



The shadow of a wrangler and the horse he is currying is cast by early morning light on a barn at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park as another fun day of trail rides begins. Photo by Eric Fowler.



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# NEBRASKAland

May 2008



## *Spring with the Foxes*

**PLUS** PARKS BY HORSEBACK • FISHIN' WITH GIB • MUSSELS OF THE MISSOURI  
AT FIRST PIKE • TREE SWALLOWS • YELLOW FLOATING HEART



# NEBRASKAland

Volume 86, Number 4, May 2008

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A photographer shares his experience after photographing six young fox pups last spring. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MARK DIETZ

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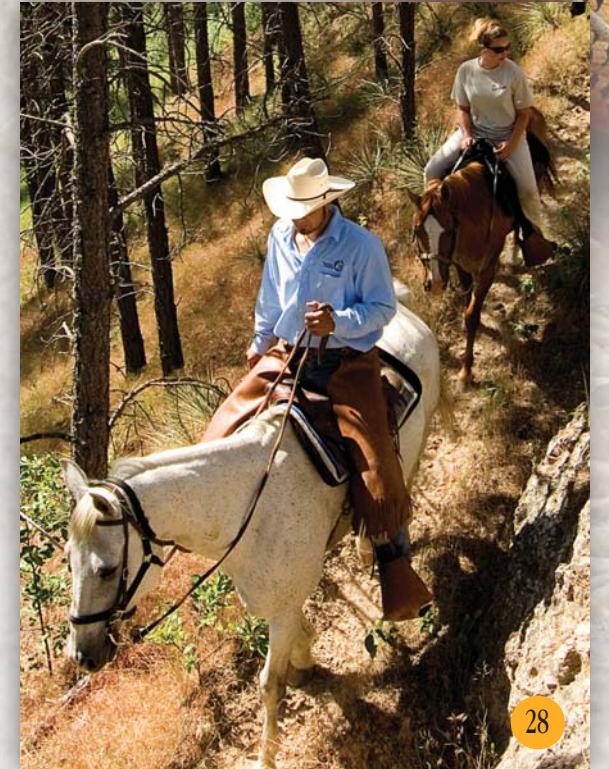
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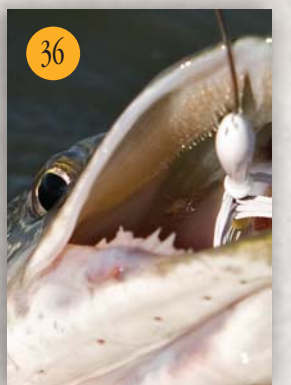
**Cover:** Young red fox pups keep a sharp eye out as they play and practice life skills outside the entrance of their den. See story on page 10. Photo by Mark Dietz. **Opposite:** Disturbed while sunning itself near the prairie dog hole where it had spent the winter, a prairie rattlesnake takes a defensive posture against potential danger. Photo by Doug Carroll.



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# NEBRASKAland Magazine



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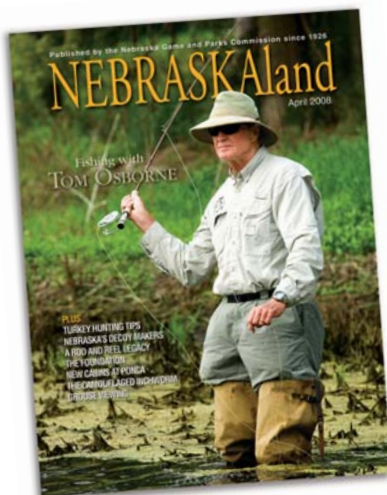
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## Comment



### April Issue a Hit

Wow! NEBRASKAland just keep getting better. You are setting a standard that will be a challenge to maintain.

Consider the April issue. First there was fishing with Tom Osborne, then turkey hunting, and suddenly there was the late Bill Horst. What a lovely tribute to Bill and his rod and reel legacy. Undoubtedly it resulted in tears, but also cherished memories and joy for his wife, Diane Horst.

As if all this was not enough, next was the finest narrative and pictorial presentation on decoys I have ever read. An absolutely outstanding article. My congratulations to Farrar, Peterson and Zaruba.

On final comment. I subscribe to other state magazines. Unfortunately they now clutter virtually every page with advertisements, unrelated announcements, and photographs that are ruined by excessive cropping or overlaid print. NEBRASKAland continues to avoid this deleterious format, and I applaud your decision to maintain full-page articles that are clean, attractive to the eye and a joy to read.

Keep up the good work, it's appreciated.

Sincerely,  
Jerry P. Lightner  
DeLand, Florida

### Picture submissions

I'm interested in submitting some of my photos for your publication. I was just wondering the best method

for submitting digital photos. I read the guidelines, but I didn't see where it talks about how to submit digital photos. Would you prefer that I print them and send them, make a CD with the pictures on them or another method?

*If you have just a few pictures that you think NEBRASKAland might be interested in using, then feel free to e-mail them to me. If you have quite a few, then please burn them on a CD and mail them to me. Both addresses are listed in the yellow box on page 5. Please remember that we only use high quality photographs, and that submitting photographs in no way guarantees that we will be able to run them in the magazine.*

- Editor



### Purchasing Past Issues

The October 2007 issue had an article on "black squirrels." Is there a way to get a copy of that issue? I have ordered a subscription of the magazine, but will have missed the October issue.

Please advise. Thank you.  
Bob Hudson  
Via E-mail

*You can purchase this issue by going to our web site at [NebraskalandMagazine.com](http://NebraskalandMagazine.com). Just click on the "Online Catalog" button on the left side of the page, then click on the "Nebraskaland" button to find back issues. By browsing through our online catalog, you can also find some of*

*our past special issues and cookbooks under "Publications" and in the "Bargain Corner" section of the web site. You can also order past issues through our office by calling (800) 632-5263.*

- Editor

### Equipment Question

Are stone points (knapped stone broadheads) legal equipment for hunting big game in Nebraska?

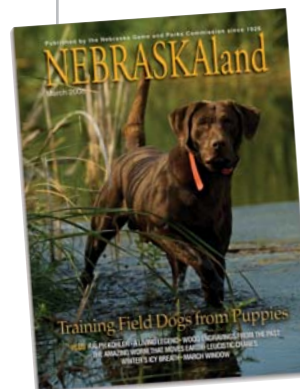
Randy Clark  
Via e-mail

*Nebraska Conservation Officer Murray Johnson replies: If the stone meets our dimensions required for broadheads – three inches of cutting service and 7/8 of an inch cutting diameter – then it would be legal.*

### Kudos

The March issue of NEBRASKAland Magazine is superb cover to cover. Congrats to all.

Richard  
McCabe, Vice  
President  
Wildlife  
Management  
Institute  
Annapolis,  
Maryland



Send your comments to:  
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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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| Scott Brandt         | Gering    | 436-3418       |
| Heath Packett        | Gordon    | 282-2553       |
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| Dan Zuehlke          | Ogallala  | 284-4815       |
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| George Sund           | Cambridge | 697-4629    |
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## Nebraska Federal Junior Duck Stamp Winner

An acrylic painting of a northern pintail was chosen best of show in this year's Nebraska Federal Junior Duck Stamp Contest.

The winning entry, painted by Bethany Cooper, a 16-year-old student at Banner County High School, was chosen from among more than 800 entries received from across the state.

Cooper's painting will be used to create the 2009 Nebraska Waterfowl Stamp and was sent on to the National Junior Duck Stamp Competition held April 17 at the San Diego Zoo. The winner of the national competition receives \$5,000, a trip to Washington D.C., and his or her artwork will be used to make the 2008-2009 Junior Duck Stamp. Proceeds from sale of these stamps, which cost \$5, are used to support conservation education efforts across the nation.

Judges for this year's competition were Brad McKinney, a biologist with Pheasants Forever; Bob Grier, writer/photographer for NEBRASKALAND Magazine; Ron Kephart, artist and curator of the Natural History Museum in Gering; Paul Cornes, a refuge supervisor

with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and Kevin Mooney, news director for KNEB radio in Scottsbluff.

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

## Lake Contour Maps Available

If you're looking for a good spot to fish this year, check out the contour maps of 98 of Nebraska's best fishing reservoirs and lakes, available for downloading or viewing in the fishing section of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's web site at [www.OutdoorNebraska.org](http://www.OutdoorNebraska.org).

New to the list of maps are: Gracie Creek Trout Pond near Taylor; Twin Lakes Wildlife Management Area (WMA) North and Twin Lakes WMA South near Bassett; Victoria Springs Lake State Recreation Area (SRA) near Anselmo; Fremont Lakes SRA lakes No. 1 and No. 5 near Fremont; Louisville SRA lakes No. 2 and No. 3 near Louisville; Rockford Lake SRA near Beatrice; Timber Point Lake near Brainard; Blue Hole WMA West Lake near Elm Creek; Johnson Lake SRA near Lexington; and War Axe SRA near Shelton.



Beth Cooper's acrylic painting of a northern pintail won this year's Nebraska Federal Junior Duck Stamp contest.

## Free Park and Fishing Day to be held May 17

Nebraska's annual Free Fishing and Park Entry Day will be held on Saturday, May 17 this year. On this day, the need for park entry permits and fishing licenses is waived, but all other park and fishing regulations are still in effect.

As part of this celebration, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is offering the 11th annual Family Fishing Clinic at select state parks (SP) and recreation areas (SRA) across the state. Here are the locations and times for the clinics:

Alexandria SRA, 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Chadron SP, 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Fort Robinson SP, 9 a.m. to noon; Fremont Lakes SRA, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; Louisville SRA, 9 a.m. to noon; Eugene T. Mahoney SP, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m.; Platte River SP, 9 a.m. to noon; Ponca SP, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Two Rivers SRA, 9 a.m. to noon; and Victoria Springs SRA, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

## Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas Volunteers Needed

The Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas is entering its third year of data collection and volunteers are still needed. Many Nebraska Game and Parks Commission state parks, recreation areas and wildlife management areas are included as "blocks." Volunteer contributions can range from reporting a single active robin's nest to spending the entire summer compiling a long and comprehensive list of breeding bird observations. For more information about the project and also to find maps where the "blocks" are located, go online to: [www.ngpc.state.ne.us/wildlife/programs/bba/bba.asp](http://www.ngpc.state.ne.us/wildlife/programs/bba/bba.asp).

To volunteer for the project, please contact Wayne Mollhoff at [wmollhoff@netscape.net](mailto:wmollhoff@netscape.net), or Joel Jorgensen at [joel.jorgensen@ngpc.ne.gov](mailto:joel.jorgensen@ngpc.ne.gov).

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[www.OutdoorNebraska.org](http://www.OutdoorNebraska.org)

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission



## The Great Park Pursuit

Encouraging active lifestyles while increasing awareness of outdoor recreation opportunities throughout Nebraska parks and trails via a series of interactive activities is the goal of The Great Park Pursuit that is being held across the state this year.

Based on a similar program started in Connecticut, which uses it as the centerpiece of its No Child Left Inside initiative, The Great Park Pursuit encourages people to get out and visit some of Nebraska's most scenic places by making participants eligible for valuable prizes.

Bass Pro Shops and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska are corporate sponsors of The Great Park Pursuit, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the Nebraska Recreation and Park Association are the founding program coordinators. Outdoor Recreation Products and Landscape Structures are contributing sponsors.

The Great Park Pursuit awards levels of participation with prizes, including five grand prizes sponsored by Bass Pro Shops. Each grand prize winner will get to pick from one of the following three packages valued at \$1,000 each: a canoe/kayak package, a camping package or a fishing package.

