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NEBRASKAland

July 2015



A honey bee pollinates a purple coneflower in central Lancaster County. Photo by Chris Masada.

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INSIDE

Saw-whet Owls • Floral Explosions
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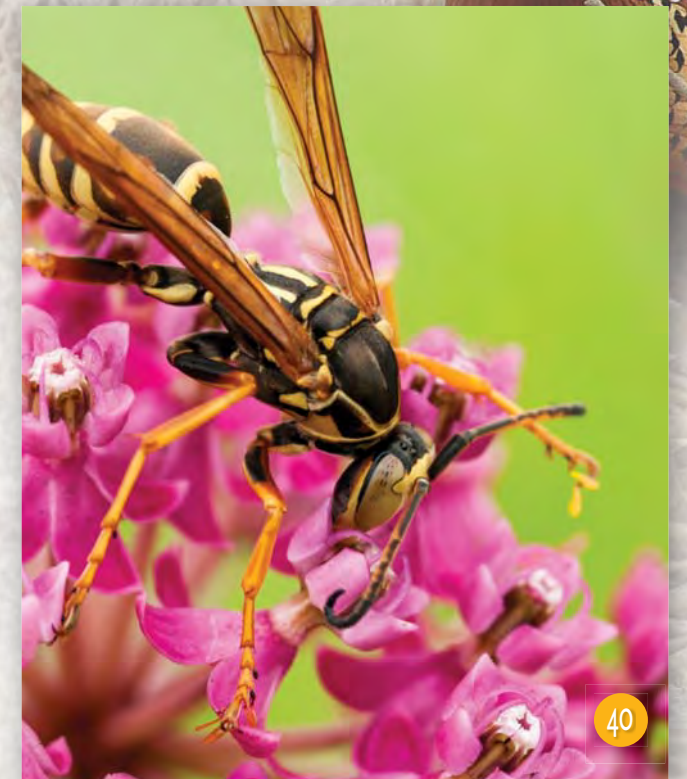


NEBRASKAland Magazine

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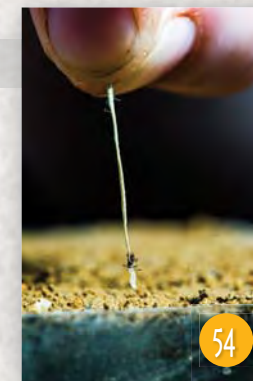
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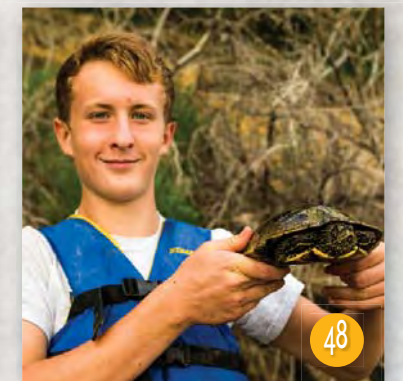
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Cover: This diminutive saw-whet owl was photographed in the Wildcat Hills of Nebraska's Panhandle. The name comes from the sound of its call being similar to that of a knife on a whetstone. See the story on page 24. Photo by Justin Haag.



Honking for Nebraska

I wanted to send my congratulations on the excellent “Nebraska On My Mind” article written by Michael Forsberg in the June issue of *NEBRASKAland*.

I too honk the car horn when me and my family enter Nebraska on our way home from visiting relatives in Denver. I was glad to hear someone else does this crazy ritual. Normally I hit the horn with the “There’s no place like Nebraska” tune when we cross into Nebraska.

Being born and raised on a northeastern Nebraska farm, I also have a fond love of the land as described by Mr. Forsberg.

My two daughters, now grown, also made sure we honked the horn upon entering Nebraska. My wife, being a native of Colorado, at first thought this “honking” was nuts but now completes the tradition when it’s her turn to drive us home across the state line.

Yes, there is No Place Like Nebraska!

Douglas A. Koopman
Hastings, Nebraska



Cece Grimes took this eastern fox squirrel image in downtown Lincoln in Lancaster County.



A Canada goose flies over Pioneers Park in Lancaster County. Photo by Mitch Tranmer.



Four-year-old Wyatt Niebuhr holds up a bluegill while fishing with his dad on a lake in Hall County. Photo by Kay Niebuhr.



Andrew Nelson of Orting, Washington, shot this white-tailed buck on private land in Cherry County. Photo by Rusty Lurz.



Paul Pack photographed this great blue heron with a bluegill in its beak on a private pond in Dawson County.



Outdoor Plates

The license plate on Gary Kurtzer’s vehicle lets others know what he’s likely to have inside. The Lincoln man has fished year-round for largemouth bass for more than 40 years in the Salt Valley Lakes and elsewhere.

If you have a unique outdoor message plate you would like to share, or know someone who does, e-mail a photo (high-resolution, JPEG format only, please) along with your hometown and a brief description of the interests expressed on your license plate to Eric.Fowler@Nebraska.gov.

Message in the Magazine

Now, you can send a message to *NEBRASKAland Magazine* at [Facebook.com/nebraskalandmagazine](https://www.facebook.com/nebraskalandmagazine) and your comment or photograph may appear on these pages.

– Editor

Correction

In the May 2015 issue on the Portraits of the Past page we incorrectly identified Guy Stinson as Gary. The letter also stated that Guy and his yearly hunts with friends Ben and Frank Parr and Dr. Sievers ended in 1944. In fact, their hunts actually ended in November of 1941, just before full United States involvement in World War II.

Send your comments to:

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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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Mixed Bag

A Mammal Brief

Least Shrew

By Lindsay Rogers

Although small and mouse-looking, the least shrew (*Cryptotis parva*) is more closely related to hedgehogs than mice. Least shrews are found across the eastern United States from eastern Mexico to New York. In Nebraska, they are found in all areas except the Panhandle. Like all shrews, least shrews are insectivores; they feed primarily on insect larvae and centipedes, but will also eat spiders and snails. They have huge dietary needs often eating 60-100 percent of their body weight in food daily. Shrews are often considered an economic benefit as they consume large amounts of potentially harmful insects. ■

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



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Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever 2015 Habitat Tours



Photo by Scott Schmidt, PF



Photo by Scott Schmidt, PF



Photo by Kelsi Wehrman, PF

Title	Description	Starting Location	Date and Time
Results of Prescribed Fire in the Canyons	Travel through the Loess Canyons to see the remarkable difference prescribed fire has made in recent years. See the results of the landowner led Loess Canyons Rangeland Alliance (LCRA) Prescribed Burn Association and their massive efforts to battle Eastern Red Cedar encroachment.	Curtis Community Center 201 Garlick Avenue Curtis	June 11 10:30 am to 3:30 pm
The Birds & the Bees Habitat Tour	Learn about the critical importance of Honey Bees, Monarch Butterflies and Native Pollinators. Tour a Central NE property with prime habitat for pollinators and other wildlife and hear how pollinator declines affect you. Free bus transportation will be provided from St Paul.	St. Paul High School 1305 Howard Ave St. Paul	June 17 4:00 pm to 7:00 pm
What's the Buzz about Pollinators?	This tour will highlight areas where habitat management activities have been implemented to enhance the landscape for wildlife and pollinators. Learn how to identify grasses and wildflowers in Southwest NE and their economic importance as pollinators. Tour and supper will end at the PF Memorial Youth Park west of Champion NE.	Imperial NRCS 706 East 5th Street Imperial	June 25 4:00 pm to 7:00 pm MT
Quail Management and CRP Practices	Learn how to improve quail habitat with simple management techniques such as edge-feathering, creating down tree structures, and the importance of early successional habitat. See how CRP can be tailored to enhance quail habitat and benefit other species. Each participant will receive their own quail management take home package.	From Franklin, go 3 miles East on HWY136, turn south on 35 Road and go 1/2 mile	June 25 9:00 am to 1:00 pm
Benefits of CRP	This tour will illustrate the CCRP program and the tremendous advances through the Farm Bill to enhance areas for wildlife and pollinators. See the different CCRP practices and the difference they have made on the landscape.	Community Center 202 Sycamore St Pleasanton	July 15 10:00 am to 1:00 pm
A Patchwork of Habitat	Explore how the timing and arrangement of different management practices can improve your land for pheasants and other wildlife.	3097 County Road O Tekamah	July 16 5:30 pm to 7:30 pm
Pheasant Management on Public and Private Ground	This tour will illustrate high quality pheasant management on public and private ground. See how land managers are using tree clearing, invasive species control, prescribed fire, and grazing management to boost pheasant populations.	Medicine Creek Reservoir NGPC Headquarters Shop 40697 Trail 10 Cambridge	July 16 11:00 am to 3:00 pm
Pheasant Management	See what volunteers can accomplish for habitat! Davis Creek WMA has undergone some recent habitat work by the hands of local citizens and PF Chapters. Learn how this has improved the public access area for pheasants and show support for local volunteers.	Davis Creek WMA South of North Loup Meet at NRD campground on South side of lake	July 25 10:00 am to 12:00 pm
CRP with High Diversity Seed Mixes	This tour will highlight different CRP practices, primarily SAFE and Pollinator Habitat as well as upgrading and managing CRP for upland birds. High diversity seedings will be shown to illustrate how quality habitat is supposed to look and how conservation programs can fit into your operation.	Grove Lake WMA 86502 Grove Lake Rd Royal	July 28 11:00 am to 3:00 pm
CP What?	See and understand the many different CRP practices that are available to benefit soil, water, and wildlife. Learn the best option based on your objective.	USDA Office 120 W. 16th Schuyler	July 30 9:00 am to 12:30 pm
Fire Ecology and Results	Take a quick tour of Howard County to see the tremendous effort and result of the landowner led Central Nebraska Prescribed Burn Association and their massive efforts to battle Eastern Red Cedar encroachment.	The Gathering Place 612 Howard Ave St. Paul	August 20 11:00 am to 3:00 pm
The Critical Role of Pollinators	Learn the global importance of pollinators and the local role they play in economics, farming, food resources, and the landscape.	Apple Jack Festival Nebraska City	September TBA

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



Background Photo by Scott Schmidt, PF

Travelogue

By Justin Haag

Harrison

When travelers on the two-lane blacktop of U.S. Highway 20 go as far northwest as they can get in Nebraska, they'll surely not miss a road sign that has triggered many laughs. "Harrison: Next Four Exits."

The sign, made in green and designed to match the familiar markers along Interstate 80, has been a longstanding joke in the Sioux County seat, population 247. When one is traveling along the quiet highway, which is alternately known as the **Bridges to Buttes Scenic Byway**, though, it's no joke: People are wise to take one of the many "exits" that lead to the region's trove of scenic gems. Unique buttes and rock formations, Pine Ridge forest, badlands, grasslands and an abundance of wildlife await visitors who take the time to look.

A good place to start is a drive on Pants Butte Road, known for its fantastic view from high above, and Sowbelly Canyon Road, which winds through a wooded area of steep country. Keep your eyes peeled as this area provides what may be Nebraska's best chance for observing bighorn sheep. Along the latter road sits the quaint **Coffee Park** where Sowbelly Creek and trout ramble over river rocks in the fashion of a mountain stream.

Just north of Harrison is **Monroe Canyon** and the **Gilbert-Baker Wildlife Management Area**, a popular hunting destination where elk, wild turkey, mule deer and whitetails roam under a forest of towering ponderosa pine trees.

