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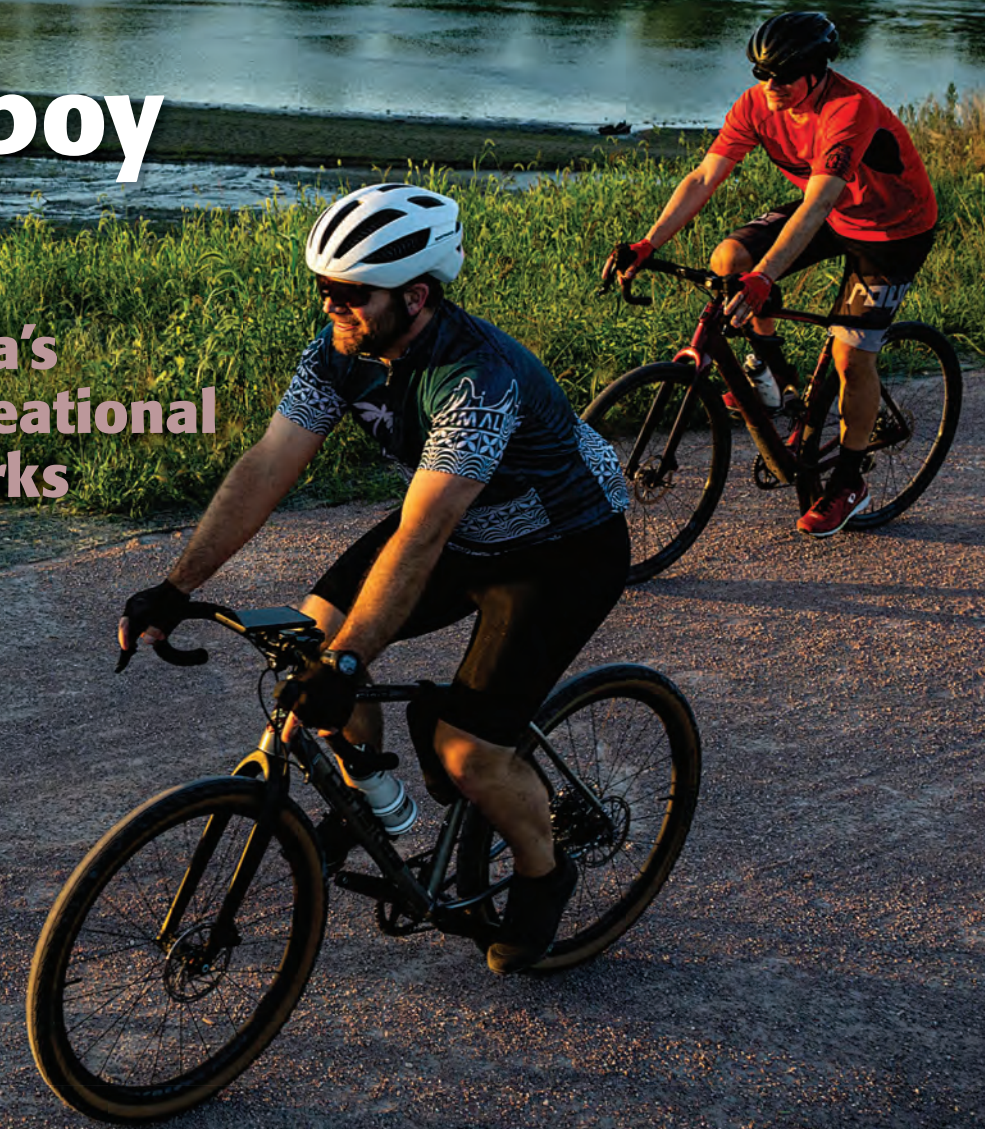
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APRIL 2025

## The Cowboy Trail

**Nebraska's  
Big Recreational  
Trail Marks  
30 Years**

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A Birding Family • Ginger and Pepper Walleye  
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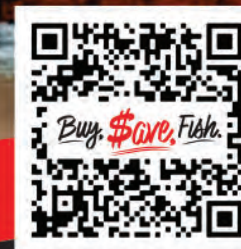
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Cover: Andrew Smith and Larry Wenzl  
of Norfolk ride bikes on the Cowboy  
Trail along the Elkhorn River near  
Norfolk. See page 20.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

This page: A male greater prairie-  
chicken calls from a lek on the  
Valentine National Wildlife Refuge in  
Cherry County. The birds gather and  
dance as part of a spring  
mating ritual.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND





# Nebraskaland magazine

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Newly emerged zebra swallowtail butterflies are flying in the woodlands. GETTY IMAGES

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densed and edited. Photographs are  
also welcome.



APRIL RIDGE

The sun shines on an unnamed landform at Fort Robinson State Park in the Pine Ridge of Dawes and Sioux counties.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND





# ANOTHER REASON FOR PICTURES

Story and photos by Jeff Kurrus

To record a memory. To be reminded of a time and place. To show our friends. These are some of the reasons why people shoot photographs.

For an angler, the reason might differ. To record the time and place a fish was caught. To remind you what lure was



May 28, northern pike, rooster tail, Clear Lake.



June 15, carp, mulberry imitation, creek off the Platte River.



Aug. 1, smallmouth bass, woolly bugger, War Axe.

used. To foretell what can be repeated.

Before you plan this year's fishing trips, or even decide what you're going to do this weekend, take a quick glance at your fishing photographs. These images might just make the decision for you.



July 21, largemouth bass, spinnerbait, Pelican Lake.



April 1, crappie, San Juan worm, private pond.



June 27, bluegill, popping bug, CenturyLink Lake.

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Plover 274 has had a very busy year. MICHAEL FORSBERG

# PLOVER 274

By Elsa Forsberg

As far as I'm concerned, 2024 was the year of Plover 274. She is a piping plover, a small shorebird species that is both state and federally threatened. The Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership — a collaboration of Nebraska Game and Parks, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, private industry and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service — has tracked more than 800 piping plovers over the years, but Plover 274 stands out for several reasons.

Our record of her began in May 2013, when she was given colored plastic leg bands that allowed us to uniquely identify her. Since 2013, Plover 274 has hatched at least five nests both on sandbars and at sand and gravel mines along the lower Platte River in Sarpy, Saunders, Douglas and Dodge counties. This summer, she was back for the first time at the sand and gravel mine where she was banded 11 years prior.

It was quite a summer for Plover 274. In June, she was incubating her nest on the sand when big thunderhead clouds rolled in and brought golf-ball sized hail and 6 inches of rain in an hour. Once the clouds cleared, Plover 274 was still there, sitting tight on her nest. Contractors at the sand

and gravel mine where she was nesting were amazed that a small bird could protect her nest in a storm that cracked windshields. They fondly called her “Hail Mary” after that. She successfully hatched her eggs a week later and at the end of July, Plover 274 was ready for her next adventure — winter break on a Miami beach.

While Plover 274 became famous in her summer home this year, she is also popular in her winter abode. She has spent every winter for the last 12 years at the same beach on a barrier island off the coast of Florida, where birdwatchers recognize her distinct leg band color combination. Reports of Plover 274 on the beach let us know she has made it another day, which is quite an accomplishment.

Beyond surviving thunderstorms and attracting many admirers, there's something else special about Plover 274 — she is at least 13 years old, which is more than double the average lifespan of a piping plover. As the summer of 2025 draws closer, I hope to see her back in Nebraska to raise yet another brood of chicks and help boost the recovery of her species.

# Saving Wildlife and Wild Places



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Look for the Peregrine Falcon image on your Nebraska tax return.







Walleye marinated in soy, ginger and black pepper. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

# GINGER AND PEPPER WALLEYE

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

This recipe is a variation of salt and pepper fish, a Chinese dish. It will work with any white-fleshed fish, but keep the skin on so the fillets don't fall apart in the pan while flipping and transferring.

Regular soy sauce is an OK substitute for dark soy sauce, although you won't get the nice caramelization and depth of flavor. Do not use seasoned rice for this recipe — the fish will be salty and is meant to be paired with plain white rice. In a pinch, precooked jasmine rice packets that you can throw in the microwave will work, but adjust the rice vinegar amount to taste — you're looking for just a bit of tartness, similar to sushi rice.

**Serving:** 2

**Prep Time:** 5 minutes

**Cook Time:** 30 minutes

**Ingredients:**

- 2 walleye fillets, skin on
- 1 tbsp. finely grated ginger
- 3 tbsp. vegetable oil, separated
- Freshly cracked pepper, to taste

- 1 tsp. kosher salt
- 1 tsp. dark soy sauce
- 3 scallions, thinly sliced on the bias
- 1½ cup of long-grain white rice and water
- 1 tbsp. seasoned rice vinegar

1. Rinse rice and cook according to package directions. When rice is cooked, fluff it with seasoned rice vinegar and keep warm.

2. While rice is cooking, cut each walleye fillet into 2 to 3 pieces, depending on size. Season generously with salt and pepper. Then combine 2 tablespoons of vegetable oil, grated ginger and dark soy sauce in a bowl. Toss seasoned fish in the marinade.

