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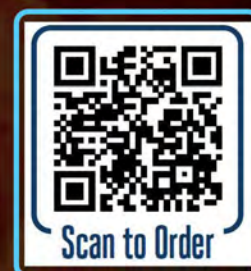
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**MIXED BAG CAPITAL
OF THE GREAT PLAINS**

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ON THE WEB

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Cover: A drake and hen pintail cup their wings toward a Hamilton County wetland. See story on page 40 regarding how hunters can influence Nebraska's waterfowl zones.
DOUG STEINKE

This page: A colorful evening sky decorates the scene where the Oglala National Grasslands meet the Pine Ridge in Sioux County.
JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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Look for swallowtail butterfly chrysalises on tree bark.
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Playing at Merritt Reservoir



Marquene Koontz, Ogallala
Banded Garden Spider





Brendan Leehy, Omaha
Foggy Sunrise



Steve Krout, Papillion
Juvenile Yellow-crowned Night Heron



Chelsae Beyer, Bridgeport
Lab Work

Correction: In the October issue on page 46, it is incorrectly stated that legal shooting hours for pheasants end 30 minutes after sunset.

For pheasants and other upland game, small game, turkey and waterfowl, shooting hours close at sunset. Only big game can be hunted until 30 minutes after sunset.

We regret the error.

Send your comments and photos to:

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FIND THE HUNTERS

Jake and Keith Jadowski, of Ralston, waterfowl hunt for ducks and geese on the Elkhorn River near Tilden.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND





JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

FISHING FOR FALL RAINBOWS

By Julie Geiser

Every fall, Nebraska Game and Parks hatcheries release 10-inch trout in waters across the state to provide anglers more fishing opportunities. Trout fishing is inexpensive, requires simple equipment and is fitting for a variety of ages and skill levels.

Light Tackle

Light or ultra-light rods and reels with 4-to 6-pound-test monofilament line are ideal. Four-pound test is virtually drag-free and makes it easier to detect soft strikes often typical of trout in cold water.

One or two split shots fastened 10 or 12 inches above a No. 6 or 8 hook is ideal for trout fishing. Adjust the weight to keep the bait where the fish are biting by adding or subtracting split shots as needed.

Popular Bait and Lures

Popular baits to catch trout are salmon eggs, wax worms, PowerBait and my favorite, a small piece of worm or a small minnow and bobber.

Under many conditions, bait or lure-and-bait combinations are the best ways to put a mess of trout in the creel, but at times, lures alone have their advantages. Casting and retrieving lures allows anglers to cover a lot of water, often catching more trout than



the live bait angler.

In-line spinners are a superb lure choice. A flashing spinner imitates a small minnow, which trout love to hit.

Spinners trigger strikes using flash and sound. A slow-revolving, Colorado-type blade works great with its wide, deliberate movement.

Silver spinners match the silvery-hued minnows trout prey on. In discolored water, gold, chartreuse and copper spinners are effective. Spinners with a hair trailer may produce more strikes than a bare hook spinner.

Spoons, which wobble and flutter, are another choice for trout. They work better than spinners in swift water where they can be worked faster and more erratically than spinners.

They are also a good pick for fishing fast-moving waters or for trout in lakes or ponds.

Start with slow retrieves, which will let you know just how active the trout are. Then switch from a slow to a faster retrieve if you can't get the fish to bite. As when fishing for other species, you may need to change lures altogether to see what the trout prefer on a particular day.



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Mountain lions have primordial pouches, offering a lifeline for extended periods without hunting success. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

THE PRIMORDIAL POUCH

By Monica Macoubrie, Wildlife Education Specialist

The primordial pouch, also known as the “belly flap,” in felines is a natural accessory seen in our Nebraska mountain lions (*Puma concolor*), bobcats (*Lynx rufus*) and even our pet house cats. This pouch is an extra flap of loose skin and fatty tissue located along the length of the belly, extending from the lower abdomen to the hind legs. Contrary to the common misconception that it is simply a sign of obesity, the primordial pouch serves several important functions.

Protection of Internal Organs

When a cat engages in activities that involve physical confrontation, such as fighting with other cats or defending itself from predators, the primordial pouch provides an additional layer of protection. The loose, pliable nature of the skin allows it to absorb impacts and distribute the force over a wider area, reducing the likelihood of severe injuries to organs, such as the stomach, intestines and liver.

Additionally, the pouch can stretch and shift, accommodating the cat’s movements and further minimizing the risk of internal damage during intense physical exertion. This evolutionary adaptation is particularly advantageous for wild cats, such as mountain lions and bobcats, which often face aggressive encounters in their natural habitats. By providing a flexible yet protective barrier, the primordial pouch enhances the cat’s ability to withstand blows and bites, thereby improving its chances of survival in the wild.

Greater Flexibility

The primordial pouch contributes to a cat’s exceptional flexibility and movement. The loose nature of the pouch allows the skin to stretch and expand, giving the cat a greater range of motion during various activities. When a cat stretches, jumps or twists, the primordial pouch provides the

necessary slack in the skin, preventing it from tearing, and allowing the cat to perform these actions more fluidly. This flexibility is critical for wild cats, aiding them in hunting, climbing and evading predators.

In the wild, mountain lions and bobcats rely on their agility to navigate diverse and often rugged terrains, to pounce on prey with precision and to quickly escape from threats.

Energy Storage

From stretching to protection, it’s hard to believe the primordial pouch does more. It also serves as a reservoir for extra energy. In the wild, where food availability can be unpredictable, this ability to store fat is particularly advantageous. During times of abundance, cats can consume more food than immediately necessary, and the excess energy is stored in the fat within the primordial pouch. This stored fat can then be metabolized during periods of scarcity, providing the cat with a critical energy reserve.

The primordial pouch offers a lifeline to wild cats at risk of facing extended periods without successful hunting. It helps to ensure the necessary energy reserves for sustaining vital bodily functions, maintaining muscle mass and supporting physical activities like hunting and defending territory. This energy storage capability is not just about survival; it also enhances the cat’s endurance and resilience, enabling it to thrive in diverse and often challenging environments.

The primordial pouch is a remarkable and multi-functional feature in cats, illustrating the sophisticated adaptations these animals have developed to thrive in their environments. From providing crucial protection to internal organs during physical confrontations to enhancing flexibility and facilitating agile movements, the primordial pouch plays a vital role in a cat’s survival and overall physical prowess.



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The CanCooker offers an easy way to cook nourishing meals in the duck blind. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

DUCK CANCOOKER

By Todd Mills

I was first introduced to using the CanCooker in a duck blind by my good friend, Trevor Johnson. Although I'd had one at home for a while, I never thought of using it outside the house. After that day, the duck blind CanCooker became a staple in my boat and on hunting trips. As an added plus, it can be used on almost any heat source. Whether you're camping, hunting or just looking for a quick meal with easy clean up, using this method is about as easy as it gets. Below is my favorite CanCooker recipe.

Servings: 4

Ingredients:

- 4 links duck sausage cut up into small chunks (or substitute your favorite sausage)
- Carrots, broccoli and celery cut into cubes, to taste
- 4 small white potatoes cut or sliced into cubes
- Approximately 2 cups wild rice
- 12 oz. liquid, such as stock, dark lager beer or pop (I

prefer Dr. Pepper.)

- Seasonings, such as Lawry's Seasoned Salt

Spray the inside of the CanCooker with cooking spray. Add liquid first, and then put in vegetables with potatoes and rice. Meat goes in last, on top of the vegetables. Add Lawry's or other seasonings at the end. Close the CanCooker, put on medium heat and wait for steam to start coming out of the top. When you see steam, slightly turn down heat and cook for 45 more minutes.

Prepare the can and ingredients the night before and store in the fridge so it's ready to go without any morning prep. Clean-up is easy and fast, another plus if you're looking for convenience, which we usually are in the duck blind.

Feel free to substitute ingredients. The CanCooker is versatile, and you can experiment with various protein and carbohydrate choices.

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In the Shadows

The light and dark of aerial photography

Photos and story by Eric Fowler

The rising sun casts long shadows across a foggy meadow dotted with trees along the Platte River in Douglas County.

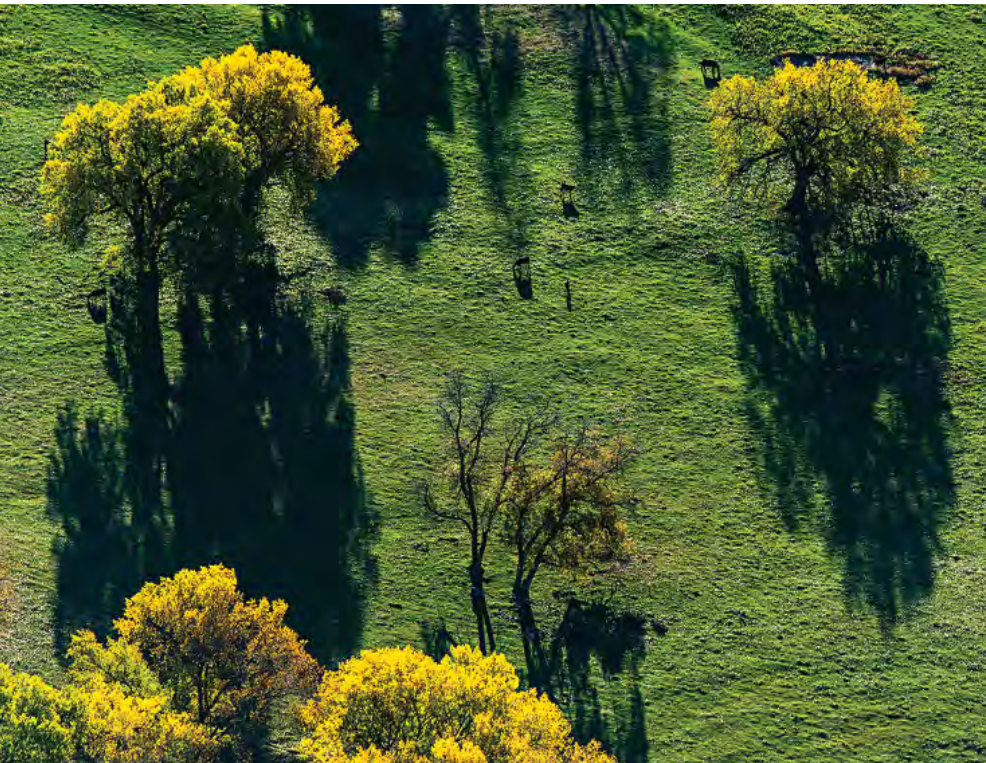
We've all stood and looked at our shadows on the ground, many of us even creating shadow puppets in our younger years or, later, for the entertainment of our kids and grandkids. We've sat in the shade of a tree and watched the darkness cast by a hill or mountain creep across the landscape at the beginning or end of a day.

