



While hiking on private land in Dawes County, I came upon this unusual rock formation. How it was formed, either naturally or by man, is unknown. Readers are invited to comment. Photo by Jeff Kurrus.



NEBRASKAland Magazine

Published by the
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

NebraskalandMagazine.com



\$2.95

Published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission since 1926

NEBRASKAland

November 2007

Riding the Ridge

Equestrians gather at
Fort Robinson State Park
to ride through the
rugged beauty of
Nebraska's
Pine Ridge

PLUS

- OIL-STAINED WHOOPERS
- HOW BIG WAS THAT GOOSE?
- THE FINAL CORRIDOR
- BOWHUNTER CLIMBS TO SUCCESS
- NONGAMEY GAME MEAT





NEBRASKAland

Volume 85, Number 9, November 2007

FEATURES

10 How Big Was That Goose

The debate has probably raged since hunters and Canada geese first lived in close proximity to one another, certainly since the invention of scales. Is there, have there ever been, wild geese weighing more than 15 pounds? By JON FARRAR

20 Paint Horse Trail Ride at Fort Robinson

Colorful paint horses and their riders gather each September at Fort Robinson State Park for the American Paint Horse Association's trail rides at the historic frontier fort, cavalry station and equestrian training center. By BOB GRIER

24 The Final Corridor

In 1941, the North Platte River was forever transformed, dramatically altering the appearance of this mountain to prairie river and its valley. By ROCKY HOFFMANN

32 Oil-stained Whoopers

An encounter on the Platte River with one of the world's most endangered wildlife species. By MICHAEL FORSBERG

38 Bowhunt in Southeast Nebraska

Tim Heckenlively uses what might seem to be slightly unorthodox hunting methods, but they work – he's harvested eight Pope & Young bucks in the past 10 years. By ERIC FOWLER



DEPARTMENTS

8 Outdoor Business

Waterfowl hunting's opportunities and numbers are bountiful.

46 Outdoor Update

Biologists start restocking after last year's winterkill.

47 Wilderness Workshop

Little-known secrets lead to better tasting deer.

49 Parks & Places

Wapiti WMA important for American burying beetles and elk.

Comment 4

Outdoor News 6

Classifieds 48

Portraits from the Past 50

Cover: The annual American Paint Horse trail ride at Fort Robinson State Park gives riders a view from atop the historic Red Cloud Buttes. The trail overlooks Giant's Coffin, a scenic butte between Fort Robinson and nearby Crawford. See story beginning on page 20. Photo by Bob Grier. **Opposite:** As the curtain falls on another Nebraska season, a last stiff goldenrod (*Oligoneuron rigidum*) seed waits to fall in east-central Nebraska. Photo by Chris Helzer.



NEBRASKAland Magazine



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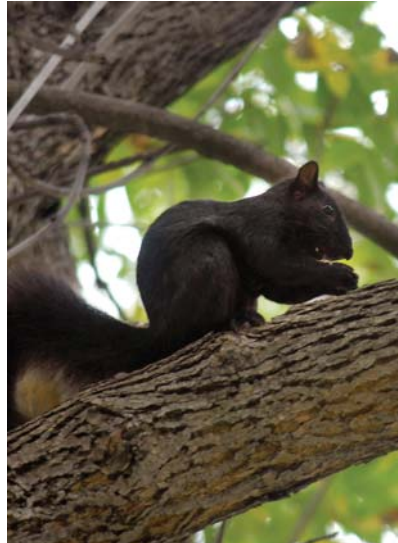
NEBRASKAland VOL. 85 / NO. 9
ISSN: 0028-1964 NOVEMBER 2007

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.

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This black squirrel was photographed in Hastings, Minnesota.

Black Squirrel Love

This guy/gal came into my yard about three years ago and then left for about six months. He has been back all summer and seems to mingle well with the gray squirrel population. I was really excited to see him initially and didn't know they existed. My friend, who spends his summers on Gull Lake near Brainerd, Minnesota, tells me that's all they have up there. Another friend says there are actually calico squirrels in southern Minnesota.

Speaking as a retired photographer, your magazine is one of the best! Loved the article in the October issue on black squirrels. If I come across one of those calico guys/gals, I'll try to catch it with the digital! John Colwell Hastings, Minnesota

Thank you for a great magazine. I really enjoyed the black squirrel article in the October issue. I have watched black squirrels from my youth (63 years), first only seeing them in Council Bluffs across the river, then a gradual appearance in Omaha neighborhoods along the river. I thought when I moved west in the city a few years back I would miss them, but last week I saw a black squirrel only blocks away from the house while I was walking

with my Newfoundland.

The article's information and speculations on origin and genetic sources was also interesting as I carried my interest in outdoors through a biology degree. That education and my other degrees has allowed me to hold a deeper interest in our niche in the world.

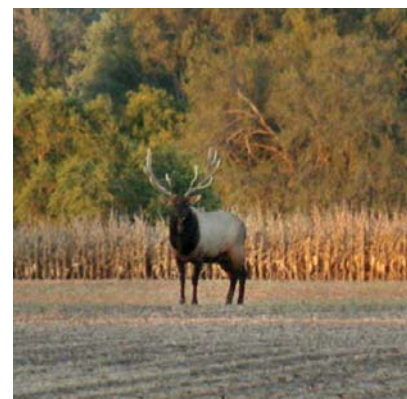
Tom McKean
Omaha, Nebraska

Unusual Sight

Last night while driving my boys to church, my 9-year-old son Ethan said, "Hey Mom, there's an elk!" Needless to say, I didn't quite believe him until my 13-year-old son Clayton said, "No, Mom, really there is an elk."

Sure enough, there stood a large elk in a newly harvested bean field. Since one does not often, if ever, see an elk near Yutan, Nebraska, we decided to take a picture. I quickly dropped the boys off at church, drove home, grabbed my camera and came back to the field. The elk had unfortunately moved further away, but I took several pictures anyway. During my drive home to get my camera, two of my neighbors, Neal Bedlan and Matt Tederman, had seen the elk and had pulled over to view the animal. We watched in amazement for several minutes as we discussed the oddity of an elk in eastern Nebraska.

Liz Karloff
Yutan, Nebraska



This bull elk was photographed near Yutan in early October.

Great Issue

Thanks for the October 2007 issue of NEBRASKAland Magazine – it was one of the best I've ever read. I've saved virtually every article written in the past 40+ years about grouse and dove hunting in Nebraska, two of my favorite fall pursuits, and found "Much More Than Pheasants" very entertaining!

Eric Fowler's article, "Ducks on the Pond," was especially helpful as our 11-year-old son is quickly becoming an avid waterfowler in his first year of duck hunting. And finally, Jeff Kurrus's black squirrel article answered many questions I've had for years about them.

While working for the U.S. Postal Service in Lincoln in the mid-1990s, I would frequently see black squirrels on my route. Most were in the areas of 6th & D streets near Friedens Lutheran Church and 20th & D near First Plymouth Congregational Church. Perhaps these black squirrels liked living near houses of worship?! Keep up the good work!

Rev. David A. Feddern
Cambridge, Nebraska

Corrections

The prairie chicken on the cover of last month's issue was misidentified by the magazine's editorial staff. Also, Yazoo, Mississippi was misidentified in the story on black squirrels. We regret the errors.

-Editor

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Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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Officer's Notebook



Fowl Ball

In late-March I received a call from a Mrs. Matt Asche in Cedar Rapids regarding five or six wild turkeys that had been staying around her family's house the last few days. She said some of the turkeys had become a problem and were somewhat annoying. The family had been feeding the turkeys, so I told her if they quit doing that, they would probably leave. I also told the woman that if the turkeys were around her door or driveway that she could take a broom and strike the birds with the flat side of the broom on their body in order to chase them away. If they were not gone in a few days, I said I would try to relocate them to a more rural setting. I told her to tell her husband about our conversation and have him call me if that was not acceptable.

The next day I received a call from the Boone County Sheriff's office regarding a call from a Cedar Rapids resident who said Matt Asche was chasing and killing wild turkeys in his yard with a baseball bat. While on my way to investigate the complaint, I received another call about the same incident from the Nebraska Wildlife Crimestoppers hotline. Both reporting parties stated that a number of high school boys were at the scene and were chasing the turkeys also.

Mrs. Asche answered the door at their residence, but said she knew nothing about what had happened. I asked if her husband was home and she said he was at the town's high school, which he was the principal of. When I contacted him there, he first denied knowing anything about the situation, but when told about the two eyewitnesses, he dropped his head and became very nervous. He said the turkeys were very aggressive toward his children and wife and that he was only protecting his family, but didn't answer when asked why he didn't call me.

He indicated that he killed one of the turkeys with a ball bat and hit one while it was on the ground flopping around to "finish it off so it wouldn't suffer." When asked, he said he didn't have the turkeys, but thought they might be at the east end of the high school shop area. I located the carcasses of a hen and a jake in the front-end loader bucket of a school tractor and asked for the names of the involved, but he wouldn't tell me.

After tracking down the four students involved in the incident, I conducted interviews and obtained written statements that corroborated the fact that the principal had killed both turkeys with a ball bat. One of the students had been instructed that day by Mr. Asche to try to remove the birds one way or another, so they had gone to the house to try and catch the turkeys so they could relocate them. One of the turkeys was killed while the student was carrying it to the nearby Cedar River in order to release it.

No charges were filed against the students, but Mr. Asche was charged with taking turkeys without a permit, taking turkeys by illegal method, permit revocation and liquidated damages on the turkeys. He pled not guilty to the charges and hired an attorney. The end result was a plea bargain with the county attorney and all charges were dropped except taking turkeys by illegal method. He paid a \$50 fine, \$44 in court costs and \$200 in liquidated damages for the turkeys.

Within the first 24 hours after this incident took place, I received complaints from six individuals regarding it and numerous additional calls and personal contacts from the general public afterward. All of the callers indicated they were very unhappy that someone would kill turkeys in this manner and, most of all, that he involved students from the school where he was the principal.

— Bob Kelly, Conservation Officer, Albion



ERIC FOWLER

Endangered least terns are among the wildlife that depend on the Platte River.

Platte River Biological Opinion Released

A recently completed Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biological opinion concludes that further degradation of the lower Platte River and its tributaries by additional surface water appropriations will jeopardize the continued existence of the pallid sturgeons, interior least terns and piping plovers that depend on the river for survival.

"We have been studying the river since the 1980s – more than 25 years – and we feel the evidence is conclusive that the river can stand no further development," said Kirk Nelson, assistant director of the Commission.

The biological opinion was developed at the request of the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources to determine if continued issuance of surface water appropriations would jeopardize threatened and endangered species or their habitat requirements in the lower Platte River.

The lower Platte River is the section of the Platte River which begins at the Loup River confluence near Columbus and extends downstream to Plattsmouth. "These species utilize the lower Platte River and require the

semblance of the natural high flows in the spring and low flows in the summer that still remain in this stretch of the Platte River," said Nelson. "These natural high and low flows are dependent on inputs from the Loup River, Elkhorn River, Salt Creek basins and the central Platte River, therefore the action area of the biological opinion includes the Loup, Elkhorn and lower Platte watersheds."

The pallid sturgeon (*Scaphirhynchus albus*) is a state and federally endangered fish that has a complex life cycle that requires habitat with certain depth, velocity and river connectivity. Interior least terns (*Sterna antillarum athalassos*) are state and federally endangered, and piping plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) are state and federally threatened. These birds rely on the sandbars created by natural high spring flows and summer low flows to meet their nesting needs on the lower Platte.

"The Commission's mission is to provide stewardship of the state's fish, wildlife and park, and outdoor recreational resources in the best long-term interests of the people and those resources," Nelson said. "We hope people understand the action on

our part is not only for the wildlife species dependent on the Platte River, but also for the sustainability of the river for the people who use it. By stopping further depletions of water from the lower Platte, we will further sustain municipal and domestic water supplies."

A dramatic amount of degradation to the lower Platte River has already occurred over little more than a century's time. But returning flows in the river to the levels recorded from 1895-1909 isn't the Commission's goal. "It's important to note that this opinion doesn't change any of the rights currently granted. Farmers, ranchers and businesses that already have rights will retain them. We aren't talking about attempting to undo what has already happened or change the river's current status," Nelson said. "What we are saying is that the very least we can do to stop further degradation to protect the river's status at the level it is today. The interior least tern and piping plover are in jeopardy now, and pallid sturgeon numbers are below historic levels. We simply can not allow further degradation to the natural flow regime of the river." ■



ERIC FOWLER

The Platte River, shown here near Silver Creek, has dried up in central Nebraska each summer since 2002.

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Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Waterfowl Hunting

When talking bird abundance and liberal seasons, these are “the good old days.”

By Jon Farrar



Mark Vrtiska, waterfowl program manager with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, said hunting regulations have been liberal since 1995.

Waterfowlers past the half-century mark remember the not-so-good old days when season regulations, weather patterns and a shortage of ducks and geese conspired to produce loser years. We will still be grumbling about them on our deathbeds. How many of us, though, are making mental notes about the liberal waterfowl hunting seasons of recent years? To put these seasons in perspective, look back at some of the stinkers.

In 1947, a typical post-World War II season, duck numbers were down. Canada geese were as scarce as hen's teeth, and snow geese mostly blew through the state without a downward glance. Waterfowlers were allowed four ducks daily, any species or sex, but not more than one wood duck. The season opened October 21 and closed November 24, a 35-day season, and the duck season was statewide – no consideration for early marsh shooting or late river shooting. Okay, 1947 was 60 years ago, ancient history.