"Too often, recreation time is spent in front of a screen," said Lee

Handke, vice president of Health Network and Wellness Services for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska. "We are happy to sponsor The Great Park Pursuit because it encourages families to get out and spend meaningful time together in Nebraska's beautiful parks. Families will be rewarded with more active lifestyles, plus create memories that will last a lifetime."

Here are the details of the program: Participants have 10 specific state or city parks to visit from April 26 through Sept. 1. At each park they are prompted to find their way to a designated location, where they will make a pencil tracing of nature artwork mounted on a post. They will then mail in the tracings they have made, reflecting the total number of parks visited. Prizes will be awarded based on the number of tracings collected and mailed in by Sept. 10, 2008.

Participants can visit [www.negpp.org](http://www.negpp.org) to register or get more information. They may register individually, as a group, or as a family. They will select a park from the 10 available, then print off that park page and take it to the park. They should follow the clues on the park page to the post that has the nature impression, make the tracing, then plan a trip to another park. Participants should continue to complete as many tracings as possible

while enjoying the outdoors and other activities at the parks.

Those who complete and mail in one nature impression tracing will be entered to win a two-night stay at a Nebraska state parks cabin of their choice. The first 200 participants who complete and mail in five tracings will get a \$25 Bass Pro Shops gift card. Those who complete and mail in seven tracings will be entered once for the grand prize drawing, and those who complete and mail in all 10 tracings will be entered three times for the grand prize drawing and will also receive a free 2009 Nebraska Park Entry Permit.

The 10 parks included in The Great Park Pursuit are: Steinhart Park, Nebraska City; Chadron State Park (SP); Scottsbluff Riverside Park; Zorinsky Lake Park, Omaha; Smith Falls SP; Yanney Park, Kearney; Eugene T. Mahoney SP; Iron Horse Park, North Platte; Ponca SP; and Lake Hastings Park, Hastings.

Kickoff events for the Great Park Pursuit are planned at three locations in conjunction with other activities: April 26 – Iron Horse Park, 3-5 p.m., held in conjunction with the O'Rourke Triathlon; May 17 – Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, 9-11 a.m., as part of Nebraska Free Park Entry and Fishing Permit Day, fishing derby and outdoor education seminars; June 14 – Lake Hastings Park, 10 a.m.-noon, in conjunction with a fishing derby, kite flying and disc golf.

"Nebraska is blessed with 86 state park areas and many more community parks," said Roger Kuhn, assistant director for the Commissions Parks Division. "The Great Park Pursuit park areas include some of the best Nebraska has to offer, and visitors will not be disappointed. From the Pine Ridge of western Nebraska to the unmatched beauty of the Niobrara River Valley to the Missouri River at Ponca State Park, the Great Park Pursuit has wonderful parks to visit." ■

## Population Control

*Changes in deer regulations intended to increase doe harvest.*

By Doug Carroll

Thanks to changes made during the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission meeting last March, deer hunters in Nebraska will have a lot more opportunities to take multiple deer during next fall's deer hunting seasons.

Kit Hams, big game program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, said regulation changes that expand deer-hunting opportunities to an unprecedented level were a reflection of the Commission's desire to control the rising deer population in the state, especially white-tailed deer in eastern Nebraska, while allowing mule deer populations to increase in central and southern mule deer units.

Nebraska's white-tailed and mule deer populations have been steadily increasing and buck quality has never been higher, said Hams, but complaints about crop and vehicle damage caused by deer continue to increase, particularly in eastern Nebraska and along the state's major river corridors. In order to alleviate these problems, the Commission is issuing a record number of bonus antlerless permits this year and has created four new Season Choice antlerless units in the Calamus and Loup deer hunting units.

Perhaps the biggest, and most welcome, change for many hunters is that now all archery, muzzleloader,



Leslie Hershberger of Milford poses with a one of two does she shot near Nebraska City during the antlerless-only deer season last January.

youth and landowner permits, formerly restricted to one deer of either sex, will now allow the harvest of one bonus antlerless deer. Bonus antlerless permits will also be used to increase antlerless harvest in some firearm units, including Blue Northwest, Blue Southeast, Wahoo, and Season areas 19 and 20. In all, approximately 87,000 bonus antlerless tags, most of them for whitetails, will be available this year.

The Commission also changed regulations regarding the youth deer

permit at their March meeting: Youth permits can now be used to harvest antlerless deer during the January antlerless season. Restrictions were also placed on mule deer doe harvest to allow the population to increase in southern and eastern mule deer units, and mule deer does will be protected in some public areas of the Pine Ridge, where the population has decreased in recent years. These area are Fort Robinson State Park (SP) and wildlife management area (WMA), Peterson WMA, and Soldier Creek Wilderness Area.

In other action at their March meeting, commissioners changed antelope regulations for 2008 so landowner permits will be either-sex, unused North Sioux Unit landowner muzzleloader permits can now be converted to North Sioux Unit landowner firearm

permits, and Fort Robinson SP is now closed to antelope hunting.

Highlights of the changes to elk regulations enacted for this fall's season include expanding the Box Elder Elk Unit from approximately 300 to 17,000 square miles in order to manage elk that have become established in new areas, discontinuing the use of either-sex permits and replacing them with bull and antlerless permits, and creating a December antlerless-only elk season in order to increase antlerless harvest. ■

A photograph of four red fox cubs in a natural, wooded environment. Three cubs are sitting on a log in the middle ground, looking towards the camera. A fourth cub is lying on the ground in the foreground, also looking at the camera. The background is filled with dark, leafy ground and some green grass. The lighting is soft, suggesting a natural setting.

# *Spring with the Foxes*

Text and photos by  
Mark Dietz

I've scouted the hills and plains for many years looking for opportunities to photograph the elusive red fox. I've even set up photo blinds near deer carcasses in the woods, hoping to capture a few images of *Vulpes vulpes* stopping by for a bite, but I'd only go home with a few frames of raccoons, opossums and perhaps an occasional image of my cunning target.

Eventually I came to realize that my best fox photos had come from setting up on the few den sites I had come across during my travels through the woods, so now I spend a lot of my time

scouting the woods for dens that might offer good photo opportunities. I start my search in late winter, usually in mid-February. I like going out after a fresh snow because it helps me locate newly excavated sites, and the tracks and other sign easily visible in the snow can indicate whether or not a fox has been doing the work. Occasionally, however, I am "outfoxed" – some of the dens I have worked turned out to be woodchuck (a.k.a. groundhog) dens. I have a lot of nice woodchuck photos, but that's another story.

I generally try to set up my blind three to four weeks before I plan on



using it. This works particularly well when photographing adult foxes, and may provide opportunities to photograph white-tailed deer as well.

Last year started out like many others. After a new snow, I spotted freshly excavated earth on a hillside that would be ideal for setting up a blind – it was a south-facing bank with no obstructions and there was some level ground in a good spot for a portable blind. Everything looked perfect. Then the owner of the new den revealed himself – a robust woodchuck. Having found no other locations for a blind, I decided it was going to be another woodchuck year. For several

weeks I monitored the den from a distance with binoculars to see if there was any activity, occasionally watching the woodchuck sunning in the den's entrance.

After hunting morel mushrooms one day in early April, I stopped by to check on the den. In the last light of day, I noticed a flurry of activity around the den and discovered there had been a change in tenants – a fox family had apparently evicted the woodchuck and taken possession of the den, because I could see several young fox pups at the den entrance. With my blind already in place, all I needed was some nice weather and a little time to

spend in the blind. I just hoped the woodchuck didn't decide to reclaim his den.

My first opportunity to sit in the blind was a mid-April afternoon. An hour or so passed before I saw the first fox pup (also called a kit) crawl out the den opening. A few moments later a second appeared. Both looked like they just finished a long nap, and neither paid any attention to my blind. It wasn't long before they started exploring their surroundings.

While I was busily trying to follow their activities with my camera, I noticed more movement at the entrance of the den. Two more pups were lying

Above: Because she had such a large and hungry family, Mom was very popular whenever she returned from one of her numerous hunting forays.

Opposite: Although red fox pups (also called kits) are fairly small and more of a brownish color when they first emerge from their birthing den, they grow quickly and soon take on the reddish/orange color of their parents.

there. Before long I was trying to keep track of six pups. It was as if the recess bell had rung and all the students were releasing their pent-up energy on the playground.

Everything within 20 feet of the den

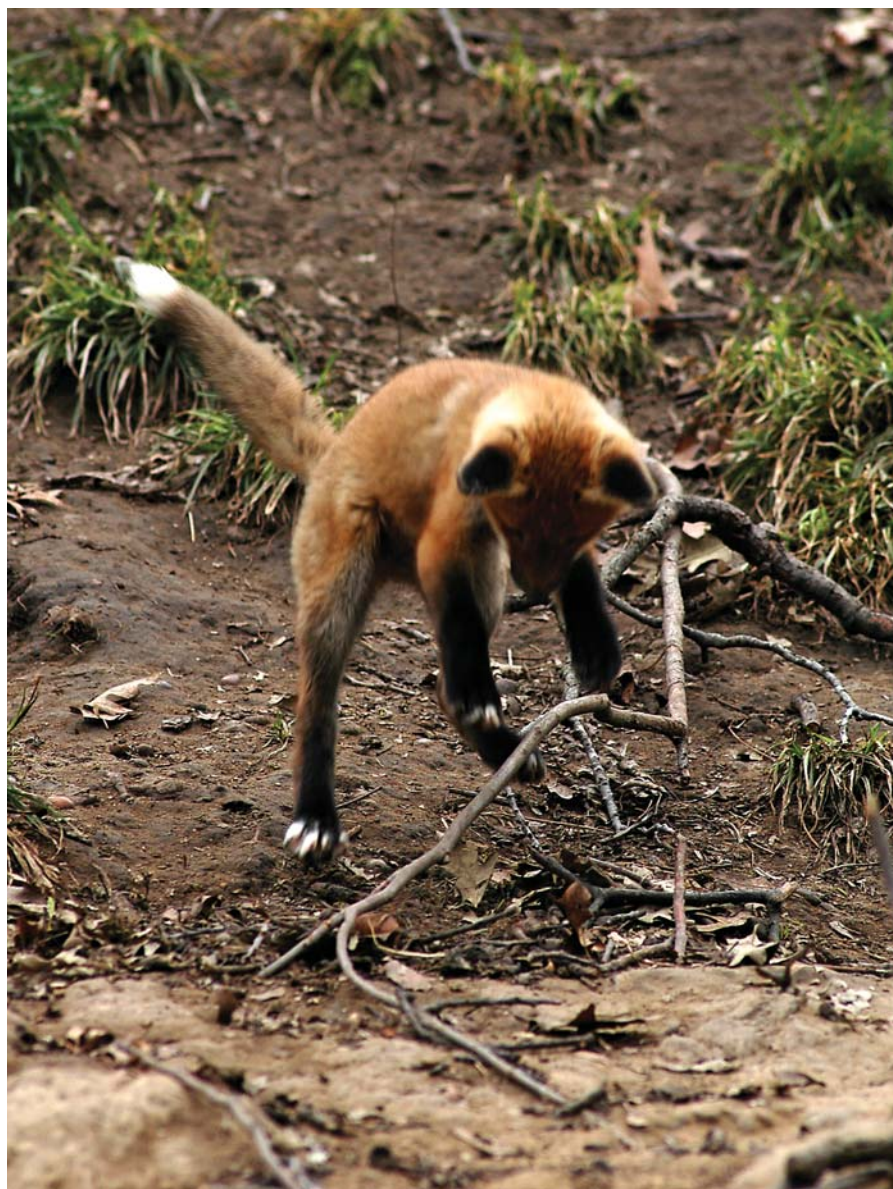
Curious and active, much like a kitten, the first few months of a fox pup's life are made up of a lot of play and wrestling matches that strengthen the muscles, improve coordination and prepare it for life outside the den. All of this activity, combined with the fact that they are growing rapidly, requires a lot of nourishment, so their parents are on the hunt during almost every waking moment.

entrance was fair game. It could be chewing on sticks, digging holes, exploring, climbing or simply wrestling. Lots and lots of wrestling. At times it resembled a pro wrestling

tag-team match – all it took was for one pup to find something that nobody else had, such as a stick, leaf or bone. Then they all wanted it.

