L. Bristow, History Nebraska

40 WILDLIFE HABITAT
FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

44 RARER THAN A
THREE-SPURRED ROOSTER

By Cassidy Wessel

50 HOW TO TELL A STORY

Remembering Dick Turpin

Edited by Nebraskaland Staff

DEPARTMENTS

6 Your Nebraska

10 In the Field

52 Mixed Bag

60 Portraits from the Past

62 The Last Stop

ON THE WEB

For more articles and
information, visit
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Nebraskaland magazine

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Art Director Tim Reigert
Graphic Designer Mel Severin

Photo Librarian Jaclyn Cruikshank Vogt

Circulation

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Advertising Sales Manager

For advertising information contact
Shane G. Gilster, 402-742-0125
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The spring rains will signal barred tiger salamanders to seek breeding grounds.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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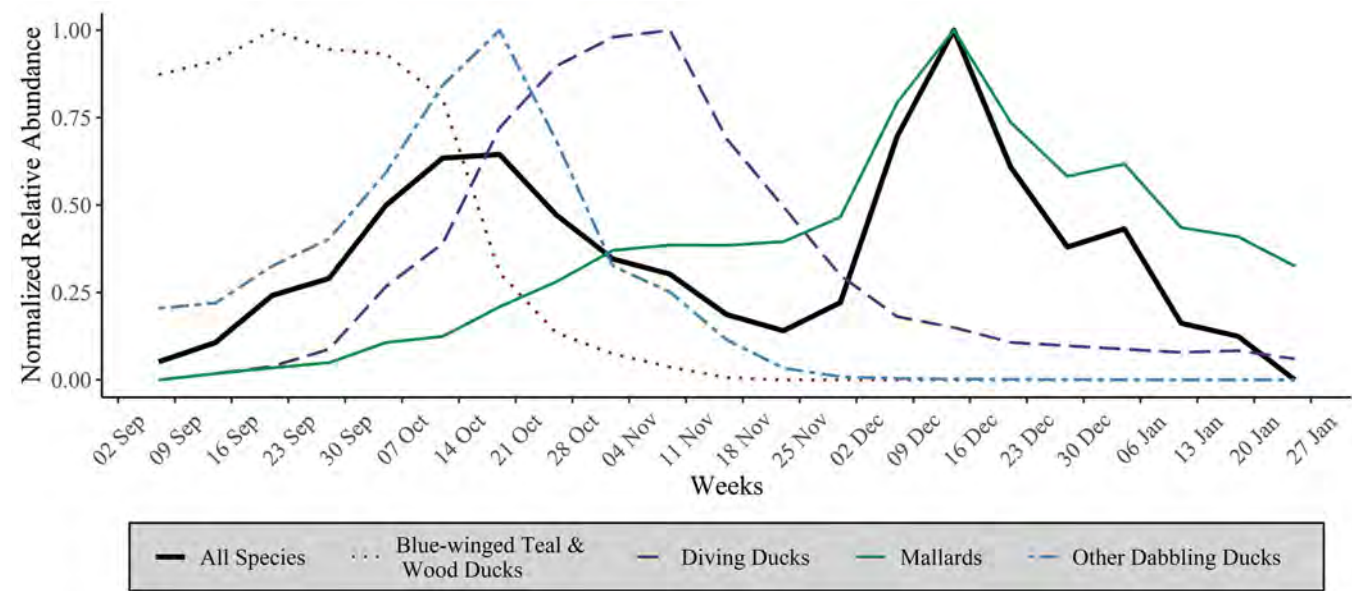
Connor McClellan, Omaha
Treetop Raccoons

FLOCK FIGHT

Wild turkeys fight for supremacy of the flock at Rowe Sanctuary on the banks of the Platte River.

BRITTON BAILEY





ESTIMATING DUCK MIGRATION

By Cynthia Anchor, Waterfowl Biologist

Hunter opportunity is one of the many considerations that go into developing waterfowl hunting season recommendations. For Nebraska waterfowl hunters, that largely means recommending hunting season dates that overlap with the highest concentrations of birds in the state. Although Game and Parks does not have a formal waterfowl survey during the fall, duck migration estimations have improved through the use of eBird.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York, developed the eBird platform to offer birders a way to store and organize birding media, species lists, counts for single birding events, and “life lists”—complete lists of every bird species seen by an individual — at county, state, national and global scales. Since the release of eBird in 2002, birders have contributed more than 60 million checklists containing over half a billion bird sightings.

A team of scientists at the Cornell Lab used eBird observations from January 2006 – December 2020, along with data on habitat, weather and birder experience, to predict the relative abundance of a species in a given location for each week through the year. Recently, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission used these data to estimate the

migration chronology of ducks.

We used known life histories to group 13 of the most common duck species found in Nebraska, including early migrants: blue-winged teal and wood ducks; mid-season migrating dabbling ducks: northern pintail, American wigeon, northern shoveler, green-winged teal and gadwall; mid-season migrating diving ducks: canvasback, redhead, ring-necked duck, lesser scaup and common goldeneye; and late migrants: mallards.

At the statewide level, relative abundance of blue-winged teal and wood duck numbers show steep declines through October, with mallard numbers peaking in December. Weekly relative abundance for all species demonstrated two peaks in migration that predominately represented mallards and other dabbling ducks. We repeated this process to estimate the timing of autumn duck migration in each of the four duck hunting zones in Nebraska. Average migration chronology was one data stream used to inform waterfowl hunting season date recommendations to maximize opportunities for duck hunters.

Visit ebird.org to learn about collecting and reporting birding data. Visit ebird.org/science/status-and-trends/ to learn more about how weekly relative abundance is estimated.

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Male and female ornate box turtles in a Sandhills blowout. GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

TURTLE LOVE

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist, NGPC

One morning last June, while photographing wildflowers in the Sandhills blowout, I came upon a pair of ornate box turtles. I determined, based on eye color — male box turtles have red eyes, while a female’s are yellowish-brown — that they were of the opposite sex, apparently an amorous couple on a blowout tryst. And I was intruding.

I hated to be rude, but with no box turtle photographs in my portfolio, this was, for me, a fortuitous photo opportunity. So I crept in close to the couple and set up my tripod. The male, either scared, shy or embarrassed, wanted nothing to do with this botanical paparazzo and instantly retreated to the safety of his shell, leaving only the tip of his nose sticking out. He remained unwilling to pose and, after a few photos, skedaddled, running as fast as a turtle can to shielding vegetation, perchance a patch of sand lovegrass, downslope from the blowout.

The female, on the other hand, was not the least bit

camera shy. She stayed put, head exposed, the perfect model of female turtleness. Perhaps she decided that dealing with a camera-carrying botanist was less stressful than being pestered by an aroused male. For a female box turtle, mating is a rather trying event, as here described by one author: “The male chases the female, biting her on the neck, head, and the edge of her shell. He may even roll her over on her back. The male eventually mounts the female ... and hooks his toes into the female’s shell.” The female’s only satisfaction appears to be that pushy males sometimes fall on their backs while doing the deed and, if they’re in a place where they can’t flip themselves over again, die.

After posing for about 10 minutes, the female became restless, her eyes seeming to say, “That’s enough old chap. I need to get going.” So I folded up my tripod, thanked her for her time and left. At the dune’s crest, I looked back to see her sauntering downslope, perhaps to locate her beau. Or not.



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Walleye marinated in miso served over noodles and king oyster mushrooms. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

MISO WALLEYE

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

If you've been to a sushi restaurant, then you're likely familiar with miso soup. Miso is a Japanese seasoning made of fermented soybeans, salt and the fungus koji. Find it in the refrigerated section, sold as a thick, yellow-brownish paste stored in small tubs. Although miso's main flavor is salty, it also can be nutty, earthy, savory and slightly sweet. And its uses far exceed just soup.

White miso enhances flavor wherever it's added and is not overpowering. For this recipe, I used the seasoning to marinate walleye, which transforms this mild fish into something that is delicious with plain, hot white rice. Or, as pictured, you can serve your miso walleye over soba noodles lightly seasoned with mentsuyu (Japanese noodle soup base) and seared king oyster mushrooms.

This marinade also works with red meats, such as venison. Wondering

what to do with the rest of that miso? Stir a little bit in the mayonnaise or mustard you might eat in your sandwiches. Make a glaze for roasted or grilled vegetables. Or, add a little bit into soups and stews — Eastern or Western recipes.

If you can't find mirin, which is sweet Japanese rice wine, you can substitute with dry sherry or sweet marsala wine.

Servings: 4

Prep Time: Overnight

Cooking Time: 20 minutes

Ingredients:

- 4 walleye fillets
- ¼ cup white miso paste
- ¼ cup mirin
- ¼ cup sake
- 4 tsp. sugar
- 4 tsp. soy sauce
- 4 servings of prepared white rice
- 4 green onions, sliced on the bias

1. In a small bowl, stir miso paste, mirin, sake, sugar and soy sauce until smooth. Place walleye fillets in a zip-lock bag and pour in miso marinade. Marinate in the refrigerator for at least 1 hour, flipping the bag halfway through.

If serving with plain white rice, I recommend marinating the fish overnight.

2. When ready to cook, preheat oven to broil and place the rack in the middle position. Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil and grease with cooking spray. Allow excess marinade to drip off fish before laying them onto the baking sheet. Broil for 5-10 minutes, or until fish is cooked through and flaky. You may also grill or sear the fish in a non-stick pan.

Serve with hot white rice and sliced green onion or soba noodles and mushrooms, as pictured.

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Turtles at Home in Nebraska

The Sandhills region is tops for Blanding's turtle habitat and numbers

Story and photos by Justin Haag

Grass-covered sand dunes accented by wetland marshes and lakes as far as the eye can see. Humans and vehicle traffic sparse. Vibrant community of turtles and other wildlife.

If real estate advertisements targeted wildlife, such words would catch the eye of at least one species. Thanks to research at the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, we know many Blanding's turtles (*Emydoidea blandingii*) are already living the good life in the Nebraska Sandhills — so much so that the region is increasingly becoming known as Blanding's turtle capital of the world.

Meet the Blanding's Turtle

Ask a naturalist to describe the Blanding's turtle, and chances are you will be told it appears to be smiling. Its dark head with highly contrasting yellow chin makes it look that way, and serves as its most significant identifier.

Its high-domed dark shell is usually accented with dots and short streaks of yellow. The plastron, the bottom portion of the shell, is hinged like that of a box turtle but does not close as tightly. The turtle is mostly carnivorous, eating creatures such as snails, insects, tadpoles, crawdads and frogs. It was named for the first person believed to have described it, Dr. William Blanding, an East Coast physician and naturalist who lived 1773-1857.

A semi-aquatic species that loves marshy areas, the turtle's historical range is centered in Michigan and includes

portions of states and provinces that border the Great Lakes. The range also extends into parts of the East Coast, Missouri and, of course, Nebraska.