3. Heat the remaining 1 tablespoon of oil in a non-stick skillet over medium-high heat. When hot, sear fish flesh side down until golden. Then flip and cook the skin side until flesh is just cooked through. While the second side cooks, add sliced scallion around the fish and sauté until lightly browned. Serve fish and scallion immediately with hot rice.



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# The Cowboy Trail

## Nebraska's Big Recreational Trail Marks 30 Years

*By Justin Haag*



Nicole Bauer, Andrew Smith and Larry Wenzl of Norfolk ride bikes on the Cowboy Trail along the Elkhorn River near Norfolk in Madison County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



# Progress on the Cowboy Trail



The Cowboy Trail has two completed sections: Norfolk to Valentine, then Gordon to Rushville (solid line). Not yet completed: Valentine to Gordon, and Rushville to Chadron (dotted line). Development between Rushville and Chadron is underway.

Coursing through cattle country, the name might conjure up a dusty trail to drive longhorns across the prairie. But the Cowboy Trail — formally the Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail — instead caters to the drive of cyclists, runners, hikers and, yes, even some horseback riders, as it crosses some of Nebraska’s most scenic regions.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the trail, which was born when trains stopped running on tracks operated by the Chicago and North Western Railway. The historic route known as “the Cowboy Line” was developed in the 1880s and played a critical role in Euro-American settlement and commerce in northern Nebraska.

When economic shifts forced the railroad company to cease operations on the line in the 1980s, trail enthusiasts capitalized on an opportunity. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a national organization based in Washington, D.C., purchased the right-of-way between Norfolk and Merriman for \$6.2 million in 1994 and gifted it to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. The portion between Merriman and a spot a few miles east of Chadron was added in the early 2000s when operations ceased there. In all, there are 317 miles.

At the time it was purchased, the trail was publicized to be the longest rails-to-trails conversion in the country. So far, 187 miles between Norfolk and Valentine have been completed, along with 15 miles between Gordon and Rushville. Work is underway to complete more.

Yes, development has been derailed along the way, but progress continues, and like the Little Engine That Could, proponents are building momentum with an I-think-I-can attitude.

### Big Features for a Big Trail

The Cowboy Trail is among the many rail-trails throughout the nation that have capitalized on the gentle grade, 2 percent or less, and wide curves of old rail lines. Federal law allows trail development of the lines through rail-banking, a

provision that preserves railway corridors should they ever be needed for trains again, but allows recreational use in the meantime. About 25,000 miles of rail-trails have been

completed in the United States, with nearly 9,000 more in progress.

With the dirt work and sturdy bridge structures already in place, old rail lines make ideal multi-use trails. Once the steel, ties and ballast are removed, the trail is surfaced with low-maintenance crushed limestone, and bridges are fitted with wood decking and safety rails.

Alex Duryea, recreational trails manager for Game and Parks, said the Cowboy Trail has become a special way for people to experience a large portion of the state.

“And, best of all, it’s free to do it,” he said. “Just hop on and go.”

The Cowboy Trail, albeit desolate in places, features some of the best aesthetics Nebraska has to offer. Beginning with its trailhead at Ta-Ha-Zouka Park in Norfolk, it takes people through the lush farmland of the Elkhorn Valley. Farther west, it crosses the pristine trout waters of Long Pine Creek, patches of wetlands and expansive grassland in the northern Sandhills, and overlooks the mighty Niobrara River. Those who travel the full distance get a sampling of at least five of

the state’s specified Biologically Unique Landscapes while going through more than 25 cities and villages along the way.

Much of the trail runs parallel to U.S. highways 275 and 20, the latter designated the Bridges to Buttes Scenic Byway. That name provides a clue to some of the trail’s most impressive features.

More than 200 bridges on the trail have been converted for recreational use. Southeast of Valentine, the bridge over the Niobrara River is a quarter-mile long and 148 feet high. Farther east, the 145-foot-tall bridge over Long Pine Creek spans 595 feet.

Also attractive are the old rail line’s series of ornate arched culverts constructed of stone blocks. Perhaps the most impressive, just west of Johnstown, is 32 feet wide and 232 feet long. Plum Creek flows through it.

Part of the trail’s allure is the same thing that’s credited for slowing development: the sparse population along the route.

Food, lodging, gear and other amenities can be found in the route’s largest cities — Norfolk, Valentine, Ainsworth and O’Neill. North Fork Outfitting in Norfolk caters to



Terri VanHouten of Long Pine walks her dogs, Jasmine and Harper, on a bridge over Long Pine Creek on the Cowboy Trail in Brown County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND





The Newport Pool Hall, located a few yards from the Cowboy Trail, is always open and offers free pool, concessions and merchandise. Camping is allowed outside. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

cyclists with a shuttle and other services, for instance.

Fun stops can be found in smaller locales. One such place is in Newport, population 97, where resident Melissa Denny renovated an old hay scale building to a pool hall. The unmanned facility is always open for trail users to shoot a game of pool. Drinks, snacks, shirts and hats are available on the honor system.

Other popular sites along the way are the Neligh Mill State Historic Site and a pair of restored depots — one made of brick in O'Neill and another constructed of wood at Long Pine.

The trail is surely not as busy as those in and near metropolitan areas, but Duryea said it gets a lot more use

than most people think.

“We have automated trail counters out there now, and just from January through the end of July 2024, we had 87,000 counts. That’s just between Norfolk and Valentine and doesn’t include the section between Gordon and Rushville,” he said.

Most of the traffic occurs near communities along the way, but there are users who like the challenge of taking it on in its entirety.

Kylee Borg of Stuart, population 590, has a front row seat for activity on the Cowboy Trail from her convenience store, SouthSide Mini Mart.

“We see a lot of bicyclists stopping along their trip to fuel



Todd and Mary-Ann Madison of Valentine ride bikes on the Cowboy Trail, passing through the Sandhills southeast of Valentine in Cherry County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

their bodies — they don’t need gas, but they need bananas, water and whatever else to make it to where they’re going,” Borg said. “I would have never imagined how many people bike the trail during the summer. A lot of Americans do it, but there are also so many people from overseas. This past summer, we had a lot of visitors from Europe.”

Borg helped promote the trail in fall 2024 by getting firsthand experience in one of its premier activities. Even though she doesn’t consider herself to be a runner, she was persuaded by fellow community members to enter the Cowboy 200, a grueling footrace that covers the trail’s entire distance between Norfolk and Valentine. She made it 36 miles before bowing out of the 100-mile category. This year’s race is set for Sept. 26.

## Working Away

With little revenue to support the trail, Game and Parks has had challenges maintaining and developing it since the beginning,

“We are statutorily mandated to develop, operate and maintain this corridor as a state recreational trail, so we are doing our best with what resources we have,” Duryea said.

With the trail’s position in the Elkhorn Valley, occasional high waters have caused problems. Flooding in 2010 washed out a large section of trail and several bridges east of Clearwater that have yet to be repaired due to funding and logistics, forcing a detour along Highway 275.

In 2019, flooding resulted in five Federal Emergency Management Area disaster sites along the trail. Three of these locations have been fixed with disaster funding. They include sites just west of Norfolk and Neligh, and another east of Long Pine.

Remaining is a spot between Neligh and Oakdale where floodwaters washed away the approaches to a bridge that still stands. The other location to be fixed is erosion around a twin 260-foot-long, 4-by-8-foot box culvert underneath about 80 feet of embankment east of Valentine.

“If you’re just walking along the trail, you’d have no idea that it’s even there,” Duryea said. “It’s a costly repair because it’s in a remote, hard-to-get-to location.”

The setbacks from flooding have slowed new development, but progress is being made.

An increased focus on maintenance has made the trail more enjoyable for users in recent years. It also has seen a boost in advocacy from its communities, with some stakeholders along the route forming the Cowboy Trail Coalition.

The Cowboy Trail got a boost in publicity in 2019 when the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy announced an effort to connect Washington D.C. with Washington’s Pacific Coast via what they dubbed the Great American Rail-Trail. With its central location, the Cowboy Trail is key to the effort which links 150 existing rail trails on the 3,700-mile-long route.

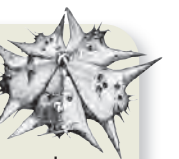
Kevin Belle, the conservancy’s project manager for the effort, said more than half of the trail is already in place and that it has already become popular even though numerous gaps exist along the way.

“The Cowboy Trail is a big part of our history. You all are pretty important with your location as the midpoint, and also because you’re one of the longest rails-to-trails conversions



People ride horses along the Cowboy Trail near Long Pine in Brown County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

## Tackling the Trail



The Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail is open to hiking, running, cycling and other non-motorized travel. Horses are allowed alongside the trail, too.

Mountain bikes with large tires, such as fat bikes and 29ers, are recommended. Especially late in summer, the burs of puncturevine (shown above), or “goatheads,” are present in many places, so riders should be equipped with extra tubes with internal sealant and an air pump.

Class 1, 2 and 3 eBikes — pedal-assisted with a top speed of 28 mph — are permitted.

Visit [OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://OutdoorNebraska.gov) for information about the trail, including a list of events planned for its anniversary.

ARTWORK BY TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND



in the country. That helps make this trail possible,” he said. “Now our big job is to figure out how to fill in the remaining 1,600 miles, including the segment of the Cowboy Trail that still needs to be finished.”

