



The rising sun greets pasque flowers, an early bloomer, in the Nebraska National Forest southwest of Chadron. Photo by Justin Haag.

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Outdoor Painting • Travel to West Point • Time Well Spent

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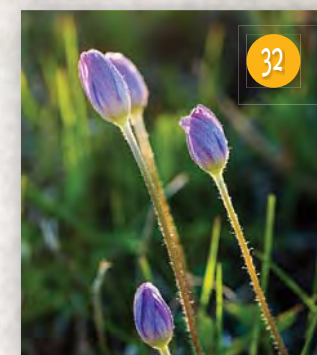
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ON THE WEB...



WHEN YOU SEE THIS SYMBOL IN THE PAGES OF
NEBRASKALAND MAGAZINE, VISIT
NEBRASKALANDMAGAZINE.COM AND VIEW OUR INTERACTIVE
DIGITAL EDITION FOR MORE INFORMATION.

Cover: This greater prairie chicken or pinnated grouse
(*Tympanuchus cupido*) was photographed in early April in Hall
County. This particular bird would occasionally fly up and land on
top of my blind. Photo by Rick Rasmussen.

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Mixed Bag

A Mammal Brief

Big Brown Bat

By Lindsay Rogers

With a wingspan of 13 inches, it is easy to see why this species got its name. Compared to other Nebraska bat species, which range in wingspan length from 8-12 inches, the big brown bat is one of the state's largest species. Found throughout North America, this species can be found in a variety of habitats including cities, farms, pastures and forests. During the summer months, they roost in hollow trees, barns, silos and attics. During the winter months, this species remains in Nebraska, taking shelter in caves, mines, attics and cellars. Because they often utilize human-made structures for roosting and hibernacula, they are one of the most commonly encountered bat species in Nebraska.

Like all Nebraska bat species, the big brown bat is an insectivore, eating copious amounts of night-flying insects such as beetles, leaf-hoppers and moths. Each lactating female can easily eat her weight in insects each night. Because of this, bats are vitally important to Nebraska's wildlife ecology. They also provide significant benefit to Nebraska's agricultural economy. And, for those of us who enjoy summer evenings outside, having bats around provide chemical-free mosquito control. ■

Lindsay Rogers is an outdoor education specialist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

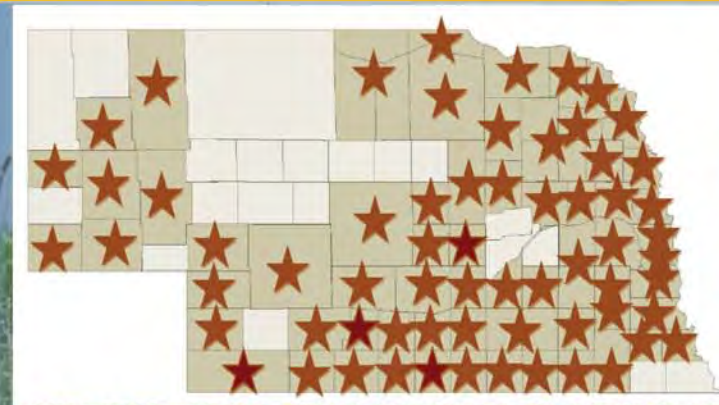


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Visit West Point

By Brenna McFadden, Nebraska Tourism Commission

West Point in northeastern Nebraska is a thriving small town with a welcoming atmosphere. This community has much to offer people looking for an outdoor experience or a night spent on the town.

Do

The West Point Community Theatre is renowned for its historic building and friendly staff of volunteers. Its mission is to be northeastern Nebraska's destination for families to enjoy shows of all sorts – ranging from entertaining to educational. This venue offers top-notch entertainment including recent movies, galas and live plays suitable for all ages. Bring your family in April to enjoy *Gilligan's Island: The Musical*. For information on dates, times and pricing, visit westpointcommunitytheatre.org.

Eat

Stop at the Hide-Away Grill if you are looking for a great place

to eat dinner before enjoying a show. This steakhouse is a bit off the beaten path but worth the search. The staff are friendly and the food never disappoints.

If you would rather have a fresh Mexican dish, then Fiesta Brava is your place. Generous portions at great prices, you'll be supporting the community's local meat businesses.

Stay

Dead Timber State Recreation Area offers areas for modern camping if you are looking to spend some time outdoors while traveling. The area has great opportunities for families to fish, hike, hunt and picnic while enjoying spring weather.

Neligh Park also offers camping sites along with the option of renting a log cabin. If you are looking for more traditional lodging, you can rent a room at Horizon Inn and Suites or Super 8 Motel.

Shop

West Point has a variety of businesses for any shopping purposes you might have. Lana A Boutique offers a personalized shopping experience with 20 years in the business of helping people find what works best for them. Schmitt's Clothing is the premiere shop for men and offers everything from sportswear to suits. If you are in the mood for a cozy small town coffee shop, then pay Red Door Coffee a visit and try their delicious blueberry scones.

Explore

Take a quick trip to Indian Trails Country Club, just south of Beemer and about 11 miles away from West Point, for breathtaking views of the Elkhorn River Valley and its challenging 18-hole golf course. For a more family-friendly activity, take everyone to Main Street Bowl over the weekend. ■



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Dead Timber State Recreation Area is just seven miles south of West Point. It offers great outdoor recreation for the entire family.

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A Brief History

The Nebraska Wolf-breeding Industry

By David Bristow,
Nebraska State Historical Society

Wolf bounties were a point of contention between eastern and western Nebraska in the early 1900s. Many eastern Nebraskans saw wolves as a western problem and didn't want to be taxed to pay for it. The political struggle included charges of fraud – even the rumor that people were raising their own wolves and coyotes, killing them, and turning their scalps in for payment. It was “an industry that is thriving in several sections of the state,” reported the *North Platte Semi-Weekly Tribune* on Jan. 3, 1902. The story soon went national with a *New York Times* report on Jan. 20:

“The large number of claims coming into the [Nebraska] State Auditor's office for bounties on wolves and coyotes has led that official to make an investigation, and he has arrived at the conclusion that the farmers and ranchers in the western part of the State have gone into the business of breeding these animals for the bounty market. In one instance it was found that one farmer had raised more than 100 wolves last summer from several animals he had trapped and penned up for that purpose.”

State law allowed counties to pay \$3 apiece for the scalps of wolves, coyotes or wildcats. The state added \$1, bringing the total bounty up to \$4. Claimants were required to present a scalp to their county clerk with both ears and the face down to the nose. They swore an oath that they killed the animal in Nebraska. The county clerk then paid the claimant and billed the state for the extra dollar.

Was it profitable to breed wolves in captivity for only \$4 a head? It seems implausible, and contemporary reports are suspiciously vague on details. No names or specific locations were given.

The rumor may have gained traction because of the politics of wolf bounties. The state had fallen way behind in bounty payments by 1902. No money had been appropriated since 1899. Western Nebraska legislators wanted \$40,000 appropriated for wolf claims. Western farmers and ranchers wanted the bounty so that non-landowners would also have an incentive to reduce the wolf population.

Many eastern Nebraskans were skeptical. It sounded to them like ranchers wanted the government to pay them for performing a task they were going to do anyway. Stories of wolf breeding seemed to confirm their suspicions. The *Omaha Bee* claimed on March 23 that wolf-breeding was “the most profitable industry in Nebraska.”

In the end, the legislature appropriated the money – but also repealed the bounty for future claims.

The wolf bounty returned with the 1905 legislature. The *Omaha Bee* described the legislative struggle as a battle of “east against the west,” while the *Alliance Herald* advised that while waiting for the legislature, “this would be an excellent time to get out with your horse and hounds and kill off a few that are bothering your sheep or poultry.”



“Old Jules” Sandoz with his dog and a pair of coyotes he shot at his place in Sheridan County, circa 1924. NSHS RG1273-2-2

Western Nebraskans won, and the state enacted a new bounty law. On April 4, the *Omaha Bee* called the new law “another legislative outrage upon the taxpayers of Nebraska. There is no good reason why people subject to the depredations of wolves should not kill them for their own protection without the incentive of a bounty. The bounty law will simply resurrect the wolf scalp factories that did such a flourishing business a few years ago until the bounty claims accumulate again in such alarming proportion that the taxpayers will be forced to insist upon another repeal.”

But it doesn't seem to have worked out that way. By Nov. 8, 1905, the *Columbus Journal* observed that the “next legislature probably will not have to make an appropriation for a state bounty on wolf scalps, as wolves seem to becoming [sic] scarce in Western Nebraska. Auditor Cook reports that bounties for several months have not averaged more than \$100 per month.”

And with that, rumors of a Nebraska wolf breeding industry faded. Across the lower 48 states, wolves were all but exterminated by the mid-20th century. At one point only small populations survived in northern Minnesota and Michigan. Coyotes, of course, were another matter – bounties or not, these adaptable creatures have managed to thrive in a multitude of environments. ■

Visit the Nebraska State Historical Society's website at history.nebraska.gov.