Straight south from Harrison are rolling grasslands that lead to the slowly meandering **Niobrara River**, a hardly recognizable waterway to those who know it as the busy canoeing destination 180 miles east. Just off the highway in this valley is the impressive **Agate Fossil Beds National Monument**, which features the many Miocene Epoch mammal fossils that have been discovered at the site.

Lodging and dining in Harrison includes the historical **Harrison House Hotel** on Main Street, a bed and breakfast originally established in 1886 by the Chicago Northwestern Railroad. For those wanting an experience away from "the big city," there's the **High Plains Homestead and Drifter Cookshack** situated in the wide open grasslands and badlands northeast of town. A stay at this site, known for its food and Old West atmosphere, will put the traveler near the **Oglala National Grassland** and the **Hudson-Meng Bison Kill**, another fossil site which features the excavation of an ancient breed of bison that were killed by the Alberta Culture as many as 11,200 years ago. Just up the road is the moon-like landscape of **Toadstool Geologic Park**, a must-see for anyone who thinks of Nebraska as just fields of corn, beans and wheat.

The region also is a popular destination for those looking for gems in a literal sense, not just figuratively. Many come to Sioux County to hunt the state gemstone – blue chalcedony, more commonly known as blue agate.

From magnificent elk herds to spectacular rocks, this area is sure to have what the traveler is hunting. And conveniently, it's always easy to get off at the right exit when you're in Sioux County. ■

Toadstool Geologic Park is a favorite among visitors.

HARRISON
Next 4 Exits



Coffee Park is a must-see destination.

Harrison



Gilbert-Baker WMA is abundant with wildlife.

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Nebraska State Capitol, July 1936.

A Brief History It's Too Hot to Sleep Inside

By Patricia C. Gaster,
Nebraska State Historical Society

During the Great Depression Nebraskans became accustomed to living under trying conditions. People had to cope not only with hard economic times, but with the intense heat accompanied by drought that plagued this state and much of the rest of the country.

The relentless heat was hard on everyone who suffered through the summer of 1936. The heat wave started in late June, when temperatures across the United States exceeded 100 degrees. Temperatures reached record levels in July. On July 25, 1936, the Lincoln Journal Star's banner headline said it all: "Mercury 114; Breaks Record Here." The Star reported: "The merciless heat followed the hottest night in all Lincoln history. The lowest

temperature of the dark hours was 91."

Many people suffered from heat stroke and heat exhaustion, particularly the elderly. In the era before air-conditioning and public swimming pools, most people could rely only on fans and blocks of ice for some degree of cooling.

Ruth Godfrey Donovan and her family lived in a small apartment in downtown Lincoln. Donovan said, "The iceman was still making his daily rounds at that time. I prepared for his coming by placing a large washtub in the center of the living room floor. Then I watched for him. When I saw his small truck in front I rushed out and asked for a fifty pound piece of the delightfully cold product. He would bring it into the apartment and place it in the tub. Then I turned a strategically placed electric fan to blow on the block of ice. For several hours I gloated over the cooling breezes!"

She recalled a neighbor's homemade air conditioner, "the wonder of the year," which consisted of little more than an old automobile radiator in the

living room. "The window behind it was open slightly, just enough to allow a garden hose to be passed in to the coils of the radiator and another piece of hose to go from the coils and out of the window. An electric fan was placed behind the radiator and blew a steady stream of air on the coils. The mixture of cold water going through and the air from the fan produced cool air for the room!"

Some people could swim in lakes and rivers, and cities opened fire hydrants. Many slept outdoors. The photo above, from the MacDonald Studio Collection at the Nebraska State Historical Society, depicts residents of Lincoln sleeping on the lawn of the Nebraska State Capitol to escape the heat.

The summer of 1936 was the hottest and driest ever recorded. The heat wave and drought largely ended in September, though fields and lawns remained parched. ■

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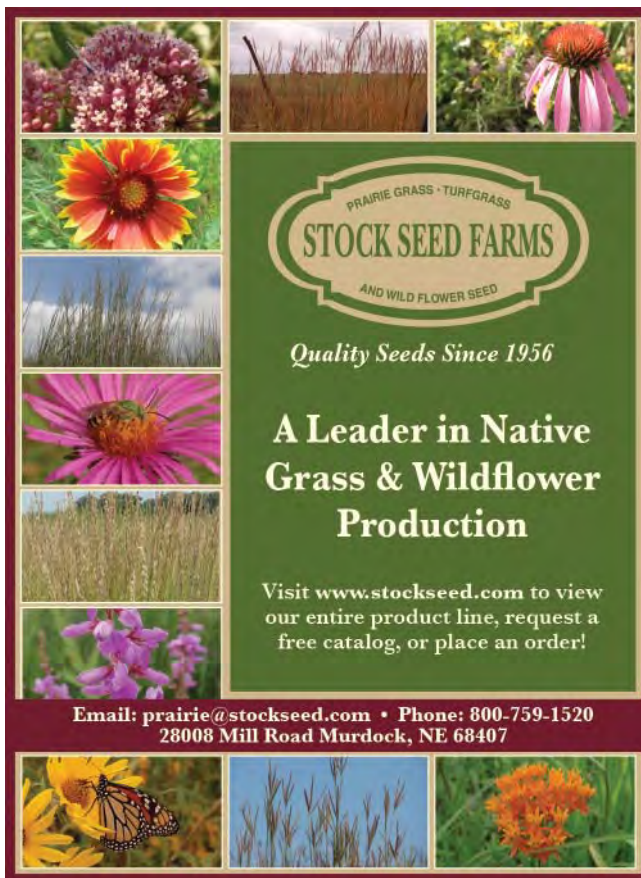
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SAFETY



Nebraska Bird Library

White-breasted Nuthatch

Song or calls: Low, repeated, nasal “yank.” Song is whistled series on one pitch, “whee, whee, whee.”

Description: Sexes similar. Blue-gray above; white below; black crown and nape; all-white face; extent of rust below is variable.

Habitat: Generally found in fairly mature floodplain forests during the breeding season. During the rest of the year it inhabits a wider variety of habitats, and can also be seen at residential birdfeeders.

Where in Nebraska: Common permanent resident in eastern Nebraska. Breeds as far west as the Pine Ridge area and to at least Hall County along the Platte.

Field Notes: These birds are essentially nonmigratory, and will store food during the fall for winter in crevices behind loose tree bark.

Fun Facts: White-breasted nuthatches creep down tree trunks head first in search of insects and other food. ■

To learn about more birds visit:
NebraskaBirdLibrary.org.



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

Product Reviews

By Jeff Kurrus



The Vivitar Life Cam Wearable Camcorder is a bit different from the camcorders of your youth. This one easily fits in your pocket and boasts 1080 HD, a 2.4x digital zoom and built-in Wifi. It's also compatible with iPhone and Android. Vivitar.com.



The Titan watch from Reactor, with its Never Dark technology, has become the first watch – with its durability, look and feel – to make me leave my smartphone in my pocket. A must-have for outdoor enthusiasts. View all models at Reactorwatch.com.

Frogglez swimming goggles for kids feature a tangle-free design ideal for little heads. With a strap made from neoprene fabric, they have become my young daughter's go-to goggle for her trips to Eugene T. Mahoney State Park's aquatic center. Frogglezgoggles.com.



Wood N' Stream once again features a series of boots worth sharing. Their Flyway models – noninsulated, waterproof and breathable – prove to be one of the most comfortable boots we've worn. Perfect for bank fishing in the summer and those warm bow hunting days in the early fall. Weinbrennerusa.com.



PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

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wildbirdhabitatstore.com

Wingtips by Wild Bird Habitat

White-breasted Nuthatch are often called the up-side down bird as they forage for insects head first down tree trunks.

They nest in old woodpecker cavities or rotted out knotholes in trees.

Common at backyard bird feeders year round feeding on peanuts, sunflower seed, and safflower seed.

Will take seeds from bird feeders and wedge them into crevices of trees using their sharp beaks to hammer open the shell.

Often stores seed away in the cracks and crevices and grainy bark of trees to consume later.



Everywhere Signs

By Jeff Kurrus

White-tailed deer can be scouted all year. Here are a few different ways to analyze what you're seeing in the woods and what the signs mean.



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

1. Trails and Tracks – Some people think game trails are distinct for individual species – like a raccoon has its own road, a bobcat another, etc. Game trails that don't go directly to and from a burrow are used by all animals, including deer. Pay attention to the locations of game trails, especially when more than one of these trails cross. Most of the time these trails will be near fence lines and field edges, and are paths connecting where whitetails eat, sleep and drink.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

2. Bedding Areas – In the summer these areas will be scattered across a landscape because of does protecting their fawns and will be made up of multiple grass laydowns of various sizes. Look near thickets, tallgrass areas and the ends of ridges. During this time, bucks will often bed alone. In the winter, however, these areas will consist of evergreens and other forms of thermal cover. Know where these areas are, but don't get too close throughout the season.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

3. Scat – Deer scat usually looks like black marbles or raisins. It can further confirm whitetail use of a game trail or bedding area and give a pretty good indication of how many deer are using an area.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

4. Rubs – Whitetails rub on trees to announce their presence in an area, and will begin to appear once their antlers harden in late summer and early fall. Traditionally, tree width tends to coincide with buck size, and broken branches can be an indicator of how tall or wide a buck's rack may be.



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

5. Scrapes – Not far from rubs are ground areas where leaves, grass and other material have been replaced by bare earth. Deer will use their hooves to scrape away these areas and will urinate in these spots. Also search for overhanging limbs above these scrapes where a buck will rub his eyes, mouth and forehead to leave scent to further announce his presence. Whether a hunter or photographer, look for these signs next time afield for a better chance at locating whitetails. ■

Hot Item: Propane Coffeemaker

By Justin Haag

The old enamelware percolator over a morning campfire may be fun but it doesn't exactly excel at brewing a lot of coffee in a hurry at the campsite. That's why the Coleman Portable Propane Coffeemaker has reached essential status among my camping equipment.

The coffeemaker works much similar to an electrical unit but with the freedom of propane. No longer am I required to camp at a place with electricity in order to brew the morning pot of coffee with speed and convenience. Just a level surface and a cylinder of propane get the job done.

One word of caution: The shiny stainless steel carafe looks great and holds up to the rigors of the trail, but it won't keep your coffee hot for long. After brewing, I pour the pot of coffee into a thermos and it stays hot until it's gone. ■



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

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Fireworks Photos

By Justin Haag

With Fourth of July upon us, impressive fireworks displays throughout the state will provide ample opportunity for photographers. Many shutterbugs will be satisfied by snapping a few shots with their mobile phones for sharing on social media, but those of you with DSLR cameras should aim higher. Here are basic tips, a declaration if you will, to make the most of your fireworks photography.

Don't Flash – A direct flash will do nothing to improve your fireworks photos and will likely hurt them. Turn it off.

Keep it Steady – A tripod with a remote release is all but required for getting sharp firework photos with no blur. If you don't have a tripod, try to find something besides your shaky hands to keep the camera steady.

Setting the Scene – No need to buy any special lenses. An average focal length lens will be adequate to compose a scene for fireworks. My favorite fireworks photos have something in the scene besides just the pyrotechnics. Look around. Are the bursts reflecting off the lake? Is there a crowd of people or landmark below? Can you use the silhouette of an interesting shape in the foreground?