It is a sizable range, but the turtle's distribution is spotty. Most populations are small, numbering in the tens, rather than hundreds. Nebraska

is the only state in which the species is “apparently secure,” a favorable ranking on NatureServe, the national nonprofit that combines species data from state and federal sources. In all other states and provinces, rankings range from “vulnerable” to “critically imperiled.”

The Blanding's turtle is listed as a “tier 1” species in the Natural Legacy Project, Nebraska's wildlife action plan. That makes it Nebraska's only turtle species designated to have the greatest need of conservation.

The species is doing well in the Sandhills, but likely has suffered in other parts of the state. While populations of many wildlife species may fluctuate upwards in just a few years, Blanding's turtles are true to stereotype in this regard: slow. They can live to be more than 70 years old, but do not



A Blanding's turtle crosses a road at Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area. The low volume of vehicle traffic in the Sandhills has helped the species survive there better than more populated regions of the continent.

reach sexual maturity until they are well into their teens and up to 20 years old.

Conservation Challenges

While the Blanding's turtle may appear to be smiling, people who love the species have reasons to frown. Throughout most of the turtle's range in the upper Midwest and East Coast, properties have been extensively developed with farms, buildings and roads.

Roads serve as a primary enemy of all turtles, but Blanding's seem especially susceptible to being smashed by rolling rubber.

That is what first brought Dr. Jeffrey Lang, a professor at

the University of North Dakota, to the Sandhills in 2002 and 2003. At that time, a lot of attention was placed on Blanding's turtles as U.S. Highway 83 was being straightened with a widened right-of-way right through the east side of the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge.

Prior to coming to Nebraska, Lang had studied Blanding's turtles at multiple localities in Minnesota, including one population near the Mississippi River that was considered the largest in the world. An estimated 5,000 turtles were living there.

Upon his arrival to Nebraska, Lang immediately observed the remains of more than 50 dead Blanding's turtles on the blacktop of U.S. Highway 83. Given what was known about the abundance of these turtles in Nebraska at that time, this

A Blanding's turtle encounters a chain link fence along U.S. Highway 83 at Ballard's Marsh Wildlife Management Area. The fences, installed in the early 2000s, direct turtles to culverts to avoid traffic above.



Dr. Jeffrey Lang and volunteer Alan Bartels check a turtle trap on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge.

much road mortality seemed incredible.

Lang and other researchers later learned a lot more Blanding's turtles were in the Sandhills, and the highway mortality, while certainly undesirable, was not as much of a threat to the population as they originally suspected. By trapping turtles, marking them and tracking them with telemetry equipment, they later estimated just the refuge population at more than 130,000 turtles — about 26 times that of the one in Minnesota.

"The Sandhills total population is likely well over several hundred thousand," Lang said.

But despite their abundance, this is a difficult turtle to study.

"They're kind of shy," Lang said. "They also live in habitat which is really hard to make observations on. They don't sit out and bask as readily as painted turtles."

Similar to other hard-shelled relatives, Blanding's turtles move between habitats depending on the season.

In May and June, the females travel as much as 1 mile away from the marsh to each lay about a dozen eggs, and that is when they are most vulnerable to becoming roadkill. Thankfully, Sandhills roads are some of the most lightly traveled in America.

"The magic here is that the turtles are basically surrounded



The holes in the shell of this turtle indicate that it was captured and marked when Lang visited the refuge two decades ago.

by almost perfect nesting substrate,” Lang said. “Sand is what they like, and so they could almost nest anywhere. It’s just a matter of picking the right slope; the right place where the sand has drained and warmed. Basically they can hike out of these lakes in almost any upland area, and it’s probably 10 times better than most Blanding’s turtles in the world would find.”

Mark Lindvall, a retired manager of the refuge and project volunteer, said Blanding’s turtles deserve special consideration in road development. They seem to be more timid than other kinds of turtles, a characteristic that he believes may make them more vulnerable to traffic than other species.

“They’re crummy at crossing the road,” he said. “Of all the turtles, they’re the worst. The car comes by and they suck in (their shell) and just stay there. Others, such as painted turtles or snappers, will suck in, but then get out of there. Blanding’s just linger.”

A couple of road projects have helped the turtles, he believes.

During the Highway 83 project, sections of chain link fence were installed along problem areas of the road, directing turtles to cross in culverts that connect the expanse of lakes and marshes.

Earlier, in 1999, Little Hay Road, which provides access to



Turtles are corralled in buckets during processing. Prior to release, newly drilled holes in their shell will correspond to an alphabetic code and provide a unique identifier.



Lang measures a turtle before returning it to its habitat. The data is not only presently valuable, but also may be compared by researchers who capture the turtle in coming decades.

many sites on the refuge, was improved from a two-track trail to a graded gravel road.

“I think this reduced turtle mortality, as prior to the improvements turtles were less visible to motorists and less likely to linger on the road,” he said. “When it was a two-track, water collected in the ruts and attracted turtles.”

With the ruts’ puddles largely concealed by grass, drivers on two-tracks smashed turtles without even knowing it.

Nest predation also is a major threat to Blanding’s turtles. Less than 24 hours after laying her eggs, the female returns to the marsh leaving behind six to 21 buried prizes for skunks, foxes, raccoons and other nest predators. The eggs have an incubation period of 50-75 days, but are most exposed during the first 48 hours when scent is strongest. Studies have shown that Blanding’s and other turtles in their range face more than 80 percent mortality because of nest predation.

Conversion of wetlands and uplands to agricultural and other uses has been hard on the species, destroying habitat and making it easier for predators to locate nests in what remains.

“They get hammered like crazy on the East Coast, mostly crossing roads, because their habitat has been all fragmented,” Lang said.

Even though the Blanding’s turtle’s conservation status forbids it from being possessed, transported or sold in Nebraska, that does not always stop people from unlawfully

picking them up. Lindvall said there have been several instances of such suspicious activity by visitors to the refuge.

The turtles are especially sought as pets overseas and are sold for hundreds of dollars, Lang said. While Lang worries that added attention could draw unlawful collectors to the Sandhills, he knows the turtles’ story needs to be told in order to protect them into the future.

“It cuts both ways,” Lang said. “If you don’t make it known that it’s important, you could lose aspects of the region that are important to the turtles.”

Return to the Refuge

When coronavirus restrictions sidelined plans for Lang to return to India to study gharial crocodiles last spring, he decided it was time to revisit the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge. He got clearance from the refuge, loaded the hoop traps — he’d been paying storage for them since the Blanding’s project ended in 2003 — and headed south on Easter weekend.

“I kept the traps because I always dreamed about coming back here,” he said, relating his goal to revisit turtles he had handled in the past.

To mark the turtles, the researchers use an alphabetic code that relates to scales on the outer edge of the carapace, the top part of the shell. Holes are drilled in specific locations to

give each turtle a unique identifier. Lang is not the only one who has marked Blanding’s turtles in the Sandhills. In 1991, prior to Lang’s involvement, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Bruce Bury marked dozens of them.

Lang set up camp, and the traps were set at lakes and marshes throughout the refuge just as they were in the early 2000s.

“The main thing I was trying to do is get some idea of the age distribution of the turtles,” he said. “The hope was that we would recover the turtles that we marked and that were marked in 1991. And we did that.”

Lang and volunteers captured 285 Blanding’s turtles, and he was ecstatic to find 30 turtles with holes that he had drilled about two decades ago, and more than 10 that Bury had marked three decades ago.

“These adults are really homebodies, it looks like,” Lang said, while relating a story about capturing a 42-year-old turtle in the exact same place near Hackberry Lake that he did 20 years ago. “She’s still there. Really, what we have are these resident populations that seem to be spread all over the refuge.”

He said evidence is showing that Blanding’s turtles are not evenly dispersed throughout the refuge.

“We get turtles that are 3 years old, which are almost the smallest turtles I’ve ever seen here, all the way to the full adults that are 40 years old, and they’re all in the same trap,”



Aging turtles is challenging, but growth rings, similar to those of trees, provide clues. At left, the underside of the Blanding's turtle has worn smooth, indicating it is more than 20 years old. At right is a "teenager" with 10-14 growth lines on every scute. Each scute enlarges as the turtle grows.

he said. "Even if we have two hoop nets in one small wetland, all of the Blanding's will be in one trap and there won't be any Blanding's in the other trap. So, there's some social thing going on, too. They may be cuing each other in."

From what he saw in 2021, Lang suspects the Sandhills population is not only super abundant and stable, but likely increasing. The Indian crocodiles are taking priority this spring, but he plans to return to the refuge to study turtles in coming years.

Beyond the Sandhills

Blanding's turtles are doing best in the Sandhills habitat, but the species can be found in other parts of Nebraska. Thanks to another research project, we have a better understanding of where those places are and how well the population is connected.

Herpetologist Dan Fogell, a science instructor at Southeast Community College in Lincoln, conducted a presence-absence survey of the species that ended in fall 2021. The project took him to 427 sites in the Platte, Elkhorn and Loup valleys where he became proficient at looking through spotting scopes and binoculars and differentiating the heads of Blanding's turtles from painted turtles and other species.

He found the distribution to be continuous along the Niobrara River between Valentine and the community of Niobrara. He also found them to be present in the Elkhorn

and Loup valleys. The research confirmed that Blanding's turtles were present at locales of many previous sightings, but he also found them residing at more than 30 new sites.

"They are conspicuously absent along the Platte River between North Platte and the confluence with the Loup River," Fogell said. "There are a lot of places that they should be, but they aren't there."

He spotted the most turtles of any one location, 11, at Memphis Lake State Recreation Area between Lincoln and Omaha.

Oddly, he said, a couple of Blanding's turtles have been reported way out west in the Chadron vicinity, and one near Fort Robinson State Park, in the past decade. Whether they arrived there naturally, or if someone moved them there, is unknown.

Tests indicated that a Blanding's turtle found roaming near Scottsbluff in 2017 had previously been kept as a pet. It is now living at the Wildcat Hills Nature Center near Gering.

"It's not unlikely that they could expand to the west," Fogell said. "They're a lot more tolerant to the changes in climate that we're experiencing and will continue to experience. It's expected that their numbers will increase and the distribution will expand as a result of climate change."

If they are expanding west toward other "real estate," it will only solidify Nebraska's claim as Blanding's turtle capital of the world. Let's just hope they take roads less traveled in the process. 



A young and old turtle await processing. Note that the old turtle sustained an injury to its left eye sometime during its many years on the refuge.

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Spring is here — how will you spend it? You could be exploring the woods in search of morels, casting for crappie, hunting turkey or attending a fun outdoors event. [N](#)



Youth shotgun turkey season

April 9 – May 31
Statewide

Share an unforgettable hunting adventure with a young person: Be there for the opener of the youth shotgun turkey season on April 9. With high hunter success rates, turkeys in every county, and \$8 youth permits for both residents and nonresidents, Nebraska has lots of opportunities for hunters of all ages.

JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND



Morel mushroom hunting

Season typically begins mid- to late April | Statewide in woodlands

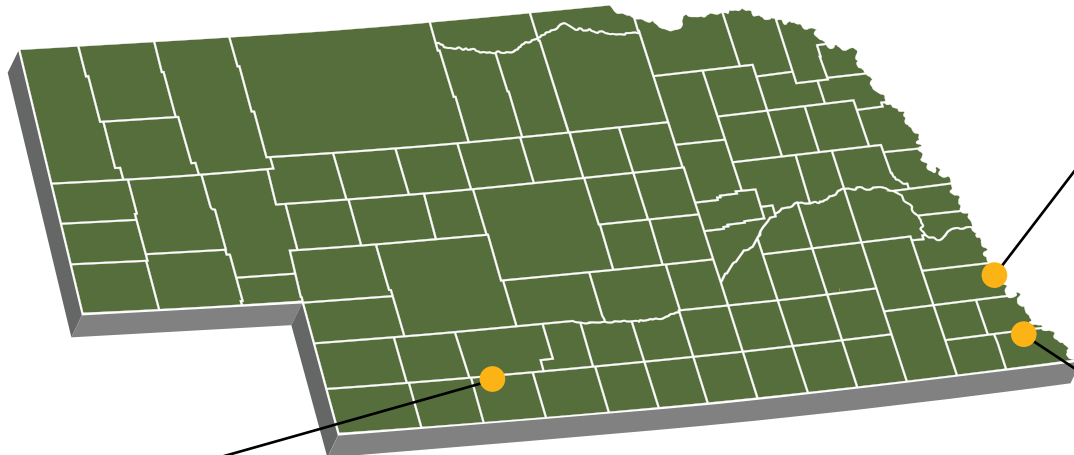
Foraging for morels is a great way to spend a spring day. Morels tend to be fickle, but they often emerge on warm, sunny days following spring rains, and can be found in both moist floodplain and upland woodlands. Look for them at the base of cottonwoods and elms that have recently died. DOUG CARROLL, NEBRASKALAND



Celebrate at Arbor Lodge State Historical Park

April 29 | Nebraska City

Take a trip back in time to where Arbor Day first began. Tour the beautiful mansion home of Arbor Day founder J. Sterling Morton, featuring authentic furnishings and displays that capture the life and times of the Morton family. Stay tuned to [Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov](#) for details on special Arbor Day events at the mansion. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



Fish for crappie at Red Willow State Recreation Area

As weather allows | McCook, Nebraska

Crappie populations at Red Willow are booming right now, and spring is one of the best times of year to fish for them. The lake offers prime crappie habitat, with plenty of vegetation to attract fish. Pick a nice day to go out: Fish will be seeking warmth in shallower areas, and they'll retreat during a cold snap or spring snowstorm. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Outdoor Adventure event at Indian Cave State Park

April 23 | Shubert, Nebraska

This popular event returns for its 11th year, featuring a mushroom hunting contest, 5K or 1-mile run, fish fry, black powder gun demonstration and history reenactments. There are plenty of hands-on activities as well, including archery, kayaking, a fish touch tank and Dutch-oven cooking demonstrations. Learn more at [Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov](#).

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Conestoga

A Model Lake

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

Conestoga Lake is a peaceful retreat. But it's not as quiet as it used to be. That's what happens whenever improvements are made to a fishery near Nebraska's capital city. And the improvements made to Conestoga were many.

Larry Czolgos of Lincoln fishes from a kayak on a foggy morning at Conestoga State Recreation Area.



Located south of Emerald, Conestoga State Recreation Area is one of 11 Salt Valley Lakes built around Lincoln in the 1960s and 1970s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The dam on Holmes Creek that created the reservoir was completed in 1963. The 230-acres lake and 486 acres of land around it were leased to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in 1965.

Like the rest of the lakes in the area, it was an excellent fishery when it was new, and a popular camping spot. But time took its toll on the lake and sediment inflows from the watershed and shoreline erosion, caused by wind-driven waves, powerboating and ice, had consumed one-third of its original volume. Water quality declined, algae blooms were common, and the amount of lake capable of supporting fish had declined. Considering carp and gizzard shad made up most of the fish population in the lake, anglers had little reason to visit. Some campers still did, enjoying a new RV campground built in 1999. And speed boats and jet skis still zoomed around the surface. But many found other places to go.

Enter the Commission’s Aquatic Habitat Program. The lake was lowered in 2014 and work on the \$8.6 million project, the biggest in the program’s 25-year history, began in 2016 and was completed in 2018. The lake was deepened, and structure was added to attract and support fish. What anglers and campers see, however, are the numerous features built to improve fishing access and protect the shoreline.

A new kayak launch includes a wheelchair accessible dock equipped with a transfer system that allows people to easily get in and out of their crafts. They can then slide down ramps into the water and, after a paddle, pull themselves back onto the dock with handrails. The launch is equally popular with children, seniors, and anyone else who wants to hit the water without ever getting their feet wet.



An angler fishes from one of the new breakwaters built to protect a bay and a new boat ramp in the northeastern corner of Conestoga Lake. Two fishing decks are found on the opposite breakwater.

Breakwaters protect a bay on the lake’s north shore from southerly winds. In the bay, there is a new two-lane boat ramp with a wheelchair-accessible dock which replaces the single lane ramp that was located in the main arm. A mooring dock, with room for 12 boats, gives people a place to park while heading back to camp for lunch. It is also wheelchair accessible, as is a kayak launch on the other end of the bay.

One of two fishing decks on the main breakwater on that bay and two fishing pads next to it are wheelchair accessible. There are 12 other fishing pads and points spread around the lake to get anglers closer to deep water. Access trails lead to two other fishing breakwaters on the lake, including one on the south side near a new parking lot and latrine.

The Angler Access Program, an offshoot of the Aquatic Habitat Program begun in 2010, paid for these access features, contributing \$1.2 million of the overall cost of the work at Conestoga.

One of those trails also leads to a wildlife viewing deck on the sediment dam in the upper end of the main arm of the lake. Grants from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and the Department of Environment and Energy paid for the deck and much of the wetland work done above the dam. The wetlands and the stream that flows through the wildlife management area that covers 396 acres mostly west and south of the lake attract thousands of migrating ducks and geese in the spring and fall. The entire lake and WMA are designated as a waterfowl refuge, so those birds can’t be hunted, but hunters do enjoy pursuing white-tailed deer, pheasants, quail and small game on the area.

And there are plenty of fish. Last year, anglers were already catching 10-inch crappies. This year, they will be catching 8-inch bluegills. And there will be plenty of 15-inch largemouth bass to bend a pole, and a few walleyes and catfish that have reached keeper-sized proportions.

The main area on the north side of the lake offers 25



The sun rises over Conestoga Lake on a fall morning.



Evelyn McArthur and Raven Trejo blast R.J. Trejo with water cannons while playing in the yard next to the RV campground. The kids were three of several from Sprouts Child Development Center in Lincoln on a campout hosted by staff.

camping pads with electrical hookups and eight more without electricity. There are another 24 designated campsites without electricity for tent campers. Eight of those tent sites and a day-use area are next to the lake, new fishing pads, and a 100-yard-long sidewalk that sits above water that is 3 feet deep and within casting distance of brush and tree piles that attract fish.

Anglers are already flocking to the lake, some throwing spinnerbaits from their boat searching for bass and others content to watch from shore and wait for a panfish to pull their bobber under. “There are always people there, any time, even in the rain,” said Jay Woltemath, who manages the Commission’s parks on the Salt Valley Lakes. “It’s an outstanding place to take little kids with Barbie poles for bluegill fishing. I had two of my own grandkids catch their first fish there last summer.”

The trees planted around those RV campsites that were added in 1999 have now grown up to offer plenty of shade. None can be reserved. Visitors can no longer water ski at Conestoga: a 5 mph speed limit was imposed to reduce wave erosion and protect the investment. Still, the improved fishing and other opportunities the lake offers has made the



Taylor Spickelmier of Lincoln holds up a green sunfish she caught while fishing with her brother, Jarrett, and grandfather, Pat Leichter of Harvard.

campsites more popular than ever.

“If you want to get in there you’d better not wait until Friday,” Woltemath said.

That’s what happens when the Aquatic Habitat Program breathes new life into aging waters. [N](#)

An Anniversary Celebration

- 25th Anniversary, Aquatic Habitat Program
- June 18, 3-7 p.m., Conestoga SRA
- Activities: Fishing, bowfishing, kayaking, boat tours, educational booths and food trucks.
- Projects complete:172
- Dollars Spent: \$90 million from Aquatic Habitat Stamp, Federal Sport Fish Restoration Program and other sources.

Aquatic Habitat Program

Flood control reservoirs aren't expected to last forever. Rivers and streams inherently carry sediment from the watershed. Banks erode, adding more sediment. Many are expected to fill in just 100 years.

Conestoga Lake was no exception. Completed in 1963, it had lost one-third of its original storage capacity of 2,400 acre feet to sedimentation by 2013. The maximum depth had dropped from more than 20 feet to 16. The west half of the reservoir was less than 6 feet deep, and much of the lake was 2 feet deep or less.

"Shallow, muddy, full of carp and gizzard shad and powerboaters," is how Jeff Jackson, head of the Commission's Aquatic Habitat Program, described the lake.

"Essentially it was a mud bowl," said Aaron Blank, southeast district fisheries manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Fast forward to today, and you will find a lake full of fish that is already attracting anglers in droves thanks to an \$8.5 million Aquatic Habitat and Angler Access Program project that began in 2014 and was completed in 2018.

Most of the work involved addressing the number one problem: sediment. With little deep water remaining, and no aquatic vegetation growing in the shallows, there wasn't much habitat left for fish. Additionally, the sediment also contained nitrogen, phosphorus and other nutrients washed from farm fields that fueled large algae blooms. "It was probably nearing the end of its life expectancy as far as recreation sport fishery at that point," Jackson said.

Roughly 600,000 cubic yards of muck, enough to fill three-fourths of the bowl of Memorial Stadium, was scooped from the lakebed. Most of the sediment was removed from the bays on the north side of the lake and the perimeter of the main arm, increasing the depth of water within casting distance of where most bank anglers fish to 10 to 12 feet.

Keeping sediment out of the lake and protecting the shoreline was the second priority. The Commission had built two-stage sediment traps in reservoirs it had previously rehabilitated. At Conestoga, they added a third, creating three fingers that come from opposite banks that Holmes Creek snakes around before reaching the

main sediment dike. This shallow area also forms a wetland that is being colonized with cattails, bulrushes and an assortment of native pond weeds and smartweed that filter sediment and provide food for migrating waterfowl. Along the creek in the wildlife area above the reservoir, three wetlands were dug and the bank notched to allow the stream to spread out, slow and drop more sediment before it reaches the lake.