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Mixed Bag

Observing Migrating Birds by Watching Weather Radar

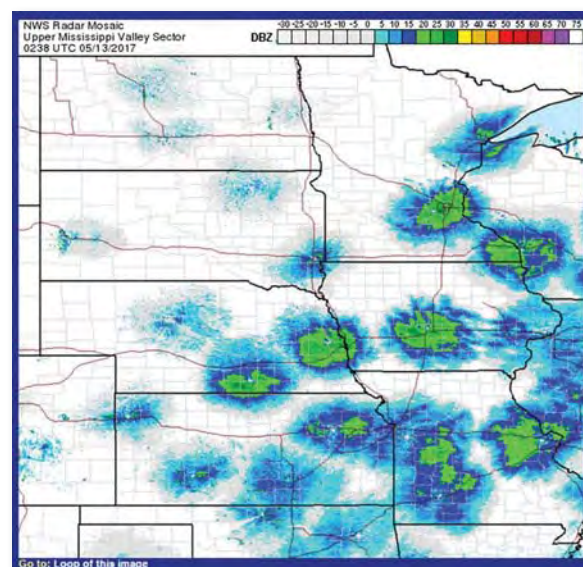
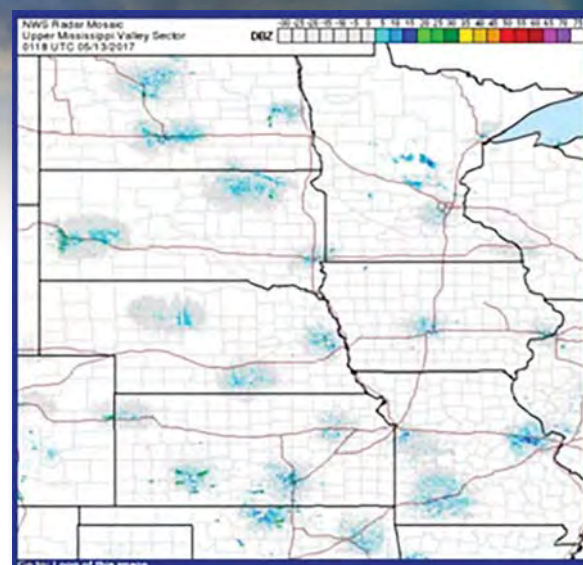
By Joel G. Jorgensen

Not long ago the only way most people could view Doppler weather radar was to tune into the weather segment of a local television news broadcast. Smart phones, tablets, computers and the internet have changed our ability to access all sorts of information, and now real-time Doppler radar can be viewed at any time of day or night, even when there are no clouds in the sky and no chance of rain, snow or thunderstorms in the forecast. Increased accessibility of this technology can now be put to an unexpected use – tracking migrating birds.

During spring and fall, millions of birds travel between their wintering haunts to our south and breeding sites in our area and points farther north. All species undertake strategies to fly from point A to point B that help them minimize risk of predation and over-expenditure of valuable energy reserves. Some species migrate during the day, but many others, including most songbirds, migrate during the nighttime. The vast number of migrating birds that take flight shortly after sundown during spring and fall migration can be easily seen on Doppler radar, and it is possible to watch the movements of migrating birds on time loops of radar images. The radar signature of birds is distinctive in terms of height and speed of movement and flocks light up radar as concentric rings around radar installations when conditions are favorable, such as south winds during spring and north winds during fall. Migrating birds land before sunrise and, consequently, the activity on radar dissipates before dawn.

Radar is frequently used by researchers to address questions about migrating birds and bats. Birders now regularly access radar during migration season to get a sense of whether there will be an influx of migrant birds in the area and whether it makes sense to set the alarm clock early and head out to a favorite birding spot before dawn. Radar can be used to show patterns of bird migration at regional scales and is frequently used to monitor passage of birds over the Great Lakes and Gulf of Mexico. The signature of migrating birds may only be strong on one side of a weather front since conditions on the other side may not be conducive for migration.

In the coming weeks, especially during early to mid-May, you can observe the mass migration of birds by visiting a website, such as the National Weather Service (radar.weather.gov/conus/uppermissvly.php), which provides access to Doppler radar. Observe the radar loop immediately before and after sunset when there are south winds or when the weather is relatively calm. Radar returns that appear shortly after sunset almost certainly will be migrating birds representing dozens of species. ■



Regional Doppler radar before and after sundown on May 13, 2017. The top image captured at 8:37 p.m. shows a calm and quiet evening, while the second image captured at 9:55 p.m. has “lit up” showing a lot of activity which represents migrating birds.

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Upcoming Events

by Jerry Kane

Contact the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at 402-471-0641 or visit OutdoorNebraska.org for more information. Visit HuntSafeNebraska.org for a list of hunter education classes and BoatSafeNebraska.org for a list of boating safety classes.

April 3
Spring Turkey Hunting Workshop
Mid-Plains Community College, North Platte

April 5
Light Goose Conservation Order closes in Rainwater Basin and West zones

April 6
Crow Hunting
Statewide crow hunting season closes

April 7
Spring Youth Shotgun Turkey
Spring youth shotgun turkey season opens

April 7
City History Trolley Tour
Arbor Lodge State Historical Park (SHP), Nebraska City

April 7-8
Platte River Art Show
Eugene T. Mahoney State Park (SP), Ashland

April 10
Turkey Calling 101
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

April 10
Monarchs on a Mission Workshop
Educational Service Unit No. 2, Fremont

April 14
Nebraska State Conventional Pistol Championship
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

April 14
Powerful Pollinators
Wildcat Hills Nature Center, Gering

April 14
Spring Shotgun Turkey
Spring shotgun turkey season opens

April 15
Light Goose Conservation Order closes in East Zone

April 15
National Quilting Day
Arbor Lodge SHP, Nebraska City

April 16
Bighorn Sheep Lottery
Application period begins for bighorn sheep lottery permit

April 18-22
Coalition of Historical Trekkers
Fort Atkinson SHP, Fort Calhoun

April 19
Meeting
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission meeting, Fort Robinson SP, Crawford

April 21
Youth Fishing Instructor Certification Class
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

April 21
Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Outdoor Survival Workshop
Fort Kearny State Recreation Area (SRA), Kearney

April 21-22
Great Plains Garrison's Spring Muster
Fort Hartsuff SHP, Burwell

April 28
Beyond Becoming an Outdoors-Woman
Experience Platte River SP, Louisville

April 28
Roger G. Sykes Outdoor Heritage Education Complex
opens on weekends, Platte River SP, Louisville

April 28
Outdoor Adventure
Indian Cave SP, Shubert

April 28-29
Arbor Day Weekend Celebration
Arbor Lodge SHP, Nebraska City

A State Park Scavenger Hunt

By Jeff Kurrus

For parents it's imperative to come up with new, creative outdoor ideas to share with your kids. However, sometimes the old ideas work just as well – none any better than a scavenger hunt.

With clipboard and pen in hand this month, my kids will spend hours trying to find items at one of Nebraska's state parks and recreation areas. While every list will be different, here are some standards to spot to get you started this April.

- Pine cone
- Squirrel
- Blooming flower (extra points for being able to name it)
- Good skipping rock
- Tree stump
- Bird nest
- Bird feather (extra points)
- Spider web
- Something fuzzy
- 3 different leaves (extra points)
- Hole in a tree
- Cloud that looks like an animal
- Butterfly
- Animal track (extra points)
- Chewed leaf
- Sign
- Turkey
- Predator (e.g. coyote, red-tailed hawk)
- Water
- Something prickly

This list is compiled from a number of outdoor scavenger lists found online as well as other items that have worked well for us in the past. The main idea, especially when taking kids in the outdoors, is to make sure that they are having more than a walk in the park. These walks are fine for adults, but if your younger sidekicks are already wired to find clouds that look like frogs, then go ahead and give them more to find. ■

Mount a Turkey Tail

By Jarrod Spilger

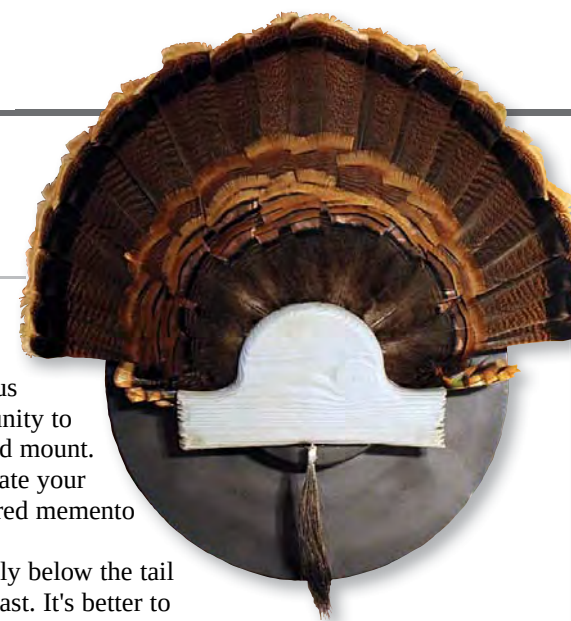
One of the joys of harvesting a mature gobbler, besides the thrill of the hunt and the delicious meal that follows, is the opportunity to obtain a trophy tail fan and beard mount. Follow these simple steps to create your own mount that will be a treasured memento for many years.

First, cut off the tail fan slightly below the tail bone and the beard from the breast. It's better to have too many feathers initially than not enough, as you can always trim excess feathers, but you can't add them back on. Then, cut out the tail bone so the fan lays flat during the drying process. With a knife, cut and scrape away all meat and fat from the tail's base, making sure to remove the oil gland. Trim the beard's base, too. Leave enough material, though, so the tail feathers and beard fibers remain attached.

With a cotton ball soaked in rubbing alcohol, dab the base of the tail and beard to dry out any remaining fat and kill bacteria. Let dry overnight.

Next, liberally apply Borax to the tail fan base and stretch out the fan, front side down, on newspapers. I use three or four full shotgun shell boxes to hold the fan in place. Also, stick the beard base into a separate small pile of Borax. The Borax will dry out any remaining flesh or oil. Let the stretched out fan set for several months in a cool, dry place indoors where pets and bugs can't get to it.