Two nonprofit organizations in the Panhandle, Cowboy Trails West of Sheridan County and the Northwest Nebraska Trails Association based in Chadron, are working with Game and Parks and other stakeholders to develop the western end, which takes users from the edge of the Sandhills through another one of Nebraska’s most scenic places, the Pine Ridge.

Cowboy Trails West was born after cyclist Kris Ferguson of Gordon was injured from being struck by a vehicle while pedaling on the highway’s shoulder. The cyclist gathered with other persistent Sheridan County residents to advocate for completion of the trail, eventually partnering with Game



Volunteers pile railroad ties and other debris that was collected during a clean-up effort on the corridor east of Chadron in 2016. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



New decking and rails adorn a bridge on the Cowboy Trail in the Pine Ridge east of Chadron. It is one of 26 bridges on the abandoned rail line between Rushville and Chadron that received decking and rails in summer 2024. The section of trail is expected to be complete and open as soon as summer 2026. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

and Parks to complete the portion between Gordon and Rushville in 2015.

Contractors for Game and Parks decked bridges through the Pine Ridge between Rushville and the terminus east of Chadron in 2024. That section is projected to receive surfacing in 2026. The trails association in Chadron is working to develop a trail alongside the still active rail line for the last 5 miles leading to its downtown area.

Once the section between Rushville and Chadron is complete, a 91-mile gap between Valentine and Gordon will remain. It is the trail’s most sparsely populated section, but proponents believe its Sandhills scenery has potential to attract interest from afar.

“I’m sure we could get money to develop the entire trail now,” Duryea said, “but doing so without having maintenance dollars would be setting us up for sure failure. The big key is getting maintenance dollars. We don’t even have enough money to maintain what we have. We need to get a little more money to spur development and maintain

the additional miles out west.”

As with trails throughout Nebraska and the nation, much of the funding for development has come from the Federal Highway Administration’s Recreational Trails Program and Transportation Alternatives Program.

Game and Parks is exploring other revenue sources, such as building a fund to serve as principal for a lasting endowment. Other ideas have been explored. Bills introduced to the Nebraska Legislature in 1997, for instance, would have provided about \$1.5 million of annual funding by taxing bicycle sales and raising vehicle registration fees, but they failed to pass. Also considered have been voluntary fees at iron rangers, but Game and Parks has been hesitant to this idea, projecting the cost of management would exceed income.

Wherever the money may come from, Duryea believes it’s a good investment.

“The trail is so much more than just a trail,” he said, noting the corridor contains 5,000 acres of opportunity for

wildlife and its habitat. Along the way, Game and Parks also facilitates hundreds of crossings for electricity, fiber-optic cable and pipes for water and sewer.

One full-time and two part-time employees are assigned to the trail now. Game and Parks is working to secure funding for another staff position to maintain the west end.

Duryea is optimistic for the trail’s future. “I’m not saying we’re going to complete the entire trail in five years or anything, but we have some good momentum, and it will surely be a nice thing to see when it happens,” he said.

Development of the entire route could also give Nebraska a point of pride for being the longest rails-to-trails conversion in the country, as it was first advertised to be. The 240-mile long Katy Trail in Missouri claims to be the nation’s longest developed section, but proponents want the Cowboy to someday lasso that claim.

By staying the course and chugging along — or, perhaps, cowboying up — proponents are betting on it. 🤠



# The Cowboy Trail's Railroad History

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

Today's Cowboy Trail follows an old railroad that was organized in January 1869, less than two years after Nebraska statehood. Its founders called it the Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley Railroad. Starting in Fremont, track-laying crews followed the Elkhorn River to Wisner before an economic depression halted construction in the early 1870s. According to David Seidel's book, *Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley R.R. Co.*, the original plan was to continue northwest to the junction of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers. The idea was to connect with steamboat traffic on the upper Missouri. Plans changed after gold was discovered in the Black

Hills. The army fought the Great Sioux War to force the Lakotas to sell the Black Hills. Afterward, the railroad began building again, but with a new destination in mind. Following the Elkhorn upstream, the tracks reached Norfolk, Neligh and then O'Neill by 1880. As the railroad approached the headwaters of the Elkhorn, Chief Engineer J. E. Ainsworth planned a route west across the Sandhills. The rails reached Long Pine in 1881 and Valentine two years later. The route originally looped south at Long Pine to avoid a deep canyon, but there was no avoiding the Niobrara River, which had to be spanned with a high bridge. The original wooden structure was



Crossing the bridge over the Niobrara River east of Valentine, 1957. This 1910 bridge is a favorite spot along the Cowboy Trail. NSHS, RG3314-10-144



Chicago and North Western Engine No. 1191 pulling a post office car, baggage car and passenger car, early 1900s. Photo by Emanuel Wolfe of Neligh. NSHS, RG2836-0-1464

replaced in 1910 with a steel bridge that is still enjoyed by Cowboy Trail travelers today. The Chicago and North Western Railroad took over the Elkhorn route in 1882 and soon found itself in an enviable position. A competitor's planned route to the Black Hills was blocked when Congress banned railroad construction on Indian lands in Dakota Territory. The C&NW soon boasted of having "The Only Line between CHICAGO and the BLACK HILLS." The rails reached Chadron in 1885, Rapid City in 1886 and Deadwood in 1890.

The railroad also continued west from Chadron into Wyoming. The Elkhorn route carried freight and passengers for many years. Eventually traffic declined, and operations ceased on most of the track in the 1980s and 1990s. N

Visit NSHS's website at [History.nebraska.gov](http://History.nebraska.gov).



Postcard showing the Chicago and North Western coal chutes at Oakdale, circa 1907. NSHS, RG2986-5-32



Postcard of the Chicago & North Western Depot at Neligh, circa 1910. NSHS, RG2986-4-25

| CHICAGO-OMAHA-CHARDON |       |       |                                |         |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|--------------------------------|---------|
| READ DOWN             |       |       |                                | READ UP |
| 3                     | Daily | Miles | Table 10                       | 4       |
| AM                    | 10.00 |       | Central Standard Time          | PM      |
| 7.35                  | PM    |       | CHICAGO                        | 8.50    |
|                       |       |       | OMAHA                          | 10.30   |
| 13                    | Daily |       | Italics show connecting tables | 14      |
| PM                    | 11.30 |       | OMAHA                          | 6.30    |
| 11.57                 |       |       | Irvington                      |         |
| 12.25                 |       |       | Arlington                      | 5.30    |
| 1.00                  |       |       | FREMONT                        | 5.10    |
| 1.00                  |       |       | FREMONT                        | 5.10    |
|                       |       |       | Nickerson                      |         |
| 1.27                  |       |       | Hooper                         | 4.37    |
| 1.43                  |       |       | Scribner                       | 4.25    |
| 2.08                  |       |       | West Point                     | 4.06    |
| 2.20                  |       |       | Boomer                         | 3.50    |
| 2.43                  |       |       | Waver                          | 3.40    |
| 2.58                  |       |       | Pilger                         | 3.27    |
| 3.12                  |       |       | Stanton                        | 3.12    |
| 3.40                  |       |       | NORFOLK                        | 2.50    |
| 4.10                  |       |       | NORFOLK                        | 2.35    |
| 4.28                  |       |       | Battle Creek                   | 2.20    |
| 4.42                  |       |       | Meadow Grove                   | 2.05    |
| 4.55                  |       |       | Tilden                         | 1.52    |
| 5.10                  |       |       | Oakdale                        | 1.37    |
| 5.24                  |       |       | Neligh                         | 1.24    |
| 5.39                  |       |       | Clearwater                     | 1.07    |
| 5.58                  |       |       | Ewing                          | 12.51   |
| 6.18                  |       |       | Inman                          | 12.33   |
| 6.46                  |       |       | O'Neill                        | 12.18   |
| 6.59                  |       |       | Emmet                          | 11.53   |
| 7.17                  |       |       | Atkinson                       | 11.39   |
| 7.34                  |       |       | Stuart                         | 11.23   |
| 7.50                  |       |       | Newport                        | 11.06   |
| 8.10                  |       |       | Bassett                        | 10.48   |
| 8.30                  |       |       | LONG PINE                      | 10.30   |
|                       |       |       | Mountain Standard Time         |         |
| 8.00                  |       |       | LONG PINE                      | 9.15    |
| 8.20                  |       |       | Ainsworth                      | 9.03    |
| 8.35                  |       |       | Johnstown                      | 8.34    |
| 8.53                  |       |       | Wood Lake                      | 8.20    |
| 9.38                  |       |       | Valentine                      | 7.27    |
| 9.58                  |       |       | Crookston                      | 7.13    |
| 10.18                 |       |       | Kilgore                        | 6.59    |
| 10.32                 |       |       | Nenzel                         | 6.47    |
| 10.50                 |       |       | Cody                           | 6.37    |
| 11.10                 |       |       | Eli                            | 6.15    |
| 11.32                 |       |       | Merriman                       | 6.00    |
|                       |       |       | Irwin                          |         |
| 12.25                 |       |       | Gordon                         | 5.20    |
| 12.38                 |       |       | Clinton                        | 5.00    |
| 12.58                 |       |       | Rushville                      | 4.50    |
| 1.20                  |       |       | Hay Springs                    | 4.30    |
| 1.50                  |       |       | CHARDON                        | 3.55    |
| PM                    |       |       |                                | PM      |

A column from the Chicago & North Western's April 28, 1957, timetable shows the times to "Chardon" Nebraska. NSHS, RG1633-AM



# Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

With warmer weather returning and signs of spring everywhere, now is a great time to be outdoors. This month, find a friend and enjoy wildlife watching, stargazing and fishing. 🌳



## Celebrate Earth Day at a state park

April 22 | Statewide

Nebraska's state parks are ideal places to celebrate Earth Day, with its emphasis on protecting the environment. You might organize a group bike ride or walk on a park trail, while practicing Leave No Trace principles. Or consider hosting a picnic with friends and family, where everyone brings eco-friendly snacks or locally-sourced food in reusable containers. Find a state park near you at [OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://OutdoorNebraska.gov).