Smaller sediment traps were built on two smaller, intermittent streams that flow into the lake from the north. The reservoir had already lost some of its surface area, and the sediment basins took more, reducing its size to 160 acres, a worthwhile loss to maintain water quality. The lake's outlet was modified to allow the lake to be lowered to remove the silt that will one day fill in the basins, rather than the lake, a process currently underway at Wagon Train and Summit lakes, sites of previous Aquatic Habitat projects.

Nearly all of the shoreline is now protected from wind-driven waves by breakwaters or riprap, addressing the other source of sediment. "Offshore breakwaters create a calmer environment for more wetland species to get established and they do function really well," said Jackson.

Hundreds of trees had to be removed to build the structures and reshape the lake's shoreline. Most were moved to the lakebed to create fish habitat. Some were cut and stacked like Lincoln logs. Another 400 eastern red cedar trees were cut and hauled in from the wildlife area.

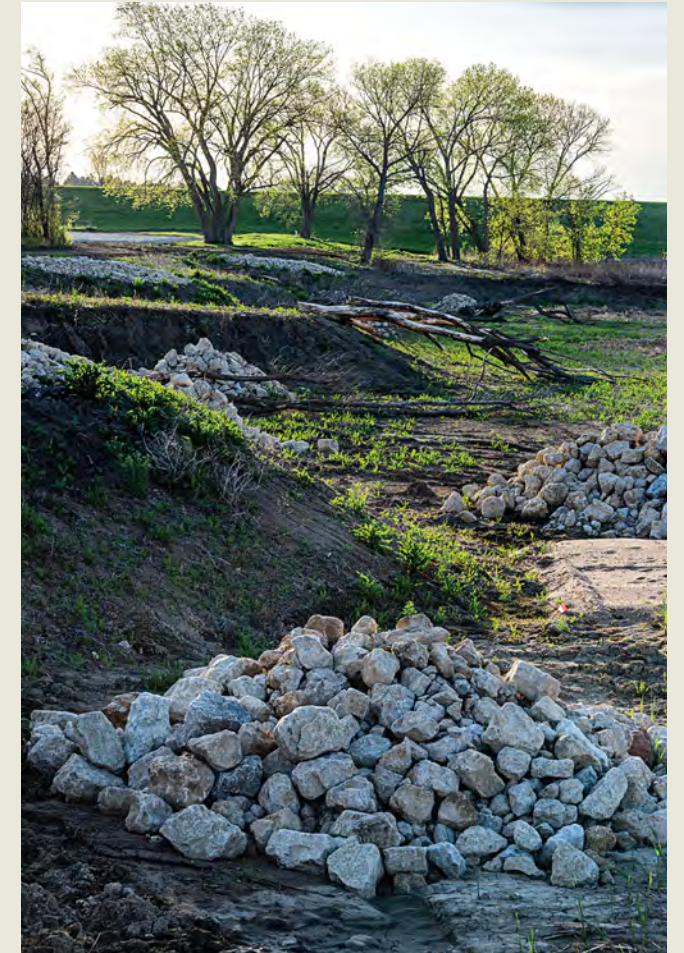
There are also now a dozen underwater islands or shoals dotting the lakebed. Some were built with old riprap that had lined shorelines, others with rock that was hauled in specifically for that purpose. Some were built with soil and topped with rocks, trees or gravel.

"If you add up the rock piles and trees, I know you're well over 500 or 600 structures in there," Jackson added.

All of that structure will attract fish. "They like protection," Jackson said. "Small fish will congregate around them. You'll certainly get some bass around those, and the crappies orient around those things also."

The number of angler hours fell to 18,000 per year by 2012, half of what it had been 20 years earlier. Based on what they've seen following other projects on the Salt Valley Lakes, biologists expect that number to quadruple soon.

As has been the case with other projects, the 417,000 fish stocked since the fall of 2018 are growing fast. The lake received the usual dose of



Rock piles, gravel beds, trees and other fish habitat added to Conestoga are now covered with 10 feet of water within casting distance of the fishing points built in the bay in the lake's northwest corner.

largemouth bass, channel catfish, bluegills and crappies added to eastern Nebraska lakes. But biologists also added redear sunfish, rock bass, walleyes and, last fall, 1,150 17-inch tiger muskies.

Walleye and bass have reached 15 inches, crappies 10 inches and bluegills 8 inches. "The fishery has taken off," Blank said, "and angler catch rates were high last spring. I would expect the crappie and bluegill fishing to be good out there this year. I don't see any reason it wouldn't be."

In all, the project is showcasing what commission biologists and the engineers they work with have learned during the first 25 years of the Aquatic Habitat Program.

"This is the biggest aquatic habitat project that we've ever undertaken," Jackson said. "We tried to create a balance between access and habitat improvements."

"If you go to Conestoga, you say, 'They did a lot of things here.' I think there's some balance here. You can't just do everything under the water."

But boy did they.



A three stage sediment trap in the upper end of the reservoir will keep silt out of the lake and maintain water quality, and also created wetland habitat for ducks, geese and shorebirds.

From High-Wheel to Safety Bicycle

By David L. Bristow, History Nebraska

Nebraskans participated eagerly in the bicycle craze of the 1890s, which began when the new “Safety” bicycle became widely available.

Why was it called this? With a chain drive and two wheels of equal size, the new bicycles kept the rider close to the ground, no longer perched atop the high-wheel bicycles of the 1870s and 1880s.

The high-wheel bicycle, shown below, was built by the



A resident of Osceola, Nebraska, owned this high-wheel bicycle circa 1886-1895. History Nebraska 3197.

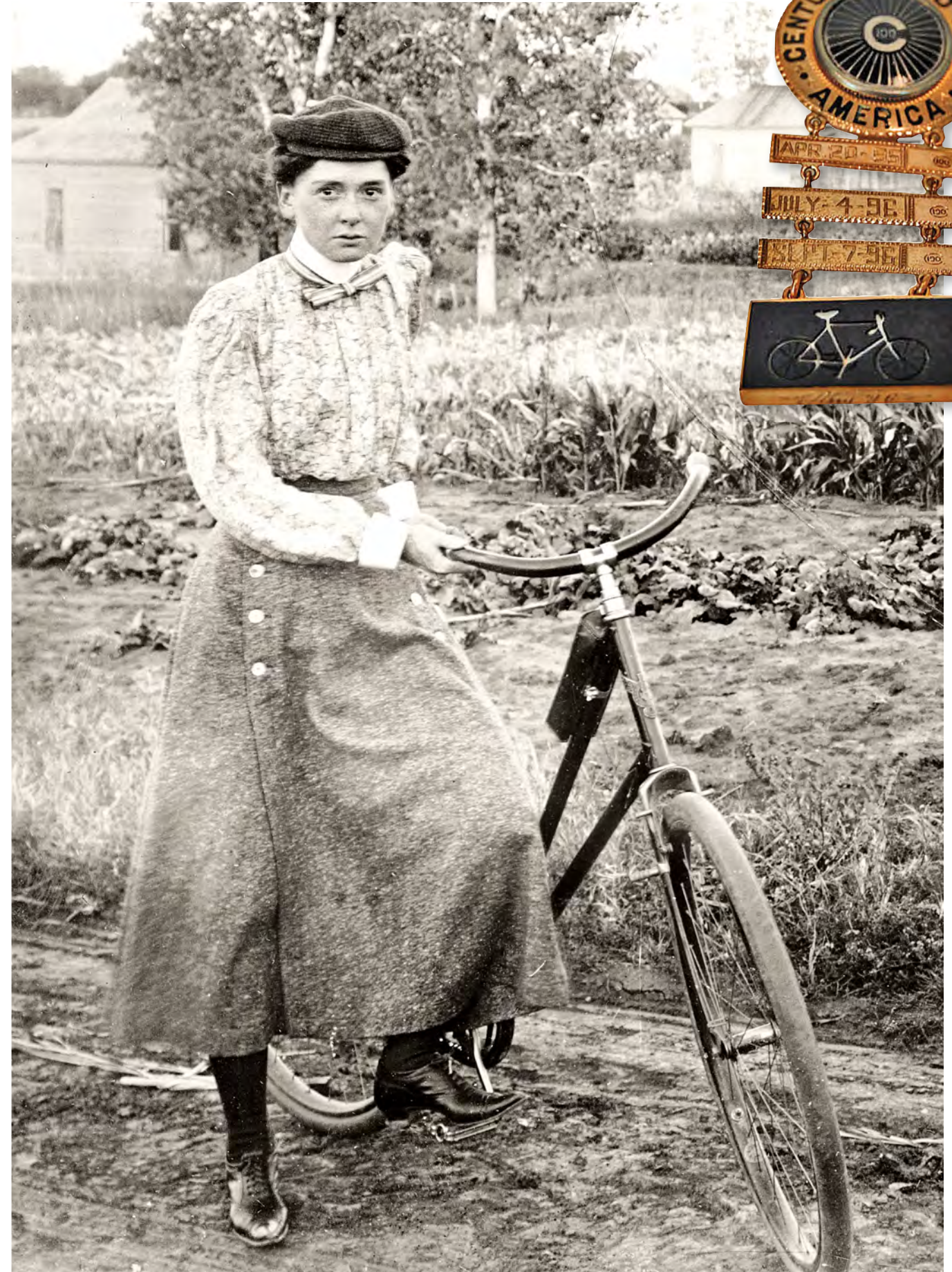


To modern bicyclists, the bike's leather seat looks familiar but the handlebars seem odd.



The bike has a kerosene lantern for riding after dark. Such low placement better illuminated the road.

Right: Louise Pound with her first bicycle, circa 1895. Pound went on to a noteworthy career as a linguist and folklorist at the University of Nebraska. History Nebraska RG909-10-6. Far right: Louise Pound's century pin. History Nebraska 7134-30



Overman Wheel Company of Suffolk, Massachusetts, and used by Ernest Peterson of Osceola, Nebraska, circa 1886-1895. It has solid rubber tires, a leather seat mounted on springs, wooden grips on the handlebars and even a little kerosene lantern between the spokes. A lever on the handlebars operates a spoon-shaped brake on the wheel. But don't brake too hard — you'll tumble over the handlebars!

Would you ride such a bike? Would you race one on a crowded indoor track? An Omaha woman named Lillie Williams did so professionally starting in 1889. She and



A CHAMPION FEMALE BICYCLIST.
MISS LILLIE WILLIAMS, OF OMAHA, PADDY FALLON'S SWIFT TWO-WHEELED
SCOOTER OF THE GREAT NORTHWEST.

Lillie Williams in the National Police Gazette, May 18, 1889.

16 SUNDAY MORNING—ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH—DECEMBER 5, 1897.

BICYCLE RACING TRANSFORMS LOVELY WOMAN FROM A PALE BEAUTY INTO A PERFECT FRIGHT.