Finally, mount the tail. You can use a prefabricated mounting kit for a professional look, or simply tie the tail onto a piece of cardboard with the beard hanging below it using flexible wire. Cover exposed wire with tape to protect walls, and punch a hole into the top of the cardboard to hang this economical display from a nail. ■



Clean the base of the tail and beard with a cotton ball soaked in rubbing alcohol.



Apply Borax to the tail fan base to dry out any remaining flesh or oil.



The tail can be mounted onto a piece of cardboard with the beard hanging below it using flexible wire.

NEBRASKAland Visitor



Last issue's winner of the Visitor drawing was Kelly Mercer of Stanton, Nebraska, who found the head louse on page 14.

Readers are encouraged to contact NEBRASKAland within 10 days after this issue's publication with the correct page number and name of this issue's "Visitor" – a critter found in Nebraska. We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a NEBRASKAland mug.

To enter each month, write:

NEBRASKAland Visitor
2200 North 33rd Street
Lincoln, NE 68503

Or e-mail: Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov with "Visitor" in the subject line of the message.

HINT: This issue's visitor is not on page 16, 19, 22, 23, or 42-43.

Head lice (*Pediculus humanus capitis*) are very small insects, tan to gray or white in color, and approximately 1/10 inch in length. They are ectoparasites, feeding on human blood, though fortunately are not known to transmit disease between hosts. While they are wingless and cannot fly, they are able to quickly crawl and have large claws to grasp hairs. Female lice attach individual eggs to a shaft of hair, usually near the scalp. These small eggs, called nits, are white when first laid, turning tan as they age. Nymphs hatch from the eggs and will molt three times before reaching adulthood. Infestations most commonly result from head-to-head contact, though sharing of hats and brushes can also spread lice. Over-the-counter treatments and the use of a nit brush can be used to eliminate lice once an infestation occurs.



Special thanks to Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture.



Animal Architects

By Monica Macoubrie
Outdoor Educator, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

My mother inspired my love of the outdoors, even if sometimes it felt like she had to push me out the door. She loved to garden, walk, and ride bikes, and she took me to nature centers and watched me climb trees. Of all the things we did together outdoors, one excursion in particular is forever ingrained into my head.

My mother and I were walking along the river by my uncle's farm, and I noticed some tiny trees that looked like they had been broken off about knee high. I didn't really think anything of it, so I just kept shuffling along throwing rocks. We walked maybe another two minutes along the river and there, directly in front of us, was an unbelievably large pile of sticks and mud.

I asked my mom what that pile of junk was in front of us; I remember even asking if this was the landfill (give me a break – I was 8). My mom told me that this was not the landfill, but a beaver lodge, and a pretty substantial one by the look of it.

Being so young, I didn't know at the time what a beaver lodge actually looked like. I had never observed one with my own eyes. My mom told me how beavers build them with sticks and mud and use them as their home. We spent the next 15 or 20 minutes looking around the beaver lodge after that. I was so in awe of this thing that an animal had built. This beaver didn't need help from any humans, and it cut and constructed this entire house by itself, using only mud and sticks. No

steel, nails, hammers or saws.

In Nebraska, we have many different animals that will build and construct their own homes. From insects to birds, and even mammals, the amount of time and engineering knowledge these animals possess is nothing less than impressive. We call these special building creatures animal architects.

Beavers

When most of the human population thinks of animals that build their own home, the first thing that comes to

mind is the beaver. Is it because their houses are just that remarkable? Or perhaps, they are more visible to the public eye than other animal homes.

Beavers are semi-aquatic animals that live together either with a partner or in groups. These herbivorous rodents are one of the most famous and skilled animal architects out there. To build a home, like any good architect, they first have to find the right location. This is usually a peaceful river with shallow waters. They will then find their building materials.

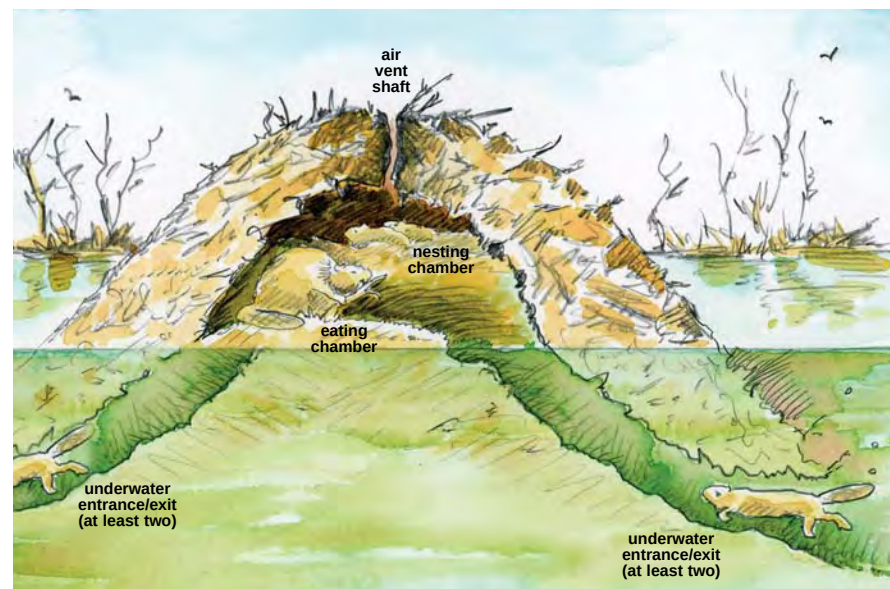


ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT

Beavers (opposite) construct and maintain houses called lodges. These lodges can be found in two shapes – conical (like the one above) or bank-shaped. The conical is the most recognizable shape which is usually surrounded by water. These structures modify the natural environment in such a way that the overall ecosystem builds upon the change, making beavers a keystone species. Beavers are nocturnal and are prolific builders, carrying mud and stones with their front paws and timber between their teeth.





The black and yellow garden spider is common in Nebraska and is known for its large size and quintessential orb-shaped web. The spiders in this group get their name from the English word “orb,” meaning “circular,” in regards to their wheel-shaped webs.

Since materials like two-by-fours aren’t available for purchase by beavers, they use the next best thing – trees. These large rodents will cut down tree trunks and branches using their large front orange-colored incisors. Like all other rodents, a beaver’s teeth never stop growing. By chewing and cutting down their building supplies, they wear down their teeth to a manageable length.

With location and materials ready, these animals will first build a solid foundation of stones and mud in the center of a lake, river, pond or stream. From here, they will pile on branches and foliage until it surfaces out of the water. For the roof, beavers will build a dome-shaped top made of branches, leaves and interwoven grasses. On top of this, they will then place a thick layer of mud that will eventually harden over time.

Once the structure is complete, beavers will move on to finish their work. This includes adding underwater doors, chimneys and a security fence

made from mud and castoreum, a foul-smelling oil produced by beavers. The smell is usually so strong that no one will come close to the den except for family members.

Spiders

Another common but amazing animal architect is the spider. Spider webs are some of the most fascinating, and should I say, pretty examples of animal homes out there.

There are four main web patterns that spiders can construct: the orb-web, sheet-web, funnel-web and cob-web. The most recognizable is the orb-web. Think of the movie *Charlotte’s Web*. Charlotte constructed her words in an orb-web.

To build a web the first thing a spider will do is find a solid support structure, such as the eaves on your house, stone crevices or a branch. The spider will then use silk, which is produced in its body, for every inch of the web.

While in the body, the silk is in liquid

form. Once it reaches the outside air, the liquid solidifies. Some species of spiders have up to seven glands – each producing a different type of silk, depending on the use. The most durable silk is used to stretch across the web and keep it firm. The more sticky fluid silk is used to create the articulate pattern of spirals that attach to the main threads.

Some species of spiders, such as orb-weavers, will reconstruct a new web every night.

Caddis Flies

The caddis fly is an animal that most people have never heard of. Caddis flies are insects that are closely related to moths, and have homes that can be moved from place to place. Throughout their lifetime they will go through four stages during their life cycle: egg, larva, pupa and adult. These animals will spend their larva and pupa stages underwater, and then emerge as a flying insect for the adult portion of

their life.

During the larva stage, this insect will build a mobile house to protect itself until it reaches adulthood. The caddis fly will fabricate a house by gluing hard materials such as sand, dried leaves, twigs and small stones to its body using a specially made silk, similar to the silk produced by spiders. This animal will select objects harder than its own shell to build a camouflaged “case.”

During construction, this animal will even assemble windows into its design – holes that allow its legs to move about. This enables the insect to eat without ever leaving its house.

The specialized silk that a caddis fly produces can also be used to make fishing nets to catch food from the flowing river. Depending on the speed of the current and the size of the catch, the caddis fly will make a net with small or large mesh to catch its prey.

Monarchs

These insects are known for flying thousands of miles to migrate, but they are also amazing architects. Similar to other butterflies, monarchs will build a chrysalis when they change from caterpillar to butterfly. To start, the



Pictured is a caddis fly in its larva stage while underwater. It builds its mobile residence with widely available materials such as sand, leaves, twigs and small stones, which it “glues” together using self-produced silk, similar to spiders.

caterpillar will find a branch where it feeds and hang by its tail using its own silk. The chrysalis is made up of chitin, the same material found in insect shells – like that of a cicada. The chrysalis will change colors from green to translucent during the development of the butterfly within.

Honeybees

Honeybees live in large groups and share the same hive. To build their hive these bees look for an ideal spot – like a tree trunk, cave, shed or high branch. Then, these insects will actually clean

the surface of the spot where the hive will be attached to make it more durable.