Being Sharp – Some assume they need to open their aperture wide because it's night, but your subject is bright enough it's not necessary. You can use f/8 and higher and ensure the subjects in your scene stay in focus. If your camera lens is searching to find the fireworks, switch to manual focus.

Shutter Control – Generally, try to have the shutter open from the time the firework explodes to the end of its burst. The bulb setting on your camera, with the use of a remote, allows you to open and close the shutter as the "oooohs" and



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

"ahhhs" are occurring.

No Noise – It's best to let the fireworks make the noise, not your photos. Noise, which used to be referred to as grain in film days, becomes a problem with high ISO settings. Set the ISO at 100 for sharp, noise-free photos.

Independence! – When shooting digital it's easy to see what's working and what isn't. The Fourth of July is all about independence, so break away from your camera's automatic settings and bravely go manual to record the "rocket's red glare." Your forefathers of photography would be proud. ■

Bucket List

By Julie Geiser

Five-gallon buckets are one of my favorite tools to take tent camping. They can be used to keep items clean and dry, to store camp water, a place to sit around the campfire, a nightstand inside a tent, and they are easy to carry. Here are some other ideas.

A bucket can be used for storing cleaning items and to wash clothes or dishes at camp. Place an ice cream bucket or another smaller bucket inside and use that to store smaller items such as a bottle of dish soap and wash cloths in a plastic bag. Don't forget disposable wipes, Clorox spray and hand sanitizer.

Fill another bucket with paper plates, disposable cups, plastic utensils and other kitchen items.

If you have young children, a bucket makes a great potty; line the bucket with a heavy-duty trash bag and buy an

inexpensive child's training ring for comfort to sit on. Those night trips to an outhouse will be eliminated. More expensive, regular toilet seats that fit over five-gallon buckets are also available.

Store clothes in buckets to keep them dry and out of the rain. Make a bucket for each person, and label buckets with a permanent marker to eliminate the guesswork of what's inside.

Be creative and put your favorite camping items in five-gallon buckets. They're inexpensive and stack easily in a garage or shed, ready for the next camping adventure. ■



Stay Alert... Their Lives Depend On It

- ◆ Merge into the Proper Lane
- ◆ Follow Instructions from Flaggers
- ◆ Keep Your Headlights On
- ◆ Don't Tailgate
- ◆ Be Patient



www.roads.nebraska.gov



Soldiers Point the Way at Fort Atkinson

By Jenny Nguyen

Park-goers will notice new characters as they drive into Fort Calhoun to visit Fort Atkinson State Historical Park this season. Standing on the north and south sides of town are four three-dimensional iron soldiers. Each at nine-feet tall, they point the way to the park; one is painted in the likeness of Steve Kemper, a previous park superintendent at Fort Atkinson, and another looks like John Slader, the fort's current superintendent. And on the east side of Highway 75 in the Super Bee Orchard property stands a new directional sign.

The project was part of an effort to make the historical park more visible. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission provided \$14,000 in grant funding, while the city of Fort Calhoun provided assistance from its Keno Funds. Local businesses such



An iron soldier stands by the welcome sign in Fort Calhoun, the location of Fort Atkinson State Historical Park. Three other soldiers can be found in town.

as Black Dog Steel in Tekamah, artist Art Clausen, Tri-County Grading and volunteers were instrumental in completing and installing the soldiers and sign. Future plans call for additional landscaping, brickwork, a welcome sign and smaller five-foot

soldiers to line the streets in Fort Calhoun. This season's living history dates are July 4-5, Aug. 1-2, Sept. 5-6, Oct. 3-4 and a Candlelight Tour on Nov. 7. For more information, visit FortAtkinsonOnline.org. ■

Painting Decoys

By Julie Geiser

After the waterfowl season this year I noticed many of our plastic decoys were in dire need of repainting. These decoys have been used for over a decade – their paint has faded and chipped, but they are still in good condition. Repainting your old decoys is a great way to save some money.

Choosing paint colors is easy – get color samples from a paint store that look similar to the ones on newer decoys or photos and match them with either a matte/flat spray paint or satin exterior latex paint or use both.

Start by getting all the mud, debris and old paint off by placing the decoys in a decoy bag and power wash them at home or at the car wash; use a wire brush to get loose paint off or do both according to your needs.

Fix any shot holes in the decoys with

paintable silicon and let dry before continuing.

Next, line up all the drake decoys in a well-ventilated area and the hens in another. Then paint the base coat on the body of the decoys first, starting with the drakes then the hens – this way a routine can be followed to make painting go faster. The following techniques can be used for other duck and goose decoys, too.



These mallard decoys have the basecoat painted on the body and bills.



areas with a brush. Making the white color patterns larger than normal is advisable as the birds will see these distinguishing marks from the air.

Painting the iridescent blue on the wings is optional. When resting in the water most mallards do not have the blue displayed.

Once repainted, these old plastic mallard decoys are ready for a few more seasons.

dark brown color makes from a newer decoy or photo and mimic that pattern.

Brush white paint on the tail area.

To finish, paint the brown pattern on the bill of the hens and fill in nostrils of drakes with the corner of a sponge brush. With a permanent black marker fill in the eyes and very tip of the bill. If the decoy has glass or realistic plastic eyes, cover them with tape before starting to avoid painting over them.

TIPS:

Use fine grit sandpaper to smooth out paint-chipped areas.

If you mess up, simply touch the area up with spray paint or paint and a brush.

Don't worry if your painting is not perfect – if the ducks are close enough to notice imperfections, you should be shooting anyway.

Pints of exterior latex paint will paint over two dozen decoys.

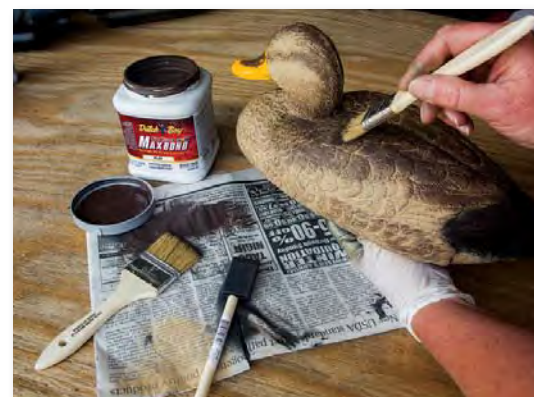
If the entire body doesn't need to be painted, touch up painting can be done on a smaller scale.

Do not use gloss paint, it will look unnatural.

Spraying paint onto paper and dipping a brush into it works just as well as using paint from a pint jug for smaller touch ups or details.

Let the newly painted decoys dry for a few days then finish by spray painting with a flat/matte clear coat to seal the paint.

It takes an afternoon to get through a couple dozen decoys, but it's time and money well spent. ■



The topcoat of the hen mallard is done by brush painting a darker brown color over the basecoat. Follow the pattern of the dark brown by looking at a newer decoy or photos.

HENS:

Paint the bill. Mask off the bill and cover the back and sides of the hen with newspaper or a plastic bag to avoid overspray on the basecoat. Holding the keel, point the bill down and spray paint.

Paint the tail black. Use newspaper to mask off areas if spray painting on the tail; if using a brush there's no need to mask.

Using a sponge or bristle brush, paint the darker brown on the head, cheeks and back; note the patterns that the

DRAKES:

Paint the bill. Cover the back and sides of the drake with newspaper or a plastic bag to avoid overspray on the basecoat. Holding the keel of the decoy, point the bill down and spray paint. I purposely paint some of the yellow on the cheeks of the drake for a little sparkle. Brush painting with exterior house paint versus spray paint may be easier for some and is just as effective.

Paint the green head of the drake. I prefer brush painting to spray paint on the head so I don't have to mask off the bill, making the painting go faster.

Paint black on the tail and head with a sponge brush or bristle brush. Make sure the paint is dry between paint coats; usually by the time you get to the last drake the first is ready for more paint. Use newspaper to mask off areas if spray painting on the tail; if using a brush there's no need to mask. Brush the black on the top, back and sides of the head leaving plenty of green showing. Note the pattern that the black color makes from a newer decoy or photo and mimic that pattern.

Brush the burgundy color on the chest, sides and back; paint all the white patches around the neck and tail

Colors

The colors I used for my decoys are listed below. Not everyone will have access to the same colors so match colors using a newer decoy or copy the colors off a photo.

DRAKE COLORS

Bill: Marigold color spray paint (a yellow/green color is best).

Body: Sand color spray paint (a tan/gray color is needed).

Head: Behr paint color Alpine View (dark green).

Neck ring: Flat white.

Chest, back and sides: Home Depot paint color Argo (dark burgundy).

Tail: Flat black.

HEN COLORS

Bill: Sunburst Yellow (a yellow/orange color is best).

Body base coat: Khaki spray paint (light tan, golden brown color needed).

Body top coat: Behr paint color Coal (dark brown).

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Upcoming Events

by Jerry Kane

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

June 29-July 2
Outdoor Adventure Camp Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln, 402-471-6141

July 1
Archery Fishing of game fish is allowed statewide through Dec. 31

July 1
Underwater Spearfishing of game fish allowed in specific waters through Dec. 31 (see page 22 of 2015 Fishing Guide)

July 1-4
Western and Wildlife Art Show Fort Robinson State Park (SP), Crawford, 308-665-2900

July 1-14
Paddlefish Snagging permit application period

July 3
Super Tag Final day to apply for Nebraska Super Tag and Combo lottery permits

July 3
National Park Service Program Niobrara SP, Niobrara, 7 p.m., 402-857-3373

July 3, 17, 31
Friday Night Guest Speaker Series Fort Robinson SP, Crawford, 7 p.m., 308-665-2900

July 4, 18
Buffalo Cookout and Nebraska Humanities Program Niobrara SP, Niobrara, 6 p.m., 402-857-3373

July 4
Fourth of July Barbecue Fort Robinson SP, Crawford, 11 a.m.-1:30 p.m., 308-665-2900

July 4-5
Living History Fort Kearny State Historical Park (SHP), Kearney, 308-865-5305; Fort Atkinson SHP, Fort Calhoun, 402-468-5611

July 4-5
Pioneer Longrifle Rendezvous Indian Cave SP, Shubert, 402-471-5427

July 5
Sidewalk Chalk Art and Emerald Ash Borer Program Niobrara SP, Niobrara, 402-857-3373

July 7
Family Fishing Event Optimist Lake, Auburn, 6-8 p.m.

July 7
Ladies Day at the Range Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln, 6:30-8 p.m., 402-471-5662

July 8
Family Fishing Event Holmes Lake, Lincoln, 6-8 p.m.

July 8, 15, 22, 29
Beyond Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) Rifle Class Platte River SP, Louisville, 402-471-5547

July 9
Family Fishing Event Halleck Lake, Papillion, 6-8 p.m.

July 10, 24
Friday Night Guest Speaker Series Chadron SP, Chadron, 7 p.m., 308-432-6167

July 11
Carp-O-Rama Lake Maloney State Recreation Area (SRA), North Platte, 8 a.m.-4 p.m.

July 11
Bighorn Sheep Hike Wildcat Hills Nature Center, Gering, 9 a.m., 308-436-3777

July 11
Archery paddlefish season opens

July 11-12
Cabela's Regional Walleye Championship Lake McConaughy SRA, Ogallala, 308-440-7018

July 13
Remaining big game hunting permits may be purchased, beginning at 1 p.m. Central Time, through the close of the seasons

July 13 & 15
Rimfire Sporter Clinic Platte River SP, Louisville, 6-8 p.m., 402-471-5547

July 13-17
Outdoor Skills Camp for ages 8-15, Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln, 402-471-6141

July 13-31
Application Period for Gifford Point Wildlife Management Area special access permits for deer hunting

July 14
Family Fishing Event Arrowhead Meadows Golf Course Pond, Curtis, 6-8 p.m.

