



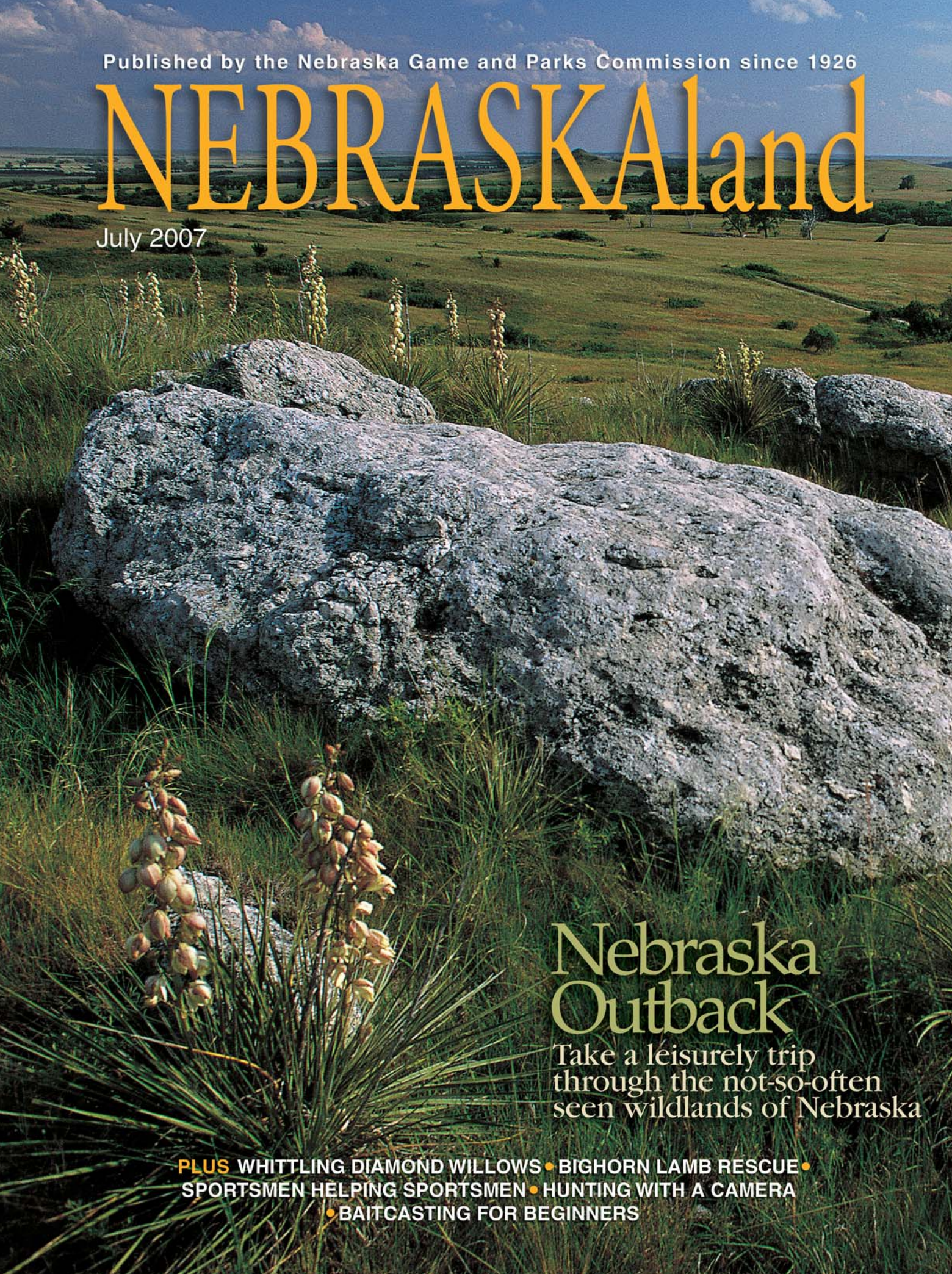
As American as apple pie, Fourth of July firework displays are enjoyed by both young and old alike each year as our country celebrates its freedom. Here onlookers watch a display in Lincoln. Photo by Justin Wambold.



NEBRASKAland Magazine

Published by the
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

NebraskalandMagazine.com



Published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission since 1926

NEBRASKAland

July 2007

Nebraska
Outback

Take a leisurely trip
through the not-so-often
seen wildlands of Nebraska

PLUS WHITTLING DIAMOND WILLOWS • BIGHORN LAMB RESCUE •
SPORTSMEN HELPING SPORTSMEN • HUNTING WITH A CAMERA
• BAITCASTING FOR BEGINNERS



NEBRASKAland

Volume 85, Number 6, July 2007

FEATURES

10 Nebraska Outback

An evening drive down a country road or a walk through woodland or grassland watching the subtle changes of the seasons is one of the simple joys of life in Nebraska.

By JON FARRAR

20 Rocky Rescue

Volunteer firefighters from Gering work with Nebraska Game and Parks Commission employees to rescue a wayward bighorn lamb.

By BOB GRIER

24 SANDS - Nature for Everyone

Sportsmen Assisting Nebraska's Disabled Sportsmen teams volunteers with disabled participants seeking time afield.

By JEFF KURRUS

32 Photographing Nebraska Outdoors

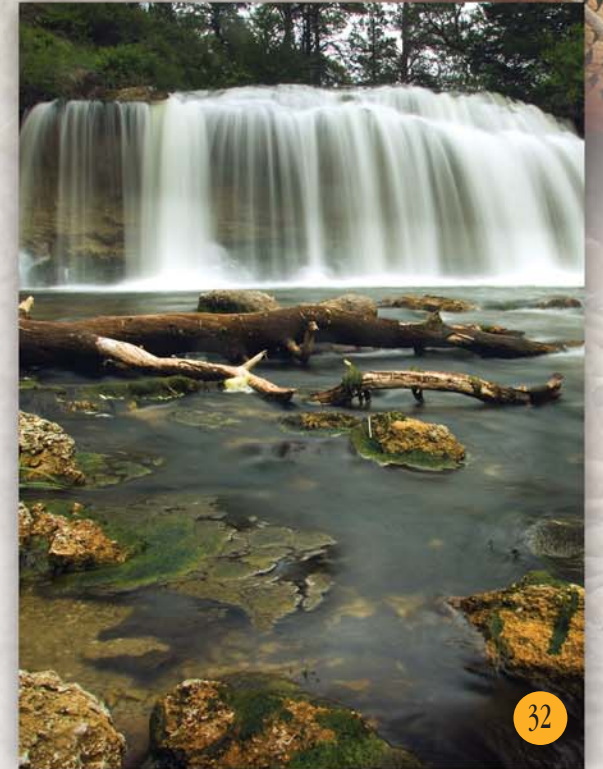
This month we discuss camera stabilization techniques, how to "hunt" with a camera and how to use a histogram to help you properly expose digital images.

By JUSTIN WAMBOLD, ERIC FOWLER AND DOUG CARROLL

38 Diamonds in the Rough

Whittling diamond willow canes was once a common craft in rural Nebraska, transforming rough sticks into works of art.

By JON FARRAR



DEPARTMENTS

8 Outdoor Business

Flow-through chute at Schilling WMA is improving habitat.

46 Outdoor Update

Rock hunters can have great fun on U.S. Forest Service land.

47 Wilderness Workshop

Baitcasting 101 – how to successfully use an oft-feared reel.

49 Parks & Places

Nemaha NRD lake an out-of-the-way hotspot for anglers.

Comment 4

Outdoor News 6

Classifieds 48

Portraits from the Past 50

Cover: Scenes like these glacial boulders surrounded by flowering soapweed are some of the simple joys of living in Nebraska. See story beginning on page 10. Photo by Jon Farrar.

Opposite: Randy Deck of Doniphan portrays a blacksmith hard at work during a living history day at Fort Kearny State Historical Park. Photo by Eric Fowler.



NEBRASKAland Magazine



Published by the
**Nebraska Game and
Parks Commission**

Director: Rex Amack

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

Commissioners

Chairman:
Gary Parker, Columbus
Vice Chairman:
Bill Zutavern, Dunning
2nd Vice Chairman:
George E. Hall, Bridgeport

James Ziebarth, Wilcox
Jerrod Burke, Curtis
Dr. Mark Pinkerton, Wilber
James Stuart, Jr., Lincoln
Ron Stave, Waterloo

Magazine Staff

Editor: Doug Carroll
Associate Editor: Jeff Kurrus
Art Director: Tim Reigert
Senior Editors: Jon Farrar, Ken Bouc
Regional Editors:
Eric Fowler, Bob Grier, Rocky Hoffmann
Contributing Editor: Michael Forsberg
Circulation: Donna Robinson
Photo Librarian: Sarah Johnson

NEBRASKAland VOL. 85 / NO. 6
ISSN: 0028-1964 JULY 2007

Published monthly, except for Jan./Feb. and Aug./Sept.
issues, by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, 2200
N. 33rd St., Lincoln, NE. Copyright 2007, all rights reserved.
Please address comments or questions to this address.
Periodicals postage paid at Lincoln, Nebraska, and other
locations. POSTMASTER: Send all address changes to
NEBRASKAland, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370.
NEBRASKAland is available on audio cassette from the
Nebraska Library Commission Talking Book and Braille
Service, Suite 120, 1200 N St., Lincoln, NE 68508, (800)
742-7691.

Rates: \$18 for one year; \$33 for two years; \$44 for
three years. Nebraska residents must add
appropriate sales tax.
To subscribe call 1-800-NEBLAND (632-5263),
or go online to: NebraskaLandMagazine.com.

For address changes and questions about your
subscription, e-mail donna.robinson@ngpc.ne.gov.



Six Air Force personnel stationed in southwest Asia are pictured showing where their hearts are. From left to right are: Capt. Johanna Ollerich, Sioux Falls, S.D.; Capt. Nathan Frederickson, Lincoln; Lt. Col. R. Bruce Mundie, Papillion; Capt. Jason Howell, Lincoln, Capt. Chris Shannon, Lincoln; and Capt. Steve Ohlmeyer, Papillion.

Memories of Home

While preparing to deploy to southwest Asia, I bought a copy of *NEBRASKAland Magazine* and put it in my deployment bag. When I pulled it out a few weeks later to read, the magazine drew a lot of attention. The discussion quickly turned to other Nebraskans who were deployed to the same location. Come to find out there were quite a few.

Attached is a picture of our small group of fellow Nebraskans serving in the United States Air Force in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. We are pictured in front of an RC-135 deployed from the Fighting 55th Wing at Offutt Air Force Base Nebraska.

Love your magazine and home back in Nebraska. All the best.

R. Bruce Mundie,
Lt Col, USAF
Papillion, Nebraska

I am writing on behalf of myself and many fellow soldiers currently serving in Iraq to thank you for the great work you do.

There is not a month that goes by that we don't anxiously await the arrival of care packages that we know will contain the newest *NEBRASKAland*. With a good portion

of Nebraska soldiers currently deployed, I see many of them passing new and old issues of the magazine around daily, each enjoying its photos and articles for different reasons. Most find that it simply reminds them of home and simpler days.

In our travels I have also shared my joy of Nebraska by sharing copies of *NEBRASKAland* with fellow soldiers from other states who share our love of the outdoors. There is not a one who hasn't commented on the outstanding photos and articles, wishing their state provided such a magazine.

Again, thanks for the outstanding work you do,
Capt. Bradley Wangler
1-167th RSTA (CAV)
LSA-Anaconda Iraq

Well Done

I am a seasoned citizen and moderately longtime subscriber (probably 20-plus years, but I am sure that you have many subscribers in the 40-plus year range).

Before the end of my seasons, I would like to congratulate and thank everyone associated (past and present) with *NEBRASKAland*. I have subscribed to many magazines over the seasons, including the Sierra

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Offices

Headquarters
2200 N. 33rd Street
Lincoln, NE 68503
Phone (402) 471-0641

District Office I
East Hwy. 2, Box 725
Alliance, NE 69301
Phone (308) 763-2940

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

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

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

District Office VI
1617 First Ave.
Kearney, NE 68847
Phone (308) 865-5310

Omaha Office
1212 Bob Gibson Blvd.
Omaha, NE 68108
Phone (402) 595-2144

Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium
21502 W. Highway 31
Gretna, NE 68028
Phone (402) 332-3901

World Wide Web site: OutdoorNebraska.org
E-mail: ngpc@ngpc.state.ne.us

Conservation Officers by Region

Administration			Terry Brentzel			Grand Is.		
Ted Blume (Adm.)	Lincoln	471-5531	Darin Gress	Hebron	(402) 768-2287			384-8296
Craig Stover (Asst.)	Lincoln	471-5532	Dale Johnson	Kearney	237-1079			
Wes Loos (Asst.)	Lincoln	471-5591	Mark Reeves	Loup City	745-0662			
Rod Loos (Asst.)	Ogallala	(308) 284-8056	Robert Finke	Milford	(402) 761-3537			
Murray Johnson	Lincoln	471-5003	Richard Seward	Ord	728-3115			

Panhandle			Northeast		
Officer	City	Phone (308)	Officer	City	Phone (402)
Jim Zimmerman (Sup.)	Gering	436-7561	Tom Zimmer (Sup.)	Norfolk	371-6625
Walt Meyer	Chadron	432-4398	Robert Kelly	Albion	395-2538
Scott Brandt	Gering	436-3418	Dale Davis	Bassett	273-1700
Heath Packett	Gordon	282-2553	Ross Oestmann	Bloomfield	373-4412
Dennis Thompson	Ogallala	284-6450	Steve Oberg	Columbus	564-5937
Dan Zuehlke	Ogallala	284-4815	Daniel Roberts	Fremont	721-7852
Doug Pollard	Oshkosh	772-9950	Jon Reeves	Kennard	427-7378
Frank Miller	Valentine	(402) 376-1183	Marion Shafer	Norfolk	371-2031
Dan Kling	Whitney	432-8367	Pat George	O'Neill	336-1588
			Eric Wiebe	Ponca	755-2566
			Tim Williams	Neligh	887-1335
			Cory Krause	West Point	372-6979

Southwest			Southeast		
Officer	City	Phone (308)	Officer	City	Phone (402)
Roger Thompson (Sup.)	N. Platte	532-9175	Duane Arp (Sup.)	Gretna	332-2965
Ray Dierking	Brkn. Bow	872-3078	Sean McKeehan	Ashland	944-4174
George Sund	Cambridge	697-4629	William Krause	Auburn	274-3789
Michael Thome	Cozad	784-4362	Jeremy TenKley	Beatrice	228-1437
Matt Andrews	Elwood	785-3025	Mike Luben	Colon	443-4278
Dirk Greene	Imperial	882-5328	Douglas Kramer	Lincoln	466-9001
Virgil Gosch	McCook	345-2185	Dina Barta	Lincoln	483-2358
Dudley Sorensen	N. Platte	532-0747	Stacey Lewton	Lincoln	476-0436
Rich Routh	Rep. City	799-2085	Levi Krause	Louisville	234-2212
			Jerry Pecha (Sup.)	Kearney	865-5327
			Russell Mort	Nebr. City	873-5684
			Dan Evasco	Papillion	592-6733
			Jeff Clauson	Waterloo	359-5301

Nebraska Wildlife Crimestoppers 1-800-742-7627

Club magazine, but *NEBRASKAland* has always been and continues to be my favorite. The photos and writing are superb, even better than what is in the Sierra magazine. What I especially like about *NEBRASKAland* is that it is all substance, not page after page of commercial advertising.