The hive is built of wax, which is formed into hexagon shapes. This gives the bees the most space, using the least amount of wax. Bees mix the wax with their saliva to make it flexible and then shape it with their jaws.

Baltimore Orioles

Not only are their colors bright and eye-catching, these birds are among



The metamorphosis of the monarch butterfly is illustrated here starting with the caterpillar in a green chrysalis. This chrysalis will then become translucent as the butterfly is ready to emerge. The chrysalis is made up of chitin – the same material found in insect shells, like a cicada.



Pictured is an open-air (exposed) wild honeybee hive built on a tree branch showing the honeycomb structure.

the most accomplished nest builders in the world. This is because their nests are shaped just a little differently than those of most other birds: they make a hanging, or pendulum, nest. Female Baltimore orioles will meticulously weave flexible, long strands of grass, and every now and then will intertwine

man-made materials they find, such as fishing line, to build their nests. Every year when these birds return from migration they will use the same area to build their new nests, often recycling parts of their old nests.

Brook Sticklebacks

Not all animal architects have to have arms and legs; the brook stickleback can build a nest without them. Considered a non-game fish in Nebraska, this fish is found in a few widely scattered streams and ponds north of the Platte River.

The brook stickleback will build a nest to house its eggs. This nest is



A Baltimore oriole nestling is shown in a typical pendulum-shaped nest, which is anchored firmly to a fork in the upper branches of a tree – usually American elms, but also maples and cottonwoods.



A male brook stickleback uses sticks, algae and other plant materials to build a nest, held together by a secretion from his kidneys. Nests are typically the size of a golf ball.

made of bits of plants that have been woven together to form a round nest. This unique fish will then “glue” the pieces together using a secretion from the male’s kidneys.

Prairie Dogs

Prairie dogs live in a complex network of underground tunnels, which have numerous openings for protection. If you have ever seen a prairie dog town from the top, you’ll see the raised portions on land, which are the burrow entrances. From here if you descend into the town, tunnels below the ground can spread hundreds of acres and contain thousands of animals at one time.

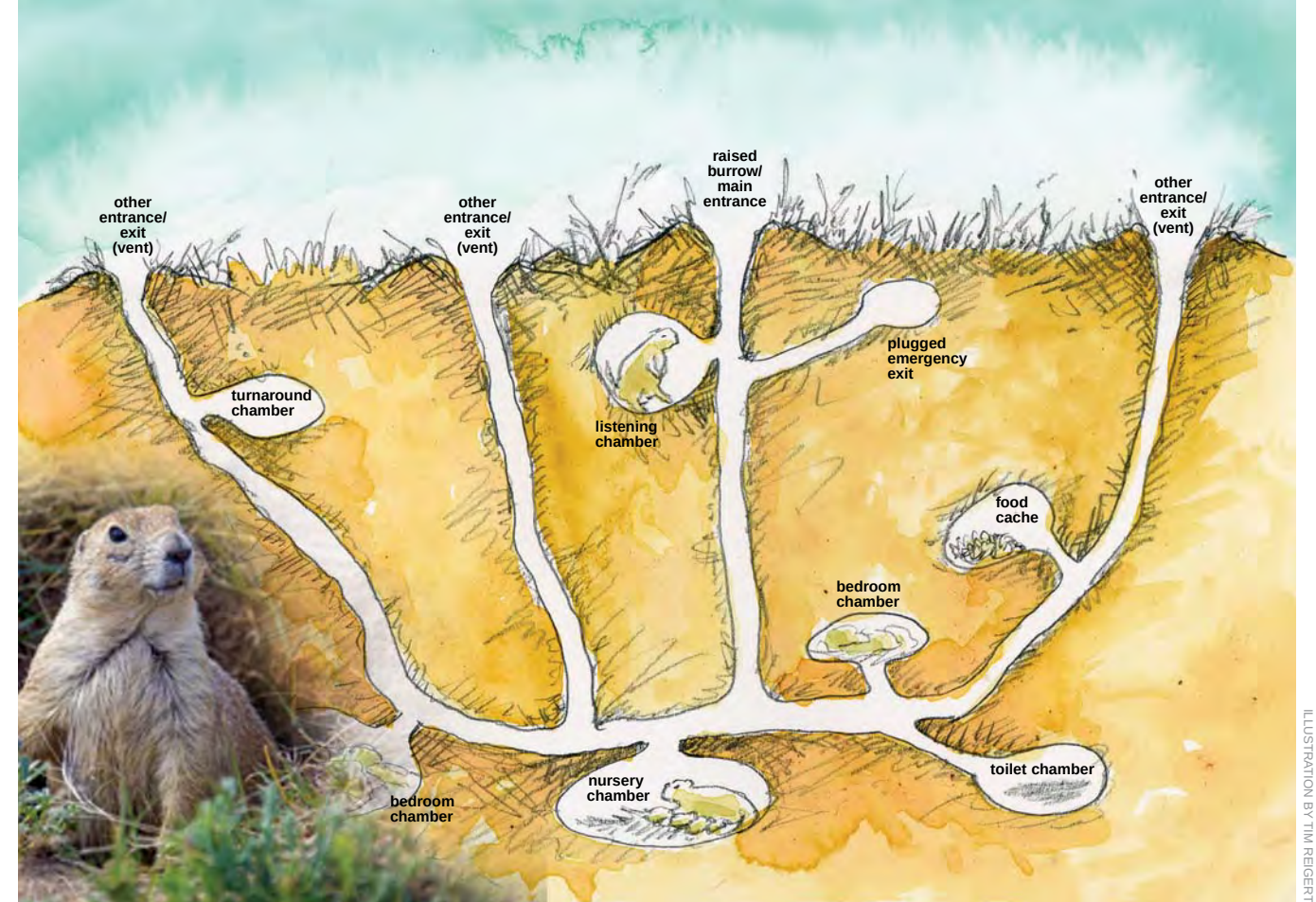
Prairie dog towns are more like exceptionally well-organized cities with different rooms built for caring for young, storing food, eliminating waste and sleeping.

So what if it floods? Well, don’t worry. They have thought of this as well: They build levees around the entrances to lessen the risk of flooding.

Paper Wasps

These insects are called paper wasps because their nests appear to be made of paper. These insects use different types of plant material, which when mixed with their saliva and eventually dried, gives the appearance of paper.

These nests will have multiple rooms which are used for rearing young and laying eggs. Paper wasps will feed on pollen and nectar, although



This is a cross section of a prairie dog town, which consists of multiple chambers that make up this tunnel network. Prairie dogs are considered a keystone species as their colonies create habitats for approximately 150 other species including snakes, burrowing owls and salamanders.

they also hunt for insects, such as caterpillars, to bring back to their growing larvae. As the larvae grow

and the colony expands, the adult paper wasps will increase the size of their nests. You can find these

nests on window sills, the eaves of houses and other sheltered areas.



A paper wasp nest is usually built from a single central stalk, and tends to have the shape of an upside down umbrella. Paper wasps will build these nests out of plant material and mix it with their saliva. When this material dries it will then become thin and film-like, giving the appearance of a paper-like material. Normally colonies of up to several dozen wasps inhabit the nest.

Within the animal kingdom there are dozens of other animal architects, from bald eagles, which build massive, heavy nests, to the small, circular beds of bluegills; from leafcutter ants that construct enormous underground tunnels to termites that can build a 26-foot-high tower with a ventilation system.

Some animals are content with finding previously used homes, but others demand nothing but the finest accommodations. These are our animal architects. ■

Monica Macoubrie is an outdoor educator for the Commission. This is her second appearance in NEBRASKAland Magazine.



Time Well Spent

What to Do in April

By Renae Blum

It's time to shake off the doldrums of winter and head outside for as many fun activities as you can think of – fishing, hiking, and morel mushroom hunting are good places to start, but don't stop there; read on for more ideas. For a complete list of upcoming events across the state, or for more information on activities listed here, visit Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov. ■



Spring Turkey Hunting Shotgun season starts April 14

Statewide

Put on your camo and grab your shotgun – spring turkey season is here. With a little planning, you can have a great experience. Big Game Program Manager Kit Hams recommends taking food with you, camping overnight, avoiding rain or snow, bringing a kid with you (“They have better hearing than old people and are more entertaining,” he quipped), taking bug spray, and tucking in shirts and pant legs to avoid ticks and chiggers. You can also take along a fishing rod, as turkeys are often heard and spotted around lakes.

7th Annual Outdoor Adventure April 28

Indian Cave State Park

Not a moment is wasted for spring-y things to do at Indian Cave's Outdoor Adventure event. With more than a dozen activities planned throughout the day, here's just a sampling: archery, kayaking, kids' horse rides, a mushroom hunt contest, a fish fry, hayrack rides, and a Raptor Recovery exhibit. Come enjoy the spring air and beautiful park grounds!



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY

Spring Muster at Fort Hartsuff April 21-22

Fort Hartsuff State Historical Park

The grounds of Fort Hartsuff State Historical Park bustle with relics of Nebraska history during the Spring Muster. Working busily are cooks preparing period meals, blacksmiths plying their trade and surgeons tending to the wounded. Meanwhile, soldiers, women and children carry out daily life at the fort. Expect to see cannon fire, roll calls, infantry drills, and civilian activities such as church services and women's sewing groups.



PHOTO BY BOB GRIER

Photograph Blooming Pasque Flowers

Throughout the month
Statewide

Easily recognized by its purple flower and hairy leaves and stems, pasque flowers are one of the earliest flowers that people see blooming in the spring, says Monica Macoubrie, a wildlife education assistant. “People know when they see this flower, spring has definitely arrived,” she writes, adding: “These small purple flowers are usually found in northern Nebraska and along the Niobrara River. Normally found in prairies, they can bloom anywhere where there is lots of sun and dry, rocky soil.”