July 14, 28
Best Shot Camp Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln, 6:30-8:30 p.m., 403-471-6141

July 15
Family Fishing Event North Park Lake, Holdrege, 6-8 p.m.

July 16
Nebraska Game and Parks Board of Commissioners meeting, Sidney

July 16
Super Tag Nebraska Super Tag permit drawing

July 16
Family Fishing Event Clark's Pond, Sutton, 6-8 p.m.

July 17
Families on Target Archery Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln, 6-7:30 p.m., 402-471-6141

July 17-18
Beyond BOW Niobrara and Missouri River Kayaking Trip Niobrara SP, Niobrara, 308-660-6955 or 402-890-6463

July 17-18 - 20
Target 3-D Shoot/Bow Sight-In Day Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln, 402-471-6141

July 18
National Park Service Event Discover the Real Missouri River, Niobrara SP, Niobrara, 10 a.m., 402-857-3373

July 18
Family Fun Day Victoria Springs SRA, Anselmo, 11 a.m.-3 p.m., 308-749-2235

July 18
Geocaching Niobrara SP, Niobrara, 10 a.m., 402-857-3373

July 18
Mahoney XL Sanctioned C-Tier Disc Golf Tournament Eugene T. Mahoney SP, Ashland, 402-944-2523

July 18
Living History Rock Creek Station SHP, Fairbury, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., 402-729-5777

July 18
Calamus Cleanup Calamus SRA, Burwell, 308-346-5666

July 18-19
Centennial Bass Club Tournament Lake McConaughy SRA, Ogallala, 303-601-1723

July 20
Family Fishing Event Zoo Pond, Scottsbluff, 4-7 p.m.

July 21
Family Fishing Events Bowling Lake, Lincoln, 6-8 p.m.; Legion Park Pond, Sidney, 6-8 p.m.

July 21
Ladies Day at the Range Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln, 6:30-8 p.m., 402-471-5662

July 21-23
BB Gun Camp Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center, Lincoln, 402-471-6141



July 22
Family Fishing Events Benson Park Pond, Omaha, 6-8 p.m.; Laing Lake, Alliance, 6-8 p.m.

July 25
The Dam Run 5K Run/Walk Lake McConaughy SRA, Ogallala, 308-284-6023

July 25
Kites and Castles Contest Lake McConaughy SRA, Ogallala, noon, 308-284-8800

July 25
Kite Day Niobrara SP Niobrara, 1-3 p.m., 402-857-3373

July 25
Campfire Christmas in July Indian Cave SP, Shubert, 402-883-2575

July 25
State High School Fishing Tournament Lewis and Clark Lake SRA, Crofton, 580-765-9031

July 25
Beyond BOW Beginning Kayaking Workshop Lake Wanahoo SRA, 402-471-6009

July 26
National Park Service Parent's Day Program Niobrara SP, Niobrara, 11 a.m., 402-857-3373

July 28
Family Fishing Event Carney Park, O'Neill, 6-8 p.m.

July 29
Family Fishing Event Melham Park, Broken Bow, 6-8 p.m.

July 30
Family Fishing Event Auble Pond, Ord, 6-8 p.m.

Look Around, Nature's Waiting

By Lindsay Rogers, Wildlife Education Specialist

Below you will find 10 different natural objects perfect for a July scavenger hunt with your young ones. Head outside and look, really look, and you will find them!

1. A Pinecone.



2. A Seed from a tree ... any tree, but it must be a tree!



4. A yellow flower.



5. An oval rock.



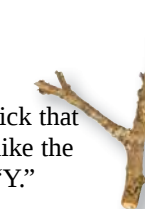
6. A leaf that is partially eaten.



7. A cicada's exoskeleton.



8. A stick that looks like the letter "Y."



9. A natural object with a hole in it.

10. Something orange.

When you have found all these items, gather them together and take a picture. E-mail the image to me and I'll send you a prize! You can e-mail me at lindsay.rogers@nebraska.gov. ■

NEBRASKAland Visitor



Last issue's winner of the Visitor drawing was Lee Saunders of Waterloo, Nebraska, who found the **June bug** on page 3. 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 Magazine* 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 3-4, 12, 23, 40-41, 54, or 64.

*Scarab beetles make up a very large family of short, oval, stout bodied beetles. The **June beetle**, a well-known member of this family, ranges in color from light gold, to reddish brown, to almost black. It gets its common name from its tendency to emerge in May and June. These beetles are attracted to light, and you can often find them in the evening, around your porch light. There are several species of June beetles (Phyllophaga spp.) found in Nebraska, and it takes from one to four years to reach maturity, depending on species. The larvae of June beetles are white and c-shaped; these are the common white grubs in lawns. Adult females lay eggs in the soil in mid-summer. After hatching, the grubs live underground, feeding on roots until pupating, before emerging in spring.*

Special thanks to Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture. Photo from Thinkstock. Bugguide.net is a popular site for identification.



Saw What?

Baby Saw-whets in Nebraska

Story and photos by Justin Haag

An Ashland man has logged many miles studying birds in Nebraska. In 2014, he met his goal of documenting a northern saw-whet owl nest – a first for the state.



Nest boxes in the Wildcat Hills near Gering and the Pine Ridge near Crawford have the distinction as the first documented northern saw-whet breeding sites in Nebraska.

Wayne Mollhoff of Ashland holds a northern saw-whet owl chick near West Ash Creek southeast of Crawford. The chick hatched in one of 27 nesting boxes that Mollhoff placed in nine counties.

wasn't found breeding in Nebraska piqued Mollhoff's interest most: the northern saw-whet owl.

Birders have long known that saw-whets can be found in Nebraska. Compared to many other bird species in the state, however, there has been little documentation about the diminutive owl. With a small body, large head, and cat-like face it ranks pretty high on the cute meter, even if its nocturnal, reclusive nature makes it difficult to study. The saw-whet is said to get its peculiar name from its "tooting" call that sounds something similar to an old steel saw being sharpened with a file. They use their incredible hearing to precisely locate prey – mainly small mammals such as deer mice.

Despite the lack of confirmation, birders have long suspected saw-whet breeding in Nebraska.

Mollhoff said the first evidence of nesting by saw-whets in the state was a second-hand account relayed in 1899 at the first Nebraska Ornithologists' Union meeting. An attendee of that conference wrote in a research paper that he was told of a set of five saw-

whet eggs collected near Nebraska City about seven years prior. Since then, occasional sightings of the secretive bird were recorded at sites ranging from Lincoln County in the central part of the state to northwestern Nebraska's Pine Ridge, further raising suspicions of breeding. A road-killed saw-whet in juvenile plumage was found in Antelope County in 2002, all but confirming nesting in the state. Young birds had also been seen on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge and near Chadron State Park.

"Previously we all 'knew' they were found in the conifers of the Pine Ridge," Mollhoff said. "Except that a guy working with them in northwest South Dakota found the biggest concentration to instead reside in deciduous-filled ravines."

So, in 2012 Mollhoff took the owl by the beak, so to speak. He built 27 nest boxes and began traveling the state. He placed the boxes in locations saw-whets had been reported or that had habitat suitable for them. With cooperation of land managers and biologists from agencies such as Nebraska Game and Parks and the U.S. Forest Service, he placed boxes on state and federal property in Johnson, Lincoln, Thomas, Cherry, Sheridan, Antelope, Dawes, Sioux and Scotts Bluff counties.

Making a nest attractive for a saw-whet owl requires getting off the ground and Mollhoff's climbing



This mixed media drawing by John James Audubon from the 1800s depicts a pair of northern saw-whet owls. A second-hand report of saw-whet nesting was made at a meeting of Nebraska ornithologists in 1899, but it would be more than a century later before a nest would be confirmed in the state.

experience comes in handy. Research shows that they most frequently bear young in tree holes eight to 44 feet high. He makes his boxes with three-inch holes for entrances and sized to match tree cavities where nests have been found in other states.

"Most of my boxes are in or near the pines, but are also placed in deciduous areas, too, just out of curiosity," he said.

The project wasn't immediately a

success. During the first two seasons, eastern screech-owls took to nesting in three of the boxes, but no saw-whets. The boxes also attracted northern flickers, American kestrels, and even bluebirds and house wrens on occasion.

In year three, however, patience paid off. A box placed about as far west as one can get in the state would attract the birds Mollhoff was seeking – even though it wasn't immediately apparent.

In March 2014, he found no birds but



Wayne Mollhoff of Ashland approaches life with vigor and curiosity. He does a lot of running, both literally and figuratively. Much of the retired Army lieutenant colonel's running since retirement has been directed toward Nebraska's bird life – and, in recent years, an owl just seven inches long has been getting most of his attention.

For about three decades, Mollhoff has been volunteering to research and

gather information about Nebraska's avian species. One of his largest efforts was in 1984-1989 when he recruited "an army" of 125 people from across the state to compile information for the first Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas. The process and resulting document, which was updated in 2006-2011, has been a valuable resource to state wildlife managers and birders.

While a lot was learned from the atlas, one species in particular that



a depression in the sawdust covered floor of the nest box in a ponderosa pine tree in the Wildcat Hills Wildlife Management Area south of Gering. A month later, he returned to find five warm eggs at the box which, in the dark of night, he mistakenly figured were those of a screech-owl. On May 10, however, he was surprised and elated when he approached the same box and saw a northern saw-whet owl peering down at him. In the box, he found four owlets about two weeks old and an unhatched egg – the first documented saw-whet owl nest in Nebraska.

Mollhoff returned to the nest several times that spring, documenting the chicks' development. Considering that the first two seasons were unsuccessful in the search for saw-whets, Mollhoff wasn't sure what to expect when making rounds at nest boxes in 2015. Would it be one-and-done or would he once again be looking saw-whets in the eye?

The answer came early as he was checking a box in Dawes County on Feb. 12. It was holding the state's second documented saw-whet nest, confirming suspicions that the Pine Ridge provided suitable nesting habitat. The eggs, which were laid and hatched extremely early in the season compared to those documented in other states, were in a box on an ash tree along West Ash Creek in the Nebraska National Forest. Six owlets hatched and fledged from that nest.

And the other boxes? Much to his delight, Mollhoff discovered April 2 that saw-whets had returned to the same box as the first nest in the Wildcat Hills. Seven eggs, generally considered to be the most a female will produce, were laid at that site.

Mollhoff recruited Jerry Toll of Omaha, who has extensive experience banding saw-whets, to place leg bands on the chicks at West Ash Creek and the Wildcat Hills

Mollhoff climbs a ponderosa pine at the Wildcat Hills Wildlife Management Area. The box was placed about 25 feet from the ground, a height which research shows is within preferred nesting range for the species.



Northern saw-whet chicks huddle in one of the nest boxes. A total of 11 saw-whet chicks were banded this year, also a first for Nebraska.

this year with hopes to gain future data about the owls. Historically, their distribution and migration patterns have not been well understood.

Perhaps these owls will be captured at banding sites such as those of Project OwlNet, a collaboration of more than 100 locations focusing primarily on saw-whet owls. The sites, mostly on the East Coast and Upper Midwest, use the owls' familiar call to lure them into mist nets. By chance, the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory's annual bird-banding site at Wildcat Hills Nature Center captured a saw-whet last fall.

