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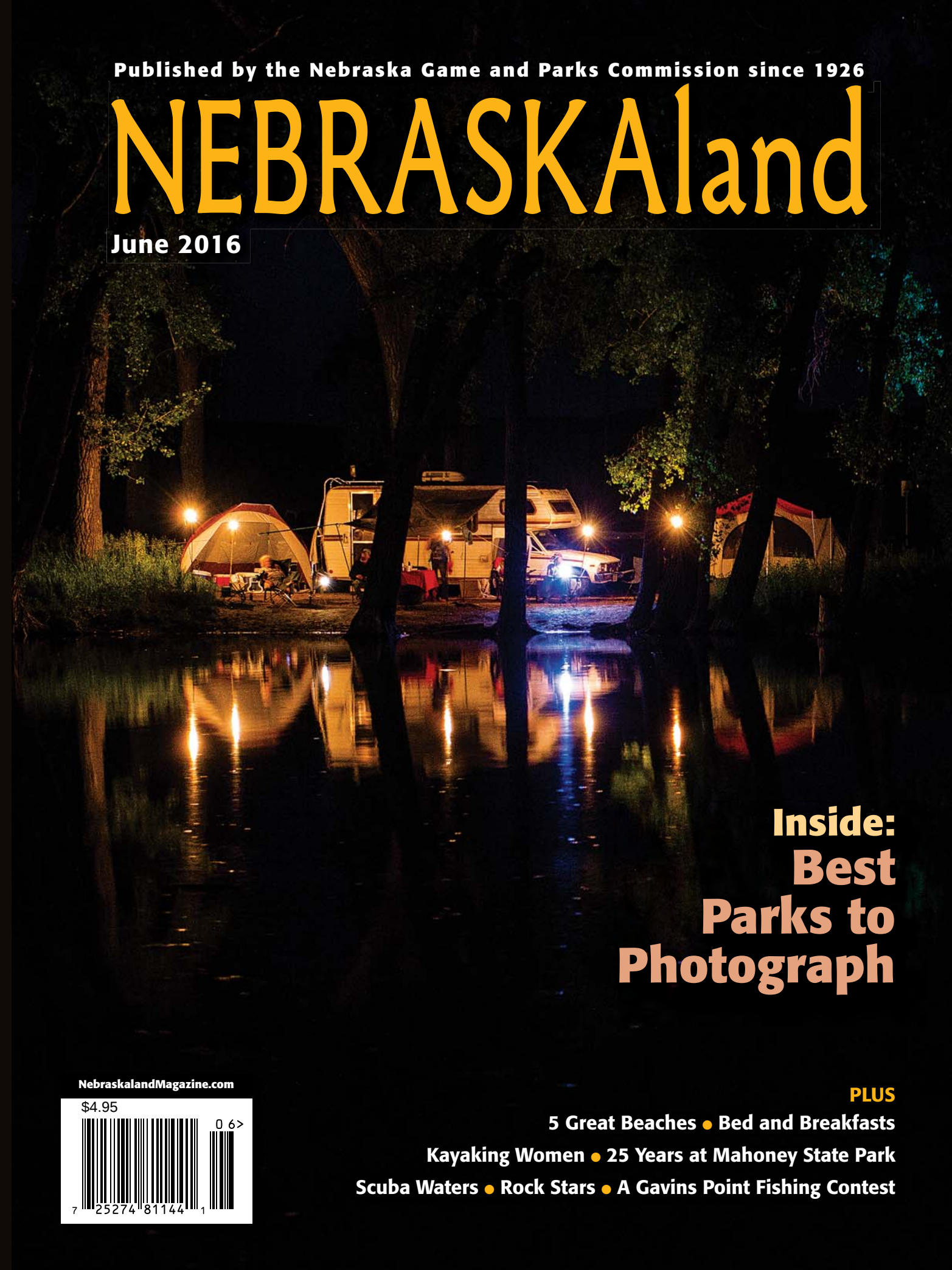
NEBRASKAland

June 2016



The photographer takes a cold seat under the falls at Smith Falls State Park in Cherry County. Photo by Jeff Kurrus.

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NEBRASKAland Magazine

Volume 94 • No. 5 • June 2016

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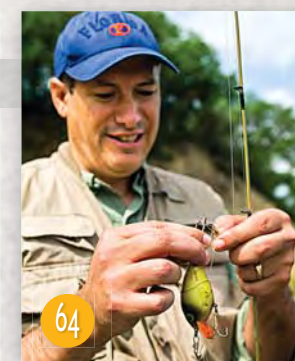
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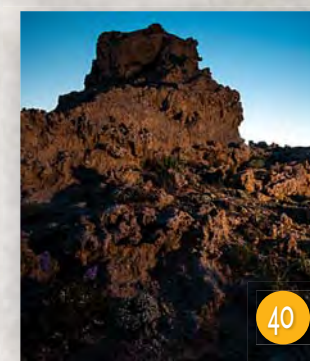
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Cover: A campsite is reflected in the still water of the inlet at Lake Minatare State Recreation Area. Night or day, June brings anglers to this popular fishing spot in the western Panhandle. Photo by Justin Haag.

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64



40



54



Above: Brian Foster runs 108 bluebird boxes and fledges over 200 birds annually southeast of Bartley. "As of April 23, I had 28 active nests with 115 eggs and 16 babies," Foster said.

Below: Beth Merkle photographed lilac in bloom at Arbor Lodge. "One of the things I enjoy about Nebraska is how Nebraskans embrace the outdoors and all it has to offer," said Merkle. "I lived in Minnesota for 25 years and can count the number of times I visited a state park on one hand. Relocating here just three years ago I've already visited seven state parks and several historical and wildlife management areas."



Dear *NEBRASKAland*,
During a morel outing, I was asked by a good friend, Brad, to go walk a little piece of property he leased for hunting along the Elkhorn River (which was his first mushroom hunt ever). It was slow going at first, but after the recent rain and the warm spring days we had, I was sure we would run into them.

After about an hour of walking and checking stands, we ran into our first big patch of morels. After covering a little more ground we ran into the biggest morel mushroom I have ever seen in my life. I know others have probably found bigger, but in my 27 years of mushroom hunting this is the biggest one I had ever seen.

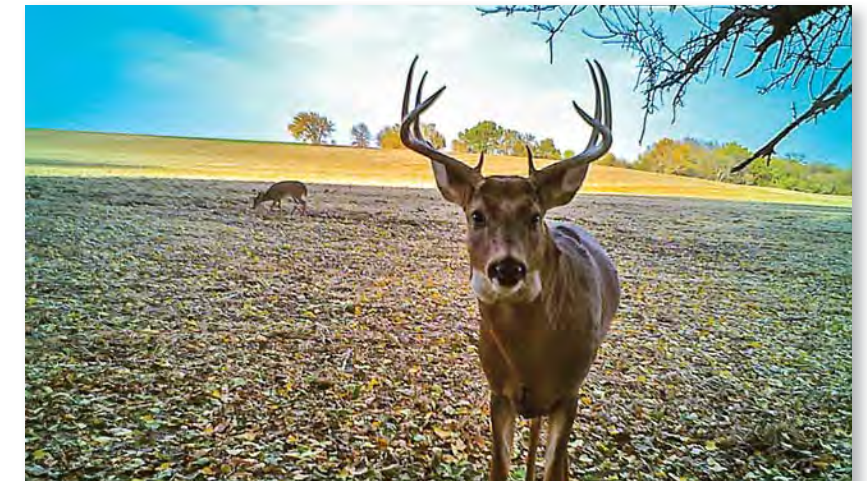
I wanted to share my find with the magazine and my family tradition of morel mushroom hunting in hopes that it might make *NEBRASKAland*.

This magazine got my son and I through some long days of potty training and sleepless nights. During potty training your magazine became his go to for animal pictures!

Joshua Gibbs
Bellevue, Nebraska



Jeff Dale of Walton photographed this raccoon going toward a picked corn field from this hollow cottonwood tree.



Roger Cox sent us this photo of a white-tailed buck deer from private land in Harlan County.



This trail cam photo of what appears to be flying insects, captured by *NEBRASKAland Magazine's* Jeff Kurrus, was taken in Cass County.



Above: This autumn sunset photograph taken at Frank Shoemaker Marsh in Lancaster County was sent in by Ingrid Crummey of Lincoln. Below: Ingrid also sent in the image below, of the waterfall at Platte River State Park in Cass County, which she shot during a family hike last spring.



Outdoor Plates
When someone sees Jerry Steinke’s plate, they know what fish he is after. Steinke has called Lake McConaughy home since 2001, but has been dragging worms, leeches and lures around southwestern Nebraska waters for more than 40 years since growing up in Trenton.
If you have a unique outdoor message plate you would like to share, or know someone who does, e-mail a photo of it (high-resolution, JPEG format only, please) to Eric.Fowler@Nebraska.gov, along with your name, hometown and a brief description of the interests expressed on your license plate.

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Send your comments to:
Jeff Kurrus, Editor
NEBRASKAland Magazine
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or e-mail Jeff.Kurrus@Nebraska.gov
Please include your postal address and telephone number. Letters may be condensed and edited. Photographs are also welcome.

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A Mammal Brief

Hoary Bat

By Lindsay Rogers

Lasiurus cinereus

A relatively large bat, by United States standards, the hoary bat has a wingspan of about 16 inches. It is easily identified by its large size and distinctive color. It has dark brown-black fur tipped in white which gives it a frosted or hoary appearance. Like all of Nebraska's 13 bat species, the hoary bat is an insectivore; each individual eats hundreds (if not thousands) of insects every night. They consume mosquitos, moths, beetles, flies and wasps. Their importance in insect control cannot be overstated. Hoary bats arrive in Nebraska from their wintering grounds in May. They have one litter of pups, usually twins, annually. With young ready to fly, they depart in October for wintering grounds which provide a steady source of insects throughout the winter months. ■

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



PHOTO BY JOEL SARTORE

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Title	Description	Starting Location	Date and Time
Flowers for Fish	See how you can help improve water quality in local streams by providing wildlife habitat on land! Learn how water quality is sampled, important fish and invertebrate indicator species of water quality, and important components of wildlife habitat.	Homestead National Monument Outreach Center Beatrice	June 9 9:00am - 1:00pm CDT
Prescribed Fire Tour	Landowner prescribed burn associations provide benefits to forage production, wildlife habitat, ranchers' pocketbooks, and local communities. This tour will show how the Loess Canyons Rangeland Alliance is impacting the region. Catered evening meal included.	Curtis Community Center 310 Center Ave N Curtis	June 16 2:00pm - 7:30pm CDT
Successful Pollinator Projects - What Does It Take?	Join us to learn about the importance of Monarch butterflies, why and what native forbs are needed for pollinator habitat establishment.	North Platte NRD 100547 Airport Road Scottsbluff	June 22 10:00am - 2:00pm MDT
Fantastic Forb Friday	Come along to learn about plants that can be used in Southwest Nebraska to attract Monarch butterflies, honey bees, bees and other pollinators.	NRCS Office 706 East 5th Street Imperial	June 24 5:00pm - 8:00pm MDT
Prairie Establishment Strategies	Establishing a native prairie takes time and weed control is critical during the first few years. Learn what to expect and how to manage weed competition.	Danish Alps SRA 1260 200th Street Hubbard	July 16 9:00am - 1:00pm CDT
Sandhills Plant ID Tour	Tour the Calamus Reservoir and learn about the different habitat types and plants of the sandhills.	Calamus Reservoir SRA Little York Point 42285 York Point Rd Burwell	July 16 9:00am - 1:00pm CDT
Rangeland Management Tour	This tour will dive into cost effective methods to control cedars, adaptive grazing management strategies, and cost share programs available to help meet your objectives.	From Naponee, go 1 mile South on 31C and park in gravel lot on west side of road right after you cross the Republican River bridge.	July 21 9:00am - 1:00pm CDT
Pheasant Management & Research Workshop	Come learn about current upland game bird research taking place in Southwest Nebraska and the New Pheasant Mega Plan for Nebraska.	TCDC Community Building 406 East 1st Street Trenton	July 28 9:00am - 1:00pm CDT
Monarch Madness	Learn all about the Monarch Butterfly. Hear about habitat needs, cultural importance, conservation efforts and what you can do to help.	Nelson Community Center 333 S Main Nelson	July 29 9:00am - 12:30pm CDT
Using Prescribed Fire for Grassland and Wildlife Management	See how fire is used at Lake Wanahoo SRA to control invasive woody plants, while benefitting native grass and wildflower diversity.	Lower Platte North NRD 511 Commercial Park Rd Wahoo	August 4 9:00am - 1:00pm CDT

Workshops are FREE! Please call 844-733-3669 for more information and to RSVP for meal count.



Travelogue

By Christy Rasmussen

Kearney

"You'll Never Forget Kearney" they say. Kearney is Nebraska's best big small town. The city offers the exciting atmosphere of a college town, with lots of things to do, entertainment and outdoor recreational opportunities with friendly people who welcome visitors.

For outdoor lovers, the **Kearney hike bike trail** was expanded in 2015 and gives cyclists and runners a 17-mile long stretch to see sites along the way including **Yanney Park**, **Kearney Country Club Golf Course** and ultimately ending at **Cottonmill Lake**. Cottonmill Lake, just northwest of Kearney, is a beautiful and serene place to enjoy the outdoors, visit the nature barn, fish, float or rent a paddle boat. The rolling hills within the wooded oaks make for a serene walk.

Kearney is home to a plethora of historical and cultural attractions such as the **Archway**, the **Museum of Nebraska Art**, **G.W. Frank Museum of History and Culture**, and **Kearney Area Children's Museum**, the best hands-on, educational kids' museum between Lincoln and Denver. The Classic Car Collection features more than 200 historic automobiles from the early 1900s to present day.

Buzz's Marine in Kearney is Nebraska's oldest boat dealer, selling fishing, runabout, and pontoon boats with an amazing indoor showroom. **Cabela's** in Kearney serves outdoorsmen and women with sporting goods and also hosts educational events.

Visit one of Kearney's best locally-owned restaurants, the **Alley Rose**, located "on the bricks" in downtown Kearney. The Alley Rose is a traditional dark-wood eatery offering surf n' turf, potato casseroles, local beers and cocktails.

Fort Kearny State Historical Park features living history demonstrations throughout the summer on major holidays with a special event Memorial Day weekend May 28-30 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with the cannon firing at 2 p.m. **Fort Kearny State Recreation Area** offers camping amenities, picnic tables, shelters, quality fishing, handicap accessible fishing piers and walking trails. A park entry permit is required.

Kearney has two public 18-hole championship golf courses, **Meadowlark Hills Golf Course** and **Awarri Dunes** located 5 miles south of town.

Thunderhead Brewery and **Platte Valley Brewery** are two local breweries in downtown Kearney. Both feature unique pizza menus and guest beers. Another great local favorite is **Cunningham's Journal** and the **Courtyard**, their outside bar. A definite favorite about downtown Kearney's nightlife is all the live music you can find on the weekends.

The **Buffalo County Fair** will be July 27-Aug. 1 and will feature rock star Brett Michaels, Lita Ford and Firehouse on July 29 and Jake Owen with Chase Rice on July 30.

In addition to the Fair, Kearney is home to many annual events such as the **Nebraska Cattlemen's Classic**, **Nebraska Outdoor Expo**, **Nebraska Shrine Bowl Parade and Football game**, **Cruise Nite** and **Gateway Farm Expo**. For more information go to VisitKearney.org.