PHOTO BY GREG WAGNER

Forage for Wild Asparagus Throughout the month

Statewide

Spring gathering of wild edibles goes beyond just morels – try wild asparagus. This wild delicacy prefers full sun and can be found in areas that have a lot of moisture but are not fully saturated. Try pastures, fence rows, meadows, ditches, roadsides and riverbeds.

OUTDOOR PAINTING

NATURE IN 2-D

By Renae Blum

Here in Nebraska, beauty surrounds us constantly. It tends to announce itself most clearly in uninterrupted moments of quiet – a long morning in a deer blind, a lazy tubing trip down the Niobrara, an evening of calm after an afternoon of hiking. Seeking out that beauty can be its own goal and reward, driving us into the

outdoors with the need to capture it forever.

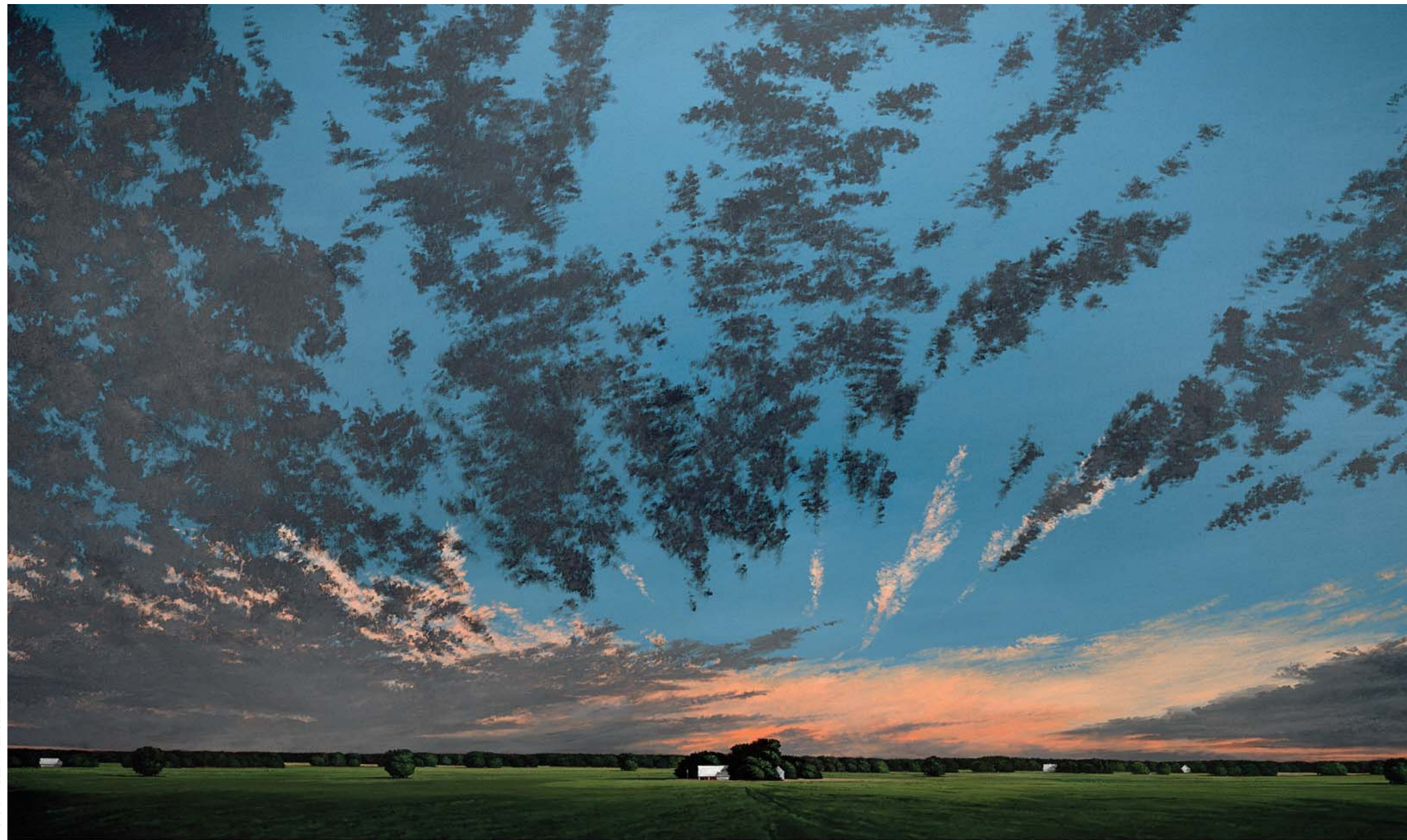
Photography is a common method, both accessible and familiar. Less well known, but growing in popularity, is the practice of painting *en plein air* – directly from nature.

Plein air (pronounced *pleyn air*) is a French term that means “open air” and refers to the act of painting on location



Frederic Remington paints at Fort Robinson in 1905. Image courtesy of the Frederic Remington Art Museum, Ogdensburg, New York.

PHOTO BY ROBERT NEWCOMBE



“Crow Call (Near the River)” by Keith Jacobshagen, 1990-1991. Oil on canvas, 46 3/16 by 80 1/8 inches. Courtesy of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.

using natural light. Some artists use their plein air pieces as inspiration for works completed in the studio, while others prefer to complete entire paintings on site. Plein air artists work within an extremely limited time frame, usually two or three hours for an entire painting, before the light and shadow alter too drastically. Artists must also contend with unpredictable weather, bugs and animals, limited equipment, and subject matter that may or may not stay in place. On the other hand, plein air pieces often have a freshness and vitality that is lacking in studio work. Young artists are often encouraged to paint en plein air, as it provides a

masterclass on painting realistic light and color.

A plein air painter does not copy nature or include everything she sees. Instead, the challenge is to winnow down a scene into its most essential shapes, and arrange them into an aesthetically pleasing composition. A good plein air piece captures the spirit of a particular time and place, and inspires the viewer to experience the emotion and wonder that drew the artist to that site in the first place.

Nationally acclaimed painter Keith Jacobshagen of Lincoln has been painting en plein air for more than 50 years. “The best compliment I get is

when someone tells me, ‘We drive out to my grandparents’ house every couple of weeks, and all of a sudden, I am really enjoying looking at the landscape. Before that, I was just kind of bored.’”

Plein air painting is deeply personal, often connected to an artist’s upbringing and earliest memories. Jacobshagen’s father was a pilot who scrutinized the skies and appreciated their beauty. “I remember as a kid, him coming into the house and saying, ‘You’ve got to look at this cumulous cloud,’” he said. What Jacobshagen saw mesmerized him. “There’d be a whole line of thunderstorms out there, stretching from horizon to horizon,

with the late afternoon sun on them. Just extraordinary. So I started looking pretty early on, paying attention to it.”

Painter Debra Joy Groesser of Ralston grew up camping, fishing and hiking with her family. “Dad just instilled a love of nature in us,” she said. “I think about all those memories when I’m out painting. You just feel like you’re home again, almost.”

Among the rewards of plein air is a renewed connection with nature. “If you have a love for nature and being outdoors, there’s no greater gift or joy than just being able to sit and study nature for three hours,” said artist Todd A. Williams of Central City. “There’s



PAINTING BY TODD A. WILLIAMS

“Victorian Garden — Lauritzen Gardens” by Todd A. Williams. Oil, 9 by 12 inches.



PHOTO BY REBECCA WILLIAMS

Todd A. Williams (in white) supervises his Joslyn Museum plein air painting class held at the Lauritzen Gardens in Omaha.

just something it does for you mentally and spiritually.”

The more a person is exposed to outdoor painting, the more likely they are to see the outdoors in a completely different way. Groesser describes it as a light bulb switching on. She watches for it in her students, and she’s noticed it in her husband, who often accompanies her in the field. “It’s really fun to hear him say, ‘Oh gosh, look at the pinks in those clouds, the purple in those hills,’” she said.

Groesser, Williams and Jacobshagen, all nationally-recognized professional artists, say that Nebraska offers a landscape that is as unique and rich with inspiration as anywhere else in the

world. They appreciate its diversity, its awe-inspiring horizons, its subtle beauty, its stunning light. A visiting painter friend told Groesser that Nebraska’s light in February is “as beautiful as Tuscany.”

“It’s a difficult landscape to paint, because there are so many subtleties to it,” Groesser said. “But it’s incredibly beautiful.”

If you’re interested in learning how to paint en plein air, the best way to get started is to take a class. Some professional plein air artists, like Williams and Groesser, offer workshops and classes. Beginning art courses at local universities and community colleges are also a good



PHOTO BY RENAE BLUM

Debra Joy Groesser is president and CEO of the American Impressionist Society and has painted en plein air since 1997. She is pictured above painting on-site at Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center.



PHOTO BY RENAE BLUM

Groesser puts some finishing touches on her painting “Spring Creek Prairie” (oil, 8 by 16 inches).

launching pad.

Even if you never pick up a brush, you can still experience some of what makes plein air painting special. “Just sitting and staring at the light in your backyard sometimes can be enough,” Jacobshagen said. He acknowledged that in our busy, complex lives, this is often seen as a waste of time. “But I think when you pay attention to what’s

out there, when you pay attention to the landscape and the sky, it’s regenerative. It’s a very positive thing to do, whether you’re an artist or not.” ■

To learn more about the artists featured in this article, visit keithjacobshagen.net, toddwilliamsfineart.com, and debrajoygroesser.com.