Although I have meant to write this letter for years, the kick in the pants was the Jan/Feb issue with the beautiful photos of sandhill cranes and the article "A Cause for Celebration" about them nesting in the Panhandle.

I keep the October 2005 issue by my desk so that when I need a moment away from work, I can gaze upon the fall prairie grasses in Grant County or any of the other marvelous Forsberg photos from "Sandhills Autumn on the Rise."

Of course, *The Way Home* is on my coffee table, the Lewis and Clark special is on my breakfast table for ready reference to the journey; and many other past issues are in my filing cabinet for wintertime review and refreshment.

In other words, every issue is special and extremely well done. Thank you again, and please thank everyone associated with the magazine for your wonderful work.

Clayton Brant
Lincoln, Nebraska

Send your comments to:
Doug Carroll, Editor
NEBRASKAland Magazine
P.O. Box 30370
Lincoln, NE 68503
or e-mail doug.carroll@ngpc.ne.gov.
Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

Story and photo submissions can be sent to the same address. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope for mailed submissions. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material.

Under federal and/or state law, discrimination is prohibited on the basis of race, color, religion, age, gender, marital status, national origin, disability or political affiliation. If you think you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission or want more information, contact the Commission in Lincoln, NE, at (402) 471-0641 or the Equal Opportunity Commission, Lincoln, NE, (402) 471-2024, TTY/TDD (402) 471-4693.

Tune In To Turpin Time



Veteran outdoorsman Dick Turpin offers outdoor tips in Turpin Time, produced by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Each 60-second spot features Dick's trademark humor, and includes advice on camping, hunting, fishing, cooking, wildlife viewing, or safety.

KOLN-KGIN (Lincoln-Grand Island)
Thursdays: 6:50 AM
Thursdays: 6:00 PM Sports

KNOP (North Platte)
Thursdays: 11:30 AM News
Fridays 6:55 AM

KDUH (Scottsbluff)
Tuesdays: Noon, 5:30 PM
and 10 PM News

KMEG (Dakota Dunes SD – Sioux City market)
Wednesdays: 6 PM News



Brett Cooper's acrylic painting of a pair of trumpeter swans was chosen Best of Show at this year's Nebraska Federal Junior Duck Stamp Contest.

Nebraska Federal Junior Duck Stamp Winner

Brett Cooper of Harrisburg won the Nebraska Federal Junior Duck Stamp Contest for the fifth time when his acrylic painting of a pair of trumpeter swans was chosen Best of Show.

An 18-year-old student at Banner County High School this past year, Cooper's artwork was selected from more than 900 entries received from across the state. Cooper's painting will be used for the 2008 Nebraska Waterfowl Stamp and was entered in the National Junior Duck Stamp Competition held at the National Zoo in Washington, DC.

The winner entry in the national competition will be used for the 2007-2008 Junior Duck Stamp. Proceeds from the sale of Junior Duck Stamps, which cost \$5, support conservation education. Last year Cooper's painting of a canvasback duck pair placed second in the national contest.

Judges for this year's competition were Connie McKinney, a Scottsbluff artist and educator; *NEBRASKAland* writer/photographer Bob Grier; Neal Anderson, an award-winning wildlife artist from Lincoln;

Hod Kosman, a conservationist from Scottsbluff; and Jim Holland, editor of the Scottsbluff Star Herald.

Information for next year's contest will be posted on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's internet homepage at <http://duckstamps.fws.gov>.

2006 Master Angler Results

In 2006 a total of 1,852 Master Angler (MA) fish were caught in Nebraska, with largemouth bass (435), striped bass hybrid (328) and channel catfish (309) leading the way.

Some of the top lakes across the state by region included Box Butte Reservoir with 18 MA awards, Merritt with 55, Fremont Lakes with 10, Red Willow with 165, Branched Oak with 149 and Harlan County Lake with 58.

Looking at individual species and where they were caught, 82 MA flathead catfish were caught at Branched Oak, 44 MA walleyes at Lake McConaughy, 39 MA channel catfish at Merritt, 9 MA largemouth bass at Zorinsky Lake in Omaha, 7 MA northern pike at Box Butte and 3 MA bluegill came from Smith Lake.

Of the 1,852 MA fish caught in 2006, 396 were caught from private

impoundments and 1,306 were released.

Although anglers can catch master angler-sized fish each month in Nebraska, in 2006 March was the best month for flathead catfish (42); May for walleye (38), crappie (30), northern pike (14), and carp (6); June for largemouth bass (87), channel catfish (80), and bluegill (34); July for striped bass hybrid (175) and smallmouth bass (7) and August for white bass (11) and drum (6).

For information on Master Angler rules and other fishing regulations, pick up a copy of the 2007 Nebraska Fishing Guide or go online to OutdoorNebraska.com and click on Fishing.



Advanced Muskellunge Stocked in Nebraska Lakes

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission personnel from the North Platte Fish Hatchery recently stocked advanced-sized muskellunge in six Nebraska Lakes as part of the agency's trophy fishery program. These included 2,000 muskies that measured 12-14 inches long in Enders Reservoir, Fremont Lakes Nos. 7 and 8, Wagon Train Lake, Calamus Reservoir and Zorinsky Lake. Anglers should note that there is a 40-inch minimum statewide for muskellunge.

New Online Feature

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Outdoor Calendar is now available and can be accessed at OutdoorNebraska.com.

The calendar features upcoming outdoor activities including state park events, living history demonstrations,

buffalo cookouts, entertainment, hunting and fishing. The calendar also features outdoor education programs including boater education, hunter education and naturalist programs. It is the perfect way to plan a Nebraska outdoor vacation this summer.

Corners for Wildlife Program Receives \$300,000

Corners for Wildlife, a Pheasants Forever (PF) program in Nebraska, has received a \$300,000 grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust to help establish wildlife habitat on center pivot irrigation corners.

The Trust is a state program dedicated to the preservation of Nebraska's natural resources. Pheasants Forever, the Nebraska Environmental Trust, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and local Natural Resources Districts help fund Corners for Wildlife, which gives landowners the option of enrolling in a program to help establish wildlife habitat on corners of center pivot-irrigated fields.

Center pivot irrigation systems leave areas of irrigated fields where the pivot cannot reach. Through the Corners for Wildlife program, these marginal corner areas are planted with prairie grasses, shrubs and trees, which provides critical wildlife habitat. Willing landowners enter into five-year contracts and receive annual rental payments up to a maximum of \$75 per acre and cost-share assistance for planting and maintenance. Once replanted with native plants and trees, these corner areas provide food and cover for pheasants, quail, grassland songbirds and other wildlife. They also reduce soil erosion and protect water supplies from agricultural runoff.

"Corners for Wildlife is the only program like it in the nation," said Pete Berthelsen, Senior Field Coordinator for PF. "The fact is many landowners have marginal areas or

pockets that aren't as agriculturally

productive, such as pivot corners that won't produce without supplemental water. The average pivot corner is seven acres, and this program gives us the opportunity to do some very valuable wildlife habitat work in otherwise intensely farmed areas."

Last year, Trust funding allowed for the enrollment of 185 corners in 2006, the most projects ever enrolled in a single year. Since the Corners for Wildlife program was introduced in 1994, over 6,698 acres of habitat have been planted on 1,183 projects by local PF chapters and their partners.



Purchase Deer Permits Now

Resident and nonresident deer hunters may now purchase any remaining firearm, youth or season choice permits for Nebraska's 2007 deer hunting seasons.

There is an unlimited number of permits available for the archery deer season that runs Sept. 15 - Nov. 9 and Nov. 19 - Dec. 31, as well as the muzzleloader season that will run Dec. 1-31. Hunters may obtain no more than two permits that allow the taking of a buck, but there is no limit to the number of antlerless-only permits a hunter may have.

Permits are available online at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's web site at OutdoorNebraska.com and over the counter at Commission offices in Alliance, Bassett, Kearney, Norfolk, North Platte, Omaha, Lincoln and at the Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium.

Completed application forms will also be accepted by mail at the Commission's Lincoln office at 2200 N. 33rd Street, Lincoln, 68503. ■

Restoration Project Paying Immediate Dividends

A Missouri River success story for wildlife and anglers.

By Eric Fowler

The construction of a flow-through chute and backwater at Randall W. Schilling Wildlife Management Area has given the 1,789-acre area near Plattsmouth a completely new look and re-created a diversity of fish and wildlife habitat not seen there for decades.

The 12,000-foot-long chute was completed in 2005 as part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Missouri River Mitigation Program, which is restoring some of the 500,000 acres of

feet, averaging 150 feet in width. The depth varies throughout its length and width and rises and falls with river levels, but should range from five to 15 feet during the summer under normal water levels. When river levels are low, the backwater will be disconnected from the chute, but still deep enough that fish can survive the winter.

The Metropolitan Utilities District in Omaha paid for the backwater to offset the effects its new well field, which will draw 100 million gallons per day from the groundwater along

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biologists captured pallids in their nets on more than one occasion in 2006 while sampling the fish community. Biologists have also found shovelnose sturgeon, channel and flathead catfish, sauger, smallmouth bass, carp, bigmouth and smallmouth buffalo, blue sucker, goldeye and gizzard shad in the chute. This spring, they found crappies, catfish and bluegills, as well as some of the previously mentioned species, in the backwater. Largemouth bass, sauger and catfish are expected to find their way into the backwater as well.

Heavy rains in May sent a flush of water through and across the area, which had been dry because of drought. As a result, the chute is a bit wider, a process that will continue and eventually lead to the development of sandbars and other important components of riverine habitat.

Construction of the chute created a 500-acre island and made 2½-miles of the area's 3¾-miles of Missouri River frontage inaccessible to bank anglers who had enjoyed fishing behind wing dikes. The Commission and Corps are currently working on plans for a bridge that

will span the chute, but whether it will be large enough for vehicles and when it will be built is not known. The area also has about ¾-mile of Platte River frontage.

Originally named the Plattsmouth Waterfowl Management Area, the area was renamed in 1980 for Randall Schilling, a wildlife biologist and manager of the area who was one of three biologists killed in a plane crash while on a deer survey. The area got

its start when the Commission purchased 1,167 acres from the federal government in 1947 and began developing it as a waterfowl refuge with Goose Lake as its centerpiece. A flock of captive Canada geese was held in a 15-acre pen on the lake to attract migrants, and those birds also hatched goslings that contributed to the expansion and recovery of geese in Nebraska. Eventually, as many as 100,000 ducks and geese a day were using Schilling during the fall migration.

In 1967, portions of the area were opened to controlled waterfowl hunting. Hunters lucky enough to have their name drawn could reserve one of several blinds scattered throughout the crop fields on the area and had good luck, especially on snow geese. Shifts in the snow goose migration route and the resulting drop in hunter success had all but ended that program by the late-1990s.

The Commission purchased an additional 478 acres on the south end of the area in 1997, and in 2005 lifted restrictions that limited access to the original acreage, making the area open to the public year-round for fishing, wildlife viewing and most hunting, including archery deer, pheasant and waterfowl. Parts of the area are reserved for a special youth dove hunt September 1-4 each year.

Some of the cropland on the area, including the island and the area around the backwater, has been replanted with a native grass and wildflower mix that includes Canada and Virginia wild rye, little bluestem, Indian grass, Illinois bundleflower, black-eyed Susan and Illinois bundleflower. ■

For more information on Randall W. Schilling WMA, go to www.OutdoorNebraska.org.



A recently completed flow-through chute at Schilling Wildlife Management Area near Plattsmouth has greatly increased fish and wildlife diversity in the area.

fish and wildlife habitat that was lost when the river was channelized. The chute begins just below the mouth of the Platte River and empties back into the Missouri just above the Plattsmouth Boat Club. In between, it branches off and passes through Schilling's Goose Lake, built in the early 1950s to provide a roosting area for migrating waterfowl.

The backwater, completed last fall, connects to the chute and branches off to the south for approximately 9,300

the Platte River west of Omaha, is expected to have on river flows and the endangered pallid sturgeon. In May, the Corps offered to help expand the backwater through its mitigation program, but those plans were not finalized at press time.

Fish quickly found the chute and backwater to their liking. Anglers reported catching pallid sturgeon in the portion of the chute passing through Goose Lake in May 2006, and

Family Fun!

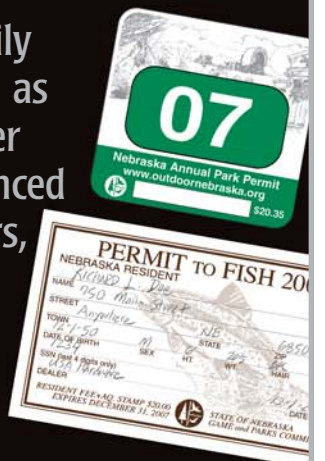


Fishing's Great at Nebraska's Parks and Recreation Areas

Few activities combine family fun and togetherness as well as camping and fishing. Whether your family includes experienced anglers or beginning campers, Nebraska's state parks and recreation areas offer something for everyone.