Shadows are a product of light, an object that blocks that light and geometry. When the light source is the sun, the shadows are the longest early and late in the day. A 60-foot-tall cottonwood, for example, casts a 60-foot-long shadow when the angle of elevation of the sun is 45 degrees above the horizon. Thirty minutes after sunrise, however, when the angle is just 5 degrees, the shadow from that same tree stretches nearly 700 feet.

From ground level, it's hard to appreciate just how long those shadows can be. From the window of a Cessna, 1,000 feet above the ground, you get a much clearer picture. The contrast of light and dark, and the patterns it creates on the landscape, can be striking, and has always caught my eye when I've been on an aerial photo assignment for Game and Parks — especially when the flight plan includes an early takeoff or late landing. 



A silo towers over grain bins in a cornfield in Thurston County.



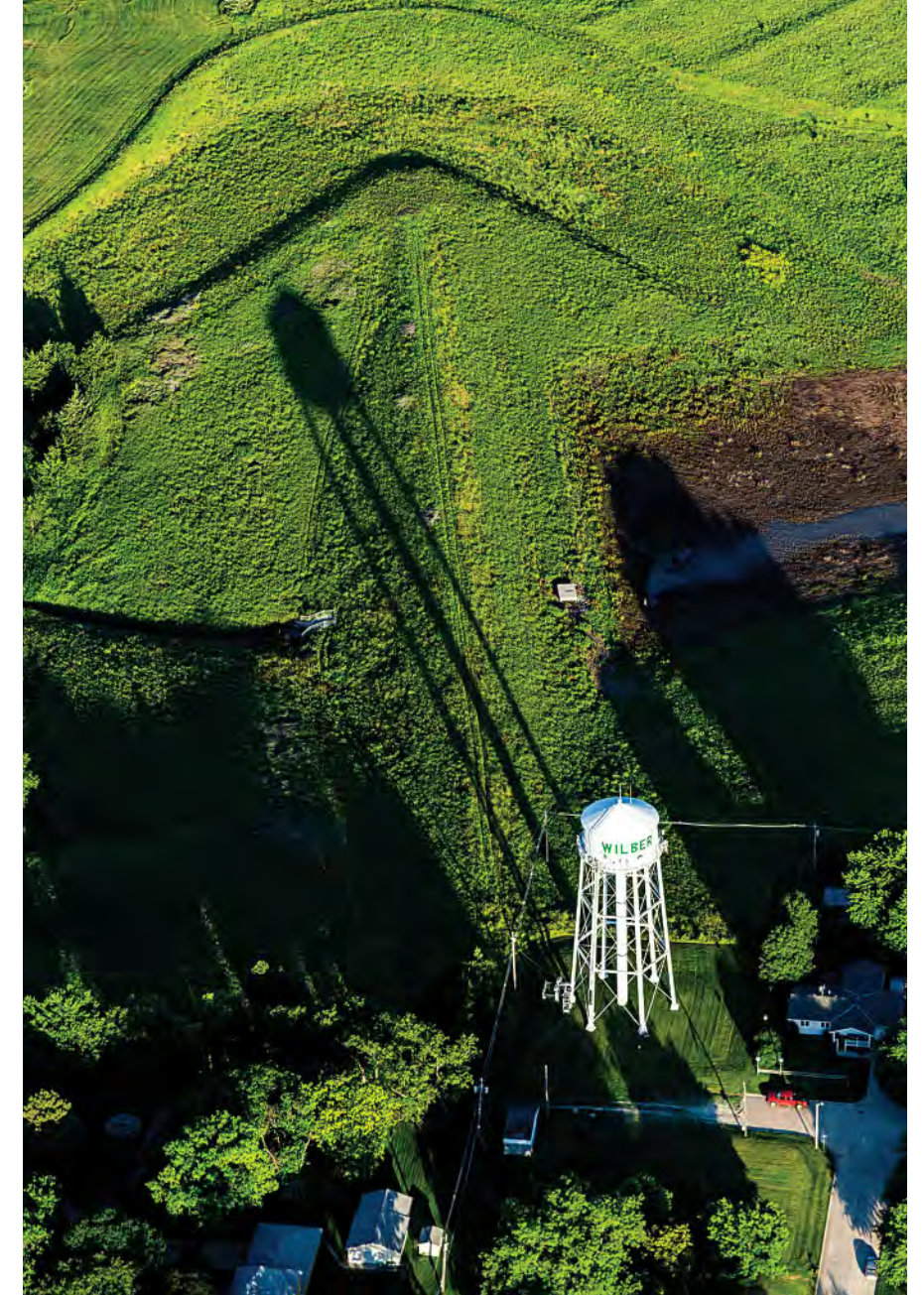
TOP LEFT: Cows, calves and cottonwoods in fall color pepper a meadow along the Cedar River in Greeley County.

BOTTOM LEFT: Trees on a terrace crossing a cornfield in Thurston County.

RIGHT: Fencerow trees between cornfields in Hall County.

TOP RIGHT: A water tower in the city of Wilber in Saline County.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Streaks of sunlight filter through cottonwoods onto sand deposited on George Syas Wildlife Management Area in Platte County.



Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Soak in the last of autumn by spending time outdoors — whether that’s in a deer stand, hiking at a beautiful park or trying your luck with fishing. [N](#)



Hike at Ash Hollow State Historical Park

Throughout the year | Near Lewellen

Walk paths that have been traveled for thousands of years — from Indigenous peoples to pioneers on the Oregon and California trails. Be prepared for a challenge, though; several trails are steep. One of them, the paved Windlass Hill trail, will reward you with the sight of swales, or depressions, left by wagon ruts. The River Overlook Trail offers an impressive view of the North Platte River Valley and is a great spot for birdwatching. Twelve miles of trail are available; bring a comfortable pair of hiking boots and a cell phone in case of emergency. [ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND](#)



Gather wild rose hips

All winter; generally October into spring
Throughout the state

The hip, or fruit, of the wild rose is an excellent source of Vitamin C and can be made into tea, jams, jellies, syrup and more. For most uses, you will need to first split each hip open and remove the hairs and seeds; a baby-food spoon works well. Avoid plants that have been sprayed or grow along heavily used roads. For recipes and more information, see *Wild Seasons: Gathering and Cooking Wild Plants of the Great Plains* by Kay Young.

[JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND](#)



Fish for walleye and wipers at Lake McConaughy

Anytime or as weather allows | Lake McConaughy State Recreation Area

While fishing opportunities may be limited this month, you can still pick up some walleye and wipers by vertical jigging on reservoirs like Lake McConaughy. “It’s a good time for big fish,” said fisheries biologist Daryl Bauer — perhaps 8 to 10 pounds or more for both walleye and wipers at Lake Mac. It’s a boat game, so look on your depth finder for schools of baitfish that these predators will be feeding on.