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

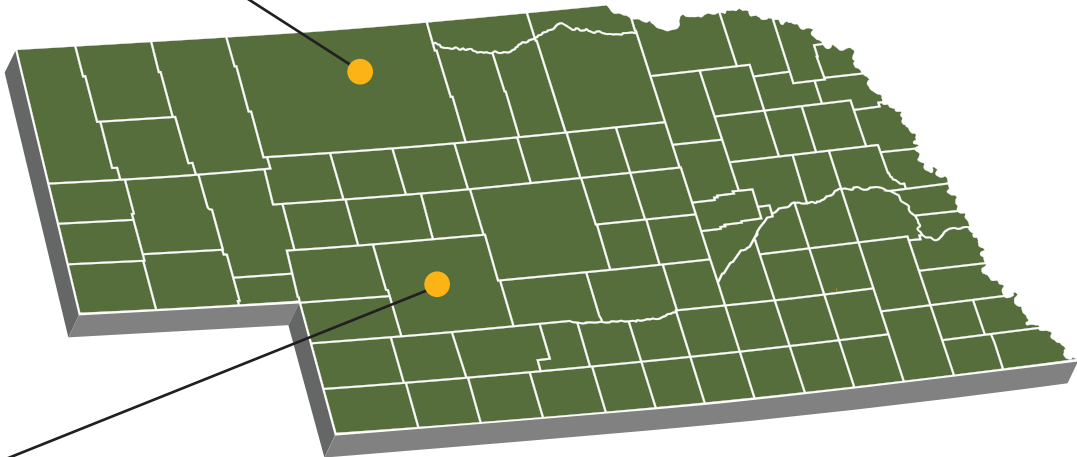


## Watch the Lyrid meteor shower

April 16-25, peaking in the early hours of April 22 | Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area

Need a good excuse to spend some time under the stars? Head to a dark sky location, like Merritt Reservoir, to view the Lyrid meteor shower. One of the oldest recorded meteor showers, it can produce 15-20 meteors per hour at its peak. The best time to watch is in the predawn hours. Be patient, bring warm clothes and allow 30 minutes for your eyes to adjust to the darkness.

GETTY IMAGES



## Report sightings of whooping cranes

Mid-March to mid-April | Primarily central Nebraska

As you're out exploring this month, be ready to report any sightings of migrating whooping cranes. This critically endangered species may spend time in wetlands and river channels, as well as in cornfields and meadows near those habitats, mostly between Columbus and North Platte. These large white birds stand 5 feet tall, with black wingtips and reddish-black face masks. Never approach or pester these birds; view them only from a safe distance. You can report sightings at [OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://OutdoorNebraska.gov) or by calling any Game and Parks office.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



## View prairie-chickens at N-CORPE's blind

March 15 – April 30  
About 30 minutes southwest of North Platte

Greater prairie-chickens put on an amazing show during their spring mating rituals. One popular spot to view them is N-CORPE's blind, where you can make reservations for free. Given decent weather, the chance of seeing birds close by is about 100 percent, said project manager Kyle Shepherd. The blind comfortably holds six, and one group per day is allowed, offering plenty of privacy. Learn more and make reservations at [Ncorpe.org/wildlife-viewing](https://Ncorpe.org/wildlife-viewing).

JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

## Catch bluegills on warm afternoons

As weather allows | Statewide

If warm weather is in the cards this month, anglers could see some of the best opportunities all spring for catching bluegills. On warm spring afternoons, bluegills will move into shallow, protected areas, searching for prey. Make use of any wax worms left over from ice-fishing — and have fun. There's nothing better than soaking up some early spring sunshine on a shoreline, waiting for a bobber to go under.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND





# A Birding Family

By Eric Fowler

For one Omaha couple, what began with hiking and a birdsong book has led to two high-school-aged boys who can hold their own with some of the top birdwatchers in the state.

Corey and Andi Weber always enjoyed hiking. When their son, Eli, was born in 2006, they received a membership to Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue as a Christmas gift. That led to more hikes with Eli and, two years later, Silas. “We took the boys there ever since they were teeny tiny,” Andi said.

The hikes were simply about being outdoors. Corey grew up in Wisner and had learned to identify the ducks he saw



The Webers were looking for, and found, a northern parula that had been spotted at Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue during its northward spring migration. Eli Weber was able to capture this photo of the bird. ELI WEBER



The Weber family of Omaha, Corey, Andi, Silas and Eli, look for birds in the woodlands at Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

along the Elkhorn River but hadn’t paid much attention to songbirds.

While perusing the clearance rack at a local bookstore, Andi ran across a copy of the Bird Songs Bible, a book with an audio player containing photos and sounds of all 750 breeding birds in North America.

“Eli would just sit and go through it one song at a time,” Andi said.

One day, while sitting on the porch, Eli, who was 5 or 6 years old at the time, exclaimed, “Mom! Chimney swifts.”

When Andi asked what he was talking about, he told her there were chimney swifts flying around the house, and he knew that because of the noise they were making. “I thought, ‘That’s cute.’ And he went inside and got the book and came out and played it and, sure enough, he was spot on,” she said. “That’s when we were like, ‘He’s really into this. Let’s get

everybody some binoculars.’”

The family’s interest in birds grew with outings to Fontenelle and other sites around Omaha. More than once, while getting ready for a hike, Silas would wander off to talk to other birders. “Silas was great,” Corey said. “He’d break the ice with anybody else out on the trail.”

Silas’s outgoing personality led to a chance meeting along a trail at Fontenelle in 2018 with Mark and Ed Brogie,





Five-year-old Eli Weber holds a white-breasted nuthatch at the first bird banding workshop he attended at the Fontenelle Forest Nature Center. COREY WEBER

brothers from Creighton and Wayne, and two of just seven birders in the state who have checked off more than 400 birds in Nebraska on their life lists. As it turned out, Mark had done his student teaching under Corey's father at Wisner-Pilger schools. The next day, when they crossed paths again, the Brogies and their party invited the Webers to join them in the woods. "We saw a bunch of stuff we had never seen before," Andi said, noting a prothonotary warbler was the highlight of the day.

Warblers piqued their interest early on, and they purchased the warbler identification course from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Bird Academy to help them identify subspecies, something that can be tricky with these small, colorful birds that flit among the treetops. Other courses have followed.

The interest in warblers led to a vacation in High Island, Texas, in the spring of 2019. The birdwatching destination boasts the only strip of forest for miles on the Gulf Coast, and it is where millions of neotropical songbirds, including warblers, stop to rest after flying across the Gulf from their wintering grounds farther south. The Webers were among a group of bird-watchers when Silas, 10 at the time, made an

impression.

"Silas is up front, sitting down, and he says, 'There's a chestnut-sided warbler.' And I hear someone say, 'Hey, that little kid's right,'" Corey recalled.

When the coronavirus pandemic shut the world down in 2020, the Webers did their social distancing in the woods, often twice a day in the spring and fall.

"The pandemic really helped because I barely had any schoolwork, and I was able to go out every day in the spring," Eli said.

"We were killing it," Corey said. "We just saw so many birds. It was a great use of time when there wasn't much else to do."

The brothers each bring something to the table.

"Eli is the engine room," Corey said. "He's got the insatiable appetite for it, and he kind of motivates the rest of us. Silas has outstanding ears and outstanding eyes but takes a little prodding to get going. Once he gets going, he loves it. But sometimes he's not dying to get up early and come out here. But he's good. He's spotted a lot of birds for us."

Silas's eyes have made him good at spotting and identifying

warblers. Eli is quick to identify many species. "Without Eli, we have a lot of question marks," Corey said. "We really rely on him like with the sparrows. It's hard to be conclusive, but that quick, he's got it."

"Corey and I, when we're birding with the kids, we don't have to work as hard to figure out what stuff is," Andi added.

The boys sometimes walked to Hanscom Park near their home in midtown Omaha to look for birds, once spotting a Cape May and hooded warbler on the same day. Until recently, they relied on their parents to drive them to birding spots farther from home. Those drives were for searching rare birds reported on eBird, a website and app created by Cornell Lab that allows birders to track and share their sightings. "That's what really got me into it," Eli said of eBird.