The wrestling matches usually went on for several minutes, with no decisive winner. One of the smaller pups often joined in to take a cheap shot at one of the other pups being assailed by several others, but no serious harm was ever done.

All the action going on at once was difficult to follow with my camera. I might have two pups stalking a squirrel to the far right, two or three pups wrestling in front and one playing with



a stick up the hill. All this activity would go on for about an hour, then each pup would slowly return to the den entrance to take a break. A few pups might try to rest, but usually one or two others would try to keep them from getting any shut-eye.

As the light of day started to fade, some of the pups retreated to the safety of the den. Just as I started thinking about packing up my gear for the day, I heard a commotion on the hillside above the den. It was Mom!

Mom was greeted by a mob of hungry pups. With some trying to nurse and others begging for handouts, the reunion lasted for a short time and ended when the adult made a high-pitched bark that sent the pups to the den as she scampered off up the hillside. As I packed up my gear, I realized that I had taken nearly 400 images within a couple hours. Thank goodness I switched to digital – buying and processing that much film would have

put me in the poorhouse.

It was more than a week before I could return to the blind – the dreary spring weather wasn't very suitable for photography, and I found the pups didn't care for the wet weather either. Still, I was anxious to get back to the blind to see what the pups were up to and I eventually had more opportunities to visit and photograph my new friends. The recent rains had revitalized the forest floor with color, and the pups were changing color, too, from brown to a light red.

The pups were up to their usual activities – exploring, wrestling, sleeping and more wrestling. Mom would occasionally stop by for a visit and the pups would stop what they were doing to greet her, hoping for a handout. These visits were short and often occurred away from the den site. It seemed the pups could sense her presence – they always knew she was in the area long before I realized it.





Above: Personal grooming habits, including scratching, quickly become a family affair when you have six siblings living together.

Opposite: Sleeping space near a fox den is apparently a rare commodity even aboveground.

By the middle of May, activity around the den became less frequent. The pups were getting bigger and spent much of their time a short distance away from the den. On occasion I would watch a couple of them stalking squirrels or songbirds without success.

One morning I witnessed a different side of the pups' behavior when Mom showed up with a couple of voles. What used to be play turned into an all-out fight, with only two winners. I suspect the hierarchy of the den had thus been set. On several occasions, I saw Mom or Dad out hunting during the middle of the day, accompanied by a single pup.

As May came to a close, I would see just two or three pups at the den, usually after they ran past the blind from somewhere behind me. I wondered what had happened to the

other three pups. Because past experience had shown me that pups are often moved to an alternative den site, I did a little investigation and found the missing pups at another den about 70 yards away. They must have outgrown the original den and the parents decided to split them up.

My last few trips to the blind were for the most part uneventful, with the occasional appearance of a single pup. Mom, apparently a successful hunter, would leave gifts for her hungry offspring, including rabbits, squirrels, a woodchuck and even a whitetail fawn.

Eventually the fox family abandoned their dens completely and I removed my blind. Although the pups were out in the world now, they were not out of my thoughts.

Over the summer I would occasionally catch a glimpse of the foxes darting in and out of a nearby cornfield and my thoughts would drift back to the times I had spent watching them. When I go back now and look at the many photographs I took over my spring with the foxes, it's hard not to smile. Next time I'm going to pack a video camera, too. ■

#### Fox Facts:

- Foxes can thrive near urban areas, and fewer coyotes mean more foxes.
- Adult pairs can mate for life.
- Foxes can live 10 years in the wild.
- Dens can average from 1-7 pups, with a high mortality rate the first year.
- Adult males can help raise young, and last year's non-breeding females may help raise young.
- On occasion, adults will move pups to another den if the den is infected with mange mites.
- It's not uncommon for foxes to use the den the next year.
- A fox's diet consists of mice, voles, rabbits, ground-nesting birds, squirrels, and an occasional domestic cat.



# Mussels of the Missouri

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

A 2006 survey of the Missouri River between Gavins Point Dam and Ponca State Park failed to turn up two federally endangered mussel species that had been found in the river in recent years. But it did paint a clearer picture of freshwater unionid mussel populations in a river that historically was mostly devoid of mussels, mistakenly called clams by most people, and will help guide ongoing habitat restoration efforts on this reach of the Missouri.

Shells from scaleshell mussels (*Leptodea leptodon*) were found below Gavins Point Dam in 2004 and 2005, the first time the species was documented in the river since 1981. The shells were still intact and had not been affected by weather, indicating the animals had probably died less than a year before they were found. The weathered shell of another mussel believed to be either the Higgins' eye pearlymussel (*Lampsilis higginsii*) or the pink mucket (*Lampsilis abrupta*) was also found in 2005. All three are endangered.

The discoveries of these species in the Missouri River, well outside their known range, created a stir among biologists and raised hope that additional reproducing populations had been found. It also prompted the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to commission the 2006 study to determine if its work to rebuild sandbars

could affect these and other mussel species.

Freshwater mussels are declining nationwide. Of the more than 300 species once found in North America, 7 percent are believed to be extinct and more than 30 percent are either listed or proposed for listing as federally threatened or endangered species. Mussels are good indicators of environmental quality because they filter microscopic plants and animals from the water and, as such, are sensitive to pollution. The construction of dams, the channelization of rivers, silt from farm fields and construction sites, and overharvest for food and commercial

uses has also reduced their numbers.

Freshwater mussels are a segment of the mollusca phylum, which includes oysters and snails among its more than 110,000 species worldwide and is second only to arthropods in species diversity. Two shells hinged by a ligament protect their soft bodies, and they are capable of producing pearls. Depending on a species's preference, mussels live in sand, silt, mud or gravel on the bottom of rivers and lakes, where they bury most of their shell in the substrate and move by pulling themselves along by extending a muscular, fleshy foot from between their shells.

The unique lifecycle of a unionid mussel begins when a male releases sperm into the water. Females capture this sperm through a siphon, and the fertilized eggs develop into a larval stage called glochidia. After growing in the female for up to 10 months, glochidia are released into the water, where they float until they can attach to the gills of a fish host or die. The glochidia remain attached to the host's gills for one to four weeks. Some actually feed on the host while others just hitch a ride. After developing shells, the young mussels drop off, leaving the fish unharmed. If they happen to fall in suitable habitat, they survive.

Fish hosts help mussels spread up and down rivers and across lakes. Heidi Dunn, president and lead researcher for Ecological Specialists, Inc., the



Under the right conditions, finding a freshwater mussel is as easy as following the trail it leaves in the sand, as Kendall Cranney of Ecological Specialists, Inc., did during a mussel survey on the Missouri River in October 2006. With Cranney is Jeff Dolwick.



Heidi Dunn of Ecological Specialists, Inc., counts freshwater mussels she and her crew collected below Gavins Point Dam.

Missouri firm that conducted the 2006 study for the Corps, believes a freshwater drum, the preferred host for the scaleshell, may have brought glochidia from central Missouri, the closest population, to Gavins Point Dam. While the survey found none, there could be more, although "with as many mussels as we found and with as much time as we spent out there, to not find any of them leads you to believe that they're not really living in the Missouri River proper, but they had to come from somewhere," Dunn said. Exactly where – a tributary, Lake Yankton or somewhere in Missouri, is anyone's guess.

Dunn and others involved in the study believe that because no other pink muckets or Higgins' eye mussels have been found in the Missouri River and it is so far outside their historic range, it is more likely that someone simply discarded the shell that was found below Gavins Point Dam.

Dunn's 2006 survey did find 2,524 specimens of 12 different species of mussels, the most common being fragile heelsplitter (*Leptodea fragilis*) and pink papershell (*Potamilus ohioensis*). A total of 18 species have been found in the

river in seven studies dating to 1981. Most have been found in shallower areas protected from the river's swift flows.

Mussel abundance and diversity was highest in the reach below the dam where sediment-free water has washed fine sand and silt from the river bottom, leaving more of the gravelly substrate preferred by the mussel species that inhabit the Missouri. This was especially true near the Lake Yankton outlet, an area known as "the bubble," and near the mouth of the James River. Ironically, while man-made changes to some rivers has resulted in a decline in the number and variety of mussels, the changes to this short segment of the Missouri may have made it more habitable for them than it once was.

"We didn't find as many downstream in the natural river where the sand and channel is shifting. Those conditions aren't conducive to freshwater mussels," said Dunn.

That was good news to the Corps, which is busy dredging sand from the bottom of the river to rebuild sandbars between Gavins Point Dam and Ponca State Park to serve as nesting habitat for the endangered least tern and



Scaleshell mussel.

threatened piping plover. Most of these sandbars are below the areas with the highest concentrations of mussels. The river rebuilt sandbars naturally when it was free flowing with high flows in the spring and lower flows in the summer. Currently, flows from Gavins Point Dam are fairly constant, with higher flows much of the year to support downstream barge shipping and lower flows in the winter.

"We're thinking it's not very likely that we'll find any federally listed species in those areas," said Becky Latka, a Corps biologist assigned to the Missouri National Recreational River.

Still, Latka said the Corps will continue to survey sites where sandbars will be constructed to ensure existing mussel beds are not affected. ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF G. WATERS, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY



# Fishin' With Gib

Text and photos by Rocky Hoffmann

*Self-described I-80 lake purists, these two North Platte fishermen get together once a week from ice-out to freeze-up to try their luck.*

At age 14, Larry Sable went to work sacking groceries and stocking shelves at Sixth Street Foods in Ogallala. Sable retired from Sixth Street 48 years later as a store manager, and claims he enjoyed every single minute of his career. “How boring!” Gib interjected.

Gilbert (Gib) Larsen worked 26 different jobs before retiring from the railroad two years ago. Those jobs ranged from trucker to state trooper, and oil rigger to yardmaster at Union Pacific’s Bailey Yards in North Platte. Gib’s hobbies are as varied as his vocational pursuits. Among other things, he’s a blacksmith, flint chipper and hide tanner. He’s also a pretty good fisherman.

Gib and Larry grew up together in Ogallala, attended high school together and then parted ways. Nearly 45 years later, after both had retired, they bumped into one another at a North Platte garage sale.

“We were kind of caught up in our new lifestyles of doing nothing, so I suggested we ought to get together and catch a fish or something. We

did, and we’ve been fishing partners ever since,” Gib recalled.

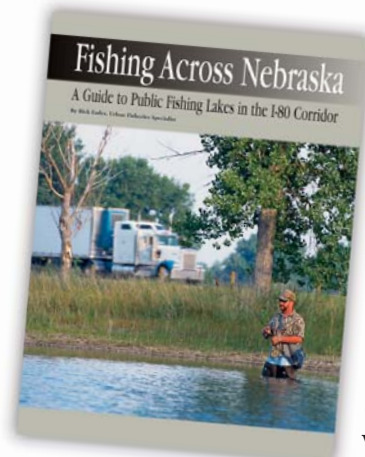
“This will be our third season of fishing together,” said Larry, “and it’s been a good arrangement. I take my grandsons fishing fairly regularly, but they’re not always available. Gib, on the other hand, is always ready to go, and we’ve worked it out that we fish at least once a week from ice-out to freeze-up.”