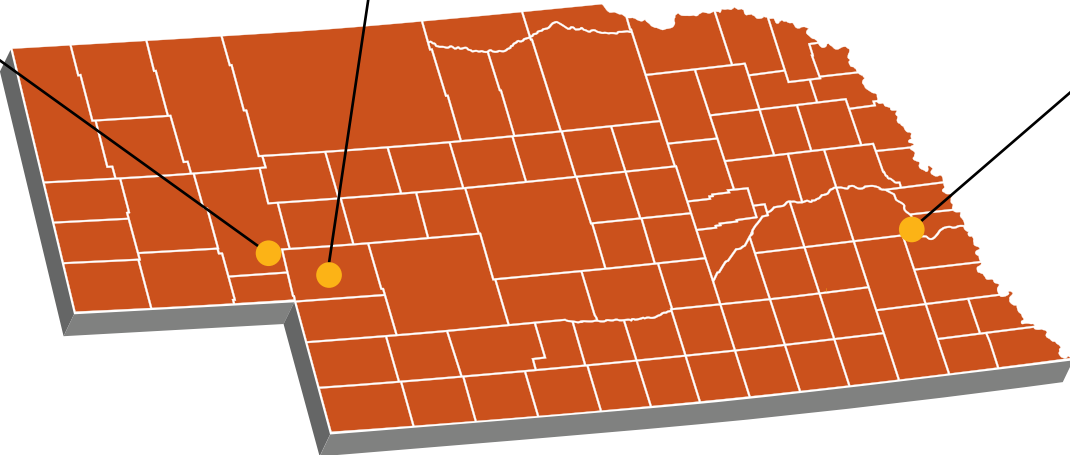
[ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND](#)



Attend ‘Birding by Ear’ workshop

Nov. 12, 9:30 a.m. – 11 a.m. | Eugene T. Mahoney State Park

When you’re out birding, it is often difficult to see birds, whether they’re too far away or hidden behind tree branches. However, if you can recognize the bird’s call, you can still identify it. Birders of all ages and levels are invited to join Nebraska Game and Parks naturalists to learn how to identify some common Nebraska birds by their calls. The program begins with indoor instruction followed by time outdoors to practice. Meet at the James Family Conservatory and Nature Center. The program is free, but a park entry permit is required. [RENAE BLUM, NEBRASKALAND](#)



Hunt for prairie grouse

Season is Sept. 1 to Jan. 31 | Statewide

No game birds represent the American Plains better than prairie grouse. Nebraska has two species, the greater prairie-chicken and the sharp-tailed grouse. Nebraska is arguably the best place on Earth to pursue both on the same hunt. Several public hunting areas in the Sandhills provide opportunities. Every bird harvested is a testament to the hardiness of these native birds and the effort of the hunter. [ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND](#)



DEER ANTLER CRAFTS

By Jeff Kurrus

What you can make with your harvested antlers

For deer hunters, the decisions that need to be made are endless. Should I hunt the stand by the cornfield or the pine thicket? Should I stay up a little bit longer this morning? Should I take that shot or wait a split second longer?

Once the deer is down, and all the appropriate congratulations and photographs have been handled, you would think there would be no decisions left. But this notion is also incorrect. Brats or burger? Shoulder mount or European mount? Or, like the spot many of us have been in before — what else can I do with these antlers?



Desktop decoration, complete with various metal deer tags from other deer. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

The last question becomes a fun one, as it's quite easy to get online and see the endless possibilities hunters have for repurposing deer antlers, from practical uses to home décor.

We share a few of our finished favorites and how to get you started.



After the Hunt

Removing the antlers is a necessary first step, and there are three ways to do it. First, and my least favorite, take a handsaw and begin to cut in front of the deer's ears but behind the antlers at a 45-degree angle. Then, make the same cut just above the eyes toward the end of the first cut. This wedge can then be removed. My apprehension for this method is cutting into the deer's brain. Since I was a kid, I never liked the messiness of this step. However, with small bucks (pictured, left), a standalone desktop deer tag display can be created because of how well small antlers like these balance.

A second, and cleaner, option is to cut the deer's head completely off below the throat. Again, with a handsaw, you'll have to cut through the deer's hide, muscle tissue and backbone, but it's a relatively clean cut.

A slightly less cleaner cut is to open the deer's mouth and separate bottom and top teeth until you cut completely through the rest of the muscle, bone and hide. My only hesitancy with this method is it reminds me of '80s horror movies of my youth.

After you decide how you'll remove the antlers, there are more decisions to make. You can go through the painstaking

A black powder measure made from an antler tine hollowed out with a drill and files.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Deer antlers can be a rustic addition to a dinner table centerpiece.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND





My favorite method: Burying the deer's head and letting Mother Nature do the cleaning. Just remember to cover the antlers with aluminum foil so rodents don't chew them while they are sticking out of the ground. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Hose off the debris after the flesh has been eaten away. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

task of removing the buck's facial hide, muscle fibers and brain tissue with a knife. From there, you'll need to soak the skull in boiling water to loosen up the rest of the deer's hard-to-remove fibers. I rarely enjoy this labor-intensive process.

The technique I do like, especially if I happen to shoot a deer early in the season, is to remove the deer's entire head, dig a hole in my garden, and bury the skull. I cover up the antlers with aluminum foil to prevent mice from eating them, and then place a bucket or large pail over the entire skull. Just before the ground freezes for the winter, I remove the skull, wash it with a hose and soak the skull in a combination of water and clothes fabric softener to remove any leftover odor. The final step is to dry the skull in the sun and stuff two scented dryer sheets in the brain cavity. Now it's ready to display.

The last, extremely easy option of removing deer antlers is to take a fine-toothed saw and, starting underneath the pedicles, cut the antlers off at their bases. Choose this technique if you know you're not going to hang your deer on the wall, but you still want the antlers for other uses, including rattling antlers for deer hunting.

Chronic Wasting Disease

by Justin Haag

Chronic wasting disease has changed the game for those who want to display their big game trophies. These processes involve the brain and the spinal cord, where the stubborn prions that cause CWD accumulate most. People should take proper precautions for handling and disposal, especially in areas where the disease is known to exist.

Disease experts recommend wearing gloves and a mask, and soaking the skull and all equipment in a solution of 50 percent chlorine bleach and 50 percent water after tissues have been removed. In places where CWD rates are high, your best, and easiest, move may be to remove the antlers and affix them to one of the many faux skull options available from retailers like these shown.



After the skull dries, apply furniture stain with a brush to restore antler color that has been lost. RYAN SPARKS

Options

From fire pokers, letter openers and sewing kits to kitchen décor and mantel pieces, the possibilities for antlers are never-ending. Repurposing can range from the complicated task of creating an antler wreath to finding the perfect set of antlers to use as a tabletop centerpiece for Thanksgiving dinner.

Just don't, under any circumstance, permanently keep them in a box somewhere never to be seen again. 

Items and tools you may find helpful in making a European mount include:

- Handsaw
- Slow cooker (for heating and soaking)
- Fabric softener (for soaking)
- Aluminum foil (to cover antlers when burying)
- Furniture stain (to paint the antlers)
- Clothes dryer sheets (for the brain cavity)
- Twine or wire (for hanging)

Some of the tools you may find helpful in creating these projects also include:

- Fine-toothed saw
- Drill and bits
- Files
- Sandpaper
- Epoxy



Antler tine ink pen



Sewing kit made from an antler tine



Antler-handled skinning knife



Antler awl with beaded sheath



Antler tine letter opener



Antler-handled knife



Round and triangled files made with antler handles



Antler handled-awl



Antler tine needle awl



Antler fireplace poker



Orville Ralston

Nebraska's WWI Flying Ace

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

Orville Ralston had a choice to make. Flying over France, the engine of his Sopwith Camel fighter plane was giving him so much trouble that he dropped out of the combat formation. Then an oncoming allied fighter plane signaled him that enemy aircraft had been sighted.

The sensible thing would be to get out of there. Instead, Ralston decided to return to his formation, balky engine or not. Soon he saw “three Camels being driven down by five [German] Fokkers,” with another enemy formation above.

What to do?

It was Sept. 26, 1918, a day neither Ralston nor his beleaguered comrades would ever forget.

Born in Weeping Water in 1894, Ralston graduated from Peru State Teachers College before enrolling in the dentistry program at the University of Nebraska. He left the university for an army officers' training program soon after the U.S. entered World War I.

Ralston volunteered for the flying corps, but the U.S. was



Ralston pasted into his scrapbook this photo of “Red Baron” Manfred von Richthofen’s “Flying Circus,” noting that the photo was “captured from Hun pilot.” NSHS RG2432-1-305



Lt. Orville A. Ralston in France beside a fighter plane painted with the roundel of the Royal Air Force. NSHS RG2929-0-348



Ralston kept this photo of his friend and fellow Nebraskan Lt. Jarvis Offutt, who became Omaha's first air casualty on Aug. 13, 1918. Fort Crook's Offutt Field (now Offutt Air Force Base) was named in his honor. NSHS RG2432-1-144



Royal Air Force S.E. 5 fighters lined up for patrol, from Ralston's scrapbook. Ralston flew an S.E. 5 with the RAF's 85th Squadron before flying a Sopwith Camel for the 148th American Squadron. NSHS RG2432-1-337



Lt. Orville Ralston, portrait taken in London. NSHS RG2429-0-351

so far behind in military aviation that he learned to fly under British instructors in Canada. (And he soloed after only two-and-a-half hours of instruction!) As a fighter pilot, Ralston flew British planes and spent the first part of his combat duty with a British squadron. Only two weeks after joining the squadron, Ralston earned his first combat victory, returning to the aerodrome with three large holes in his wings.

"Oh, how much a fellow realizes how little he knows about the game after he has been out here a while," Ralston wrote in his diary. His combination of boldness and humility got him through his early days as a novice fighter pilot. Within weeks he was an experienced and deadly pilot racking up victories.

And then came Sept. 26. With his buddies in trouble, Ralston attacked the nearest enemy and chased him into a

cloud, risking a mid-air collision in low visibility. Emerging back into the sunshine, he shot down his foe at short range. Ralston was then attacked by four enemy planes, but escaped by ducking into another cloud. Back at the aerodrome, a mechanic discovered that Ralston had flown the mission with a cracked cylinder that had no compression.

Ralston received the Distinguished Service Cross for that encounter.

The war ended with an armistice on Nov. 11. In four months of combat, Ralston shot down at least five enemy aircraft—making him Nebraska's only "ace" of the war—and had other unconfirmed victories. Back home in 1919, Ralston spent a summer as a Chautauqua speaker to earn money to finish dental school. He told audiences about his war

experiences and talked up aviation's growing commercial potential.

Ralston then settled into married life, opening a dental practice in Ainsworth, where he became a community leader, even serving as mayor. Later, "Doc" Ralston and his wife owned a ranch near Valentine.