Windflower

a delicate prairie wildflower

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist,
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

As a botanist, I often wander about in prairies, pondering their presettlement flora. The writings of Nebraska’s early botanists sometimes relieve my curiosity, providing insight into the abundance and habitats of our prairie grasses and wildflowers before intense cropping, fenced herds of cattle and herbicides. Case in point, digging deep into Roscoe Pound and Frederic Clements’ 1897 *The Phytogeography of Nebraska*, I recently found fine prose regarding one of my favorite spring wildflowers – windflower (*Anemone caroliniana*).

“[Windflowers] are to be found regularly and in great abundance over the sides of and summits of sandy hills, and particularly subsand hills or sandstone hills. ... [Here it] occurs in conspicuous patches, not infrequently several meters in extent. ... These patches are carpet-like in nature, and when variegated with the diversely colored flowers which run from white to deep purple through several shades of blue give a most striking character to the floral covering. Frequently it is to be found as well in low meadows, in which the whole plant is greatly reduced in size, and the patches are much diminished or are often represented by a few straggling individuals.”

Windflower Natural History

Legend has it that windflower was named because its flowers open with the coming of the spring breezes. It is also called prairie anemone and Carolina anemone. The latter name is misleading, as the species ranges well beyond the Carolinas, extending westward into central Nebraska. In the mesic eastern United States it occupies open, rocky woods



The blue form of windflower.

and barrens, while in the drier Great Plains it occupies prairies.

As Pound and Clements state, the delicate perennial grows as scattered individuals or in colonies. At the stem’s base, just below ground, are fingernail-sized tubers, storage organs. From these spread rhizomes, which grow new tubers at their ends. The year after their formation, the tubers sprout leaves or leaves and flowering stems. Windflower leaves, small, three-lobed and toothed, are nestled about an inch above the ground; only keen eyes can detect non-flowering plants among the prairie flora.

Among the first wildflowers to emerge from winter slumber, windflower sends forth white, blue or pinkish-purple blooms as early as mid-April. The lone, inch-wide flowers have 14 to 20 oblong sepals radiating from a central, yellow disc and are balanced on slender peduncles that rise several inches above the ground. In the buttercup family (*Ranunculaceae*), to which windflower belongs, the sepals, which form the outer whorl of flowers and are typically green and somewhat leaf-like, are petal-like in form and color, and true petals are lacking.

The flowers last but a week or two before withering and forming seed heads. As the seeds mature, the flower stalks, similar to those of dandelions, elongate and the heads fluff out, exposing the feathery-haired seeds to dispersing winds.

Windflower at Gjerloff Prairie

Bill Whitney, director of the Prairie Plains Resource Institute based in Aurora, first encountered windflower on a April afternoon in the early 1980s while botanizing a Platte River hay meadow. That day, he gazed upon prolific windflower blooms on a level, sandy loam river terrace. Over the years at other local prairies, the lean and sun-worn Whitney has observed only scattered windflowers that never bloom. “The variability in windflower abundance and



Windflowers close at night and open with the warmth of the morning sun.

PHOTO BY GERRY STEINAUER

flowering between prairies is interesting. It is one of those obscure, little plants we know little about,” Whitney said.

“It was strange, but after the severe drought of 2012, windflower went gangbusters at our Gjerloff Prairie,” Whitney said. Owned by Prairie Plains and located on the south bluff of the Platte River in Hamilton County, the 160-acre Gjerloff Prairie consists of flat-bottomed canyons with intervening knobs and plateaus with loess soils. Here, windflower grows on flats and gentle slopes, and avoids steeper hillsides.

Whitney explained that at Gjerloff the drought stressed the dominant grasses, such as big and little bluestem, leaving openings in the prairie sod. With reduced competition, in 2013 windflower began to spread via rhizomes, flowered more, and likely produced more seed and eventually seedlings.

Not only the drought, but management at Gjerloff also has stimulated windflower and other wildflowers, such as prairie violet, puccoons and wild dandelion. In recent years, Prairie Plains has burned portions of the prairie in April. Then, a few weeks later after the grass has sprouted, staff turn cattle out on the prairie for a few months. Though they have access to burned and unburned grassland, the cattle mostly graze the fresh and nutritious grass regrowth on burned areas and generally avoid grazing wildflowers, allowing

them to flourish. This management attempts to simulate the presettlement disturbance pattern of periodic prairie wildfires and grazing by roaming bison herds under which the prairie flora evolved and thrived.

Prior to its purchase by Prairie Plains in 2002, Gjerloff Prairie had sparse wildflowers, but now it has a rich native flora, beautiful and inspiring. “After the dreariness of winter, I look forward to the fleeting burst of windflowers,” Whitney said. “It tells me spring is coming.” ■



As windflower seed heads mature, they fluff out, exposing the feathery-haired seeds to dispersing winds.

PHOTO BY GERRY STEINAUER



PHOTO BY CHRIS HELZER

A colony of white windflowers on a Platte River bluff prairie in Hall County. Because colonies are a single genetic individual, their flowers are of one color.

Countdown for the Crew

Nebraska's Turkey Hunting Opener

Story and photos by Jeff Kurrus

This year's youth spring turkey hunting shotgun opener can't come soon enough. On Saturday, April 7, Jake Heard of Gretna, along with three members of his hunting crew, including me, will begin the season.

A week later, the adults get their turn.





Bill and Jake Heard of Gretna spring turkey hunt on private land outside of Lincoln. Last season was the first turkey season for Jake, who has been spending his time leading up to this year's opener by working on his calling.



The start of the turkey season means an extra cab full of supplies, including bows, shotguns, decoys, and anything else that could help turn the tide versus what could be Nebraska's most addictive gamebirds.

I've never been more excited for a turkey season than this year. I'm excited for turkey season each year, of course, but this year has a different level of anticipation because I no longer have to suffer my turkey hunting nightmares alone. Now our newly formed four-person hunting crew shares these with me.

It was a crew formed during last winter's goose hunting season, and contains hunting partner Bill Heard, his 9-year-old son Jake, and my 5-year-old son Eli.

So for the last month, as temperatures begin to warm and birds begin to reappear from their large, winter flocks, every person in the crew has been getting ready.

While Bill is lining up hunting spots, Eli, who

doesn't even carry a gun, is watching any turkey hunting video he can and spending his Saturday afternoons in the front yard setting up decoys and shooting them and duck decoys with his Nerf guns.

At the same time, Jake and I had this conversation yesterday.

"Jeff, how much longer?" he asked.

"Your season opens April 7th," I answered.

"Have you been practicing?"

"Yes, with the box call. And it sounds really good."

"How about the slate?"

"Still working on it, but I'm getting better."

Not your typical conversation with a 9-year-old – unless he is just as excited for the season to start as

the rest of the crew.

And excitement is what you get from Jake. Starting at the age of 6, he's walked more field edges for bobwhites than most adults I know, and when the sun goes down is the most disappointing part of his day. For that day has been filled with Big League chew gum, Charlie Daniels music (*The Devil Went Down to Georgia* is especially popular) and searching for anything on the ground that might garner the interest of him or his 5-year-old hunting partner Eli. These artifacts might include spent shotgun shells, turkey feathers, or on



Box calls remain an essential supply for the spring turkey hunter, especially for young hunters because they are relatively easy to use.

a top-notch day, a white-tailed deer antler shed. The day can't get any better – unless it does.

For artifact searching will stop when anyone hears the first gobble, and these hollowed sounds that send tremors through a hunter's soul are felt most by Bill and me – for each of us has a story from the previous year that still keeps us up at night.

Bill's occurred during a hunt outside of Lincoln with Jake and me, when two toms responded to us from a distance but never came closer. When, a half-hour later, Bill decided it was time for us to make a move in the direction of the last calls we had heard, those two toms were staring at he and Jake from a spot just outside of shooting range, and then ran as fast as they could in the opposite direction as Jake was unable to get a good shot.

Mine occurred while driving near land where we hunt and saw a tom in full strut in the middle of the field. I slowed my truck down and pulled off the side of the road, photographing as I did.



Seeing me, but apparently unconcerned, the tom remained with a pair of hens, following them wherever they went. He continued this as the hens continued to walk west of where I was parked, across the road, and then out of sight.

Meanwhile, the tom, about 60 yards from me and losing ground from the hens, turned and went into full strut not 20 yards from me, turning back and



forth, making sure I got to see the whole show for several minutes before finally lowering his wings and continuing his pursuit of the hens.

It was June 1, one day after the hunting season closed.

They just seem to know that they'll keep you awake for the rest of the year.

But this year will be different. For we have a four-man crew now – a gum-chewing, fiddle listening, elementary-school-skipping group of first-year, second-year, and lifelong hunters who want nothing more than to settle a score from the year before – as well as start a new rivalry with another one of our favorite Nebraska gamebirds. ■

Opposite, top: Jake Heard of Gretna holds up an antler shed he found while turkey hunting last spring.

Opposite: A tom turkey walks through a field in Cass County.

Top: A pair of turkey hunters leave the woods near sunset in Dawes County, no doubt planning their next time afield.

Right: On June 1, the day after the spring turkey season closed, this tom turkey came within 20 yards of the author's truck.



Big Red Water Wolves

Fly-fishing for Pike in Nebraska

Story and photos by Ryan Sparks

Strong and aggressive, northern pike are the alpha predators of freshwater. Being at the top of the food chain, they have little to fear and viciously attack anything they can swallow, including frogs, crayfish, mice, muskrats, other fish and even baby birds. Due to their voracity, pike have many nicknames: northern, gators, snakes, slough sharks and water wolves, just to name a few. Most fly anglers think they must travel to remote locations in Canada to experience this aggression, but Nebraska has many bodies of water where anglers can

target pike.