In 1962, within the reach of many oldster's memories, duck production

was again down and reflected in a 25-day, statewide season and a daily bag limit of two, of which only one could be a mallard. The following year, the bag limit was raised to four birds daily and the season was open 31 days. But the 1963 season will probably go down as the best example of the worst duck hunting regulations in Nebraska's history. It was the first year the federal framework allowed states to split the total number of hunting days to provide more hunting opportunity. There always has been two duck hunting camps in Nebraska: those hunting Sandhills lakes, Rainwater Basin marshes and farm ponds who want as many days as early as possible before freeze-up; and those hunting rivers and large reservoirs wanting a late season to take advantage of late migration flights and wintering mallards and Canada geese. In 1963, the duck season was open statewide, from October 5-13, and November 16 through December 8, a total of 31 days. Essentially, early shooters had a nine-day season before freeze-up. Considering that most ducks migrate

through Nebraska in October, the 1963 season was a slap in the face for early-season hunters, and there were nearly as disagreeable seasons in the early 1990s, especially for early season duck shooters.

Rains returned to the prairie-pothole country in 1993, and by 1995, waterfowl regulations reflected swelling duck numbers. Beginning in 1995, the federal framework used to set waterfowl hunting seasons has been drafted under the Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) system. The goal is to maximize hunter opportunity while maintaining stable waterfowl populations. Mallards drive AHM because more data for more years is available for mallards than any other duck species. Two factors are heavily weighed – the abundance of water on the breeding grounds in the spring and the size of the mallard population. The computer model suggests one of four season alternatives – very restrictive, restrictive, moderate or liberal. State and flyway waterfowl managers discuss the alternatives and make recommendations to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Since 1995, all waterfowl seasons have been set under the liberal criteria. Those species significantly short of their target population – such as canvasbacks and pintails in recent years – receive special consideration, even separate seasons.

A waterfowler from the 1960s would not believe today's season dates and bag limits. During 2007-08, the duck season in the High Plains Unit is 97 days long, there is an early teal and an early Canada goose season in September, dark geese can be hunted somewhere in the state from mid-September into February, and the Light Goose Conservation Action allows hunting snow geese and Ross's geese from February 7 until April 13. Except for the few days between the

early teal and the opening day of regular duck seasons, a waterfowl hunter could be in the field somewhere in Nebraska from mid-September to mid-April. The last time Nebraska hunters enjoyed such liberal seasons was before 1901, when there were essentially no regulations.

“We try to accommodate the most number of hunters, all the diversity, the best way we can,” said Mark Vrtiska, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission waterfowl program manager. “We try to get people in the places they want to hunt when there will be waterfowl there to hunt. But we can only take that so far. Nebraska is a migration state, and so weather patterns determine the migration peaks. And Nebraska is an incredibly diverse state for waterfowl hunting. We have places where winter waterfowl habitat actually abuts early migration habitat.”

Vrtiska's advice to waterfowl hunters is to be more mobile, to take full advantage of the long seasons and variety of hunting opportunities. The nature of waterfowling often ties hunters to one location – somewhere close to where they live, where they have permission to hunt or favorite public hunting waters, the fact that most blinds are stationary and that travel can be expensive. Often, though, Vrtiska said, different hunting opportunities are not that far away – 15 miles to different zones and season dates.

“Young hunters, those who started in 1995, have never known a restrictive season,” Vrtiska said, “in part because of AHM, in part because of good water and recruitment on the breeding grounds. Young hunters have not gone through a 39-day season and daily limit of two or three ducks. Today's waterfowlers should be basking in the exceptionally long seasons we've had for the last 12 years.” ■

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How Big Was That Goose?

By Jon Farrar

The debate has probably raged since hunters and Canada geese first lived in close proximity to one another, certainly since the invention of scales. Is there, have there ever been, wild geese weighing more than 15 pounds?

The argument has raged around campfires, in the back rooms of gun stores and in goose pits for decades. Are there, were there ever, free-flying Canada geese weighing more than 15 pounds? Did some weigh 18 pounds, or even more? The maximum weight of Canada geese was a frequent topic in the columns of Sandy Griswold, outdoor writer for the *Omaha Bee* from 1886 into 1898, and the *Omaha World-Herald* from 1898 until his death in 1929. An excerpt from one of many letters he received typifies the discourse. In the January 19, 1913, edition of the *Omaha World-Herald*, R.C. Darby of Northboro, Iowa, after hunting on the Missouri River, wrote: “I killed one that weighed fourteen pounds, thought that was good, but one fellow said he killed one weighing twenty-one pounds. Don’t believe it, do you?” Griswold’s response: “Canada geese weigh anywhere, on an average, from eight to fourteen pounds, one larger than that is a rarity. No, I do not believe your friend ever killed a Canada goose weighing twenty-one pounds, and I do not believe there ever was one of such a weight.”

Griswold did believe wild Canada geese reached weights of 15 to 19 pounds, and even claimed to have seen them weighed. Griswold, like most hunters (and most outdoor writers), had moments of inconsistency, but more on that later. First the science of large Canadas as we know it today.

Branta canadensis maxima

“It appears likely that a geographical [Canada goose] race of large size once inhabited the northern prairies, for much heavier birds are recorded from this region,” John C. Phillips and Frederick C. Lincoln wrote in their 1930 book *American Waterfowl – Their Present Situation and the Outlook for Their Future*. They added: “This breeding stock is now extirpated.”

William B. Mershon, a Michigan copper mining executive and noted waterfowl hunter of his time, often shot in North Dakota in the 1880s. He recalled the big Canadas in a 1925 issue of *Field and Stream* magazine: “While having the general markings of the Canada goose, such as the black head and neck with white throat and cheeks, they were lighter colored, of a blue-ashy general appearance, and the bodies were shaped differently – long ovals instead of round, chunky ovals.” Mershon wrote the “big geese held aloof and did not mix with the others,” segregating from smaller Canadas when feeding in fields. He observed they “came into their feeding ground quietly, without any honking or noise, knew right where they wanted to go and did not circle about,” and “usually flew low, not so high in the air as the other geese.” Mershon considered any birds weighing less than 12 pounds to be “small geese.”

Canada geese exhibit greater variation in body size than perhaps any other

bird species, ranging from little more than two pounds to at least 14 pounds. They are an exception to the biological rule that warm-blooded vertebrates of any species are usually largest in the northern portions of their ranges. Canada geese populations decrease in body size from south to north – the smallest races nest in the far north and the largest race, the so-called “giant” Canada goose, nests on the central Great Plains. Additionally, the general plumage coloration becomes darker from southeast to northwest.

The taxonomy of Canada geese (which ones are distinct species or races) has long been a realm of lively debate for biologists using Latin and Greek scientific names, and for laymen employing common names such as honker, lesser, Hutchie, Richardson’s and cackler. During the last 50 or more years, as many as 12 subspecies and four different species have been used or suggested to classify Canada geese. The most recent classification, adopted by the American Ornithologists Union in 2004 and largely based on mitochondrial DNA studies, recognizes two living species of “Canada geese” – the cackling goose (*Branta hutchinsii*) with five subspecies of small geese, and the Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*) with seven subspecies of larger geese. The giant Canada goose is still considered a subspecies, *Branta canadensis maxima*. The giant Canada’s field marks are a pale, grayish plumage, especially on the underparts;



Former Nebraska governor Robert Cochran (1935-1941), left, with Art Storz, Omaha brewer, and their morning bag of mallards and Canada geese at Storz’s Ducklore Lodge on the North Platte River west of Lisco in Garden County.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ART STORZ, JR.



The North Platte River Valley has long drawn goose hunters and Canada geese of all sizes.

white on cheeks extending somewhat farther up on the head than other subspecies; very long neck, only rarely with a white collar; and very large bill.

Whoppers of Old

Griswold was probably the most comprehensive chronicler of Nebraska sporting history during the late-1800s and early 1900s. During that time he defended his contention that exceptional Canada geese did weigh more than 15 pounds, even in the face of contrary beliefs of older sportsmen he held in high regard, sportsmen who had shot geese in Nebraska decades before Griswold moved to Omaha. A sample of Griswold's comments, and of other Nebraska goose shooters, appearing in the *Omaha Bee* or *Omaha World-Herald* over the years follows.

- In an 1894 article about hunting south of Lakeside in the western Sandhills, Griswold wrote: "...during the hour and a half we spent in our grass suits amidst the rushes we knocked over six big Canadas – the largest pulling down the scales at fifteen pounds and a half. ..."

- Griswold, in 1895, writing of a

hunt on the Platte River near Clarks: "We had nine and one that tipped the scales at nearly eighteen pounds. ..."

- "I never was much given to weighing either the goose I killed or fish I caught, contenting myself with mere guesswork pertaining thereto."

– Griswold, December 31, 1905.

- "I killed two Canadas in the year 1898 on the Platte River, about half a mile east of the Burlington & Missouri railroad bridge near this place, which weighed seventeen and sixteen pounds each, and I also killed one four miles west of this place in 1901 that weighed seventeen pounds after it was dressed."

– W.E. Jordan, Central City, January 14, 1906.

- Jno. R. Woodin of Tekamah "killed a Canada goose out on his winter wheat field last Sunday that weighed fifteen and one-quarter pounds. Woodin weighed the bird himself, both on common scales and a pair of steel yards and says the above weight is absolutely correct."

- In a January 15, 1928, column, Griswold wrote: "Received a letter a day or two since from a friend out in the northwestern part of the state

telling me about a Canada goose he killed a few days before that weighed within a fraction of 19 pounds. While I have no cause to doubt this statement I can safely say that if it is correct, that goose was one of the heaviest Canada geese ever killed in the state...."

- And in a February 5, 1928, column, Griswold wrote: "Therefore, with all due reverence for the memory of Mr. Hoagland and his opinion, I do know positively and beyond all possible revocation, that Canada geese have frequently weighed as high as four pounds more than the 15 [pounds] set by Mr. Hoagland for his one thousand dollar prize for the man who produced one that even tipped the scales at that figure." (See pages 14-15).

George A. Hoagland's offer of \$1,000 [earlier columns gave the prize as \$25] to any hunter producing a Canada weighing more than 15 pounds, given back in 1888 when Canadas were still abundant, suggests exceptionally large geese rarely, if ever, existed. Hoagland was a wealthy Omaha lumber merchant who came to Nebraska in 1861. Griswold noted that Hoagland had probably killed more geese than any other hunter in Nebraska at the

time. As for Hoagland's \$1,000 reward "in the iron Bank over on Farnam awaiting demand from the lucky individual that can produce this goose," well, it never left Hoagland's account. Dozens of Omaha's most experienced hunters took to the Platte River in November 1888 when the flight of Canada geese arrived, hoping to claim the prize. Griswold recalled their triumphant return and "the pile of dead geese that were heaped up on the long main counter of the gun store. ... That great pile of geese was sorted and then weighed, and it would have made you jump to have heard the raucous outburst from that crowd of good and honest and jolly sportsmen, when the old scoop shovel on the scales had held all the largest, and not a single one reached a single notch over 12¼ pounds."

Griswold, though, persisted in believing that geese weighing over 15 pounds once existed in Nebraska. In 1928 he wrote: "...when wild geese, and I mean Canadas at that, were as plentiful almost as the ducks themselves, and when largely, perhaps on account of the conditions existing, there were many geese killed much larger than any that have been killed save in rare instances,

during the past quarter of a century. Therefore I am willing to concede that if George A. Hoagland's offer for a 15-pound goose had been made in these times, there would be little danger of any man ever collecting the same."

There is some scientific information supporting Hoagland's belief that there were few, if any, Canada geese in Nebraska in the 1880s weighing over 15 pounds. During the fall migration of 1884, 1885 and 1886, and the spring migration of 1885, D.H. Talbot and "his collectors" secured 593 Canada goose specimens from the Mississippi Valley area, of which 404 were collected in central Nebraska. The collection eventually was given to the University of Iowa. The weights of 356 specimens were preserved, of which 57 were "larger geese." The 57 Canada geese ranged from 5.5 to 13 pounds, averaging 8.18 pounds. Female geese averaged heavier, but the heaviest birds weighed were all males.

How Big Today?

"Whether the average sportsman realizes it or not, there is no gainsaying the fact that our wild fowl are a fast vanishing race," Griswold wrote in

1907. "The Platte in the old days was undoubtedly the greatest fall and spring resort of wild geese of any region in the country....Twenty years ago you could see more geese at a glance of the eye than you can in these modern times from the first of March to the first of March. The sight of a flock of Canadas is now an event to excite the most enthusiastic exclamations of even the most persistent hunters along the waters of the Platte valley...."

If all races of Canada geese were much diminished by 1907, the giant Canada goose no doubt was on the cusp of extinction even before 1900. Their characteristic low-flying habit made them more vulnerable to the gun; their great size made them more desirable to hunters; and their breeding range was the most southerly of all Canada races, and so converted to agriculture earliest and most extensively. By the 1930s, shooting a Canada goose in most Nebraska counties was rare, sure to land a photo of the fortunate hunter and his goose in the local newspaper. But there were regions in Nebraska where Canadas continued to be shot with regularity, such as the North Platte River Valley. How big were the

(continued on page 16)



By the early 1900s, the giant Canada geese that once nested in the Nebraska Sandhills were a thing of the past.

CHAT OF THE WILD FOWLERS THESE COLD WINTER NIGHTS

BY SANDY GRISWOLD



ONK! Auh Unk! There were a number of the old day hunters met in Townsend's old gun store the other night and the subject of the seemingly extraordinary size and weight of the mallards this fall came up for the usual discussion. One said that this was accounted for by the uncommon plentifulness of feed this fall; another that it wasn't so much a question as to the abundance of provender as it was to the long continued balmy and open weather, which enable the ducks—which were not too much disturbed—to gorge themselves from morning until night and thus gained the very maximum of their size and weight. Still another experienced and observing old fowler said that while both were in a measure correct, that the same could be said of the whole duck family, and the geese, too, for that matter....

While lolling around in front of a tent out in the Sandhills one balmy October afternoon, years ago, with the venerable George A. Hoagland, the Rev. Edwin H. Jenks and several other kindred souls, a passing flock of geese over the distant sand dunes started us to discussing these birds and incidentally the biggest ones we had ever met with. After most of the party had all had their say, Mr. Hoagland turned to me and inquired what the heaviest goose weighed that I had ever killed.