“I don’t like ice-fishing,” Gib chimed in, “because I can’t stand the taste of schnapps.”

So at least one day every week during the open-water fishing season, Gib and Larry pack a lunch and some bottled water, gather their tackle and push Gib’s boat off the trailer onto an I-80 lake somewhere on either side of sunrise. Then they fish and chat until they put the boat back on the trailer somewhere close to sunset.

One would surmise that since both fishermen grew up in Ogallala, they would be prone to fish Lake McConaughy, or, since they both live in North Platte, that they would be found wetting their lines on Lake

“Gib’s eyes ‘light up’ when a bluegill dances on his line,” said Larry Sable, his fishing partner.



**This guide to fishing the I-80 corridor is free at all district offices and many public vendors.**

Maloney or Sutherland Reservoir. Instead, they have become I-80 lake purists.

“We like the consistent clarity of the water, the unique character that each lake offers, their relative small size, the excellent fishing and the solitude,” Gib explained.

Solitude? On lakes that, as their collective name aptly describes, are located just across the fence from one of the busiest interstate highways in the nation, where thousands of trucks and cars pass daily?

“We don’t hardly notice the traffic once we focus on fishing,” Gib said. “Sometimes we use it (the highway traffic) as a diversion when things get a little slow on the water. I’m a real truck nut, and I have an extensive model truck collection. In fact, I can identify every truck that passes and hit the year pretty close as well. Larry knows his old cars, and there are a lot of antique automobiles being toted up and down the interstate. He’ll see one on a trailer and say, ‘there goes a ‘51 Studebaker,’ and I’ll point out a classic, older-style

Peterbilt still hauling freight that might have a million miles or more on it.”

Truckers often honk at the two fishermen as they pass. “Some of these guys have a regular route out to the coast and back, and they’re likely to see us on the same lake when they go out and when they come back. They must think we’re there all the time. We get a chuckle out of that,” Larry said.

As far as the fishing goes, last year was their best year yet. The more they fish these small lakes, the better success they have. Gib feels they learn from every outing, and to help them improve their catch rates each year, he keeps notes in a fishing journal designed specifically for that task. The book, *Fishing Journal, Angling Legacy*, provides space for categorical entries such as weather, water temperature, air temperature, wind speed and direction, trip observation and special catches. Special catches have been remarkable, especially in numbers last year when the two men had numerous 20- to 30-fish days that included a Master Angler or two.

Gib and Larry feel no need to fish anywhere else. The chain of I-80 lakes in their area suits them just fine.

“Why go dragging your boat across the state? The lakes we fish are relatively close, we catch a lot of fish and we catch a few Master Anglers,” said Gib. “Besides, my boat is just perfect for these small lakes and is too small for Lake McConaughy or the



**This duo’s fishing trips begin on either side of sunrise and usually end somewhere near dusk.**

other large, southwest reservoirs. I grew up on Lake McConaughy, and I know what can happen if you don’t have enough boat.”

## Snuff

In fact, Gib’s last two boats were designed for small lakes. Not long ago, he had one of those little “bass buggies,” which he felt served him fairly well when fishing alone. However, it was a bit crowded with a fishing partner and he couldn’t take along all the items that make a fishing trip a bit more enjoyable.



**Snuff**

One such item is Snuff, Gib’s Chinese pug and constant companion both on the water and off.

“I sold that boat and bought a 15-foot fiberglass bass boat. You don’t see many bass boats that short around here, and it’s absolutely perfect on these little lakes for Larry, Snuff and me.”

Snuff quickly determines who’s catching most of the fish during an outing and positions himself near that person until the momentum changes. Then so does Snuff.

“We’re catch-and-release fishermen, except for the first little sunfish of the day, and that fish belongs to Snuff. He’s come to expect it, and always seems more excited about the first fish reeled to the boat,” said Gib.

## An I-80 Bass Boat With a Power Anchor?

Not only is Gib’s small boat suited perfectly for two people and a little dog on I-80 lakes, it has everything that the bigger bass boats have, including a bow-mounted electric trolling motor, two fish locators, livewells and an outboard motor (which hasn’t been started for some time) on the rear. One of the things used most on Gib’s boat is the anchor, which is deployed whenever they want to fish a particular spot for a while.

“The best thing about this anchor system is the electric winch. We use an anchor a lot, and I’d hate to pull that hunk of steel off the bottom and hoist it

by hand over the side of the boat every time we wanted to lift anchor. I’ll never have another boat without a power anchor,” said Gib.

“He’s getting pretty good at operating it too,” bragged Larry. “The other day he was barefoot in the boat and was running the electric motor with one foot while operating the electric winch switch with the big toe on his other foot. Who has a more talented fishing partner than I?”

## Catch’em and Let’em Go

Other than the outboard motor, the only other equipment on their boat that hasn’t been used for a while is the livewell. Gib and Larry don’t keep any

The fun part is from when the fish is hooked until the time it's in the boat. Then, the fun is all over and you might as well turn the fish loose.

— Gib Larsen

of their catch, as Gib claims the fun part of fishing is the time period from when the fish is hooked until it's in the boat. Then, he said, the fun is over and you might as well turn the fish loose.

"I'll bet we've caught some of these

fish several times and at different stages in their lives, from when they were small up to Master Angler-size. I mean, we fish these lakes so often that we have to be catching some of these fish time and again," said Gib. "I would feel selfish if I took a nice fish out of these lakes when I can weigh it, snap a photo and turn it loose for someone else to catch."

One of the things that Gib in particular has noticed about I-80 lakes is how the fishing in them has improved over the years. Gib moved to North Platte in 1978 and immediately began fishing the lakes along the interstate. At that time, he said, he had consistent catches of 8-inch bass. Now it's not uncommon for him to hook a 14- to 16-inch fish, and the frequency of catches has also improved.

Larry's style of fishing is quite similar to Gib's. Both fishermen use ultra-light rods, reels and line, and they enjoy

catching most of the species that these little lakes have to offer. Larry has a slight aversion, however, to catfish, which, as luck would have it, he catches frequently. He prefers catching largemouth bass, but rationalizes that since they release all of their fish, it doesn't really matter what they catch.

"We still have our preferences, however. For instance, you're most likely to find Gib's end of the boat tucked into a bluegill hole whenever he gets the chance," Larry said.

## Bluegill Rule!

"Usually a good bluegill spot is next to a good bass spot. I'll try to position the boat so that Larry can fish for bass for a while, allowing me to catch a few bluegill. We have a lot of good-natured fun with each other about who's catching the most and biggest fish, but when it comes right down to it, each of us gets more enjoyment out of watching the other guy catch a fish than catching one ourselves," Gib said.

Larry is very aware of Gib's obsession with bluegill: "His eyes always light up when he gets a bluegill dancing on the end of his line. Gib claims that it's a good thing that bluegills don't grow to 10 pounds, because he doubts if anybody could land one that big."

Right now, Gib is more interested in big bluegill.

"In the past while fishing alone, I know I've caught some 10-inch bluegill. I'd just turn them loose. That 10-inch threshold is the benchmark for Master Angler-sized bluegill, and it has become a hard one to catch. I've caught lots of 6- and 8-inchers and a few 9-inch bluegill, but I just haven't been able to find the real big ones lately. They're out there, and if not this year, I'll get into them next year."

Gib's logbook is fairly revealing and, at times, somewhat surprising. For example, while many fishermen pack it in during the dog days of July and August, Gib and Larry keep right on fishing and catching fish. A July 20 entry, beginning at midday, indicates that Gib and Larry began catching bass at a rate of one every five minutes. By the end of the trip, Larry had boated 15 bass and Gib had caught 18, including one Master Angler.

## The Pitiful

Although Gib and Larry use just about everything in their tackle boxes over the course of a season, Gib constantly returns to a small lure he designed several years ago. He calls it "The Pitiful," and it's rather simple – an inline spinner with a tiny blade and some beads. He trails it with a No. 6 Aberdeen



Gib fishes a bluegill hole after positioning the boat so that Larry can fish for bass.

hook and usually just enough nightcrawler to cover the hook. It received its name from its looks.

"Several years ago I was fishing with a friend and pulled this little spinner contraption out. He took a look at it and said that it was the most pitiful lure he had ever seen. The name stuck," Gib recalled.

Pitiful or not, it catches fish of all species.

"It's my go-to bait after I've been 'exercising' my tackle box a lot," said Gib. "I even get Larry to try it once in a while. The last time he used it, he tossed it back to me when he was done, and it went in the lake. I told him that was pretty low rent. Some people will do anything to get the upper hand on fishing."

## Boat Talk

Such good-natured jabs don't bother Larry, who rarely talks all day long. Gib, on the other hand, talks constantly.

"Sometimes I don't hear what he's saying because of the interstate noise,

but he carries on anyway. When he knows that I am unable to hear him, he talks to himself. Gib always says that it's alright to talk to yourself, and it's even alright to answer yourself, but when you start saying 'huh?' to yourself, then you have problems."

## Mike

"When you spend as many hours on an I-80 lake as Larry and I do, you realize that you're really not as alone as you think you are,"

said Gib. "We don't see many fishermen, but those we do see are likely standing way off in the corner of the lake tossing lures. Just because there are not a lot of people, it doesn't mean you own the lake. These little lakes along the highway have a lot of wildlife. In the spring, the red-winged blackbirds give us heck if we get in too

close to the rushes, and every once in a while a pair of Canada geese sail in looking for a place to nest. This year we came upon a muskrat that had no fear of us. We could coast right up next to him, and he'd just sit there on his feed bed, munching reeds. Every time we went to that lake, there he'd be. We even named him Mike. I don't know why, he was just Mike to Larry and me."

Not everything needs an explanation when you're fishin' with Gib! ■



Mike the muskrat.



Snuff is always found close to the fisherman who is having the most luck.

# Tree Swallows

Text and photo by Jon Farrar

*A combination of environmental factors resulted in declining tree swallow abundance in Nebraska and across the continent, but they have made a remarkable comeback in recent years.*

Of the eight species of swallows found in Nebraska, the tree swallow and purple martin (a swallow, though not by name) are the only two that nest in tree cavities. Because of their nesting requirements, tree swallows historically were largely restricted to woodlands of the Missouri River Valley and the lower reaches of its major tributaries, such as the Platte and Elkhorn rivers. As timberland was cleared for agriculture and other uses, much of the tree swallow's nesting habitat, principally abandoned woodpecker holes, vanished and the species began a steady decline in both Nebraska and across the continent. Competition with introduced house sparrows and starlings for nesting cavities, and the impact of pesticides since the mid-1900s, also played roles in the decline of tree swallows.

Tree swallows, however, have made a remarkable comeback in recent decades, even expanding their breeding range across Nebraska as woodlands spread westward along river valleys. Tree swallows migrating in the spring apparently pioneer and prospect for acceptable breeding areas, even finding isolated cottonwoods and willows with woodpecker holes on the margins of Rainwater Basin marshes and Sandhills lakes. Trees with old woodpecker holes are critically important nesting habitat. Tree swallows readily adopt bluebird nest boxes, but ornithologists point out that bluebird nest boxes alone will not maintain tree swallow numbers in North America. Tree swallows are far more common in Nebraska today than

they were only 50 years ago.