But he left it all behind after the U.S. entered World War II. Reenlisting in the Army Air Forces, he trained as an intelligence officer. On Dec. 30, 1942, Ralston was a passenger on a B-17 bound for Ainsworth Army Air Field when the bomber crashed in Montana, killing all aboard. He was 48 years old. [N](#)

Visit NSHS's website at history.nebraska.gov.



The control stick from Ralston's Sopwith Camel. He carved a notch for each enemy plane he shot down. NSHS 10091-15

My Favorite Running Trails in Nebraska

By Christy Firestone

There is nothing better than a long run through beautiful country.

As communications director for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, I get to travel to some of the state's best destinations for meetings.

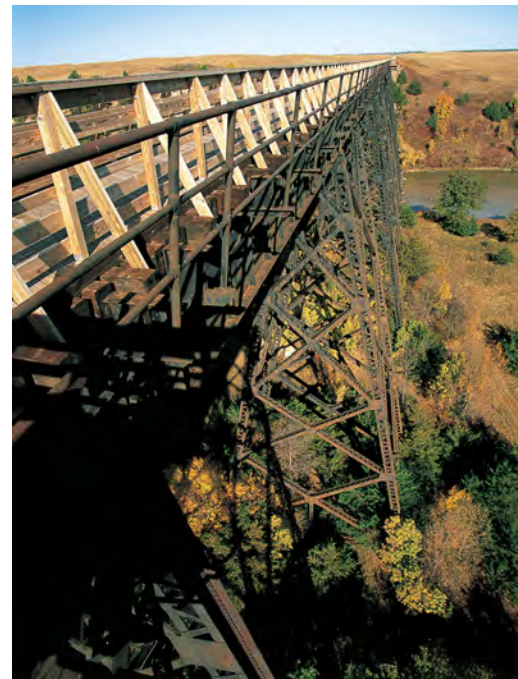
Quite often, before those meetings start, I hit the trail. Donning my Nathan hydration belt and a headlamp, I head out before sunrise, take in the first light of day and return in time to make roll call. Here are some of my favorite parks and trails for walking, hiking or running.

Fort Robinson State Park

Kick off your day on the White River Trail just before sunrise and witness the golden glow lighting up the Red Cloud Buttes of Fort Robinson. This flat, easy, out-and-back trail along the White River offers stunning views and is lined with native plants and wildflowers. Keep an eye out for longhorn steers grazing nearby. Another gem here is the loop around Fort Robinson's historical buildings — roughly a mile-long trail where you can stop to pet the horses and enjoy the mouth-watering aromas wafting from the lodge.



A longhorn steer grazes in a pasture of Fort Robinson State Park in front of the Red Cloud Buttes. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



The Niobrara River Bridge on the Cowboy Trail in Cherry County. MIKE FORSBERG, NEBRASKALAND

Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail at Valentine

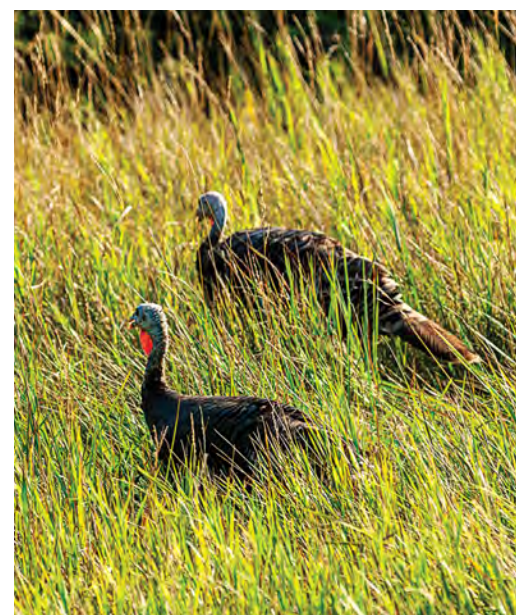
This trail, and the bridge 2 miles southeast of Valentine, showcase some of Nebraska's most breathtaking scenery. Cross the bridge over the Niobrara River for an elevated view that will leave you in awe. Keep heading east and the trail takes you through the serene Sandhills and past wildflowers and grazing horses and cattle. Complete your visit by renting a tube or kayak from a local outfitter and float down the Niobrara River, with a must-see stop at Smith Falls.



Jenna Marshall, from Omaha, runs at Schramm Park State Recreation Area — another picturesque option in eastern Nebraska. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Platte River State Park

Nestled between Lincoln and Omaha, Platte River State Park offers surprisingly diverse terrain in a tranquil paradise. The steep hills above the Platte River boast winding, tree-lined trails that feel like a hidden escape, especially the trail guiding you to the peaceful Stone Creek Falls. Don't worry about getting lost: the trails are well-marked.



Wild turkeys at Niobrara State Park. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Niobrara State Park

With its rolling hills and breathtaking vistas, Niobrara State Park is rich in history and teeming with wildlife. Listen for the gobble of turkeys in the morning and keep an eye out for deer. A ridge-top trail provides an impressive view of where the Niobrara and Missouri rivers converge. Even if you're not into running or hiking, grab a cup of coffee and enjoy the view from the comfort of the park's cabins.

Ponca State Park

For both hiking and running, Ponca State Park is a top choice. The challenging rolling hills will test even the fittest adventurers, offering numerous spots to pause and catch your breath. Framed by an enchanting canopy of oak woodlands, the trails make you feel like you've stepped into a storybook. Follow the road to the banks of the Missouri River for a peaceful trail experience. Within the park, well-marked trails promise fun challenges for the whole family. The Tri-State Overlook Trail gives you a view of South Dakota, Iowa and Nebraska.



Park visitors walking a trail at Ponca State Park in the winter. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Pro Tips for Your Park Visits

When visiting any of these parks, be sure to chat with the park's staff for personalized recommendations. Maps are available, or you can use the popular AllTrails app to explore even more.

Nebraska's parks and trails are calling. Will you answer? Whether you're looking to catch the sunrise, hike challenging trails, or simply soak in the scenery, there's a perfect spot waiting for you. [N](#)

Waterfowl Zones Explained

Story and photos by Jeff Kurrus

Todd Mills prepares breakfast from his boat blind on the Missouri River near Santee while his Labrador retriever, Hope, continues to hunt. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland contributor and avid waterfowler Todd Mills's hunting season seems to have as much windshield time as blind time. After spending his mornings in early September hunting teal in the Rainwater Basin, the Gretna resident begins road tripping for ducks on the Missouri River near Santee.

By season's end, he will have hunted ducks and geese at a few locations in eastern Nebraska, the Missouri River in South Dakota and Nebraska, the Platte River near Grand Island, the North Platte River near Paxton and in the Hastings area. And, if weather allows, reservoirs in Missouri and Kansas.

He makes these trips out of necessity. One, it feeds the constant burn that is duck season for Mills. This yearly

tradition is his fall and winter Super Bowl. Secondly, he does so because Nebraska has some of the most diverse waterfowl habitat of any state within the Central Flyway.

The Platte River, unlike nearly any other river, offers exceptional waterfowl hunting opportunities throughout the season and across the entire state. The Loup River system spans the Sandhills and can provide open water through early January, while shallow Sandhills lakes and wetlands might be frozen over by Thanksgiving in most years.

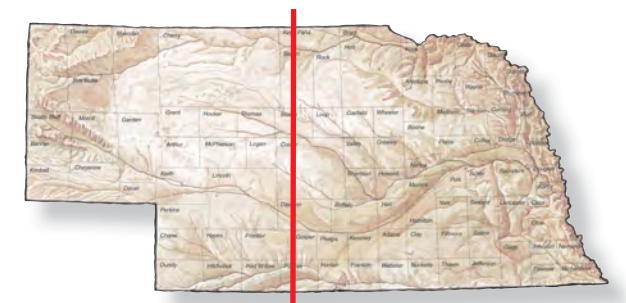
To accommodate these varying hunting circumstances, Nebraska has four hunting zones, providing early- or late-season opportunities, or both. Mills hunted three of them last year with high river water levels forcing him from hunting all

four. This year, he plans to hunt all four, with trips scheduled on both the Loup and in the Sandhills.

Because of Nebraska's waterfowl habitat diversity, hunters like Mills know they can find a zone with open water and ducks from start to finish during the season. They also know there are factors across all four flyways — including total breeding populations, harvest estimates and the habitat needs of waterfowl species — that come into play when determining the future of these zones.

Fortunately this fall, like they can every five years in Nebraska, waterfowl hunters will have a say regarding the future of these zones.

But first, some history.



In 1971, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the High Plains Mallard Management Unit, which roughly extended west from the 100th Meridian in states throughout the Central Flyway. MAP BY TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND



A mallard retrieved by a Lab during an eastern Nebraska duck hunt. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Zone History

For some time prior to 1971, duck hunters east of U.S. Highway 83 enjoyed a season that was a week longer than it was west of that line. In 1971, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the High Plains Mallard Management Unit, which roughly extended west from the 100th Meridian in states throughout the Central Flyway. The new High Plains Unit, however, received 23 additional hunting days, a decision based on research that had shown harvest and the number of hunters was lower in this portion of Nebraska and these other states. In 1981, the Low Plains Unit was divided into four zones with different season dates based on early- or late-season hunting opportunities. The zones have been modified since.