Their bird identification skills didn't go unnoticed with birders met during the outings. Colleen Childers of Grand Island and Boni Edwards of North Platte, both accomplished bird-watchers, met the family when they were all among birders gathered to see a limpkin that had stopped in Omaha



Eli Weber photographed this cinnamon/blue-winged teal hybrid on the wetland at Fontenelle Forest last spring. ELI WEBER



Silas, Eli, Corey and Andi Weber watch a bird in the woodlands at Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue last spring. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



in 2022. They were so impressed with the boys’ skills and interest that they each gave them one of their old cameras. Andi was humbled and tried to pay the women, who refused to take anything. “It was like they gave them a quarter for a gumball,” Andi said. Childers said she and Edwards had both recently upgraded their cameras. “I thought, ‘Oh, man. I bet they’d love to have cameras,’ too because I knew they were big birders. I saw their names on eBird all the time,” Childers said. “It’s no big deal. They just came off as really kind, respectful lovers of nature, and I knew they loved birds. They are such good kids, and they do know their stuff.” The cameras opened a new world of birding, Eli said, allowing him to document what he’s seen and do research at home to help identify birds. “It’s really useful if you see something you don’t quite know what it is and could be rare for the area,” he said. He’s also now able to post photos to accompany his sightings on eBird. There had been some who doubted the sightings the boys reported, simply because of their age. “I think a lot of the local birders trust my sightings more than they used to. But still, I’m far from being an expert, and I still make mistakes all the time, but it’s always good to have a little proof.”



Eli photographed this scissor-tailed flycatcher in 2024 near Flanagan Lake in Omaha. ELI WEBER



Eli followed a report on eBird of a hooded warbler at Towl Park in Omaha in 2024 and captured this photo. ELI WEBER

Now Childers and Edwards text the Webers whenever they make a trip east to go birding. The family has gotten to know many other birders from the Omaha area as well. “We always run into somebody we know, and they always know who the boys are,” Andi said. “Everyone is just very kind and welcoming to them in the local birding community.” They’ve stayed in touch with the Brogies, too, and even called Ed when they were visiting Corey’s parents in Wisner on Mother’s Day in 2022 and spotted a cerulean warbler. They kept eyes on the bird, a rare sighting in Nebraska, until Brogie could make the drive from Ponca. Ed Brogie said he doesn’t see many children who get their start in birding as young as the Webers did, and even fewer who stick with it. “It’s a pretty good deal that a lot of older birders kind of gave them some kudos, so to speak, and boosted their interest,” he said. “They still have good eyesight — they’re good at spotting things — and good hearing. And they’re very enthusiastic, so I really enjoy those kids.” Eli, now age 18, and Silas, 16, both play baseball for Omaha Central High School, so schedules are full in the spring, leaving Sunday as the day the family often goes birding. They have more time in the fall when songbirds are heading south. In the winter Eli will be looking for horned larks, waterfowl or “any random rarity that shows up,” he said. Silas’s interest in birds has waned as he focused more on baseball. Not Eli, who is preparing to study wildlife in college later this year and hopes to someday have a career involving birds. He received a scholarship to attend the Nebraska Ornithologists’ Union conference in McCook last fall. Andi went, too, and they birded their way home across southern Nebraska, adding species to their lists. Eli’s list has grown to 334 species, more than half of what is in the Bird Songs Bible, with 262 in Nebraska. Last summer, Eli attended an American Birding Association

Young Birder Camp, spending a week watching birds on and around Delaware Bay in Delaware and New Jersey. On that trip, his life list grew by 26 species, including pelagic birds such as a Cory’s shearwater, a brown booby — rare even for that area — and a curlew sandpiper, a bird native to the other side of the world. “It was really cool to see a bird that wasn’t even supposed to be on this continent,” Eli said. “Probably the coolest thing for me was getting to meet people my age who are as into birds as I am,” Eli continued. “Before that, it was pretty much just my brother, who has not been that interested in it the last few years, and a few others who have either moved or got disinterested.” While forming friendships with older birders has been rewarding, it can be hard to relate. “I can’t just hang out with a 40-year-old outside of birding,” Eli said. In hopes of finding others with an interest locally, Eli started a birding club at his school and dubbed it the Central Flyway. “If there were more people my age, it brings a little bit of competitiveness to it ... just having someone to compare yourself to, I guess.” Andi doubts Corey and she would’ve become so interested in birds if it weren’t for the boys. “It was kind of a nice marriage of our love for being outside and hiking and then Eli wanting to be birding on top of that,” she said. That, in turn, has led

to other interests, including native plants, mushrooms and foraging. “I think it was a really good springboard for all of us to really get more interested and more in tune with what was going on around us when we were outside.” “I just love being outdoors in nature, and it kind of gives me an incentive to get outside,” Eli said following a family outing on the riverbottom last spring at Fontenelle Forest that yielded, among other birds, a northern perula, a migratory warbler more common to the east, and a hybrid cinnamon/blue-winged teal. “It’s almost like treasure hunting, sometimes, because you never know what you will find. A morning in May, there could really be anything. You could have a chance to find something pretty interesting and special.” Silas agreed, to a point. “But when you don’t find anything it’s frustrating. But then you have like that perula we had today, and it makes it better when you don’t see anything else.” “If he was guaranteed to go out and see a bunch of stuff, he’d go all the time,” Eli said. “But it’s never guaranteed.” What is guaranteed? Perhaps a life-long appreciation of nature for two young men that began with family time outdoors and a book. 📖



When the Webers bumped into fellow birders Colleen Childers of Grand Island and Boni Edwards of North Platte last spring during an outing at Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue, Eli showed them a photo of a bird he captured. The women gave their old cameras to Eli and his brother, Silas, when they upgraded. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



# Rushes Reborn

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

One June morning in 2021, *Nebraskaland* regional editor Eric Fowler and I explored an abandoned channel of the Elkhorn River on Red Wing Wildlife Management Area in Antelope County. Eric was taking photos and gathering material for an article about the historic 2019 flood and how it altered the river's course along this stretch. I was there to help him understand the ongoing changes in the vegetation as

the channel gradually transitioned from sandbar to marsh or woodland.

While Eric took advantage of the warm, early-morning sunlight to capture photos, my botanical eyes, and camera, were immediately drawn to the obscure rushes thriving on the channel's sandbars. It was no coincidence that the flood we were investigating was responsible for the rush colonies.

Let me explain. When buried in

sediment and shielded from the elements, tiny, nearly microscopic rush seeds can remain viable for decades. As floods have done for millennia, the churning waters of the 2019 flood tore down streambanks, scoured the streambed and carried away sediment, mainly sand, along with long-buried rush seeds and those of other plants. When the floodwaters receded and slowed, the sand and seeds settled across the floodplain.



The abandoned Elkhorn River channel on Red Wing Wildlife Management Area, as seen in September 2020. Severe flooding in 2019 caused the river to return to a channel it had abandoned during an earlier flood sometime before 1938. The abandoned channel's sandbars provide ideal habitat for several rush species. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



The perennial knotted rush in bloom on a sandbar of the abandoned Elkhorn River channel.

GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND





Toad rush seedpods ripen to a rich brown in the June sun. This annual grows nearly statewide along the margins of lakes, ponds and streams. It is especially abundant on sandbars, including those of the Elkhorn River. GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

Of the millions of rush seeds carried by the floodwaters, some were fortunate. They landed on bare sand, warmed by the sun's rays and moistened by groundwater or nearby pools and rivulets. Their long, dark, dormant wait was over, and they germinated. These reborn rushes were the ones I photographed.

## What is a Rush?

If an adventurous hiker had happened to pass by that morning as I knelt behind my camera, they might have assumed I was photographing grasses, given the grass-like appearance of rushes. However, the

two plant groups differ in subtle yet distinct ways.

For example, in grasses, the male and female flower parts are protected by two bracts, while rush flowers are enclosed by six bracts that open as the flowers mature.

Additionally, each mature grass flower produces a single, relatively large seed, whereas each rush flower forms a pod containing dozens to hundreds of seeds.

Furthermore, grass stems are round, hollow and contain nodes, swollen joints where the plants' many leaves emerge. In contrast, rush stems are solid, lack nodes and are typically round, except in a few species where

they are flat. Rushes have few leaves, most of which grow from the base of the plant.

To further complicate matters for plant enthusiasts, sedges closely resemble both rushes and grasses. However, they can be distinguished by a single bract that shields the flower parts, as well as solid, triangular stems that lack nodes. Fortunately, there is a simple rhyme to help discern these tricky plants:

*Sedges have edges,  
rushes are round,  
and grasses have nodes  
from the top to the ground.*



Torrey's rush in bloom. The bunched flower heads contain 20 to 60 small individual flowers. GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

## Nebraska's Rush Diversity

Nebraska is home to 16 native and one non-native rush species. By comparison, the state has about 200 grass species and 75 sedge species. While all our rushes inhabit wetlands, some also grow in upland woodlands and prairies. A few, like joint-leaf rush and soft rush, have a limited range and are rare in Nebraska, while others, such as Baltic rush and interior rush, are widespread and common.

Rushes play vital ecological roles in wetlands. For example, the three

species I photographed at Red Wing WMA — knotted, toad and Torrey's rush — colonize sandbars and other disturbed wetlands, where their fibrous roots stabilize the soil and prevent erosion. As their roots and stems decompose, they contribute organic matter, enriching the soil and aiding the establishment of other plant species.