The increase in woodlands near water across Nebraska has been the perfect formula to bolster tree swallow numbers. These areas, where insects are abundant, are the species's preferred nesting habitat. Insects make up the majority of a tree swallow's diet and are taken as the bird swoops, dives and careens over grasslands, fields and wetlands. Tree swallows migrate earlier in the spring (usually in late-March), linger later in the autumn (mid- to late-October) and winter farther north than other swallow species. Consequently, they can encounter cold weather and a shortage of insects, and have evolved the very un-swallowlike habit of feeding on berries and seeds when necessary. Tree swallows are adept fliers and most in their element when on the wing, even skimming insects off the surface of calm waters and bathing by dipping across surface water and shaking vigorously as they fly away.

Males usually arrive on the breeding grounds before the females, locating acceptable nesting cavities and establishing territories around them. Pairs form when the females arrive and accept a male's choice of territory and nesting cavity. For such a fragile bird, male tree swallows aggressively defend their nesting territories against rival tree swallows and other cavity-nesting species. Outside of the breeding season, tree swallows are highly social. Where abundant, they gather into large flocks during autumn migration and share night roosts.

The bowl of the tree swallow's

nesting cavity is lined with grasses or other plant material, and bird feathers found near the nest site are added after the eggs are laid. Typically, the male gathers these feathers and presents them to the female, who incorporates them into the nest by pressing them into a form with her breast. Four to six smooth, white eggs are laid. Only the female incubates the eggs, for 13 to 16 days, and broods the clutch, but both adults feed the chicks. At 18 to 22 days of age, the young leave the nest cavity and make their maiden flights. Adults are reported to continue to feed the young birds for at least three days after they leave the nest. Tree swallows breed across most of North America where acceptable habitat is available, and winter in the southern United States and Central America. They are most common in eastern Nebraska.

In Nebraska's central and western counties, tree swallows could be confused with violet-green swallows. Tree swallows, though, characteristically climb with rapid wing beats and make periodic glides. Both species have only shallowly notched tails. If viewed closely or with optics, identification is simple – violet-green swallows have white feathers above and behind the eyes, tree swallows do not.

Tree swallows readily accept nesting housing built specifically for them. Plans and finished houses can be found by searching the Internet for "tree swallow house." Placement is important, the best being eight to 12 feet above the ground in a dead tree near water and grasslands. ■



Tree swallows, which prefer to nest in woodpecker holes found in dead trees, have made a remarkable comeback in recent years.

# Giddyup!

Hit the trail at parks across Nebraska

Photos and text by Eric Fowler

*In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't that long ago that most Nebraskans knew how to ride a horse, and many owned one. In a sense, we all still own a piece of the 170 horses that roam the trails at seven of Nebraska's state parks, and can saddle one up most any summer day and go for a ride.*



**ABOVE:** ISABELLE KAEDING OF BLAIR CLIMBS ABOARD FOR A TRAIL RIDE AT INDIAN CAVE STATE PARK. "IT WAS THE LONGEST RIDE OF MY LIFE," SHE SAID AFTER RETURNING TO THE STABLES. **OPPOSITE:** WRANGLER BLAIN WILLIER LEADS THERESA BAKER, LAURA CHUBICK AND LESLEE KEEPERS PAST A ROCK FACE TUCKED IN THE PINES ATOP A RIDGE AT CHADRON STATE PARK.



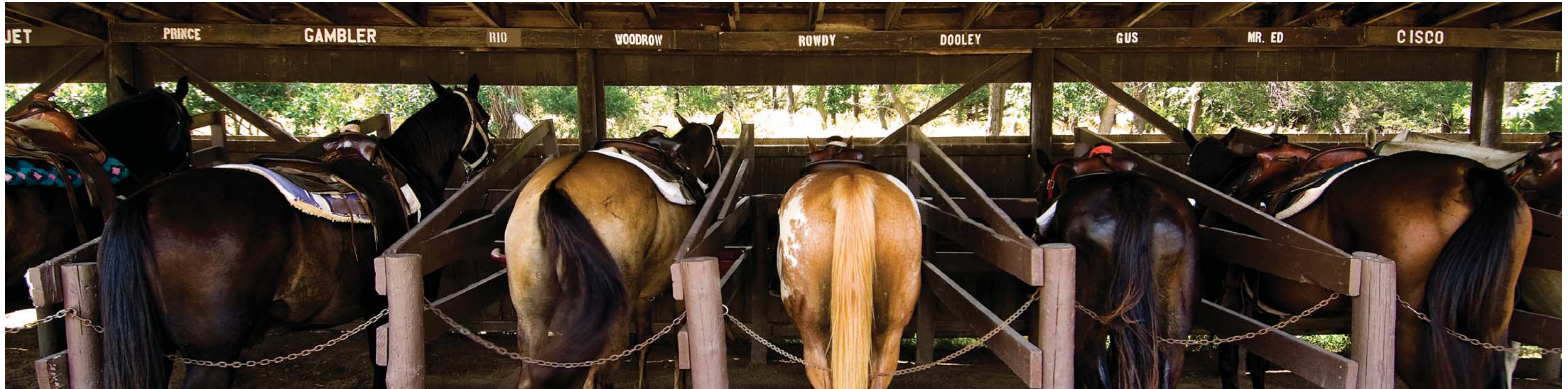


OPPOSITE: ON THE LONGEST OF TWO RIDES OFFERED AT FORT ROBINSON STATE PARK, RIDERS GET AN UP CLOSE LOOK AT THE RED CLOUD BUTTES. ABOVE: WRANGLERS JAKE HENDERSON AND CODY MEYERKORTH CATCH SOME SHUT-EYE BETWEEN TRAIL RIDES AT INDIAN CAVE STATE PARK.

*The horses know their way around some of the most scenic landscapes in the state better than most of the wranglers who spend their summers leading trail rides at the parks. They should – the horses follow the same trails hundreds of times each summer, and some have been doing it for 20 years or more.*



GLENN CASS SADDLES UP FOR HIS FIRST HORSEBACK RIDE EVER WHILE ON A FIELD TRIP FROM THE KING SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY MAGNET SCHOOL IN OMAHA. "IT WAS A LITTLE SCARY, BUT IT WAS A LITTLE FUN, TOO," HE SAID.



ABOVE: HORSES GET PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT, INCLUDING THEIR OWN STALLS, AT NIOBRARA STATE PARK. BELOW: YOU HAVE TO LIKE HORSES TO TAKE A SUMMER JOB LEADING TRAIL RIDES, AND BECKY LEARMONT, WHO WORKS AT PLATTE RIVER STATE PARK, IS NO EXCEPTION.



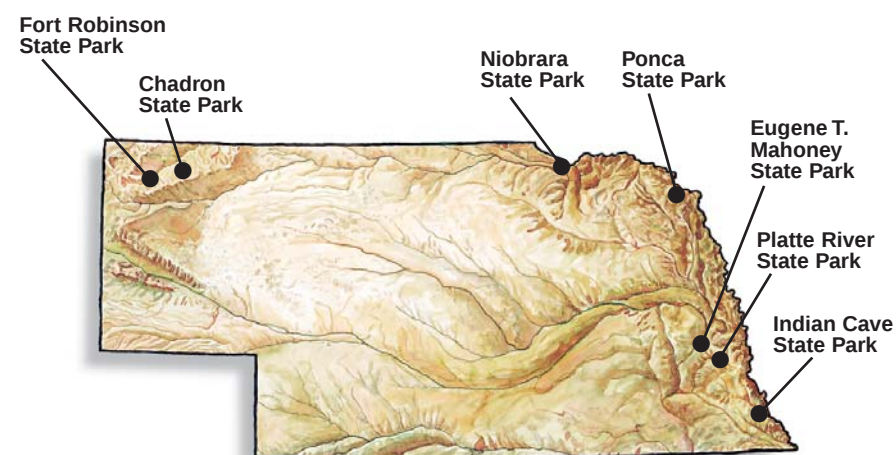
*The experience of the horses is good news for the folks who climb aboard – some riders, both young and old, are greenhorns who have never been on a horse in their lives. Others were once seasoned horsemen or women who haven't grabbed the reins since they left the farm decades ago. Either way, the horses pretty much run on autopilot, making holding onto the reins optional most of the time.*



WRANGLER CIERA MARSHALL LEADS CYDNEE BANCROFT OF OMAHA ALONG A HILLTOP TRAIL OVERLOOKING THE NIOBRARA RIVER AT NIOBRARA STATE PARK.



*Whether you're looking to cut your teeth, relive the good ol' days, or just want to traverse a Pine Ridge or Missouri River bluff trail on a summer vacation without investing any boot leather, your horse is waiting.*



## State Parks with Trail Rides



ABOVE: SCOTT MCALLISTER, RODNEY WEIMANN AND JORDAN KINCAID OF INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI, FOLLOW WRANGLER ERICA MCCARTHY THROUGH A TUNNEL OF OAK TREES AT PONCA STATE PARK. OPPOSITE TOP: A ROLL IN THE DIRT AT DAY'S END IS CUSTOMARY FOR MOST HORSES AT PLATTE RIVER STATE PARK. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: KALLYN MEYER OF KANSAS CITY BROUGHT HER PINK COWGIRL BOOTS FOR A RIDE AT MAHONEY STATE PARK WITH HER SISTER, JENSEN, AND FATHER, DALE.

# At First Pike

Text and photos by Jeff Kurrus

A lifelong largemouth bass fisherman, angler Kevin McMillan found that there's more to fishing than just bass on his first trip to Nebraska.

“How quick can you get me to the middle of nowhere?” the voice on the phone asked. “How quick can you get here?” I responded. “I’ll be on a plane tomorrow.” “I’ll believe it when I see it,” I said. That next day, longtime friend Kevin McMillan shook my hand at Eppley Airfield in Omaha. “I can’t believe I’m in Nebraska.” “That makes two of us. You must have really needed to get away.” “More than you’ll ever know,” he said. “Well, you have two hours to make a decision,” I said. “We’ll start on I-80 and either fish along the interstate or take a detour.”



This new spinnerbait took a beating after just one day of pike fishing in Nebraska.

“I want to fish where you’ve never fished,” he said. “New water it is.” “New” is a common word in Kevin’s life. He coaches basketball, and in the coaching profession, seldom does one remain in one spot for the duration of their career. Three different stops, including jobs on both the high school and college level, were already on his résumé. More recently, interviews in three states and visits to multiple high school and university campuses had filled his summer, as well as long talks with his wife Paige about again moving their family, including sons Matt and Ben. Yet there was one issue that, at least for this day, trumped all others. “I’ve fished once in two years,” he said, “and that was with you in Arkansas.” “What does Paige think about this trip, when everything’s so hectic back home?” “She told me to go. She got tired of watching me pace around the house. She also knows that I haven’t done this for so long, that this is one thing my last job didn’t afford me the chance to do.” A bass fisherman by nature, it is hard imagining Kevin not spending time on the water each year. Yet that is what life had become, and he was trying to change that aspect. He repeatedly checked his cell phone as we traveled down the interstate, answering calls about jobs until we headed north and stopped at Ravenna. I thought that the phone calls would continue for the entire trip, that he would be consumed by his impending relocation. Little did I know. Less than ten minutes on Ravenna Lake, Kevin saw his first Nebraska

largemouth strike, a Master Angler fish that bludgeoned a topwater scum frog. Then he saw it again, and again. “You got to be kidding me,” he finally said. “Do Nebraska bass always hit this hard?” A bit of perspective on this: Kevin has caught a number of big bass in Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee, fish that would rival Nebraska’s state-record largemouth. But it was the pure aggressiveness of these strikes that excited him, as well as a local teenager sitting on the bank.