Until recently, Nebraska anglers had to head to the Sandhills to find good pike fishing, and while that area continues to produce quality fish, now anglers in the eastern part of the state can enjoy prime pike fishing at Lake Wanahoo. Most bodies of water in Nebraska that contain pike are tailor-made for fly-fishing with deep creek channels, rip rap points, flooded timber and abundant vegetation. With quality pike fishing within striking distance of anywhere in the state, now is a great time to chase them with a fly rod.

Location, Location, Location

Northern pike are forenamed “northern” for a reason, and Nebraska marks the southern edge of their range. Yet pike can adapt to a wide variety of conditions. They live in small ponds, big lakes, and even rivers; can tolerate turbid water and low oxygen levels; and rarely die from winterkill. Adults prefer water temperatures in the mid 50s, while juvenile fish don’t mind temperatures in the low 70s. This means that many lakes in Nebraska become too warm for pike during hot summer months. When you find pike, they will likely accept your fly, so locating fish is the most important skill in a pike angler’s repertoire. The crucial part to catching pike on the fly is identifying lakes that contain pike and then isolating areas within those lakes where you are likely to find them.

Luckily for anglers in Nebraska, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission does yearly pike samplings throughout the state and shares this information with the public. For those in the west, Valentine National Wildlife Refuge contains some of the best pike fishing in the state, including **Dewey** and **Hackberry lakes**. During 2016 surveys, Hackberry contained both the highest density of pike as well as the largest pike sampled – a toothy monster measuring 40 inches. **Box Butte** and **Merritt reservoirs** are also excellent locations for pike, with many anglers landing trophy fish every year. Perhaps most exciting for eastern anglers is the healthy population of pike in **Lake Wanahoo**, just 30 miles north of Lincoln. The majority of fish in Wanahoo are between 20 and 30 inches, but several fish collected during the yearly sampling approached the coveted 40-inch mark. In years to come, there will be massive specimens lurking in Wanahoo, as pike in warm water grow more quickly than their far north cousins.

With this information, finding a lake containing pike is easy, but once on the water, locating pike can seem like a daunting task. Lake Wanahoo, for example, is more than 650 acres and the amount of structure in the lake,

including long lines of trees, creeks and bays, makes it seem even larger. By knowing what conditions pike favor, you can eliminate large swaths of water and narrow your search dramatically.

The first consideration should be water temperature which, more than any other factor, dictates a pike’s behavior. In spring, pike go on a feeding binge just before the spawn. This feeding often begins even before the ice is off, when water temperatures are still in the mid-thirties. During and immediately after the spawn, feeding will slow, only to pick up again a few weeks later.

As water temperatures continue to climb, feeding activity slows dramatically and pike descend into the depths of the lake to find cooler water. However, smaller “hammer handle” pike will stay in the shallows nearly year-round, making them a fun target in the height of summer when large adults are too deep for fly tackle.

Pike favor places where they can hide and wait for their prey. Being ambush hunters, pike are sprinters, not marathon runners, and stay camouflaged until an unsuspecting

baitfish wanders too close. Pike can’t sustain their initial burst of speed for long, but their lightning quick attack takes place in the blink of an eye. Downed timber, large rock piles and weed lines are especially productive features. While pike are territorial and don’t school like other fish, they do travel in close proximity to one another so if you catch one, there are likely more nearby.

Seasons of the Pike

Pike are one of the first fish of the year to move shallow. This makes them a welcomed relief for fly anglers anxiously waiting to shake off winter doldrums. Pike begin their “spring” as soon as the ice creeps off the water, and so should you. Spring is undoubtedly the best time to catch pike on a fly rod. There is no other time of the year when you can find large, aggressive pike in shallow water.

Look for fish in shallow bays with dark mud bottoms because these areas warm more quickly than the rest of the

lake. Other potential areas are locations where feeder creeks drain water into the lake. Pike spawn over vertical vegetation, so if you find one or more of these conditions, slow down and work the area thoroughly. Pike will remain shallow after they spawn until the water warms and pushes them out of the shallows.

While summer is not as productive, the persistent fly angler can still catch fish. If you found a fruitful bay in spring and notice the pike getting smaller, chances are the bigger fish have moved deeper. Begin looking at the first major drop-off outside of bays. During the summer, pike prefer depths of 5-20 feet of water, ideally with healthy green vegetation. Vegetation provides shelter for baitfish, and affords pike the cover to wait in ambush. These areas are usually unswadable and require a canoe, float tube or boat to access. Just because pike are deeper doesn’t mean they won’t take a fly. You just need to work a little to find them.

In fall, fly-fishing for pike is feast or famine. It can be an outstanding time to catch large pike, as fish feed heavily in

An early-season pike with a colorful mouthful of fly.



Lake Wanahoo’s vast diversity and size makes a great location in eastern Nebraska to fly-fish for pike.

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER



Eight, nine, and ten weight rods, sturdy reels, and large flies are the name of the game.

preparation for winter and are heavier than at any other time of the year. However, it can also mean long days of fruitless casting when cold fronts send pike deep.

The biggest key is to stay mobile. Try a variety of depths and types of cover until you begin to catch fish. Pike move frequently at this time, following both their desired water temperature and baitfish. The colder the water, the more lethargic pike become. Your retrieve should reflect these considerations.

In the fall, I like to make very long slow strips to make my fly look like an easy meal. I use the largest streamers during the fall, and flies of 8 to 12 inches are common. Just like people, pike crave hearty meals when the weather turns cold.

Gearing Up

The mistake most people make when selecting a fly rod for pike is thinking they should match the weight of the rod to the size of the fish they intend to catch. Yes, you can handle a decent pike on a six weight, but that same rod can't cast the large, sometimes heavy flies used for pike. Flies for pike can be big and air-resistant. For this reason, an eight, nine or ten weight rod is best. If you aren't sure about fly-fishing for pike and just want to try it, it's possible to "overline" a rod, or use a line one size larger than what your rod is rated

for. This will help you cast large flies, although it's not ideal.

Floating lines are fun in spring and early summer when pike will strike surface flies like frog or mouse imitations, but the majority of fly-fishing for pike takes place with a sinking line. Sinking lines help your flies get down to where the pike are. They also allow you to fish unweighted flies, which is a welcomed relief after a few hours of casting. Pike leaders are very simple – keep them short and strong. Pike aren't line shy, and a leader of four or five feet is plenty.

For leader material, you have two options. The first is wire. There is always the chance of hooking the fish of a lifetime and many people use knotable wire for that reason. I sometimes use wire, but it is expensive and cumbersome to work with. Most of my pike fishing takes place with 50-pound fluorocarbon line. Fluorocarbon is abrasion resistant and the thick diameter keeps pike from biting through it. Keep an eye out for nicks though. Even a small pike can scratch up the leader, weakening it significantly.

You want a fly reel with a smooth drag, but don't worry about line capacity. As mentioned before, pike are sprinters, and don't have the stamina to make large runs. If you think fly-fishing for pike is something you will enjoy, you might consider purchasing a spare spool for your reel. An extra spool allows you to quickly switch between a floating and sinking line with only one reel. Other pike-specific equipment include a stream thermometer for checking the water

temperature, needle nose pliers to keep your fingers away from sharp teeth when removing a hook, and jaw spreaders for stubborn pike that clamp down on your fly and won't let go. Like anything, you can make your pike fishing as technical or straightforward as you wish.

Flies

There is a general perception that pike are gullible, stupid fish. While they are aggressive, they channel this aggression toward items they perceive as food, and will quickly flee if they sense danger. Like other fish, pike become educated as fishing pressure increases. Many pike have never seen a fly or lure, and these fish are the easiest to catch. Yet, lakes with good fishing develop a reputation, and these susceptible pike quickly become wise. Fly anglers live by the credo "match the hatch," and this is as true of pike as any other species, especially pressured pike.

For those unfamiliar with the phrase, "match the hatch" simply means imitating whatever naturals are present in a body of water. Pike have a varied diet, and this means using flies that imitate everything from small minnows to fleeing crayfish to adult bass. In the spring, I have found medium-sized baitfish imitations work well, and flies such as large white woolly buggers, bunny leeches and deceivers are good choices. Summer sees the most life of the year in any lake, which expands your options. Skating a mouse or frog pattern across the surface is exciting spring through summer, and can even be successful in fall if the conditions are right.

Fall is the time to offer up the largest flies of the year, and long articulated



Flies from left to right include a chartreuse swamp buck, Cohen's baby bird, Bish-A-Rat, and a deceiver.

flies, or those with two connected hooks, are highly productive. Of course, much of this is dependent on the lake. The important part is to imitate what the pike are already eating. If there is a large population of small bluegill present in your lake, use flies that imitate the color, movement and profile of those bluegill. The same goes for any forage species you might encounter.

The Water Wolf at Your Door

Fly-fishing for pike is fun and challenging, and the rewards are often

measured in feet! Undoubtedly, some of the thrill of pike fishing lies in the sheer size of the fish. The 40-inch barrier is a hard one to break, but there are certainly a few fish of that size or larger swimming in Nebraska. In fact, now might be the best time in Nebraska's history to catch a giant pike.

The official state record caught in 1997 weighed just over 30 pounds, but in 2014, Jake Rodiek caught and released what would have been a new state record at an unnamed public lake in northern Nebraska. Rodiek's pike measured 45 inches long with a girth of 27.5 inches. Applying formulas

used by fisheries biologists to calculate fish weight based on length and girth measurements, that puts his catch around 33 pounds. Even better, Rodiek released the fish, making it possible for another angler to hook the fish of a lifetime. Without a doubt, there are some huge pike swimming in Nebraska. Monsters with big teeth may be scary, but they are also a ton of fun on a fly rod. ■

Ryan Sparks is a freelance writer and photographer originally from Louisville, Nebraska. He has been contributing to NEBRASKAland since 2017.