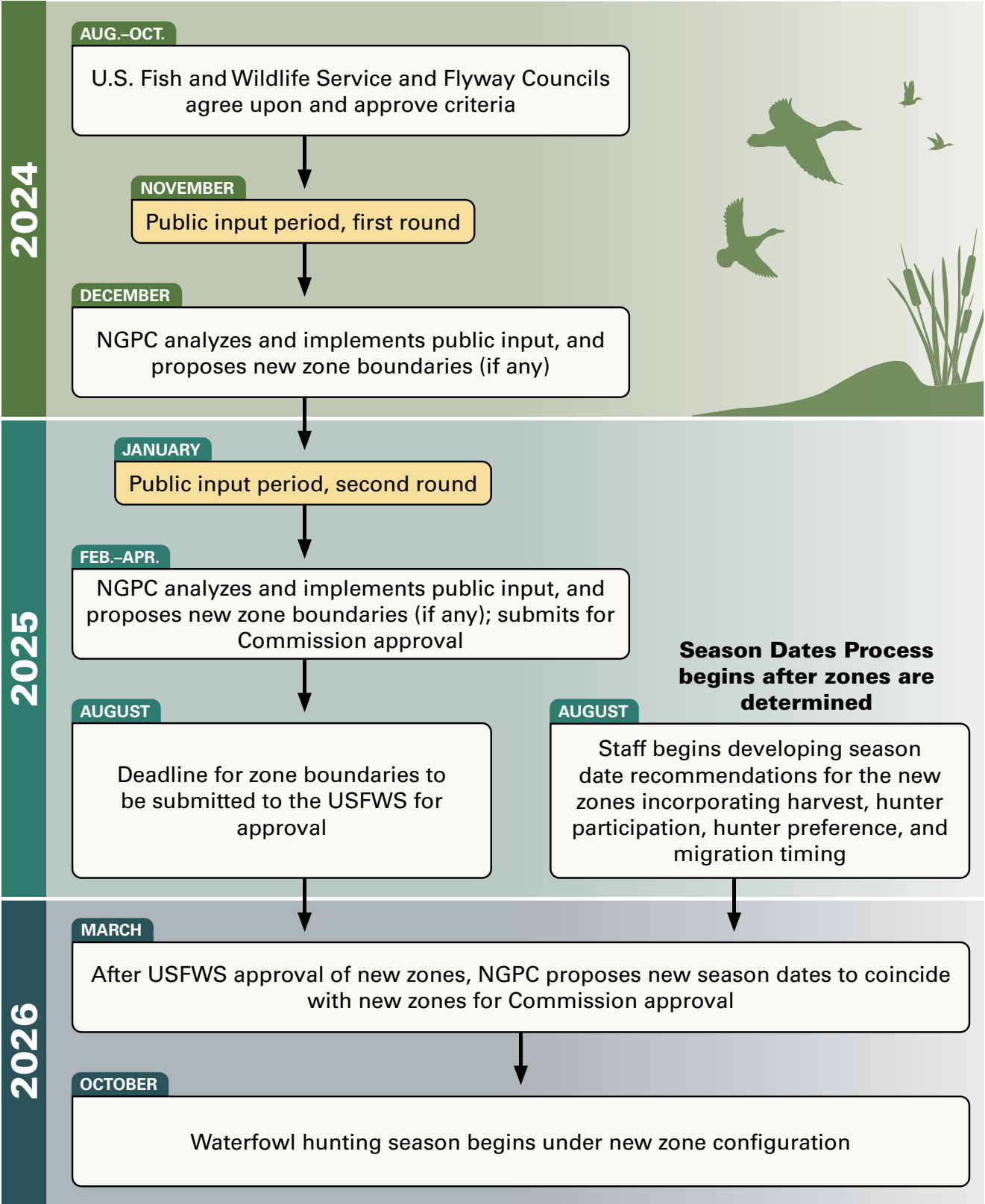
Re-zoning

Every five years, the USFWS allows changes to waterfowl zone boundaries. To take advantage of this, Nebraska hunters who obtained a Harvest Information Program number will receive a postcard in November directing them to the Nebraska Game and Parks website where they can offer their input on current zone boundaries. Hunters will print a zone map, mark any changes they desire and mail the form back. “Nebraska has a history of working with duck hunters on waterfowl zone boundaries,” said John McKinney, waterfowl program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks, “and since this opportunity only arises

every five years, it is important that we hear from hunters this November.” During this initial round of input, only written comments will be accepted. Hunters are encouraged to suggest only small changes, as larger shifts could affect a greater number of hunters who may not agree with the change and result in no change being made. A letter in support of a boundary change with multiple signatures will not be accepted. A second round of input will be sought in January regarding any boundary changes that are being proposed. “Nebraska is an amazing state for waterfowl hunting,” said McKinney, “and we want hunters to be engaged during this process.” The boundaries approved by the Game and Parks Board of Commissioners next spring will be submitted to the USFWS for final approval. New zone boundaries will go into effect beginning in fall of 2026. Concurrently, Game and Parks will seek input and make season date recommendations based on harvest estimates, hunter participation and preference, and migration patterns and timing. These are important steps for hunters like Mills, who has journaled for years on success rates and the migration itself. “With waterfowl hunting being so weather dependent,” Mills said, “it’s difficult to predict what seasons should look like. Data from this survey is crucial in determining the most effective way to set zones that can increase the success for hunters.”

Waterfowl Rezoning Process

Occurs once every five years



Learn more at OutdoorNebraska.gov

Rock Creek Hatchery

100 years of trout production

By Julie Geiser

Once regarded as the most popular of all game fish, the rainbow trout still has a big presence in Nebraska waters. In the early 1900s, trout were not only a staple food source for many but also an esteemed sport fish for anglers. Because of this popularity, ideas began to form at the Nebraska Bureau of Fish and Game, now the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, about growing rainbow trout.

Then, in 1924, the Bureau purchased 20 acres of land north of Parks for a new hatchery for \$4,500. Fed by

Rock Creek, a series of the largest and coldest springs in Nebraska, the Bureau planned for this new hatchery to supply the entire state with trout.

It was a lofty goal that quickly gathered steam.

The Beginnings

H.P. Runion was a rancher and owner of a hatchery at Benkelman until it was purchased by the Bureau in 1919. Runion raised many fish at the Benkelman hatchery and sold them to the state. But he thought more could be done and done better. Years before,



around 1911, Runion began a nursery pond experiment at Rock Creek back when the crystal-clear waters of Rock Creek served as a watering area for thirsty cattle.

Runion found out the water and vegetation at Rock Creek were ideal for newly hatched trout fry and that they thrived and grew rapidly in the clear, cool, flowing waters at Rock Creek. Coming from the notion of rearing trout and other fish to a fingerling size before releasing them into wild waters, giving them a better chance of survival, these

features made Rock Creek seemingly exceptional for a fish hatchery.

Getting a hatchery at Rock Creek did present challenges, however. The State Fish Commission in Lincoln claimed there wasn't enough water flowing in the creek to support a trout-rearing facility, dismissing the idea of a hatchery in that part of the state.

Frank Richardson, a Benkelman resident and hatchery supporter, challenged the Commissioners to travel the 300 miles to Rock Creek to take a look. If they still claimed the creek

didn't produce enough water, Richardson would pay their travel expenses, buy them a steak, and put \$10 in each of their pockets — a substantial amount of money at that time.

After making the journey and seeing Rock Creek's potential, the Commissioners vowed to build a trout facility there. Shortly after, Gov. Charles W. Bryan visited the area and was also supportive of this idea, helping push the hatchery through during his first term in 1923.

Construction soon followed.

In this 1950s photograph, Rock Creek Hatchery assistant Charles Blank (center) and two assistants, Jerry Plucker (left) and Elvin Bray, seine trout fingerlings from a circular raceway for stocking.

NGPC LIBRARY



Rock Creek Hatchery was the third state hatchery in Nebraska after the Gretna and Valentine hatcheries. TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND

Construction and Expansion

With construction well underway in 1926, Harry Runion was appointed superintendent to Rock Creek along with running the nearby Benkelman hatchery. A facility with the capacity for hatching several million trout eggs a year was built, along with a residence for a caretaker, a barn, several small holding ponds and other buildings. New ponds were in the works to be built as there were more fish that could be hatched than there were nursery ponds to put them in.

The Bureau purchased 87 more acres of land for Rock Creek hatchery in 1927 for \$6,500. An icehouse and a new road were built along with more nursery ponds.

By the summer of 1927, 42,000 largemouth bass fingerlings had been raised in the small pond, supporting the idea that conditions at the

hatchery were ideal for both bass and trout rearing.

But the Bureau sought even more success. At the time, there were few facilities available to hold fry and raise them to a larger size prior to stocking. It was estimated that only about 5% of trout raised ever reached maturity or were available for anglers to catch. The Bureau’s plan was to keep the fish in the nursery ponds from spring to fall so they had time to grow into fingerlings and increase their chances of survival. They would distribute less fry and more fingerling-sized fish to Nebraska’s lakes and streams, which meant more rearing ponds and nurseries were needed.

Rock Creek would help this policy by building more ponds for trout and bass, but more were needed to satisfy the growing demand of fish by anglers. To help supply fingerling fish, private fish culture was encouraged by the Bureau. Chapters of the Izaak Walton

League built nursery ponds and were a big supporter of raising the larger fish. The goal was to have excellent trout fishing in approximately 65 streams across western and northwestern Nebraska.

By 1929, four new ponds were added at Rock Creek, a bridge was constructed across the creek leading to the hatching ponds and several retaining walls were built on the ponds. Three concrete spillways were constructed, and sewer pipe was laid.