At an age where girls are normally more important than fishing, the teenager temporarily left his companion and walked over to us. “What are you using?” he asked.

“Scum frog,” Kevin said, pulling one from his tackle box and showing how it worked. A couple minutes later, the boy was walking back to his girlfriend with tips on how to use this lure and one to try out.

Twenty bass later, Kevin’s \$370 flight (which was delayed two hours), and the stress of his job search had all but drifted away. He climbed in the truck. “I’m done. I don’t have to catch another fish,” he laughed. “But I do have one question for you.”

“Pizza Hut,” I answered.

“That’s all I needed to know.”

Our drive toward Valentine took us to Broken Bow, where we sat down to dinner and began our customary attempt to rank our latest aquatic triumph with the host of others we had shared on the water. We compared notes through a quick dinner, debated the next day’s plans, and asked the server if there was a Dairy Queen in Thedford.

She could only giggle. “No, not so much. The last ice cream is right down the road. Past that, you’re not going to see much at all.”

An hour later we understood what she meant as we drove north on U.S. Highway 83. “I can’t see a light in any direction,” Kevin said. We debated through the darkness toward Valentine, pulling out notes I had compiled earlier after talking to Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biologist Daryl Bauer about northern pike fishing. Despite being a bass angler, Kevin now wanted to catch pike because he had never fished for them before. “But it really doesn’t matter what happens tomorrow,” he said. “There’s no way



On his first fishing trip in Nebraska, Kevin McMillan caught this Master Angler-sized northern pike at Clear Lake near Valentine.



Ravenna Lake welcomed Kevin to Nebraska, and he was catching quality largemouth bass soon after he started fishing.

you can top today.”

By the next morning, we had settled on Clear Lake at the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge. Because of its 425-acre size, we decided to split the lake in thirds and headed toward the shallower, northeastern side.

We started fishing with casts in shallow water, much like we were largemouth fishing, with an assortment of topwater and spinnerbait lures. The water was much clearer than anything Kevin had ever fished back home. “We’re not going to catch a fish,” he suddenly said.

I wasn’t sure myself. The area was much too shallow, much too clear, and had no visible structure. The bulrushes we thought we needed to find fish were on the land, far from the water’s edge. I turned and made a long cast toward deep water. “Great, 15 minutes in and you’re already casting out in the middle of nowhere,” he said.

“I did see a drop-off out there when we trolled across,” I replied. It was the most important comment of the day.

Kevin finally turned himself, making a long cast to open water. During one

of his first casts, he jerked, looking at me over his shoulder as he did. He reeled fast, attempting to catch up with what quite possibly was a fish running toward the boat. When he reeled up the end of his line, his spinnerbait was gone. He looked at me.

I was belatedly reminded of a recent conversation with Bauer. “*What about steel leaders?*” I had asked.

“*A necessity,*” he said. “*If not, you’ll probably lose your lure the first time a pike strikes.*”

Kevin stared at his line, then at me. Then back at his line. “What in the hell was that?”

“Northern,” I said.

A pause. Then a look at the glassy water. “Do you have one of those, uh, steel thingies?” he asked.

“Yep.”

He retied, put a similar spinnerbait back on, and looked nervously at me. “What happens if I catch one?”

“You get it in the boat,” I answered.

“I’m not so sure I want to.”

The first pike he landed shortly after became the most photographed fish in the history of Nebraska. However,

these were not photographs worth viewing. Usually the angler is smiling in fishing photographs, happy with his or her catch. Shots of Kevin that day, especially early on, were filled with trepidation and fear. With his welding gloves beside him, he asked for help.

“Just open his mouth and get the hook out,” I said, also remembering a colleague’s suggestion to never pike fish without jaw spreaders.

“He doesn’t want to open his mouth,” Kevin returned.

“Make him,” I said, obviously not knowing his adversary.

That day it often took both of us to pry open a pike’s mouth to retrieve a lure, especially with the larger fish. Being a first-time pike angler, Kevin judged fish by whether he could easily put his hand around the fish’s back. If he was able to, it was a nice fish. If he wasn’t, it was a really nice fish. By the end of the day, he had caught two fish he couldn’t get his hand around. When Kevin caught the largest fish of the day, we knew it was a good fish. But it wasn’t until later when we finally measured one of the smaller pike of the day at

26½ inches that we realized how big his largest fish had been.

At lunchtime he wanted to try something new, so we put in at the refuge’s Duck Lake for bass-only opportunities. Within 15 minutes, Kevin had seen three thunderous topwater strikes, comparable to anything he would see back home, and caught one largemouth measuring 19 inches. Before coming to Nebraska, Kevin’s recreational life was bass fishing. Now, with Duck Lake showing its largemouth potential, he turned to me.

“Pike,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Northerns,” he said. “What are we doing here when we could be catching northerns at the other lake?” We were off the lake five minutes later.

When we put the boat back on Clear Lake, the question was whether or not the pike would still be feeding off the deep drop-offs. Within 10 minutes, we knew the answer.

“There he is,” Kevin said, fighting his first pike of the afternoon.

Between white spinnerbaits and

## “Northerns,” Kevin said. “What are we doing here when we could be catching northerns at the other lake?”

spoons, the rest of the day was spent slow-fishing for pike, except for a 10-minute period when two pike were caught on a topwater prop bait. Neither one of us had ever seen a northern hit on top before. Kevin spoke for both of us. “Oh, m-my, G-god.”

We got off the lake near sunset, starting our drive to North Platte and already questioning why we were leaving in the first place. Although the next day found us catching smallmouth bass at Ft. McPherson Wildlife Management Area near Maxwell and largemouths at Recharge Lake near York, all talk centered on Clear Lake. “Those pike are just so powerful,” he kept saying over and over again. Then, every once in a while, he would say, “What about

Ravenna? I’ve never seen bass like that.”

He repeated these lines all the way back to Eppley, where I assume he did eventually check his cell phone again. But for a couple days in Nebraska, jobs and stress were the furthest things from his mind.

A couple days after he returned home, I got a phone call from Kevin. “Hey, let me ask you a question,” he said, “How far is Valentine from Denver?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“I’m going to be out there in a couple months with a few buddies from back home. Do you think you could meet us in Valentine?”

All I could do was smile. He isn’t wearing Cornhusker gear yet, but he sure is close. ■



Kevin caught pike at Clear Lake by casting spinnerbaits and spoons along contour changes.

# Lake McConaughy's Fishery

## Going With the Flow

Text and Photos by Bob Grier

*Throughout its history, Lake McConaughy has provided some of the best fishing opportunities to be found anywhere. Despite recent low water problems, it still does.*

At full pool, Lake McConaughy holds 1,743,000 acre-feet of water, stretches 22 miles west from Kingsley Dam and attracts anglers, boaters, campers and beach-seekers from across the region. However, eight years of drought in the North Platte River watershed, which stretches from the northern Rockies in Colorado through southeastern Wyoming and

into Nebraska, has left Big Mac battered, bruised and only one-third of its full-pool size. But like a journeyman heavyweight, the lake continues to fight back. Despite record low inflows, boater access issues and a reshuffling of the lake's forage and game fish populations in recent years, McConaughy has still been able to produce world-class walleye fishing in quantity and quality, a resurgent white bass fishery that hints of the lake's former glory days, and a surprisingly diverse fishery that includes walleye, white bass, wipers, smallmouth bass and channel catfish.

For irrigation

hydrologists managing the water in the complex, multi-state system of interconnected impoundments, delivery canals and the North Platte River's mainstream reservoirs, McConaughy has met one of its original design goals – storing enough water to help the downstream irrigation system withstand a five-year drought. For Nebraska Game and Parks Commission fisheries managers working to provide the best fishing possible with the resources available, “going with the flow” is a challenge and fast-paced ecosystem classroom.

### Managing a Top-notch Fishery in an Ever-changing World

For hydrologists, fisheries managers and anglers alike, Lake McConaughy now sits at the most challenging and uncertain period of its 60-year plus history.

One thing certain is that, with few exceptions, knowledgeable anglers

pursuing their sport on Big Mac have enjoyed quality fishing ever since the reservoir filled in the early 1950s. Photo albums and scrapbooks from the past 25 years are filled with memories from the white bass glory years of the '80s and the remarkable rainbow trout fishery produced back when the full-pool lake stratified by midsummer and the introduction of downriggers and other depth-control techniques allowed anglers to target rainbows in the narrow, trout-supporting band.

This period also included the arrival of stripers, the so-called “dead sea era” when the 1989 introduction of alewife exploded, making it difficult for anglers to compete with the lake's abundant natural forage, and the truly world-class trophy walleye fishery that ultimately resulted from that same introduction. The lake's significant mileposts also include the demise of stripers, their unanticipated impact on the lake's migratory rainbow trout fishery, and the eventual loss of trout

from the lake fishery as lower and lower water levels resulted in higher summer water temperatures throughout the lake's water column.

Anglers that have perfected their fishing techniques to pattern McConaughy's white bass, trout, stripers and walleye over the years now face a surprising challenge – what will happen to the lake's traditional open water fishery if and when the lake refills to flood the stands of timber growing in the lake's western basin?

“Everything I've learned over nearly 30 years would change overnight,” said Jim Kohl of Ogallala during a fall walleye fishing trip last September.

Big Mac's recent history is filled with enough twists, turns and surprises to sound like a mystery novel.

District fisheries manager Darrol Eichner's voluminous data files tell McConaughy's story best, the highs and lows over decades and how fishery managers attempted to respond to

immediate and long-term trends. The data sets gathered from creel surveys of McConaughy's anglers as well as from netting, electro-fishing and other on-going research of the lake's game fish and forage reproduction and survival show the complexities of managing a fishery even without the drought-related, low-water cycles added to the mix.

Colored lines on the charts reveal year-class survival, water temperatures, dissolved oxygen, population estimates of gizzard shad and alewife, game fish



Nebraska's largest reservoir, Lake McConaughy is located 11 miles north of Ogallala in Keith County. Despite several years of drought, Big Mac is still 12 miles long.



Some of the new technology employed by Big Mac anglers in recent years include devices such as this one, which helps figure out what color of lure to use based on water and light conditions.

numbers, the state of zooplankton at the bottom of the food chain and how important microscopic organisms are to fingerling fish survival.

“This is a good place to start,” Eichner said as he held up a jar of zooplankton captured years ago on McConaughy with a fine-mesh plankton net. The jar of water was clouded with millions of light-yellow plankton called daphnia (*Daphnia pulex*).

“Daphnia are larger plankton and are ideal forage for walleye and other game fish hatchlings,” he said. “Daphnia in McConaughy are available to hatching game fish fry as they absorb their egg sacks and begin feeding. Over the years, these microscopic organisms have been responsible for excellent hatchling survival until the juvenile fish convert to foraging on the fry of baitfish such as gizzard shad.”

Although McConaughy is on the very northern edge of their range, gizzard shad were the lake’s predominant forage base during the 1970s and early ‘80s. Significant shad die-offs and the accompanying reduction in annual shad reproduction soon thereafter directly impacted game fish survival and growth rates, so biologists attempting to diversify McConaughy’s forage base introduced four additional prey species – rainbow smelt, spottail shiner, threadfin shad and alewife. Rainbow smelt and threadfin shad stockings failed to survive, but although the lake still supports a token population of spottail shiners, it was the alewives stocked in the late-1980s that quickly exploded into extremely large numbers.