The author holds a 41-inch pike he caught on a BT bunny fly in a marshy bay.

Sighthunting for Fish

If you can see them, this is how you catch them.

By Jeff Kurrus

The old fishing adage I grew up with of “If you can see the fish, you can’t catch the fish” followed me most of my fishing life until I found myself on a lake in Minnesota watching gigantic, black blobs swim back and forth through the water. My fishing partner and I made repeated casts toward these blobs, knowing they were smallmouth bass, only to have them ignore every offering we made. Until we picked up our fly rods.

For the next six hours, we had one of our most memorable days on the water, complete with lunkers we got to the boat and other stumps that we never could talk into hitting. But the best part was that for each fish, we got to watch the entire show, start to finish.

Since that day, I have been in love with sightfishing for any number of

species. Here are a few tips to increase your own sightfishing success:

First, sunny, windless days are a great time to go for species like crappie, bluegill and smallmouth bass. The shine from above and the glassy surface allows you to see into the water. With this ability to see, however, also comes the ability of the fish to see you.

Get used to making long casts toward potentially wary fish, and make sure you wear nondescript, earth-colored clothing to keep yourself camouflaged. Some anglers will also wear fish masks. When I’m fly-fishing for carp, I make sure I have plenty of insect repellent as well, because I’ll frequently crawl to a creek edge in search of these extremely cautious fish.

Another thing to consider is what you should be looking for. Fish is the easiest answer to this question, yet

you’re not always looking for fish. Pay attention if a strand of grass or a reed moves in the water. Then make your cast as accurate as possible. Personally, I’ve found I can do that best with fly tackle, and I can also minimize the amount of splash I have when my offering hits the surface when using a bug or fly attached to something as small as a four-pound leader.

Last, understand that sightfishing is not a numbers game. Some days you’re hunting for one fish. There have been days when I didn’t come close to casting.

Whether you cast or not, using sightfishing as a legitimate strategy can be fruitful and is definitely exciting. Out of my most memorable fishing trips from last year, sightfishing had a part in each of them. The heart just seems to beat a little bit faster when you can see the fish you’re trying to catch. ■



These bluegills are clearly visible on their beds and would make for an exciting day of sightfishing.

PHOTO BY JULE GEISER



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school students.

The AWLS school offers hands-on lessons focused around the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation as well as engaging take-home lessons on conservation education that have been integrated into K-12 math, science, language arts, social studies and physical education.

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In addition, content-relevant field trips provide real world experiences they can take back and share with the students in their classroom.

The Nebraska Chapter of Safari Club International has scholarships available to educators in Nebraska.

For more information contact Greg Middleton at glpm3751@gmail.com. ■



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◀ Attached is a photo we believe was taken in the early 1920s after a successful day of fishing in the Omaha area.

The man on the left is W.J. Petersen, the owner of the truck. He was a first-generation American as his parents were born in Denmark. He worked as a general contractor in Omaha as noted on the truck. We believe W.J. Petersen was a great-uncle to my mom, Esther Petersen Rishel, who grew up in Omaha in the 1920s and 1930s. The other two men in the photo are unknown.

– Steven Rishel, Plattsmouth



▲ We were hunting from a duck blind on Stevenson's Lake west of Petersburg in October of 1974. A pheasant flew right over the top of George Fritton's blind, who has been featured in a previous Portraits of the Past [August-September 2013], and flew straight at us like a Kamikaze. My dad, Bill Leifeld, shot it out of the sky. "I had to shoot it," he said. "It was self-defense." A lifelong resident of Petersburg, Bill is now 92 years old.

– Ron Leifeld, Alva, Florida



▲ This picture was taken in 1930 northeast of Elm Creek during a coyote hunt. In those days, coyote hunts were quite common in the winter. The hunters would meet and spread out around several sections of land, depending on how many hunters showed up. At a predetermined time, the hunters would walk toward the center and any coyotes would be surrounded.

My great-grandfather, Herman Kunstman, is in the center holding the coyote and his Winchester Model 12 shotgun, which he bought new in 1928. He handed the gun down to my grandfather, Wayne Kaps, who hunted with the gun around Elm Creek and Broken Bow for many years before passing it down to my father, Steve Kaps, who has now passed it down to another generation that will carry on the family tradition of hunting in Nebraska.

– Tyler Kaps, Lincoln

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKAland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1980. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Text may be edited and photos adjusted for reproduction. All photos will be returned.



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My Time on the Lek

The thrill of the dance.

By April E. Casey

When the Pine Ridge Rangers erected a lek viewing blind on the Oglala National Grasslands, I jumped at the chance to experience the dance of the sharp-tailed grouse. For years I had researched private and public blinds. Distance and weather concerns kept me home, but this blind was nearby. I packed blankets, camera, water and snacks and made my way to the blind.

Flashlight in hand, I stowed my gear and settled in. Wrapped in the blind's cocoon, I quietly waited. Shortly before twilight I heard the whoosh of wings and a solitary coo, followed by the rushing sound of dozens of wings and boisterous coos and warbles. I peeled open the portal hole coverings. Wonderment gave way to delight. Directly below were several males.

Fascinated, I watched them pair up, facing one another. They cooed and warbled. Then, feathers puffed out, each would crouch. One would rise and look around. Then the other. Suddenly, wings stiffly spread wide, purple air sac filled, rump up, head down, tail feathers on display, one would begin to dance. Rapidly stamping while the low staccato buzz of snapping tail feathers filled the air, the grouse turned in small circles and charged forward. The challenger would rise and they would face one another in a dance-off. This stamping was repeated across the lek as the males paired with first one, then another, challenger. The air was filled with sound.

Suddenly the birds froze. Silence fell. Observing females took note and, moments later, the ritual resumed. Males returned to their favored dance area and challengers zipped back and forth.

Engrossed in photographing the birds, I had yet to record them when a shadow swept across the lek. The grouse disappeared. A hawk, taking advantage of the lower terrain surrounding the lek, had flown up the north side,

unseen until swooping across the lek, making a grab for an unsuspecting grouse.

All was quiet. Shadows lifted. The light warmed. The grasslands were bathed in gold and dotted with patches of white wildflowers. From a nearby pond, frogs added their voice to the calls of red-winged blackbirds and meadowlarks. Then, with a whoosh of wings and boisterous calls, the grouse returned.

Golden light revealed a dozen pairs of males dotting the lek. The calls and sounds of the dance surrounded the blind. My favorites were the pair who claimed the area below me. Their dance often included a flight onto the blind's roof where the pounding of stamping feet boomed.

As the light brightened I began to record. Males stomped and zipped around the lek. I barely knew who to keep my eye on when suddenly they were gone. With a dramatic swoop, the hawk had returned.

I remained. The grouse returned, but the dance was over. The birds lounged about, then dispersed. I followed, thrilled with my morning adventure.

You, too, can enjoy the thrill of the dance. Free public blinds can be reserved at The Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, (308) 762-4893; Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, (402) 376-3789 or (403) 376-1889; and NCORPE southwest of North Platte, (308) 534-6752 or (308) 535-8025.

First-served blinds are at Bessey Ranger District near Halsey, (308) 533-2257; and Oglala National Grasslands near Crawford, (308) 432-0300. Paid viewing excursions include Prairie Chicken Dance Tours near McCook, (308) 345-1200; The Sandhills Motel and Glidden Canoe Rental near Mullen, (308) 546-2206 or (888) 278-6167; and Calamus Outfitters near Burwell, (308) 346-4697. Dress warmly, arrive well before dawn, bring binoculars and a camera, and indulge yourself in the exuberance of the dance. ■

April E. Casey is a freelance writer living in Hemingford. This is her first appearance in NEBRASKAland Magazine.

N See a video and hear the sounds of sharp-tailed grouse booming on a lek in spring in Nebraska.



PHOTO BY APRIL CASEY

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Breaking the Ice

Last spring, I made a phone call to high school basketball coach and my hunting partner Bill Heard. “I have a turkey hunting photoshoot in the Pine Ridge in a few days and I’m needing a guy to photograph who would look the part. Any ideas?”

Bill thought for a moment. “What about Chandler?”

Jacob Chandler was a former player of Bill’s who, after finishing up school, went on to become an Omaha firefighter. While I had hunted with Jacob before, I hadn’t thought about him being a possible model for us.

“Has he ever done anything like this professionally?” I asked Bill.

You could sense Bill smiling on the other end of the phone. “Professionally?” Bill questioned. “Well...”

A day later, I was at Bill’s and asked him to clarify his response about Jacob. He walked over to a pile of old newspaper articles about players he used to coach, and pulled out a Chippendales-like calendar with a cover featuring 12 shirtless firefighters – Jacob among them.

Fast-forward a few days later as our group of photographers, models and director started our turkey hunting photoshoot.

I view my job as a photographer to make everyone as comfortable as possible with me and this process; the models are about to see our cameras in their faces for the next 10 hours.

So as we began the first location, and it was Jacob’s turn to work, I took a knee and began to click the button on my camera. I shot a couple of frames with him posing as he liked, then I said, “Give me a look like you did for that bare-chested fireman calendar.”

As the group laughed behind us, this look was Jacob’s response, the exact look that he gave in the firefighter calendar. A true professional. ■

Jeff Kurrus
Feb. 1, 2018



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