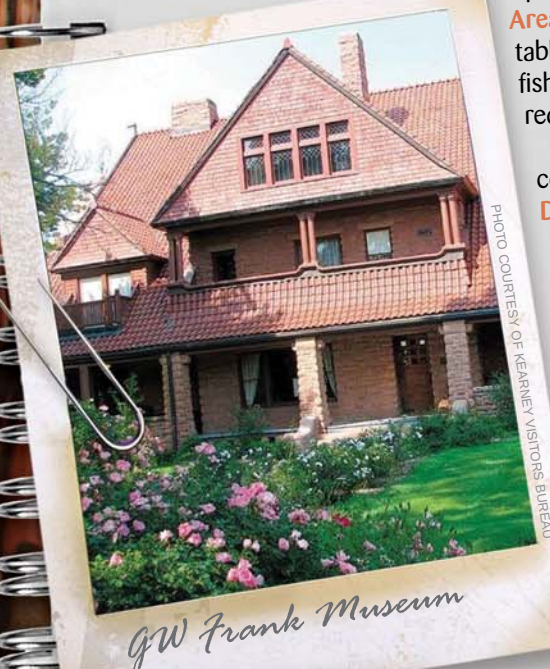


Archway Museum near Kearney



Reenactment at Fort Kearny State Historical Park

Kearney



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Buffalo bones piled at Fort Totten, Dakota Territory, in 1885.

A Brief History

Buffalo Bones Once Plentiful on Nebraska Prairie

By Patricia C. Gaster and James E. Potter
Nebraska State Historical Society

Although the native peoples of the Great Plains had slain buffalo (bison) for generations to provide themselves with food, shelter, clothing and other useful products, the great herds' rapid demise began in the 1870s with the advent of commercial "hide hunters." As the nation became industrialized, buffalo hides were in demand for the manufacture of factory machine belting, boots, winter coats and many other leather products. This demand was met by professional hunters armed with large caliber, breech-loading rifles, who could kill scores of buffalo in a day, taking only the hides and perhaps the tongue, leaving the rest of the carcass to rot on the prairie.

Military and political leaders encouraged depletion of the herds as a means of forcing the Plains Indian tribes to abandon their nomadic, buffalo-dependent lifestyle and settle on designated reservations under government supervision. The Indians' former hunting grounds would then be available for occupation by an ever-increasing tide of white settlers

moving west. They would also be available for the great herds of domestic cattle that would soon dominate the grasslands. By the mid-1880s, the buffalo in their millions had been virtually exterminated from the Plains, leaving only a few hundred survivors in Yellowstone National Park and other remote regions.

The slaughter of the buffalo left the prairie marked by millions of tons of their bones, the skeletal remains of an entire species. Settlers wanting to augment their meager cash incomes sometimes collected and sold these bones, which were usually ground for use as fertilizer. Harry B. Harlan, born on a farm near Waverly, Nebraska, in 1874, recalled gathering buffalo bones with family members during the summer of 1880 in Furnas County:

"That first summer I remember going with Uncle Allen and his team and wagon with side-boards on, to gather a load of buffalo bones. In those days money was scarce, and a dollar looked as big as a wagon wheel to the settlers. A man was glad to work all day for a dollar. Some one in Arapahoe



Unloading buffalo bones at rail terminal, Dakota Territory, in 1885.

would buy the bleached bones to ship to some fertilizer plant perhaps. A big load of the bones would bring two or three dollars, perhaps more, so, if a man put in a day with his team gathering up a load, and another day to take it to town – it would be hard money, wouldn't it?"

Harlan said the bones were plentiful, "usually scattered here and there, where the animal happened to fall, and sometimes two or more skeletons were in one place. There were many huge skulls with wide spreading short horns; bulls horns thick and stubby; cows horns more slender. I found lots of flint arrowheads nearby, or sticking in a bone when the buffalo had been killed by an Indian. We found some bones with a big lead bullet smashed into them. Some of the bullets were as big as the end of a man's thumb, being from large bore 'buffalo guns' sometimes used by hunters."

Harlan also remembered another artifact of the buffalo valuable to settlers: the buffalo robe. A buffalo hide, carefully tanned or softened and with the hair left on, "would be in nearly every farmers rig for a warm wrap in riding. Some carried a robe the year round as padding for the wagon seat. We had one of those buffalo robes, the inside leather soft and pliable, the outside long curly hair making it perfect protection for winter weather. The robes were plentiful then and comparatively inexpensive for millions of buffalo had been slaughtered a few years previously intirely [sic] for their hides." ■

Visit the Nebraska State Historical Society's website at Nebraskahistory.org.

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Bowfishing Mentor Program

By Jenny Nguyen

Fishing combined with the thrill of hunting and shooting archery, bowfishing is one of the fastest growing outdoor activities in the country. Many hunters do it during the off-season, and it's a fun activity for fishermen during the hot, dog days of summer. If equipped correctly, bowfishing can also be a fast-action sport at night.

Interested in learning how to bowfish but don't know where to start? Sign up for the Bowfishing Mentor Program at Ponca State Park this July. The course will be taught over four nights: July 6, 13, 20 and 22 from 6-8:30 p.m. You will learn basic bowfishing skills, including knowledge on archery equipment and how to find, identify and shoot fish. A cleaning and cooking demonstration will be held July 20. The program will wrap up on July 22 at Gavins Point Dam in Yankton, South



Mentor Nick Tramp instructs Brock Floyd about technique and equipment during a Bowfishing Mentor Program session at Ponca State Park.

Dakota, where local bowfishing experts have volunteered to take students out on boats to test their skills.

The program is limited to 25 registrants, and students must be 10 years old or older. Program is free and most gear will be provided, sponsored by the Nebraska Big Game Conservation Association, Bowfishers

of Nebraska, Whitetails Unlimited, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Participants should bring insect repellent, sunscreen and polarized sunglasses.

Ponca State Park is located at 88090 State Spur 26E, Ponca, NE, 68770. To register, contact Nick Tramp, nicktramp@myunitedagent.com. ■

Amphibian or Reptile?

By Dan Fogell

As a herpetologist I get a lot of crazy calls about a group of animals most people know very little about. One such call was about bright blue salamanders someone had in their yard. Bright blue salamanders. We don't have any bright blue salamanders in Nebraska, so this was going to be fun. I asked for more details and got blue with a little green, but it was hard to see because they move so fast through the sand. But they were always out there in the middle of the day.

None of this screamed salamander to me, but by now I knew what they were. I explained they were not salamanders, which are amphibians, but rather they were lizards, which are reptiles. Prairie racerunners to be precise. Males turn a bright blue in spring to impress the ladies, they are extremely fast, and they prefer sandy environments. The caller responded with "Well what's the difference?" Good question.

The science of herpetology involves the study of amphibians and reptiles ... two very different groups of animals. Why they are linked together is beyond me and makes very little sense, other than they are both ectothermic tetrapods. Ecto what? Ectothermic, meaning they gain heat from an external source – like the sun, and tetrapod, meaning they have four legs (or at least they DID at one point in their evolutionary history). Other than that, they have very little in common.

Amphibians and reptiles haven't shared a common ancestor for more than 300 million years. The amphibians include frogs, toads and salamanders. Their name is from two Greek words meaning "double life" (*amphi* = both, *bios* = life), a description of their life history. Their ties to water make them both anatomically and physiologically different than reptiles. They have scaleless, usually moist, and very porous skin. Some breathe using lungs, but all of them breathe through their skin, and some actually have gills ... like fish. And while they may be adapted to terrestrial life they return to the



Reptiles, like this prairie lizard, have scaly, dry skin and either lay leathery, shelled eggs on land or give live birth.



Amphibians, like this barred tiger salamander, are tied to water and have scaleless, usually moist and porous, skin.

water to reproduce. Most lay eggs similar to fish eggs with a jelly-like coating around the embryo, which hatches into an aquatic, gilled larva. Larvae metamorphose to become land-dwelling adults. Due to their reduced number of neck vertebrae, amphibians have a relatively immobile skull.

Reptiles, from the Latin word *reptilis* meaning creeping or crawling, include snakes, lizards, crocodilians, and turtles. Compared to amphibians they have scaly, dry skin that is somewhat impervious. All reptiles breathe using lungs, and reptiles either lay leathery, shelled eggs on land or give live birth. Their shelled egg – called an amniotic egg – keeps the embryo in an aquatic

environment without having to be in the water, thus completely severing their ties to water. Even reptiles that are somewhat "amphibious" (such as turtles) return to land to lay eggs. Newly born reptiles are not larval and require no metamorphosis, but instead are small versions of the adults. Numerous neck vertebrae give reptiles a highly movable skull making them better hunters.

So while the tendency is still to lump "cold-blooded terrestrial vertebrates" together into a single group of animals called herpetofauna, the truth is that amphibians and reptiles are much more different from each other than they are similar. ■

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Fireflies

By Paula Hoppe

The show is about to begin. Wait for it – the first twinkle far in the distance drifting across the landscape. At first there are only a few glimmering points floating in the cooling air, but as the darkness grows around us the lights brighten, and we are witness to a beautiful mating dance. The dance of the fireflies.

What we may not realize is that the characters on this moonlit stage have been waiting to perform for almost a year. They begin as eggs, usually deposited in moist soil or leaf litter. The larvae, which have light organs on their abdomen similar to those of the adults, will hatch in three to four weeks and begin to feast and grow. They hunt at night, eating slugs, snails, worms and other insects until winter, when they hibernate in the larval stage. In late spring, emerging larvae feed briefly before pupating and transforming into adult fireflies.

• Fireflies, or lightning bugs, are actually beetles.

• A chemical reaction from the light organ on the fireflies' abdomen produces a very efficient "cold light" using a substance called luciferin. Besides causing them to glow, it also protects them from predators by virtue of its foul taste.

• Different firefly species produce different colored light – yellow, green, or even pale red – and also have unique flash patterns. The firefly seen most often in Nebraska is the common eastern firefly; its light is a yellow/green color. It flashes brightly, then flies up and forward as the light fades.

• About 45 minutes after sunset, males begin looking for mates by flying over vegetation and flashing in flight. Females, lying in wait on



PHOTO COURTESY OF FIREFLY.ORG

vegetation below, signal when they recognize a male of their own species.

So when the sun sets on our summer days, look to the fields and watch the dance begin. The light fades as the sun sends its rays of farewell arcing into the sky. The curtain of darkness rises, and the meadows and backyards of the plains set the stage. This is their moment. This is their dance. ■

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Five Great Beaches

By Jeff Kurrus

While we don't have an ocean view, Nebraska does have plenty of waterside beaches that allow you to close your eyes, bury your feet in the sand, and feel water creep between your toes. Here are a few of my favorites:

Lake McConaughy

Let's go big first. Whether you're here with a group of friends or by yourself enjoying the sounds of a windy western Nebraska day, sitting lakeside at Lake Mac can sometimes feel like you're sitting oceanside.

Calamus State Recreation Area

The sun-filled afternoon sky at Calamus State Recreation Area, on the edge of the Sandhills, is enough to make anyone stay on vacation with their family for an extra day.

Louisville State Recreation Area

This Cass County beach, located on Lake No. 2, welcomes couples as well as kids.

Windmill State Recreation Area

You may have this one to yourself, as many travelers passing by on Highway

80 will drive right by. But it's their mistake. You'll definitely enjoy this quiet beach at Lake No. 5.

Summit State Recreation Area

Adjacent to the area's campground, this beach is a one-stop shop for summer fun for the entire family. ■

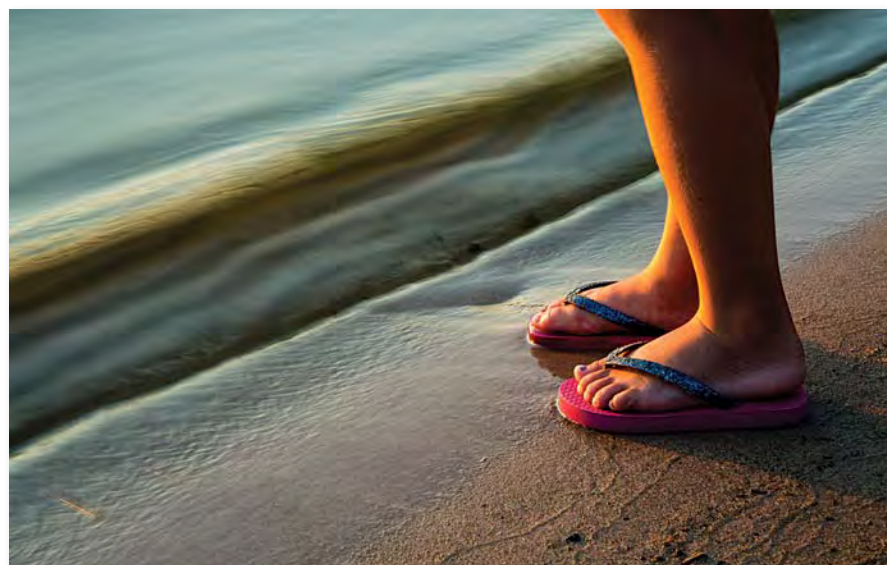


PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Bug Banter

Emerald Ash Borer and Firewood

By Julie Van Meter
State Entomologist, Nebraska
Department of Agriculture

Emerald ash borer (EAB) is an exotic, invasive insect, originally from Asia, which feeds on ash trees (*Fraxinus* spp.) The Nebraska Forest Service estimates Nebraska is home to more than 40 million ash trees. How many ash trees are in your yard, along your street, or in your favorite campground? Each of these ash trees is at risk of infestation by EAB.

EAB has not yet been found in Nebraska, but has been confirmed in 25 states since its discovery in the U.S. in 2002. Several surrounding states are infested with EAB, including Colorado, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri. Firewood is the primary means by which this pest spreads; the beetles emerge from cut firewood to infest new



trees. The federal EAB quarantine requires that all hardwood firewood, both commercial firewood and firewood for personal use, be officially certified before it leaves an EAB infested area.

EAB is a 1/3- to 1/2-inch long, metallic green beetle. EAB larvae are legless and creamy white and up to 1 1/4 inches in length, with distinctive, bell-shaped body segments. Larvae feed under the bark, damaging the phloem of the tree and creating S-shaped galleries. This damage prevents the movement of water and nutrients throughout the tree, and eventually the tree dies.

All ash trees, regardless of the age, size or health can be attacked by EAB. Symptoms of an EAB infestation include branch or crown die-back, bark splitting, suckering, and woodpecker damage. Signs include 1/8-inch D-shaped exit holes and S-shaped larval galleries.

A number of native insects also infest ash trees, including ash-lilac

Presented by



borer, red-headed ash borer, and the eastern ash bark beetle. These insects typically target stressed or declining ash trees, and produce round exit holes of varying size. Several insects also have green coloring similar to EAB, including dog-bane beetles, the poplar flatheaded borer, and even some metallic bees, or share a similar body size and shape, like the bronze birch borer.

None of us want to be responsible for bringing EAB, or any other invasive plant pest, to Nebraska. Minimize the risk by leaving your firewood at home and purchasing locally harvested firewood at your destination. Don't bring firewood back home with you, either. Leave it for the next camper. If you think you've found an EAB infested tree, contact your local extension office, the Nebraska Forest Service, or the Nebraska Department of Agriculture at (402) 471-2351. ■

VISIT Cheyenne County

Sidney Dalton Gurley Lodgepole Potter

For more information on all that Cheyenne County has to offer, contact the Cheyenne County Visitors Center
658 Glover Rd., Sidney, NE (308) 254-4030 / (866) 545-4030
www.sidneycheyennecountytourism.com

YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT IS LURKING IN YOUR FIREWOOD

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Invasive pests like Emerald Ash Borer can move in firewood.

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.