Visit our web site today for information about fishing and camping opportunities across the state. You can even purchase state park entry and fishing permits online. Round up your family and head outdoors for great family fun!

www.OutdoorNebraska.org
NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION



Nebraska Outback

Photos and text by Jon Farrar



A western meadowlark sings from a soapweed's dried flower stalk in the Sandhills.



Flowering elderberry found its piece of earth at the foot of a weathering barn north of Sargent in Custer County.

The price of gasoline has robbed us of some of life's small pleasures, like Sunday-evening drives across the river. It was a small town ritual, a parade of cars poking along one after the other, especially in the heat of summer, before air conditioning in houses was common and such an addiction. It was such a quiet joy, cruising along at 30 miles an hour down dirt and gravel roads, windows cranked down, delighting in the summertime wind chill; checking the progress of chokecherries, field corn and spring-born calves; laughing at your grandmother "making music" by humming on a comb wrapped in waxed paper.

It's not just the cost of gas keeping people from drives down country roads, it's a change in how we spend our hours away from work. And country roads are not what they used to be. Still, if you know your countryside, or don't fear not knowing exactly where you are or will end up, there are enough left to use up a bit more fossil fuel. With any luck at all you might come out at the Dairy Queen the next town over from yours.

Better than driving, and certainly less costly, is walking a bit of wildland. State parks are laced with walking trails, but not everyone lives near a park. Wildlife management areas are sprinkled across the state and open to the public the year-round. They are perfect places to park your car, extract your walking staff from the trunk and set off on foot. Day to day, week to week and through the seasons there is change, some small and subtle, easily overlooked, some so dramatic that familiar old stomping grounds are transformed into another world.



A killdeer pauses during its race along a sandy beach in search of insects.



Clouds roll across calm pond waters on Prairie Wolf Wildlife Management Area south of Genoa in Nance County.

Water, it is the stuff of all life: All creatures are built of it. All creatures require it. All creatures are drawn to it. And so the pencil-thin line where water and land come together is the richest in life. Sit in the willow patch by the edge of it and watch. Great blue herons stalking shallows for careless frogs, muskrats harvesting bulrush groves to build their lodges, red-winged blackbirds crying out their territorial songs. And there are magic moments in the windlessness of predawn and dusk, when wind-raked waters calm to smooth as glass, and only a sliver of horizon separates the clouds gathering on sky and seemingly on water. Daytime creatures retreat and nighttime creatures move silently through their dark world.

An old Sandhill rancher told me one time his “pet peeve” with photographers was that they photographed old dilapidated barns and outbuildings. “Why don’t they photograph the new, well-kept steads?” I said nothing. I was his guest, but, well, brick ranch houses and metal barns are just not that visually interesting. Even more, they are too young to have stories to tell.



Once a farmer's pride, a rusting International tractor is swallowed up by the land along the central Niobrara River.



A sprawling cottonwood rubbed by generations of cattle north of Haigler in Dund County.

Whenever I look at an old run-down, two-story farmhouse occupied only by raccoons and skunks, with a lilac bush by the screened door leading to the mud porch and irises still prospering by the yard gate, I try to imagine the first occupant's pride as their house was built, when they moved in their sparse furniture, how they must have showed it off to neighbors and relatives at Sunday dinners. Perhaps they were newly married. Perhaps the man promised his bride a new house, one with running water. How many children were born in the winter-cold upstairs bedroom, played barefoot in the dirt, grew like July corn. Where are they now? Long moved to noisy cities to raise their own children without plump red chickens gleaning potato bugs from the garden patch?

Spring comes with a blush of yellow-green to the tops of willows, a change more sensed than seen. Summer seems to come by default on grasslands, marked more by the end of spring, when the landscape's lush softness braces for scorching days with relentless south winds. Autumn begins with ripening grasses and, if rains have been timely, a rankness of vegetation. Winter comes not by the calendar but whenever the notion moves it south out of Canada. Each little spot of earth has its own progression, its own cast of characters.

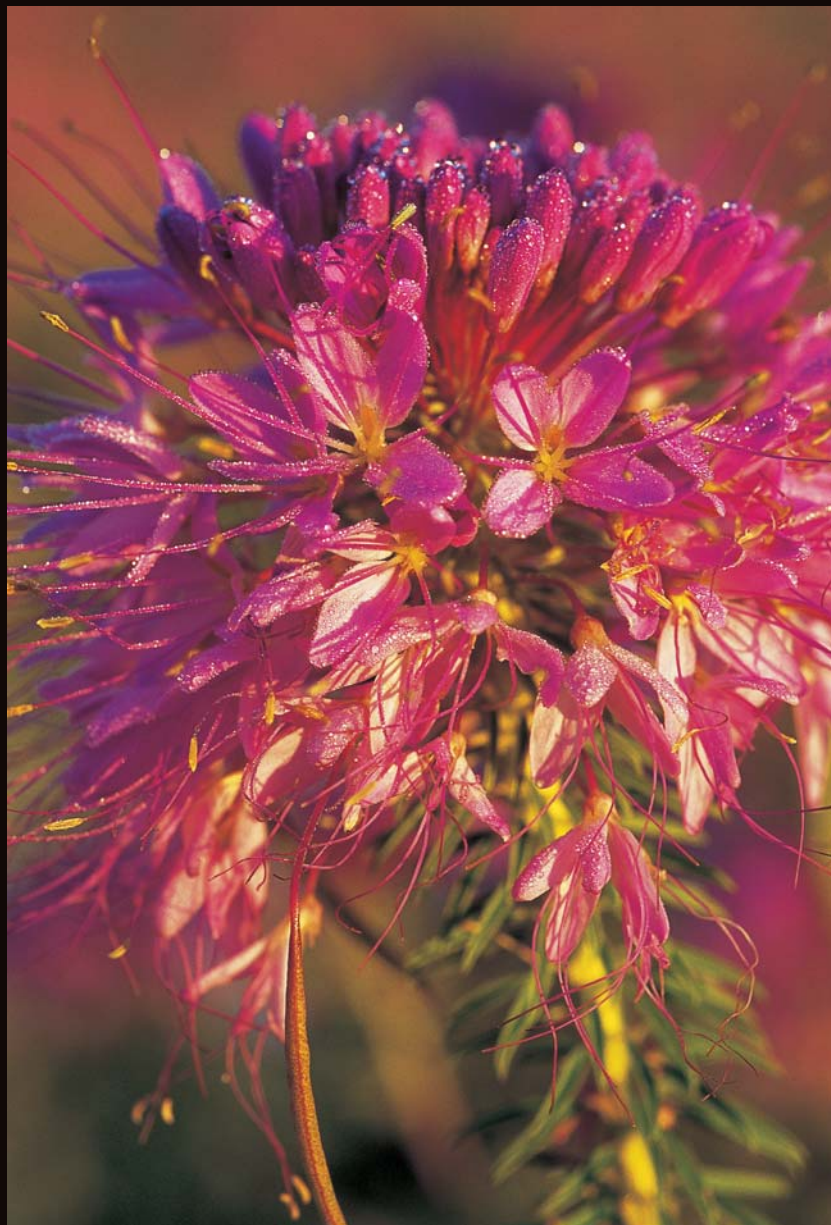


A patch of butterfly milkweed at Oak Glen Wildlife Management Area in Seward County glows in early morning light.



Glacial boulders and flowering soapweed dot a hill northwest of Mills in Keya Paha County.

I think of Marchs past, of driving down the interstate where it parallels the central Platte River and of swarms of sandhill cranes shifting low overhead from fields to sandbars. I look at other drivers, their eyes steely fixed on the road, none looking, and so none seeing. And so it is on every back road we drive, every deer trail we follow through riverside woodlands. So much to see, so little seen by so few.



A dew-covered Rocky Mountain bee plant glistens in the light of a new day.



A carpet of Rocky Mountain bee plants covers a pasture southeast of Tryon in McPherson County.

Preconceptions close our eyes to the world. We were taught apples are red, so we never look closely at the subtle blending of color on an apple's skin. We have been programmed to believe beautiful landscapes have snowy mountains and pounding surf. But beauty surrounds us, even in the least likely of places, even in this flat place we call Nebraska. It is in the wide sweep and the intricate details, in the pasture rich with weedy wildflowers and the uncountable, tiny blossoms that compose it.

Rocky Rescue

Photos and text by Bob Grier

Volunteer firefighters from Gering work with Nebraska Game and Parks Commission employees to rescue a wayward bighorn lamb.

The odds of finding a two-week-old, 10-pound bighorn lamb caught in a rocky crevasse near the top of a steep butte in the Wildcat Hills are extremely small. The chances that three volunteer firefighters and a handful of Nebraska Game and Parks Commission personnel could stage a successful rescue of a lamb unable to reach its mother in the area's nearly vertical terrain would have to be considered nearly impossible.

"Trapped like it was and unable to nurse, it was a sure death for the lamb," said Todd Nordeen, district wildlife manager of the Commission's district office in Alliance, "but Gering Volunteer Fire Department chief Jay Templar and his crew had mountain rescue training and Conservation Officer Scott Brandt and our wildlife division crew were eager to do all we reasonably could to keep from losing the lamb. We're not able to rescue every animal that we hear about, but because of the bighorn population's small size and the fact that we had a trained climbing crew available, we felt it was well worth the effort."

The lamb's predicament was discovered by Jennifer Malmberg, a

Chadron State College graduate student who is conducting research for the Commission on the Cedar Canyon bighorn herd that lives in the Wildcat Hills southwest of Scottsbluff and Gering. As part of her study, every day she tracks bighorns fitted with radio-transmitting collars and observes their habitat use and movements throughout the region.

While following the radio signals of an adult female bighorn west of the Cedar Canyon Wildlife Management Area in late-May, Malmberg found the ewe lying along the skyline at the edge of a steep cliff face. Movement below the sheep caught Malmberg's attention and as she watched, a weeks-old lamb made several attempts to climb the sheer rock walls below the ewe, each time sliding back to the bottom of a U-shaped notch.

Malmberg continued to observe the ewe and lamb for about four hours and after returning that evening for additional observations, watched the lamb make several more unsuccessful escape attempts while the ewe remained on the butte's rim.

"While this was going on," Malmberg said, "a coyote moved across the hillside below the lamb and

it was obvious – even at a distance – that the ewe became very alert and disturbed by the predator's presence. There was no doubt that she was intent on protecting her lamb."

Malmberg never saw the ewe try to climb down to the lamb, but the young animal did try to get some nourishment as she watched. "We'd received rain on the previous day and it was obvious the lamb was attempting to get water from the rocks and even browse on vegetation at the floor of the notch."



As rescue workers wait below with a net, Gering Volunteer Fire Department chief Jay Templar tries to rappel close enough to capture a trapped bighorn lamb (circled in red) and reunite it with its mother. The lamb eventually jumped safely into the net.

Malmberg telephoned Nordeen that afternoon to explain the situation and after returning home was able to e-mail photos showing the lamb's location among the steep terrain.

The odds of somehow extracting the lamb and getting it back with the ewe were really slim, Nordeen said, but given the herd's history, he felt it was important that they try. "The Commission and a partnership of sportsmen's and conservation groups reintroduced bighorn sheep into the

Wildcat Hills in March 2001 with 22 bighorn captured near Colorado Springs, Colorado. The bighorn population quickly grew that spring with the addition of 11 lambs, and eventually reached approximately 64 bighorn by 2006. That year, however, the herd suffered a devastating outbreak of pasteurella pneumonia that cut the Cedar Canyon bighorn herd in half. The difficulty of a rescue attempt to reunite this lamb with its mother was daunting, but we

wanted to at least try."

After receiving the report of the lamb's predicament, Nordeen contacted Templar, whose reaction he described as enthusiastic and determined.

"He and his personnel had received mountain rescue and recovery training and had previously rescued a climber caught on the side of Scotts Bluff National Monument," Nordeen said. "Jay felt the rescue attempt could be a valuable scenario to provide additional training for his department. During



After the lamb was safely captured and secured in a carry bag, conservation technician Rana Tucker safely took it back to the top of the ridge where it was reunited with its mother.

our planning that evening and the next morning, everyone understood that the trained firemen would do the climbing and that our wildlife team would follow their instructions and assist as much as possible without placing anyone in a risky situation.”

When the rescue crew arrived at the scene the following morning, the lamb was standing on a narrow foothold on the north side of the notch, occasionally moving to the notch’s floor where it tried to feed and drink. While the rescuers watched with spotting scopes and binoculars, it also retreated several times into a long, narrow passage that had eroded into the back of the notch. If a net could be thrown across the opening while the lamb was inside, rescuers realized, it would be possible to control the lamb’s movements.

The ewe was nowhere to be found as the crew hiked to the base of the butte but reappeared above the lamb and

watched as Brandt and three members of the Commission’s wildlife division spread a large net on the ground 30 to 35 feet below the lower rim of the notch. The cliff wall angled outward as it rose and prevented the net crew from observing the movements of the lamb, but the slight overhang also provided protection from rocks dislodged by the activity above.

When the netting crew was in place, Nordeen, Templar, Malmberg and the other rescue team members hiked around the base of the butte and after finding a gentle slope that provided access to the rim overlooking the lamb’s location, began their hike to the top carrying the ropes, climbing harnesses and safety equipment that would be needed for a safe descent into the notch. Nordeen also carried a throw net, blindfold, hobbles and a nylon carry bag that could be used to safely catch and control the lamb.

They were met at the top by the ewe.

“The ewe was obviously concerned and ready to defend her lamb,” said Malmberg. “The ewe continued to move back and forth fairly close, and at one point we felt it necessary to walk toward the ewe to move it back from the climbers as they rigged the ropes and rappelling equipment for the descent. The ewe couldn’t see everything that was going on and she continued to move forward and closer – she definitely wasn’t going to abandon her lamb.”

A large pine on the butte’s eastern slope served as a tie-off for the ropes and as Templar began his descent, the lamb began to sprint across the notch opening, climbing the steep rocky walls on both sides. The bighorn lamb’s climbing ability was impressive but not enough to carry it out of the notch – several times it was able to climb within five to ten feet of the top

before slipping back.

When Templar reached the notch’s floor the lamb sprinted by within a few feet of him several times and once or twice nearly bounced off of his helmet as it frantically moved from one side of the notch to the other. However, it never entered the narrow passageway that might have provided an opportunity to use the net to restrict its movements, and throwing the net at the small, high-speed lamb as it crossed back and forth proved equally futile.