*Dr. George L. Kearney and Mrs. Frazer Deprecate
the Practice of Bicycle Riding as a
Profession for Girls.*

*The Women Themselves Admit That They Will Break
Down, but They Are Determined to Race
for the Money They Win.*

TILLIE ANDERSON DOTTY DAYTON FARNSWORTH LIZZIE GLAW LILLIE WILLIAMS IDA PETERSON

THE GIRLS AT THE FINISH OF THE SIX DAYS BICYCLE RACE IN THE COLISEUM.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Dec. 5, 1897.

other racers switched to Safety bicycles within a few years, but women's professional sports remained controversial. An 1897 illustration from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch shows one of their opponents' biggest concerns. (Williams is second from right.)

Williams excelled as a multi-sport athlete during her long professional career, competing in bicycle and motorcycle racing, swimming, fencing, horsemanship, rowing and shooting. She even raised fine show animals. After moving to Los Angeles, she made headlines when in 1912 she applied —

unsuccessfully — to join the police department's motorcycle squad.

Back in Nebraska, meanwhile, both men and women joined bicycling clubs. Some bicyclists rode tremendous distances on the dirt roads of the day. Have you ever done a century ride? That's 100 miles on a bicycle in a single day. Louise Pound of Lincoln completed three such rides along dirt roads on a heavy, single-speed bike in 1895-96.

Like Williams, Pound was a talented multi-sport athlete — she twice won the men's tennis tournament at the University

of Nebraska — but she was far from the only Nebraskan riding long distances for fun. In fact, bicycling was so popular that it led to a movement to improve the condition of rural roads. The Good Roads movement began in the 1890s as an alliance of bicyclists and farmers who wanted better farm-to-market roads for their wagons. Only later did the movement's focus shift to the needs of the growing number of automobile drivers. [N](#)

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

Wildlife Habitat from the Bottom Up

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

Billy Chromy is a big picture kind of guy when it comes to wildlife habitat.

That likely comes from his background, which includes growing up on his family's farm in the hills near Linwood, and working as a conservation technician, game warden and park ranger before returning home,

where he now farms with his father and is also a contractor who helps landowners implement conservation practices on their land.

An avid hunter, Chromy has been managing the woodlands, pasture and croplands on their farm with white-tailed deer in mind. To improve things for deer, he manages the



Billy Chromy stands beneath a tree he hinged and toppled into a stream on his family's farm in Butler County as part of a NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program project to add woody debris and increase aquatic life.



An American bullfrog rests on a log in a pool that formed above debris deposited in the stream by Chromy.

ground for quail.

"The white-tailed deer, he can live anywhere," Chromy said. "He's proven that he's adaptable. I didn't say he will thrive anywhere, but if we can grow our property for quail, you have 10 times the minimum for what the white-tailed deer needs."

With that kind of thinking, it's no surprise that Chromy is enrolled in many programs offered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, including one that might be considered an oddity: placing woody debris in a stream to improve habitat

for aquatic insects, amphibians and other creatures. He is one of just five Nebraska landowners enrolled in the practice through the Conservation Stewardship Program, and the only one outside of the Panhandle, where work typically involves a trout stream.

Chromy removed overabundant hackberry, elm, ash and eastern red cedar trees while leaving oaks and walnuts. He "hinged" some larger trees along the creek, cutting them halfway and then pushing the top into the stream while leaving it attached to the stump, insuring they wouldn't wash

away. Others were placed directly in the stream. With more sunlight hitting the ground and less competition, he is seeing oak regeneration and a flush of grasses and forbs.

Chromy said aside from dry years, the small spring-fed stream flows year-round on its way to the Platte River Valley. It also carries surface runoff and catches some sediment from farm fields, but not as much as it did before they implemented no-till farming practices on the farm 15 or 20 years ago. "It was just kind of existing and not thriving," he said.

Adding the woody debris will provide a spark to the aquatic food chain from the bottom up. It will slow flows and create pools above the debris and scour holes under and below. Algae on the wood will feed macroinvertebrates and the wood will provide habitat for insects, all of which will feed amphibians and crayfish.

"The nice thing there is you add crawdads or other water-based species," Chromy said. "That way the raccoon isn't always raiding nests, because he's got other stuff to eat as well.



Walk along Chromy’s stream and turn over wood and you can find a variety of aquatic life. Pictured clockwise from top-left are: water strider, leech, mayfly larvae and millipedes.

“So then an added benefit was the fact that it was mature forest all the way around the stream, and by taking these trees down and hinging them into the water, it opened up a ton of diversity for more wildlife species outside of just the aquatic side.”

The project paired well with other habitat work he was doing in the woodlands above the stream. There,

he cleared a solid stand of cedars from beneath a stand of oaks to restore a savannah. He was able to place most of the trees in the stream rather than piling it and later burning it.

“I got three things accomplished for one area,” he said.

He can now find 30 species of grasses, forbs and shrubs growing where there were only cedars, all of

which can feed deer throughout the year, especially when leftover grain in crop fields is covered in snow. And he regularly finds deer bedded in the regrowth, including the Boone & Crockett-class bucks he’s managing the property for.

Chromy and his father are enrolled in several other CSP practices, as well as more in the Environmental

Quality Incentive Program. They plant cover crops, manage their grazing to promote warm-season plants, plant trees and shrubs, created grassed buffer strips and waterways, and have created pollinator habitat, all while continuing to farm.

“There’s a place where they can definitely coexist and you can make a better living at your profession at

the deer and the quail and turkeys and pheasants and bugs can make a better living at their profession,” Chromy said, touting the benefits of the program and his desire to see more people involved for the sake of wildlife and not one of his jobs.

“I’m a contractor by design. I do this for a living elsewhere, habitat improvement ag land restoration. So

it’s self-fulfilling because of what I do for a living.

“But 60 to 70 percent of the people I contact about stuff don’t know that they could be getting funding to go to the project. Build your property for the least common denominator. Fill in the lesser species and everything else will come. The biggest thing is do something.”

Conservation Stewardship Program

Since it was launched as a pilot program in 2004, the Conservation Stewardship Program has grown into the largest conservation program for working lands offered by the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The program offers 87 different practices and another 167 enhancements to those practices. While many are focused on improving crop and grazing land, it also has offerings that provide financial assistance to help landowners or managers create or improve wildlife habitat. Those practices include: planting trees, shrubs, cover, food or pollinator habitat; conducting prescribed burns; establishing wildlife corridors; leaving grain standing; managing woodlands to promote oak regeneration or ponds for fish; changing harvest practices to benefit wildlife; and building wildlife-friendly fences.

“It’s like almost anything under the sun can be done,” said Eric Zach, Farm Bill Program manager with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

In Nebraska, there are currently 1,361 active CSP contracts covering nearly 3 million acres — twice as many acres as are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program in the state. With higher crop prices, landowners have been hesitant to tie up ground in 10 or 15 year contracts, and enrollment in traditional CRP practices has been on the decline for more than a decade. In 2021, there were just 22.1 million acres enrolled nationally, well below the 25.5 million acre cap. The latest general signup period ended in March. Grassland CRP signup runs through May 13.

Zach said CSP, which is open for continuous signup, is helping make up the difference in declining CRP acres, and that there is plenty of room for growth.

“There’s a lot of potential,” Zach said. “It’s just getting the word out and getting landowners to understand that opportunities exist beyond CRP to create wildlife habitat.”

“This is a voluntary, incentive-based conservation program. It’s totally up to the landowner. It’s all about what we can do to help the landowner with wildlife resources.”

To learn more about the Conservation Stewardship Program or other opportunities offered by the FSA, contact your local NRCS office and ask to speak to a Farm Bill Biologist. These individuals work one-on-one with landowners under a unique partnership between Game and Parks, the NRCS and Pheasants Forever.

Rarer Than a Three-Spurred Rooster

By Cassidy Wessel, Wildlife Biologist

I can remember the first rooster pheasant I ever held as a kid, standing over the trash can in our garage helping my dad clean birds and thinking that this brown, purple, blue, red and green iridescent thing might just be too pretty to pluck. And I'm sure I did think "pluck" — skinning a bird at that time would have been completely foreign to me. Pheasants were rare table fare.

Being the fifth generation in a town in eastern Nebraska where the Platte and Loup rivers meet, our family first and foremost hunted ducks. Sure, we'd sit in the deer stand once in a while. And we might abandon the duck blind now and again to walk a weedy towhead and answer the taunt of a ringneck crowing across the channel on a bluebird day. But until I took a job as a Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist in northeastern Nebraska at age 23, the only thing I could have told you about pheasant hunting was that hunters wore bright orange and had to walk through the field in a line.

Birds of a Different Feather

As duck hunters coming of age in the early 2000s, my siblings and I were reaping the benefits of the conservation efforts of generations before us. Regulated harvest, management and international

cooperation to benefit migratory waterfowl had begun with the landmark passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918. When the droughts of the "Dirty Thirties" helped underline that science-driven habitat management and protection were an essential part of the equation, we got the Federal Duck Stamp, the expansion of National Wildlife Refuges and Ducks Unlimited. Waterfowl management and habitat development and protection picked up again after World War II and have gained momentum since.

By the time I was old enough to shoulder my grandpa's old .410, the only thing most Platte River duck hunters felt they really needed to do was buy their duck stamps and permits every year, spend some money at the DU banquet, pick a good spot for the blind and get the decoys ready to go. Every fall, when the weather turned, ducks and geese would show up from some magical place up north.

Pheasant hunting, however, has a far different backstory. Pheasants aren't magically created in a far-off place and delivered to us on a cold north wind. Pheasants are homegrown, intimately tied to how economy, policy and technology shape the landscape right here in our own neighborhood. We don't get to share

the load with other places, as is the case with waterfowl: letting Canada, Alaska and the Dakotas handle nesting and brood-rearing, while the southern United States and northern Mexico handle wintering needs. The average home range of a pheasant is 1.5 square miles, so places where people want pheasants need to have it all.

The Good Old Days

In my 12 years of learning to become a pheasant hunter, early lessons included opportunities to hunt over pointing dogs, how and where to look for birds in different types of weather, and the value of good boots and wearing something just a little thicker than plain old jeans. I also learned that in many ways, pheasant hunters were a lot like the duck hunters I had grown up with — there was the passion and dedication, the appreciation of camaraderie and tradition, and sharing good stories and memories. Of course, a day with lots of action never hurt.

In some ways, pheasant hunting was duck hunting flipped on its head. Where I had grown up listening to stories of scarcity in the old days of waterfowl hunting — of waiting all morning, morning after morning, and being excited just to see a flock or a Canada goose fly that stretch of river for the first time — pheasant hunters' stories of the "good old days"



JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



The Goc family first and foremost hunted ducks. The author (right), age 11 or 12, hunting waterfowl on the Platte River with her father Tom, little brother Colton, family friend Terry Kostinec and springer spaniel Wiley circa 1998.

COURTESY TOM GOC

had birds boiling out of Soil Bank fields by the hundreds in the 1960s. When Conservation Reserve Program enrollment peaked in the mid-1990s, everyone remembers the big hunter breakfasts and town fundraisers on opening weekend and, if you didn't have your limit by noon on the first day, then "Buddy, your gun barrel must be bent."