June 1
Underwater spearfishing season begins at Box Butte Reservoir and on private waters

June 1, 8, 15, 22
Beyond Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) Archery Series
Platte River State Park (SP), Louisville

June 1-3
Eligible landowners may apply for one elk permit

June 1-30
Archery paddlefish season

June 2
Ladies Day at the Range
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

June 2, 9, 16, 23
Explore Archery
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

June 3
Final day eligible landowners may apply for one elk permit

June 4
Family Fishing Event
Yanney Park, Kearney

June 4
National Trails Day
Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area (SRA), Crofton; Ash Hollow State Historical Park (SHP), Lewellen; Indian Cave SP, Shubert

June 4
Crittter Corner
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

June 4-5
Living History
Fort Atkinson SHP, Fort Calhoun

June 4-5
Becoming an Outdoors-Family Governor's Campout
Two Rivers SRA, Venice

June 4-5
Rock Creek Trail Days
Rock Creek Station SHP, Fairbury

June 5
Inaugural Director's Cup Archery Tournament
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

June 7
Family Fishing Event
TaHaZouka Park, Norfolk

June 7, 21
Women's Firearm Series: Introduction to Handguns
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

June 8
Family Fishing Event
Benson Park, Omaha

June 9
Campfire Chef
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

June 9
Family Fishing Event
Oak Lake, Lincoln

June 9
Beyond BOW Beginning Canoe
Wehrspann Lake, Omaha

June 11
Family Fishing Event
Camp Hayes, Hayes Center

June 11
Family Fun Day
Red Willow Reservoir SRA, McCook

June 11
Rimfire Steel Plate Fun Shoot
Platte River SP, Louisville

June 11, 17
National Park Service Event
Niobrara SP, Niobrara

June 13, 15
Introduction to Civilian Marksmanship
Platte River SP, Louisville

June 13-24
Residents and nonresidents may apply for one deer permit in any draw unit

June 13-24
Residents and eligible landowners may apply for one buck or either-sex antelope permit in available units

June 13-24
Residents may apply for one elk permit

June 14
Family Fishing Event
Birdwood Wildlife Management Area, North Platte

June 14
Family Fishing Event
Walnut Creek Reservoir, Papillion

June 15
Family Fishing Event
Bowling Lake, Lincoln

June 15
Introduction to Shotguns and Trapshooting
Platte River SP, Louisville

June 16
Buzz Into Action Educator Workshop
Pioneers Park Nature Center, Lincoln

June 16
Family Fishing Event
Mormon Island SRA, Grand Island

June 17
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission meeting, McCook

June 17
Beyond BOW Platte River Canoe Trip
Schramm Park SRA, Gretna

June 17-18
Ash Hollow Pageant
Ash Hollow SHP, Lewellen

June 18
Ride the Ridge
Fort Robinson SP, Crawford

June 18
Dance of the Summer Moon
Indian Cave SP, Shubert

June 18
Buffalo Cookout and American Folk Music
Niobrara SP, Niobrara

June 18
Carp-O-Rama
Branched Oak SRA, Raymond

June 18
Very Important Kid Day
Victoria Springs SRA, Anselmo

June 18-19
Friends of Fort Robinson Intertribal Gathering
Fort Robinson SP, Crawford

June 19
Father's Day Buffet
Platte River SP, Louisville; Fort Robinson SP, Crawford

June 19
Father's Day Fishing Tournament
Niobrara SP, Niobrara

June 19-26
High Plains Regional Rendezvous
Fort Atkinson SHP, Fort Calhoun



June 21
Family Fishing Event
Holmes Lake, Lincoln

June 21
Growing Up WILD
Mid-Plains Community College, McCook

June 21-23
Outdoor Explorers' Day Camp
Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln

June 22
Family Fishing Event
Mormon Island SRA, Grand Island

June 23
Family Fishing Event
Cottonmill Lake, Kearney

June 23
Pony Express Re-ride
Fort Kearny SHP, Kearney

June 23
Family Fishing Event
Towl Park, Omaha

June 25
Family Fun Day
Red Willow Reservoir SRA, McCook

June 25
3-D Archery Shoot
Red Willow Reservoir SRA, McCook

June 25
Family Fishing Event
Branched Oak SRA, Raymond

June 29
Family Fishing Event
Prairie Queen Recreation Area, LaVista

June 30
Family Fishing Event
Carter Lake, Omaha

A Birding Obsession

By Jeff Kurrus

Birder Kermit Cummings, author of *A Backyard Birding Experience*, recently offered these steps to begin birdwatching as a family.



1) Start in your own backyard and learn about birds in your area. You might be surprised how many different species there are.

2) Attract new birds with feeders by providing a mixture of 90 percent sunflowers and 10 percent small grains. Another must is a birdbath for bathing and drinking.

3) Expand your knowledge by buying a field guide for birds in your part of the country. Pairing it with a children's field guide improves the experience for the entire family.

4) Purchase a pair of quality binoculars. These open up a whole new world of beauty, especially when many birds species spend a lot of time in the tops of trees.

5) Record all the different bird species you see, then include information on when and where you saw it as well as any other interesting details you noticed.

With these simple steps, birding can become a family obsession, one that starts in your own backyard. ■



A young American robin perches on a fence in the author's backyard in Sarpy County near Gretna.

NEBRASKAland Visitor



Last issue's winner of the Visitor drawing was **Janet VanHouten** of Denver, Colorado, who found the **American bumble bee** on page 56.

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 pages 16, 19, 21, or 61.

Bumble bees (*Bombus* spp) are a common sight buzzing around flowers in Nebraska. There are approximately 50 species of bumble bees in North America, and roughly 20 species are found in Nebraska. Bumble bees overwinter as mated queens underground in a small chamber called a hibernaculum. The queens become active in the spring, feeding and preparing to lay eggs. Each queen will search for a proper place to establish her colony, often in an old rodent burrow. The first offspring are workers; later offspring will include males and future queens. The colony will reach its peak in the fall, and then the colony members will die off, with only the new mated queens

surviving until the next spring to start new colonies.



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

Our Top 15

Photographers share their favorite places to take pictures in Nebraska parks

By Renae Blum

We all know that Nebraska is a photographer's dream, from the forested buttes in the west, to the rolling Sandhills plains, to the many lakes, rivers and fields bursting with wildlife. Every shutterbug has their favorite spot or two. Few of us, though, are lucky enough to travel the state for a living with a camera in hand. I asked *NEBRASKAland Magazine* staff photographers Jeff Kurrus, Jenny Nguyen, Julie Geiser, Justin Haag and Eric Fowler to name their favorite public spaces – namely state parks, state recreation areas and wildlife management areas – to stake out with a camera and capture Nebraska in the wild. Here, in no particular order, are their top 15 suggestions for your photography bucket list.

Platte River State Park

Eastern Nebraska

"What Platte River State Park offers that a lot of others don't is big timber – a true forest setting," Kurrus said. "It lends itself to immediate intrigue. If you're an adventurous type, you can strap on a camera, grab your bike and go. You have easy access to some beautiful scenery."

In addition, two observation towers afford enviable views of the Platte River, and a waterfall can be found along park trails.

PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Chadron State Park

Northwestern Nebraska

Nestled in the scenic Pine Ridge, Chadron State Park features towering buttes, soaring ponderosa pines and sweeping canyon views. Haag said, "Although it's not as big as other parks, Chadron State Park offers a lot of variety. I can almost always count on some interesting photo subjects popping up here. From bighorn sheep to spiders, it has great wildlife diversity, and the scenery is outstanding. Not to mention, it's easily accessible, and there are usually some people to photograph doing one of the many activities available."

PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG



Yellow Banks Wildlife Management Area

Northeastern Nebraska

Yellow Banks Wildlife Management Area is notable for its splashes of color: red sumac, purple phlox and yellow clay along the banks of the Elkhorn River. “Turkeys often frequent the area, and the wooded areas are interesting in the spring – there are all sorts of different plants, flowers and fungi that grow here,” said Nguyen. “It’s a good place to catch views of the Elkhorn River.”

Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area

Western Nebraska

The Wildcat Hills region along the North Platte River Valley “is magnificent,” Haag said. The area features canyons, forested buttes and ridges that in some places rise to nearly 1,000 feet. Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area features a great view of the valley. Four miles of hiking trails winding through this landscape around ponderosa pines and hills are sprinkled with colorful flowers. Bighorn sheep, pronghorn, elk, mule deer and wild turkeys live in and around the hills. During your trip, you’ll definitely want to make time to see Chimney Rock, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Courthouse Rock, and Jail Rock, which are outcroppings along the northern and western edges of Wildcat Hills.



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Ponca State Park

Northeastern Nebraska

“You can get lost – in a good way – at Ponca,” Kurrus said. “It really feels like you can ‘get away’ here. The sheer amount of hiking trails lends itself to a lot of creativity. Plus, the great trout fishing opportunities brings lots of people to the area, so you can get some good shots of people as well.”

Visitors will also want to stop at the Three-State Overlook, which affords views of Nebraska, South Dakota and Iowa, along with the Missouri River.

Gallagher Canyon State Recreation Area

South-central Nebraska

Want to get off the beaten path and enjoy a beautiful spot with nobody else around? Gallagher Canyon State Recreation Area is the right spot for you.

"It's a truly unique area, and one of my favorites to photograph," said Geiser. "There are numerous birds, deer and other animals around to take photos of, as well as beautiful sunrises and sunsets."



PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER



PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER

Sutherland State Recreation Area

Southwestern Nebraska

"This area is great year-round for bird species," Geiser said. She explains that the birds are attracted to the warm water coming out of a nearby power plant. "It's always warm and never freezes over, so they love that," she said. "I've seen cormorants, pelicans, blue herons, bald eagles and so many varieties of waterfowl."

Beyond the birds, there are other draws for shutterbugs at the Sutherland State Recreation Area. "The scenery is nice on the shorelines and tree areas, and you can photograph mule deer near the reservoir," Geiser said. "Spring and summer is a great time for capturing photos of people and outdoor recreation as well."

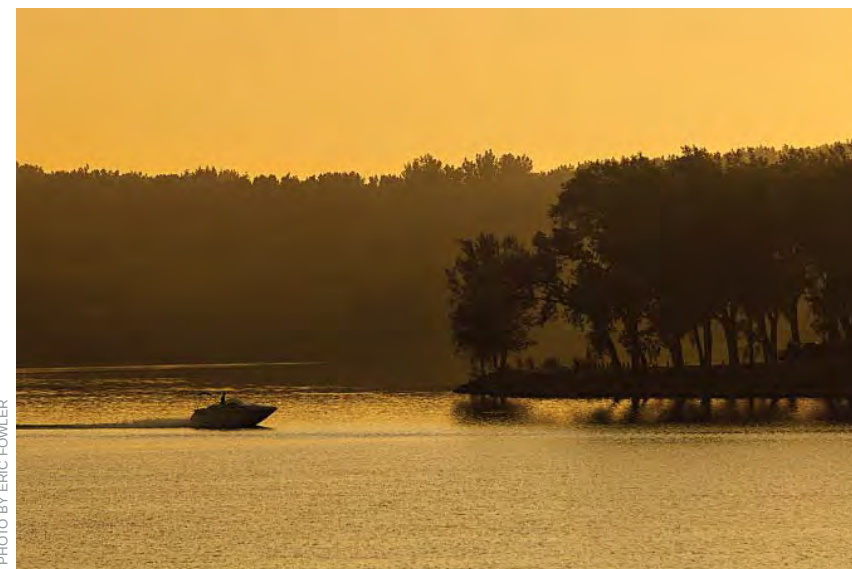


PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Medicine Creek State Recreation Area

South-central Nebraska

Medicine Creek State Recreation Area is a natural choice for landscape photography. It's a quiet, very green area, with tranquil blue water and plenty of mature trees and grassy areas. Gorgeous dawns and dusks are frequent. Keep an eye out for numerous animals and birds, including deer, turkeys, hawks, owls, songbirds, osprey, eagles and waterfowl.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Niobrara State Park

Northeastern Nebraska

It's all about the big views at Niobrara State Park. The park is situated on a bluff overlooking the confluence of the Missouri and Niobrara rivers. Photographers have found much to love about the interplay of light between the water and the sky. Wildlife viewing is excellent here, too – you can spot beaver, muskrat, mink, bald eagles, white-tailed deer and wild turkeys roaming through the park.



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

Toadstool Geological Park

Northwestern Nebraska

Dubbed “the Badlands of Nebraska,” Toadstool Geological Park feels otherworldly, like you’ve been dropped onto the moon. Creamy sandstone pillars rise from the earth. Rugged outcroppings trace wavy lines across the sky. Researchers love this site for the prehistoric fossils captured in the rock.

Low light, particularly at dawn and dusk, really brings this dramatic landscape to life. Bring hiking boots for the well-marked one-mile trail loop.

Wood Duck Wildlife Management Area

Northeastern Nebraska

Wood Duck Wildlife Management Area is all about variety. Here, you can find several different kinds of habitats: wetlands, oak woodlands and Sandhills-esque plains. “There’s something to photograph year-round,” Nguyen said. “The wetland and lake areas are gorgeous at sunset.”

A diverse range of wildlife can be found in the area as well. Pelicans, cormorants, trumpeter swans and bald eagles have been spotted here, as well as beavers, muskrats, deer, pheasants and quail.



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

Long Pine State Recreation Area

North-central Nebraska

Pine trees shade a winding crystal-clear creek at Long Pine State Recreation Area.

“This is one of my favorite places in Nebraska,” Nguyen said. “It reminds me of California, where I grew up.

It’s not big, but it’s a little hidden gem and a great place to camp. I often see turkey there. I enjoy catching brown trout out of the creek as well.

It’s where all of my brown trout photos have come from.”



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Indian Cave State Park

Southeastern Nebraska

Curled around the Missouri River, Indian Cave State Park offers gorgeous views of the river, a beautiful hardwood forest and an impressive trail system. You have to hunt a bit to find the vistas, but you don't need them to get a good photograph. "Here, you can think 'micro' instead of 'macro,'" Fowler said. "You can find some really cool compositions in the trees and the interesting rock formations."



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Fort Robinson State Park

Northwestern Nebraska

Less heavily forested than its relative neighbor, Chadron State Park, Fort Robinson State Park provides sweeping views of expansive grasslands. "They stretch on forever," said Fowler, a native of western Nebraska. He also notes the spectacular views from the Red Cloud Buttes. "I never get tired of exploring them," he said.

Eugene T. Mahoney State Park

Eastern Nebraska

There's always something going on at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, making it a fun place to grab shots of people and outdoor activities. Kurrus noted that wildlife is easier to photograph at Mahoney. "Deer, turkey and other species seem to stand still just a little longer than they do at private locations," he said. "They're used to people being around, but are still in a natural setting."

The observation tower offers an impressive view of the Platte, which is particularly spectacular in full autumn color. A number of lakes and hiking trails also afford good photography opportunities.

Time Well Spent

What to Do in June

By Renae Blum

Take advantage of the long summer days and try any one of the activities below. You can hit the trail, enjoy kayaking and scavenger hunts, try carp fishing and more. For a full list of this month's events across the state, or for more information on any of the activities listed here, visit Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov. ■

National Trails Day

June 4

Ash Hollow State Historical Park
Indian Cave State Park
Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area

Traverse an old Oregon Trail path at Ash Hollow State Historical Park starting at 9 a.m. at the Visitors Center, care for the trails at Indian Cave State Park with a day of trail restoration or enjoy a day exercising outdoors at Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area.

Carp-O-Rama

June 18

Branched Oak State Recreation Area

Stop by the ever-popular Carp-O-Rama from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. You'll learn all about carp fishing, and watch demonstrations on cleaning, preparing and cooking the freshly-caught fish. The battered-and-fried carp will then be served as a free lunch. Meet at Liebers Point.



PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Friends of Fort Robinson Intertribal Gathering

June 18-19

Fort Robinson State Park

The steady beating of drums ... a flashing rainbow of color ... a palpable sense of pride and community in the air. These are a few of the sights and sounds you can expect at the 17th annual Intertribal Gathering at Fort Robinson State Park, in which Nebraskans and South Dakotans from across the High Plains will gather to celebrate their Native American heritage.