Mollhoff said the biggest challenge to his project has been the distance involved. A round trip to check the boxes, which occurs at least monthly during breeding season, is about 1,400 miles.

But, Mollhoff is used to challenges. He joined the Army in 1965 and did a tour in Vietnam and was mobilized again for two years during the second Gulf War. He doesn't show much sign of slowing down, either. Despite suffering a broken foot during a 10k race last Thanksgiving, he's not only back to climbing trees but also is back to running.

With diligence and a well-placed box, more treasures such as saw-whet eggs and chicks just might greet the retired military man when he reaches the pinnacle of his climbs. The rewards come in the form of new data – not to mention, looking into a box and

seeing the attractive face of a saw-whet owl. Something that ranks so high on the cute meter, he says, is well worth the trouble. ■

 [View additional saw-whet owl photos.](#)



The adult female northern saw-whet owl keeps a watchful eye from the nest box at the Wildcat Hills Wildlife Management Area near Gering.

Leaving Ladies

The nesting behavior of the northern saw-whet owl often raises people's eyebrows, especially women.

The female leaves the male behind to roost at another location when the owlets reach 18 days. He continues hunting for small mammals to feed to the owlets. Because eggs are laid as many as three days apart, the oldest of the owlets is often more advanced than younger siblings and are believed to help feed deliveries to younger ones in the nest.

Don't give the male and young too much credit, though. The female keeps the nest clean and tidy, but things get messy when she leaves. Sound familiar, ladies?

Before owlets fledge, the nest has a thick layer of feces, pellets and decaying prey parts.

The Ultimate Deer Knife

By Matthew Marx
Photos by Jeff Kurrus

Choosing the right knife can be a daunting task – especially when a specific task deserves a specific knife. So what makes a good “deer knife?”



Matthew's custom Fallkniven F1, while technically a survival knife, is great for field dressing deer.

The knife – perhaps mankind's oldest tool at 2.5 million years – has a special place in any hunter's field kit. There are as many kinds of knives as there are uses, and as many opinions about knives as there are hunters. While most knives perform more than just one task, it's important to remember that no single knife can do everything. With so many styles, designs, features and materials to choose from, it can be hard to figure out what *your* ideal knife should be. If you are a hunter – and the primary function of your blade is field dressing a deer – then there are a few things to consider.

Size Matters

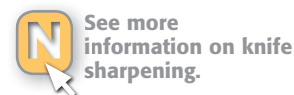
The most common mistake novice hunters make is buying a knife that is too large. Perhaps Hollywood is to blame for this: while Bowie knives, “Rambo” knives and fantasy knives might look great on film, they are poor choices when field dressing game. The ideal field knife should have a blade length of only three to five inches. (If you do your own processing at home, then you might switch to a hatchet or hack saw to remove the antlers or cut through the thicker leg bones.) The blade thickness should be between .11 and .17 inches. Anything less is a pocket knife and anything more is a bushcrafting knife.

Know When to Fold ‘Em

Folding knives are compact and handy. Many hunters swear by them in the field, and there is certainly nothing wrong with field dressing a deer with one. Make sure, however, that you buy a quality brand with a sturdy blade lock. The last thing you want is to fold the blade onto your fingers, or for a cheap blade to snap off at the weak spot (which is usually at the fold). Folding knives are also more difficult to clean, especially when deer fat gets into the folding mechanism, which it invariably will. I prefer a fixed-blade knife with a full tang (the blade and handle are one piece of continuous metal). They say the greatest tool a hunter can have is confidence, and for me, a fixed blade gives me the most confidence.

The Blade's the Thing

The best knife is a sharp knife. That being said, you should sharpen your knife *before* you get to the field. How you sharpen a knife depends on the grind. With steel, you are balancing hardness and toughness. Hardness is measured on the Rockwell Scale, and hunting knives should have a score of 58-60. Toughness (in metallurgy) is its ductility, or ability to resist shattering. If a knife is too hard it might break; if it's too soft it won't hold an edge. Metallurgy has come a long way in the last few generations of modern hunting knives. I recommend a “modern” stainless steel blade, which seems to come in an endless variety of confusing numbers and letters – SV30, D2, VG10. Even among stainless steels there are vast differences, and you get what you pay for. Some blades are even “laminated” so that the core of the blade and the outside are two different steels. High quality and high cost tend to go together, but there are many mass-produced brands that use acceptable stainless steel. Avoid carbon steel since it will rust. Also avoid blades that are hard to clean such as “anniversary editions” with engraved pictures; keep those in your display case with the fancy Damascus steel.



The best blade shape for hunting is the drop point (see knife photo on opposite page). The tip is lowered in a convex curve from the spine, which gives the blade both increased control and point strength. A clip point (like the famous Buck 110 folder) has a concave “cut-out” at the tip, which creates a sharper point, but less strength.

Buck 110 Folder Clip Point



While both are fine for hunting, you are less likely to nick a deer's internal organs with a drop point, which, if you've ever done it, is unpleasant, to say the least (and could taint the meat). Blade shapes like the **tanto**, **sheep's foot**, **spear** and **dagger** are *not* for deer hunting.

Tanto



Sheep's Foot



Spear



Dagger



For years I used a knife with a gut hook. It's a great way to “unzip” the front of the deer's belly without risking puncturing the internal organs. However, once you are inside of the deer's body cavity – especially when you are “up to your elbows” – the gut hook only gets in the way, snags on viscera, and is generally bothersome. It's also unnecessary. With a little practice, you will learn to pull the skin of the deer upward while making the long incision.

Gut Hook



The author with a deer he harvested near Tekamah in Burt County.

While serrations can sometimes be useful to cut tendons (they're made to cut rope), they are hard to sharpen and generally unnecessary. Some hunting knives feature a few serrations near the bottom of the blade to offer some “toothiness” if you should need it (which you probably won't). Sometimes, hunting blades will feature a choil for your index finger – an unsharpened area between the guard and the sharp edge – to give more control. But this defeats the purpose of having a guard and exposes your index finger to the edge should you slip, which can happen when your hands are covered in blood.

Get a Grip

For many hunters, the grip is important for aesthetic reasons, and I'm no different. I've had custom grips (scales) made for perfectly functional knives. A good grip is, well, grippy. Remember, your hands will be bloody, and you don't want them to slip. Rubber is a functional material, but I prefer antler, bone, or wood based purely on looks and feel. Avoid grips that are laminated, though, since they are slippery. Stacked leather looks and feels great, but can be difficult to clean because it absorbs liquid. All hunting knives should have a single guard on the side with the edge, even if it is just a small bump. A double guard (one on the back) is unnecessary and is designed for fighting. Avoid deep finger grooves, sharp corners, and bumpy logos since these will just give you blisters. Above all, the grip should feel comfortable in your hand. A good deer knife combines function, safety, comfort and aesthetics. ■

Matthew Marx is an instructor at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. He has a passion for deer hunting, bass fishing and camping. Matthew's first story for NEBRASKAland, entitled “Out in the Cold,” was in the January-February 2008 issue.



Stagecoach

Photos and text by Eric Fowler

Spend a day at Stagecoach State Recreation Area south of Hickman and you'll notice something: It can be quite loud out there.



Matt and Renee McGinn and Brad Dewey, all of Lincoln, fish and relax in camp as a whisp of fog rises from Stagecoach Lake on a cool August morning.

On a busy summer weekend, you'll hear kids laughing as they ride their bikes through the campground, reel in another fish or roast marshmallows over a campfire. You'll hear the din of an outboard motor at idle, slowly pushing anglers toward their favorite fishing hole in search of walleye, bass, bluegills or channel catfish. Or the slosh of a paddle pushing a canoe or kayak across the water.



LEFT: Tyler McDonald of Lincoln intently watches his bobber while fishing with his sister, Meghan.

RIGHT: Brian and Kim Otto of Lincoln and their children, Kailey, Braddon and Kellen, enjoy a summer morning in camp. Stagecoach offers 30 sites with electrical hookups in the main campground on the southwest side of the park.



In the fall, you're likely to hear a hunter calling "whoa" to his dog, urging it to hold point on a covey of quail it found in the uplands around the lake or the bottoms along the creek feeding the lake from the south. Or the thump of a bow or crack of a rifle or muzzleloader during deer season. Or hunters trying to call a flock of Canada geese



Stagecoach SRA features a 195-acre lake and 607 acres of land. The area offers 30 campsites with electrical hookups and more without, no-wake boating, fishing and picnicking.



into their decoys. In the spring, those same hunters might trade their honks for purrs, putts and gobbles when turkey season opens. In the winter, you'll hear the crunching of cleated boots and the whir of an ice auger as anglers probe the depths through holes they make in the ice.

And those Canada geese can make a real racket. Many of them nest and raise their broods at the lake, especially on islands built during a 1991 aquatic habitat improvement project that was among the first of many that has improved fishing on this and other lakes in the Salt Valley.

For many of us, the noises are exactly the kind we want to hear. If it's not for you, don't worry. Oftentimes, you will find you only have to share the lake with the geese. Or at least it will seem that way. And you'll hear nothing but deafening silence. And that's why people go. ■



ABOVE: Golden yellow cottonwood leaves sparkle on a fall evening.

LEFT: Elmer Burcham, who died in 1883, is one of three Burcham children buried in a cemetery on the north side of the lake. While several headstones have been stolen through the years, according to genealogy web sites, 14 people from four families are buried there, the first in 1868.

RIGHT: Matt McGinn of Lincoln shows off a stringer of channel catfish caught from the bank in front of his camp. The lake holds good populations of catfish and walleye, as well as a few bass and bluegills.





The freezing spray from crashing waves coated rocks with ice before the wind died, hoarfrost accented the scene, and the lake succumbed to the cold on a frigid night last winter.

A FIELD GUIDE FOR HUNTERS

By Jeff Kurrus

With their first book, *Hunting For Food*, being released this month, NEBRASKAland Associate Editor Jenny Nguyen and co-author Rick Wheatley sat down to chat with me about this project, their blog and their goals with introducing people to wild game.

JK: Tell me about the evolution of the book.

RW: The book itself started from us both growing up in different eras, but both growing up watching cooking shows and loving the outdoors. We created our *Food for Hunters* blog, where we share wild game recipes. Then last year an

editor at the publishing company F+W Media asked us if we wanted to write a book. We went for it.

JK: Why did F+W approach you in the first place?

JN: They saw our blog where over the last few years we have made a reputation for ourselves in the hunting community, especially with food bloggers. I was constantly pushing recipes on social media. Then we had a deer chili recipe that *Deer and Deer Hunting* magazine, which is owned by F+W, shared on their website.

JK: How many people visit your site?

JN: We have about 16,000 hits a month right now and that will go up to about 35,000 during hunting season. About 700,000 in three years.

JK: What was your original goal with the blog?

JN: We wanted to share recipes. We hadn't even thought of a book. We wanted to show people what you could do with wild game besides wrap it in bacon – even though there's nothing wrong with that either.

RW: People who don't know say that venison is tough. Well, it's really not. If you take care of it right, you'll have some of the best meat around. We started this for fun. When we got our 100th hit, we were like ...

JN: Yes!

RW: "Can you believe it?" we said. It really turned into something that had been a dream for both of us.

JK: Where do the recipes come from?