Eventually, the rush colonies I photographed at Red Wing will decline as the sandbars transition to other plant communities. In the meantime, they will scatter countless seeds across the sand. When the next flood



The northern rush grows on Elkhorn River sandbars and wetlands in northeastern Nebraska. a) root and stems, b-d) flower heads, e) single flower, f) seedpod surrounded by bracts and g) seedpod. GETTY IMAGES

arrives, these seeds will be carried away, hopefully settling on moist sandbars to begin the eternal cycle anew. [N](#)



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# The Serious Business of Turkey Fighting

*Story and photos by Justin Haag*

Perhaps it's the relatively small, featherless, wrinkly head on the big body that gives it comical appeal. Make no mistake, though, fighting among wild turkeys is serious business.

Similar to other wildlife species, most fighting among turkeys is related to the mating scene. Throughout the year, males establish a pecking order with the most dominant toms earning

the right to breed and pass on their genetics.

The process of developing this hierarchy picks up in fall when turkeys gather in flocks. While spending all of that time together throughout the winter, social structures develop. Tough guys get a reputation. Inferior birds are shunned. Gangs form. Hens also squabble as they jockey for rights to food and nesting locations.



A wild turkey pecks at the head of another after establishing dominance. The bottom turkey waited for the bird on top to get out of sight before rising and heading in an opposite direction at Chadron State Park.



Jake wild turkeys in Banner County lock beaks while sparring for dominance in the fall. Such skirmishes help establish the flock's pecking order.

While much of the dominance has been determined come spring, the mating period is when some of the most dramatic fights occur. Toms have a one-track mind and are intent on their mission. As each day lengthens, so rises the level of testosterone in the males, making them more apt to get worked up.

When toms become agitated in a skirmish or excited at the presence of females, blood rushes to their heads. This changes the way light reacts with collagen fibers, causing them to emit the distinct red, white and blue



The characteristic red, white and blue coloring.

appearance. This colorful head, with its odd snood, caruncles and wattle, is integral to the tom's iconic courtship display of Thanksgiving decor: a bird in full strut, tail feathers erect and wings dragging on the ground.

Fighting toms and jakes don't abide by any rules of engagement. Kicking, scratching and biting are allowed. There's neck wrestling, wing flapping, pecking at heads, clawing and a lot of squawking.

One especially interesting sight is two birds with locked beaks, appearing as if they are trying to swallow each

other. The conflicts can last a few minutes up to days.

For hunting purposes, it's hard to know when to play upon the birds' tendency for conflict. A gobbler or fighting purr call paired with a full strut decoy might attract a battle-ready big tom, but others are likely to keep their distance for fear of getting their butts kicked.

Especially comical is when a confused tom beats up on a decoy or attacks some other thing that isn't a turkey. Make no mistake, though, it's serious business. 🦃



# Loup River Water Trail

*Story and photos by Eric Fowler*

The Loup is a beautiful, braided river, flowing for 69 miles through fertile, eastern Nebraska farm country, surrounded by towering cottonwoods that serve as ideal perches and nesting spots for bald eagles.

Other than those who hike down its bank at five wildlife management areas along its course or a city park in Columbus,



Bald eagles are plentiful along the Loup River Water Trail.

few people spend time on the river. Until recently, even fewer paddled its waters, primarily because there was nowhere to easily get on and off the river. That changed in 2023, when the Loup River Water Trail was completed between Genoa and Columbus, the culmination of work by many, opening the river to the countless individuals who have taken up paddle sports in recent years.



Ken Curry grew up in Lincoln, but his mother was from Tilden. During the summer, the families would meet on the banks of the Loup River at Pawnee Park in Columbus, the midway point between the communities, for picnics. “As a little kid, we would run up and down that river,” Curry said.

He has watched people play in the Loup River on summer weekends since moving to Columbus in 1991. In many years serving on the Chamber of Commerce, the river occasionally came up during chamber planning meetings. “We always said we have a great asset, this river, but we never did anything with it,” Curry said. Similar discussions came up during his time spent as a leader at the local and district level

of what is now Scouting America. An Eagle Scout himself, neither of his sons paddled the river during their path to the same rank. Access was the issue.

In 2021, when he was appointed to the Game and Parks’ Board of Commissioners, Curry started learning more about water trails. That led to a meeting between a few Platte County commissioners and the Columbus mayor and city administrator. They reached out to Lee Rupp, and a former state senator and Game and Parks fisheries biologist, a long-time resident of Monroe with a love for the river, for advice. Rupp already had notes and a map drawn up when they met with him. “We all said: ‘Let’s make it happen’,” Curry said.

While an official water trail access couldn’t be built on

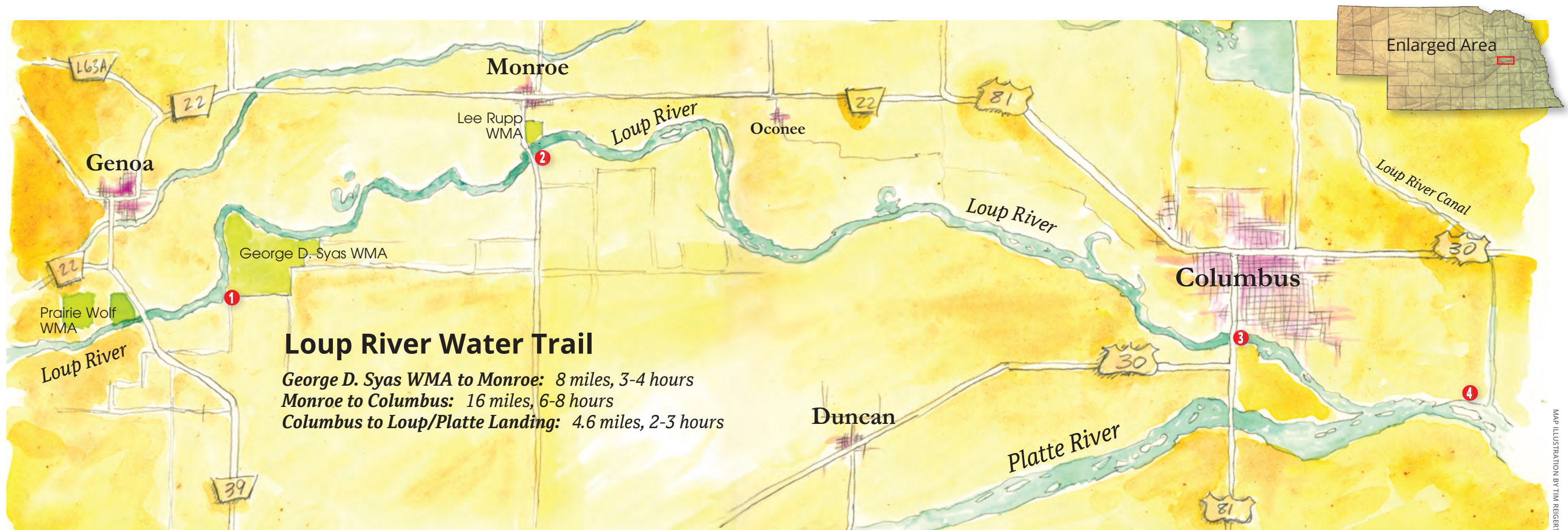
George D. Syas Wildlife Management Area southeast of Genoa, an existing fishing access point could be utilized as the starting point. Eight miles downstream, the county agreed to build an access point with plenty of parking on land it owned south of Monroe. At Columbus, 16 miles downstream, owners of the Quality Inn agreed to allow paddlers to use their parking lot, a 250-yard walk up the newly paved Pawnee Park Trail from the riverbank. With those three points in place, the trail was opened in the spring of 2023.

Late last year, a fourth point was developed 4½ miles downstream on the banks of the Platte River, a mile from the mouth of the Loup. Archer Daniels Midland, owner of an



Ken Curry and his son, Brian, of Columbus paddle the Loup River Water Trail between Monroe and Columbus. The trail opened in 2023 with new put-in and take-out points.





MAP ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT



Brian and Ken Curry paddle beneath a railroad bridge crossing the Loup River west of Columbus.

**1. George D. Syas Wildlife Management Area:** A fishing access point is located on the southwest corner of the area at 445th Avenue and 190th Street. An unimproved trail leads 80 yards from the parking area to the south bank of the river. **2. Monroe Loup River Trail Access Site:** This Platte County area is located south of Monroe on an access road on the east side of 370th Avenue. The river is a few yards from the parking area. **3. Columbus Loup River Trail Access Site:** River access is located on the north bank on the east side of U.S. Highway 81. Paddlers can use the southeast corner of the Quality Inn parking lot and take the Pawnee Park Trail 250 yards to the river. **4. Columbus Loup/Platte River Landing:** This access is located on the north bank of the Platte River 3.5 miles east and 1.5 miles south of Columbus south of the Archer Daniels Midland ethanol plant.

ethanol plant north of the site, granted the city an easement for the access point. Other collaborators in the project included the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, the Columbus Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, the Columbus Morning Rotary Club and Columbus Area Recreational Trails.