“The introduction of alewives was a double-edged sword,” said Eichner. “They were the ideal shape and size for forage – a one- to two-year-old alewife is approximately four to five inches in length, but they don’t have the body depth of a similar size gizzard shad, which makes them an ideal shape and size for walleye and other predators. At the same time, alewives are very efficient filter feeders and their exploding numbers quickly eliminated the lake’s zooplankton population, primarily the 2 mm-size daphnia that were available to juvenile game fish, including white bass in May and walleye in June. The abundance of alewives directly impacted angler success as well – walleye fishermen, specifically, found their traditional presentations couldn’t outcompete the large forage populations.”

Research soon documented the alewife’s predation on young-of-the-year walleye and other game fish. Even with nearly three miles of ideal walleye spawning habitat along the dam, annual walleye surveys and netting studies looking at walleye recruitment and year classes revealed the sharp impact of the alewife predation on natural walleye recruitment.

“We felt the predation was serious enough that we started stocking walleye and the hatcheries ramped up their walleye production to meet the demand,” said Eichner. “Ideally, we hoped that by stocking fingerling walleye, they would be beyond the size that alewives could readily utilize and also large enough to feed on gizzard shad and alewife fry. Alewife spawn in June and gizzard shad in June and July. During those initial years,

we chemically marked some of the fingerling walleye and, using a black light that revealed the dye imbedded in walleye bones, the large numbers of stocked fish that began to show up in anglers’ catches were remarkable.”

In the early ‘90s, Eichner and other biologists that had been pummeled with questions and criticisms from anglers unable to catch walleye with their traditional techniques responded by inviting representatives of local sportsmen’s groups and other walleye anglers to participate in an electro-fishing survey along the dam. The onlookers joined the biologists in the survey boats as they applied electrical current into the water to stun fish caught between the boat’s electrodes.

“I’ll always remember the look on everyone’s faces when we started electro-fishing along the dam that



Although it may not be quite the trophy walleye fishery it once was, Big Mac anglers still can find plenty of good fish to catch.

night,” said Eichner. “We’d only moved a few yards along the rocks and started netting trophy size walleye – beautiful fish in the 10- to 12-pound size range.”

During the early to mid-1990s, anglers at McConaughy began changing their walleye presentations to “match the hatch” – running larger, alewife-colored crankbaits instead of using the traditional jig and crawler or trolled spinners with nightcrawlers that had proven ineffective because of the lake’s alewife-dominated forage base. During this same period, anglers began to increasingly fish specifically for walleye to the exclusion of other species, and *In-Fishermen Magazine* and numerous cable channel fishing venues and internet sources were filled with walleye technique and information that provided insights to catching walleye populations using different

forage species, including alewives.

The breakthrough of sorts occurred on McConaughy in June 1996, when two anglers quite literally bumped into trophy walleye staging along the dam at night. The anglers arrived at the lake’s headquarters the following morning with a stringer that included two 11-pound, a 10½-pound and a noticeably smaller walleye that weighed more than eight pounds. After stopping at the McConaughy park office, the anglers visited the offices of the Keith County News in Ogallala to have their picture taken. Soon the word was out and anglers by the hundreds were trolling the face of Kingsley Dam to harvest trophy walleye.

Between 2000 and 2005, McConaughy became a world-class trophy walleye fishery and anglers

traveled from all over to harvest large walleye. The lake’s production of Master Angler-size walleye, fish over 28 inches in length and eight pounds and larger, hit record levels. In 2001, McConaughy recorded 401 Master Angler walleye and fishing pressure, primarily on the face of the dam at night but also during the day in the lake’s western reaches within weeks of the spawn, increased exponentially. On May 19, 2007 – a Saturday – nearly 500 boats were counted on Lake McConaughy.

“The boat counts were doubly significant because during this period the reservoir was only about one-third of its full-pool capacity,” said Eichner. “Even the 484 boats recorded that day couldn’t compare with the numbers of fishermen during the 1980s, when anglers generally harvested two or



One benefit of recent low water levels at Lake McConaughy is that visitors have had miles upon miles of clean beaches to camp and have fun on.



On the west side of Lake McConaughy, the North Platte River channel is now a narrow band of water that is cutting into the lake’s historical sediment bed.

three times more white bass than walleye.”

Anglers using the latest techniques and technology to target Big Mac’s walleye soon found that their new gear worked on other species as well. It wasn’t unusual for Eichner and other fisheries biologists to hear comments from anglers that were catching channel catfish and other game fish as they attempted to reach their daily bag limit of walleye. McConaughy’s white bass fishery, in particular, was almost forgotten during this period.

“We’d seen record levels of white bass year-classes from 1983 and 1984, for example, and there is a very strong correlation between white bass year-classes and lake levels. During the early ‘80s we enjoyed very high lake levels and related high river inflows, so white bass could easily move into the North Platte River channel to spawn. The declining lake levels since 2000, however, combined with the other factors, including losses of zooplankton and the exploding alewife populations, quickly reduced McConaughy’s white bass numbers.”

Eichner responded with a request to the Commission’s fish hatcheries for white bass to stock in Lake McConaughy.

“Ironically, white bass are fragile and difficult to culture and grow, but

our crews at our hatcheries geared up to raise white bass and as their success increased, we began to stock white bass in an effort to bring back McConaughy’s white bass fishing. However, weather fronts, specifically cold fronts, can decimate white bass production in a hatchery – we saw a complete bust in 1996 when temperature declines hit the hatchery ponds at a critical moment. Walleye in the hatchery ponds can be similarly impacted, and there have been complete losses in the holding ponds several times over the years.

“Thankfully, white bass recruitment from natural reproduction that year helped fill the void and we continue to see growing numbers of white bass in angler creels over the past five years or so. In 2006, our creel clerks working at the boat ramps recorded approximately 20,000 white bass in angler creels, but just a year later, the creel count found an estimated catch of 83,600 white bass, and anglers reported catching nearly 200,000 white bass while releasing approximately 114,000.”

### Delayed Impacts

The dramatic declines in McConaughy’s water levels over the past eight years have additional impacts that are only now becoming clear.

When the lake is closer to full-pool it stratifies into several distinct layers of water temperature and dissolved oxygen combinations. During high water years, a cold water layer that is nearly devoid of oxygen and thus unable to support most fish species extends to McConaughy’s outlet gates at the southeastern corner of Kingsley Dam. As a result, few if any fish were drawn through the outlet gates during irrigation and hydroelectric releases into Lake Ogallala, which sits below McConaughy.

Because of the lower lake levels of recent years, however, oxygenated, warmer water is lower in the water column and some of the game fish residing there are being sucked through the outlet gates and out into the Lake Ogallala complex and eastward through the North Platte River and Keystone Diversion Canal. While these unintentional game fish releases have been supporting the fisheries in Lake Ogallala and other downstream reservoirs, the warmer water being released has had a negative impact on the trout fishery below the dam.

Another impact of lower water levels could be an increased threat of algae-related fish kills. Even at full pool in the 1970s, Lake McConaughy saw a blue-green algal bloom that resulted in a partial fish die-off,

primarily limited to carp and white bass. In June 2002, Pruitt Reservoir, located northeast of Brush, Colorado on the South Platte River, suffered a massive fish kill created by a golden algae bloom (*Prymnesium parvum*). Golden algae may be related to stagnant water, unlike the water found in Lake McConaughy, but the die-off alarmed biologists and water quality specialists across the Great Plains.

The majority of McConaughy’s inflows are irrigation return water from the North Platte River valley, and nitrates and phosphates carried into the lake are at least partially trapped in lake bottom sediments. As the water edge at the west end of the reservoir moves east, a forest of cottonwood, willows and other vegetation has filled the lake’s western basin from Sand Point west into the Clear Creek Waterfowl Refuge. The North Platte River channel, located north of the old Eagle Canyon boat ramp on the lake’s southwest side and Omaha Beach on the north shore, now forms a swift flowing, narrow band of water that is cutting into the lake’s historical sediment bed.

The drought that continues to blanket the Great Plains, including the North Platte River drainage from northern Colorado, Wyoming and into

western Nebraska, effectively holds Lake McConaughy’s irrigators, anglers and fisheries biologists in a state of limbo, and everyone’s eyes are turned to the west, watching winter snowpack levels in the Rockies. The mainstream Wyoming reservoirs on the North Platte currently hold approximately 20 percent of their capacities, and it will take exceptional snow melt over a number of years to bring the system back to pre-drought levels in Wyoming and Nebraska.

### Down But Not Out

Despite all this, Lake McConaughy still offers exceptional walleye fishing and a resurgent white bass fishery.

Eichner’s annual walleye sampling and creel surveys of McConaughy’s anglers shows the result of low lake levels since 2000 and five to six years of heavy walleye fishing pressure. In 2006, anglers harvested 44 Master Angler walleye in Lake McConaughy, compared with 401 taken in 2001. Last year the lake produced 24 walleye that met Master Angler requirements.

Despite that large drop in numbers, McConaughy still leads Nebraska in the harvest of Master Angler walleye, and the “quality and quantity” of McConaughy’s recent walleye fishery is revealed by looking at the average

size of walleye harvested throughout the years – some years the average size of the walleyes being caught was more than 19 inches, but over the past several years, the annual size average from all walleye taken has still exceeded 17 inches – an exceptional resource for anglers.

Also, white bass fishing at the lake has been steadily improving: A lot more white bass have been showing up in creel surveys, and the average size is getting larger as well. Current fishing regulations in Nebraska allow the daily harvest of striped bass, white bass and their hybrids of 15 daily, with no more than one fish over 18 inches. Anglers targeting white bass on the rocks along the southeastern corner of McConaughy in early 2007 found it necessary to measure the majority of white bass hitting their small spinnerbaits in order to avoid violating that regulation – a restriction that represents a quality white bass weighing about three pounds. White bass anglers also found excellent success by following gulls feeding on shad in the late summer, much like they did during McConaughy’s white bass glory years.

McConaughy may be down, but it is definitely not out – Big Mac remains a premier destination for anglers and others seeking water-based sport and recreation. ■



Lake McConaughy anglers still have good luck by simply bird watching – by following gulls feeding on schools of shad, the anglers are able to target the feeding game fish that are driving the shad to the surface.

## Elwood Reservoir

*Recent low water levels are harming this lake's fishery.*

By Rocky Hoffmann

Just when biologists believed they had a very progressive trophy walleye management plan established at Elwood Reservoir, the bottom fell out, or, perhaps more accurately, the top came off. Since 2004, this Gosper County reservoir has dwindled from 32 to 52 feet below full pool. The typically 80-foot-deep reservoir was left holding only 28 feet of water in its deepest haunts, and it shrank from 1,150 surface acres to less than 300.

Back in 2004, Elwood ended the irrigation season approximately 32 feet below full pool after releasing much of its water so corn could be irrigated in three south-central Nebraska counties. Using Elwood's water to grow corn isn't anything new – that's why Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District (CNPPID) created the reservoir. The difference since 2004, however, is that Elwood has not received the normal winter and spring canal inflows that have traditionally refilled the reservoir before the next irrigation season came around and with major upstream reservoirs, such as McConaughy near Ogallala and Pathfinder and Seminole in Wyoming, all running well below capacity, Elwood is last in line to get any excesses.

Elwood Reservoir opened for public recreation in 1979. Beyond irrigation, the canyon-confined reservoir was touted to be an angler's reservoir. Nebraska Game and Parks Commission personnel had the unique opportunity to walk the canyon floors and construct artificial habitat reefs from tires and other structure in the years preceding the reservoir's first delivery of water, and speed limit regulations were enacted to protect the canyon's fragile banks from wake erosion.