The safety net now stretched below the cliff appeared to offer the best remaining hope for the lamb’s rescue and when the lamb momentarily stopped below him, Templar lowered himself further into the notch to see if it would be possible to catch the lamb before it attempted to jump. As he moved closer to it, Templar continued to tell the net crew the lamb’s exact location, so they were ready when the lamb suddenly attempted to climb down the sheer rock face below the notch before leaping approximately 20 to 25 feet into the waiting net.

“The lamb suddenly appeared in mid-air above us,” said Brandt, “but fortunately it landed almost exactly between three of us holding the south end of the net. If it had jumped several feet further south it would have missed the net because of the narrow foothold we had on the platform at the base of the cliff, and several feet to the north was a large boulder that would have certainly injured or killed the falling lamb. It was an amazing leap, but because of its landing spot, the lamb never touched the ground before we lowered it in the net.”

Brandt and the rest of the net crew quickly covered the lamb’s eyes and placed it into the nylon carry bag that was lowered from above. Just as quickly, the decision to return the lamb to the top of the butte using a circular route along the west and southern edge of the butte was relayed from the rescue crew above, so Brandt and Rana Tucker with the Commission’s wildlife division

carefully carried the lamb back to Nordeen and Malmberg’s location. Rather than re-climb the vertical cliff, Templar rappelled to the bottom and the remaining climbers packed the ropes and remaining climbing gear and began their hike to the south as well.

Nordeen said the ewe had moved away from the rescue crew on top of the butte, but they were soon able to find her again.

“Once the lamb was back on top, we worked our way south to relocate the ewe and found her still attempting to observe our activity from a narrow-edged point at the south end of the butte. She remained there as we approached to within 100 yards. We needed to maintain line-of-sight with the ewe and once that was possible, I opened the bag and, holding the lamb, let it raise its head. The lamb began to call and the ewe immediately responded with her calls to the lamb. As we released the lamb, it ran to an open area about 30 feet below the ewe and the ewe quickly moved to the lamb. They touched noses, smelling each other before the lamb began to nurse, and with the immediate business out of the way, the two walked slowly along the edge of the

butte and out of sight to the south.”

The sight of the ewe and lamb finally together again was met with cheering from the rescue party watching below.

“I was really excited about being there when the lamb was released,” Malmberg said later. “I’d spent several years already both at Chadron State College and with the Game and Parks Commission studying bighorns and it was great everything turned out the way it did. I’d have to say that it was really one of the very special days that I’ve been able to spend with the bighorns.”

Malmberg was able to observe the ewe and lamb over the next few days following the rescue and watched as they joined several other bighorn ewes and another lamb. Malmberg remains concerned for any delayed response to the stressful rescue and she noted the ewes with their lambs moved to a more grassy and flat plateau, where the lambs continually circled the ewes and the rescued lamb occasionally darted between the ewe’s legs to nurse.

Based on her experience observing bighorn sheep with lambs, Malmberg noticed that, perhaps not unexpectedly, the rescued lamb is now sticking very close to its mother. ■



After being reunited, the lamb made up for lost nursing time before the pair slowly walked over the hill and out of sight.

SANDS

Nature for Everyone

Photos and text by Jeff Kurrus

Sportsmen Assisting Nebraska's Disabled Sportsmen teams volunteers with disabled participants seeking time afield.

I've been told by more than one hunter that if they could stand a deer back up after they shot it and watch the animal walk away, they would do so. For many outdoor enthusiasts, the challenge of making the shot, or seeing the strike of a fish, is the most gratifying part. Harvesting the animal is just icing. Yet what happens if a person is never able to experience these moments in the first place? What happens if a person who adores their time in nature has these moments completely taken away by circumstance?

For people yet to experience nature as well as those whose hunting trips have been cut short by their disabilities, there is a program in Nebraska dedicated



Mason Freel, who has cerebral palsy, fishes from a pier at Zorinsky Lake.

to providing support. It is known as Sportsmen Assisting Nebraska's Disabled Sportsmen (SANDS), and it seeks to provide the opportunity for all people, regardless of their disability, to gain access to the outdoors where their own challenges of making a shot, or seeing a fish strike, can be fulfilled.

History of SANDS

"'Disabled hunter needs assistance' was what I originally wrote on the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's (NGPC) message board," said SANDS co-founder Dave Burgess. His wife was unable to push Dave and his wheelchair through the areas he wanted to hunt. Without help, he was at a loss how to continue his outdoor ventures until he received his first response, then another. "In the end, about a dozen people offered to take me out," he said. Little did he know where his simple request would lead. At first, Burgess admitted, the main focus was on him.

One of the people that responded was Mike Freel, who was interested in helping Dave because Freel's daughter, Mason, has cerebral palsy. As Mike and Dave began to talk, they spoke not only of getting Dave reacclimated to the outdoors, but also getting others involved. "There had to be other people out there who were in the same boat," Burgess remembers thinking. "Then I found out there were at least 29,000 people in Nebraska with disabilities in 2003."

Dave continued to research ways to construct a program where able-bodied volunteers could match up with disabled hunters needing assistance.

Then he found out about an organization in Illinois called Far Cry that had a disabled-assistance program. Realtree and Buckmasters, two of the outdoor field's largest companies, also had disabled programs. So Mike and Dave, after compiling their findings and constructing a plan of their own, took their idea to Greg Wagner, who runs the NGPC's Omaha office and suggested they take it to Jeff Rawlinson, who was the Commission's outdoor education

specialist at the time. Like Wagner, Rawlinson favored the idea, and he presented it to the NGPC's board of commissioners and it was approved in May of 2005, only three months after Burgess and Freel first spoke. Dave originally suggested they call it the Outdoor Nebraska Buddies program. Then Rawlinson suggested the SANDS acronym.

The main goal Burgess and Freel wanted to accomplish was provide an

avenue for volunteers and the disabled to contact each other. Currently there is a link on the Commission's web site that does just that, which is exactly what Burgess intended. But the program has grown even more than Burgess thought it would.

The first year saw more than 40 participants and 50 volunteers signed up. Now, there are more than 78 participants and 165 mentors whose varied interests include hunting, fishing,

camping, boating and other outdoor activities like astronomy.

"I don't tell people what activity they must do," said Burgess. "And I don't pick and choose who takes them. Let's be real — If I tell you you're going to go with this person over here, and you can't stand them, you might want to spend the day choking him instead of fishing with him. Instead, here's this guy's name and phone number. You contact him, arrange it, and build a



SANDS co-founder Dave Burgess and volunteer John Swinarski mark yardages before beginning their afternoon deer hunt at Boyer Chute.



SANDS member Don Rydburg (left) is congratulated by mentor Tyler Huffaker after Rydburg killed his first deer in more than a decade.

rapport between the two of you. You will have done more than start a hunting or fishing event. You will have started a friendship.”

But Burgess’s work still isn’t done, sending emails to a legion of people and organizations in an effort to not only find volunteers to hunt with but also sponsors for the program. Through these efforts the Bass Pro Shops in Council Bluffs allowed SANDS to run a mechanical bull at their 2006 Fall Classic, with all proceeds going to the SANDS program; Michael Cox, promotions manager for Bass Pro, donated over \$1,600 at their spring classic; free hunts have been donated by the National Wild Turkey Federation, Nebraska Safari Club and Pheasant Bonanza to participants of the program; and Whitetails Unlimited has sponsored one of the SANDS participants, Don Rydburg, with hunting gear. While Burgess is pleased with the sponsored hunts and extremely grateful for the ability of his members to participate in them, he still understands the cornerstone of the program.

“I don’t want SANDS to just be donated hunts,” he said. “I want there to be an outlet where mentors and disabled people can set up their own hunts just like everyone else. I researched what people were doing in other states and 90 percent, if not more, were donated hunts. I don’t want it like that forever.

“Nebraska is the first state to have this program. There are other states that have privately owned organizations that charge you to join and hunt. Nebraska’s is a free service. There is no fee for the equipment I lend out, including fish finders, ground blinds, tackle boxes and hunting supplies. All you have to do is buy your own tag. If you can’t do that, I try and find funds to have that tag bought for you.”

Volunteer Intensity

The first noticeable thing about John Swinarski is the intensity in his eyes. Once you meet him, you’ll see where that intensity is directed.

“Someone needs to take him fishing,”

he said about a man with Parkinson’s disease he had just met at a SANDS picnic last fall at Omaha’s Zorinsky Lake. “I don’t have a boat but I can take him somewhere off the bank.”

Swinarski had first asked Greg Wagner about helping people with disabilities a few years back, but at the time there wasn’t a program of that type in Nebraska. “Then I got on the Internet one day, saw the SANDS link and started talking to Burgess. We worked a fishing event with disabled kids in the Millard area. I didn’t realize there were so many kids who needed help. We had over 100 children at Zorinsky Lake that day in May of 2006. We also hosted a fishing tournament at Carter Lake that matched up disabled participants with mentors.”

Swinarski became interested in SANDS because his mom has limited mobility, eventually losing a leg last year. He has places close to Omaha where he can take people hunting, and they are not second-rate areas. “I saw 35 deer yesterday afternoon, including two respectable bucks, at the place I

have permission to hunt,” he told me last fall. When asked what chance the SANDS participant he was taking would get a shot, he said, “We’ll get him a deer if he can hit it.”

I was then able to go with Burgess and Swinarski on a hunt at the Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge. What interested me most about the hunt, and the most fascinating aspect of the SANDS program, is the amount of work the volunteers put in. The entire time we were in the woods, even while I interviewed Burgess, Swinarski was hunting, trying to get Dave a shot. As we talked, John was steadily scanning the front of the blind. At the end of the hunt, I asked John how he had so much free time.

“I just use vacation time to make these trips work.”

The 14-Year Deer

“I want you to shoot one more off the sticks,” Tyler Huffaker told SANDS participant Don Rydburg after Huffaker had made him a set of handmade shooting sticks to use as a brace on their hunt at Boyer Chute. The two met after Tyler signed up to be part of the SANDS program after meeting Dave Burgess at a booth he was running at the Council Bluffs Bass Pro Shops. Tyler then started calling people who had registered online for the program, but was not having much luck getting a response. ‘Maybe next year,’ he’d hear, or ‘Not right now.’ “I basically gave up on the program,” he said.

Then Don Rydburg called asking for help, and Tyler jumped at the opportunity. A few months later, Tyler was helping Don line up a crossbow Whitetails Unlimited had donated to him. They also gave Don the money for his tag, a knife and the first camouflage that Don has ever owned.

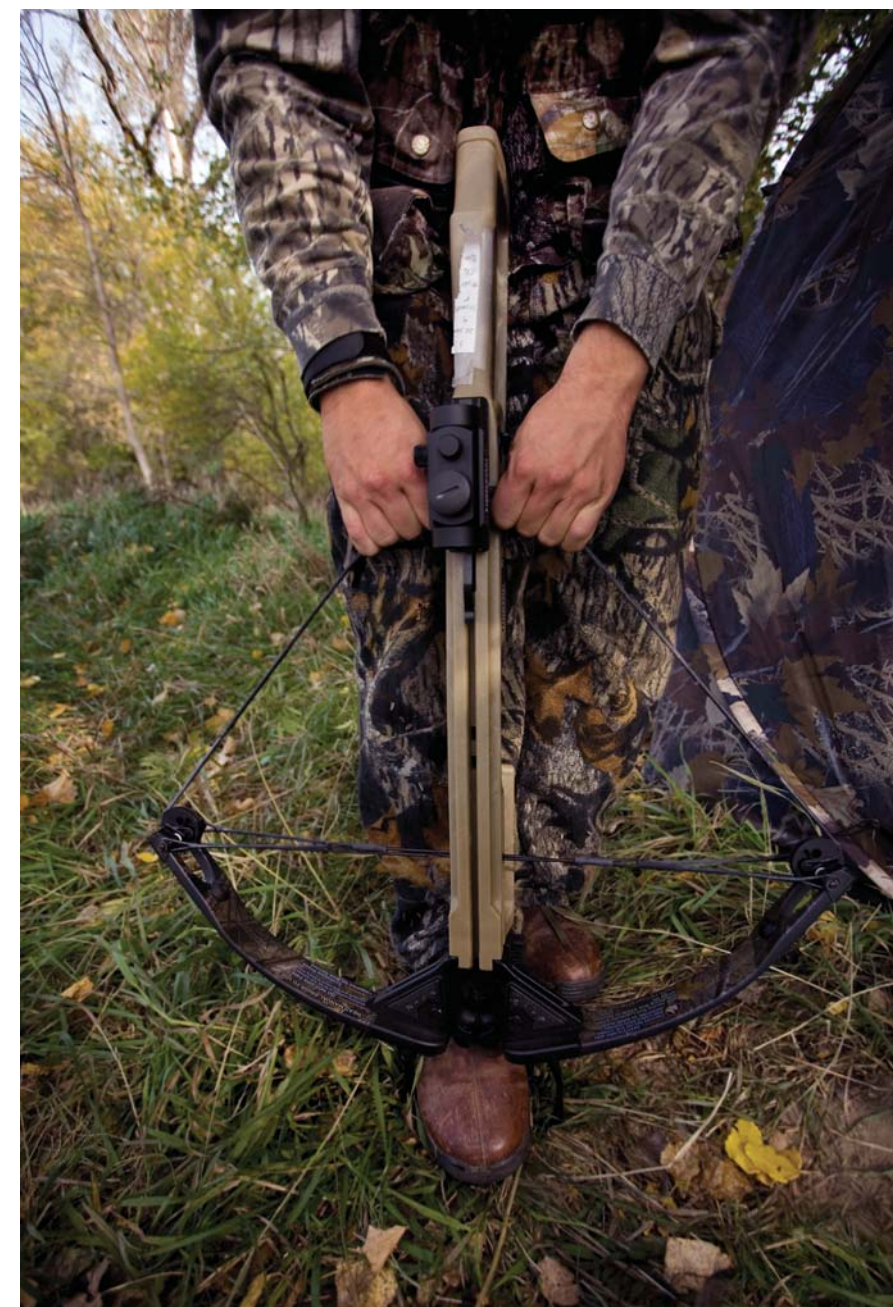
“Don, you’re not missing up and down, but you’ve been consistently to the right. I think you’re pulling instead of squeezing,” Tyler told him. After making a couple more adjustments to Don’s equipment, Tyler loaded another bolt into the crossbow, one of the things Don needs help doing, then had him shoot again. “Dead center,” Tyler said. “Whenever you shoot, remember to squeeze, not pull. It’s not a shotgun, Don.”