A modern fish hatchery was constructed for \$6,000 in 1930. At the time, this was one of the most up-to-date hatching houses in the country and had the capacity to hatch 1.5 million eggs. The old hatch house was then turned into a residence for hatchery staff. The hatchery was said to have 31 ponds of varying sizes from the small nursery ponds to the main lake that took up 16 acres on the property.



In 1981, an adult female rainbow trout jumps up the 18-inch concrete pipeline that was constructed for growing adult trout at Rock Creek Hatchery. This pipeline is no longer in use. ROCKY HOFFMANN, NEBRASKALAND



A vehicle drives through the entrance to Rock Creek State Fish Hatchery near Benkelman, circa 1940s. The text on this postcard reads: “State Fish Hatchery, Benkelman, Nebr.” NGPC LIBRARY

Statewide, fishing became increasingly popular. As roads were developed and cars became a household staple, more people were traveling to fish. This also meant fish production and transportation of the fish would have to change with growing needs.

By 1940, the Commission’s number of adult fish for spring stockings was increased by about 30 percent from the year before. However, at this point, Rock Creek’s maximum capacity levels had been met, and if more fish were to be produced there, the hatchery would need to be expanded.

To meet this demand, the largest spring at Rock Creek was evaluated. This spring sat about 3,000 feet above the hatching house and that water was running into the creek, meaning the flow of 2,000 gallons of water per minute was not being utilized.

To tap into this unused water supply, an 18-inch concrete pipeline to

a surge tank near the hatching house and a group of circular pools were constructed for growing adult trout. By doing this, up to a quarter million adult trout could be grown at Rock Creek annually.

A Relentless Task

Feeding the fish at Rock Creek was a relentless task. In the early years, trout were fed liver; staff would walk from pond to pond with a kitchen cheese grater and beef liver, scraping off chunks of meat into the water as they went. As the trout grew and required larger pieces of liver, the grater was turned over and the cabbage shredder side of the utensil was used.

As more fish were reared, more food was needed, and the hatchery turned to horse meat that was butchered in Benkelman and ground up at the hatchery. Sometimes, the meat arrived spoiled and infested with maggots, which would later become

an innovative way of feeding the fish.

Frank Weiss, the new superintendent, discovered that trout loved maggots and seemed to thrive on them. So, he designed a wooden box with a hail screen, a galvanized wire mesh covering, on the top and bottom and suspended them over the ponds. “We’d shoot a few jackrabbits and put them in the boxes and leave the rest to the flies,” he stated. As the maggots developed, they’d drop from the box and the trout fed on them.

During World War II, finding fish food meant coming up with different sources. Weiss began seining carp from area lakes, transferring them to hatchery ponds. The carp were then seined again when needed as food. They were frozen overnight and run through a large meat grinder.

From 1943 to 1945, trout production was dramatically impacted at Rock Creek due to the lack of meat products for feeding the fish and the lack of

Fish Cars

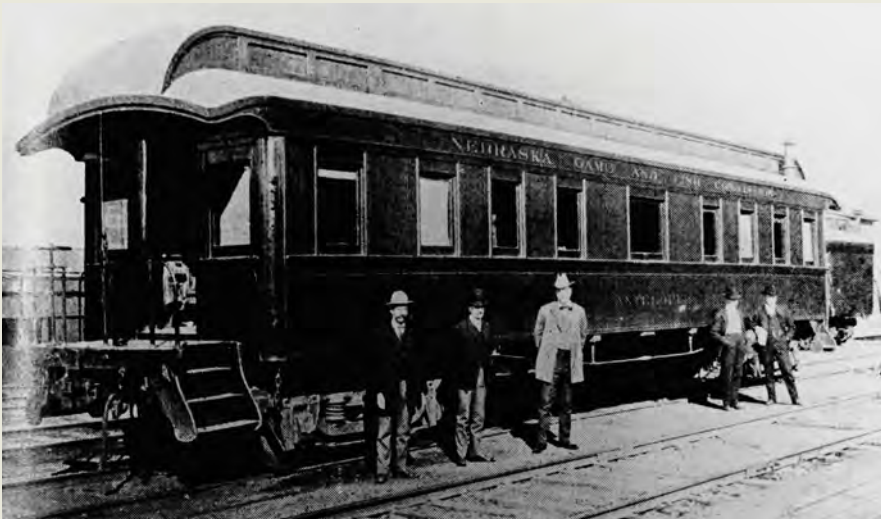
Fish cars were used on railways to carry eggs from other states, such as Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri and Wisconsin, to Nebraska. These cars were the best in service at that time, made specifically for hauling fish long distances. Equipped with fish tanks instead of seats, water was kept running over the tanks to keep the air supply at appropriate levels for the fish. There were also living quarters on board for fish crews.

The Antelope was the first fish car to service Nebraska in 1889. It was a wooden-framed car and would eventually be replaced by a modern metal car. The Angler was the original name of Nebraska's second fish car, later named the Waltonian. This car serviced Nebraska and Rock Creek with fish deliveries until around 1931.

When the trains stopped at a depot or near a stocking location, fish were taken off the fish car and transported the rest of the way by horse and cart in milk cans, by baggage or other means of less-than-superior transportation over sometimes undeveloped terrain.

Fish rearing evolved, and fry were no longer taken from hatcheries and dumped into lakes, ponds and streams. Instead, they were placed in nurseries where food was abundant and they could grow to larger sizes.

The fish cars would eventually be replaced by trucks, increasing stockings from 10-15 per day up to 50 at about the same cost. By 1930, a fleet of fish trucks equipped with ice and oxygen were placed into service.



The Commission's second fish car was originally named the Angler, later named the Waltonian. Millions of fish were transported to waters throughout the state in this railroad car until around 1931. Circa 1910. NSHS RG0031



Interior view of the above photo fish car, the Angler, showing the tanks. Circa 1918. NGPC LIBRARY



Live trout transport tank on truck from the Rock Creek Hatchery. Undated. NGPC LIBRARY



An aerial view shows the Rock Creek Fish Hatchery in Dundy County in 2000. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

labor in the area because of the war. Weiss was pretty much a one-man-show at the hatchery. If it wasn't for the help from anglers and his family, production would have been cut back even more.

After 24 years of grating liver, grinding horse meat and carp and propagating maggots, Weiss came up with another solution to feeding trout, with its principles still used in hatcheries today. Weiss began experimenting with a dehydrated cereal pellet.

Previously, the cereal was in powder form, but Weiss found that when beef melt, which is beef pancreas, is ground with fish cereal, it makes a nice floating fish food that sinks slowly, giving trout a chance to eat it before it reaches the bottom.

Ground liver was still used along with the new concept of floating fish food at Rock Creek until the late 1970s. Nowadays, most hatcheries exclusively feed trout floating fish food.

If It Works ...

Rock Creek Hatchery has produced millions of fish for Nebraska anglers to catch. In 2024 alone, Rock Creek Hatchery was scheduled to stock more than 92,000 rainbow trout and 2,500 tiger trout.

The hatchery has also produced many other species of fish. Everything

from rock bass, redear sunfish, crappie, largemouth and smallmouth bass, bluegill, channel catfish, yellow perch, brown trout, brook trout, wiper and grass carp have been raised there. Even Kokanee red salmon were hatched in 1958 and released at Lake Ogallala.

Today, the modern hatch house that was built in 1930 is still being



Fish culturalist Clint Burrell (left), biologist Nolan Watkins, and Julie Fraley, Nebraska's first woman fish production manager, load trout from the Rock Creek raceway ponds into a truck to stock into lakes and ponds around the state.

JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

Making Trout

While some of the eggs used at Rock Creek are obtained from federal hatcheries and fertilized before being shipped, quite often biologists, with a squeeze from their hands, start the process of making trout.

Once a female's eggs are stripped, a male's milt is immediately put into the pan of eggs to fertilize them. This is a tedious task and must be done quickly as the eggs are full of pores and, once exposed to water and air, will begin closing rapidly. The milt must be obtained and enter the egg's pores quickly to fertilize them. After being fertilized, the eggs are placed in a large container with running water for three to four hours to harden. Afterward, they are moved into the hatching troughs in the hatch house.

The already fertilized eggs that are delivered to the hatchery are shipped in ice water. Before these eggs can be placed in hatching troughs, the eggs are tempered by slowly warming the water they are in for three or four hours to match the temperature of the water in the troughs.

Once in the troughs, temperatures have to be regulated as warm water speeds up the hatching process, which produces weaker fish and could lead to death. Successful temperatures are between 50 and 60 degrees for trout, and the spring-fed water from Rock Creek is about 56 degrees year-round.

Newly hatched trout absorb their yolk sac as food, and once the sac is gone — around 14 days — trout look for other food swimming toward the surface of the water. Because of this, staff feed them ground liver four or five times daily.