“I’m a firm believer that a good idea is just looking for the right time, and it turned out to be the right time,” Curry said. “The collaboration of this community is great. We’ve always come together to find ways to win and do things together, and this is just another example.”

■ ■ ■

In most places, the Loup River looks like a smaller version of the Platte, a wide, braided channel filled with constantly shifting sandbars on a generally easterly course across the state. In a few places, it looks like the Elkhorn, meandering through the valley, carving away at the outside bank and forming beautiful sandbars on the inside of bends.

I floated the Loup River Water Trail from Monroe to Columbus late last June with Curry and his son, Brian. Along

## Kayaking Etiquette

When paddling Nebraska’s rivers, remember that only the water belongs to the State of Nebraska. The riverbeds and all adjacent lands are the property of the landowner through which the water flows. Appreciate the privilege of using the waterway. Be respectful and mindful of landowners and their property. Nebraska state statutes give users permission to portage around fences and other obstructions; however, you are responsible for any damage to the property. You must have landowner permission to picnic or camp.

There are 11 established water trails in Nebraska. For a complete list and to download trail guides, go to [OutdoorNebraska.gov](http://OutdoorNebraska.gov) and search “Water Trails.” The website also includes an interactive trail map, tips, a list of river outfitters and more.





The Loup River takes a wide bend around George D. Syas Wildlife Management Area southeast of Genoa.

the way, we lost track of the number of bald eagles and red-tailed hawks we saw perched in trees along the river or soaring above it. We saw beaver and deer along the willow-lined banks, and the sound of our paddles occasionally sent silver carp, an invasive, non-native species, jumping out of the water.

The Loup River and its three branches, the North, Middle and South Loup, drain one-fifth of Nebraska. Fed primarily by groundwater bubbling up from the Oglala Aquifer, its reliable flows are diverted for power and irrigation. The last diversion located near Genoa sends a majority of the river's flows down a canal that feeds Nebraska Public Power District power plants.

At the time we floated the river, it would typically be laced with sandbars. On this day, with less water than normal being diverted into the canal, river flows measured by a U.S. Geologic Survey gauge near Genoa were 1,600 cubic feet per second, more than twice the norm. That was fortuitous, as we were bucking a 15- to 20-mph headwind through most

of the southeasterly course of the trail and literally moving upstream in spots if we dropped our paddles. Simply moving forward was enough work without having to chase the channel. While the best flows are typically found on the outside of bends, we found them sufficient throughout the channel, even on the inside, and rarely did our kayaks bump the bottom. When having to choose to go right or left of the two small, wooded islands and a few large sandbars we encountered on the trail, it was plain to see either choice would have enough water.

Instead of sandbars, most of the sand we saw was what historic flooding in 2019 piled on massive point bars. Those bars were reshaped a few weeks before our trip when the river approached flood stage following heavy rains. The latter had harvested a fresh crop of cottonwoods from the banks, leaving the river dotted with fresh snags.

The power district maintains at least 275 cubic feet per second of flows in the river throughout the year. They are limited in the amount they can divert from March through

June, meaning there is often more water in the river, making it the best time to paddle. Flows can still be highly variable during this time depending on rainfall in the basin. For the remainder of the summer, flows are low, but navigable.

Ken and Brian had tested the river during lower flows in July of 2022. Paddling from George D. Syas WMA to Monroe when flows were 350 cfs at Genoa, they had to work to stay in the deepest channel but rarely had to put down their paddles, grab a bow rope and walk.

With higher flows, our trip from Monroe to Columbus took six hours, including a stop for lunch and a few more to relax. "That was fun today," Curry said. "But it was long and definitely not a beginner's course."

Curry said the other two segments of the trail are more suited for paddlers not looking for an all-day adventure. The upper segment is a 3- to 4-hour float and the lower should be 2- to 3 hours, a distance that could even be inviting to tubers. He can see someone launching an outfitting business to ferry customers to and from the access points at Columbus and expects people to drive from Lincoln and Omaha to float the river. "You've got 1.5 million people within an hour," Curry said. "You saw the activity on the river today. Kids are hungry and families are hungry for fun on that river."

And now, they can easily access it. 📍

## The Pawnees

The Loup River Valley was once home to the Pawnee Indians. They called themselves Wolf People, or "Skidi" in their native tongue. Early French traders called them the "Pani Loups," and the river took their name. The Pawnee, however, had their own name for the river: Kari Kitsu, or "Plenty Potatoes River," named for the abundance of tubers Native American women gathered along its course.

The Skidi were one of four Pawnee tribes living in central Nebraska. They were farmers who lived in earth lodge villages and raised corn, beans and squash. They were also hunters and spent much of the year hunting bison along the Loup, Republican and Platte rivers.

Once numbering more than 60,000, European-borne diseases brought to Nebraska by white settlers and local battles greatly reduced their population. The tribe eventually ceded its territory to the U.S. government and was relocated to what is now Pawnee County in Oklahoma. Today, the tribe has 3,200 enrolled members.

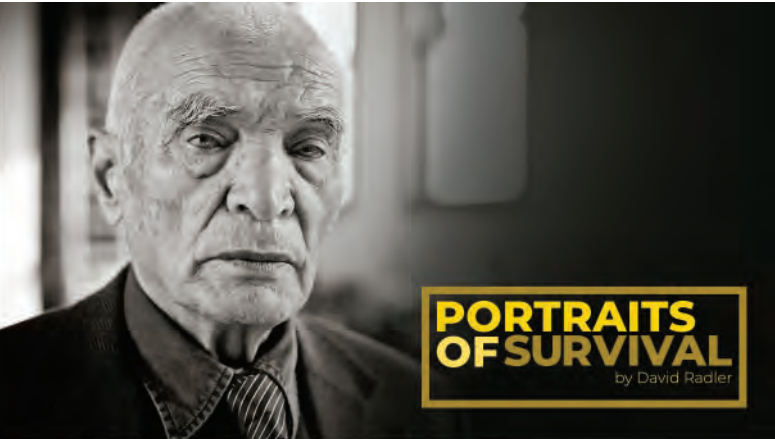


Brian and Ken Curry load up their gear at a new access point on the Loup River Water Trail south of Monroe.





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# A HARLAN RECONNECTION

By Eric Fowler



When reservoirs are new, and creekbottoms and draws that once led to the river that was dammed fill with water, they can be incredible fisheries. As the reservoirs age and shorelines erode, however, the mouths of those bays can become filled with sediment, disconnecting them from the lake. That was the case with Methodist Cove on the north side of Harlan County Lake.

Thanks to a \$9.25-million aquatic ecosystem restoration project set to be completed this spring that removed 150,000 cubic yards of silt and dredged a channel between the cove and the lake, connection between the two will be more frequent. The result should provide a spark to the lake's fish populations, especially crappie, and provide more opportunities for anglers.

At Harlan County Lake, ice heaves and wind-driven waves had no trouble moving light, eroded soils up and down the bank. That lateral movement of sediment had formed berms across the mouths of all but two of 29 coves, Patterson Harbor and Gremlin Cove, both at the east end of the reservoir near the dam, separating them from the reservoir except when it was at or near full pool.

Prior to the habitat project, Methodist Cove became

disconnected from the reservoir when water levels dropped less than 4 feet, and 11 times since 2000, the lake did not rise enough in the spring to spill into the bay. When it did and fish were able to spawn there, falling water levels when the irrigation season began often trapped and doomed their young.

Now, a 200-foot-wide channel connects the cove and the lake when the lake is 9 feet from full pool. It was designed to facilitate access to and from the cove in most years with two critical time periods for crappies in mind: mid-April to mid-May, when adults are looking for spawning habitat; and early July, when young of the year are large enough to head for the reservoir.

Additionally, the bay was less than 6 feet deep. After 100,000 cubic yards of sediment was removed — enough to cover a football field 50 feet deep — water will be up to 17 feet deep when the lake is full, much closer to the depth found there when the lake first filled in 1957. Even when it becomes disconnected, water will be 8 feet deep, enough for fish to survive the winter. More than 150 artificial structures



Artificial structures and cut cedar trees will serve as fish habitat in the area where sediment was excavated from Methodist Cove at Harlan County Lake. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Water fills the portions of Methodist Cove where a channel was dug to connect the cove to the lake and sediment was removed as part of an aquatic ecosystem restoration project at Harlan County Lake. Soon after this photo was captured last fall, the construction road crossing the channel was removed. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

and roughly 1,000 dead cedar trees, as well as a 300-foot-long rock shoal, were placed in the bay to provide spawning habitat and cover for fish.

Water levels in the lake, dependent on precipitation in the Republican River Basin that doesn't always replenish water released for irrigation, have varied widely through the years. "There are going to be times that [Methodist Cove] doesn't connect, but you're going to just have it function so many more years than if we wouldn't have done anything like this," said Tom Zikmund, who manages the lake for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

On both sides of the cove, shorelines were protected with riprap and jetties were built to prevent sediment from filling the new channel. The 500-foot jetty on the west side of the cove extends from one of the Corps' two major campgrounds on the lake and will provide anglers access to deeper water.