I caught up with them again the next day. Only this time, they weren’t lining up a crossbow. They were telling a story, one they had already told before and would most certainly tell again.

“I looked out in the grass field right before sunset and saw a doe. Then I saw two more does right behind her. I hadn’t seen a deer all day up to this point, and now the front doe was walking right toward me. I looked where Tyler had marked 30 yards for me, where he had stuck an arrow in the ground,” Don said.

“We can shoot past 30 yards but we wanted to keep it under 30,” Tyler added.

“She was just on the other side of the marker, then she turned sideways. I aimed at the front shoulder, using the sticks Tyler had made me. Then I squeezed the trigger.”



Loading a crossbow is one of many tasks where SANDS volunteers can aid their disabled hunted partners.



This blind placement under fall foliage at Boyer Chute by SANDS volunteer Tyler Huffaker allowed Don Rydburg to kill his first deer in 14 years.

“I heard a pop,” Tyler said, who was hunting thirty yards away from Don in another blind Burgess had lent them. “I started walking toward him, got a shot of my own at one of the other does, missed her, then realized I had only brought one arrow with me. The doe just stood there watching me.” Tyler paused, shaking his head and smiling. “We found his arrow covered in blood about 10 yards from where he shot. Close to that, we also found my arrow. It was clean as could be.” “Then Tyler made me wait 25 minutes,” Don interrupted. “I thought those 25 minutes were never going to end.” “By then it was about dark,” Tyler

said, “so we started calling everyone we could to come help us.” Don’s brother and nephew met up with the two, and a friend of Tyler’s and his wife also joined the search. While each person searched for blood through the woods, Don stood at the last place they had found any sign. “We lost blood twice and we were hands and knees looking,” said Tyler. “By the time we found the deer lying dead in a creek, it was 10:40.” “She took us for a hell of a ride,” Don said. “Yea, after walking into trees, bushes and stickers, my clothes were done,” Tyler said. “My arms, chest, and legs were rubbed raw.” Don, with his diamond willow cane

(see story page 38) and very limited mobility, still managed to walk the entire way with them. “I couldn’t let someone else finish what I had started.” Where they had started was in a different spot than they had been that morning. “We changed our blind placement from the first morning after picking a spot on paper before ever seeing the place. Deer had our blind pegged from 40 yards away. This new spot was nice and secluded, backed off the road a bit. We were better hid and Don had a shooting lane both ways. In the end, we saw seven deer at our new spot.” When asked about the SANDS program, Don shook his head. “I told

myself, if I ever got a chance, I was going for it. I got hooked up with SANDS and the following year a friend of mine said I could have an old crossbow of his. But that old crossbow is nothing like what you see here. You had to jerk the trigger.” “It had a 30-pound trigger,” Tyler said. “And past 20 yards, it just wasn’t accurate. So I talked to Burgess, and he talked to Kevin Harrington from Whitetails Unlimited. Next thing you know, Don, Dave, Dave’s wife Danielle and I are sitting on Don’s front porch putting his new crossbow together.” “This was the first time in 14 years that I’ve hunted or killed a deer,” Don said.

“It’s just a start,” Tyler said. “We have a lot more hunting to do.”

A Blind Interview

I had the opportunity to sit in a blind with Dave Burgess on a Boyer Chute deer hunt last year. We talked about SANDS, his physical conditions, and a host of other subjects while we waited for a deer to pass by. “The degenerative disk disease in my back started with me walking with a cane, then walking with a walker, then using a wheelchair to get around. There’s nothing that can be done about

my back,” he told me. “The rest of the disks in my back will slowly deteriorate and my spine will crush itself. The little bit of bending and mobility I now have will lessen. Physical therapy won’t work. I’m not even a candidate for surgery any longer.” When he finished telling me that, he reached into a bag he had brought with him. “But a doughnut always helps,” he said, pulling out a box of Krispy Kremes and offering me one. I declined, explaining that doughnuts give me heartburn. “That’s awful, must be stress-related,” he told me, downing a pastry. Then, “Are you good at making



Lani Baker poses with guide Brian Frost after killing her three-bird limit at Pheasant Bonanza near Tekamah last fall.



Lani Baker prepares to shoot at a flushed rooster during her hunt at Pheasant Bonanza as guide Frosty watches.

distances out?” he asked.

“I’m okay,” I said.

He pointed at a series of objects outside the blind, “Over there, those three trees, about 30 yards?”

“Sounds about right,” I told him, and he continued to point while I gave my thoughts on the various landmarks he pointed toward.

“I haven’t gotten a deer in six years,” he told me a bit later. “But it’s all about getting out for me. The thing is, I just need a bit more help than most. People volunteer their time and skills but some are worried about working with a disabled person. They don’t know what to do — Is it okay to ask them how they got hurt? I need help carrying stuff, cleaning a deer, but I’m pretty self-sufficient.”

Plus, Burgess told me he expects volunteers to bring their own weapons.

“There’s nothing worse than sitting there, helping someone out, and not being able to participate yourself. We don’t want a babysitter, we want someone to hunt with,” he said.

I asked Dave what it took to be a part of the program. “What people need to realize is I never ask someone what their disability is. I don’t want to accept some and not accept others. As far as I am concerned, if you’re 75 years old and can’t get around very well, that’s a disability. Disability is the inability to do what you were once able to do. If there is something you want to do and can’t do by yourself, as far as I’m concerned you have a disability. And SANDS is here to help.

“A house is your home. It’s not a prison. That window is quarter-inch glass, but it’s just as strong as a prison bar if you can’t get out. And what kind

of life is that? There’s no enjoyment there, there’s no living. You’re existing. If you have a chance to get out and meet people, you become part of a community.”

Dave then offered me another doughnut. Again I declined. “We got a rule at the house that if you’re hungry, it’s your fault,” he said. Then he told me, “It comes back to this: People everywhere have needs for various reasons. The people helping those with needs are the real glory of SANDS. If not for them, the whole concept is a pipe dream, something that could have never come to fruition.”

A Walk To Remember

“We volunteered for the Outdoor Buddy program that used to be in western Nebraska,” said Lani Baker, a

participant of the SANDS program. But she’s no longer a mentor, now she’s a disabled participant needing assistance. “At that time, I was healthy. I would whitewater raft for days on end in desolate rivers. I always thought I was going to be this strong, agile woman. I was a workaholic, then a light switch flipped. It wasn’t even piecemeal. All of a sudden, it was a major, major adjustment.”

In 1998, Lani was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. With it came shaking, trembling, and muscle spasms. Sometimes she can’t talk, can’t walk, and her multiple arthritic joints have led to 24 surgeries and an artificial hip. When she told me about her history, we were on an arranged hunt at Pheasant Bonanza, a private game farm near Tekamah. “I’m just starting with the excuses early,” she said.

Due to Lani’s physical conditions, she had not been pheasant hunting for 10 years, but had won a drawing for the guided SANDS hunt in Tekamah. Once there, a crowd of people surrounded her, including her husband Larry, Mike Freel and her guide, Brian “Frosty” Frost. “Because of MS, I have issues with memory. I do lots of word association. I have a girlfriend that has a jackass named Frosty. That’s how I will remember you,” she told her newfound friend.

“Thanks a lot,” Frosty replied.

Someone asked if she wanted to ride through the fields on a golf cart during her guided hunt, and for the most part, she declined. “It’s a good day today,” she said, missing birds early but having the opportunity to kill roosters later in the morning. With each step she took, a throng of people walked behind, each one hoping her next shot would find its mark. For while Burgess said that he didn’t want SANDS to become a program relying on guided hunts, he couldn’t have frowned at this. A person smiling through the day, and crying by the end, whose first pheasant hunt in 10 years had yielded so many good feelings.

But she also knows what hunts like this do to her body. “I’ll sleep for a day or two after a day like today,” she told me. “Twice a year we kayak the Niobrara and it’s the same thing there. But I’m willing to experience the pain to do what I want to do. I can’t imagine curling up and stopping.”

A house is your home. It’s not a prison. That window is quarter-inch glass, but it’s just as strong as a prison bar if you can’t get out. What kind of life is that?

By the end of the morning, Lani’s good fortune of winning the drawing was over. And she was definitely spent to the point that her husband had to support her from falling by placing his finger through her back belt loop as she walked. But to everyone else, it was just a husband walking by his wife, who for that day was just another hunter in the field. The way she wanted it.

Future of SANDS

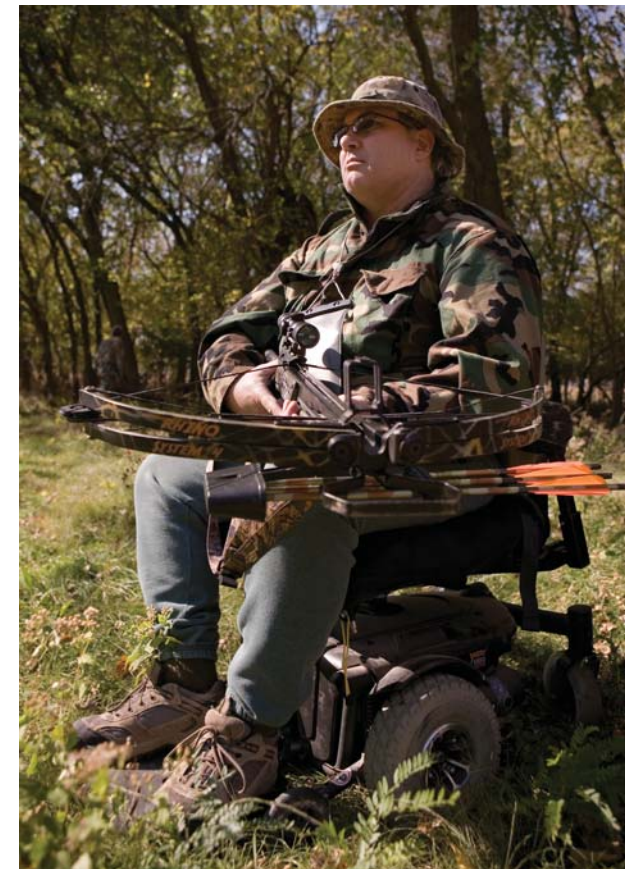
While Dave Burgess’s to-do list is long, he understands how much longer he would like it to be. “It’s dropping a pebble in a pond,” he said. “I’ve been contacting the DNR resources from surrounding states, even Washington D.C., trying to get support from everyone in the nation. I would like to see this program as a nationwide service offered through each state. I’ve also been working up satisfaction surveys to see how we could make our own program better. I just haven’t totally figured it out yet.”

Burgess said that much of the work left to do with the program has to do with the volunteers themselves. He knows there are a lot more people out there wanting to help than those who do. “If a person is thinking, ‘I don’t know how to deal with a person with a disability,’ I tell them to not be afraid. People with disabilities are just like able-bodied individuals. They’re just going to do things a little different. That’s the only difference. Make the phone calls, get to know each other, start to build those relationships. The help needed could be as simple

as carrying a rifle, helping to reel in a fish, or casting out. Little things are the things we need. Personally, I need help field dressing game. We all need help from time to time.”

When asked what Dave’s ultimate goal was, he responded without hesitation. “Right now, SANDS means Sportsmen Assisting Nebraska’s Disabled Sportsmen. One day I’d like it to stand for Sportsmen Assisting the Nation’s Disabled Sportsmen.”

That’s a lofty goal, but SANDS definitely has the right person for the job. ■



Dave’s Burgess’s mission with SANDS is to ensure that all people have the opportunity to participate in outdoor-related activities.

Photographing Nebraska's Outdoors

This month we discuss camera stabilization techniques, how to “hunt” with a camera and how to use a histogram to help you properly expose digital images.

Steady that Camera

Justin Wambold – Nature Photographer

Capturing compelling images with great color often means shooting in low-light conditions using long exposures. As exposure time increases, however, so does the difficulty of capturing sharp images. Any unintentional movement of the camera during an exposure can result in a loss of crucial sharpness and effectively ruin a photograph. Here are a few tips to keep in mind to ensure your images remain sharp, no matter how long the exposure.

- *Tip number one: Use a tripod*

In today's world of light, compact cameras, it's tempting to cast aside a bulky, sometimes heavy tripod in order to

move faster with less weight and fewer hassles. However, the benefits of traveling light don't matter if you can't make a good photograph when you want to. Tripods keep the camera perfectly still for the duration of the exposure – whether it's one second, or one minute – helping to ensure a sharp image. In addition, great advancements have been made to reduce the size and weight of tripods, making them much more manageable in the field.

When selecting a tripod, there are many factors to consider – size, weight, height and load capacity, for instance. In the end, however, the best tripod for you is the one that you will use on a regular basis – it doesn't matter how nice the tripod is if it is in your closet when you need it most.

Tripods are not only a good idea when using long exposures; they are also a good idea when you are using long, telephoto lenses. For wildlife photography, long lenses – often more than 200mm – can be the key to getting good images. However, as lenses get longer the ability to handhold them gets tougher. Not only are these lenses heavier, but with their



JUSTIN WAMBOLD

This 1.6-second exposure of Snake River Falls in north-central Nebraska would not have been possible without the use of a tripod. During the exposure, the movement of the water over the falls and down the river creates a smooth, blurred effect while the secured camera is able to keep stationary objects, such as the rocks in the foreground, in focus.

magnification the slightest movement can create a soft image. Good tripods help offset this movement.

As a rule I do not handhold the camera for any image taken with an exposure longer than a fraction of a second equaling the focal length of the lens. For example, if the focal length is 200mm, I do not handhold the camera for longer than 1/200th of a second. This also holds true for wide-angle lenses – if the focal length is 35mm, I don't handhold longer than 1/35th of a second.

- *Tip number two: Use a remote switch or built-in timer.*

Never underestimate the amount of movement you impart

to the camera as you press the shutter button, even when using a tripod. The shake caused by simply placing or removing your hand from the camera can ruin an otherwise great photo.