"That I do not know," I promptly replied, "as I never was much given to weighing either the goose I killed or fish I caught, contenting myself with mere guesswork pertaining thereto. But I have seen one, Mr. Hoagland," I quickly added, "that weighed eighteen pounds."

"Whew, that was a whopper," rejoined Mr. Hoagland, "where was

that, Sandy?"

"Down at Hardin's gun store on South Thirteenth street, after the club hunt in 1888," I responded glibly as ever. "There were two of them that weighed within a fraction one way or the other of eighteen pounds each, and they were both killed by the same team of hunters, but for the life of me I cannot remember who they were, but I have a faint recollection that one of them was the late John W. Gwin, but I may be mistaken."

"Were they Canadas—are you sure?"

"Oh, yes, they were Canadas all right, but old timers, we all thought from the gray of their plumage: there was scarcely any black blending with their general color at all."

"They must have been old-timers, very old-timers," interjected Mr. Hoagland, with much doubt implied in his tone. "I've been shooting geese out in this country now for, let me see, about forty years, and I have never yet run across a goose that weighed over fourteen pounds."

"Mr. Hoagland," deprecatingly from me.

"Well, that's so, and at that I have only killed two or three that reached that weight. Why, some sixteen or seventeen years ago, one March morning down in Collins' gun store, on Douglas, between Thirteenth and Fourteenth streets, there was a lot of us

shooters discussing this very subject. There were several, like you, who imagined that they had seen an eighteen-pound, or even a twenty-pound goose, and, of course, guided by my extensive experience and close observation, I disputed them and

finally to convince them that I was in earnest, I offered \$25 in cash and immediately drew my check for that amount and deposited it with G.W. Collins, to the first man that brought me in a Canada goose weighing over fourteen pounds. That was in the days when geese were as thick as black birds and every man in the party that night left Collins' store with that \$25 of mine as good as in their pockets.

"Some two weeks subsequent, one afternoon, a boy came to my place of business and told me I was wanted at



Sandy Griswold

Collins' gun store right away. Not suspecting what was up, I responded, however, within the next half hour. When I reached Collins' I found pretty much the same crowd there that had been present the night we were discussing the Canada's

weight, and Yank Hathaway said to me: 'Well, George, Mr. Blank has won your \$25. Look here.' And I followed him to the back room where John Collins had his saddlery shop, and there on the floor I beheld a very handsome old Canada gander. Blank picked it up by the neck and held it before me with the interrogation: 'How much will he weigh?'

"Now, I pride myself that I cannot be fooled on the close approximate weight of a wild goose or a black bass after I have had a chance to look at it. I have a peculiar talent in this line, I've weighed thousands of both birds and fish and seldom mis-guess their weight more than an ounce or so.

"Scrutinizing Blank's gander searchingly, I deliberately declared that it wouldn't weigh more than twelve and a half pounds. The steel-yards were out in a flash, and hooking the goose through the bill, Blank held it up and it pulled down the marker to fifteen and a half pounds! They all gave me the laugh, of course, and Mr. Collins said: 'Shall I give Blank his money?' 'not yet,' I replied, and turning round I stooped and reaching under the bench where Blank had carelessly tossed the Canada, I dragged it out by one leg and held it up, intending to heft it, as I felt confident from its looks that I had killed many a heavier goose.

"There was a pattering as like hail upon the leather-scraped floor, and as I jerked the goose up a little higher, a perfect stream of buckshot began to pour from his throat, and so the snap was given away and my \$25 was safe. After the joke had been abundantly enjoyed by us all, I insisted on stripping the gander's crop of the buckshot and weighed him and you can imagine my pride and self-esteem when the bird notched exactly twelve and a half pounds.

"Now, Sandy," continued the genial old sportsman, "those two

geese you saw down at Hardin's in the fall of '88 may have weighed eighteen pounds each, as you claim, but I think some one handed you something, as they say nowadays.

"Did you see the birds weighed?"

I acknowledged that I did not. [In a February 1928 column, Griswold's recollection of the event was different: 'I, myself, asserted previously, that I had seen two geese weighed down in the old Penrose & Hardin gun store, in the fall of 1888, that tilted the scales at more than 18 pounds, and that is true, as I stood by and saw them weighed not once, but repeatedly, and on the regular store scales where patrons were having their shot and powder weighed daily.']

"Then," said Mr. Hoagland, "I have no hesitancy in declaring my doubts. I tell you I never saw a wild goose that weighed over fourteen pounds."

Now, how about Mr. Hoagland, anyway? I know he is Omaha's most active sportsman among all the veterans of the old day school, as he is, without doubt, one of the best informed men on wild fowl in the whole community, their diversified habits, peculiarities, flight, notes during both the closed and open season, as well as the most effective way to hunt and kill them. And there is no shooting he likes better than goose shooting, and he is never more interesting than when descanting upon the days he spent in his brush blind on a bar in the sprawling Platte; or in a pit in some one of the limitless pasture lands which border it....

According to Mr. Hoagland no sportsman need know the bird overly well to appreciate that he is quite worthy of his fire. Few birds are bet-



The time to give it to them.

ter judges of the range of a shotgun, few eyes much quicker than his to detect any suspicious motion, and see through a flimsy blind. Nor are there many sounds that awake more tender thoughts than the deep-toned unk-auh-unk, whether, falling afar from the sky as the noble bird floats away south in disdain of all your quarter of the universe, or sounding clear and generating above your tent as he passes in the dead of the night, or rolling toward every corner of the sky as the flock sheers, whirls, and, on great pounding pinions, climbs upwards as you rise from your hole in the field and pour a storm of leaden bullets among them.

But to once more revert to the weight of the Canada, and, with all due respect for the Hoagland opinion, I shall never believe that the two geese I saw on Johnny Hardin's counter that memorable October evening eighteen years ago fell far short of what they then said they weighed, eighteen pounds. I did not see them weighed but there were many shooters there who did, and maybe one of these in perusing these lines will recall the incident and come forth with a verification. If he does not, however, it is all right, and the next best thing I can do is to invite sportsmen who have killed geese weighing over fifteen pounds to send me in a report...and, as for myself, I'll promise to never allow another big goose to get away from me without first testing his poundage on the scales.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FRED W. SIEMAN

Canada geese, large and small, were still abundant in 1908 when hunters shooting on the North Platte River between Sutherland and Paxton posed for a photo. Keith Neville, who would be Nebraska's governor from 1917 through 1919, is the center hunter.

Canadas shot along the North Platte River from the 1920s through the 1960s?

Irvin Winterer, a lifelong goose hunter on the tableland northwest of Oshkosh, said in a 1987 interview when he was 88 years old that during the 1920s and 1930s the average size of Canada geese shot was 10 to 12 pounds: "Some of them would be bigger than that, but that would be about the average, 10 to 12 pounds." Jack Robinson of Oshkosh first hunted geese in 1929 when he was eight years old, hunted with Winterer, and still hunts them today. Few living hunters can match either his days in the goose pit or number of geese shot during his lifetime. "We've always killed about eight-pound geese. Some were bigger. The heaviest goose I've killed was 14 pounds and 2 ounces, weighed on the post office scale. I've killed 12-pounders and 13-pounders, but only that one over 14 pounds."

The late Goldie Haworth of Sidney began hunting on the North Platte River Valley in 1919 as a high

school sophomore and continued hunting there into the 1990s. In a 1987 interview, Haworth said that while the average size of Canada geese on the North Platte had been increasing in recent years because of the restoration of giant Canadas to the northern Great Plains, they still averaged eight or nine pounds and the largest were about 12 pounds.

Haworth recalled a heavier goose, though. In 1925, Haworth and two companions were hunting along the North Platte River in Garden County. "We got a bunch of geese to come in and we got six of them, big geese, one weighed 14 pounds," he said. The big goose was only wing-tipped and Haworth kept it for his call bird flock.

"So, my brother-in-law and I were down in Joe Simodyne's pool hall one night and we'd all been spiking bottles of near-beer with a little alcohol and we got to talking about big geese," Haworth recalled. "And Ed says, 'well, I've got the biggest geese.' And he kept his geese three miles out east of town on a lake out there. And I kept mine

here in town. It was about 11 o'clock at night. So we bet \$5 who had the biggest geese. He went out there and got his goose and I went home and got my goose and we took 'em down and weighed 'em and my goose weighed 16 pounds and his weighed 14." The 14-pounder Haworth shot and took home in 1925 had gained two pounds during its flightless life in a pen. That was the only goose heavier than 15 pounds Haworth had seen during 70 years of raising and hunting them.

Ralph Kohler of Tekamah started hunting waterfowl on the Missouri River in the 1920s, and has operated a commercial waterfowl hunting operation since 1956. While the bulk of his shooting has been snow geese, he has seen thousands of Canada geese tumble into his decoys. The largest Canadas he has seen weighed came not during his youth, but in 1988. "We needed seven [more] to have the limit that day," Kohler recalled in a 1989 interview. "We got into a bunch and it turned out just exactly right, we just had seven of 'em. Two of those weighed 14 pounds

and 10 ounces, one 13 pounds and 10 ounces, one 13 and 9 ounces, and one 13 and 6 ounces. I never saw such big geese in my life. I've hunted all those years and never seen anything like it."

With the successful restoration programs during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the chance for a hunter to shoot a goose weighing 12 pounds or more has not been better during the last 100 years. And so it is not surprising that claims of Canadas weighing 15 pounds or more are heard most hunting seasons. Few of these monsters are actually weighed on certified scales, though. But there are exceptions, providing insight into the maximum weights of birds today.

During the last six hunting seasons, Commission biologists at Clear Creek Wildlife Management Area on the North Platte River above Lake McConaughy have gathered hunter success information, including the weights of Canada geese shot there. Of 1,865 geese weighed, the average weight was slightly over nine pounds. The heaviest bird shot in any year ranged from 12 pounds, 8 ounces to 13 pounds, 4 ounces, with an average of 12 pounds, 14 ounces. The North Platte River is a major migration stop and wintering area for large geese nesting in the northern Great Plains and south-central Canadian provinces, and as such is probably a reliable sampling ground.

Since 1976, the North Platte Valley Sportsman's Club has sponsored an annual competitive goose shoot in the Oshkosh area, with the proceeds going to scholarships, local civic endeavors and conservation projects. Last year 18 four-member teams competed. There is an official weigh-in at the end of hunt. Last year was a record setter for big geese. Gary Ebert of Lincoln killed the largest goose ever recorded during the 30 years of the competition, a bird weighing 14 pounds. Each member of his team shot their limit, 12 geese total, for a combined weight of 135.6 pounds and an average of 11 pounds, three ounces. That team total was also a 30-year record for the organized hunt.

Al Lake, who operates a game bird cleaning service in Oshkosh, has dressed ducks and geese for hunters since 1980. He has processed as many as 4,919 geese in one hunting season.

Return of the Giant

In the early 1910s, Ray P. Holland, president of the American Game Protective and Propagation Association and later editor of *Field and Stream* magazine, initiated a public discussion about the maximum weights of Canada geese that continued into the 1930s. "I have been working on the theory that there is a distinct species of big goose for the last ten years, but have never gotten very far with it," Holland wrote in 1922. "I have a pile of data here in the office, but nothing conclusive enough to convince the ornithologists that such a bird exists." Holland concluded that the Platte River was probably "about the southern limit of their range."

In 1934, Holland received a letter from John Phillips, one of America's most prominent ornithologists, saying: "I believe you are right in your surmise that there was a large race of Canadians in the Dakotas, Nebraska and southern prairie region, but unfortunately, nothing tangible remains on which to base a new subspecies." Phillip's judgment essentially reignited the debate to dusty file drawers, largely for the absence of specimens either alive or dead. There was a revival of the effort to document the existence of big Canadas by ornithologist James Moffitt in the mid-1930s. Moffitt described a race of large Canada geese native to western states, the race bearing his name today, *Branta canadensis moffitti*. Moffitt was convinced an even larger race once occurred in the North American interior. His research ended prematurely when he was killed in World War II.

The rediscovery of giant geese is largely attributed to Harold C. Hanson, an Illinois Natural History Survey research biologist and author of *The Giant Canada Goose*, published in 1965. In 1962, Hanson, along with Minnesota and federal biologists, trapped Canada geese wintering at a Rochester, Minnesota city park to gather measurements. At first they thought their scales were faulty because of the heavy weights recorded, but they were not. The large birds perfectly fit descriptions of the giant Canada goose described in the early 1900s. Hanson subsequently found giant Canadas in flocks from Michigan to Colorado and north into the prairie provinces of Canada.

Also in 1962, South Dakota game biologists began to select and gather large geese with the morphological traits old-time hunters and ornithologists assigned to the giant Canada. In a cooperative project to reestablish giant Canadas to their native range, the USFWS and the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Commission assembled birds from game breeders in both Dakotas and Minnesota. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission initiated a program to restore Canada geese to their native breeding grounds in the Sandhills in the late-1960s. Thirty-seven male and 23 female *maxima*-type goslings were obtained from the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in Jamestown, North Dakota, as well as birds from other sources, such as Cody Park in North Platte, geese with lineages tracing back to pre-1935 call bird flocks. Moffitt's Canada geese, the slightly smaller race, were also included in the breeding flock. Biologists were not as concerned with producing a pure line of giant Canadas as they were birds of large size that were reliable nesters and adapted to Nebraska. Restoration breeding flocks were established at Sacramento-Wilcox Wildlife Management Area in Phelps County, and a smaller breeding flock at Branched Oak Lake near Lincoln.