JN: Everywhere. A lot of it I make up, but a lot comes from dishes I've had in Southern California growing up. I recently made a Thai curry dish with snapping turtle, because I thought that turtle has a similar texture to pork. Even if turtle meat is gamey, curry is so flavorful that it hides it well. So I tried it. And we'll do the same with dishes from all over the world. We also collect a lot of cookbooks and adapt recipes for pheasant, quail or whatever else.

JK: Do you write your recipes as you go?

JN: Exactly. I have a small notepad I keep in the kitchen for notes and measurements.

RW: It's like doing a science experiment.

JN: For example, we made a morel mushroom chowder recipe last week. It was a basic chowder recipe, but I didn't have white wine so I skipped it.



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

At the end of each chapter are cooking tips, techniques and recipes. The book's pheasant chapter, one in 13, features a recipe on aged, brined and roasted whole pheasant.

RW: I tasted it and thought it was missing something. It was good, but it still needed something else. When something is missing or doesn't taste right, we'll cross things out, add more ingredients or tweak measurements.

JK: Do you drive yourself crazy as you try to figure them out?

JN: Sometimes. I may be cooking and 'the cream is curdling,' or something else isn't going right. We're not trained cooks. We just learn as we go along.

RW: That's the thing. These recipes are not complicated, but they can be made to look elegant. You can have a fine meal without going out.

JK: Your book shows what it looks like from the time an animal is harvested until it's on the table. What was your role in the book's design?

RW: We worked off a very good outline from the publisher, but then they put the ball in our court.

JK: How did you choose your cleaning methods?

RW: We worked with what we knew how to do already. Jenny cleans things a bit differently than I do, but we looked for what we thought was the best method.

JK: What are your favorite recipes?

RW: Our venison dishes are our favorites. There are just so many things you can do. As far as a single dish, we butterflied a roast, stuffed it with fresh crab and tied it with cooking twine. Then we grilled it.

JN: My favorite is the very first recipe we had on the blog – venison backstraps with a blackberry, balsamic vinegar sauce with blue cheese sprinkled on top. It's my go-to dish if

I'm introducing wild game to friends.

JK: So how would you describe this book? It has a little natural history, cleaning methods for 13 different game and fish species, and recipes for each. So it's not a cookbook?

RW: It's more of a field to table guide with step-by-step photos. I like to look at this as a clear and easy introduction to the new person who is interested in hunting. There's always that question, "What do I do with it now?" once the animal's on the ground. More than likely they are going to cook it like domestic meat, and they may have just ruined it. The book provides a starting point, and then people can experiment on their own. Also, another goal is to show to non-hunters that wild game is a renewable resource, a healthy way to eat, and it's always going to be there if we take care of the land. If you protect the land, you will protect the species that live there.

JN: And food is a great way to communicate all those things. ■

To obtain your copy of *Hunting for Food*, visit Foodforhunters.com beginning July 15.

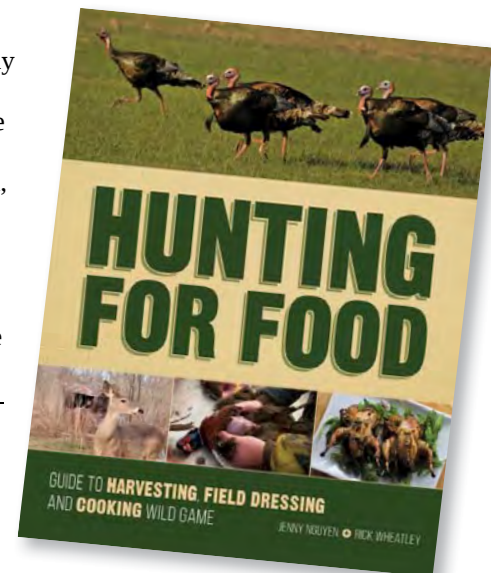


PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

Hunting for Food includes 176 pages of instruction and color photos on how to hunt, field dress and cook fish and game.

A Series of Fortunate Accidents

By Chris Helzer

The pollination strategy for milkweed is so impossibly crazy there's no way it should work.

Milkweed plants have recently gained a lot of attention because they are the plant of choice for monarch butterfly caterpillars. Loss of habitat and changes in agricultural practices have decreased milkweed populations across the state, leaving fewer places for monarchs to lay eggs.

At the same time, if you look at the

reproductive strategy for milkweed plants, it's kind of shocking they've survived as long as they have. Milkweed pollination is literally (and I don't mean that figuratively) a series of accidents strung together. That any milkweed plant produces seeds seems nothing short of miraculous.

To start with, an insect has to be attracted to the milkweed flower,

presumably by the sweet sugary nectar inside. That's not difficult – many insects enjoy sweets, and milkweed nectar seems to be particularly tasty. However, the next step requires the insect to accidentally step into one of the tiny slits between the anthers on the side of a blossom. There is certainly no incentive for the insect to do that, in part because those slits can be tight enough that insects can't always get their leg back out.

Once the insect's leg is in the flower, it will immediately try to extract it. As it does so, it may snag a pair of waxy orange gobs of pollen called the "pollinia" with its foot. That's the critical next step of the process for the milkweed. If the insect pulls its leg out without pollinia stuck to it, the milkweed loses.

However, even if pollinia stick to the leg of a visiting insect, the milkweed hasn't yet won. In order to complete the pollination process, the pollinia have to be deposited inside a different flower – hopefully on a different milkweed plant altogether. This requires a couple of things to happen; the insect has to travel to a different milkweed plant and it has to refrain from removing what has to be a pretty awkward sticky mass hanging off its leg before it makes that trip.

Assuming an insect makes it to another flower with the pollinia still attached, there are still several steps



The abundance of milkweed seeds floating around in the fall shows that the accidental pollination strategy of milkweed is successful.



This paper wasp tried to clean the pollinia from its legs but wasn't having any luck. It was sliding its leg through its mouthparts, but the pollinia remained afterward.

to go. First, the insect has to make the same mistake it made earlier and stick its leg into another anther slit. Not only that, but also it has to step in the slit with the same leg as before – the leg with the pollinia attached. Then, when it pulls its leg out again (assuming it can) it needs to leave the pollinia behind in just the right place, a small spot at the base of the stigma lobe, so

pollination can occur.

To review, here are the steps needed:

1. Insect attracted to flower.
2. Insect accidentally steps into anther slit.
3. Insect pulls both its leg and pollinia out of the slit.
4. Insect visits another flower.
5. Insect accidentally sticks the same leg into another anther slit.

6. Insect successfully extracts its leg and leaves the pollinia at the base of the stigma lobe.

This is the actual pollination strategy for milkweed, one that has somehow allowed milkweed to survive and produce seeds for many thousands of years. While it seems crazy to rely on the missteps of others for success, it's hard to argue with the results. Milkweed, and its many insect "partners" can make plenty of seeds. But it's up to us to make sure there are places for those seeds to land and grow. We can also help increase the number of milkweed plants by tweaking land management practices and adding milkweeds to landscaping and restoration projects. ■

Chris Helzer is the Eastern Nebraska Program Director for the Nature Conservancy. He has been a contributor to NEBRASKAland since 1994 and his first full-length article was "The Closer View" in June 1995.



This giant milkweed bug (on butterfly milkweed) already has pollinia stuck to two of its legs.



The anther slits on a milkweed flower. This is the tiny hole an insect must step into and out of (twice) in order for pollination to occur.

Yellowbanks WMA

Story and photos by Jenny Nguyen

With exposed banks of yellow clay cut by time and the Elkhorn River, Yellowbanks Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Battle Creek has been a named landmark for nearly a century. Though only acquired by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in the early 1960s and expanded in 1984, the area has long held an identity of both history and legend. Now wild and trafficked by mostly deer and turkey hunters, there is little evidence – save some crumbling concrete – that anything ever happened there.

Currently 664 acres, the WMA is composed of mostly riparian and oak woodlands, with some grassland. White-tailed deer, turkey, rabbits and squirrels thrive there, as well as eastern woodland plants such as wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) and jack-in-the pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*), the later of which bears clusters of distinctive bright-red fruit in late summer and fall. Though historically logged, the oak woodlands

have survived, and their location on the floodplains of an ever-changing river is a rare occurrence in Nebraska.

In 2015, the striking yellow banks still stand, but more steeply than what they were. Rivers will gradually move over time, as evidenced by scars seen from satellite images from above, but big rain events can drastically change their course and the face of the surrounding land, too. Battle Creek locals who have been around long enough to watch the river change may also know stories about Yellow Banks Park and the old hermit.

Yellow Banks Park

Crumbled with weeds growing through its cracks, a concrete foundation is hidden among encroaching trees in the southwestern area of the WMA. Rusted metal clips that once held a maple dance floor are still attached to its surface. Hard to believe, but they are the only remains of Yellow Banks Park, a large



The dance pavilion's concrete foundation is the only remaining structure of Yellow Banks Park. The park was a recreation resort that existed on present-day Yellowbanks WMA in the 1920s and 1930s.

Yellow Banks Park in Madison County featured a dance pavilion where local bands and orchestras played. It also offered 50 cottages, as well as tennis, croquet, horseshoe courts and much more. All structures were torn down during the Great Depression.

recreation resort that opened June 3, 1928.

Admission was 10 cents per person and 10 cents per vehicle. An estimated 15,000 people showed up from all over Nebraska and nearby states at the grand opening. Practically its own city, the park offered 50 cottages, a café, shoe-shining parlor, barbershop, beauty parlor, popcorn stand, two large confectioneries, bathhouse, filling station, dance pavilion, a large amphitheater that seated 3,000 and other concessions. It had its own electric light plant.

The park was 20 years ahead of its time, wrote Gary and Lenora Kuchar in their book, *They Called it Meadow Grove*. Dances accompanied by local bands and orchestras took place in the pavilion, while rodeos and ballgames happened outside. A merry-go-round was one of the park's highlights, as well as tennis, horseshoe and croquet courts. At that time, the Elkhorn River flowed to the south, providing visitors plenty of boating, swimming and fishing opportunities. Many Battle Creek locals believe that bandleader and television personality Lawrence Welk played at the pavilion, though in a letter, Welk said he couldn't recall.

Yellow Banks was a great place for vacations, large gatherings, picnics and ethnic, family and community celebrations. A Prohibition-era park, a bootlegger could be found in every crowd. Moonshine was hidden in gallon tins and fruit jars, and often mixed with soda or non-alcoholic "near-beer," the only beverages legally sold on the grounds. Business was good until the Great Depression, when everything came to a halt. Yellow Banks Park closed its doors in December of 1937. Equipment was sold off piece by piece and the dance pavilion torn down. Over time, the river swung north – most of the park is underwater now.

The Hermit

Yellow Banks was always a popular campground, even before the resort existed. Those who have spent time there during the late-1800s will most likely have heard of "Uncle Johnny" the hermit, a local legend who haunts the forests. Under the headline "Johnny, the Hermit, Going Insane," *The Norfolk News* wrote on Friday, August 17, 1906, "There is a mystery wrapped up in the life of Uncle Johnny. Nobody seems to know the truth of his story... a little, dried up old man who has lived a hermit's life at the Yellow Banks ever since anyone can remember." In August of 1907, the newspaper reported, "Living alone out in the wildwood for forty-one years, this hermit has lost his mind. For some years he has been deranged and today he is insane at all times. Much of the time he knows nothing at all." Though John McKerihan is long gone, living Battle Creek residents continue to pass down the myth of the old hermit.