Many single lens reflex cameras allow the use of remote switches that enable you to trigger the shutter without touching the body, thus eliminating the possibility of accidentally moving the camera during the exposure. If you can't use or don't have a remote switch, your camera probably has a built-in timer that can be equally effective if you are not shooting a time-sensitive subject. The same built-in timers



JUSTIN WAMBOLD

Stabilizing the camera is a must for nighttime exposures. This image of a camper at Rock Creek Station State Historical Park in southeastern Nebraska was exposed for 30 seconds. During that time the sky was lit by stars and an out-of-frame moon, and the camper was lit by its dim lights and a nearby campfire.



Blinds allow photographers to get shots of otherwise unapproachable wildlife subjects.

that allow photographers to place themselves in family photos can also be used to ensure sharp images in the field. By delaying the operation of the shutter, you are able to remove your hands and allow the camera to stop moving before the image is exposed. With either method, you can compose and focus the image and then be completely hands free once the exposure begins.

• *Tip number three: Be resourceful*

If you don't have a tripod handy when taking a picture, use whatever you can to steady your camera. I often use my camera bag atop a rock to hold my camera still. When shooting from a car window, or at ground level, I use sandbags made from plastic bags, sand and duct tape.

Rocks, trees, fallen logs, fences, road signs, bridges or the ground also make great impromptu tripods and can save an image.

If all else fails, push the camera tight against your face,

brace your elbows against your chest, hold your breath, press the shutter and pray you can hold still long enough to make the exposure.

Hunting with a Camera

Eric Fowler – NEBRASKAland Magazine

When I head into the field in the fall, the only way my wife can really tell if I'm heading out to work or to play is whether I'm carrying my camera or a firearm. In a way, that's how little of a difference there is between nature photography and hunting.

Of course, there are many different types of hunting. Some are active, others passive. In either case, a hunter must know something about his or her quarry, particularly its habits and habitats. Some of this can be learned from books. The rest must be learned from observation.



Great photos can be obtained by using hunting techniques and gear, such as stalking while wearing camouflage clothing.

A wise deer hunter increases his chances for success by spending time before the hunt searching his quarry's home range for sign and watching its movements from a distance. Wildlife photographers can use similar strategies to improve their success, whether they're photographing deer or birds.

The senses of birds and mammals are very acute, especially their sight. Most are programmed to avoid the human form, making the use of camouflage and blinds critical to both hunting success and to capturing a photograph of most species in their natural surroundings. Hunters and photographers decked out in camouflage clothing can sometimes be successful by concealing themselves in natural vegetation, but depending on your quarry, a blind may be needed to break up your outline and conceal your movements.

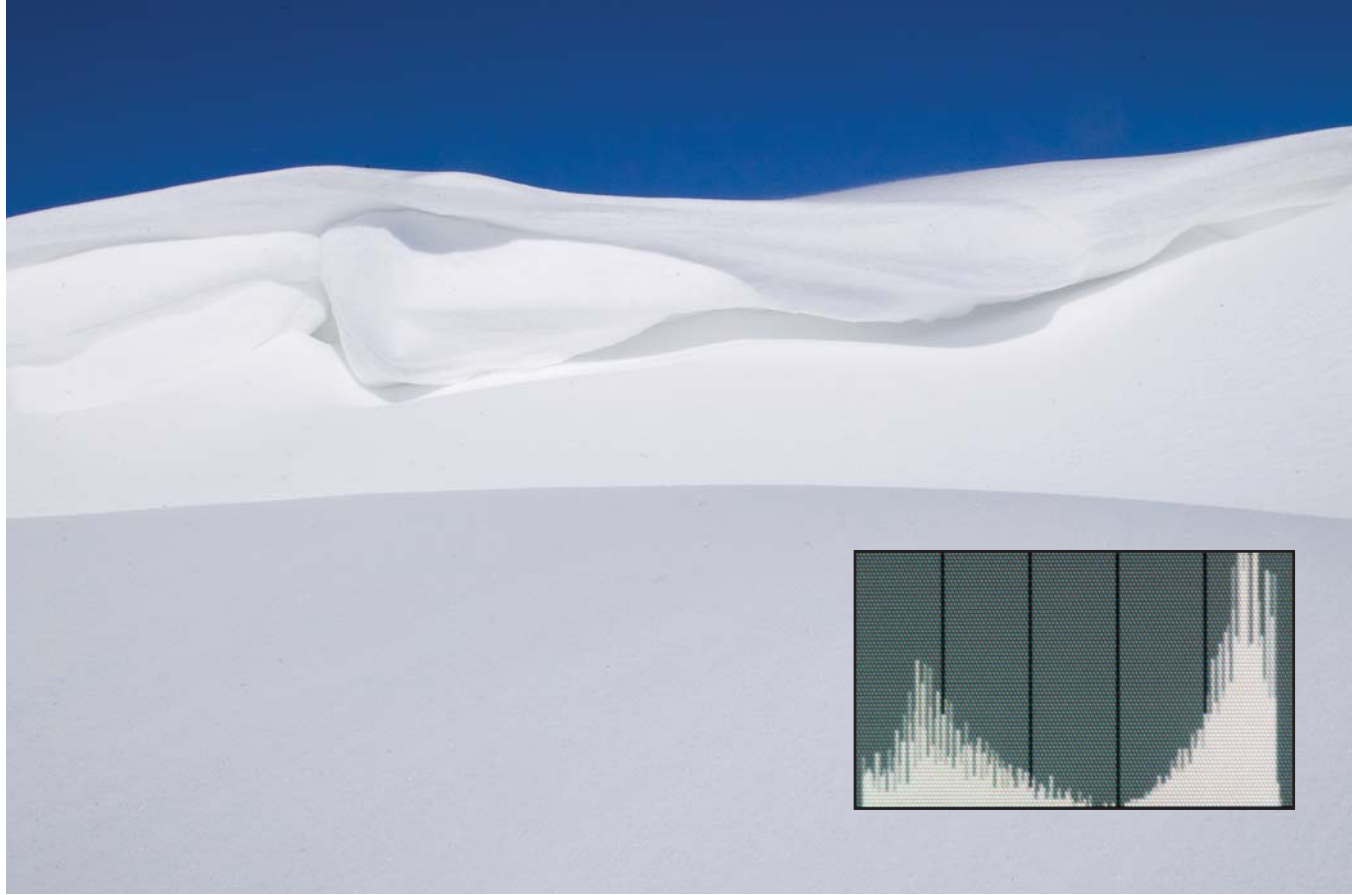
Blinds can be as simple or as complex as you want them to be, ranging from a pile of sticks or sheet of camouflage fabric to a commercially made pop-up blind, boat blind or

treestand. Or it could simply be your vehicle, something animals are used to seeing.

To further increase the odds of your subject coming within camera range, you might even try using decoys or calls. In the case of the latter, photographers have a huge advantage over most hunters in that they can use electronic calls to attract their quarry. Scents that either cover your human scent or attract animals can also be deployed.

While working from a photo blind can be rewarding, I must admit that I have trouble sitting still and would rather actively pursue my quarry. Maybe it's my daily newspaper background, but I'd rather stalk a bedded mule deer than sit in a tree or ground blind waiting for one to walk by. Success depends on my ability to not be seen, smelled or heard. Stalking dictates you use terrain or vegetation to conceal your approach, move slowly and approach from downwind.

Still-hunting is another strategy I often use when I'm in



The inset histogram of this photo indicates that the highlight portions of the scene are properly recorded without being overexposed.

the field with my camera. Walk quietly, constantly scan the woods ahead of you and have your camera ready, just as a pheasant hunter would his shotgun, and you sometimes are lucky enough to stumble on a good photo.

Hunting tactics can be applied to landscape photography as easily as they can wildlife photography. Scouting might reveal a pristine scene, but just as a deer hunter may spend days in the perfect spot, many visits to a particular location may be required before the light or weather come together to provide the perfect photo.

A final strategy to consider that often leads to great photos is frowned upon in most hunting circles: road hunting. Road hunting with a gun is at best unethical, at worst unlawful and is the largest source of complaints involving “hunters,” but road hunting for photographs is perfectly legal as long as it’s done safely. Unless I’m traveling at night, my camera is always on the seat next to me, telephoto lens attached, in case a deer, bobcat, duck, nighthawk or other furred or feathered critter appears on the roadside. These opportunities are fleeting – there is no time to dig a camera out of a bag or change lenses.

Right next to the camera on the seat is my *DeLorme Nebraska Atlas and Gazetteer*, which helps me chart a course to my destination via the state’s back roads when time allows, giving new meaning to road hunting. These roads take you to some of the state’s most scenic spots and afford a slower pace. And when you slow down, you’ll see things you might have otherwise missed when barreling down a super slab of concrete. Sometimes, great photographs just happen. But more often than not, you have to hunt for them.

Using Histograms

Doug Carroll – NEBRASKAland Magazine

There’s no question that the advent of digital photography has had a huge impact on both the photography industry and people’s photo-taking habits. Virtually anywhere you go nowadays, you see more and more people taking pictures, usually with a digital camera.

As with almost any new technological gadget, however, there are a lot more people using it than really understanding it and taking advantage of all of its capabilities. I’m as guilty of that as anyone – although I know that today’s automatic exposure features on most cameras will work for the majority of photos that are taken, I still find myself shooting on manual mode for the most part. I can do this with confidence, however, by taking advantage of what in my opinion may be the single greatest advantage digital cameras have over film cameras – the histogram.

In the old days – you know, more than 10 or so years ago – serious photographers who knew the importance of getting the proper exposure usually had to rely on a combination of experience, handheld light meters and, more often than not, bracketing to make sure they came home with a well-exposed image. Today, however, digital aficionados often have histogram features to help them. Although not found on all digital cameras, an increasing number of camera models have this feature, which can be invaluable to photographers who know how to use them. So what exactly are histograms, and why are they so important?



In a properly exposed, low contrast scene such as this one, most of the information is recorded in the middle tones, as shown.

In short, a histogram is a graphic display of how many light, dark and midtone areas there are in a picture that the camera has recorded, with dark areas represented by the left side of the graph, and light areas indicated by the right side (think right = light). The graph’s extreme left side shows any portions of the photo that contain featureless dark areas, areas with no shadow detail. Conversely, the extreme right side of the histogram indicates bright white areas of the photo that have no highlight detail. The area in between shows how much of the picture falls between those two extremes.

So how do we use histograms to help us make better pictures? By getting in the habit of looking at it when we’re shooting to make sure we’re exposing a scene properly and not losing detail that we think is important.

Say you’re photographing a waterfall in a dense forest shortly after a rain and you want to maintain the saturation of fallen leaves without losing detail in the wet rocks. You set up the tripod, compose the scene and make an exposure based on the camera meter, a hand-held meter, past experience or perhaps all three. With a film camera you have to wait to see the results, but with a digital camera with a display and histogram option, you can check both your composition and exposure: The way you framed the scene looks nice and the leaves certainly look saturated, but you’re having trouble seeing much in rocks, so you take a look at the histogram and notice that the graph is heavily weighted to the far left and trails off well short of the display’s right side. This type of histogram indicates probable underexposure

that might be saved with photo-editing software on the computer, but who wants to spend time on the computer trying to fix mistakes when they could be out taking more pictures? So you increase your exposure a stop or two until the histogram is indicating that you’re getting shadow detail without blowing out the highlights and you shoot with confidence, trying out a variety of different angles and periodically re-checking the histogram to make sure the light hasn’t changed on you.

Conversely, if you happen to be shooting a snow scene or similarly light-colored composition that a camera meter typically tends to underexpose, the histogram can help you have clean, white snow in your final image without losing highlight detail. Just make sure your histogram is weighted heavily to the right side of the graph but doesn’t abruptly end too far up the “wall.” Many digital cameras can be set so that highlight areas without detail will “blink” when the captured image is shown on the camera display, and this is another great tool that can be used to make sure the proper exposure is obtained.

One final note about the use of histograms: If you over-expose an image and lose highlight detail, you can’t get it back, but in general you’ll end up with a lot cleaner and smoother-looking image if your histograms are weighted more on the right side. ■

Look in the August/September issue to see the final installment of this summer’s Photographing Nebraska’s Outdoors series.

DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

Photos and text by
Jon Farrar

Whittling diamond willow canes was once a common craft in rural Nebraska, transforming rough sticks into works of art.

In the late-1950s, the small town of Monroe in Platte County was replete with genuine characters. Orville Flemming was one of them. In those days, when people owned less, little cash was required to make it from year to year, just a big potato patch. I don't recall Orville working, but his endeavors could well have escaped the notice of a 10-year-old boy. He was married to Rosy, the town postmistress, and they lived behind the post office on the first floor of a cream-colored, two-story, stucco building on the west end of the block-long business district on main street.

With the first warm days of spring and the last of fall, the south side of Flemming's building, especially the rotting wood trim around the big glass windows, crawled with box elder bugs, better known in those times as Democrat bugs as they only came out on warm days. There was a crude wooden bench in front of the post office, and Orville was often found perched on it on warm sunny days whittling with a little pocketknife. He was, perhaps, a Democrat, too. The object of Orville's whittling was diamond willow canes.

As the decades passed I came to believe whittling diamond willow canes was a pursuit of old men long laid to



Jerry Motacek of Verdel has been working diamond willow wood since 1978. His backyard shop is filled with drying diamond willow, canes and other items in the works, and finished pieces. He calls the large diamond willow behind him a "mother tree," a term probably with some botanical validity as many willow species form colonies by suckering.

Imagination is required to see the beautiful wood hidden under the rough-bark exterior of a diamond willow.

rest, a pursuit banished by the invention of television. It wasn't until last fall, when I talked to Scott Wessel, a friend in Norfolk, and he said, "I know a guy up by Niobrara who makes diamond willow canes," that I began a nostalgic trip back in time.

When Wessel and I walked into Bill Meier's farm shop southeast of Niobrara early on a snowy December morning there were two griddles on the homemade shepherd's stove, one sizzling with a mound of farm-cut bacon, the other with fried potatoes and chicken gizzards. Meier sat on an ornate bench near the stove, a rack on the wall behind him crammed with diamond willow canes. The talk turned, as it always does when diamond willow folks gather, to what makes the diamonds on diamond willows.



Bill Meier, a diamond willow cane maker of rural Niobrara, in his shop last December. His canes were fashioned from willow found on his own property. Meier died in April.