The first releases of still-flightless juvenile geese were made in the Sandhills in 1970. Geese and most other birds imprint on the site where they make their first flight and return there to nest when mature. To speed the reintroduction, dark goose hunting was not allowed in the Sandhills for 10 years, and the harvest limited for several subsequent years. A total of 4,100 goslings were released in the Sandhills until 1983, when the goal of establishing 500 breeding pairs was reached. The following year, a similar program to restore large Canadas as breeding birds in the North Platte River Valley was initiated. Over the next 10 years, more than 5,000 goslings were released. After 1993, goslings were released at other locations across the state. The restoration program was discontinued and the breeding flock dispersed in 1997. Today, "giant" Canada geese are common across their former range.



PHOTO COURTESY OF EARL HAWORTH

Earl “Goldie” Haworth, left, hunted along the North Platte River more than 70 years. The only goose weighing more than 14 pounds he saw was a flightless call bird.

While he has not kept formal records, large birds regularly find their way to his scale. Lake said more geese weighing a few ounces over 13 pounds are shot in the Lewellen area than farther west in the North Platte River Valley, but they are not common. The average weight of a Canada goose he handles is about eight pounds. “Twelve pounds is a pretty big goose in the Oshkosh area,” Lake said. He also noted that the winner of biggest goose contests in Lewellen and Oshkosh are usually 11- to 13-pound birds, but he did recall a 14-pound goose winning one year.

Nick Lyman, a recently retired Commission waterfowl biologist stationed in North Platte, worked with Canada goose restoration projects in Nebraska for 30 years. He has probably handled more geese than anyone in the state. He said the average weight of Canada geese reared and released in Nebraska during restoration programs was eight to 12 pounds. The heaviest Canada goose he ever saw weighed

was 14 pounds.

Griswold wrote in 1928 that a hunter’s chance of bagging a big Canada was poor compared to 40 years prior because few geese lived long enough to attain exceptional size. “Considering the terrific decimation of this class of our wildfowl family that has taken place within the past several decades, it would be a rare goose, indeed, and one that surely bore a charmed life, that could survive even for three or four seasons after being hatched.”

While far from a scientific sample, in 1995 I shot a banded Canada goose on a Cherry County lake. The bird was in good flesh and fat. The band on its leg was nearly worn through. The goose was weighed on a certified scale at Big Alkali Fish Camp, a scale used to verify weights of Master Angler fish. It weighed 12 pounds, 9 ounces. The goose was already an adult when banded in June 1985, and so was more than 10 years old, but did not weigh 14 pounds, 15 pounds or 18 pounds. Such

information is little more than anecdotal, but suggests Griswold’s contention that old birds grew to exceptional weights was probably unfounded.

An Aversion to Scales

Scales and large Canadas rarely seem to be found in close proximity to one another. And the accuracy of scales should always be in question. Last November, I hunted Canadas with Tom Olson and Miles Fiscus near Lisco. Both have hunted geese for many, many years. Fiscus said the largest

goose he has killed and weighed on certified scales was 14 pounds, 2 ounces. On that hunt we shot a conspicuously large goose. Fiscus weighed it an hour later on a hand-held fish scale. The goose pulled down to 13 pounds, 6 ounces. About 12 hours later it weighed 12 pounds, 6 ounces on a certified scale at the North Platte fish hatchery. There are at least two explanations for the lost pound – either the hand-held scale was inaccurate or the dead goose lost a full pound through dehydration.

So, returning to the question in the title of this article, what is the maximum

weight of a Canada goose shot in Nebraska today? There is, of course, no definitive answer, but evidence suggests that any goose tipping the scales at more than 14 pounds is an exceptional goose.

Were there heavier Canada geese years ago? Do today’s restoration Canada geese accurately represent the size of geese on the Great Plains in the 1800s? Considering that the weight argument of 120 years ago was essentially the same as the weight argument of today – were there, are there Canada geese that weigh more than 15 pounds – suggests today’s big

Canadas probably are representative of geese of old. After all, George Hoagland bet against a goose heavier than 15 pounds in 1888 and kept his money.

Harold C. Hanson put his finger on the difficulty of documenting the maximum weights of Canada geese when he wrote his 1965 book, *The Giant Canada Goose*: “The proneness of sportsmen to misjudge the size and weight of the game animals they bag has always been sufficient reason for scientists to view with skepticism reports of individual animals that departed widely from the known norm for a given species.” ■



PHOTO COURTESY OF JODI MCNEEL

By the 1920s, only smaller, northern-nesting Canada geese were taken by hunters during the fall migration.

Riding the Ridge

Photos and text by Bob Grier

Colorful paint horses and their riders gather each September at Fort Robinson State Park for the American Paint Horse Association's trail rides at the historic frontier fort, cavalry remount station and Olympic equestrian training center.

Take one of North America's most famous frontier outposts, cavalry remount station and Olympic equestrian training center, add the American Paint Horse Association's (APHA) thousands of riders nationwide and sprinkle liberally with the region's colorful history and scenic, rugged beauty, and you've put together the perfect recipe for the "Cadillac" of all trail rides. APHA's riders and their boldly marked paint horses gather each September at Fort Robinson State Park and this year marked their 12th annual weeklong schedule of activities and trail rides at the park.

The formal organization of paint horse enthusiasts that make up APHA began relatively recently, but paint horses are no stranger to North America's grasslands. Spotted horses were among the first horses to arrive in the New World with Spanish explorers at the beginning of the 16th century. Spanish historian Diaz del Castillo, traveling with the Cortes expedition in 1519, described several of the expedition's mounts, including a "pinto" with "white stockings on his forefeet" and a "dark roan horse" with "white patches." Diaz del Castillo's writings are the earliest known records of the arrival of paint horses on the continent. The Spanish explorers' spotted mounts are

believed to have been descendants of North African and Asian breeds.

Boldly marked, showy paint horses quickly became prized for their beauty, stamina and performance. The arrival of horses in the New World also opened an epic chapter in the history of Native American tribes and the spotted horse was revered by European and native horsemen alike.

After their arrival in the southwest from the upper Platte River in eastern Wyoming and a brief period in eastern Colorado and western Kansas, the Comanche were among the first Native American tribes to acquire horses from Spanish explorers, settlers and their allies. The Comanche became feared raiders of the southwest, stealing horses, women, children and goods, and often selling their plunder back to the original owners, who would rather barter and buy what they couldn't take back from the fierce Comanche by force.

During this period, the oral and recorded histories of many plains tribes, including the Northern Cheyenne, describe early horse-gathering forays to the south to bring horses north. In the beginning, the Cheyenne walked from their homelands on the northern High Plains as far south as Texas and northern Mexico to acquire horses.

The romantic vision of mounted riders

hunting immense herds of bison on the grasslands and moving far and fast to conduct intertribal warfare in the 18th and 19th centuries became legendary. Judging by figures of spotted horses in numerous winter counts on bison hides, and more recently as ledger book art, the boldly patterned paint horse was a highly regarded part of Native American horse herds. The plains horseman – the nomadic hunter and warrior – remains today only as history and legend, but the popularity of the horse that has become the American paint horse continues to grow.

According to APHA's history, during the 1800s and 1900s spotted horses were called pintos, paints, skewbalds and piebalds. Efforts to recognize and preserve patterned paint horses began with the organization of the Pinto Horse Association in the 1950s, followed by the 1962 organization of the American Paint Stock Horse Association (APSHA) by breeders and others interested in preserving the colorful patterns and working, stock horse-type conformation. Another group, the American Paint Quarter Horse Association (APQHA) entered what became at times a heated

rivalry with the existing paint horse organizations before APSHA and APQHA merged in 1965 to become the American Paint Horse Association, with 1,300 members and 3,800 registered horses at the time. Maintaining the breed registry to record pedigrees is APHA's primary responsibility, and the organization's activities and events help preserve the breed's history and promotes the breeding, training, showing, racing, sales and enjoyment of American paint horses. With more than 25,000 foals registered annually in recent years, APHA has grown to be

the third-largest equine registry, with more than a quarter million registered horses worldwide.

The paint horse registry maintains the color patterns and stock-type conformation of working horses, but also horses known for their beauty, natural intelligence, gentle disposition and versatility. Today, paint horses are used for pleasure riding, showing, ranching, racing, rodeoing, trail riding and as companion horses for young riders.

American paint horses are formally divided into established color patterns: Tobiano (pronounced: tow be yah' no),



Fort Robinson State Park superintendent Mike Morava leads a trail ride through the Red Cloud Buttes overlooking the scenic White River Valley. Riders from across the United States enjoy Fort Robinson's equestrian facilities and scenic Pine Ridge trails.



The Friday's trail ride includes a hearty chuck-wagon breakfast on top of the Red Cloud Buttes, a winding descent into the White River Valley and a colorful cattle drive to move longhorns and their calves into nearby Crawford.

overo (pronounced: oh vair' oh) and tovero, (pronounced: tow vair' oh), a classification used to describe horses with markings similar to both the overo and tobiano patterns. Paint horse color patterns can have white and any one of traditional equine colors – bay, brown, chestnut, dun, grulla, sorrel, palomino, gray, black or roan.

According to APHA, horses of the tobiano pattern display “The dark color usually covers one or both flanks. Generally, all four legs are white, at least below the hocks and knees. Generally, the spots are regular and distinct as ovals or round patterns that extend down over the neck and chest, giving the appearance of a shield. Head markings are like those of a solid-colored horse – solid, or with a blaze, strip, star or snip. A tobiano may be either predominately dark or white. The tail is often of two colors.

On an overo patterned horse: “The white usually will not cross the back of the horse between its withers and its tail. Generally, at least one and often all four legs are dark. Generally, the

white is irregular, and is rather scattered or splashy. Head markings are distinctive, often bald-faced, apron-faced or bonnet-faced. An overo may be either predominantly dark or white. The tail is usually one color.” Coat patterns that don't fit neatly into either of these two classifications are listed as tovero.

The annual APHA trail rides at Fort Robinson occur each September, a time that Mike Morava, Fort Robinson's superintendent, says ideally fits into the park's annual schedule of activities. Nebraska's official state park season runs from Memorial Day through Labor Day and Morava and his wranglers look forward to APHA's arrival as the park's summer activities begin to wind down.

“We've enjoyed meeting riders from all over the country, and they've always been impressed with the complete package of facilities and services that the park offers. The fort's stables, corrals and lodging facilities are among the best for organized equestrian

events, and the Pine Ridge near the park offers scenic beauty and trails suitable for new riders and their horses, as well as trails that even the most experienced riders will find challenging. The park staff provides meals, our facilities include the larger meeting rooms, lodging, and campgrounds the riders require, and our wranglers help plan and participate in the trail rides and other activities.

“APHA's activities and programs are also a real benefit to the park as well – they usually end their stay at Fort Robinson with a fund-raising banquet on Friday, and we've been able to refurbish and build onto our equestrian facilities through the riders' and APHA's generosity.”

Alice Singleton, of Arkansas, has ridden every APHA trail ride at Fort Robinson since the first event in 1995.

“The APHA Fort Robinson trail ride is by far our favorite and our members commonly refer to the visit to the Pine Ridge as the “Cadillac” of all trail rides,” she said. “We've ridden from coast to coast, but Fort Robinson is

certainly our favorite. The wranglers could all be professional clinicians – they keep everything moving safely and Mike and his wranglers have the talent to spot potential problems and solve them before something happens. They really make this ride safe for all caliber riders. The opportunity to ride in Ash Creek and the beautiful buttes around the park is wonderful – every day is an absolute delight. We've made every one of the Fort Robinson rides and the friendships we've developed during this ride over the years will last a lifetime. It just gets better and better each year.”

During the weeklong series of trail rides, Morava and the wranglers begin with shorter, less difficult rides to acclimate riders and horses to the Pine Ridge, and by the week's end the APHA riders take on evermore challenging terrain and trails. The Friday trail ride is considered the highlight of the week.

“We begin early on Friday,” Morava explains, “leaving the mare barn facilities usually right at sunrise and riding into the Red Cloud Buttes

between the park and Crawford where the group has a chuck-wagon breakfast at the very top edge of the buttes overlooking the park and the White River Valley. After a hearty breakfast, the trail winds through the buttes, actually overlooking Giant's Coffin, Saddle Rock and the other formations. We occasionally see bighorn sheep, deer and other wildlife and stops along the trail provide some of the best overlooks above Crawford and the fort.”

As the riders descend to the base of the buttes, Morava and his wranglers put the APHA riders to work, herding some of the park's longhorn cows and their calves into the rodeo arena at the west edge of Crawford.

“The riders get to experience the color and excitement of the historic longhorn trail drives that brought the first cattle into and through northwest Nebraska in the mid- to late-1800s as drovers led wild longhorns out of Texas following the Civil War,” Morava said. “Driving the longhorns and their calves to the arena gives us the opportunity to sort and select longhorns

for the park's breeding program, and there are usually a few exciting moments as the riders and horses that don't have an opportunity to work longhorns try to keep the herd lined out and heading in the right direction.”

Once the longhorns are secure in the rodeo arena, the APHA riders trail into nearby Crawford. The sight of the boldly patterned horses and riders on the Crawford's streets and sidewalks is a tame re-enactment of the annual arrival of trail-weary, gun-toting cowboys of the old west.

“The longhorn drive gets really exciting for a lot of horses and riders,” Singleton said. “Actually helping out with the longhorns is certainly one of the memorable highlights of the week at Fort Robinson. It isn't difficult at all to feel that Crawford hasn't changed much from the early days and we enjoy the opportunity to cool off in the shade provided on main street. The Fort Robinson trail ride is great and we really look forward to coming back each fall. Hope to see you at the fort during the ride.” ■



After Fort Robinson's longhorns are herded into Crawford's rodeo arena for sorting, the Paint Horse Association's riders relive the arrival of trail-weary cowboys on the trails from Texas to Montana in the late-1800s.

The Final Corridor

Photos and text by Rocky Hoffmann

In 1941, when the gates closed at Kingsley Dam, the last 60 miles of the North Platte River were forever transformed, dramatically altering the appearance of this mountain to prairie river and its valley. The transformation was striking and not without implications both positive and negative. Not to be denied, however, is the beauty of this three-state river's final corridor.