A half-kilometer race for kids 12 and younger starts at 8 a.m., followed by a 5K for adults. The main events, including dancing, drumming, and singing, begin at noon and last until 9 p.m. The event is free to the public with the purchase of a park permit.



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

Ash Hollow Pageant

June 17 and 18

Ash Hollow State Historical Park

Travelers on the Mormon Trail in the mid-1800s passed through the Ash Hollow area, remarking on the land in their diaries. On June 17 and 18, a live band and costumed actors will retell the stories of these pioneers through their diaries and song. In addition to the performance, there will be a chuck wagon supper of roast beef, beans cooked over an open fire and the much-loved fry bread. The dinner begins at 5 p.m. and the performance at 6 p.m. Bring your blankets and folding chairs. The area is handicap-accessible.



PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER

Red Willow Family Fun Nights

June 11 and 25

Red Willow Reservoir State Recreation Area

Bring the family for a cookout at 6 p.m., and then enjoy an evening of kayaking, fishing, archery, scavenger hunts, hiking and biking. At the end of the night, relax at the campfire with some s'mores.



PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER

Where the River Bends

Story and photos by Jenny Nguyen

“Whether it’s because we feel so completely at home on the water or it’s some crazy river magic, you have conversations on a river that just don’t happen in other places. Floating forces you to really be present with people and with your surroundings.” – Cassidy Gerdes

Sometimes when the light is just right and I squint just so, the Missouri River reminds me of Vietnam. The Cái River is wide, and the trees grow thick on both sides like the cottonwoods of the Missouri. I was 18,

and I remember my uncles laughing on the boat, drinking their Tiger beer and smoking their cigarettes, teasing my mother as if 16 years had not passed by. South Vietnam in the summer is the most humid place in the world, and on some days, I think Nebraska is its equal

in this regard.

I was born in Nha Trang in the Khánh Hòa Province, in the general hospital on Yersin Street – just a 5-minute walk from the ocean to the east and a 5-minute taxi ride to the Cái River to the north. From old pictures

my parents have kept, I know that I’ve spent many days on the beaches at Nha Trang Bay. I honestly have no memories of that time, but the delight in my infant eyes suggest that I may have really enjoyed it.

We left Vietnam when I was 2-years-

old in 1992 and transplanted by the same ocean, though the Pacific was to the west now. Out of the 5,023 miles that is the border of Vietnam, 2,140 of it is coastline. It is no coincidence that Southern California is home to the largest population of Vietnamese people in the United States.

What is it about water that makes people return? People often say things like “I miss the river” or “I miss the ocean.” “We had so much fun jumping in the swimming hole by our house as kids.” For many of us, our fondest memories revolve around water. We speak of it as though we feel a kinship, like a beloved, zany family member who visited every summer to play with us and show us neat things.

“I spent a lot of time growing up in a canoe,” said my friend Cassidy Gerdes, whose childhood home is in Columbus. Her first float memory was with her parents, little brother and dog all loaded into the canoe, and taking a trip down the Loup River from Duncan to Columbus.

“I was really young. It must have been July, because I also remember my dad pushing instead of floating most of the trip.” For many years on, that old, banana-yellow fiberglass canoe became a summer-time fixture.

“We’d paddle across the lake to go see the neighbor kids and spend the day catching turtles or sneaking over to play on the big sand and gravel piles where the pumps were running. When it got too hot, we’d tip it over and use it as our diving platform out where the water was deep. I think all of us pretty much scratched tiny fiberglass slivers out of our butts all summer long from that thing.”

On average, the adult human body is made up of as much as 60 percent water. And as newborn infants, we come into the world with as much as

73 percent water in our little bodies. We’re told that water molecules are highly attracted to other water molecules in high school. Perhaps our affinity to water is just pure chemistry.

I asked Cassidy why she kayaks every summer, why she returns to the river every year.

“Because half the blood that runs through my veins is actually river water,” she said.

“The Missouri River was my first love,” another friend shared. He told me in passing, three years ago while we were driving along the river’s southern banks near Yankton, South Dakota, shortly after my move to Nebraska. From the passenger window, I was meeting the Missouri for the first time, an icy ribbon of sapphire, flowing east and shimmering under the cold midday sun like nobody’s business in January. It was not the ocean, but it had its own allure and magic.

To declare a river, or any body of water, as a “first love” – there is something profound in that. Those who grew up by water learned to love it before we ever loved another boy or girl, and for a time – before the knowledge of heartache – it provided all the excitement a young, passionate soul could ever want or need.

One spring morning, I found Scott Wessel chucking stones off the truss bridge that sits at the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers. It is a handsome bridge, built with a solid wooden pathway and tall, rusting beams. After foolishly attempting to get me to eat some catfish stinkbait, he then suggested that I climb the metal beams to take pictures from the top of the bridge.

It was a rhetorical suggestion, of course, and to this precarious proposal, I returned with a flippant grin. But Scott just smiled – a deep, guarded



In 2014, a group of women prepare to kayak the Missouri River from Sunshine Bottom to Verdel, a 16-mile trip.

“I was terrified. It was incredibly windy and freakin’ cold. But I had a blast and loved it. I don’t think I’ve missed a year since.” – Marilyn Tabor

smile that came from within, from somewhere secret and safe. He looked out onto the river for a moment and then his gaze followed the bridge’s rigid metal framework.

“I’ve spend a lot of time sitting on top of this bridge,” he admitted, leaning back against the railing, reminiscing.

I can only guess at what made the memory so pleasurable, but I suspect it was the peace and beauty – the enchanting silver moon, the river’s voluptuous bends and the thousand gazes of brilliant stars. It was an infatuation that could not be compared.

What secrets he shared with the river (and what all he drank with her before 21) during those sleepless, dark hours of the night – I will never know.

In parts of the world, many rivers are associated with a gender, wrote Susan Farlowe in her story “Sex and the river – female and male waterways”

published in *SFGate*.

The Cái River in Nha Trang, Vietnam, literally means “female river.”

The Rhine River in Germany is known by some as “Father Rhine” for its hazardous whirlpools and rocks that protect against invaders; and the Moselle River, the Rhine’s tributary, is known as his daughter for her calm, tranquil waters.

In China, the Mekong River means “‘mother of all rivers’ as it births and feeds many of the great and life-giving waters of China,” said Richard Bangs, author of *The Lost River: A Memoir of Life, Death and the Transformation of Wild Water*.

But in the United States, rivers are not often given such distinctions.

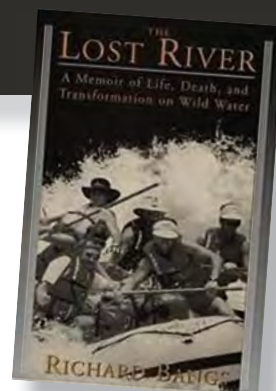
“Very often, if a river is mighty, overpowering, dangerous, it is male” and “if it is gentle, curvaceous, easy on the eyes, it is often female,” Bangs

said, though he admits that the distinctions are stereotypical.

If one considers the Missouri River under these requirements, then I would not hesitate to say that our river is female, with her life-giving water, her beautiful clay bluffs and tranquil flow.

But stereotypes are just stereotypes – they’re true until they’re not. Though easy on the eyes and usually temperate, the Missouri can also be powerful, dangerous and devastating. Her most recent flooding caused major damage to Nebraska homes, agriculture and infrastructure in the summer of 2011.

Those who know what’s good for them have a healthy respect for rivers. For rivers are always more complicated



Commission wildlife biologists Bekah Jessen (left), Jamie Bachmann and Cassidy Gerdes float down the Niobrara River along breathtaking rocky bluffs near Niobrara State Park.

than they seem— even the quiet ones.

Generous, beautiful, adaptable, powerful and enduring – these are qualities that may personify rivers in poems and songs, and also qualities that I admire in many of the women I know.

Every summer, I kayak with a group of women. I know them through work – most have worked with Game and Parks at one time or another and we get along because we share similar experiences and interests, and we are all outdoor women.

I don’t mean to sound special, but to make it in the outdoor industry as a woman, you must possess certain qualities. It’s no secret that our line of work is dominated by men, and most of the time, it’s fun and awesome. We are fortunate to be able to work with so many supportive, passionate and intelligent people. And there are many days when I thank my lucky stars for all the things I’ve learned and seen as an outdoor photographer for *NEBRASKAland* that my girlfriends back in California cannot. I don’t doubt that my female kayaking companions/ coworkers feel the same way about

their jobs. We get to play with snakes, work with snapping turtles and ride in boats during the summer and call it work – our office is the great outdoors.

But to earn and maintain respect as a female outdoor professional from a day-to-day basis means that we have to be “one of the boys.” We sort of live double lives. At work, we’re even-keeled, strong women whose wardrobes seemingly comprise of only hiking boots and jeans, and we can handle dead animals without a flinch. But at home, we’re moms, wives, girlfriends or content single women, who like to sip wine, enjoy art, wear frilly clothes once in awhile, and get upset and cry over things that we desperately hide at work – though don’t expect any of us to master walking in high heels anytime soon; years of playing and working in hiking boots have resulted in a permanent ogre-like sway.

So kayaking is our escape. Being on the river with each other and sometimes alone allows us to take stock in who we are to ourselves, the people we love and the world around us. It’s something only outdoor women

understand, because going to the mall and getting our nails done together just doesn’t do the trick.

In 2002, Marilyn Tabor, a Nebraska Environmental Trust employee and avid participant in our yearly kayaking expeditions, had her first kayaking experience on the Missouri River.

“I was terrified,” she said. “It was incredibly windy and freakin’ cold. But I had a blast and loved it. I don’t think I’ve missed a year since.” Conquering her fears, Marilyn then worked up to kayaking solo from Mulberry Bend to Ponca into a horrific headwind in 2006.

For her, kayaking and floating on the river is empowering. Marilyn’s favorite things about floating are sharing the experience “with other powerful women, both physically and spiritually;” feeling the sun while lounging on the cool sand during breaks; jumping off the boat dock by Standing Bear Bridge; being outside and seeing all the colors.

“But when my daughters, Danielle and Kelli, can come with me, it is the best.”

Bekah Jessen got her first taste of kayaking while assisting a Beyond



Sarah Doxon, a former naturalist at Ponca State Park, kayaks near the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers.



Our kayak trip from Niobrara to Santee in 2013 was halted by torrential rainfall. We got off the Missouri as quickly as we could and broke into a cabin in Running Water, SD, with a marshmallow roaster. We are forever indebted to the owners, who were on vacation at the time, for not getting angry and allowing us shelter and a marvelously absurd story to remember.



Kayakers found bones of an unidentified animal, most likely bovine, fossilizing on a sandbar in the Missouri River.

Becoming an Outdoors-Woman kayaking event on the Niobrara River in 2010. In spring 2011, she purchased her own vessel, and since then each trip has been unique and exciting.

“Kayaking is a great way to connect with nature. Every time I go out I see something new. It’s been a great way to make new friends and strengthen bonds with old friends. Nothing beats a sunny day on the water with a handful of people that you care about,” Bekah said.

Our friend Jamie Bachmann said it best.

“I think the thing for me, when any of us women get together to do any kind of outdoor experience, is doing it without men. There is just something special about lifting your own yak on top of a vehicle and ratchet strapping it down all with the power of my own freaking uterus – I suppose some upper body strength, too. There is power and freedom floating all day with just the ladies. It’s liberating and outside of any construct of woman role models I have

ever known.

“I think woman like us create new definitions for what being a woman is. We pave paths for other women and we do it together and not with caddy chick bull[crud]. Well, maybe a little, but we learn and get over it, sometimes better and quicker than many men I know,” Jamie said.

Perhaps we enjoy kayaking so much because it reminds us of what we should strive to be. Being on the water inspires us and allows us to recalibrate, to reset our inner compass and rejuvenate our purpose. Being on the water is a rebirth of sorts, and it keeps us young and kicking.

Do rivers grow old? They do, in a temporal sense. The Missouri River, according to some sources, is roughly 35 million years old, but it continues to cut and shape the landscape that holds it, constantly adapting despite the obstacles that may be in its way – despite human efforts to tame it.

*“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and not the same man.”
– Heraclitus, Greek Philosopher, Born 535 BC.*

Always moving forward and always reinventing itself, we can learn valuable lessons from the lives of rivers. Our group of kayakers include women from ages 20 to 60, and though – metaphorically – we each paddle at different paces and at different points in the river, we are all going to the same place, and hopefully we all leave with the same conclusion: that it was a fun, wild and fulfilling ride.

“There’s a special independence with being on the water for sure that was the main allure when I was younger,” said Cassidy Gerdes, now 29 and looking back on her days on the water since her first canoe ride with mom, dad, brother and dog. “You prescribe your own challenges and you’ve got all the room in the world to make your own mistakes and figure out how to recover from them. It’s always an adventure, and for me that’s always been a draw.

“But nowadays, it’s more-so that floating is my medicine. The destination is known but moot. All pressure’s off, you just get to let go for a while, and watch where it takes you. And most of the time – in a metaphoric sense – it takes me home.”

Marilyn Tabor’s first kayaking experience happened at age 46. Now 60, she has this to say, “I absolutely do not understand how some or most women age. I think that is why most women age the way they do, because they think they are getting older – men, too. Well maybe I’ve watched one too many people die before I wanted them to and have watched way too many people quit living before I wanted them to. For god’s sake, never ever do something or don’t do something because of how old you are – only do things because you want to and mostly because it will be fun.”

Jamie Bachmann, at age 38, said, “I love having you ladies as role models, especially as I start tipping toward the end of an older woman rather than

a younger woman. I have to search and pay attention and be grateful and humbled by the very few women that don’t grow old and live by some sense of what women are supposed to be and do and look like and love.”

As for me, young and restless at 26, being on the river helps me to maintain perspective. I often have to remind myself to quit being so hasty – to go with the flow. It’s important to take stock in how far you’ve come, but equally valuable to appreciate how far you still have to go. The river reminds me to slow down and pay attention.

I look forward to seeing the stretches of river that the others are paddling, but I’m going to revel in where I am first. ■



Bekah Jessen jumps off a dock while taking a break from kayaking the Missouri River.

Rock Stars

Photos and story by Justin Haag

Between 38 and 10 million years ago, thousands of volcanic events in what is now the Great Basin area of Nevada and Utah emitted fine particles of sediment – many of which were carried downwind. The particles from that then-hellish place accumulated over the High Plains ever so slightly over millions of years. And, in the millions of years following those eruptions, erosion has whittled away at the ash and carried materials from the Rocky Mountains to make the magnificent rock features of the highlands of the Nebraska Panhandle. They seem especially extraordinary to a visitor who has previously defined Nebraska as “cows and cornfields.” On clear nights, under the light of the moon or Milky Way, the visitor might get an even clearer image of this unique place’s grandeur – and an appreciation for just how small, and young, we are.

Much like a satellite dish, or some other form of equipment in a science fiction movie, one of the rock formations at Toadstool Geological Park near Crawford points to the Milky Way on a July night in this moon-like scene.



Above: Trunk Butte by Whitney. Opposite: Crow Butte near Crawford.

It's strange to think of the Pine Ridge of northwestern Nebraska and Wildcat Hills along the North Platte River Valley as being relatively flat land with a blanket of volcanic ash as it was millions of years ago. One wonders if it was just dumb luck that made the sediment gather more tightly in some areas than others over those millions of years, making our escarpments and buttes more resistant to erosion than their surroundings. Regardless, we find ourselves thankful nature did what it did – especially when witnessing a scene such as the full moon hanging over northwestern Nebraska buttes on a September night.

Geologists refer to it as *inverted topography*. It's not easy to fathom the relative enormity of a river in this region flowing strong enough to move bowling-ball-size stones along its bottom, but that's what is believed to have once been the scene above this location at Buffalo Creek Wildlife Management Area near Melbeta. That massive river has long been dry and erosion has removed the less bound sediment alongside it. In more recent times, many chunks of the riverbed with those cemented stones have tumbled more than 200 feet below to a much newer river valley – that of the North Platte.