Nature of the Beast

"The term 'diamond willow' seems to have first been applied in the middle and upper Missouri River valley to willows that showed peculiar diamond-shaped depressions on their stems," H.J. Lutz wrote in a paper published in the *American Midland Naturalist* in 1958. That paper has long been the source, and Lutz the authority, on the nature and occurrence of diamond willow and origin of the characteristic diamond-shaped growths on its surface. "When the stems were carved or otherwise finished, a striking pattern resulted from the curious diamond-

shaped cavities and the contrast between the white or cream sapwood and reddish-brown heartwood."

According to Lutz, debate had raged since at least the late-1800s as to whether the diamond-shaped scars are caused by a fungus, or several species of fungi, infecting the bases of small branches, and subsequent cankerous, scar-tissue growing around and away from the point of infection. Most diamond scars do have a small stub of a former branch in their centers. He believed it occurred on several species of willows. Willows bearing diamond shapes are common in Alaska, where Lutz studied them in the 1950s. Lutz's

point of view has held sway in most quarters to this day, yet there has been no thorough, scientific study to definitively answer the question.

Many botanists today discount a fungi infection as the cause of the characteristic diamond shapes, suggesting they are just a feature of some species of willows. Complicating the debate is that botanists have quibbled over the species names for willows with diamond-shaped growth scars for decades. The willow family is complex, and there is little consensus about which plants deserve distinct species designations and which do not. And willows considered distinct species are known to cross, producing hybrids, further compounding their taxonomy. So, after more than a hundred years of debate one can probably still choose whichever explanation one prefers – natural growth habit or fungus.

Most authorities today identify only one species of willow in Nebraska,

with two varieties, as having the characteristic diamond-shaped scars: the Missouri willow, *Salix eriocephala eriocephala*; and the yellow diamond willow *Salix eriocephala famelica*. Missouri and yellow diamond willows are widely distributed, from southern Missouri north into Minnesota and North Dakota. There is significant variation in height across its range, from shrubby plants eight- to 10-feet tall, to small trees 20 feet or taller. Lutz reported the "Missouri River type" occasionally attained a height of 50 feet and diameter of 18 inches, "but as a rule none of the forms reaches large size." In Nebraska today, a diamond willow six to eight inches in diameter at the widest point on its trunk is an exceptional specimen. It is usually found in pure stands or colonies, in wet soils, particularly in river floodplains, and is reported from all major river drainages in Nebraska.

The wood of most willows is not

durable, and so it is surprising to read, or have an old-timer tell you, diamond willow was once used for fence posts, stakes and even rail ties in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. Nebraska governor Robert W. Furnas (1873-1875), later employed at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, writing of lumber and wood trade of western states in 1884, noted: "Experience demonstrates it to be as durable almost for underground uses, posts, etc., as red cedar." The native word for diamond willow among some Northern Indian tribes, Furnas noted, translated as "durable."

The explanation for diamond willow being more durable than other willows apparently lies in its reddish-brown heartwood. The creamy white sapwood immediately under the bark is thin. While the color of the wood in the diamonds can vary, it is typically reddish-brown like the heartwood, and darkens with time if the bark is



Motacek's principal diamond willow tools are three small palm gouges and a castrating knife.



Among many items Motacek has fashioned from diamond willow are canes with an assortment of ornate handles, ladle handles, jigging rod handles and pool cues. The dark cane, center, was naturally stained when Motacek found it in a river bed.

removed. The diamonds can be quite large on larger trees. Typically they are two to three times longer than wide, although some claim that different colonies have characteristic-shaped diamonds. Lutz reported diamonds four to five inches wide and three to four inches deep. On larger plants diamonds often abut one another forming clusters, making the pieces particularly desirable for woodworking.

Working the Wood

Bill Meier made diamond willow canes and walking sticks for about 10 years before failing eyesight forced him to quit. He basically used two tools – a pocketknife, and a Dremel power

tool used only to work hard-to-get-to places. Jerry Motacek of Verdel has been working diamond willow wood since 1978. Occasionally he uses a rotary rasp bit on a drill for rough work but avoids power tools because of the noise and dust. His principal tools are three small palm gouges and a castrating knife. Speed of production does not seem to be an important consideration for most people working diamond willow. John Munter of Randolph is also of that ilk. The only tools he uses to make diamond willow furniture are a hunting knife and sandpaper.

When I walked into Munter's house my jaw fell slack on my chest. The house was filled with furniture fashioned from the showy wood –

rockers, high-back chairs, highchairs for dolls, a dining room table (with an oak top salvaged from an old refrigerated rail car), coffee tables, stools, benches, bookshelves and lamps. Munter's interest in diamond willow began in 1975 when he and his wife Vernell worked at a fishing resort near International Falls, Minnesota.

"I noticed a few people were using diamond willow canes," Munter recalled. "And I stumbled into a person who had a stool made of diamond willow. Later, when I was fishing on the lake, I saw some diamond willow growing and the thought came to my mind 'Why can't I do that?' So I collected some that summer and brought it home on the top of the car. First I made a cane, then a



John Munter of Randolph has been fashioning furniture, and a host of other items, from diamond willow since the mid-1970s. His interest was piqued when he saw a cane and three-legged stool while working at a fishing resort in Minnesota.



Roger Leader of Bloomfield, a friend of the late Bill Meier, has sent pieces of diamond willow in the rough to a California artist to be made into canes with elaborately carved details of plant and animal figures.

little three-legged stool. I've been working with it ever since. I try to come up with something different to make each winter. I don't sell any of my diamond willow furniture, it's just for my family."

Munter continued bringing diamond willow back from fishing trips in Minnesota, and has never looked for it growing in Nebraska. Motacek gathers his wood stock close to home, as did Meier. The ends of newly cut pieces are sealed with paint to slow drying and prevent the wood from cracking. Depending on the size of the piece, a year of drying is usually required before they strip the bark.

Some diamond willow carvers only strip the bark, sand the surface and inside the diamond depressions smooth, and then apply a finish. Others, and Orville Flemming was one of them, go a step farther, carving white-wood from under the lip of each diamond so they stand out in relief.

Munter does not when making furniture so the pieces are more comfortable.

Perhaps the most unusual cane in Motacek's shop is deep brown, nearly black, as if heavily stained. The stain, though, is natural, the color the diamond willow had when Motacek retrieved it from a river bed. He simply let it dry, sanded it, and applied two coats of polyurethane. He speculates that piece may have been charred in a fire or stained by river sediment. The largest diamond willow in Motacek's shop stands from floor to ceiling and is about six inches in diameter where a large cluster of diamonds spreads above the base. It is the largest he has found. He called it a "mother tree," a term probably with some botanically validity as many willow species form colonies by suckering out from the first tree established. I saw an equally large diamond willow leaning in the corner of John Munter's sunroom in Randolph a few weeks later.

Wherever diamond willow grows, woodworkers have always found it and a creative use for it, and the interest in it has spread far beyond where it naturally grows. An Internet search for "diamond willow" yields over 50,000 sites with information, many selling unfinished wood; others selling finished canes, staffs and other items. No doubt some diamond willow grown in Nebraska now resides far beyond the state's borders.

On the snowy morning Wessel and I spent at Bill Meier's farm, Roger Leader, a neighbor and friend, stopped with an incredibly ornate cane fashioned from Nebraska diamond willow. Leader sent a stick in the rough to an artist-carver in San Diego who fashioned intricate figures of plants and animals in relief on the cane. It was an incredible metamorphosis, from rough-barked, river-bottom stick to an object of art. Orville Flemming's eyes would have spread wide at the sight. ■

Rock Hunting on USFS Pastures

Agates and other collectible stones free for the taking.

By Bob Grier

Rock collectors around the globe know of the agate beds found on small portions of the Oglala National Grassland in northwestern Nebraska. The chance to find intricately banded Fairburn agates, the more common prairie agate and even blue agates, Nebraska's state gemstone, is attracting a growing number of rock hounds each year.

Named for a small community south of Rapid City, South Dakota, Fairburn agates can be found in a narrow band running along the eastern edge of the Black Hills and south into the grassland rock beds of northern Sioux and Dawes counties in Nebraska. Fairburns have a wide range of colors with sharply defined, intricately shaped and often thin banding. Rocks with patterns that resemble an aerial view of a sharply cornered fortress are known as fortification agates.

Like most rock collectors, Mike and Linda Doman of Hot Springs, South Dakota, try to spend time looking for agates and other collectible stones during their travels across the midwest. The couple likes to polish and cut the stones they find to display in their home.

"We really look for all kinds of rocks, but Fairburns are always an exciting find," Mike Doman explained while walking the well-known agate beds north of Crawford. "Fairburns are rare but even after all the years people have been collecting them, the agates are still there, waiting for someone with a keen eye that knows

what they're looking for. And a good rainfall might just wash out a rare find like a four-and-a-half-pound agate that Linda found this spring on the grasslands.

"For someone that would like to try their hand at rock collecting, there are numerous resources available, from local rock shops to field guides, brochures and other publications, and the Internet offers numerous web sites that display examples of the different gemstones and rocks. Experienced collectors are usually a very friendly and helpful group as well."

Both Doman wear snake gaiters when hunting the agate beds. "Prairie rattlesnakes really blend in well on the gumbo agate beds. We'd probably be surprised to know how many rattlers that we've walked by without seeing over the years." Other rock hunting necessities include sunscreen, cool hats with wide brims and a good supply of drinking water. Travel on even the best Sioux and Dawes county road should be avoided during and after snowmelt and



Mike and Linda Doman of Hot Springs, South Dakota, look for agates and other collectible stones at a well-known agate bed near Crawford.

rainfall due to muddy conditions.

"The interest in rock collecting on Nebraska National Forest pastures north of Crawford continues to increase and we've seen rock collectors from nearly every state on the grasslands over the years," said

Barb Beasley, Northern Zone Great Plains Paleontologist based at the U.S. Forest Service Supervisor's Office in Chadron. "While restrictions on rock collection vary on federal lands across the nation, rock hunting – the surface collection of rocks and agates for personal, hobby and noncommercial use only – is allowed without a permit on Nebraska National Forest pastures."

Current Nebraska National Forest regulations allow collectors to remove up to 25 pounds of rock per day and 250 pounds per year, but prohibit the trading, bartering or selling of rocks and agates found on forest land. Petrified wood can also be found on the agate beds and rock hunters can collect up to 25 pounds per day or 250 pounds per year of it for personal, hobby and noncommercial use without a permit.

Beasley stressed that while rock hunting is allowed, collecting or damaging paleontological and archeological resources, including fossils and material remains of

prehistoric and historic human life, such as arrowheads and other human-worked stone objects, is not allowed on the Nebraska National Forest. ■

For current federal lands restrictions and other specific information on

rocks, agates, meteorites, artifacts and fossils on the Nebraska National Forest pastures in northwest Nebraska, contact the Nebraska National Forest Supervisor's Office, 125 N. Main St. Chadron, NE 69337 (308) 432-0300.

Baitcasting for Beginners

Here's how to use one of fishing's most important tools.

By Jeff Kurrus

Most novice anglers cringe at baitcasting reels when they first see them. They seem to fear a large amount of line is going to shoot out like a busted covey of quail if the reel is even picked up. These reels, however, are by far, the simplest to use once you get used to them, and are a necessity for the avid angler due to their winch-like power and torque as compared to a spinning or closed-face reel.

So why don't more anglers use baitcasters?

Most people are afraid of backlashing – the jumbled knot of line that occurs when the spool spins faster than the line leaves it. For example, when a lure hits the water after being cast, it stops pulling line from the reel's spool. The spool, however, keeps spinning until either the angler stops it or the momentum created by the cast lure ends. If the spool spins for too long after the line stops, a backlash will occur.

So how do you stop the spool from spinning? Thumb pressure. As long as the thumb is pressed against the spool whenever you don't want it to spin, then you'll have no problems.

Start by tightening the brake, located on the handle side of most baitcasting reels, turning it clockwise until you feel tension. Tightening the brake means you won't be able to cast very far, but you won't have to worry about backlashing either.

Now the cast: With the thumb of your casting hand firmly on the spool, press the spool release button with your opposite hand and bend your casting arm back at the elbow, as if you were covering your ear. As you bring your arm forward, using your wrist to supply most of the cast's power, remove your thumb from the spool at your release point.

There are at least two different



The thumb is the critical key for anglers trying to use a baitcasting reel.

ways the release point is taught to novices, and I am split on which is better. The first involves pointing the rod tip directly at where you want the lure to land and is how the beginning angler will cast once they become more proficient. However, novice anglers are often unable to control their release point and end up casting the lure straight down instead of to their desired spot.

The second method involves the angler releasing the lure as if they were attempting to cast to the top of a tree. This prevents the straight-down cast and results in some casting distance, but might also force the beginning angler to cast higher than they will want to at a later date. However, the proper release point can usually be mastered after further practice.

Either way, the casting thumb should be used to stop the spinning spool right before the lure lands to prevent backlashing. With the brake tightened down you won't be able to cast far, but if it is too loose, you risk the chance of backlashing, so keep it tight until you feel comfortable with the motion and timing, then gradually

loosen it as you continue to practice. Eventually you will get to the ideal point that when you push your spool release button before casting, the lure slowly falls when you take your thumb off the line.

When practicing your baitcasting, the best spot is in your front yard. Back yard if you're self-conscious. Give yourself an hour and a 3/8-ounce hookless plug and you should be extremely close to having these basics down. The interesting thing about baitcasters is that many people allow backlashing fears to thwart their use of these reels when they could become accustomed to using them effectively in a reasonably short amount of time.

There's more than one person reading this that has an old baitcaster, perhaps even a new one, that's been rarely used because of the fear of backlashing. But it doesn't have to be that way. Keep the brake tight, your thumb close to the spool, and practice, practice, practice. That's how you're going to learn to use this type of reel, and once you do, you may never go back to fishing any other kind. ■

DOGS

PLUM CREEK KENNEL. German Shorthairs, stud service, puppies and started dogs. Training for all pointing breeds. Specialize in training the handler as well as the dog. Wayne Clark, Percival, Iowa 51648 (close to Omaha) (712) 529-4238, e-mail wclark@heartland.net.

WILDERNESS KENNELS. Gun dog training – over 60 years combined experience. Training all sporting breeds – retrievers, flushing and pointing dogs. All dogs worked on pen-raised birds and wild game. Training program also includes obedience training – heel, sit, stay, down and come when called. Pups, started dogs and fully trained dogs for sale. Hunting dogs trained by hunters. Henry Sader, Wilderness Kennels, Roca, NE (402) 423-4212. Since 1968.