Below Kingsley Dam, Lake Ogallala heads up the final 60 miles of the North Platte River, where a lone boat and fisherman ply curtains of fog in search of rainbow trout. The little lake was formed as a by-product of fill dirt removed for the earthen Kingsley Dam.

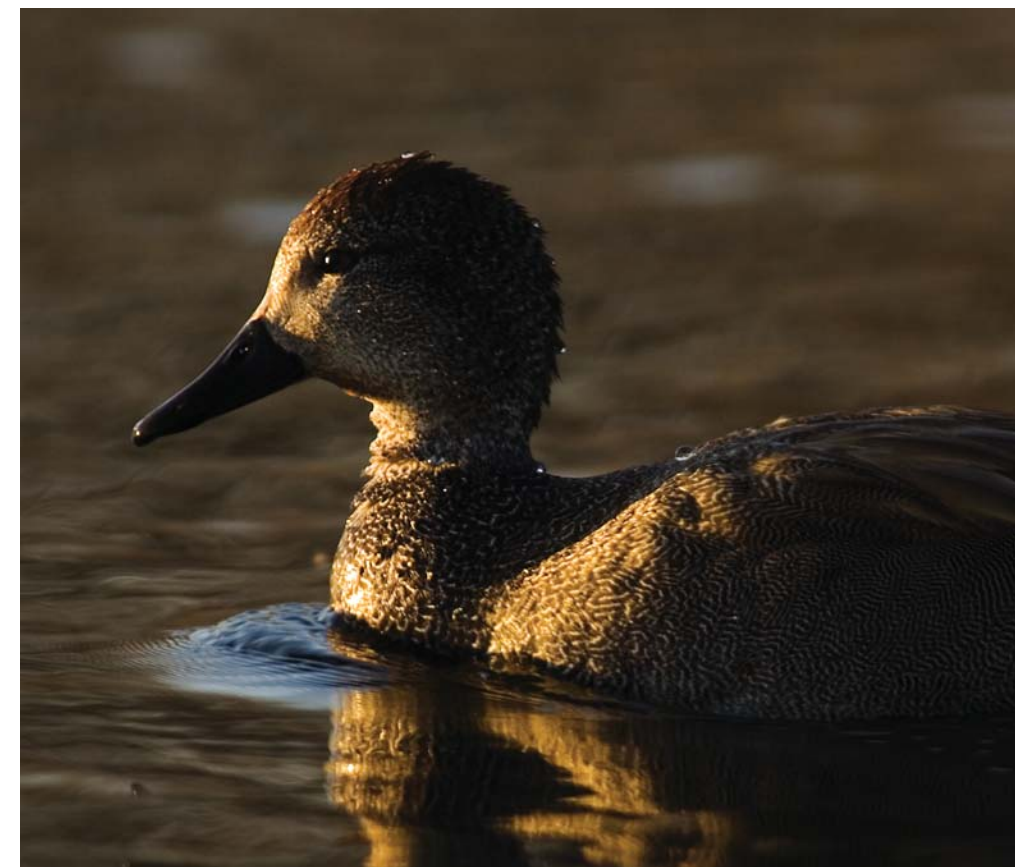


The multi-arched, historic Sutherland bridge once spanned a much wider river. Today, with a restricted river channel passing beneath, many of its 14 arches go for naught. In the early decades of the 20th century, cattle brought down from Sandhills and Dismal River ranches to waiting railroad cars would have likely balked at a long bridge crossing.

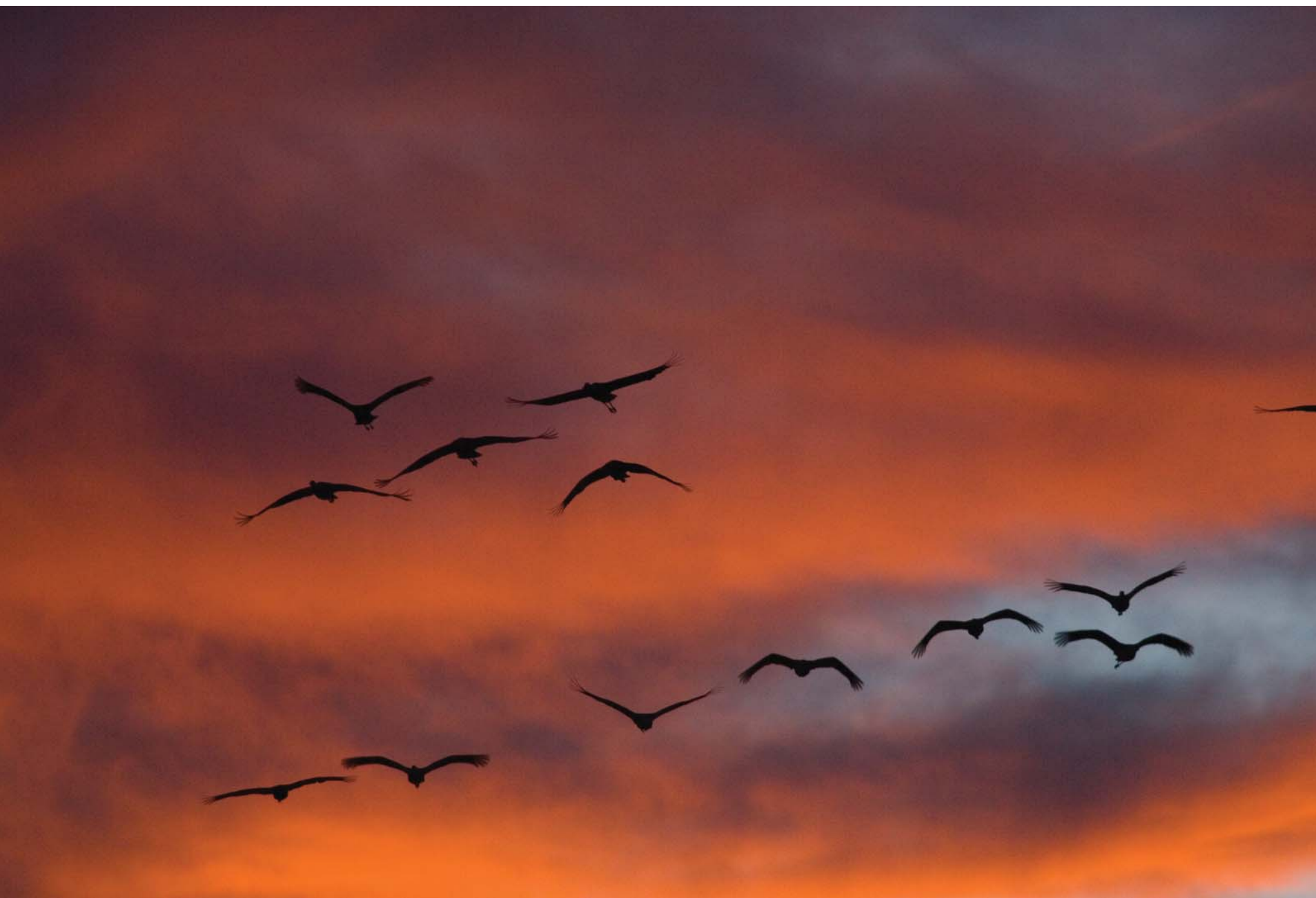
This bridge, however, was designed specifically for the passage of cattle. Completed in 1915, solid cement sidewalls played an important role in convincing cattle the bridge was safe to cross. The Sutherland bridge is technologically significant as the best example in the state of concrete arch construction. Of the 17 multiple-arch concrete bridges built in

the 1910s and 1920s, all, except for the Sutherland bridge, have been destroyed, leaving this structure as the sole intact survivor. It is scheduled for demolition in 2008.

The North Platte River and its associated wetlands attract a variety of waterfowl, from spring migrating gadwall to wintering trumpeter swan families. Partnering wildlife agencies and environmental groups have initiated extensive wetland enhancement projects along the North Platte's lower reaches.



A less celebrated spring gathering site of northward-bound sandhill cranes is the stretch of North Platte River from west of Sutherland to North Platte. More than 150,000 cranes have seasonally visited nightly roosts along this 30-mile stretch of river for centuries. During the last 50 years, controlled flows and the advancement of woody vegetation have significantly altered roosting habitat, but for now at least, cranes instinctively continue to come.



As the river's flows and timing changed, so too have its flora and accompanying fauna. Altered flows have reduced the scouring effects of spring floods, resulting in increased woody vegetation both in the river and on its banks. As a result, there are now a lot more deer, turkey and eastern fox squirrels living along the lower stretches of the North Platte River than there once were.



*P*ile jetties stand idly by like sentinels for most of the year but protect the big bend area near North Platte during periods of increased irrigation releases. Less than a mile downstream, the North Platte River's final corridor ends when it joins with the South Platte River to form the Platte.

Oil-stained Whoopers

AN ENCOUNTER WITH ONE OF THE MOST
ENDANGERED BIRD SPECIES IN THE WORLD

Photos and text by Michael Forsberg



It was Halloween Eve, 2006, and from the river's edge a small group of scientists and staff from Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary staff were watching ghosts. With a naked eye you could see them at a half mile away: three tall, lean white figures appearing, disappearing and reappearing again as they moved among the high bars of sand and shallow pools in the middle of the widest sections of an otherwise parched Platte River channel between the John Dinan Tract of Rowe Sanctuary near Gibbon and its headquarters.

A family of whooping cranes, one of the most endangered bird species in the world, had arrived on migration and for the last several days anchored themselves here where persistent water flow and recent river clearing habitat work combined to form an intricate wetland refuge in the middle of the dusty plains.

Whooping cranes are a big deal when they arrive in Nebraska on migration, making them subject to constant supervision by wildlife officials. Especially on the Platte River, where policy battles over endangered species and instream flows, water rights, multiple use and multi-state agreements are discussed with as much passion and political

fervor as Cornhusker fans debate recruiting classes and the West Coast offense.

At least five other whooping crane sightings had already been reported in Nebraska by late-October, but these birds at Rowe drew more attention because of the mysterious dark stains that interrupted their otherwise white plumage. From where we stood on the riverbank we couldn't see the stains until just before sundown, when the five-foot-tall birds with eight-foot wingspans took off and flew far upstream, gaining altitude toward the Minden bridge before wheeling around and flying back down the center of the river, gliding toward their usual roost just downstream of Rowe's visitor center. As they passed over us, the setting sun lit their undersides and the dark stains came into view. These normally very white birds looked like they had been dipped in very dark ink or, perhaps more accurately, oil.

Monitoring Whoopers

Gary Lingle, an avian ecologist and vice chairman of AIM (Assessment Inventory Monitoring), has likely logged more

hours watching whoopers on the Platte than anyone in recent years. Since 2001, he has been contracted to monitor and record information on whooping crane use of the Platte in cooperation with the Platte River Cooperative Agreement Program, and he was the first to see the dark stains on these migrating cranes on the morning of October 24, a day after their arrival.

"Well, I couldn't believe it. We'd never seen anything like this before," Lingle said. But his small digital camera photographs confirmed that the stains didn't seem to be washing off or fading away. These pictures and others over the next several days would spread like wildfire to a network of other crane biologists across the country in an effort to identify what the stains might be.

Each year, Lingle and a small group of technicians meticulously monitor whoopers in Nebraska and record every move they make from sunrise to sunset each day during a designated 33-day window from October 9 - November 10, which is when most whooper sightings on the Platte occur each fall. Planes leave from Grand Island and Kearney a half hour before sunrise each day in order to try and spot whoopers

Left: In late-October, the whooping crane family with dark stains believed to be oil fly to a roost at Audubon Rowe Sanctuary. Below: The Platte River is critical stopover habitat for whooping cranes during spring and fall migration.

still on the roost, and together cover about 90 river miles. If they find them by air, they communicate their positions to two spotters on the ground who drive to the locations and take turns with other technicians monitoring and recording the cranes' activities every 15 minutes throughout the daylight hours. This information is shared with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Whooping Crane Cooperative Tracking Project, comprised of state and federal cooperators along the Central Flyway from Canada to Mexico. Martha Tacha, current project coordinator, says one goal of the project is to assess the timing and geographic range of the whooping crane migratory corridor along the United States portion of the flyway.

The whooping cranes that pass through Nebraska comprise the only natural wild flock of migrating whooping cranes remaining in the world. They migrate from remote nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada's Northwest Territories to wintering grounds that stretch across 35 miles of predominantly salt marsh habitats in Aransas National Wildlife Refuge along the Texas Gulf Coast. Their migration route is 2,400 miles long, and cuts through the heart of the Great Plains. Most of the sightings in Nebraska occur from early October through early November, and from early April through early May.

Significance of Whoopers in Nebraska

Today the central Platte is the bulls-eye for current multi-state and federal efforts to ensure protection of critical whooping crane migratory habitat for the long term. Historical accounts and old hunting records from the 1800s and early 1900s show the Platte was used consistently by migrating whooping cranes. According to the Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust, between 1884 and 1928 there were 333 documented cases of hunter-killed whoopers in North America. Forty-three of those were in Nebraska, the majority in the central Platte region.

North America's two crane species rely on the Platte, but they use it differently during migration. Migrating whooping cranes typically use the Platte as a "stopover" site, while migrating sandhill cranes use it as a "staging" area. The





At night, whooping cranes need water to roost, but this family group also spent most of their daylight hours foraging on the river channel.

difference is that in a staging area, a bird is expected to stay for extended periods of time with regular repeated use, like sandhill cranes do for several weeks each March. In a stopover site, it is more like an overnight or weeklong motel stay, and the visits may not be as regular over the years. A radio telemetry study on the migratory flock conducted from 1982 to 1984 showed Nebraska had a higher percentage of whooping crane stopovers than any other state in the flyway, and the cranes that stopped in Nebraska and Kansas tended to stay longer than those other places, a fact that has been observed regularly ever since. During the spring migration, whooping cranes use the Platte River more than any other location in their migration corridor.