Most people age 60 or older can remember a time when eastern Nebraska still grew wheat, oats and other small grains, and grass pastures were more common. Most people age 40 and older can recall the time before weeds in ag fields were controlled with chemicals. Today's landscape is different. Without small grains in cropping rotations, we lose nesting potential, and without weeds, high quality brood-rearing areas are fewer and farther between.

CRP and Bird Numbers

Before we lost these landscape features, all we had to do was add winter cover to meet the birds'

survival needs. Furthermore, we could also create places where we knew birds would want to be throughout the hunting season. In today's landscape, our responsibilities have grown from simply getting birds through the winter. Today, we also need to provide places for hens to be productive nesters and places where broods can successfully forage for insects. And we have to do all of it on far fewer acres.

The Conservation Reserve Program, initially created in the 1985 Farm Bill to reduce soil erosion, has always been a great tool to put winter cover on the landscape. CRP has since adopted wildlife benefit as one of its program objectives, and many of today's enrollments are tailored toward providing quality habitats. In Nebraska, starting in 2008, a special CRP practice called State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) was designed to meet all the life cycle



A young-of-the-year ring-necked pheasant near a cornfield in Scotts Bluff County.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



From left to right: The author Cassidy Wessel, brother Colton Goc, father Tom Goc and brother Rogan Goc. This photo was taken after the family's last hunt of the 2021-2022 pheasant season on CRP. COURTESY TOM GOC

needs of upland game birds: nesting, brood rearing and winter cover. However, asking one piece of land to do three jobs takes intentional design and heightened management effort.

All these challenges combined made for a discouraging group rhetoric when I was starting to learn how to be a pheasant hunter:

"We have no pheasants, and we have no habitat!"

"If I want to have a good day pheasant hunting, I just cross the river and spend it in South Dakota!"

Focus on Pheasants

Then, in 2014, there was a twist in the story. CRP experienced an increase in annual per acre payments at about the time commodity prices were dropping. This, combined with good incentives for establishment made CRP

SAFE acres a popular option. Between 2015-2017, landowners enrolled or re-enrolled over 20,500 acres in three of the same counties that had recorded some of the highest rates of grassland loss in the nation from 2009-2012. Clusters of habitat began to pop up on the landscape, and all of a sudden, learning to be a pheasant hunter became a whole new ball game.

The timing of increased interest in CRP enrollments was good. In response to hunter concerns, many state agencies poured resources into improving pheasant habitat through a number of named initiatives. The Focus on Pheasants Initiative in Nebraska soon morphed into our statewide Berggren Pheasant Plan, and biologists had financial resources to incentivize greater management efforts on private land. At the same time, Pheasants

Forever celebrated its 30th birthday in the midst of unprecedented organizational growth by adding more biologist positions. With more CRP available, many landowners chose to allow public walk-in hunting access for an additional payment.

As a result, my experiences in the field were no longer mirroring what people had been telling me. We suddenly had birds to pursue and places to pursue them. For the last few years, it's a rare day when we decide to go walk for a few hours and don't come home with dinner. On the days we don't, I'm pretty sure it's because my gun barrel must have been bent.

New Chapter

In this new chapter of learning to become a pheasant hunter, I find myself gravitating toward places



Rooster ring-necked pheasant in a tree in Scotts Bluff County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

where hunters who spend the most time talking about the glory days would walk on by.

“Look at that fence line!” a hunter once told me on opening day. “I’ve been doing this since I was 10 years old, and now I’m 60, and if there was a bird in this whole country, it would have been sitting right there! I’ve been walking all morning, and I haven’t seen a thing. There’s just no birds here!”

I didn’t have the heart to tell that hunter that a mile away, the last group of hunters I had interviewed all had birds in hand; they had seen at least 40 roosters, and that field didn’t look anything like his fence line. This hunter isn’t the only person who has a hard time believing there are birds to be found.

And yet, with intentional habitat placement, good design and active

management, we see glimmers of hope.

Last Hunt of the Season

On the last Sunday of the 2021-2022 pheasant season, I joined a few family and friends for a year-end hunt in an area where significant effort had been put into habitat development and management during the first round of the Berggren Pheasant Plan. It was hot, almost 50 degrees Fahrenheit, and there was definitely no snow. When I showed up at 12:30 p.m., the four people who had walked the first field already had five birds between them. The landowner, a friend of his, and I made seven of us for this next walk.

We walked the high-diversity CRP and saw lots of roosts, but only bumped a few birds — all too far out ahead of us to take a shot. Next, we walked some

newly seeded CRP, a long narrow piece along a draw, and again, lots of sign, but no birds. Our final option was about 10 acres of CRP, so new that the perennial grasses had not yet begun to establish. The 10-foot-tall annual weeds were so thick that in some places, you had to get a running start to make it through. As we rounded the south end, it thinned out a bit, and the dogs’ tails started doing helicopter whirls.

One rooster got up — “bang, bang!” The landowner made a great shot and 30 more pheasants rose into the sky. They flew to the north, too far for most of us to take a poke, but a few coasted toward our blockers at the top of the hill. I heard gunshots and another bird fell from the sky.

“Who shot grandpa?” my husband, Scott, joked when we all got back to the truck and lined up the birds on the

Berggren Pheasant Plan 2.0

Nebraska Game and Parks Commissioners recently approved the Berggren Pheasant Plan 2.0, which gives biologists and landowners another five years to partner toward efforts of habitat management and creation. Lower CRP rental rates will make it tougher for farmers to dedicate additional acres to habitat, but in a new research effort with the University of Nebraska, Game and Parks will gain an even better understanding of creating functional habitat complexes for sustainable pheasant hunting in eastern Nebraska. If we can learn to identify those places better, there could be a lot of complexes just waiting to be created. But it’s important that this knowledge is shared beyond just biologists. Just like the sportsmen who advocated for the conservation actions that made a difference for waterfowl

decades ago, we upland hunters also have a job to do.

The CRP fields we walked for our last hunt of the season were intentionally built and intentionally managed with assistance from the Farm Service Agency’s CRP program, Game and Park’s Berggren Pheasant Plan, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Pheasants Forever and neighboring landowners who had common conservation interests.

How many more places like this can we create? Not just for pheasants and pheasant hunters, but for all wildlife — grassland birds, butterflies, mammals and reptiles — that also need these places to exist.

Learn more about Berggren Pheasant Plan 2.0 or check out public access pheasant hunting locations at OutdoorNebraska.org/PheasantPlan/.

tailgate. As we gathered in to have a look at the 23-inch tail feathers, someone else said, “Wow, look at those spurs! That bird has triple spurs!”

Pheasant hunters perhaps aren’t as religious in their communications as duck hunters with morning flight reports, but news spreads quickly, nonetheless.

“Three spurs? Not likely possible. In 50 years, I’ve never seen it,” was at least one of the replies from long-time pheasant hunter friends.

We hunted one more field that day and put two more birds in the bag. As we lined up birds, people and dogs for the end-of-the-day photo, my dad said, “You know, I spent three days in South Dakota earlier this month, but the hunting was nothing like this. Who’d have thought one of my best hunts of the year would be right here in eastern Nebraska?”

I’ve spent a lot of time over the last 12 years talking to pheasant hunters, first with Pheasants Forever and now as a Nebraska Game and Parks biologist. That comment, right there, has been a long time coming. I’ll bet it has to be rarer than a three-spurred rooster. 



When lining up pheasants on the truck tailgate after the last hunt of the 2021-2022 season, the hunters noticed a rooster with three spurs on one of its feet.

COURTESY TOM GOC

How to Tell a Story

Remembering Dick Turpin

Edited by Nebraskaland Staff

Calling Dick Turpin a hunter education coordinator, turkey call maker, conservation officer, entertainer, songwriter or any of his other titles fails to describe who he was — a person who made you feel good when he was around. Regardless of what hat Turpin was wearing when you met, you would forever remember one of his greatest gifts was that of a storyteller. Long-time staffers at *Nebraskaland* agree that while PG-rated Dick Turpin stories were good, his R-rated tales were the best.

A master of language and creativity, Turpin displayed his extensive outdoor experience with his Turpin Time videos from 2004-2010.

While we'll never be able to do justice to how well Turpin could tell a story, we can pass along some of our favorite tips from his Turpin Time video segments about a subject he remained passionate about his entire life — the Nebraska outdoors. *See more at NebraskalandMagazine.com.*

Spoon Lures

While I was cleaning my camping gear awhile back and shining up the silverware, I got to thinking how those silver-plated spoons would make good fishing lures. So I took some of them



Dick Turpin

home, and I drilled holes in the ends so I could hook my line in and of course, my hook. And then I took a grinder, took the spoon handle off, and I ground that smooth, and I narrowed it up so it made a little more of a spoon shape like the commercial fishing lures — like a Daredevil or something like that.

After I put the split ring and the hook in the end ... boy, they made a terrific spoon lure that really flashed in the

water when you cleaned up that silver.

I got to thinking with all the grandkids I have and them throwing those 3- to 5-dollar lures out and snagging them up, that homemade lures was a more economical approach to teaching kids how to fish. You could sit down and make 50 of these so fast it would make your head swim.

I got some fishing buddies who tell me: "Sometimes you've got to spoon feed those bass." So that's what I do.

Save That Safety Pin

If you're one of those fishermen who has a little trouble with backlash in a spinning reel or bait casting reel or those little knots in monofilament line, here's a good tip: Carry a large safety pin.

When you unsnap the pin, you've got a sharp point that will pop them knots right out. It works well. Some people use a round toothpick, but I think the safety pin works better because you can hook it to your shirt or wherever.

Also, you can use a regular safety pin if you want to, but I kind of like a personalized snag catcher. I've got a little teddy bear on mine that, with my worsening eyesight, it's easier to find when I drop it.



Turkey Beard Momento

Just as antlers represent the memory of a successful deer hunt, spring turkey hunters enjoy displaying the bird's beard. Here's a little craft idea that preserves that gobbler's growth — a turkey beard momento.

Take that casing you shot that bird with and punch the primer out on the top with a long nail and hammer. It leaves you a hole to put your strapping into because that's the next thing you're going to do.

Tie a loop knot in it and leave yourself enough loop to make a hanger with it. Then, take a little piece of wire, or a long nail, and shove this loop down into the casing out through the primer hole.

Next, get a little dowel plug as a spacer and push it down against the knot. Then fill the rest of the shell with five-minute epoxy, and you've got yourself a little piece of memorabilia.

I wonder if an old turkey like me could grow a beard that long.

Starting Fire

Two things here — to start a fire quickly, take the lint out of your dryer and stick it in a small container with a lid. Stick that in your pocket and when you want to build a fire, jerk about half of that out of there and put it down inside your little wood tipi. Strike that and it'll burn hot for quite a little while but not very long. But this next tip does.

Sprinkle a little sawdust in an egg carton and take hot paraffin and pour that in the egg carton. It saturates the sawdust. Once it starts to set up, I put a little more sawdust on top of it and kind of scrunch it down. Don't burn your finger.