Above: Tumbling stones at Buffalo Creek Wildlife Management Area near Melbeta.
Opposite: Wildcat Hills south of Gering.



Countless fascinating landforms of the North Platte River Valley have been shaped by erosion. Known as the Wildcat Hills, they provide eye candy for travelers along this valley just as they did westward pioneers of the 1800s and others who lived here before that. Of course, it may not be the most fertile ground on earth, but one would be hard-pressed to find a better backdrop for country living – especially with the cows grazing in the stalks on a moonlit night.



Above: Agate Fossil Beds National Monument in Sioux County.
Opposite: The Cliffs Picnic Area in the Pine Ridge Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest.

In northwestern Nebraska, the earth on each side of a fault that follows the White River has been raised slightly by force. The perceived beauty of the Pine Ridge can largely be attributed to this feature. When spring water escapes to the earth's surface through elevated rock, its persistence will eventually cut a trail to lower elevations. In this case, the spring water, now known as Bordeaux Creek, has beautifully carved through this popular place in the Nebraska National Forest known as The Cliffs Picnic Area.

With so many otherworldly rocks jutting from the landscape, it seems appropriate that Agate Fossil Beds National Monument is near the unincorporated village named Marsland. Especially at night, the landscape is so quiet that the most prominent sound is prairie rodents scurrying about their business among the rocks or the occasional howl of a coyote. Evidences of man's presence are few, save for the visitors center that by day teaches about its discovered fossils of remarkable mammals of 19-21 million years ago – and a satellite streaking by the moon.

When naming Pine Cone Butte at Chadron State Park, the inspiration surely came from nearby. While corn and soybeans may not be best suited for this challenging soil, ponderosa pines have taken hold in the loose material at the base of the buttes. Many of the seeds somehow sprout to life in cracks and crevices of the rock, eventually wedging the stone making their own contribution to changing the landscape. Whether at night or day, these rocks and evergreens are always suitable subjects for postcards and tourism guides.



Above: Pine Cone Butte at Chadron State Park.
Opposite: Badlands in Dawes County.



A summer thunderstorm can serve as a reminder of how the Panhandle's terrain has become so wondrous. Each gully-washer eats a little away at the surface of this landscape – hardly noticeable in terms of days, but over time shapes places such as this section of badlands west of Chadron. In the relatively brief period of just centuries, humans have documented the erosion of prominent landmarks such as Chimney Rock. Regardless, barring any incredible natural or unnatural events, these stubborn landforms will still be around for countless generations to gaze upon. We must enjoy them while we can, though – they will surely look much different millions of years from now. ■

Dive Nebraska

Scuba Diving in an Unlikely State

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

Many of us, especially those of us who fish, have stood on a lakeshore, dock or boat and wondered what is going on beneath the water. What does the bottom look like? Where are the fish? What are they doing? Scant few Nebraskans have taken scuba lessons, strapped a tank of air on their back and jumped in to find out.

Even if they had, only a few of the state's waters are clear enough that they could actually find the answers to those questions. Which is why most Nebraskans who take scuba lessons do so prior to a vacation in the tropics, where ocean visibility can top 100 feet. The closest you will find to that in Nebraska, according to dive shop owners, is under the ice at a sandpit lake in the dead of winter.

But those few waters with enough

visibility for an enjoyable dive, including sandpit lakes along Interstate 80 and Lake McConaughy, are enough to keep some dedicated divers happy, whether they're wanting to simply keep their skills sharp for their tropical dives, swim with the fish or grab their spear gun and fill a stringer with them.

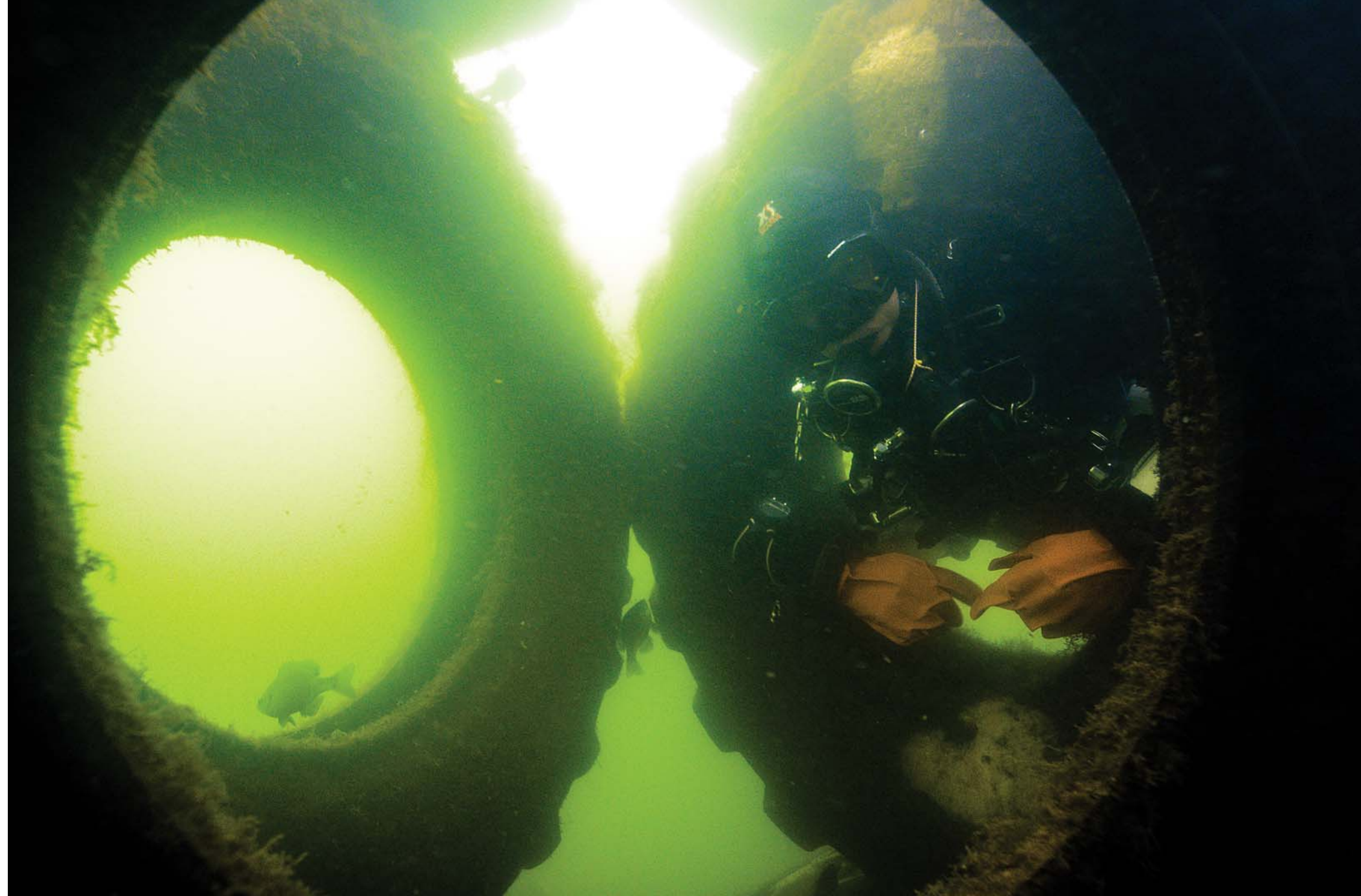
In most Nebraska waters, especially in eastern Nebraska, visibility is so poor you are lucky to see your hand at arm's length. The problem is most are reservoirs fed by rivers and streams, which are fed by overland runoff that carries fine silt and clay that clouds the water and rarely, if ever, clears.

"It's no fun diving in an ink bottle," said Don Stanger of Underwater World Scuba Center in Omaha. "You want some clarity."

Wind- and boat-driven waves lap the shorelines and stir more fine particles



Sunlight streams through the surface of Pelican Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge near Valentine, illuminating coontail covered with filamentous algae.



Kenny Beans of Kearney and a few bluegills swim through a tire reef in Lake No. 8 at Sandy Channel State Recreation Area near Elm Creek. Dive shops train in the lake and have placed the tires and other items in the lake for divers to locate.

of soil into the water. Visibility is also limited by algae, small plants that live adrift in the water, or are set adrift from wave action that breaks them free from the plants, rocks or lakebottom on which they grow. Algae, the base of the aquatic food web, is found in all waters, but just like plants growing on the land, it grows most rapidly in the heat of summer.

These things considered, divers will tell you the keys to finding clear water in Nebraska are to go early or late in the year, when algae is less abundant, and go west, where the soils contain little to no clay.

One of the top destinations for divers actually stretches half-way across the Cornhusker state: the more than 50 sandpit lakes, including 40 open to the public, found along Interstate 80 and the South Platte and Platte rivers from Big Springs to Grand Island. The lakes were created when crews building the interstate borrowed soil to build the overpasses at each interchange. The pits, with maximum depths reaching 10 feet in some and 30 in others, filled with groundwater, and because of the sandy bottoms and little surface runoff they receive, they stay relatively clear, offering visibility of 10 to 20 feet on

most days, and even more on some.

"The great thing is if [visibility] is bad in one, you can go to another one," said Randall Purdy, owner of Heartland Scuba Center in Kearney.

At the behest of the Game and Parks Commission, construction crews varied the depth within the lakes to make them more fish friendly, and they are, with most lakes holding largemouth bass and bluegill, and some adding channel catfish, crappie, smallmouth bass and common carp, giving divers plenty to see.

There are a number of sandpits with similar characteristics in the Platte

River Valley – and elsewhere in the state – that have remained following gravel mining operations, but most are private. The exception, and the one most popular with divers, is Lake No. 8 at Sandy Channel State Recreation Area south of Elm Creek. Dive shops from Kearney and Lincoln use the lake, which is actually four connected lakes, for their open-water certification classes. Through the years, with permission from the Commission, divers have sunk numerous items in the portion of the lake just north of the park entrance, including boats, a satellite dish, a tire reef and

concrete lawn ornaments, that divers are challenged to locate using their underwater navigation skills.

Dive shops chose Sandy Channel because its visibility is the most consistent of all the sandpit lakes in the region. “I’ve had 60 feet of visibility in Sandy Channel in October,” Purdy said. “That doesn’t happen often, but when it does it’s nice.”

Lake McConaughy, known for its white sand beaches, may be the top dive spot in Nebraska. The lake’s excellent walleye population draws

spear-fishermen from across the state and many more from Colorado and other neighboring states.

“It’s a lot easier than fishing,” Dan Nichols of Ogallala said of spearfishing. Nichols spends plenty of time in his boat trolling for walleye, and the time he spends under it with his spear helps him understand the fish better.

While walleye are the main draw, recreational divers enjoy exploring the rock-covered face of Kingsley Dam and the rocky points on the lake’s

southeast side. Some divers come to the lake to clean up after the fishermen, gathering crankbaits and other lures they snagged in the rocks.

“You’ve got a lot more opportunity diving up there just for fun,” said Jim Wiezorek of North Platte, who operates the Watersports Unlimited dive shop there and opens a satellite shop at Lake McConaughy on weekends in the summer to fill air tanks for divers. “I’ve been diving up there for lots of years and I’ve never gotten tired of that,” he said of the rocks. “It seems every time I go diving it’s a little different because of the changes in the water level.”

Visibility is highly variable at the 20-mile long, wind-swept lake. Recreational divers may have better visibility in the month or two before spearfishing season opens July 1. Rising and falling water levels, heavy inflows, and heavy boat traffic on most summer weekends can cloud the water, as can algae, which is at its worst in August. Wiezorek found 20 feet of visibility last November. “Every once in a while we’ll catch it to where it’s real good, but if we get 10 feet we’re happy with that,” said Wiezorek, who also dives I-80 lakes and trains divers at Hershey Wildlife Management Area.

You don’t have to be a scuba diver to explore Nebraska waters. Mark Schafer of Alliance and his son, Hunter, have for years donned wet suits and snorkels to spear fish in Box Butte Reservoir, another spot that occasionally offers good visibility and draws divers. “Sometimes you can see it as clear as 20 feet and other times it’s 3 feet,” Schafer said, noting that sometimes he has to search for clear water.

Spearfishing season for game fish opens June 1 at Box Butte, a month earlier than other waters. Schafer said visibility is best when water is high and in the trees, and warns that swimmer’s itch, a rash caused by a microscopic parasite, is prevalent from late July or August into the fall.

Purdy has dove in several other lakes, both for fun and with his spear gun, and found Lake Minatare and Elwood Reservoir often have visibility of 6 to 12 feet. “It’s a fun lake to dive. There’s a lot of trees and a lot of structure to look at and a ton of fish,” he said of Elwood, which is fed by water pumped from a canal rather than



Dan Nichols of Ogallala pulls in a walleye he shot with his underwater spear gun while diving at Lake McConaughy. Spearfishermen from across the Midwest come to the lake to hunt walleye.

Go Fish

While only a few offer enough visibility to do so, most of the state’s irrigation reservoirs are open to underwater spearfishing for game fish from July 1 through Dec. 31. Box Butte Reservoir opens June 1. Spearfishing for nongame fish is allowed year-round on 19 sandpits along Interstate 80 in Buffalo, Dawson, Hall and Phelps counties. For a complete list of open waters, consult the Nebraska Fishing Guide.

Dive Shops and Clubs

The following dive shops offer a variety of services, including lessons, equipment rental and sales, and air fills.

- Aquatrec, Lincoln. Aquatrec.com
- DiVentures, Omaha. Shop sponsors Landlocked Scuba Club. DiVentures.net
- Heartland Scuba Center, Lincoln. HeartlandScuba.com
- Heartland Scuba Center, Kearney. ScubaHeartland.com
- Underwater World Scuba Center, Omaha. ScubaUWW.com
- Watersports Unlimited, North Platte and Lake McConaughy (weekends Memorial Day through Labor Day). WatersportsUnlimited.net
- Greater Omaha Scuba Club. GO-Scuba.net

Nebraska Dive Spots

The following public areas offer enough visibility for an enjoyable dive and the chance to see numerous fish, including bluegill, largemouth bass and channel catfish.

Sandy Channel SRA, Elm Creek
Area includes six sandpit lakes left from a gravel mining operation. Lake No. 8, which is actually four connected lakes, is used for open water certification classes by several dive shops, which have sunk boats, a satellite dish, concrete lawn ornaments and other items for divers to locate in the portion of the lake just north of the entrance. Depths to 24 feet. Visibility 10-25 feet, sometimes more.

Interstate 80 Lakes
More than 50 sandpit lakes between Big Springs and Grand Island, 40 of them

public wildlife management areas or state recreation areas operated by the Game and Parks Commission, created when Interstate 80 was built. Depths from 10 to 30 feet. Visibility varies from lake to lake and day to day, ranging from 5 to 60 feet, with 10 to 25 feet common. Hershey, East Hershey, East Sutherland, War Axe are lakes mentioned by dive shop owners, but any may be good on a given day.

Lake McConaughy SRA, Ogallala
Lake’s walleye draw spearfishermen from across the Midwest. Rock-covered face of Kingsley Dam and rocky points on southeast side of lake are most popular dive spots. Boat traffic on busy summer weekends limits visibility. Visibility 10 to 20 feet. Depths to 160 feet at full pool.

Lake Ogallala, Ogallala
Located below Kingsley Dam. Fed by water released from bottom of Lake McConaughy, which keeps it cold, helping it support trout but making it not for everyone. Visibility to 15 feet. Depths to 40 feet.

Elwood Reservoir WMA, Elwood
Irrigation reservoir filled with water pumped from canal fed by Platte River diversion. Numerous coves and flooded trees. Visibility 6 to 12 feet. Depths to 75 feet.