McKerihan had two homes, a log cabin and a dugout about the size of a cellar at Yellow Banks. He raised white Angora goats and walked around the woods with a stick, usually with an extra pair of shoes tied to it. He was usually seen barefoot and oftentimes with a shoe on one foot and a boot on the other. Files at the Commission's Norfolk district office on Yellowbanks WMA include brief accounts written by longtime local Mary Blair. She wrote, "I can remember high school classmates of mine from Meadow Grove warning me not to go down into



The dance pavilion at Yellow Banks Park. The addition to the left is the kitchen and dining area.



The manager's cabin at the Yellow Banks Park on Mr. and Mrs. J. J. (Joe) Blair.



Hermit's Cave, left to right, Onieta Hannen, Ruth

Locals Onieta Hannen (left), Ruth Crook and Clarence Rosenau sit outside the dugout of hermit John McKerihan at Yellow Banks near Battle Creek in Madison County.

the Yellow Banks at night. They used to say 'the old hermit will get you.'"

In truth, Uncle Johnny was not as frightening as the old myths and newspapers said. McKerihan was friendly, and he often brought gifts during his visits with neighbors to buy goods such as eggs and milk. Though his history is unclear, before arriving at Yellow Banks in 1862, he resided in West Point and served as the first treasurer of Cuming County. During his appointment, he moved to Yellow Banks and took the county funds with him for safe keeping. When a new treasurer was elected, McKerihan walked all the way back to West Point to return the county assets – a grand total of 75 cents.

Steeped in more history than two pages can tell, Yellowbanks WMA is still heavily used today. Its variable terrain, abundance of wildlife and scenic overlooks of the Elkhorn River and the namesake yellow banks make it a popular destination for local hunters, hikers and mushroom seekers alike. ■



Floral Explosions

Story and photos by Chris Helzer



Prairie gentian is a very showy annual wet prairie plant. Floral explosions in wetlands and low-lying sites often come after extended flooding or other events that suppress the vigor of dominant grasses, sedges and rushes, leaving space for annuals such as prairie gentian.

Pioneers. Trailblazers. Colonizers. Society celebrates those who see an opportunity and grab it. Individuals who identify a gap and fill it. We call them nimble, adaptable, bold and resourceful. Or at least we do if they're people. If they're plants, we usually call them *weeds*.

Plants are in constant competition with each other for resources, and they employ a variety of strategies in that struggle. Some plants take an incremental approach. They move slowly but are difficult to dislodge. Many of the most familiar prairie grasses such as big bluestem, switchgrass and buffalograss (not to mention invasives such as smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass and reed canarygrass) are in this "occupier"

category. These grasses form tall and/or dense mats of vegetation aboveground and thick masses of roots belowground, both of which monopolize resources and help prevent other plants from gaining or keeping a foothold. You wouldn't call them sprightly, but occupiers hold their position and slowly and surely expand their dominance until something more powerful weakens them.

Historically, there were four major forces that could stop those dominating occupiers: fire, grazing, drought and flooding. Today, herbicides, mowing and cultivation can be added to that list.



Above: These four-point evening primroses at the Nature Conservancy's Platte River Prairies are biennials that germinated in huge numbers following the 2012 drought and bloomed in 2014. Below: The drought of 2012 weakened plant communities, especially on sites like this one that were burned and grazed that year. During the recovery from that drought many showy wildflowers flourished across the state. In this July 2012 photo, most perennial grasses have already given up on their year's growth and entered dormancy. Most of the green is western ragweed, a plant that grows well in the absence of strong grass competition.





Shell-leaf penstemon is a perennial plant, but a poor competitor. Because cattle don't find it tasty, it often thrives in intensively grazed pasture, and can increase in abundance quickly when given the opportunity. Here it is blooming in profusion following a year of drought, fire and grazing.



Long-term intensive grazing removes the tops of plants, but also shrinks the size of roots beneath. As a result, temporary space opens up for colonizing plants. As long as it is paired with adequate rest periods, intensive grazing can help promote overall plant diversity – an important factor in overall wildlife habitat and grassland health.

An actively growing grass plant that is abruptly chopped off by fire, grazing or mowing suddenly loses its ability to turn light into food. Severe drought and flooding can have much the same impact. When something like that happens, a normally dominant grass doesn't just lose its ability to shade out competing plants aboveground, it also has to abandon large portions of its root system belowground because it can no longer feed them. The result is a sudden abundance of space, light and nutrients in and around those weakened plants. However, those resources are only available for a short time – until those occupiers recover from whatever knocked them back. If anything was going to take advantage of that opportunity, it would have to be nimble, adaptable, bold and resourceful.

Welcome to the life of an opportunistic (weedy) plant. Most of the plants in the “colonizer” category are annuals or biennials which germinate from seed and produce

copious amounts of new seed within a year or two. Others are perennial plants that happen to be able to establish quickly from seed or rapidly expand their footprint via rhizomes (underground stems). Colonizers, however, don't tend to stick around very long. As big dominant grasses regain their strength, colonizers wither (literally) under the competition from those gorillas and vacate territory as quickly as they took it.

Ah, but while they're around, colonizers often live spectacular lives. Because most rely on producing lavish amounts of seed (which drops to the ground and lies in wait until the next opportunity arises) they often produce lots of large, showy flowers. In addition, since they can't afford to be hindered during their brief opportunity to grow, flower and make seed, successful colonizing plant species have developed strategies to resist forces such as grazing or drought that suppress their competition. Many produce chemicals that make

themselves unpalatable to grazing animals, or produce thick fibrous tissues that are difficult to bite, chew and digest. A number of them also invest in rapidly-growing long taproots and other features that help them thrive in soil too dry for many of their competitors.

As a result, in the aftermath of a season of drought, intensive grazing, summer wildfire or flooding, the landscape often erupts in a spectacular display of color. These kinds of flower shows have been happening for many thousands of years and provide evidence that natural communities are healthy and resilient. Flushes of colonizing plants provide vital short-term supplies of food and habitat for wildlife and pollinators. Dense patches of relatively fibrous or bad-tasting plants also provide weakened

grasses a safe place to hide from large grazing animals during their vulnerable recovery period.

Most importantly, despite being labeled as weeds and disparaged as unproductive and useless, colonizing plants fade away as the conditions that enabled them disappear. They are not competitive under good growing conditions; they are easily pushed aside by dominant grasses and other strong perennial plants.

Trying to eliminate “weedy” plants during or after droughts, intensive grazing bouts, or other similar events doesn't bring back “desirable” plants any faster; it just favors more colonizers. Rather than fighting against floral explosions we should celebrate them the same way we would if they were people. Remember? Pioneers. Trailblazers. Colonizers. ■

Historically, there were four major forces that could stop those dominating occupiers: fire, grazing, drought and flooding.

Chris Helzer is the Eastern Nebraska Program Director for the Nature Conservancy. He has been a contributor to NEBRASKAland since 1994. See his other story in this issue about milkweed plants on page 40.



The big yellow four-point evening primrose (far left) is a biennial, and upright prairie coneflower (yellow/dark tops) and hoary vervain (purple) are perennials that respond very quickly from seed when grasses are weakened. This site had been grazed intensively during the previous year. It was not being grazed during the year of the photo but the tallgrasses were still short and weak – leaving abundant space for these showy colonizers.

Turtles on the Missouri

Story and photos by Jenny Nguyen

Since 2005, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission began an extensive turtle monitoring project on the Missouri River. Spanning 385 miles, the survey is the largest and first of its kind. Findings will aid researchers in understanding the connection between turtle populations and the health of the river.



The Missouri River is a complex system that supports an abundance of fish and wildlife. In addition to the endangered pallid sturgeon, least tern and threatened piping plover, there is another group of inhabitants that is less talked about: river turtles. In 2005, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission began an extensive monitoring project on the Missouri River, a survey that would span 385 miles and touch Nebraska, South Dakota, Iowa and Missouri borders. With the status of Missouri river turtles unknown, this

project would be the largest and first of its kind.

Turtle Behavior

As recognizable as turtles are, the conservation world knows relatively little about them. Although many studies have been conducted on sea turtles, the life histories of river turtles have remained mysteries. In Nebraska's range of the Missouri River, species found are the common snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*), painted turtle (*Chrysemys picta*), false map turtle (*Graptemys pseudogeographica*), smooth softshell (*Apalone mutica*), spiny softshell (*Apalone spinifera*), and also a couple of red-eared sliders (*Trachemys scripta elegans*), a common pet turtle whose range is normally farther south.

River turtles are ectotherms, or "cold blooded," meaning that they depend on outside sources for heat. All species mentioned are omnivores, consuming both plant and animal matter, including fish, shellfish and insects. Common snapping turtles are opportunistic hunters and will also eat birds, small mammals, amphibians and other reptiles, such as frogs and snakes, though studies have shown that 75 to 90 percent of their diet actually comes from vegetation.

The Missouri River provides habitat for all these species. Common snapping turtles spend most of their time lying on the bottom, preferably in water with muddy bottoms and lots of vegetation, found in the backwaters of the Missouri. Western painted turtles, false maps, both species of softshells and red-eared sliders are all basking turtles, meaning that they like to spend time out of the water to lie on logs, rocks or sandbars on bright, sunny days.

Painted turtles prefer freshwater that is quiet, shallow and muddy, while false map turtles prefer large rivers, where moderate currents, vegetation, snags and floating logs are found.

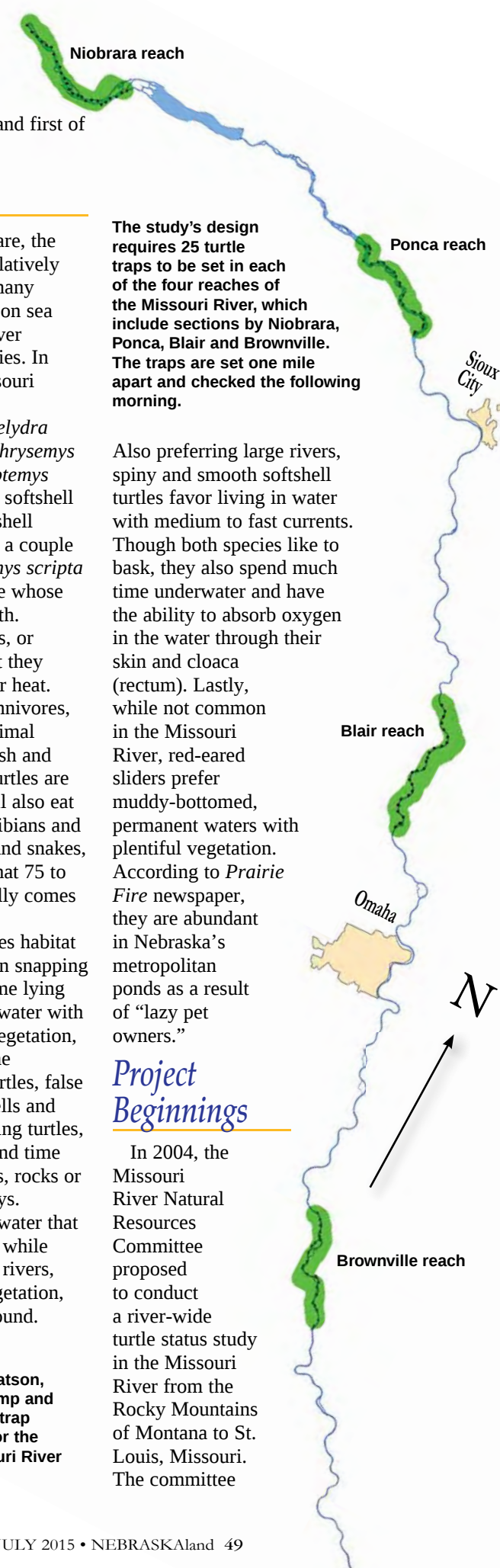
Noah Luedtke (left), Cynthia Watson, Elizabeth Grimes, Ryan Ruskamp and Jacob Johnson pull in a turtle trap near Niobrara to collect data for the Commission's study on Missouri River turtles.