When that sets up all you have to do when you want to start that fire is tear a chunk of that off and throw it in your fireplace where you got your stick tipi. Strike that carton and get it going, that wax burns, that sawdust burns, and it burns hot and it burns for a long time.

The 5-Gallon Bucket

I've lost count, but you can re-use five-gallon buckets for about 400 purposes. Here's one that dog owners and gardeners might find useful.

Take a sharp knife and cut the bucket into two parts, about four inches from the bottom. The bottom of these buckets make good dishes to water the hunting dog. Just throw it in the back of your truck, and you'll always have it. But what are you going to do with the top part? When I put my tomatoes in, I'm going to put the top part of the bucket over one of those plants so it'll keep the bunnies out. They have enough to eat — they don't need to eat my tomatoes.

Air Freshener

You can freshen up your vehicle by using scented laundry dryer sheets. I place them around on the floor and up in the vents. My old truck holds a lot of memories for me and the missus. If I get it smelling good again, I might ask her out for an ice cream cone ... take her for a little ride.

Fishing Boat Magnets

A handy item to have in your fishing boat is a magnet. I have a 100-pounder. Hook a sturdy line to it — say 25 or 30 feet — and boy, howdy, use these things around a dock and you'd be surprised by the things you'll pick up just dabbing around. I've picked up wrenches, cigarette lighters, fishing lures, pliers ... just a myriad of things. It's fun, but be careful. I was out once on a lake and hooked onto something that almost felt like fighting a fish. When I got it up, I had a beautiful mermaid hooked right by the belt buckle. My wife made me throw her back.



Fun for Kids in Wintertime

Here's a little game you can do in the wintertime to get the kids out of the house:

Take some half-inch plywood and cut out a few big feet like Sasquatch. Then, go out in the timber and lay out a trail in the snow — weave it — and then at the end of the trail, build a nice big bonfire and have all the materials you need for s'mores.

While you're following the trail with the kids, you can show them squirrel, rabbit, deer and turkey tracks ... whatever you run onto. This activity provides great outdoor education.

Backing Up Trailers

Boat ramps and camping pads can be frustrating on a busy Saturday or Sunday because some people have difficulty backing up a trailer or boat. Let me give those folks some advice: Don't concentrate at the top of the wheel or edges, concentrate on the bottom of the steering wheel because my guarantee is whichever way you turn that steering wheel from the bottom is the way your boat is going. Keep your hand on the bottom of that wheel and that's how you're going to do a better job of backing that trailer in.

A Secret Compartment

Is there a message from the past or a tiny piece of memorabilia in your gun stock? Your granddad's old gun, for example, may have a hollow place in the stock. They'd put shot in there to keep it from kicking or they might put a note or some little trinket in there, so check that old gun.

Keep from Falling on Ice

I suffer from ice elbow, like tennis elbow, anytime I slip on the ice and fall. I have cleats and everything else, but here's another addition. I fill an old coffee can with sand, and then when I'm on the ice, I'll scatter this around those areas where I walk a lot to keep me from falling. ❄️

BS, NOTHING BUT BS

By Roger Welsch

For many years, I had an old friend here on the Middle Loup River who showed up once a year with an uncanny sense of timing. It was always about the same time of year, but he seemed to know exactly the point at which I would forget about his last visit. I would be walking my usual path down toward the river, go through the dip where a slough used to run, and there he would be. He would hiss loudly, coil menacingly, rear back with a clear intent of killing me with his venomous fangs, and then, I imagine, chuckle to himself when he saw me jump 10 feet in the air and land with my feet in full bicycle motion, only to stop about 10 yards down the path when I realized it was just my old friend, the same old “BS” — bullsnake — up to the same old tricks he had used to scare me about this time every blasted year.

I’ve missed the guy the past few years. I think he may have figured out that scaring me wasn’t nearly as much fun as it was sending Linda, Antonia, or one of our dogs or cats straight into the traditional vertical take-off and horizontal dash, but now complete with siren-like sound effects. On one occasion when my old friend Bull pulled his annual gag on Linda, I was out of town. So Linda got her camera and took photos because she knew I would doubt her report of having been attacked by a fire-breathing, 40-foot dragon right in our driveway.

I know and understand that a lot of people have aversions about snakes, and I’ve come too close to rattlesnakes often enough that I understand that creepy feeling, but snakes here in central Nebraska are — let’s be honest about it — frauds. The eastern hognose puts even a bullsnake’s bluff to shame with his theatrics of make-like-a-rattler, but then has an even more hilarious comedy act if his threats don’t work: He rolls over and says in his most convincing body language, “Honest! I’m dead! No kidding. Dead, dead, dead!” And tiny ringnecks with their beautiful olive skin and bright orange necklace, are, well, downright cute — a disgrace to the



serpent world where intimidation and threat are supposed to be de rigeur. I cringe as I recall a time a neighbor drove into town and announced that she had killed six rattlesnakes in her backyard, not a quarter of a mile from our place. I went out to her truck to see the evidence of her garden spade butchery and was dismayed to find that her “rattlesnakes” were actually bullsnakes. A common mistake, perhaps, but geez, if you don’t know what you’re killing, don’t kill it! No,

it can’t be easy for reptiles on the Plains as long as there are the timorous with shovels in hand, but I was cheered last fall when Linda reported that the dragons had returned to our driveway, this time in multiple numbers and much smaller than the “boa constrictor” she had seen the time I was not here to defend her. She saw not one but four young bullsnakes warming on our gravel pile.

I’ll be watching for them next spring. No, correction: Sure as heck, I won’t be watching for them. I’ll be walking along, guileless, feckless, when all at once there’ll be a loud hiss, a frantic coiling, and a baring of fangs, and same as always, I’ll go straight up in the air 10 feet!

Roger Welsch is an author, humorist, folklorist and a former essayist for CBS News Sunday Morning. He is the author of more than 40 books and has been contributing to Nebraskaland Magazine since 1977.

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www.oneillchamber.com

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Hairball Concert on May 28
www.ewingsummerfunfest.com

Atkinson Hay Days - August 19, 20, 21
www.atkinsonhaydays.com

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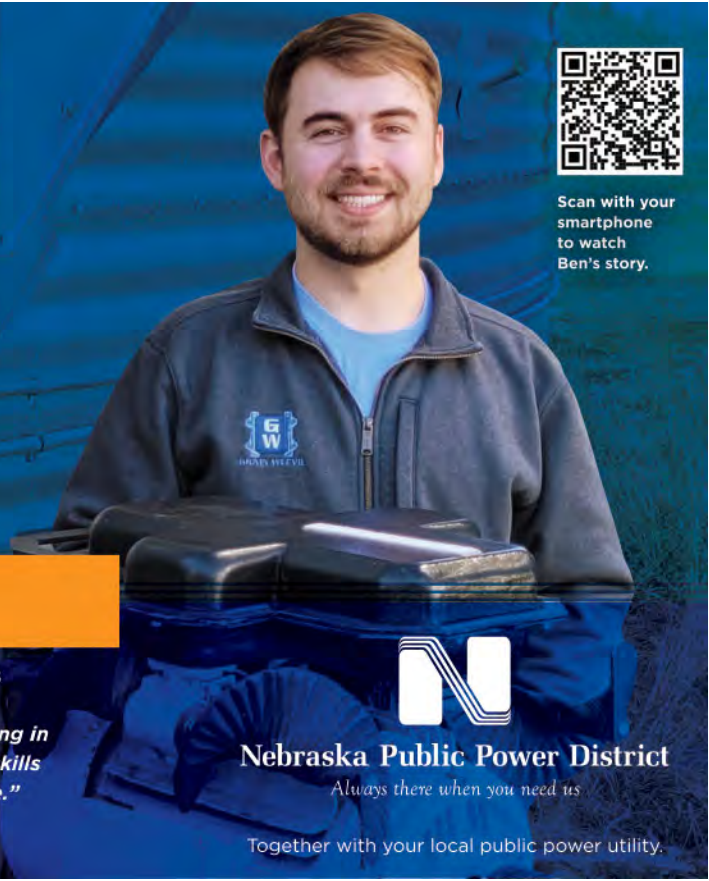
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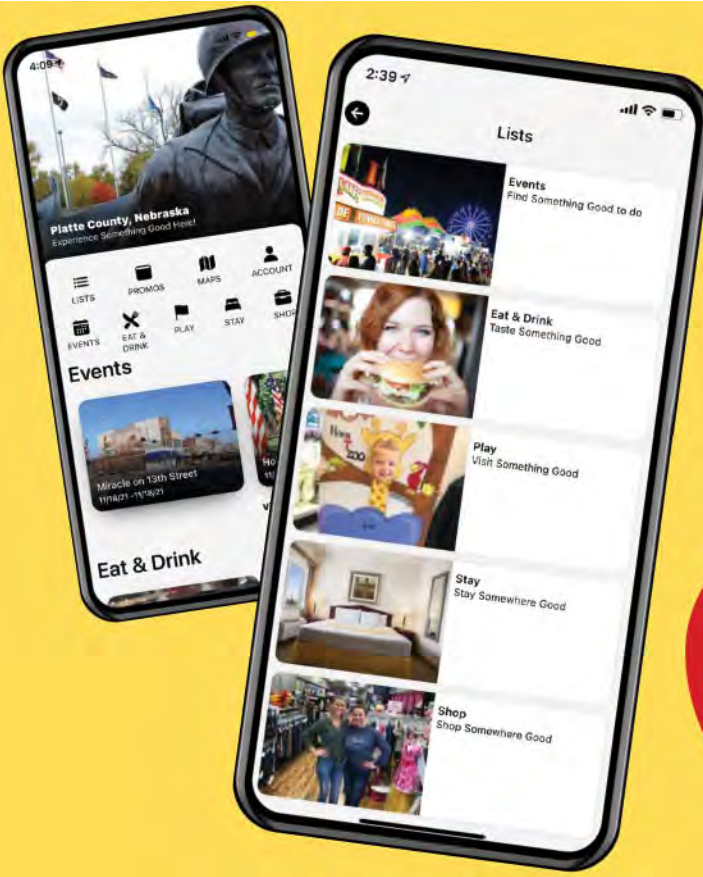
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COMPARING FORECASTS

By Jeff Kurrus

A comparison among the fishing forecasts, both past and present, reveals the following:

Must Fish Now

Elwood and its wiper fishery highlight my “must fish now” list. Fish surveyed in the 15-20-inch range and above 20 inches make it an ideal location for trophy and numbers fishing. Another destination would be Whitney Lake for crappies. Not only did the lake survey the highest number of crappies the past two years, it also didn’t survey a single fish under 8 inches, with the majority of its fish in the 10- to 12-inch range.