Lake Minatare SRA, Minatare
Canal-fed irrigation reservoir filled with water diverted from North Platte River. Ringed by trees flooded when at full pool in spring. Visibility 6 to 12 feet. Depths to 48 feet at full pool.

Sandhills Lakes
Carp-free lakes can be crystal clear on calm days. Depths rarely top 10 feet, making snorkeling an option.

Box Butte Reservoir, Hemingford
Irrigation reservoir on Niobrara River. Swimmer’s itch common in late summer. Visibility from 3 to 20 feet, best when lake is full. Depths to 39 feet at full pool.

Louisville SRA, Lake No. 2
One of three lakes in popular area along Platte River and the only public dive spot east of Grand Island. Visibility to 10 feet. Depths to 27 feet.

direct flows, and has numerous coves protected from the wind.

While there are plenty of sandpits in eastern Nebraska, they don’t offer the water clarity of those in the west due to the soils that surround them. Brian Shreve of Heartland Scuba in Lincoln said more than one diver has come to his shop to rent gear or fill tanks, saying they stood on a dock and could see the bottom in 10 feet of water, only to find once they were in the lake they could only see 2 or 3 feet. “Because of the way light reflects differently off particulates, the horizontal visibility is always less than what vertical visibility is,” Shreve said.

That said, members of the Greater Omaha Scuba Club have found one eastern Nebraska sandpit offering enough visibility to dive: Lake No. 2 at Louisville State Recreation Area. The lake had offered good diving decades ago, but it wasn’t until the Commission removed rough fish and used alum to control algae in the lake that clear water returned. The deepest of three sandpit lakes at the park at 27 feet, visibility at Lake No. 2 reaches 10 feet on a good day. “We can’t expect much more than that in the Midwest,” said

Connie Springer, a member of the club, who dives there at least twice a month in the summer.

The club does underwater lake cleanups around eastern Nebraska, collecting all of the garbage they can find around the shoreline to raise awareness of the littering problem, and at places like Branched Oak, Fremont and Wehrspann lakes, the visibility has never topped 3 feet. “We’ve done lake cleanups where you can’t even see your gauges,” Springer said. “They call it brail diving, where you’re just feeling your way along the bottom to see if you can find anything.”

There are other opportunities just across the border for Nebraska divers. DiVentures and Underwater World Scuba, both dive shops in Omaha, have dive sites in abandoned rock quarries in Iowa with good to excellent visibility.

More experienced divers enjoy diving and spearfishing in the tailrace of Fort Randall Dam in South Dakota. “You can see remnants of when the dam was built, the air hoses and truck tires they left down there,” said Mark Rettig, superintendent of Niobrara State Park and an expert diver. “It looks like they blew the horn and everybody rushed out

of there and they let the water go and what was there stayed there.”

There are abundant fish, including huge paddlefish, in the tailrace. Some people enjoy drift dives below the hydroplant, and others escape the current in two other spillway basins. Visibility in the tailrace is dependent on the conditions in Lake Francis Case, but can reach 20 feet or more. Rettig said those conditions can carry down the Missouri River into Nebraska past the Sunshine Bottom area to the mouth of Ponca Creek. While best suited for the experienced due to the danger snags present, drift diving in this part of the Missouri can be enjoyable

Purdy said diving in Nebraska is “underrated.” While visibility is limited, learning to deal with it makes better divers, and helps them appreciate days when visibility is limited in places where it is typically limitless.

“It’s all relative,” he said. ■

Editor’s note: The author was certified to scuba dive in 2014 and is still trying to learn how to take photographs in the alien underwater world and to not breathe through his nose.

25 Years and Counting

Eugene T. Mahoney State Park Celebrates

Photos and story by Jeff Kurrus

Because Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Roger Kuhn has seen the development of Eugene T. Mahoney State Park since its opening 25 years ago, it was natural to ask him about its impact on the state of Nebraska. "Millions of people have visited Mahoney since 1991," Kuhn responded. "Family vacations, reunions, weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, an event or retreat. A day at the pool, horseback ride, walk a trail, participate in educational programs or staying overnight. It's about how Mahoney has touched lives in a positive way, how it's provided millions an opportunity to make lifetime memories."

Here are a few memories to share, serving as a reminder to visit and create our own. ■



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

TOP: Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, named after the former Nebraska state senator, director of the Game and Parks Commission and executive director of the Henry Doorly Zoo Foundation, overlooks the Platte River Valley in Cass County near Ashland. At 690 acres, the park is open year-round and has hosted millions of visitors since its opening in 1991.

LEFT: A family watches the wave pool at the Family Aquatic Center, open Memorial Day through Labor Day.

OPPOSITE: The Peter Kiewit Lodge has 40 guest rooms for lodging, meeting rooms for conferences, workshops and other group events, and The Lodge Restaurant.





OPPOSITE TOP: The Activity Center has a large indoor playground and is popular for birthdays and other group outings. Connected to the center is the ice skating pavilion, which is open during the winter.

OPPOSITE MIDDLE: David Hesford, of Springfield, Missouri, plays disc golf on Mahoney's 18-hole course.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: The toboggan run at Mahoney gets sledders of all ages, including Sherry Sinn (gray), Kris Moore (blue) and Jane McDonough, each winter.

TOP: On a steam-filled September morning, two anglers fish from the dock at CenturyLink Lake.

LEFT: Adara Fowlkes, of Omaha, plays at the Family Aquatic Center. The Aquatic Center and Mahoney's other attractions (see sidebar) have employed thousands through the years. "The lives of the employees have also been impacted by the park," added Kuhn. "These employees are extremely important and deeply appreciated, because without them providing quality service to our guests and making sure everything is safely operating and maintained, like the Aquatic Center, we would have no visitors."

Other Attractions

The following details just a few more of Eugene T. Mahoney State Park's attractions.

- Walter Scott Jr. Observation Tower
- John Wayne Riding Stable
- John R. Lauritzen Golf Driving Range
- Owen Tennis Complex
- Denman and Mary Mallory Kountze Memorial Theatre
- Sand Volleyball Court
- Esther Marie Daniel Miniature Golf Course
- Owen Marina

The Park also has playgrounds, trails for wildlife viewing and other nearby attractions. Visit OutdoorNebraska.org for more information and reservations.

Grassland Resilience in a Changing Climate

Story and photos by Chris Helzer

The weather in Nebraska is crazy. From day to day and year to year, you never know what might happen. From all indications, the coming decades are only going to get crazier. We're likely to see more intense storms and longer hotter droughts. That will create a number of challenges for people, of course, but also for wildlife and the habitats they rely on. Grasslands play a huge role in supporting Nebraska's economy, through both ranching and recreational opportunities. A broad diversity of plants and animals define and drive the ecology and productivity of grasslands. That diversity will also be the key to ensuring the future of grasslands.

Nebraska's grasslands are naturally resilient. They have survived thousands of years of wild climate swings, including droughts that lasted for many decades at a time. Prairies bounced back easily from numerous bouts of intense grazing by hordes of bison and plagues of locusts. Frequent fires kept trees at bay, but made prairie plant and animal communities stronger. The changes we're seeing in climate these days should be no problem for Nebraska grasslands, except that today's grasslands are not quite the same as they were back in the day. We can't turn back the clock, but there are ways we can help those grasslands regain and sustain much of that old resilience.

The Foundations of Resilience

In the engineering world, resilience is the ability of something to bend or squish under pressure but then bounce back exactly to its prior state. In the natural world, resilience is a little different. A resilient prairie is like a ball in a bowl. Events like droughts, grazing or mowing might push the ball around the bowl, but as long as it remains in the bowl, it is still a prairie. As it moves around that metaphorical bowl, a prairie can look very different from year to year – vegetation might be short-cropped in some years, tall and dense in others, or full of “weedy” opportunistic plants in others. The key to resilience is that the prairie maintains its community of species and those species continue to perform their roles in the ecological system, regardless of what happens to the prairie or how it looks as it responds.

There are two major factors that make grasslands resilient. The first is size, the second is species diversity, and the two are strongly interconnected. Large grasslands can support big populations of species, and lots of them. Big populations are resilient because it's unlikely that every individual in a population of pocket mice, sharp-tailed grouse or digger



Droughts are likely to intensify in coming years, making ecological resilience in prairies even more important. While some species do poorly in droughts, others are able to thrive.

bees will be wiped out in a drought, disease outbreak or fire. Some individuals will probably survive and rebuild the population. Even if a population does get knocked out by a severe event, a large grassland will have numerous other populations that can send colonizers in to start a new population where the old one previously was.

Large grasslands also provide lots of habitat types. Soils and topography combine to create a broad array of growing conditions for plants, creating various plant communities that each support characteristic species of invertebrates and wildlife. Clearly, larger grasslands will have more combinations of soils and topography than will smaller grasslands, and so will have more habitat types. Not only does that variety support lots of different animal and plant species, it also gives them alternatives as weather and climate change. For example, during periods of dry, hot weather, species that normally enjoy sunny south-facing slopes might seek out cooler moisture north-facing slopes instead. If those hot dry conditions persist for many years, even plants can move (over multiple generations) to find more appropriate habitat.

In addition to soil and topography combinations, habitats are also defined by factors such as fire and grazing, which alter the structure of the vegetation. Every wildlife species has its own set of habitat structure requirements, so more variety in patches of habitat structure supports more wildlife species. Most habitat structure today is controlled by land managers who employ strategies such as haying, grazing and prescribed fire. Small prairies are likely to contain only a few management units (a pasture or two and maybe a hay meadow), meaning that there are few options for habitat patch types. A large grassland landscape, however, will have a much wider variety of those patch types, giving wildlife species a good chance to travel around and find what they need.

The second major factor that defines grassland resilience is species diversity. Healthy prairies have an incredible diversity of animals, invertebrates, plants and even soil microbes. That diversity allows that prairie to function as a community through just about any weather, fire or grazing event. In human communities, we each play different roles

The size and diversity in the Nebraska Sandhills, including The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve in Brown County, help build ecological resilience in those grasslands.





Plant diversity helps maintain consistent resources through the season for pollinators, herbivores and more. It also adds to the complexity of habitat structure, helping to increase the diversity of wildlife and invertebrates in prairies.

and contribute to society in our own way. We have teachers, firefighters, police officers, postal workers, trash collectors and many others, and the combination of all of them makes an effective community. The loss of any of those important functions ripples through the community and weakens it. Fortunately, we rarely have communities with only one postal worker or trash collector. If someone is unavailable because they are sick, there is usually someone else who can step up and fill that role.

Natural communities in prairies are very similar. Every species plays a unique role in the ecosystem, and the combination of all of those roles makes the community function. Predators, herbivores, pollinators, scavengers, nitrogen fixing bacteria and many others contribute to the prairie community, and they all rely on each other. Just as in human communities, there is redundancy within each of those roles so that if one species is unavailable for a while, others can fill in.

In many ways, prairie species diversity starts with plants because the number of plant species in a prairie affects nearly every other group of organisms. Herbivores, for example, obviously rely on plants for survival, and need to have a constant supply, no matter what happens to a prairie. In dry years, many plant species go dormant during the middle of the summer, making them unavailable to herbivores (including livestock). Prairies with strong plant diversity, however, have plenty of other plant species that can thrive under those hot dry conditions, giving herbivores something to feed on – and also providing habitat structure for numerous other species of animals and insects. Fires, intensive grazing, diseases, and many other events will weaken or temporarily deactivate some plant species, but in a diverse prairie, there are always others to take their place.

Pollinators are another group that relies on plant diversity. They also help preserve it. There are hundreds of bee species in Nebraska grasslands, along with numerous butterflies, moths, wasps, flies, and other pollinators. Some of those insects specialize on one plant species, or a particular group of species (sunflowers, for example, or legumes). Other pollinator insects visit different kinds of flowers day to day and season to season, depending upon what's available to them. When plant diversity is low, there are few choices for pollinators, and a relatively high likelihood that there will be periods of the year when nothing is available to eat – especially for more specialized pollinator species. Since pollinators are required for most prairie plant species to produce seeds, losing pollinators because of low plant diversity can mean losing even more plant diversity and create a self-perpetuating downward spiral.

Plant diversity affects much more than just herbivores and pollinators. Plant diversity begets, and is begotten by, soil microbial communities that regulate soil productivity. A high number of plant species leads to high numbers of insect species, which provide all kinds of services that keep ecosystems humming along. The availability of lots of insect species also stabilizes the prey base for the wildlife that depend upon them, including most breeding bird species.



Pollinators rely on plant diversity, but a diversity of pollinators is also important to maintain diverse plant communities. A combination of both builds resilience.

Protecting and Building Resilience

Ensuring that Nebraska's grasslands remain as resilient as possible means protecting the two biggest features that make them so – prairie size and species diversity. There are numerous economic, sociologic and other factors that lead to prairies being converted to row crop agriculture or other land uses, but the end result is the same: increased grassland fragmentation and decreased size and connectivity of remaining prairie patches. Restoring prairie habitat lost during periods of high commodity prices is exponentially more expensive and difficult than breaking it out, and the costs are shared well beyond the individual landowner who plowed up the grasses. Our best strategy, by far, is to do everything we can to protect what's left of Nebraska's prairies, especially in parts of the state where grassland still dominates the landscape.

In parts of Nebraska where grassland has been highly fragmented by rowcrop agriculture, the strategic restoration of some prairie habitat can help rebuild resilience. This doesn't mean turning back the clock and trying to make the landscape look like it did before farming. Instead, it means looking for small but important opportunities to enlarge and reconnect some of the remaining prairie fragments. While we don't know how big a prairie needs to be to support the majority of species and ecological processes, we do know that bigger is better, and more connectivity helps species move around to find the habitat they need. Adding a little more prairie habitat adjacent to, and between existing prairies, can make a big difference to the species trying to survive there.

When creating new prairie habitat, it pays to invest up front in the highest plant species diversity possible. Using seed mixes of 50 or more plant species helps ensure that there is a constant supply of flowering plants for pollinators and forage for herbivores. High plant diversity also means that invertebrates and soil microbes that are tied to particular species can find those hosts in the new habitat. More



Prescribed fire is an important tool for prairie managers trying to maintain ecological resilience. Fire helps promote plant diversity, suppresses invasive species and can be used to manipulate habitat structure.

diverse plant communities are also more stable, and less likely to become dominated by a few grass species or by invasive plants over time. A number of conservation organizations across the state have been using seed mixes of between 100 and 200 plant species in restoration projects and have seen consistent success in terms of establishment and longevity of those plantings. Landowners can often find cost-share assistance from agencies such as Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to help pay the additional cost of high-diversity prairie restoration seedings.

Within both restored and remnant (unplowed) prairies, it's critically important to maintain the species diversity and health of plant communities. Invasive species such

as smooth brome, reed canarygrass, crown vetch, leafy spurge, sericea lespedeza and many others that can form near monocultures in prairie habitats are serious threats to plant diversity. Eastern red cedars and other trees can also destroy prairie habitat if they are left unchecked. However, while controlling these and other invasive species is imperative, it's also necessary to ensure that the cure isn't worse than the disease. Perhaps the greatest losses of prairie plant diversity in Nebraska have come from broadcast spraying of herbicides aimed at killing weeds. It is nearly impossible for prairies to recover from the loss of plant diversity that results from spraying of chemicals that wipe out a large proportion of the plant community.

Herbicides are not the enemy, they

are just a tool that has to be used judiciously. There are four key ways in which more strategic herbicide application can save plant diversity while still preventing invasives from taking over. The first of those is to be on the alert for invasions and prevent nasty species from gaining a strong foothold in the first place. Every part of Nebraska has its own set of nasty invaders, the names of which can be found at NEinvasives.com. Identifying and killing these invaders when they first appear is the absolute best defense against them.