According to scientists, the lure of the Platte may be in the sense of scale it provides, along with its geographical location about halfway between their nesting and wintering grounds. As a stopover site, the Platte stretches across the entire width of the whooping crane migratory flyway. If you

are a whooping crane looking to rest and you require shallow, slow-moving or still water with wide views in all directions; little or no vegetation to roost in; and you will not rest until you find it, the Platte River valley is an appealing place. Furthermore, in years of extreme drought when many of the northern and central prairie pothole lakes and wetlands have been dry, rivers in Nebraska that hold water in the fall like the Platte may be the only refuge for several hundred miles.

Oil Speculation

The highest incidence of mortality for whooping cranes occurs during their migration. Because their numbers are so low, natural events like tornadoes, severe thunderstorms, blizzards, disease and predation pose huge potential risks to the species. But of increasing concern is death by the hand of man, either directly or indirectly by overhead power lines,

illegal hunting or exposure to pollution, including pesticides, that leak or are dumped into the wetland habitats in which the cranes forage and roost.

Given increasing oil and gas mining operations in the northern Plains, from coal bed methane extraction in the Dakotas and eastern Montana to the extraction of oil from tar sands and oil shale in Alberta and Saskatchewan, a leak in an oil or gas line, poor site maintenance or random acts of illegal dumping by any individual are all potential ways that oil could leak into wetlands along the cranes' migration route. And if ingested or absorbed, oil in sufficient quantities can prove toxic to cranes and also affect their ability to reproduce.

Trying to get to the bottom of the stains of the whooping crane family on the Platte, wildlife officials spent several days searching the river channel, banks and sandbars trying to find stained feathers and collect fecal samples for analysis. No stained feathers were found, but fecal samples were

Demise and Protection

Historically, the nesting range of whooping cranes once ranged through the prairies of the Upper Midwest from Iowa north through interior Canada and was first described in the 1700s. In the 1800s, as Euroamerican settlement moved west, big, conspicuous, white birds like whooping cranes and trumpeter swans disappeared quickly. They were shot for food, feathers and specimens, eggs were taken by egg collectors, and their wetland habitats were drained and converted to cropland.

By the Civil War, less than 1,300 whooping cranes were thought to be left in the wild. By 1929, they were extirpated as nesters from the North American prairie. By 1941, their numbers had dwindled to 16 individuals, whose remaining nesting grounds were located by pilots on a remote part of Wood Buffalo National Park in 1953. Every whooping crane alive today is the descendant of those 16 birds.

In 1967, the whooping crane was one of the first species federally protected under the Endangered Species Preservation Act, and was subsequently listed as endangered under the current Endangered Species Act of 1973. In 1978, critical habitat was designated in Nebraska, including a 53-mile stretch of the Platte River extending from Lexington to Denman. Since then, dedicated conservation efforts have resulted in a slow but steady climb in their population. Today the wild and captive whooping crane population exceeds 500 birds – the first time the species has reached that mark in nearly a century. Approximately half of those birds are divided between an experimental migratory flock in Wisconsin, a reintroduced nonmigratory flock in Florida and birds in captivity; while the other half exists in a wild migratory flock which passes through Nebraska each year, including the dark-stained whoopers seen last fall.

Field counts during in the fall of 2006 at Aransas recorded 237 birds, the highest number of whooping cranes found on their wintering grounds along the Texas Gulf Coast since 1938, when the count first started, and eclipsing the previous high of 220 birds recorded in 2005. The success is believed to be due to very good production in their nesting grounds at Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada's Northwest Territories last summer. Other records broken during the fall survey along the Gulf Coast were the largest number of chicks, 42, and largest number of family groups with two chicks, six.

According to published reports, the population of wild whooping cranes has grown 4.6 percent annually and climbed from 100 to 200 birds between 1987 and 2004. Despite such success with this year's birds, adult mortality between the spring and fall of 2006 totaled 22 birds, just over 10 percent of the flock. The threats are numerous: collision with power lines during migration, wintering habitats threatened by reduced inflows of freshwater, chemical spills from along the shipping lanes of the Gulf Coast, and sea level rise affecting the ratio between salt and freshwater in the habitats in which the birds live.

Update on Oil-stained Whooper Family

Gary Lingle watched the oil stained whooper family leave the Platte River with a flock of sandhill cranes around 9:45 a.m., November 6, 15 days after their arrival, breaking a record for the longest recorded stay by a family group in Nebraska. Sometime after 4:30 p.m. that same day, they arrived at Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in northern Oklahoma, 300 miles to the south of the Platte, which meant their average flight speed was near 45 mph, consistent with migrating whoopers. On November 15th, they were spotted by Tom Stehn during an aerial survey of their wintering grounds along the Texas Gulf Coast. According to Stehn, they likely had been on the wintering grounds about a week when he first saw them.

Although the plastic coating on the color leg bands had deteriorated and worn off, an aluminum band on the right leg helped USFWS biologist and U.S. Whooping Crane Coordinator Tom Stehn from the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas positively identify one of the birds as YbY-Y, a male that was hatched and banded in 1987 in the Lobstick Creek marshes just outside of Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada's Northwest Territories.

According to Stehn, YbY-Y began nesting in 1993 in the western marshes along the Kewi River in Wood Buffalo, and has successfully led chicks to wintering grounds 8 out of 14 nesting years. "That is a productive bird," says Stehn. Whooping cranes rarely change mates unless one dies. YbY-Y has potentially had three different mates.

On the morning of April 13, 2007, these whooping cranes, known by biologists as the North Cottonwood family group, returned to the Platte River on their migration northward, located about a mile upstream of the Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail bridge. Gary Lingle confirmed the report the morning of April 14 by identifying YbY-Y bands. There was no evidence of oil on any of the birds. Likely, the stained feathers were molted or the stains had worn off. They migrated north with a flock of sandhills late in the morning.



Above: A whooping crane dances for its mate on the Platte River as a juvenile searches for food. Right: Whooping crane tracks are left on a Platte River sandbar by the crane family that stayed fifteen days on the Platte last fall, a record by a family group.

come from possible ingestion of oil from the feathers, and how much from other sources that may be prevalent in the environment."

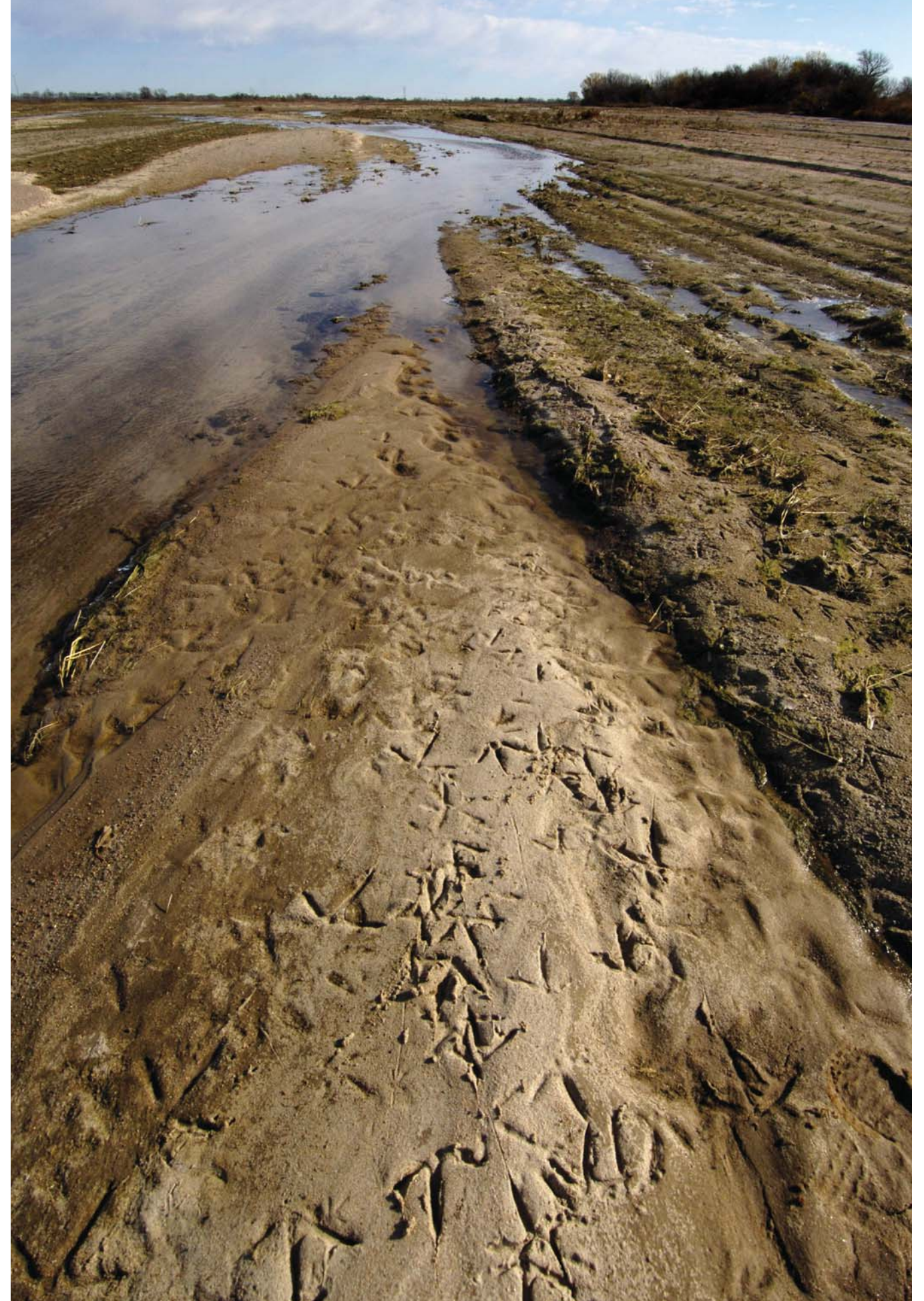
In some cases, such tests can also reveal the geographic location of where the oil came from. However, such analysis is complex and these particular samples were not complete enough to determine those facts, so how and where the cranes acquired the oily stains will likely remain unanswered.

A Future in Nebraska

By mere coincidence or fate, the oil-stained whooper family was on the Platte when Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman signed the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, a commitment between the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Platte River basin states of Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska to provide funding and tools to ensure long-term protection of the river resource and endangered species interests.

During the whooping crane family's two week stay, several people that witnessed these birds used the word "honored" to describe their experience in seeing these rare, magnificent birds. It has often proven a difficult task for those involved in conservation to argue the value of a species's right to exist based solely on economic arguments, which seems to be a benchmark by which most matters are judged in the world today. But I suspect those that have difficulty finding value in these birds simply have never heard the voice of a whooping crane roll across a Platte River valley fog at sunrise, or had one with its 8-foot wingspan fly across the sun so close it casts a shadow on your face. For those moments and for our future generations, there is no price tag. ■

Freelance nature photographer Michael Forsberg lives in Lincoln. To view more of his work, visit www.michaelforsberg.com.



collected and sent off to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Analytical Control Facility in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

The tests concluded that there was indeed the presence of a chemical signature that was consistent with exposure to oily water, likely a crude or higher-grade fuel oil.

"They must have waded into a pond or wetland with a sheen of oil on the surface, or maybe into something more nasty, like a waste oil pit. But it is pure speculation on exactly how or where they got exposed," said Tom Stehn, whooping crane coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The bottom line is that the staining is consistent with petroleum exposure," said Tacha. "Beyond that, this analysis can't tell how much of the compounds detected in the feces

Climbing to Success

Photos and text by Eric Fowler

Tim Heckenlively uses what might seem to be slightly unorthodox hunting methods, but they work – he’s harvested eight Pope & Young bucks in the past 10 years.

With about 10 minutes of shooting light left on a Friday evening in early November, Tim Heckenlively was right where he wanted to be: in a tree stand, bow in hand, watching deer crawl out of their daytime beds on the Nemaha River bottomland where he hunts near his home in Falls City.

He’d seen good doe movement since arriving, but didn’t know what to expect. Four straight days in the tree stand a week earlier had provided little indication that rutting activity, and the movement of big bucks, was picking up.

Then Heckenlively caught a glimpse of a nice, 4-by-4 buck walking along the edge of a cornfield about 150 yards to the east. With a few notes from his grunt call, the buck turned and headed right toward him. While many bowhunters would have been happy to harvest the buck, Heckenlively knew he would let this deer get older and bigger, something he does regularly in his annual quest for trophy-class deer.

He didn’t have to wait long for a trophy. As the 4-point approached, Heckenlively heard a crunch behind him and turned to see a buck with a tall, narrow, nontypical rack walking toward him on a trail leading from a nearby cattail slough. Heckenlively knew immediately that this deer didn’t

A small white-tailed buck stands beneath Heckenlively’s tree stand during a hunt along the Missouri River last fall. (Right) Heckenlively has found success using a climbing tree stand and changing locations often.



This 5-by-5 white-tailed buck was the second trophy to fall to Tim Heckenlively’s bow last fall.

need to get older, but as he slowly turned to get into shooting position, the younger buck, now just 15 yards away, spotted him, snorted and ran a short distance. When it did, the nontypical stopped dead in its tracks, fully alert, muscles tensed and ready to bolt. It soon relaxed, however, and resumed its walk toward Heckenlively, sniffing the ground as it went until it, too, was a mere 15 yards away.

“He stopped and looked up at me and I thought, ‘Oh, no,’” Heckenlively said. “I sat there and he eyeballed me for a while and kind of moved his head, but I just remained real still. He was upwind of me, so everything was good there. I held my composure and he turned broadside and started heading east to the field with his head down for a few steps and I came to full draw. When he stopped, it was a 15- to 18-yard shot, straight broadside.”