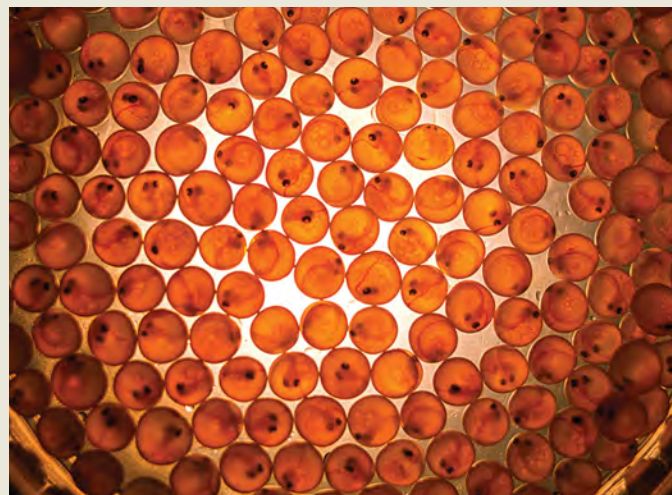
As the fry grow, they are thinned out to make room for slower-growing trout. Once trout reached a fingerling size of 1 to 2 inches, they are transferred to outdoor circular ponds. At this point, food is changed from a liver diet to a liver-cereal mix. The cereal is prepared by feed mills and is high in protein and vitamins.

As the trout grow, they are again sorted with the larger fish placed in spring-fed ponds while smaller trout are held in the circular ponds. The sorting process is repeated until the fish are at a desirable length for pond stocking.

Once in the pond, trout are fed only twice per day for two weeks before feeding is cut to once a day. Trout also feed on insect life naturally produced in the ponds. Surface feeding for insects prepares the trout for introduction into rivers, streams and lakes where they must feed on their own for survival.



Female rainbow trout eggs are stripped into a pan and ready for the male fish's milt. ROCKY HOFFMANN, NEBRASKALAND



A microscopic image of fertile eggs. The "eye" in each circle is a trout. ROCKY HOFFMANN, NEBRASKALAND



Newly hatched trout still have their egg sacs that will feed them until they are larger. ROCKY HOFFMANN, NEBRASKALAND

used along with 16 ponds for fish production. While much of the hatchery resembles its 1924 beginnings, there were obstacles to overcome and modifications made in trout rearing.

Improvements at the facility over the years include new and additional trout troughs in 1950 that would produce almost 600,000 brown and rainbow trout eggs, over 200,000 more than before the addition.

By 1976, it was feared that the cold, clean water flows at the hatchery would be greatly reduced because of the large number of irrigation wells that were put in near the hatchery for center-pivot systems, and a new hatchery may need to be built. After studies were completed, geologists found that if the water flow was greatly reduced, more water could be obtained by installing high-capacity pumps and wells.

In 1980, more than \$200,000 was



A rainbow trout swims in the newly renovated pond at Chadron State Park during the park's first stocking of the year. The fish were shipped in by truck from the Rock Creek Hatchery. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

spent modernizing the hatchery, with raceway, piping system, water reservoir, and aeration system improvements, along with new wells, to pursue the science of raising trout.

Since then, much of what worked the past 100 years still works, as seen from the thousands of fish stocked

each year. Which is why if you've fished for trout in Nebraska in the last century, chances are you've landed one raised at Rock Creek Hatchery. [N](#)

See our video celebrating 100 years of the Rock Creek Hatchery at NebraskalandMagazine.com.



The Gretna Fish Hatchery Museum in Sarpy County displays items from Rock Creek and the state's other hatcheries. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

UPLAND BIRD HUNTING THIS WINTER

By Julie Geiser

Winter is an ideal time for upland hunting. Some hunters don't want to battle the cold and snow, leaving many public areas wide open for you to chase pheasants, quail and prairie grouse.

Although hunting in the early mornings can mean cold temperatures and sometimes snow and wind, hunters can play the elements in their favor.

On cold early mornings, birds may sit a little tighter, and will move a little slower to get into fields to feed. Add snow and wind into that mix, and you'll have a tight-sitting bird, half-tamed by the cold until they are triggered by the flush.

Keep your dog a little closer to help find snow-ridden birds. Hunters should try walking in a zig-zag pattern across the field to cover more area. If hunting with a partner, keep the distance between each other a little closer than you normally would to help find sitting birds. Always abide by safe zones of fire when shooting (with two hunters, each zone-of-fire is about 45 degrees directly in front of them).

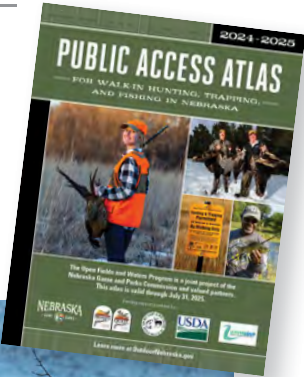
Use the wind to your advantage, and let it mask the noise you make by walking into the wind. Be quiet when pushing through a field. Minimal talking or yelling at dogs will help keep birds sitting tight.

Hunt areas where there are agricultural crops, natural

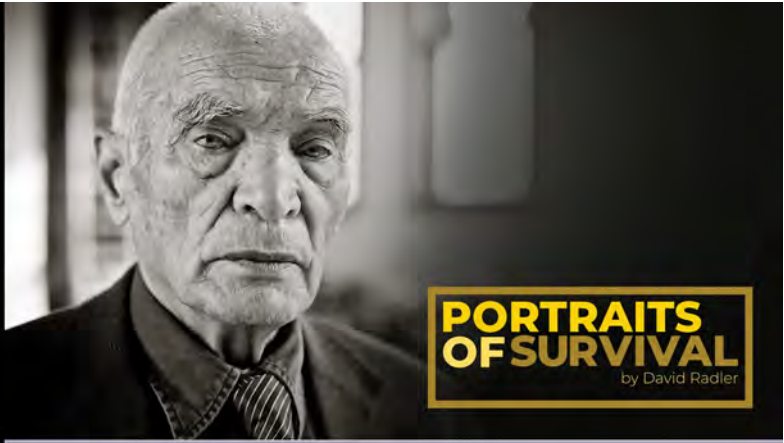
grasses, forbs, brush and wildlife plantings. Many public hunting areas offer these features. Open Fields and Waters sites have many excellent areas for walk-in hunting — from corn or wheat stubble to rolling hills. Wildlife management areas, managed by Nebraska Game and Parks, have habitat specifically for wildlife and are walk-in accessible to hunters.

- Here's my list of WMAs to hunt upland birds this winter:
- **Sherman Reservoir WMA**, Sherman County - 3,180 acres
 - **Davis Creek WMA**, Valley and Greeley counties - 2,450 acres
 - **Sacramento-Wilcox WMA**, Phelps County - 2,320 acres
 - **Medicine Creek WMA**, Frontier County - 7,487 acres
 - **Red Willow WMA**, Frontier and Red Willow counties - 5,278 acres
 - **Pressey WMA**, Custer County - 1,579 acres

For a complete listing of all public walk-in areas, including WMAs, Open Fields and Waters sites and more, pick up a copy of the **Public Access Atlas**, available online at OutdoorNebraska.gov, at sporting goods vendors or Game and Parks offices.



For those willing to contend with the cold, snow and wind, many public areas are wide open for pheasants, quail and prairie grouse hunting in the winter. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



PORTRAITS OF SURVIVAL
by David Radler

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TO HANG OR NOT TO HANG

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Deer hunters should take every opportunity to hang deer, especially when temperatures are above freezing and below 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Not only will hanging deer yield more tender meat, but it can also improve the flavor of venison.

Rigor Mortis

After mammals die, they go through a process called rigor mortis that causes muscles and joints to stiffen. Butchering a deer while it's in rigor mortis will result in tough meat.

Hang deer in a cool, dry place away from pests, debris and direct sunlight at least until rigor mortis has faded. Because I don't have a temperature-controlled, pest-proof walk-in cooler, I hang deer in my garage with the hide on for protection. When the shoulders and knee joints move and bend freely, I know rigor mortis has dissipated. During typical fall or early-winter weather, three days usually does the trick.

Temperature plays a role in the duration of rigor mortis. I once had to hang a December whitetail for two weeks because temperatures were so cold. Conversely, in a hot environment, rigor mortis can fade in a matter of hours before the onset of decomposition.

If conditions continue to be favorable, hanging deer past rigor mortis can give you better quality venison for the dinner table. Mature animals can greatly benefit from aging.

Aging

I try to hang deer for at least a week — two if possible. During this time, natural enzymes break down connective tissues, resulting in more tender, flavorful meat.

Aging deer, or any meat, in an uncontrolled space — such as a garage — requires that you pay close attention to the temperature and be flexible. Keep a thermometer in that space and keep a close eye on it. Forty degrees Fahrenheit and below is generally safe — you won't have to worry about meat spoiling. However, I am comfortable hanging deer in ambient temperatures up to 50 degrees, as long as I check it

every day.

Be mindful when hanging deer in a less protected area, such as an uninsulated shed or outbuilding. Too much temperature variability on the warmer end could cause meat to spoil. If it is too cold, the meat will freeze, which will inhibit enzyme activity during the aging process.

No two seasons are the same. Some years, a cold snap might come through, and I'd have to hang deer longer. Other years, a warmer fall forces me to butcher immediately after rigor mortis. I just go with it.

Mold

High humidity might lead to mold. If you see white mold, don't panic. Unless you're allergic or immunocompromised, the white mold you see is similar to the mold that grows on salami or expensive aged beef.

Wipe off mold with a paper towel soaked with any kind of vinegar. Check the deer every day and never let mold sit so long that it turns into something darker, which could be toxic. If the white mold becomes aggressive, I make a point to butcher sooner rather than later and cut away the affected parts.



When conditions allow, hang deer for more flavorful, tender venison.
JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

When Not to Hang Deer

Early-season archery hunters may not get the opportunity to hang deer because of the risk of spoilage. January hunters may have the opposite problem; a frozen carcass cannot age and is not enjoyable to break down. In these two scenarios, it's best to butcher the deer right away.