The second strategy is to be selective in both the chemicals used for invasive control and the application methods. Some invaders, including musk thistles and eastern red cedars, can be controlled without chemicals at all. Digging thistles has been a kind of rite of passage for many rural Nebraskans, and continues to be the most effective way to keep populations from reaching the point at which herbicides become necessary. While some herbicides can kill eastern red cedars, cutting big ones off at ground level and using prescribed fire to kill little ones has been shown to be much more cost effective. When herbicides are used, choosing chemicals that target only the species being controlled, or at least a narrow list of plants, helps keep preserve the strength and integrity of the plant community around the sprayed weeds. In addition, spot spraying individual plants or clumps may take a little more time than broadcast spraying big areas, but it is almost always the best choice in the long run. When large areas of grassland are sprayed, it is nearly impossible for the plant community to recover its lost diversity.

Third, it's important to be sure that the weeds being controlled are truly invasive. Many species, including ragweeds, hoary vervain, buffalo bur, ironweed and many others are not aggressive, they are opportunistic. These species take advantage of situations in which dominant grasses have been weakened by grazing, drought or other factors. When grasses are allowed to recover their vigor, those opportunistic species give way fairly easily. Spraying those "weeds" tends to lead to more weeds, while letting the grasses recover their strength

and dominance resolves the situation with no loss of life. A great way to see whether weeds are aggressive or opportunistic is simply to erect a small grazing enclosure for a year or two and see if the grasses come back or weeds continue to dominate.

The last and most important strategy for controlling invasive species is also the best strategy for overall prairie vigor and resilience – a management regime that strengthens the prairie community through alternating periods of stress and recovery. A healthy plant community is much like a healthy human body. Both can more easily repel invaders than their weaker counterparts. The analogy works particularly well because both a healthy prairie and healthy body benefit from a good workout. When we exercise, we temporarily stress our muscles, heart and lungs and then allow them to recover. That kind of fitness regime creates a body that is less prone to

injury and disease and also can recover more quickly if those ailments occur. Prairies also thrive when they are stressed and allowed to recover. Fires, droughts and intensive grazing all strain plant and animal communities, but going through the process of recovery from those temporary shocks keeps prairies diverse and more resistant to invaders.

Managing a prairie in the same way year after year weakens the ability of a prairie to respond to unexpected disturbances, including droughts. Regardless of whether the management includes grazing, fire, haying or rest, applying the same treatment in the same way each time favors some prairie species over others. Eventually, that can lead to the loss of those species not favored, and a loss of both species diversity and community function. There are many ways to manage for prairie resilience, but one key strategy is to shift the location of

grazing, fire or haying from place to place each year and provide adequate rest between disturbances.

Hope for the Future

Prairies are naturally resilient. Nebraska's grasslands have been around for thousands of years, and will survive for thousands more if we help foster their intrinsic toughness and adaptability. While we're likely in for some pretty drastic weather conditions in the coming decades, large and interconnected prairies with diverse plant and animal communities should survive just fine.

Nebraska's prairies provide us with livestock production, help protect our groundwater resources and give us places to hunt, hike and enjoy nature. Prairies are the foundation of our identity as a state. Let's keep them as fit and hardy as the Nebraskans that rely upon them. ■



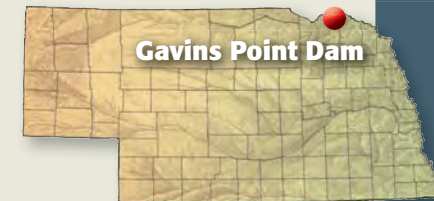
Plants such as fourpoint evening primrose (far left), upright prairie coneflower (dark yellow) and hoary vervain (purple) are often considered to be weeds, but play critical roles in helping plant communities recover from stresses such as drought and intensive grazing.

Species Contest at Gavins

Story and photos by
Jenny Nguyen



Gavins Point Dam is located near Yankton, South Dakota, on the Missouri River between the Nebraska-South Dakota border. It impounds Lewis and Clark Lake.



For 17 years, colleagues Gus Carlo (left), John Flowers and Rick Bevins make the trip to Gavins Point Dam to find out who can catch the most species of fish. All three have been faculty members at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Psychology Department. Flowers is now retired, Bevins is department chair, and Carlo recently accepted a position with the University of Missouri, but he continues to return to Nebraska for this annual competition.

The rules are simple. "The winner is the fisherman who catches the largest number of different species of fish in a defined period of time," said John Flowers, who created the Gavins Point Species Fishing Contest with his fishing buddy, Rick Bevins.

Both are faculty colleagues at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Seventeen years ago, after a highly productive fishing trip on the Missouri River, the idea for the contest was born.

"We found that to be so much fun, we have been pursuing this activity on an annual basis – except for the 2011 flood year," Flowers said. Seven years ago, Gus Carlo, a former UNL faculty member, also joined.

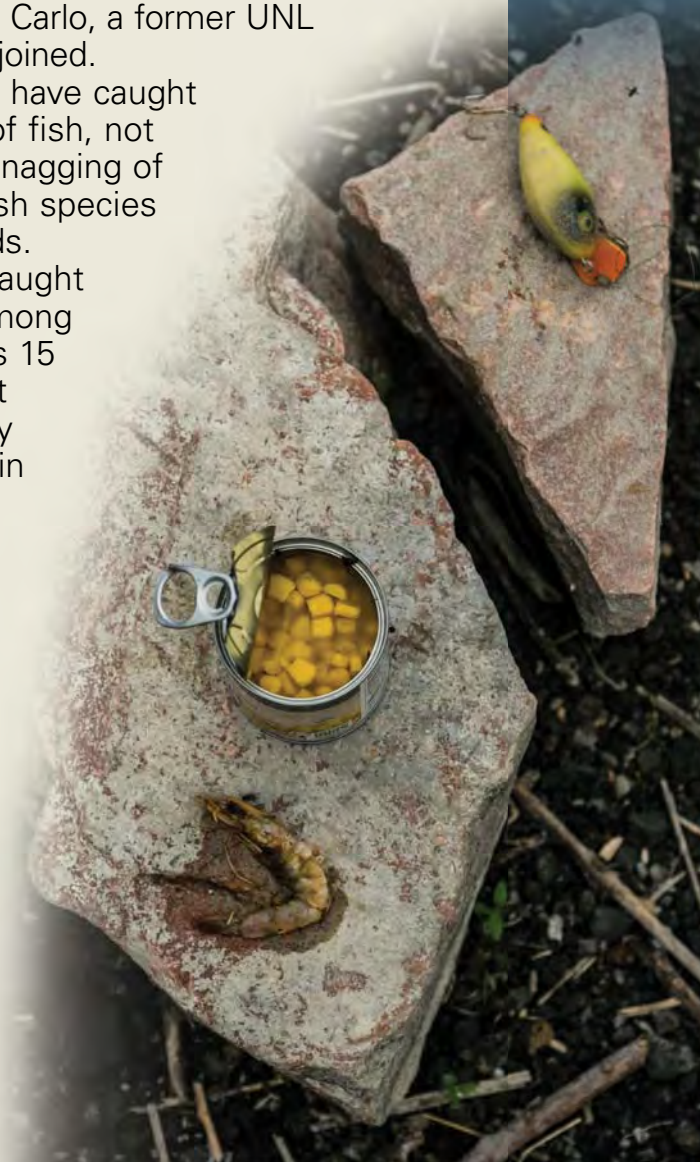
To date, the anglers have caught 25 different species of fish, not including accidental snagging of paddlefish and non-fish species such as turtles or birds.

The most species caught in any one contest among the three anglers was 15 in 2012, and the most species caught by any single angler was 12 in 2012 by Rick Bevins.

The prize consists of a traveling trophy and exemption from chipping in for beer and pizza that evening.

The anglers usually hold their contest in late spring, a time when large

To catch as many species as possible, Carlo, Flowers and Bevins use all the baits and lures they can acquire, including corn, shrimp and crankbaits.





Top Left: Rick Bevins poses with a freshwater drum. Top Right: John Flowers releases a northern pike. Bottom: Gus Carlo passes over the "Gavins Point Dam Species Fishing Contest" trophy to John Flowers, the winner in 2014.



numbers of different fish are most active, though they have also gone in the summer and fall. Typically outfitted with two or three rod-and-reel combinations, and fishing with two at a time with different rigs, they have used baits such as crayfish and shrimp for drum, canned corn for carp, minnows and worms for a variety of species, crankbaits, spinnerbaits, and more to lure in as many species as possible.

Once a species is caught, bait and tackle is switched to attract a different one. The contest usually begins at 11 a.m. and ends at 5 p.m. with a lunch break in between.

"Sometimes fish bite on both of an angler's rods at once, and that can lead to some humorous chaos," Flowers said.

These photos were taken in 2014, when Gus Carlo passed the trophy to John Flowers, who won again in 2015. The trio's 2016 trip is planned for early July, just after the holiday. Should readers of this story happen to be at Gavins Point and notice them, don't hesitate to say hello and ask questions about how to enjoy this activity.

"It's always fun," said Carlo, who has recently moved from UNL to accept a position at the University of Missouri. "John also retired several years ago, but we still get together every year."

Who will win this year? ■



John Flowers and Rick Bevins each caught a northern pike on crankbaits during their competition in July 2014.



This shortnose gar was caught on a Mepps spinner. Many others were caught on worms. In past contests, longnose gar have also been caught.



Often mistaken for carp, the shorthead redhorse is a good indicator of healthy river systems.

A Home Away From Home

Nebraska bed and breakfasts take vacationing up a notch.

By Renae Blum

When Karen Baker first began planning her dream bed-and-breakfast, she started with a list. “My husband and I have traveled a lot,” Karen said. “I sat down and thought, ‘What have I liked best about the places we’ve stayed?’”

Answers came quickly: privacy, a feeling of safety, plenty of blankets and linens and counter space. Most of all, a sense of community, of family.

Today, Bakers Bed and Breakfast in Blair, Nebraska, entertains guests from places as far away as Finland and Canada and provides a getaway for all sorts of folks, from lawyers to newlyweds to groups of scrapbooking friends. “I love hearing their experiences, and getting to know them,” Karen said.

Interest in bed-and-breakfasts in Nebraska is growing fast, innkeepers say. People are drawn to the serene atmosphere, homey touches and personalized attention that staying at a bed-and-breakfast affords.

“The experience is just more special,” said Sally Hansen,

innkeeper at the Kaley House Bed & Breakfast in Red Cloud, Nebraska. “At a bed-and-breakfast, you have a lot more privacy. In our case, we have three parlors you can enjoy. It’s kind of like having a home away from home.”

Innkeeper Kay Wunderlich, of Roca, Nebraska’s Wunder Roost Bed & Breakfast, said that their guests are often lovers of the outdoors. “We’re out in the country – we have goats, chickens, the stars, the farm life,” she says. “A lot of people just want to get away from the hustle and bustle and create a new memory.”

Staying at a bed-and-breakfast is as affordable as any other lodging, Wunderlich added, and you’ll get more for your money. “We create an experience, not just a place to sleep,” she said.

If you want to find a reputable bed-and-breakfast to stay at, a good place to start is with the Nebraska Bed and Breakfast Association, at nebraskabb.com. Each of the 29 member locations has been inspected to ensure that it meets high-quality standards for a bed-and-breakfast. ■



Off's Bed & Breakfast in Bennington.

PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN



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Camping With Kids

Tips for introducing camping to your children.

By Julie Geiser

Camping with children is one of the true joys in family life. I remember when our kids were little and all the fun we had camping; it brought us all closer but it always took some pre-planning to make it safe and fun.

Keeping youngsters from having the camping jitters is sometimes an issue, especially for tent campers. Tent camping can be a ton of fun until night rolls around and different noises start happening. To get kids familiar with camping do some pre-camping right at home in your backyard. The kids will learn what will be happening at camp, and you can make sure you have all the equipment you need before your first trek into the wilderness.

Practice cooking outdoors with your child. Set up the tent and let your child spend the night in his/her sleeping bag to get used to it. Make hot chocolate or s'mores outside. Get a pair of binoculars and look at the moon, stars and birds with your child. Share camping etiquette with your child. Helping your child become comfortable with camping activities is almost as fun as camping itself; we had many backyard campouts with our kids.

Camping Safety

Getting your children involved with camping activities teaches them the importance of safety at the campsite. If you have toddlers or young children, have them mark tent stakes and lines with small, inexpensive solar lights so they will remember to stay clear of them.

Make sure they understand the dangers of fire, and don't leave the campfire unattended with children around.

Get each child a flashlight and attach a whistle around the flashlight handle. They can keep the light with them in case they become frightened or disoriented, and if lost, they can blow the whistle.

Make sure your children know where

the campsite is and keep a close eye on youngsters so they don't wander off. Children should understand the dangers and the joys of camping. Let them help with setup and chores around the camp to make them more responsible campers.

Play Tents

Bring two tents when camping with children. The smaller tent can hold toys, provide shade, and give children an area to play safely. Your larger tent is used for sleeping and storing sleeping bags, clothing, and all the other paraphernalia of camping. This will give kids their own get-a-way and will keep them occupied.

Activities for Children

Never be bored when camping and don't fret rainy days – there are many ways to keep kids busy after they're tired of swimming or fishing. Pack a plastic tote full of craft supplies for those drab days.

Sand Drawings

Bring some heavyweight construction paper and white glue from home. Help the kids gather some sand or lightweight soil from around the campground. Let them draw pictures on the paper with the glue. While the glue is still wet, pour the sand over the glue and allow it to dry.

Rock Crafts

Allow kids to look for rocks during your hikes and around your campsite. When they find rocks that they would like to use, wash them off and dry them thoroughly, and then let the kids glue them together with white glue making shapes and creatures. When you get home, you can coat them with a layer of clear varnish to help preserve them.

Both of these activities for kids will

keep them busy for a while, and give them something to remind them of their camping trip.

Scavenger Hunt

Have a scavenger hunt by looking for these items or make up your own list:

- Perfect skipping rocks
- Straight walking stick
- A flower in perfect condition
- A perfectly round stone
- A piece of litter (this also teaches camping ethics)
- Picture of a big fish you caught
- A photo of wildlife
- Proof of visiting with another camper; again, use your camera

Games and Other Fun

Be sure to bring along some games from home to play during down times. Games seem more enjoyable outdoors, and if you play by lantern or fire light, it seems even more fun. Bring some toys too, such as balls and bats, or badminton for quick games in the afternoon.

Some campgrounds will offer activities for children and families; it is always good to ask when looking for places to camp. If you are camping elsewhere, games and toys are a great alternative to boredom and inactivity.

Camping can bring a lifetime of enjoyment to young and old alike. Passing down the love of the outdoors from parents to children is a way to give them a lifelong love of camping. ■

PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER

Root Canals, Archeology and an Old Dog Tooth

Questions always arise when teeth are found.

By Roger Welsch

For some reason I am thinking about teeth this morning. Maybe it's because yesterday I had the occasion to enjoy a root canal. As the dentist spent an hour with a diamond bit drill, blasting powder and a backhoe chiseling his way down through my molar, I was once again struck by the remarkable durability of teeth. Even though this particular one had decided to fail me and require repair.

From what little I have learned about archeology and paleontology I know that teeth are the most enduring part of organic substances. Flesh fails, bone disintegrates, but those teeth hang in there to the very last and are therefore what we often find when nothing else remains. I've been skinny dipping down here in the Loup River for almost 40 years, something readers downstream might be dismayed to learn I know, and so I know the sandbars fairly well.

And the riverbed. Even the great anthropologist, essayist and poet commented on the joys of "floating down the incline of the continent" as he butt-bounced his way down the Platte River a century ago. I imagine it is a part of the story of the survival of the human race that my ancestors learned long ago to pay some attention to what lies beneath them under the water, in the sands and directly below my... Well, directly below me. The sand bottoms of the Middle Loup are fairly fine; there are few pebbles, let alone rocks. An occasional bit of wood, but not even much of that. So when one's bottom contacts something hard down there, unseen, it tends to focus the mind.