Excited to Try

Maybe because of Maple Creek’s high percentage of channel catfish above 24 inches, or the memory of catching a couple of these catfish on a buzzbait a couple of summers ago, makes me want to visit this reservoir and target these fish specifically. Further west, for the past three survey years Winters Creek Lake on the North Platte National Wildlife Refuge has the highest number of walleyes

surveyed statewide, with more than half of those fish measuring above 15 inches. What also intrigues me about this waterbody is its “non-powered boats only” requirement, equaling the playing field for those small boat anglers.

Old Favorites

I will re-visit Ravenna this year. It boasted one of the highest number of bluegills above 8 inches, and about half of its largemouth bass measured more than 12 inches. Another old favorite is Grove Lake. Its largemouth bass population shows fish above 12 inches year to year, but its trophy northern pike and nearby rainbow trout fishing at Verdigre Creek make this destination more than a distant memory.

Keep those old fishing forecasts, and turn last year’s “I’ll pass” lake into this year’s “must fish” destination.



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CAMPSITE GAMES

By Monica Macoubrie

The campsite has been located, the gear unpacked and dinner is being prepared. Now what?

Scavenger Hunts

What better way to explore the area than a scavenger hunt? Plan it before arriving or spend a few minutes scouting the area upon arrival. Each campsite has unique trees, rocks and landscapes you can include in your scavenger hunt. Add tangible items such as ant, flower, lady bug or rock, or make an “experience” scavenger hunt with items such as “climbed to the top of a hill” or “helped start the campfire.” No two scavenger hunts ever have to be the same.

Animal Olympics

If your family likes competition, play out an animal Olympics at your campsite. See who can flap their arms the most in 20 seconds — hummingbirds can do it 1,400 times. Or, see who can jump the highest — a mountain lion can leap 18 feet. Or, see who is the fastest in the group doing a 25-yard

dash. Pronghorns can run up to 60 miles per hour. How do you compare?

Pool Noodle Target

Grab your pool noodles, some duct tape and stakes or posts. After using them at the lake, pond or pool, turn them into a target. For your target’s frame, place stakes or posts into the ground and put pool noodles over the top. Then, shape the noodles into circles and duct tape the two ends together. Finally, attach all noodles together using duct tape. Try using another pool noodle as a spear to throw through your target.

DIY Disc Golf Baskets

If there isn’t an actual disc golf course at the campground, make your own. Using only old tomato cages, round baskets and zip ties, you can make portable disc golf baskets. Place a basket inside a tomato cage and fasten them together using zip ties. Create several baskets and space them out over a large grassy area to create your own course.



Games, including scavenger hunts, are a great way to pass the time at Nebraska’s state park system. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

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Platte River Hunt, 1955.
This photo was taken Dec. 11, 1955, after a successful hunting trip on the Platte River north of Bertrand. The hunters left to right: Don Leffler, LaVern Palmer, Dick Person (my father) and Royle Carlson. When the northern flight of mallards came in, a limit of ducks was easy, but the geese were rare in 1955.
– Kent E. Person, Holdrege



Pheasant Hunt, 1947.
This is my grandpa, George Nolda (far left); his oldest son, Herb (my dad); and other brother, Virg. And Duke the Lab.
Circa 1947 in Ravenna.
Grandpa and his sons loved to hunt pheasants. Virg got married on the first day of pheasant season in 1945. His wife wanted the ceremony in the morning, but it had to wait until the afternoon because Virg couldn't miss opening day.
– Valerie Vierk, Ravenna



Upland Hunting Near Burchard, 1966.
This picture was taken in the fall of 1966 near Burchard. Pictured left to right: Walt Pleiss, Ron Lahm (me) and Jerry Anderson. We hunted in this area quite often. Birds were plentiful, and we would usually go home with our limit, especially quail.
– Ron Lahm, Omaha

Knox County Farm Pond Catch, 1973.
These bass were caught during the summer of 1973 on my uncle Donald Barta's property. My uncle is on the right in the picture holding my new Lab, Zeke. My soon to be brother-in-law, Barry Routh from South Dakota, is on the left, and I am in the middle. At that time, we lived in Omaha and I was employed by the City of Omaha Fire Department. We were never disappointed fishing at these farm ponds.
– Erik Palle, Spearfish, South Dakota

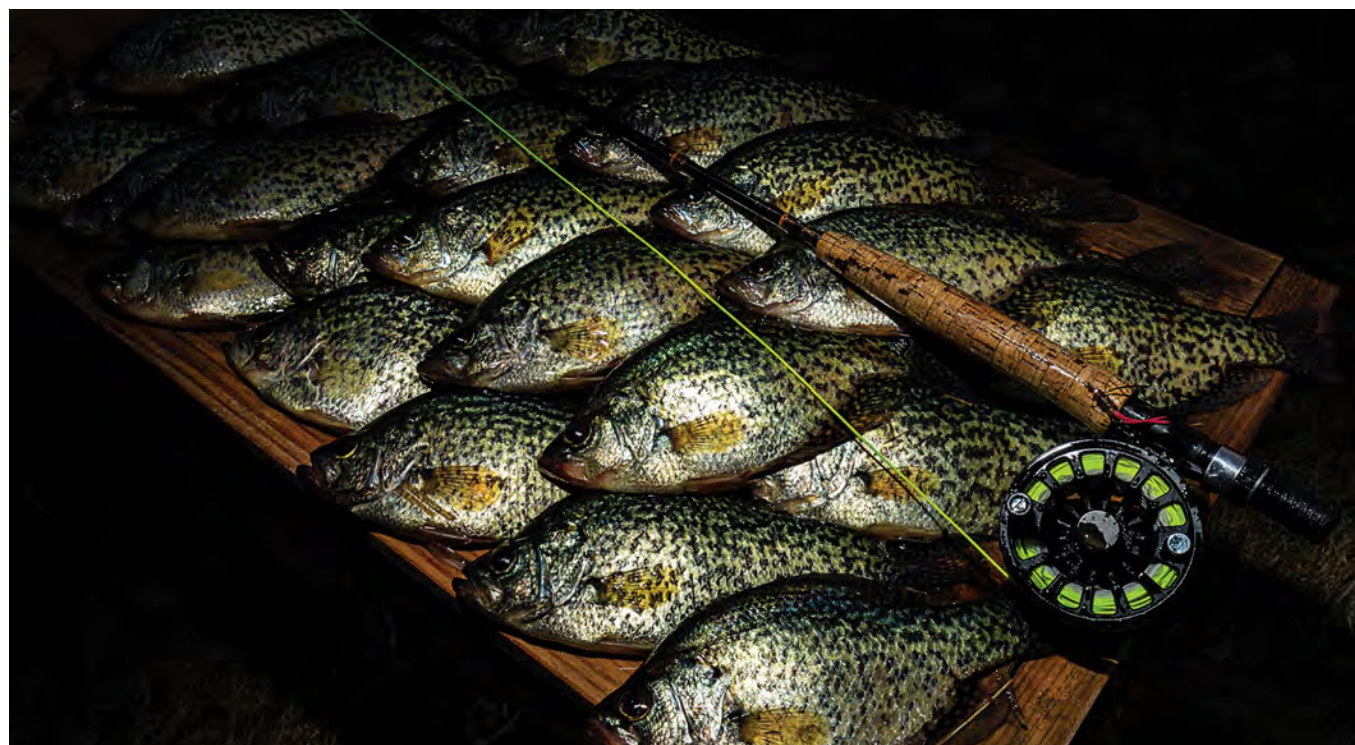


Harvesting Racoons, 1997.
This picture was taken on our farm during the 1997 trapping season. From left: Jim Barjenbruch (me) and my three sons — Craig, Jared and Brian.
The boys' excitement could not be held back, because when we checked traps, there would be an all-out sprint to the creekbank to see if we had caught anything in that set, and so on, as we went down the line. In years past, I enjoyed hunting and fishing with my dad, Otto, who also was an avid trapper and loved hunting coons with his coon dogs.
Lots of good memories were made in the past and more will be made in the future with my grandsons as they are starting to fish and coming with us out to the deer stands.
– Jim Barjenbruch, Leigh



Gavins Point, June 1970.
John Steinman and Jon Fisher (me) grew up in Falls City. We enjoyed the outdoors, especially hunting and fishing. Fishing was done in the Nemaha River. We often went to Gavins Point Dam and fished on the Nebraska side of the river. We always camped and made "standard" dough balls and "strawberry" dough balls and caught lots of carp and, once in a while, catfish. We always enjoyed this trip on the Missouri River.
I still enjoy the outdoors and have received *Nebraskaland Magazine* for over 50 years.
– Jon Fisher, Hot Springs, South Dakota

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



LAST STOP

By Jeff Kurrus

Part of my job at *Nebraskaland Magazine* is to capture a variety of photographs to accompany my stories. While I may never be able to match the technical knowledge of many photographers I work with, I do know what a good photo spread — and a bad one — looks like.

So after a day of catching crappies in the spring of 2020, I started photographing. One might assume after 15 years with *Nebraskaland*, I would have run out of ideas. Quite the opposite. You can almost always come up with a new composition or a different way to use natural or studio lighting to illuminate your subject. Especially if you study the work of others and keep challenging yourself and adapting.

The “cleaning” shot is another in my never-ending attempt to make game cleaning photographs interesting. The night and day shots of these fish were taken minutes apart — one shot properly exposed and the other using off-camera flash and underexposed two stops to make it look like night.

The problem, and blessing, with photo shoots like these are the images that completely fail in some way. Who fly-fishes at night? I’m sure some do, but that wasn’t my intent with this image. The mistake simply didn’t occur to me until I was eating my photo subjects later that evening.

Oh well. There’s always next time. As long as I can catch some more fish.

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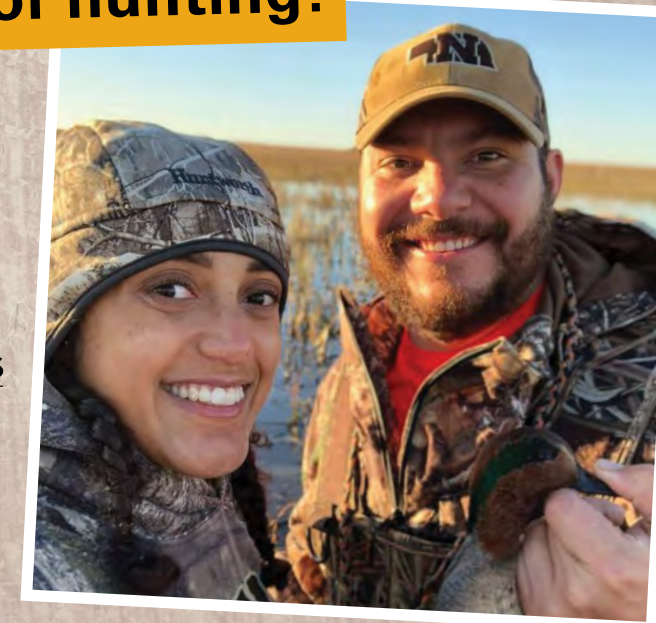
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