Each season, I adjust how I will utilize deer depending on the quality of the meat. On a good year, I may get fantastic steaks or kebab meat from the top and bottom rounds in the hindquarters, which are giant muscles. During a less favorable year when I don't get the chance to hang deer, I might turn most of it into stew meat, burger or sausage.

That's the beauty of wild game — you learn to appreciate and bring out the best of what you have. It will make you a better cook in the long run.



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IT'S A FAMILY TRADITION

By Jeff Kurrus

Six years ago, Nate Murdoch, a medical doctor in Grand Island, visited his grandfather's nursing home in Holdrege. Nate had graduated medical school and completed residency and fellowship training. He had a nice house and a beautiful family.

But when Nate, who didn't hunt as a kid, shared photos of his first mature buck taken on Grandpa Bill's old pasture ground, granddad gathered his friends at the home and said this about his grandson: "He's a hunter."

"It struck me as funny," Nate said recently while standing in his Grand Island home. "That was the way he wanted to introduce me to his buddies, 'He's a hunter'." His granddad has since passed away, but that memory remains impactful to the Murdoch family.

These days, more than one hunter lives in Nate's house; 16-year-old Bennett and 14-year-old Max have taken on the family tradition — an annual trek to granddad's land near Oxford along the Republican River for the November firearm opener.

Last season, this trip brought even more fond memories as Nate witnessed his son shoot the biggest buck they have ever seen.

That day, Bennett sat with Nate's cousin, Will, and Max with his dad in ground blinds. The adults left their guns at the truck. "The younger boys get to shoot first," said Nate. "If we make it far enough, the older guys get to shoot."

Hunting next to a dry creek bed, Nate and Max saw a nice 4x4 in the morning, but for some reason, Max passed on it.

By mid-afternoon, however, when older brother Bennett downed a buck, Nate thought his younger son might have been feeling a little left out. Then, around 5:30 p.m., came the doe. Behind her came a bigger deer.

"We knew he was a buck," said Nate, "but we didn't know he was this."

The doe disappeared through a cedar thicket about 60 yards away, and as the buck turned to follow, Nate used his "YouTube version of education" on a grunt tube, and the deer stopped. "I didn't want him to go into the timber," he said. Max didn't have a clean shot at the deer's vitals.

"You could tell he was a big deer now," said Nate. "But

Max was doing a great job of not taking a bad shot. It was very mature of him." The buck started walking again toward the thick timber, and Nate stopped him again with a grunt tube. This time the buck had stopped in one of the narrow windows to shoot. Nate whispered to his son, "Alright Max, there's your shot."

"My heart was pumping pretty good," Max said, his quiet confidence contributing to his ability to take a deep breath before squeezing the trigger on his Browning .308 bolt-action, a family rifle.

Nate saw the deer jump when Max shot. The buck quickly disappeared out of sight, and Max became anxious. "I thought that I shot him, but I wasn't sure," Max said. "That was pretty nerve-racking."

Once they found blood, Max calmed. However, his dad silently began to worry. "We started finding blood but the direction wasn't great," said Nate. "He was going toward the edge of our property. Then, when he made a turn back into our property, I felt a lot better." Twenty minutes later, they found him.

After the congratulatory text messages and field dressing the deer together, the hunt became even more of a family affair because of the size

of the buck's body.

"We'd drag him 15 yards and couldn't do it anymore," said Nate with a laugh, describing the valley-filled land they had to navigate. "We had to get Will, Bennett and my uncle, Tim."

Once back, they checked with neighbors. No one had seen this buck. They checked their cameras. Not a single image.

To this day, the Murdochs are convinced Max was supposed to shoot that buck, carrying on a family tradition that Nate plans to continue long into the future.

Maybe one day the boys will finish their hunt early and dad gets to shoot. But ... maybe not.

Either way, they'll be there together, another generation of hunters going back to family land along the Republican River.

Start, or continue, your family hunting traditions at OutdoorNebraska.gov where you can find season dates, places to hunt or buy your permit.



Max Murdoch is all smiles with his buck of a lifetime taken last season. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

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NEBRASKA
— GAME PARKS —

CWD NOT GOING AWAY SOON

By Justin Haag

North America’s deer, elk and moose continue to face a silent killer.

First identified in Colorado in 1967, chronic wasting disease is now in Nebraska, 33 other states and four Canadian provinces. It has no cure or effective treatment.

CWD is caused by prions — misfolded proteins that cause neighboring proteins to misfold. These prions accumulate in the brain and lead to erratic behavior, drastic weight loss and an emaciated appearance.

Unlike the viral epizootic hemorrhagic disease that kills deer within days, CWD progresses slowly, said Todd Nordeen, big game disease and research program manager for Nebraska Game and Parks. It can take about two years before an infected animal will show symptoms. As its motor functions deteriorate, it also becomes more susceptible to predation, vehicle collisions and hunters.

“We’ve gotten to some that are showing late-stage symptoms, but usually something else beats us to it,” Nordeen said.

Believed to be spread among susceptible species by body fluids, prions can persist in soil and vegetation for decades, complicating efforts to contain it.

“It’s a very difficult disease to deal with,” Nordeen said. “It’s so hard to destroy. It’s not eliminated by fire or freezing.”

Proteins, which are not formally living things, are the building blocks for tissues, muscles and organs. When misfolded, as prions, they wreak havoc on an organism’s mental function. Other prion diseases include Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans and bovine spongiform encephalopathy, known as mad cow disease.

Thankfully, no evidence suggests CWD poses a direct threat to humans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention encourages caution, however. People should wear gloves and a mask when handling big game species, especially the brain and spinal cord where prions accumulate the most. To limit the diseases’ spread, carcasses should be double bagged and

taken to a licensed landfill.

“Proper disposal is especially important with CWD,” Nordeen said.

Knowing what they are up against, researchers and wildlife managers are doing their part to monitor and control the disease.

In February, 59 Panhandle mule deer were captured and equipped with tracking collars as part of the USDA National Wildlife Research Center’s interstate efforts to study chronic wasting disease. Information obtained during the captures, including blood and tissue samples, gives insights into the species health.

Each year, lymph nodes also are collected in five of 18 deer units in a statistical-based approach to discovering new areas where the disease is present. Before the 2024 deer season, CWD had been detected in free-ranging deer and elk in 58 of 93 counties — all of the Panhandle and southwestern region, with other counties ranging to the eastern border.

Since 1997, Game and Parks has tested more than 57,000 deer and

over 400 elk, with 1,269 deer and 19 elk testing positive. The rate of positive animals has exceeded 30 percent in some states, but is not that high in most areas in Nebraska. Some eastern units are 5 percent or less. But at their last testing in 2022, the Plains, Frenchman and Pine Ridge units in western Nebraska each tested at about 30 percent.

Some states are implementing regulations to prevent the movement of potentially infected carcasses, while others are exploring experimental treatments and vaccines.

In the meantime, in Nebraska, biologists are furthering their research, understanding and education on the disease in the hopes of finding solutions for the future. They are asking the public to report suspected diseased animals to Game and Parks — and to spread awareness of the disease.

Learn more about CWD at OutdoorNebraska.gov; search for “CWD.”



Workers collect blood and tissue samples from a mule deer in the Wildcat Hills while equipping it with a tag and tracking collar. The capture effort in February was part of a multi-state effort to study Chronic Wasting Disease. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



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Pheasant hunting near Laurel, 1942

This is a photo that appeared in *Hunting and Fishing Magazine* in February 1943.

The hunter on the left with the pipe is my late father, Louis Hetherington, who wrote the article about Nebraska being a “hunter’s paradise.”

He and the other hunters were from Beatrice, my hometown.

The gentleman in the middle, Eugene Gish, was a reporter for the Beatrice Sun.

– Dennis Hetherington,
Las Vegas, Nevada



This windmill is one of four at Fort Robinson State Park. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

THE WINDMILL: FROM PROSAIC TO PRETTY

By Justin Haag

This image from Fort Robinson State Park has a few things people seem to like in a Nebraska photo: A blue sky with contrasty clouds, the Red Cloud Buttes defying the state's reputation for being flat, and, of course, a windmill whirring in a steady breeze. The windmill is one of four in the park used to water its bison, longhorns, horses and whatever else needs a drink.

As a nature photographer, I often point my camera away from windmills, fences and other man-made structures. Windmills, however, have become an endeared element of our region's landscape, and this one seemed to be the only nearby compelling foreground element when the light was right.

Have they always been photo-worthy? I read an article in a 1905 newspaper that panned the modern-at-the-time windmill as compared to the big, elaborate brick and wood structures with doors and windows that became popular on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean centuries prior.

"While there are undoubtedly more windmills in the United States than any other country in the world, they

are, all of them, very prosaic, very practical, and essentially businesslike. For the picturesque windmill, we still have to go to Europe," the author wrote.

The article described the aesthetics of windmills dating back to the 11th century in Europe, where their multiple uses included grinding corn to flour. They've had varied purposes in the U.S., too, but one has prevailed.

"So far as modern windmills are concerned they are entirely used to pump water, and while they add nothing that makes for beauty on the landscape, they have been responsible for making a garden out of the desert spots in this country," said the 1905 article. "While the picturesque old windmills in old England are fast disappearing, the new style windmill becomes more and more numerous here, in spite of the fact that this is the age of electricity and the times are those in which stupendous tasks are lightly undertaken."

What would the author think of today's solar-powered wells and wind turbines that generate electricity? Perhaps, they too, will someday provide nostalgic fodder for scenic photos. I'm betting some of you might doubt it.

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