DUCKDAWG RETRIEVERS - Raising exceptional field-bred yellow and black Labradors. Hunting, family and competition companions. Puppies raised in our home. Written health guarantee. Stud service available. Home of GRHRCH DuckDawg's Eba Roll The Dice - first and only Grand Hunting Retriever Champion in Nebraska. www.duckdawg.com, Ron Green DVM and Libby Milroy, North Platte, NE (308) 534-3659.

FROSTY BROOKE ACRES LLC, Labradors and Golden Retrievers - Hunt test and Field Trial bloodlines up close. Super temperament, desire and looks. Great all-purpose Labs and Goldens, www.frosty-brooke.com, (308) 783-LABS (5227), Scottsbluff Valley, Nebraska.

BRITISH LABRADOR PUPPIES, AKC/UKC, O.F.A./CERF. Guarantees. "Wildrose" Dam and Sire. Exceptional British field trial lines. Free training. Wildwind British Labradors. (402) 429-1836 steve.macdonald@davisdesign.com.

PRAIRIE DOG KENNELS, INC. specializes in retrievers and versatile pointers. Dogs worked in water, grass and timber on upland birds and waterfowl. Brian Moreland, Bennet, NE (402) 782-2075.

FOR SALE, AKC GERMAN SHORTHAI pups. Parents good hunters. All shots current. Four males, five females. Call (402) 762-3864.

ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

TOXIC ALGAE MONITORING, Environmentally Safe Blue-Green Algae Control. Complete toxic algae consulting; algae sample analysis; laboratory analysis for toxins produced by blue-green algae; environmentally safe, EPA approved blue-green algae control; water quality monitoring on streams, lakes and wetlands. Contact: Ripple Environmental, Inc. Lincoln, NE (402) 438-0806 www.rippleenvironmental.com.

FISH/FISHING

FISH FOR SALE. Catfish, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, perch, crappies, bluegills, walleyes, rainbow trout, grass carp, minnows, bullheads. Consulting available. Pleasant Valley Fish Farm, 27851 U.S. Highway 83, McCook, NE 69001. (308) 345-6599.

NEBRASKA LAKE MANAGEMENT – Biological lake surveys, fish stocking, rough fish control, lake aeration, algae control, shoreline construction. Rob Hofpar, Aquatic Biologist, licensed, insured and qualified. Phone (402) 784-6005 (Lincoln), or toll-free (888) 850-2460.

BUZZ'S MARINE, YOUR FISHING and recreational boat super store, www.buzzsmarine.com and family watersports dealer, www.buzzswatersports.com.

FREE WAXWORMS & MEALWORMS – raise your own. Thousands of waxworms and mealworms with our breeder kits \$22.95 - \$24.95. New Illuminator lighted glow jigs. Automatically light up when wet and turn off when dry. (763) 323-9273, www.waxwormkit.com.

FOOD/GIFTS/HOME

HOMEBREWING/BEER AND WINEMAKING. Fermenter's Supply, 8410 K Plaza, Suite #10, Omaha, NE 68127. Phone orders only, (888) 655-2739. Advice line (402) 593-9171. www.fermentersupply.com.

VISIT THE NEBRASKA MAPS & MORE STORE at the School of Natural Resources UNL, U.S.G.S. Topographic maps for the entire state of Nebraska – a great tool to enhance your outdoor adventures. More than 4,000 titles of natural resource, geology, wildlife and agate books and maps. Shop online 24/7 <http://nebraskamaps.unl.edu>, 3310 Holdrege St. Lincoln, NE, East Campus, (402) 472-3471.

GUIDES/OUTFITTERS

CANOE THE NIOBRARA with an affordable canoe trip by Dryland Aquatics. One- and two-day trips...full service, or just canoe, tube or kayak. Transportation furnished. Your Niobrara River specialists...We do it your way! Dryland Aquatics, Dept. N, Box 33C, Sparks, NE 69220 or phone (800) 337-3119. www.drylandaquatics.com, info@drylandaquatics.com.

KRIPPLE DUCK ADVENTURES – Southwestern Nebraska. Guided hunts along the Frenchman Creek for white-tailed and mule deer, waterfowl, upland birds and turkey. We also have a controlled-shooting area for pheasants, quail, and chukar. New lodging accommodations are available on site. For information please call (308) 394-5345 or (308) 280-5345. Email at cdom@bwtelcom.net, www.krippleduck.com.

CATFISH ON THE ELKHORN Channel, Blue & Flathead •Day trips / Overnights •Guided boat trips or bank fish from camp •Fish shack or tent camp lodging for overnights •Shore lunch included on guided trips •All bait & gear available or bring your own •Less than 1 hr. from Omaha Call (402) 427-3288 / (402) 478- 0025.

GUNS/SHOOTING/ARCHERY

GUNS – Browning, Benelli, Winchester, Ruger, etc. 1700 guns, buy-sell-trade (402) 729-6112, Bedlan's, Fairbury, NE 68352. www.bedlans.com.

OUTDOOR EQUIPMENT

IS PERFORMANCE IMPORTANT? For the finest canoes and accessories look to Great Plains Canoe Co., 205 Main, Springfield, NE 68059. Phone (402) 253-2000.

PHOTOGRAPHY

WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINTS. Matted, framed and signed. Go to inplainssight.homestead.com, hathfotofreak@hotmail.com, (402) 848-2358. "The more you buy, the quicker my wife can retire!"

REAL ESTATE

HUNTER'S PARADISE IN WESTERN NEBRASKA, Geese/Ducks/Deer/Pheasant/Turkey, 204 +/- Acres, ½ mile frontage on North Platte River. Contact: Morrow Realty, LLC (308) 262-1207, jb.morrow@charter.net.

NANCE COUNTY NEBRASKA LAND AUCTION – Friday, August 10, 2007. A Hunter's Paradise! Property is taxed as 130 wooded acres with approximately 1/2 mile of Loup River frontage. This property is located close to 3 State Wildlife Management areas and the Genoa Municipal Airport. Also to be offered will be the adjoining 160 acres with 90 acres of cropland, a Lindsay pivot, a 3 bedroom bungalow home, a Quonset and bins as well as other outbuildings. This property would make a great getaway lodge with income potential for the hunter and outdoorsman alike. For further details, call Fowlkes Realty and Auction Co. Inc. at 1-800-275-5522, (402) 948-0162 or www.fowlkesrealtyandauction.com.

VACATIONS/RESORTS

FOR FISHING AND HUNTING accommodations. Guided pheasant hunts. Jefco Inn, Gordon, NE 69343. South Cornell, (308) 282-2935.

THE OLDE MAIN STREET INN. A historic bed and breakfast listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Beautiful dining room with fireplace. Featuring prime rib, buffalo, seafood, homemade soups, chilis and desserts. 115 Main Street, Chadron NE 69337 (308) 432-3380. www.chadron.com/oldemain.

LORD RANCH RESORT. Hunters, fishermen, family

vacations, family reunions. Deluxe cabins, complete cooking facilities & TV. Quiet and peaceful in the middle of the Sandhills. Three miles north of Valentine Wildlife Refuge, open all year. Aubrey and Dorothy Lord, HC 37, Box 41, Valentine, NE 69201. Call (800) 270-0181. www.lordranchresort.com.

DIAMOND B TROUT RESORT & RESTAURANT, Orchard, Nebraska. Restaurant, lodge, cabins, spring-fed lakes, playground equipment, paddleboats. Great for families, groups, hunters. Book your cabin now! Call for brochure (800) 974-3002. www.diamondb-troutresort.com.

MILL IRON V LODGING is modern cabins for your vacation pleasure. We are located near Vedigre, NE in turkey country. Each cabin offers privacy, view and a birdwatcher's paradise. Stay with us for a COUNTRY EXPERIENCE. (402) 668-7488. www.milliron-v-lodging.com, jpeinrem@gpcom.net.

DELUXE NIOBRARA RIVER CABIN: Private, fully furnished. Kids' adventure or adult getaway. Also Biggest Tubes on the Niobrara! www.nolasupertubes.com, (800) 799-9929.

VISIT NEBRASKA STATE PARKS this summer and enjoy activities such as fishing, swimming, camping and hiking. Call (402) 471-1414 or go online at OutdoorNebraska.org and follow the Parks link.

TROUT FISHING, HUNTING, TUBING on a cool, spring-fed stream. Perfect accommodations for families. www.aboutpinevalleyresort.com, 402-273-4351.

WEB SITES

JOIN FELLOW OUTDOOR ENTHUSIASTS www.nebraska-outdoors.com. Post pictures, place your classified and join in conversation at nebraska-outdoors.com!



Becoming an Outdoor Woman

A Three-day Workshop
Oct. 5-7, 2007
Located in the beautiful Nebraska National Forest near Halsey

For more information, call
(402) 471-5482
or visit online at:
www.NebraskaBOW.com
www.OutdoorNebraska.org
NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION

Classified Rates: 75¢ per word, minimum \$15. Closing: First business day two months before issue date. Classified ads are accepted on a first-come, first-served, space-available basis. Classified Ads, NEBRASKALand Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Telephone (402) 471-5473. Fax: (402) 471-1984. E-mail: classifieds@ngpc.ne.gov. Ads are posted online at NebraskalandMagazine.com at no additional charge.

Wirth Brothers Lake

Even though few anglers know about this Nemaha NRD lake, they should.

By Jeff Kurrus

Chocolate milk. That is the best way to describe the water at Wirth Brothers, a 34-acre Nemaha Natural Resources District (NRD) lake southwest of Cook in Johnson County. However, don't pass this honeyhole up. There are big fish to be caught at this tree-infested hotspot and you might be the only angler fishing it.

I first encountered Wirth Brothers after a fellow angler told me about the big bass, and possibility of northern pike, in its waters. Since I'm always looking for a new place to fish, I started in the middle of a spring day when the sun had gotten too high to have much success at the clear-water lake I was fishing near Burchard. With Wirth's stained water, the high, midday sun did little to discourage its shallow-water lunkers. At least for another angler on the lake that day.

I have a bit of paranoia when it comes to fishing places for the first time. While my sensible psyche says most public lakes have fish, my cynical side always needs to catch that first fish for confirmation.

I didn't need to be concerned for long. I watched a man in another boat catch a nice bass weighing in the three pound range, then I was able to concentrate, but not for long. It was one of those days I needed a pair of binoculars to spy on the angler beside me, because whatever he was doing, I assuredly was not.

By the end of the visit, however, my partner and I had caught three nice bass weighing between two and four pounds apiece while the other angler caught, and released, 10 bass. I know this number because I watched him closely, yet each time I tried to move closer to talk, he disappeared into a grassy cove, avoiding me like the fish I was coveting.



Jeff Chin of Omaha pulls a largemouth bass from Wirth Brothers this spring.

Despite the limited time spent on Wirth Brothers, it is mentioned here because it is probably one of those lakes that most people have either A) never heard of; or B) want me to stop talking about because they know how productive its fishing can be. It was opened in 1996 as part of the South Branch Watershed flood control project and was stocked by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission with largemouth bass, northern pike, channel catfish, and bluegill from 1996 through 2003. However, it isn't the only Nemaha NRD lake available. Iron Horse Trail Lake, Kirkman's Cove and Prairie Owl are also accessible for fishing. For anglers, annual permits currently costing \$12 can be purchased online at www.nemahanrd.org and 2-day permits are available for \$5 at collection boxes at each park. Yet there is one thing worth noting: no Nemaha NRD park permit is required at Prairie Owl.

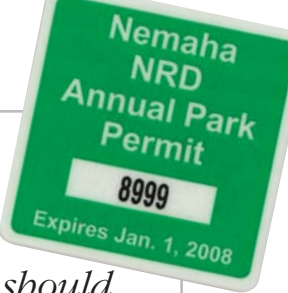
While my partner and I only caught a few fish at Wirth Brothers, I've been thinking about the place ever since. It's just a fishy looking

area that can be easily attacked with nothing more than a white spinnerbait. While murky, it offers the perfect midday destination to find fish in its combinations of submergent and emergent structure as well as the long lines of aquatic vegetation bordering its edges. There are also catfish and bluegill in its waters, and I'm still waiting to see if that northern pike rumor is true.

Wirth Brothers Lake also offers picknicking and camping. But that's not why I'll revisit its muddy waters. I'll drive back to this NRD lake in Johnson County for the aggressive fish that lie beneath the water, even if I can't easily see them. ■



Wirth Brothers in Johnson County is a little known Nemaha District NRD lake that offers picknicking, camping, and fishing for bluegill, catfish and bass.



Portraits from the Past



Pictured is my father, Charles Shada from Ansley, during a duck hunting trip with his friend Guy Smith from Grand Island.
— Venetta Harmon, Ord, Nebraska



My father, Fred Joosten, was an avid coon hunter in the mid-30s. He skinned the coons that he and his dogs, Ranger, Joe and Rex, killed. This picture was taken in 1947. Sometimes I got the honor of going with him on his hunts near and around Cortland. He sold his pelts until the early 50s when the price went down. We enjoy your magazine very much. Your photographs are fantastic.
— Kay Hall, Lugoff, South Carolina



Pictured is E.P. Spud Kapustka trout fishing in the North Loup River below Big Falls, approximately 35 miles north/northwest of Mullen in south-central Cherry County. Although no trout were caught below the falls, we both caught trout upriver a few miles. This photo was taken June 1956.

Spud owned and operated Midway Market in Elyria, ran the town's post office for many years and was well-known among the fishing and hunting circles in Nebraska.

We followed the North Loup River as best we could to its source in Survey Valley, where the river drains from a meadow. Since Spud was reared and lived in Valley County near the North Loup River all his life, he wanted to say he could straddle the river, as shown in the other picture.

I've heard from other sources, as well as from Spud, that Big Falls has crumbled into a rapid since the picture was taken. The land is now owned by Ted Turner and there is no trespassing allowed.

I would love to visit the area again.

— Harry Dubas, Ord, Nebraska

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



Nebraska state parks offer joys as simple and diverse as life itself. Camp, ski, fish, ride, or relax to a chorus of nature. Visit a state park today and discover a world of wonder. To learn more, or to buy a Park Entry Permit – visit us online at www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

Nebraska State Parks



Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