The 8-by-9 buck had four nontypical points on each side of its frame, including a drop tine on the left beam.

“I think I saw this one a couple years ago,” he said. “He’s really just a gnarly old buck.”

The buck officially scored 137 6/8 inches on a scale used by the Pope & Young Club and others that measures tine length, spread and mass. That was short of the 155 inches a nontypical whitetail must score to qualify for the archery club’s records program, but it was a trophy nonetheless, and one Heckenlively was happy to add to his bowhunting resume.

That resume – nine bucks in the Pope & Young record book, including eight in the past 10 years – is longer than most bowhunters will put together in a lifetime. For someone who is in their late-30s and has only been bowhunting seriously since after high school, it is impressive.

The resume was built with the intangibles that other bowhunters rely on – having a good place to hunt and spending a lot of time there. But Heckenlively believes his use of climbing tree stands, and the way he uses them, has





When hunting from a tree on which a climbing stand can't be used, Heckenlively uses a lightweight hang-on stand and climbing sticks. Either way, he still packs his stand in and out of the woods on each hunt.

just as much to do with his success.

Most bowhunters head to the woods in late summer to do their scouting and hang tree stands in prime locations. Some people hang just one or two stands, while others might put up many more. Regardless, once the stands are up, they usually stay up until tags are filled or the season is over.

In contrast, Heckenlively, who rarely hunts in September and spends most of his time in the woods in late-October and early November, has his stand on his back, his bow in his hand and is ready to hunt the first time he walks into the woods. He picks new stand locations in late winter, after deer season closes and before the spring turkey season. At that time, the deer woods

and movement patterns look like they will in the fall. There is no waist-high grass to conceal deer trails, the leaves are down, making it easier to see shooting lanes and keep trimming to a minimum, and a hunter doesn't have to battle heat, humidity, ticks and mosquitoes. "It's a yearlong process," Heckenlively said. "I go on late-season hunts to learn the properties even better. In late-February, I start doing my footwork and picking up sheds and clearing shooting lanes. You can't scout and do that stuff in the summer and you don't want to be tromping around during the hunting season."

Finding a good tree to hang any type of tree stand on can be a challenge. Climbing stands further complicate the

process. These stands, which first hit the market in Georgia in 1974, include two sections: a lower platform on which the hunter stands, and an upper section that serves as a climbing aid and seat. Both include a cable that wraps around the tree and teeth that bite into it. A hunter moves each section alternatively to go up or down the tree. They can only be used on trees that are fairly straight and don't have large branches growing from their trunk. And the trunk can't be too large or small – 9 to 20 inches in diameter works for most climbing stands. These facts no doubt limit the popularity of climbing stands in Nebraska.

Heckenlively first used a climber when hunting along the Republican

River near McCook where there were lots of tall, straight cottonwoods. At another location on the North Platte River near Sutherland, most cottonwoods had too many branches. Where he hunts along the Missouri River in Richardson County, the cottonwoods are older and have few low branches, but are too big around. His best bet there is to find a sycamore, a species that is on the edge of its range in southeastern Nebraska. Where he hunts along the Nemaha, there are ash trees so perfect for climbing stands that they seem to have been cultivated for the purpose. On both properties he currently hunts, there are a few large willows that will hold a climber, but there are also plenty of good trees that are laced

with poison ivy vines and can't be used.

When he finds the perfect spot for a tree stand but no tree that will hold a climber, Heckenlively sometimes uses climbing sticks and a lightweight, hang-on stand, which he also packs in and out of the woods. Other times he has to get creative, such as in the spring of 2005, when he found a well-worn trail skirting the edge of a marsh and trimmed hundreds of thorns and a few branches from a nearby a honeylocust, the only tree capable of holding a stand within 50 yards.

Heckenlively doesn't hunt field edges. He hunts deep in the woods near bedding areas. The perfect spot, he said, is not necessarily on the most well-worn trails, because those are typically made by does. Big bucks work through heavier cover, often moving from one patch to another. "Those whitetails are creatures that really follow the edges, so what I look for is hidden edges, where this habitat type meets that type," he said. "The big mature ones are just a whole 'nother creature. Very seldom do they come from the direction you think they're going to. They come at odd times and just show up."

While some people might hang numerous stands around their property, Heckenlively instead has numerous trees he can hunt with his climbing stand on any given day. Each tree has a name based on circumstances surrounding a hunt: The Day 1 Stand, which he used the first time he hunted one of the properties; the 4-by-4, 5-by-5 and nontypical stands, named after bucks he harvested from them; Zayne's Doe, where his boy was along on a late-season hunt when he harvested a doe; and Thanksgiving Stand, where he arrowed a monster buck while his wife, Tracie, and their three boys, Jace Daniel, Zayne and Brenden, were

at her parents in Colorado for the holiday.

Heckenlively had been short luck that season and got a pass to stay home and hunt. "You've got to have one of two situations, just because of the time commitment it takes, to bowhunt," Heckenlively said. "You've either got to be single or you have to have an awfully understanding wife. Tracie's good about that. She knows when hunting season rolls around she's not going to see much of me on the weekends. She knows I'm there for the basics: food, sleep and water, and that's about it."

Choosing where he'll hunt on a given day depends on the time of day and other factors. Heckenlively keeps a log of each hunt that details stand location, temperature, wind direction, cloud cover, moon phase, the number of deer seen, when he saw the most movement, whether he saw any rutting activity and anything else that was noteworthy. He also notes the crop rotation for the year and has found that deer are more likely to feed in corn stubble than soybean stubble, which means certain stands are only good every other year.



Heckenlively trims small branches from trees when necessary to allow use of his climbing stand. Smart bowhunters keep trimming, which is not allowed on state wildlife management areas, to a minimum to retain natural cover around their stand.



Heckenlively and his son, Zayne, inspect a whitetail rub during a March scouting trip.

“A big part of my success is I jump around and have a lot of trees,” said Heckenlively. “I think the big boys key in on that if you walk in and out of the same stand area every time.

“Seldom do I hunt the same stand more than once a weekend. Even if it’s only moving 100 yards, I constantly move around to try and catch them off guard. It gives me the ability to play the wind and the weather.”

Hunters who use bulky ladder stands or hang-on stands with screw-in steps might be hesitant to make such small movements due to the work involved. Not Heckenlively. He’d picked what he thought was a good stand location early in 2005, only to find when hunting there in the fall that deer movement

was better a short distance to the east. So he cleared shooting lanes around a sycamore the following spring. When he hunted the stand that fall, plenty of deer walked beneath him, but only does, fawns and small bucks. The mature bucks were consistently using a trail on the other side of a thicket. So he simply moved his climber to a tree 30 yards away. It would have paid off handsomely had the massive 5-by-5 he met on the trail after climbing down the tree arrived before legal shooting time ended a few minutes earlier.

“Deer, from what I’ve found, there’s a rhyme and reason why they travel where they travel – the lay of the land, what they can see, edge habitat and things like that. And until you’re right

on top of them and can really observe them, you’ve got to just keep inching a little deeper and closer, and you’ve got to be really careful. Most of my good stands, that’s how I find them – through observation and literally getting right into the deer’s bedroom.”

One of Heckenlively’s favorite spots to hunt is near a cedar thicket where big bucks like to bed. It’s too hard to get to the area in the afternoon without spooking deer, so he hunts it only in the morning, when he can arrive well before sunup while the deer are still feeding in area fields. “And they come from everywhere because there are crop fields in every direction,” Heckenlively said. “It’s really good during the rut, but it’s got to be a north wind.”

Heckenlively knows that hunting such spots means some deer will invariably walk downwind from his stand, smell him and spook. “Some stands you just say you’re going to hunt that stand regardless of the wind,” he said.

To minimize his scent, he wears rubber boots and sprays them with scent killer before heading to his stand. He also uses cover scent. But he has yet to buy any of the carbon-filled, scent-control clothing that has become so popular among hunters in recent years. “You can’t cover your tree stand in it, you can’t cover your bow in it, you can’t cover your backpack hanging in the tree ... well, I suppose they make backpacks now that are Scent-Lok,”

Heckenlively joked. “Your hat, your gloves, your boots ... I totally understand and I’m sure it reduces your scent. But that’s a huge investment and when you’re like me and you’ve got so many outfits for different weather conditions and different hunting situations – I hardly ever wear the same combination two days in a row. Maybe if I bought a Scent-Lok suit, it would be one less decision I’d have to make.”

Heckenlively had a lot fewer decisions to make when he began bowhunting while in high school in Imperial. Lyle Prell, an uncle and one of the founding members of the Nebraska Bowhunters Association, gave Tim’s father, Rex, a homemade tree stand and convinced him to buy a bow. “So we took that tree

stand and made several of our own and at first all three of us, my dad, my brother, Randy, and I all used that bow,” Heckenlively said.

They hung those stands at Enders Wildlife Management Area south of Imperial. But a mule deer fawn, not an Enders whitetail, was the first to fall to an arrow released by Heckenlively’s bow.

Heckenlively said he was more interested in waterfowl hunting in those days. That changed when he arrived at Chadron State College in the fall of 1988 and began bowhunting with his dorm mates. “Dad bought me a bow at Cabela’s, a bargain-cave Jennings for \$70, and we got some arrows and started bowhunting pretty big time.”



Heckenlively and Zayne follow a deer trail through the woods on the way back to the truck following a March scouting trip.

He still has a few of those homemade stands collecting dust in the attic of his garage, but after using a climbing stand, may never use them again.

“They’re so uncomfortable a guy just can’t sit that long,” Heckenlively said of the homemade stands. “I sit some pretty long vigils, so I’ve got to have a comfortable stand if I’m going to be able to put in the time. Those climbers are unbelievably comfortable. They’ve got the armrests and the sling seat you just kick back in. You can sleep in them and not even worry about falling out of the tree.”

Heckenlively enjoys being in the woods, completely alert, watching for the slightest movement and listening for the slightest sound. “It’s just an eerie feeling in the dark when you’re walking through the woods or waiting for sunrise, especially when you’re back in the timber, just the unknown.”

For him, it is a solitary pursuit he shares only with his brother and a few close friends. “The fewer people there are out there, the less scent there is in the woods,” he said.

While the pursuit of trophy deer and the challenge that presents drives him, he now occasionally says “Today’s a doe day,” when he heads out the door.



A decent 5-by-5 buck cautiously circled Heckenlively’s stand in thick cover one morning last October but stayed out of bow range.

“If you head into the whitetail woods not planning on dropping the string on anything but a Pope & Young buck, your odds go down. Then the end of the year comes and you look at the log and you passed on 150 does and 63

bucks over the course of the season. Your odds of slinging an arrow drastically decrease when you just strictly trophy hunt,” Heckenlively said. “Last year (2005) I just decided ‘I’m going to have some fun,’ and I shot four deer.”

The last of those deer came on an unseasonably warm day in late-December with the second of his three boys, Zayne, in the stand with him.

“A kid would just have a heyday right now because between big does and forkhorns, it’s like clockwork. Everywhere we set up we’ve had them right in our lap. A little kid, that’s what they need.”

Of course, even in a prime spot, harvesting a doe isn’t guaranteed. Heckenlively made nine trips to the woods after declaring a doe day before filling his antlerless deer tag. “Three or four days in a row they came in and bedded at 35 or 40 yards,” he said. “They would never come any closer and they’d end up catching my wind, they’d just leave or something would happen.”

Until 2005, Heckenlively was primarily a trophy hunter. He harvested his first trophy whitetail, a massive typical that scored 160 2/8, while hunting along the North Platte River in Garden County in 1993. Among deer entered in the Commission’s Big Game Trophy Records Program, that buck ranks as the largest typical and the second-largest of all whitetails harvested in that county with bow or firearm. The minimum score for the program is 125 inches, the same as Pope & Young.

In 1997, he entered his second trophy in the program. This one came while he lived in McCook and at 147 4/8 inches still ranks as the largest whitetail taken with a bow in Red Willow County.

In all but three years since, Heckenlively has harvested a trophy-class whitetail for a

total of nine, including eight in the past 10 years. In 1999, the year he moved to Falls City, he harvested two trophies, including his largest, a 167 6/8-inch nontypical, the largest bow-killed deer taken in Richardson County that’s

entered in the Commission’s record books.

The last entry fell to his arrow two days after he took the 8-by-9 nontypical that began this story. And it came from the same stand.

Heckenlively had chased two small bucks from their beds about 80 yards from his stand. Not wanting to spook them and send them bounding through the cattails, he sat tight for about 20 minutes until they wandered out of sight and then still-hunted his way to

his stand.

It was 4 p.m., 65 degrees, sunny and calm when Heckenlively got his climbing stand locked onto the tree and began his ascent. He was only one-third of the way up to his preferred shooting height of 20 feet when a flicker of reflected light in the middle of the slough caught his eye. He raised his binoculars and was pleasantly surprised to find the source to be sunlight shining off the head of a mature 5-by-5 buck, 150 yards away and closing.

Heckenlively continued to shooting height, locked the stand into position, secured his safety harness and pulled his bow up with the rope he’d clipped to it. When he got the bow in hand, the buck was 35 yards away.

“In the excitement of it all, it seems like you lose all dexterity,” he said. “I still remember struggling to get the hook off the bow string.” He did, knocked an arrow, drew his bow when the buck walked behind a tree, blew his grunt call, and let his arrow fly when the

deer stopped broadside at 25 yards. It scored 144 2/8, his third-largest typical.

Heckenlively usually doesn’t hunt a stand more than once a weekend, but the big rubs left on nearby trees called for an exception. He’d hunted nearby, but hadn’t hunted that exact tree before. Chances are, he’ll hunt the “Big Rubs” stand again.

“It was just being at the right place at the right time,” Heckenlively said. “Everything came together like clockwork.” ■



Heckenlively keeps an eye on the woods while hunting from a Missouri River bottom sycamore last October.

Setback at Diamond Bar

Biologists start restocking after last year's winterkill.