A half-mile north of the lake, Corps Road B dissects the creekbottom, forming a pond that had filled with silt washed in from pastures and fields in the watershed and was just a foot deep. The project removed 52,000 cubic yards of sediment from the pond. Now 5 feet deep and bisected with fingers, it will continue to capture sediment. Fed by reliable flows from spring-fed Methodist Creek, it will also provide additional shore fishing opportunities, as well as habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife. Game and Parks plans to stock largemouth bass, bluegills and crappies there this spring.

Federal funding from a program designed to improve aquatic habitat on aging Corps reservoirs covered 75 percent of the cost. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Aquatic Habitat Program funded the other 25 percent. Project

managers with the Corps and Game and Parks fisheries biologists began looking at ways to reconnect coves to the reservoir about 15 years ago.

Keith Koupal, a reservoir specialist with Game and Parks, said state and federal biologists weighed the cost and benefits of reconnecting six coves on the lake. For each, they looked at how deep the coves were, how much excavation would need to be done to reconnect them to the reservoir, how many years they would remain connected under typical lake levels and how many acres of habitat would be available to fish. While reconnecting other bays may have taken less work at less cost, the size of Methodist Cove, and its location on the upper end of the reservoir, where it was more affected by seasonal drawdowns, made it the best choice. "We're kind of making a small lake within a big reservoir," Koupal said.

Zikmund said his sons are among the many kids who ride bicycles to the Methodist Cove to fish. He expects the project will draw more anglers, both young and old, and they are working on plans to improve access around the bay. "I'm very excited about having more opportunities for people to bank fish," he said.

The Aquatic Habitat Program had previously funded a project to protect Patterson Cove. Both agencies hope they can work to reconnect more of the coves on the lake. That will make crappie anglers, especially the ones who remember fishing in Methodist Cove when the lake was new, happy. "In all of my years of being around the lake, any time the water is high, everybody is excited about the crappie," Zikmund said. "They all kind of know that we're going to have coves that have crappie in them."



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# PREVENTING CREEPY CRAWLERS

By Jarrod Spilger

Ticks are an unfortunate reality of spring turkey hunting. My worst experience happened many years ago while bowhunting along the Loup River. I must have stumbled into a nest of ticks. Afterward, I picked dozens, if not hundreds, of the critters off my body and clothes.

Thankfully, those days are over. Last season, I didn't find a single tick on me all spring while hunting, or all summer while fishing, despite frequenting some pretty buggy places. That's because I wore specialized clothing infused with Insect Shield, a permethrin treatment that not only repels ticks, but also chiggers, mosquitoes, gnats and other insects.

A couple of well-known outdoor brands offer hunters, anglers and hikers several bug-free apparel options, all of which are infused with Insect Shield. The first is Sitka's Equinox Guard line of tick-repelling clothing. It consists of a hoody with an integrated facemask and pants with integrated ankle gaiters that tuck into boots and gloves. Color options include several camo patterns suitable for spring turkey hunting or early-season archery deer, as well as earth-tone solids for outdoor lovers and tick haters who don't need camo.

Learn more at [Sitkgear.com](http://Sitkgear.com).  
Gamehide's ElimiTick line offers an even larger selection of bug-proof clothing. Options include lightweight, long-sleeve T-shirts, button-up shirts, pants, bibs, gloves, facemasks and socks. ElimiTick's Cover-Up Jacket and Pant can be worn over other clothes when hunting in cooler weather. Many of these items are also available in women's sizes. Colors include Mossy Oak and Realtree camo patterns perfect for spring turkey hunting, as well as solid earth tones. Learn more at [Gamehide.com](http://Gamehide.com), including how to maintain these products after wearing them multiple times.  
Oddly, Sitka nor ElimiTick offer an insect-repelling cap, but one is available directly from Insect Shield. It comes in either Realtree or Mossy Oak camo. I wore the Insect Shield cap last season, and it did a fine job of keeping gnats away from my eyes. Buy it at [Insectshield.com](http://Insectshield.com).  
Stay safe and comfortable this spring and summer — bugfree.  
*Lifelong Nebraskan Jarrod Spilger has been hunting turkeys for 35 years.*



Sitka's Equinox Guard line of tick-repelling clothing is worth the price to keep insects off you this spring. COURTESY OF JARROD SPILGER



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# CREATURES OF HABIT(AT)

By Mark P. Vrtiska

Ranchers and landowners who host migrating trumpeter swans each year often share a common question for biologists: “Is that the same pair of swans?” The answer, more than likely, is yes.

A recent study of 38 trumpeter swans captured and fitted with transmitters in the Sandhills found 80 percent of swans that nested at a particular wetland or lake came back to that same wetland or lake the following year. Their return to the same area each spring appears to be driven by their diet.

The largest waterfowl species on the planet, swans feed almost exclusively on submerged aquatic vegetation, which only grows in wetlands, creeks and rivers with good water quality and clarity. The swans likely return to these areas knowing there will be food to eat when they get there.

The swans’ fidelity — or rate of return — for wintering areas was similar, returning at a rate of just over 72 percent for all swans, and 79 percent for swans with cygnets. It should be noted, however, that all of the swans that were tracked returned to the wintering area from the previous year at one time or another.

Once swans migrated to a wintering area, they spent almost 77 percent of their time there, but did move some, using two to three areas during the winter. Again, there was some unanticipated variation in their use of small creeks where swan use had not been previously documented. Known for being very territorial, there was never more than one nesting pair on a wetland or lake in the Sandhills during this study.

The future of trumpeter swans in Nebraska and elsewhere depends on the conservation and management of breeding and wintering areas with abundant, submergent aquatic vegetation. Eliminating or reducing carp, soil runoff, invasive plants and other factors will ensure they have access to those resources they need.

Swans are the big, white “canaries” of high-quality wetlands, lakes, creeks and rivers, and their status are an indication in how good a job we’re doing in conserving those areas, but also our own environment.

*Mark P. Vrtiska is a professor of practice of wildlife management at UN-L’s School of Natural Resources.*



A female trumpeter swan rearranges eggs in her nest at Cottonwood Lake State Recreation Area in Cherry County.  
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



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**Pheasant hunting near Hastings, 1968**

Three generations of Joneses enjoying a beautiful fall day hunting. From left: Randy, Grandpa Charlie, Freddie McCormack (a friend from Lincoln) and Dale. Hunting near Bladen and Red Cloud along creekbeds, plum thickets and grasslands. Picture taken by Grandma Amy who probably helped tired hunters clean the birds.

– Randy Jones, Hastings



**Pheasant and rabbit hunting near Albion, 1969**

Shown are my nephew Rick Johnson and my dad Clarence Johnson of Fremont, my cousin Kurt Kinney of Albion and my uncle John Henry Johnson of Neligh after a pheasant and rabbit hunt at Kinney Farm near Albion on Thanksgiving Day 1969. John Henry would always wear his army leggings from WWII when hunting. Hunting in the Albion area was very good in the 1960s, and my dad and I spent many weekends there during pheasant seasons.

– Art Johnson, Fremont



**Waterfowl and jackrabbit hunting near Ohiowa, 1959 and 1958**

I was looking through some pictures this weekend and found a few old pictures of my father from when he was a kid enjoying the fine hunting opportunities that our state has to offer. He always loved the outdoors and is the person who instilled my love for the outdoors, which I in return pass on to my children and others. He was very instrumental in my career choice. Though he is no longer with us, his memory lives on.

The first picture is of my father, Layne Schelbitzki, and my grandfather, Loyd Schelbitzki, in December of 1959 after a successful waterfowl hunt in the Ohiowa area.

The second picture is of my father with his cousin Jerry Dittmer, new dog and old farm cat. This is my father's first jackrabbit with his new .410 shotgun at the family farm near Ohiowa in the late 1950s — I would guess 1958.

– Dusty Schelbitzki, Lincoln



**Carp fishing near Wahoo, 1969**

Summer of 1969, we got these carp in Silver Creek east of Wahoo.

Had them smoked, and my mom, Edith, took the picture.

– Dave Radenslaben, Cedar Bluffs

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](mailto: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.





Fort Robinson State Park's Soldier Creek at sunset. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

# LINING UP A PHOTO

By Justin Haag

Last April, I added this image of Soldier Creek at Fort Robinson State Park to the countless sunrise and sunset photos I've shot through the years. Some have been as easy as stepping out of the truck and pushing the button. Occasionally, the view from the driver's side window even has worked. More effort goes into others.

A goal on this day was to capture a photo of a Pine Ridge stream at sunset. By studying a website that shows the angle of the sun's exposure to locations at any given time, I noticed this section of the creek would line up with the setting sun on this day. Off I went for an afternoon of photography around Fort Robinson — always worthwhile, regardless if planning is involved or not.

With the sun approaching the horizon and

a bunch of other photos from around the park in the bag, I arrived near the location, donned chest waders and hiked to the spot with the camera, wide-angle lens and tripod over my shoulder. As expected, the sun shone through the mostly leafless trees of early spring.

I was pleased to see, actually first hear, a little waterfall. I waded into the creek and set up below that spot. The tripod, placed in the middle of the stream, allowed me to emphasize the water's motion with a slow shutter speed and capture the sunburst with a small aperture.

Is it the best sunrise-sunset photo ever taken at Fort Robinson? Not by a long shot. I like it, though.

Besides, it's always a good day of work when we get to wade in the creek.

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