So what is down there under the water? I've come up with a lot of bones over the years and not the sort of livestock you might imagine. I've found bison rib bones and a half dozen skulls – one a truly ancient Pleistocene example of bison antiquus, the species that roamed the Plains even before the modern buffalo, *bison bison*. There have been vertebrae, leg bones, bits and fragments, but most of all ... teeth. Buffalo teeth, prehistoric horse teeth, camel teeth (yes, camels did once roam the Great American Desert) and rarest and most exciting ... elephant teeth. There is some romance in knowing that this same ground where I now see fauna like deer, muskrats and raccoons was once grazed by mammoths and mastodons. And that the evidence for that is right here, in my hand. Sure, that was a long time ago, but not so long ago that I can't still find the occasional tooth, not all that different after all than the molar Dr. Destructo was grinding away at just yesterday at this very hour.

Of all the teeth I have picked up along the way the one that means the most to me is an ordinary dogtooth I



PHOTO BY ROGER WELSCH

"My precious!"

sometimes wear on a cord around my neck. I have written here and elsewhere about my love for dogs. Dogs are my favorite kind of people. But this tooth has special meaning for me. It was in a discard midden pile from an archeological dig not far from my home, an excavation of an ancient Pawnee earthlodge. Among the potsherds, flint fragments, charred bits of wood and unidentifiable and insignificant debris the researchers dug from the site there was this dog tooth.

The tooth is interesting to me because this dog was part of Pawnee village life long ago but also because it was part of family life. The tooth was found inside the lodge, so this wasn't just some stray that wandered the village. It was inside the lodge, perhaps someone's favorite. Even though his life may have been a tough one and his death in the lodge fire a terrible one, he was a dog. A household dog. And for that I hold him in regard ... even as he is represented only by this one tooth. Notably ... a canine.

This dog knew things, saw things, heard things, tasted things, lived things that still fascinate me and so I honor that dog in this little bit of him left on this earth. Maybe some day far in the future someone will find my tooth, showing signs of a root canal and cap, and think, "You know, this old dog knew things, saw things, heard things, tasted things, lived things that are now long gone."

Or maybe it's just the anesthesia. ■

Roger Welsch is an author, humorist and folklorist. He has written for NEBRASKAland Magazine since 1977.



Eagle Heron Nest

Unlikely roommates share blue heron rookery.

By Eric Fowler

When the fox comes near the hen house, the hens tend to make quite a racket. Imagine if the fox moved in? Something along those lines happened in 2014 in rural Lancaster County when a pair of bald eagles commandeered a nest in a blue heron rookery, added on and began nesting. That first nesting attempt resulted in eggs that apparently never hatched, as the adults were seen incubating in March but left in April before chicks were seen.

That was likely much to the delight of the herons, which returned to their rookery, which had been active for a few years, in late March to find the interlopers.

The eagles' second attempt in 2015 resulted in two chicks being fledged. This year's attempt may have been even more successful had high winds not blown the nest from the tree in early April, killing two to three young hatchlings.

The birds have similar nest building techniques that begin with sticks laid in the crook of the upper reaches of a tree. The eagles and herons were nesting in a cypress tree, the only case in Nebraska of eagles nesting in something other than a cottonwood. Herons nest in colonies that commonly contain from 30 to 75 active nests. Both eagles and herons

continue to add material to their nests during the nesting season and are apt to return year after year. Eagles' nests get much larger over time, with the largest measuring more than 12 feet wide and 20 feet tall and weighing several tons.

Bald eagles arrive at nesting territories in January or February in Nebraska. Herons don't arrive at their colonies until late-March or early-April. This gives eagles the chance to usurp a nest, which they are known to do. Eagles taking over a heron nest has happened before. Joel Jorgensen, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission nongame bird biologist, knows of one such case near Nehawka. But what happened there and appears to often happen elsewhere is the herons abandon the rookery and build a new one. Which makes sense to Jorgensen.

"To have an opportunistic predator that close to your offspring ... which for these birds and all other animals, producing their offspring is really the most important business in their minds ... that's almost like having a criminal stay over in your house and hoping he doesn't rob the place," Jorgensen said.

An internet search did find another case of herons continuing to use their rookery despite the eagle's presence.



Eaglets test their wings as a heron returns to the rookery.

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Photo Courtesy of Karen Klein

The search also found a case of eagles raiding it and preying on heron hatchlings. People living near the Lancaster County nest didn't report witnessing predation, but it was readily apparent when the eagles were returning to the nest from the racket the herons made.

The number of bald eagle nests dropped from an estimated 100,000 when it became the nation's symbol in 1782 to fewer than 500 in 1963, the result of habitat loss, poisoning and widespread pesticide use. When the bald eagle was removed from the endangered species list in 2007, there were about 10,000 active nests in the United States and 54 in Nebraska, where the first successful nest in recent times came in 1991. Last year, there were more than 12,000 nests nationwide and 118 in Nebraska.

Jorgensen said he expects that number to keep rising. "They're already blowing away any expectations," he said, pointing to the 1980s when researchers thought 10 active nests would be a success. "I think that the big question is when does this start leveling off and we start seeing the habitat in the state becoming saturated."

Up to 7 percent of bald eagle nests in Nebraska are blown down from trees each year, Jorgensen said. Sometimes the chicks can be rescued and raised by Fontenelle Forest's Raptor Recovery. Eagles typically return to the same territory the following year and build a new nest. People living near a heron rookery in Lancaster County, and the herons living in it, will be watching to see if they choose to start from scratch or take over another nest. ■



An adult bald eagle tends to its young as great blue herons tend to theirs last June in the Lancaster County rookery in which the eagles chose to nest the past three years.

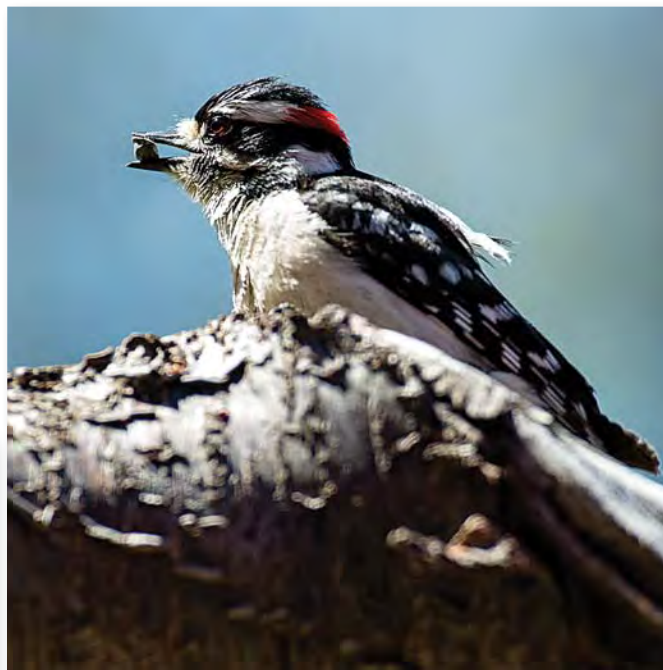
Bettering Bird Photos, Naturally

To make bird photos appear to be more natural, it helps to provide dinner and set the stage.

By Justin Haag

It's no secret. One of the easiest ways to attract birds within your camera's reach is to appeal to a feature of their anatomies – their stomachs. Common photos of birds on backyard feeders are effective at capturing details of a species' characteristics and beauty; they don't always evoke a sense of the wild, however.

In order to capture photos of birds in a more natural setting, a photographer can position feeders near areas where avian visitors will perch on branches nearby. Placing feeders above shrubs and cut branches is a way to better your chances at getting photos that appear to be from deep in the woods.



PHOTOS BY JUSTIN HAAG

A male downy woodpecker (*Dryobates pubescens*) is one of the many birds that have visited the makeshift feeder designed for photography. The attractive bark of a cherry tree adds to the photo's appeal.

An even better way to help boost the natural appeal of bird photos is to construct a feeder from natural materials that look good in a photo: for me, it's a log with a few holes in it.

Elevated by a simple inexpensive four-foot rebar fence post, the 15-inch log provides the appearance of a natural perch in tightly cropped photos. By choosing a log with attractive bark, in my case from a cherry tree, additional appeal is added to the photo. Shallow holes atop the log, drilled from spade bits, are effective for holding feed and attracting birds to the scene. A smaller hole at the bottom, drilled about halfway through the log, allows the makeshift feeder to rest on the 3/8-inch rebar post. The skinny rebar also poses a challenge for pesky squirrels to climb.

A photographer can reposition this feeder to any location in the yard to vary backgrounds, capitalize on places of concealment, and adapt to lighting situations. On this day, the camera with telephoto lens are on a tripod to my left, fixed to a view of the feeder, while I write this story and respond to emails with a laptop computer – keeping watch of the feeder from the corner of my eye. Multitasking has rarely been so fun, especially when the birds are cooperating. ■

The author used a spade bit to drill three shallow holes in a log for holding feed. Another smaller hole was drilled on the bottom of the log so the makeshift feeder and photo prop could be perched on a rebar fence post. As long as the holes are concealed from the camera's view, bird photos appear more natural than those taken of retail feeders.

Justin Haag of Chadron enjoys photographing the wildlife and landscapes of the Panhandle while serving as regional editor for NEBRASKAland.

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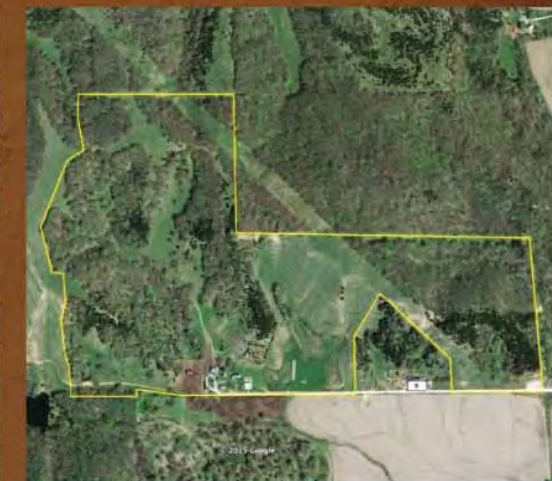
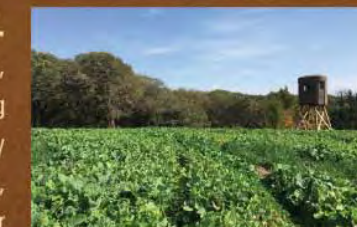
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Pictured above is my father Lawrence "Sandy" Sandoz and a bag of pheasants.

The picture to the right is of Lloyd Terwilliger (left), my father Lawrence Sandoz, and my uncle Roy Barta with a bag of pheasants on Roy Barta's farm near Niobrara, Nebraska in 1944.

Thanks for considering the photos.

— Jerry Sandoz, Lincoln, Nebraska

Editor's Note: Jerry also submitted a hunt/fish permit (top) from 1942.

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. Photos will be returned.



Butterflied Trout with Compound Butter

A preparation of boneless trout that will impress.

By Jenny Nguyen

While I was growing up, my parents often bought and served fish whole with bones intact and the head still on. It was cheaper, but I think my parents truly enjoyed the challenge of eating – navigating – whole fish. They believed that the tastiest, sweetest fish often have the tiniest, sharpest bones, and though I generally agree, it does not compensate for my being still hungry after most fish dinners with my family.

For me, the slightest graze may deflate all appetite, invoke fear and stress. Getting fish bones stuck in the back of your throat is not a pleasant experience, and if you “suck” at eating fish, as my parents often tell me I do, this happens a lot – a certain memory still makes me shudder.

Trout falls into this category. They are delicious and so much fun to catch, but they are also bony. They require too much care and attention to eat. It was one of those meals that I looked forward to but one that I also ate with much trepidation.

After catching limit after limit of trout at Two Rivers State Recreation Area, however, I was inspired to learn how to debone trout this spring. And I have to say that this new skill has been life changing. (Thank you YouTube!) Thus far, butterflied, boneless grilled trout has become my favorite preparation of this fish. Though a bit time-consuming, deboning fish is worth the effort, and your guests will appreciate it. It's also an excuse to buy a new kitchen toy – fish tweezers.

Servings: 4

Prep Time: 45 minutes

Cooking Time: 8 minutes

Ingredients:

- 4 whole trout, scaled and deboned



Deboned and grilled rainbow trout served with a compound butter of shallot, chive and garlic.

- Your favorite lemon and herb spice blend seasoning

- Kosher salt, to taste

- Olive oil for brushing

Compound Butter

- 4 tablespoons of salted butter, softened

- 1 teaspoon of chive, chopped

- 1 teaspoon of shallot, chopped

- Zest of 1 lemon

- Pinch of salt

1. To make compound butter, combine softened butter, chive, shallot, zest and a pinch of salt. Lay a piece of plastic wrap on a flat surface, place compound butter in the middle and then roll up compound butter into a log. Twist the ends and refrigerate to harden.

2. Rinse fish under cold water and pat dry with paper towels. Debone whole trout according to these directions: <https://youtu.be/KkmkbJtrhFY>. Open up trout all the way down to the tail and remove as much of the spine as possible. Use fish tweezers to remove pin bones along

both sides of the fish. Brush both sides of the fish with olive oil. Lightly sprinkle salt on both sides and generous amounts of the lemon and herb blend, but first, taste the lemon and herb blend to determine how salty it is.

3. Prepare grill to cook on high, direct heat. Once hot, clean grill grates thoroughly with a wire brush; cooking fish on a dirty grill will result in sticking. Cook trout skin-side up for about 3-4 minutes, or until meat is slightly golden. Slide a metal spatula under the fish and flip. Cook skin-side down for an additional 3-4 minutes or until skin is slightly crisp and fish is cooked through.

4. Serve fish hot with pats of compound butter on top. Warn dinner guests about leftover bones. ■

This recipe and photograph originally appeared on Jenny's Food for Hunters blog at Foodforhunters.com.



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Remembering Ken Bouc

I just noticed the obituary for the photographer Ken Bouc, who passed away April 8.

Ken Bouc was the *NEBRASKAland* magazine editor and photographer who met my wife Carolyn on the shore of Branched Oak Lake almost 37 years ago.

It was at sunset, on the north shore near our campsite, where he asked Carolyn to pose for a picture next to our little sailboat.

I don't remember where the kids and I were at that moment, but I distinctly remember Carolyn coming back from the shore all smiles, and mentioning somewhat modestly that she had posed for one Ken Bouc at our sailboat. She recalled that Ken asked her only to stand by the boat, look like she was doing sailboat things. She said she did as asked and her photo would likely appear with others in the magazine soon.

Ken's photograph captured this young women with the sailboat rigging and the sunset in her outstretched hands. We treasured that photo when it was published, but, like so many other things a young family does, we put our copy of the magazine away in some shoebox or other in the attic for safekeeping. Carolyn passed away January 4 of this year. A few days before the funeral, this photograph, and Ken's name and the publication, came into my head in a dream that meant we needed to find the photo and share it.

So our family went to Lincoln in a rush, and worked with the good people at *NEBRASKAland* to look for this photo. They found and delivered to us Ken's photo and a copy of the May 1979 magazine in which it appeared.

I never had a chance to meet with Ken, or to say thanks and tell him how much that one photo, from all of his good photography, meant to Carolyn and me and our family, then and now.

Anyway, thanks Ken, from all of us to you for sharing your artful views of the beauty of Nebraska and its people through the lens of your camera.

Jim Boucher
Valley, Nebraska



Ken worked at *NEBRASKAland* Magazine as a writer and photographer from 1969 until 2007, producing more than 260 articles and countless images. Ken died April 8, 2016.



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