By Rocky Hoffmann

Ice fishing anglers accustomed to the wintry trek through the Sandhills to Diamond Bar Lake would be wise to forego this year's excursion. The shallow, 120-acre Tryon area lake, historically prone to winterkill has been blessed with mild seasons since its decade-old fishery restoration. Last winter's onslaught of Arctic-class cold and deep snow, however, delivered a deadly blow to fish populations at the McPherson County lake. Spring surveys this year indicated a total loss of all species except bullheads, with those survivors averaging only six inches long.

Diamond Bar Lake at one time was one of the most popular fishing holes in west-central Nebraska. In 1927, local trapper Buster Magnuson turned entrepreneur and constructed a string of "modern" cabins and a commissary there to accommodate the many anglers who came from across Nebraska to catch what seemed to be an endless supply of fish. It was the place to go for weekend vacationers, regardless of the difficulty encountered in getting there. Only sand trails led the way north from Sutherland or west from Tryon, and folks teamed up to help push each other's cars over the tops of sand ridges to reach the lake.

With the good fishing and boating times came the bad. A blizzard in 1931 buried the cabins to their peaks, as did another blizzard in 1942, but neither storm compared to the 1949 blizzard that gripped western Nebraska for months. When the snow and ice finally melted, fish carcasses drifted in waves along the shore. Even some of the bullheads had died.

It was primarily bullhead fishing that continued into the 1950s, but drought diminished the lake's capacity and winter die offs became chronic. The downward slide of Diamond



Rod Shimmer of North Platte was one of many ice anglers at Diamond Bar Lake after fish stockings began in 1995.

Bar's popularity, however, had begun well before the final blow was dealt by the 1949 blizzard – the development of large reservoirs in the Platte Valley, with hard-surfaced highways leading to them, was more attractive to anglers than the sand trails leading to Diamond Bar. The little lake sat idle for decades.

In 1994, Gifford Leu, who owns Diamond Bar Lake and the Diamond Bar Ranch, approached the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission with a vision to rekindle the sparkle in the diamond. Gifford and Marion Leu dreamed of visitors returning to the area that had become just a memory for most. People no longer seeking the high traffic of big reservoirs were looking for places off the beaten path. Improved roads and vehicles played a part in sparking a renewed interest in the Sandhills lake.

Following lengthy survey analysis of water chemistry, topography and fish populations, the Commission agreed to stock the lake with suitable

game fish and to provide supplemental stockings as necessary. In return, the Leus agreed to allow year-round angler access to the lake at no charge.

Because fish surveys indicated no carp were in the lake, chemical renovation was not necessary, so in 1995 the Commission stocked the lake with an initial release of 36,000 two-inch bluegills. That summer, 15,000 northern pike, 60,000 yellow perch, 19,000 largemouth bass and 23,000 black crappies were also stocked. Over the next several years, additional stockings of bluegill, yellow perch, largemouth bass and walleye were made and fishing eventually got underway with good response from the angling public.

With a maximum depth of only six and a half feet when full, biologists were aware that a winter loss could occur again if adverse conditions persisted over a period of time, which they did last winter when heavy snow and thick ice covered the lake for several weeks. Several dry years that had reduced the lake's surface area from 120 acres to 80 acres, and its depth to four feet contributed to the loss of most of the lake's fish.

In response, the Commission began stocking the lake this past summer and fall with yellow perch, black crappie and bluegill, the priority species identified in the fishery management plan for this lake.

Biologists believe that Diamond Bar Lake will not be ready for angling pressure for at least two years, pending future events that may occur. Limiting the chances for success would be the continuance of below average precipitation and sustained low water levels. Diamond Bar has the potential to once again become a jewel in the sand, but it teeters precariously on the bubble of adverse cyclical weather phenomenon. ■

PHOTO BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

Nongamey Game Meat

Little-known secrets lead to better tasting deer.

By Jeff Kurrus

This month, many people will take their entire deer, hide and all, to a commercial processor, turning their \$28 deer tag into more than \$100 of meat their family may not eat. Not to say that most processors aren't good at what they do, but they are also working with what you give them. Which is, quite often, an ill-prepared collection of meat that can't help but taste "wild" or "gamey." Before you make this mistake again, try these steps to make the venison you put on the table more palate pleasurable.

Field Dressing

Field dress your deer quickly after the kill, doing your best not to cut anything that doesn't need cutting. Make sure you drain as much blood from the deer's cavity as possible, because blood is what causes the "gamey" taste often associated with deer.

Skinning

I've been told there are guys up in these northern parts that let their deer hang for days if the temperature is right. *NEBRASKAland* might do a story on this technique in the near future, but it won't be written by me, because first I'd have to try it myself. Growing up down south, we usually didn't encounter weather cool enough, or for long enough, to allow us to hang deer for days without spoilage.

Most of the time, the day my deer dies I skin it out, wash it off with a water hose, trim any easily reachable loose fat or undesirable meat, and take the four quarters, backstraps, tenderloins and as much neck meat as I can wrangle and put it in a cooler.

In the Cooler

When the meat's in the cooler, start filling it with water while removing any additional fat you didn't see

before. Rinse and drain the meat several times – each time you do this, the water should be less bloody than before. Finish trimming off as much fat and connective tissue as you can, because this is where grass, dirt and blood will collect, adding to the meat's wild taste. Finally, sprinkle at least ¼ cup of salt over the pieces of meat, rubbing it into the meat as much as possible, and cover with ice.

The next morning, drain all the fluid out of the cooler again and add additional ice as needed. By the end of that day, drain one last time, pouring out the large amount of blood you didn't know the meat could still have and eliminating even more of the "gamey" taste.

Go Commercial or Finish at Home?

Next you have to decide whether you're going to finish taking care of the meat yourself or take it to a commercial processor. I'm not opposed to taking meat to a processor because I have found some that make excellent burgers, sausage and steaks, but you should call beforehand and ask if the processor will take a quartered deer instead of a whole one. The reason why I go to this much trouble for meat that I might have a processor finish is because after quartering a deer, I know how well it was cleaned. When someone else does it, I'm not so sure. Because I've had people suggest that a person never knows whose meat they're getting back from a processor, I ask that question before I ever deal with a processor that I'm not familiar with. If my meat doesn't come back tasting excellent, I find a different processor.

The Cutting Board

If you are sending your quartered, rinsed meat to the processor, put it in a clean cooler and cover with ice. If not, decide how you might want to

cook it, then cut accordingly. Some options include:

- **Shoulders:** Leave them whole and slow cook in the oven before smoking on the grill. Your friends will ask how you made it taste so good.
- **Hindquarters:** Cut for roast or steak, cube for shish kebabs, slice for jerky, grind for burger or slow cook like shoulders.
- **Backstraps/Tenderloins:** Cut into steaks or slice into small chunks to be fried with onions.
- **Neck:** The necks of the small southern deer I grew up with weren't big enough to mess with, but Nebraska deer necks have a lot more meat on them, which I trim off and roast in the crock pot. It won't usually be as tender as tenderloins, so longer, slower cooking is definitely in order.

Freezing

Wrap shoulders and hindquarters in a plastic wrap, covering them in several layers to prevent freezer burn. Then wrap with freezer paper, label and place them in the freezer. For the rest of the meat, freeze in water using plastic bags and make sure you fill the water up past the edge of the meat. Also remove all the air from the bags to preserve the meat longer and prevent freezer burn.

Cooking

Cooking is the easy part if you take care of your deer properly before it's in the pan. Like I was told growing up, shooting a deer is half the work. Field dressing, butchering and freezing is the rest. And this works for any game animal. Look, my wife wasn't raised on a farm and didn't eat wild meat until we were married. Now, she'll eat dove, duck, deer and fish, and will often tell those who haven't eaten deer before that it will taste like deer, but it won't taste "wild." ■

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Wapiti Wildlife Management Area

Scenic area important for American burying beetles and elk.

By Rocky Hoffmann

Outdoorsmen and women now have public access to nearly 2,000 contiguous acres of prime loess canyons southeast of North Platte at the Wapiti Wildlife Management Area (WMA), where outdoor opportunities include hunting, trapping, hiking, and birdwatching. Hunting is the primary draw, and area game species include mule deer, wild turkey, mourning dove, coyote, cottontail rabbit, bobcat and elk. Wapiti WMA is the only holding of public wildlife lands suitable for elk hunting within the current boundaries of the Box Elder Elk Management Unit, and the frequent occurrence of wild, free-ranging elk on the area provided the basis for its Native American name.

The acquisition of the area's original 1,280 acres in 2004 was initiated not by the presence of elk, however, but by a small, rare insect, the American burying beetle. These colorful, mostly nocturnal beetles are more numerous to the loess canyons than the nonendangered elk, but elsewhere in Nebraska and nationally, the American burying beetle has become extremely rare and is in danger of becoming extinct.

A Recovery Land Acquisition Grant, initiated under the Endangered Species Act, provided 73 percent of the funding for the original two-section purchase. The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act accounted for 23 percent of the purchase price, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation provided the remainder of the money needed to acquire the property. In addition, an adjoining section of school land was recently added to the area through a grant generated by lottery receipts from the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund.

The new acquisition has a private



Wapiti WMA is located in the heart of the deeply dissected loess canyons southeast of North Platte.

grazing lease attached through 2009, which will be honored by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission; and habitat management efforts on that tract will begin in 2010.

According to Lance Hastings, a Commission wildlife biologist from North Platte, "We are specifically managing for high priority species on the area and utilizing a community management approach for all other species."

Of primary importance is the management for the American burying beetle, whose population in this area is one of the largest and most viable in the country. Rocky Mountain elk also are on the prioritized management list, according to Hastings. Management success will be based primarily on improvement of the native plant composition of the mixed-grass prairie community, including the controlling of eastern red cedar.

Hastings said, "Habitat improvement for elk is geared toward the establishment of food, water, cover and the development of remote elk calving areas and summer thermal refuges in open draws, while

maintaining hillsides with native hardwoods and shrubs."

The other priority species are mule deer and wild turkey. Mule deer are valued game animals in this region of Nebraska, and population numbers are of concern on a local, state and national level. Wild turkeys also are highly valued and have a strong population base in the area.

The beauty of the area's landscape is astounding, largely because of its immensity when viewed from a high vantage point. The stark contrast of dark cedars against winter's snow or against paling prairie in warmer months is remarkable, and the smattering of gold from intermittent ash groves in the fall make Wapiti WMA an area for all seasons. ■



Wapiti WMA is located 13 miles south and 9 miles east of North Platte. Access maps are available from the North Platte Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Office.

Portraits from the Past



This picture of three young trappers was taken in December of 1930 in Holdrege, Nebraska. The trappers were, from left to right: Wallace Brown, 16 years of age, L. Simpson, 12 years of age, and myself, Fred Egley, 14 years of age.

The skunk furs were sold for \$13, which was a lot of money in 1930, especially for three teenage boys. The two smaller pelts on the left were polecats.

Fanny, the dog, was an American water spaniel, which were common in those days. Wally Brown was the grandfather of Todd Brown, who had a very successful football career at the University of Nebraska in the 1980s. Brown and Simpson are deceased. I am a retired school administrator and have been in Norfolk since 1940.

— Fred L. Egley, Norfolk, Nebraska



This is a photograph of brothers-in-law Swede Swanson (left) and Bud Carlson. The coyote was shot with a .22-caliber rifle by us about 12 miles north of Holdrege, Nebraska, in the summer of 1946 when I was 16 years old. The coyote was stealing chickens from Mom's chicken house.

I enjoy your magazine very much, and two of my sons also take your magazine.

— Bud Carlson, Osceola, Nebraska



Coyote hunters Ed Flynn of Valley (left, pilot) and Floyd Daily (gunner) are pictured at the Leshara elevator. The plane is a Piper Cub and the picture was taken sometime in the 1940s. Ed told me years later that after many hunts and much success, they had been very lucky and never again hunted from the air.

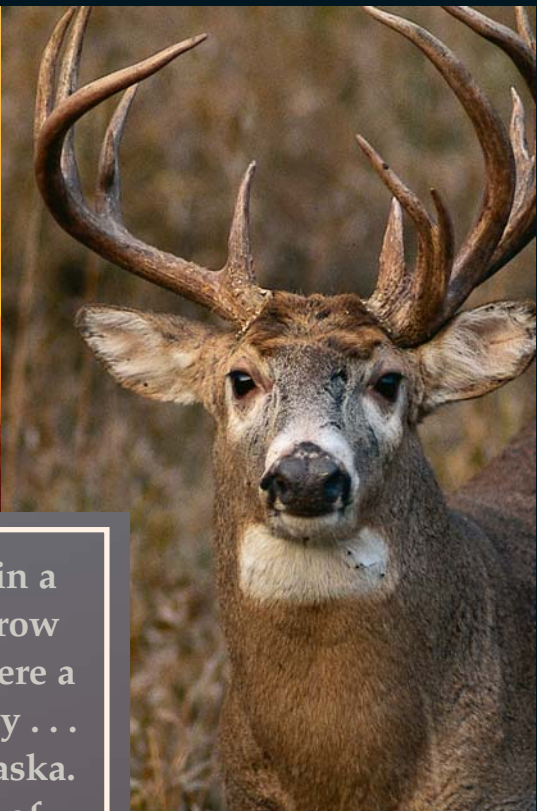
— Leon F. Eggers, Valley, Nebraska



This is a picture of my granddad, Neal Provost (center). He had a resort on North Marsh Lake in the late-1920s and early 1930s. These two men were fishermen from the resort showing their catch of perch for the day.

— Annabelle Peterson, Casper, Wyoming

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.



Imagine a frosty morning in a duck blind, a weedy fencerow with pheasants, a forest where a 10-point buck moves silently . . . it's hunting season in Nebraska.

For regulations and maps of public hunting lands, get the 2007 Nebraska Hunt Guide from permit vendors, or online at www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

Hunt Nebraska



Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