All that work created a quiet fishing reservoir, and what a fishing reservoir



When it has sufficient water, Elwood Reservoir is capable of being a trophy fishing lake.

it has been. The lake cycled through spectacular years of crappie, northern pike, white bass, walleye and even muskellunge fishing, but although all those species have played a major role in the lake's fishing identity, it was big walleye that began making the largest mark there. As more and more lunker walleyes were caught, biologists could see the potential specialized size limits would have so more fish could reach trophy size.

So in 2004, the Commission enacted regulations to protect 18- to 24-inch walleye at Elwood. Walleye 15- to 17-inches long, as well as one over 24 inches, could be kept, but all other walleyes had to be safely released. The new regulation appeared to show immediate promise, but the following winter and spring, the lake was unable to reach the beginning water levels of the previous year and a vicious, downward cycle ensued, with each following year being equally dry and resulting in less water.

Eventually Elwood spiraled down to 52 feet below full pool and threatens to lose even more water through seepage, at a rate of about 1½ feet per month. Large die-offs of prey species have already resulted and

game fish numbers are also dwindling. In an effort to save the fishery, the Commission was able to negotiate four special water deliveries to the reservoir over the last three years. Although this has helped, the effort has been expensive, as two of the deliveries alone cost \$70,000, the amount of revenue lost by CNPPID that could have been earned had they used the water to generate electricity.

Not only costly, the process of obtaining special water deliveries is also complicated. Restrictions, regulations and water rights all play a role in sending water to Elwood. Most significant is that any delivery to Elwood is tied to Lake McConaughy water rights. Water delivered to Elwood must come from McConaughy, where low water conditions since 2004 have caused CNPPID to discontinue use of Elwood Reservoir in their annual irrigation plans.

To offset the effects of low water conditions at Elwood Reservoir over the next few years, the Commission has applied for an Environmental Trust grant to help pay the costs associated with special water deliveries. Without future deliveries, the quality sport fishery for which Elwood is known may be lost.

Commission biologists will continue to monitor water quality and fish populations in addition to providing temporary boat access as long as possible throughout this low-water period at Elwood Reservoir.

On a positive note, when Elwood refills, the extensive growth of terrestrial vegetation on exposed shorelines will be flooded, providing excellent aquatic habitat conditions similar to when the reservoir originally filled and anglers should expect excellent fishing to follow. Hopefully that will come before further damage is inflicted on the fishery. ■

PHOTO BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

## Yellow Floating Heart

*The beautiful invader.*

By J. D. Brewer

I approach Benson Lagoon in north Omaha in the predawn light with anticipation and curiosity. The warm July morning breeze barely moves the leaves of the elm and sycamore trees standing randomly around the park as I near the water's edge. A school of fish darts away from a bed of aquatic vegetation, the same vegetation I am there to see – the yellow floating heart (*Nymphoides peltata*).

I kneel on the grassy bank for a closer look at a carpet of water

lily-like plants floating in the quiet shallows. Yellow buds resting on stalks rise about three inches above a green mat of shiny leaves. The closed buds lean in anticipation toward the warm rising sun. Insects are poised on the straining flowers, waiting patiently for the sun to unlock the blooms and expose the flowers.

Nearby and practically invisible, a bullfrog rests comfortably on a plant's leaf. The coming sunrise reflects in his dark eyes as he too waits for the yellow blossoms to open and attract a flurry of unsuspecting insects.

Suddenly light seems to jump above the treeline, flooding the lagoon with sunbeams. Almost unperceivably the yellow flowers begin to open, revealing the characteristic five-fringed petals of the yellow floating heart.

The yellow floating heart features heart-shaped green leaves that float on the water's surface and have slightly wavy margins and purplish



Although a beautiful plant, the yellow floating heart is not welcome in Nebraska waters.

undersides. The plant's brilliantly yellow, five-petaled flower sits on a stalk, has distinctive fringes around the edges of the petals, and opens and closes with the arrival and departure of sunlight. Yet as beautiful as it is, the yellow floating heart is not a welcomed guest to Nebraska – it's an infamous member of noxious weed lists in 15 states.

A native of Eurasia and the Mediterranean, the yellow floating heart arrived in the United States in the late-1880s as an ornamental plant but it quickly spread. A perennial that forms dense mats which aggressively spread across the water's surface, it displaces native plants, creates areas of stagnant water and limits swimming, fishing and boating activities in areas where it has taken over.

Nebraska is no stranger to noxious weed invasions, so a part of the state's administrative code, The Noxious Weed Control Act, assigns to the Nebraska Department of Agriculture specific duties relating to

the identification and regulation of noxious weeds. The Nebraska Weed Control Association (NWCA), headquartered in Grand Island, works in conjunction with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA) to identify and monitor noxious and invasive weeds in Nebraska.

Leaving Benson Lagoon, I wonder if *N. peltata* has a foothold in other parts of Nebraska and if it will soon appear on the state's noxious weed list.

A telephone call to Mitch Coffin, program director for the NDA's

state's noxious weed program, answers my questions: Mr. Coffin informs me that he and his staff are aware of the plant's presence in Benson Lagoon, but have no reports of other incursions of the noxious weed into Nebraska's waters. He also indicates that there is no current plan to place yellow floating heart on the state's noxious weed list, although his staff will monitor future occurrences.

This plant's invasion of Nebraska may well be short-lived: According to Coffin, the yellow floating heart does not tolerate cold climates very well. Rob Schultz of the NWCA reinforces this view, indicating that water plants such as the floating yellow heart usually do not become a nuisance in climates with harsh winters like Nebraska.

Perhaps that is the fatal flaw in the yellow floating heart's mysterious invasion of Benson Lagoon, an invasion that hopefully ended in the dark and icy months of last December. ■

PHOTO BY J.D. BREWER

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## Skin Cancer

*Protect yourself now or risk paying the price later.*

By Eric Folwer

I'm not your mom. But if you spend any time outside with me in the summer, you might think I sound like her with my incessant nagging about wearing a hat and sunscreen to protect yourself from the sun. Get a sunburn, and I pull no punches. "Are you stupid?" I'll ask. "Do you want to get skin cancer?"

Why do I get so fired up about this subject? Several members of my family have had chunks of skin carved from their ears, shoulders and noses, the direct result of spending too much time in the sun without protection. I'll be surprised if I don't make a visit to the dermatologist to make a donation of my own someday. When I was younger, I worked at Lake McConaughy for four summers, spending long days in the sun without a shirt or even a drop of sunscreen. When I wasn't working, I was fishing, water-skiing or just goofing off at the lake, again with no skin protection.

I was stupid. But with age comes wisdom, and now I seldom go out without sunscreen or clothing to block the sun's rays. I don't care if I look like a dork in my wide-brimmed boonie hat. By summer's end, I'm barely a shade darker than my natural, pasty white.

If you don't believe the risk is real, you're wrong. One in five Americans, and one in three Caucasians, will develop skin cancer during the course of their lifetime. In men over age 50, it's the most common form of cancer. And one in 59 people will develop melanoma, the most serious form of skin cancer.

The American Cancer Society estimates there will be 62,480 new cases of melanoma this year and that 8,420 people will die from the disease. According to the Nebraska



While melanoma may first appear as a new mole, changes in the size, shape, color or feel of an existing mole such as this should prompt a visit to your doctor.

Department of Health and Human Services, there were 324 new cases of melanoma and 58 deaths reported in the state in 2005, the most recent year for which statistics are available. The number of cases in Nebraska has been increasing each year.

Considering sun exposure is the cause of more than 90 percent of all skin cancer cases, anyone who spends time outdoors is susceptible. Dr. Dave Watts of Omaha, president of the Nebraska Dermatology Society, treats lots of farmers, construction workers and others who are out in the sun every day. But he sees plenty of hunters, anglers and boaters too. "Just outdoor folks in general," Watts said. "It's common in this part of the country. That's why we live here – we love being outdoors. No one wants to stay indoors all summer long, so we just wear sunscreen."

Watts said sunburns and even indoor tanning can lead to basal cell carcinoma or melanoma later in life. Daily exposure can lead to squamous cell carcinoma. Spend time at the lake or pool and you increase your risk. "Water is a pretty efficient reflector, but so is sand or concrete," Watts said. "You see people out on the water that are underneath shade that still wind up with a sunburn just from reflected light."

The risk is higher for some people, including freckle-faced redheads like myself with a family history of skin cancer. Kids are also more vulnerable: One blistering sunburn more than doubles their chances of developing melanoma later in life. And one study found that only 1 in 7 high school students routinely used sunblock, which explains why Watts is treating younger patients these days.

All forms of skin cancer are curable, but the cure ranges from

treatment with creams to surgically removing the affected area. If left untreated, both melanoma and squamous cell carcinoma can metastasize and spread to other parts of the body. The key is to find them early. "Always be aware of any lumps or bumps or spots on you that are new or changing and have those seen as quickly as you can by someone who's used to looking at skin," Watts said.

Better yet, do whatever you can to minimize your risk. Wear sunscreen, or even a dorky boonie hat, and don't let me catch you without them. And if you end up paying a visit to Dr. Watts, remember, I told you so. ■

### Protecting yourself from ultraviolet rays

- Seek shade, especially during midday.
- Wear pants and a long-sleeved shirt.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat.
- Wear wrap-around sunglasses.
- Use SPF 15 or higher sunscreen.
- Follow these tips even on cloudy days.

For more information:  
[www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/)  
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Pictured in the photograph (from left to right) is our great-grandfather, Nick Wetzel, and fathers and uncles Dean, John and Lee Buffington. This photo was taken in Scotia, Nebraska in 1942 and includes a mixed bag of pheasants, prairie chickens and ducks. Hunting runs deep in our family, a tradition that has lasted for six generations. Cousins and friends continue to meet every year for a week of bird hunting in Nebraska.

— Al, Doug, and Ron Buffington, Olathe, Kansas



This 1944 photo shows my brother, Larry (left), and I with bullheads caught from the Mormon Canal west of Niobrara. My dad owned the land around the Mormon monument and when he worked the land we went fishing. The canal has been my favorite fishing spot for more than 60 years.

— Charles Nielsen, Niobrara, Nebraska



This is a 1966 photo of my wife, Sal, our son, Mark, our youngest daughter, Shelly, and our two gold Labs, Liz and Cork. Sal shot these two geese when they flew over Mark and her where they were hidden on the west end of Linke Lake southeast of Bassett. This was prior to the goose stocking program in the Sandhills and it was a rarity to see geese and even more so, to get a shot at one. Mark got a little excited and shot too soon with his 20-gauge single-shot. Sal's first goose fell dead on the ground and the other one fell out in the lake, where Liz did a masterful job of retrieving it.

— Emry Mauch, Long Pine, Nebraska



Pictured is Dr. M.J. "Jim" Busby (left), a longtime veterinarian in Wakefield, and his helper, Harold "Skippy" Measerschmitt, taken around 1940.

Doc was a great outdoorsman who loved hunting, trapping, fishing and anything connected with it. He took me on my first coon hunt around 1950 after he had purchased two hounds in Missouri.

The photo came from an album of my Aunt Flora "Jack" Salley, who was one of the first lady barbers in Nebraska.

— Bob Frederickson, Omaha, Nebraska

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

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- Fort Robinson State Park (9:00 am - noon)
- Fremont Lakes State Recreation Area (9:00 am - noon)
- Lake Minatare State Recreation Area (9:00 am - 1:00 pm)
- Louisville State Recreation Area (9:00 am - noon)
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- Platte River State Park (9:00 am - noon)
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