The study's design requires 25 turtle traps to be set in each of the four reaches of the Missouri River, which include sections by Niobrara, Ponca, Blair and Brownville. The traps are set one mile apart and checked the following morning.

Also preferring large rivers, spiny and smooth softshell turtles favor living in water with medium to fast currents. Though both species like to bask, they also spend much time underwater and have the ability to absorb oxygen in the water through their skin and cloaca (rectum). Lastly, while not common in the Missouri River, red-eared sliders prefer muddy-bottomed, permanent waters with plentiful vegetation. According to *Prairie Fire* newspaper, they are abundant in Nebraska's metropolitan ponds as a result of "lazy pet owners."

Project Beginnings

In 2004, the Missouri River Natural Resources Committee proposed to conduct a river-wide turtle status study in the Missouri River from the Rocky Mountains of Montana to St. Louis, Missouri. The committee





After this false map turtle was scanned with a special reader and determined that it was not a recapture, a biologist inserts a passive integrated transponder (PIT) tag into its hind left leg for future reference.

consisted of representatives from the fish and game agencies of the Missouri River Basin, but in the end, only Nebraska and Montana took on the project, and only Nebraska continues the study today.

Nebraska biologists knew the importance of determining what population changes might be occurring in the Missouri River system. “Reptiles and amphibians are good indicators of ecosystem conditions,” said Gerald Mestl, the Commission’s Missouri River Program manager. “They have long life spans and they respond to changing environmental conditions through reproductive success.” Turtle surveys are another tool, along with fish population and water quality surveys, to look at the health of the river.

Originally a wildlife division project, the study was handed over to the Missouri River Program, the same team that handles the pallid sturgeon broodstock collection effort each spring. In addition to bringing together the wildlife and fisheries divisions, the Commission had two partners in the study. The National Park Service, which manages the upper two reaches as the Missouri National Recreational River, provided the Commission with staffing. And the United States Army Corps of Engineers provided the passive integrated transponder (PIT)

tags that help researchers track turtle movements. A PIT tag is a small, glass-encapsulated tag that is inserted into a turtle’s hind leg for tracking – the same technology biologists use to tag pallid sturgeons. PIT tags, put simply, are the same tags often used in pets. They are implanted and therefore cannot fall off.

Sampling

The project finished its second round of sampling last summer; each round spans three years. The first round of sampling ran from 2005 to 2007 and the second from 2012 to 2014. The team will take a break and then conduct another round of sampling in a few years. The Commission does not have the resources to conduct sampling every year, yet this approach will still allow biologists to see trends and changes in turtle populations, said Mestl.

Sampling includes four reaches: the unchannelized section above Lewis and Clark Reservoir by Niobrara, the reach below Gavins Point Dam down to Ponca/Sioux City, and the two channelized reaches above and below the Platte River, Blair and Brownville. Each section requires four days of sampling, Monday through Thursday. On Monday, traps are set out, baited with pieces of common carp, and

habitat measurements are recorded at each trap, including location, habitat features, water temperature, oxygen level, turbidity, water depth, flow and much more. Traps – specialized turtle hoop nets – are set at every river mile for 25 miles, ideally at the same locations each year. This is easy to do on the channelized river, “but up on the two unchannelized sections, the river changes all the time. The channel can be on one side or the other every year,” said Ryan Ruskamp, a Commission biologist who is the lead on the project.

On Tuesday, the team comes back to check traps, re-bait and process any turtles caught. All turtles are scanned with a special reader to see if they have been tagged; recaptures account for 10 percent of total catch to date. Then length, weight and sex are recorded before release. This process repeats until Thursday when all traps are pulled for transfer to the next segment of river. The team starts at the segment by Niobrara almost every year and makes it way downriver.

De-listing the False Map

So far, the team has handled 3,056 turtles in six years, and the study experienced a major achievement in just its first round. One of the big questions the Commission wanted to answer first was the status of the false map turtle in the river. A popular pet species, false maps were placed on the Nebraska Heritage Program list as imperiled in the state in 1989. However, in later years, that status was questioned.

“Those of us who have been on the river a long time have always wondered about the status of false maps. Because if you sit on the river, and you got 30 heads looking at you, it’s hard to think that the species is close to disappearing,” said Mestl. “Some of us questioned that status, but none of us knew enough about it to make specific recommendations. So for us, this project is giving us some perspective on the turtles in 385 miles of the Missouri River.”

In 2010, data allowed the Commission to remove false map turtles from the Nebraska Heritage Program list. The team found that



A common snapping turtle snaps its beak-like jaws when pulled into the boat.



In one of the traps, biologists found a common snapping turtle, two softshell turtles, a channel catfish and an eaten common carp.

false maps actually dominated their catch and that the species was not as threatened as originally believed.

Seeing Patterns

Still, with only two rounds of sampling, it might be too early to make any meaningful conclusions on the Missouri River and the state of its turtles. But Ruskamp and Mestl are seeing some interesting things. For example, segments one (Niobrara) and four (Brownville) have more snapping turtles than segments two (Ponca) and three (Blair). “Those are two of the most productive fish reaches, one and four. Is that cause and effect? I don’t know. But those are the two healthiest

reaches from several standpoints mostly because of the tributaries. The Niobrara dumps in all that sediment and nutrients in one, and then the Platte dumps in sediment into segment four,” said Mestl. However, they are only seeing this pattern in snapping turtles. The same does not hold for other species.

“We turn around and look at false map turtles and there were almost 1,000 caught in segment two throughout the six years, compared to about 460 in segment one,” said Ruskamp. Segment two does not provide the same nutrients that the Niobrara supplies in segment one, but for unknown reasons, it is “false map heaven,” indicating that false maps may require different habitat conditions

than snapping turtles.

Nebraska’s two softshell species also do not mirror one another. Spiny softshell turtles do better in the channelized river than smooth softshells.

“Softshells fascinate me,” said Mestl. “In the unchannelized river (segments one and two), we don’t have very big populations, but they’re similar. Then we get into the channelized river, and we have one species but not the other – no smooth. So there’s something going on there that we can probably talk about once we find out more about both turtles’ life histories.”

The team is also learning about turtle movement and other behavior in ways that few researchers have seen

before. One of the things that shocked Ruskamp most was how often he would find a turtle in a trap one day and then catch it again the next day in a different trap a mile up or downstream.

Other researchers on the Missouri River have also recaptured turtles during smaller studies. “We have seen turtles swim upriver 25 miles, to probably nest, and then return home. The turtles appear to be gathering at certain locations to nest. They just don’t nest anywhere. But they are willing to swim, and who would imagine that turtles would swim 25 miles upriver? I’m just amazed by that, personally,” said Mestl.

And due to PIT tagging technology, aging turtles will become easier



Noah Luedtke finds a smooth softshell turtle basking on a sandy beach of the Missouri River.

and more accurate. Although young turtles will grow new scales on their shells that can be used to estimate age – similar to growth rings on a tree – the rings stop growing after six or seven years. In the future, PIT tags will allow biologists to talk about age and behavior within the different species more accurately as they collect recaptures from year to year.

The Future

Additional rounds are only going to become more valuable as the project continues, and in a few years biologists will begin a third round of sampling.

“We really didn’t anticipate becoming turtle scientists, and being able to talk about turtles is something that is new,” said Mestl. “For us, this was another monitoring project, and that is, by and large, what we do. We usually describe numbers and changes in our fish populations. But because of the design of this project, I think we are going to be able to document some turtle behavior that’s never been captured before.”

How will this study fit in the turtle world? Is it unique? Will its findings affect the understanding of river turtles worldwide or will it be more important locally? More rounds will tell. ■

Demand for Turtles

Turtle populations receive pressure from several directions. “They get hit at multiple levels, as a food product, a medical product, a research product and a pet product,” said Gerald Mestl, Missouri River Program Manager. “The Asian markets will take almost any turtle the United States can ship. There’s a huge market for live turtles and every turtle has a market. Depending on the species, they’re almost all vulnerable.”

Although the commercial harvesting of turtles in Nebraska is illegal, arrests do happen from time to time on the Missouri River, mostly targeting snapping turtles for the local food trade; in the current market among the right buyers, turtle meat can sell for as much as \$30 per pound. While overharvesting problems are relatively small in Nebraska, in surrounding Midwestern states and in the South – where the commercial harvesting of aquatic turtles remains legal – overharvesting is a hot-button issue.

Salt Creek Tiger Beetle

Production booming in the lab.

By Eric Fowler

Major advancements in captive breeding have scientists cautiously optimistic about the future of the Salt Creek tiger beetle, the nation's most endangered insect, and this year will allow them to take further steps to expand the wild population of the insect, which last year numbered just 143.

The captive breeding program begins in July with the capture of 15 pairs of adult beetles from their rare saline wetland habitat north of Lincoln. Those adults are allowed to breed and lay eggs in petri dishes filled with saline soil under the watchful eye of keepers at the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha. When the eggs hatch, the larvae are transferred to rearing containers and fed fruit flies and crickets through the summer. The insects are kept in incubators that mimic the climate and daylight conditions of the wild, and as is the case in the wild, they become less active, or even inactive, in the winter. In the spring, as temperatures warm, the larvae become active again and feeding resumes. In late May or early June, they are released into the wetlands. While wild tiger beetles spend two years as larvae, captive-reared insects emerge as adults in just one, a convenient result of the constant food supply they are given by zookeepers that speeds their growth.

During the first two years of the program, which began in 2011, just 29 larvae were produced and only 11 survived to be released. Last spring, 832 larvae were produced, an exponential increase from an already impressive 332 reared in 2013, and about 60 percent of those survived through the winter.

Mike Fritz, a biologist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, which is partnering in the program with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Henry Doorly Zoo and the Lincoln Children's Zoo, with additional help from the City of Lincoln, Lower Platte South Natural Resources District and the Saline Wetland Conservation Partnership, said with so many larvae produced in 2013, they opted to keep 25 at the zoo and allow them to emerge as adults to boost the breeding stock. "Those adults laid far more eggs than the wild ones," Fritz said, noting that about two-thirds of this year's larvae came from the seven captive females that emerged.

With another windfall in the breeding program this year, the scientists are again hedging their bets. In May, they released 416 larvae at four sites in the saline wetland complex to supplement wild populations. They also kept back 25 larvae that will be allowed to emerge as adults and breed, and the 100 or so adults they expect to emerge from another 190 rearing containers that have been left untouched will be released to hopefully breed in the wild.

That decision could prove fortuitous, as heavy rains and flooding on Little Salt Creek a week after larvae were released inundated many sites where wild tiger beetles live



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Using a piece of sewing thread, Sarah Jenkins, keeper of butterflies and insects at the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha, "fishes" a Salt Creek tiger beetle larvae from its burrow in a petri dish where the egg from which it hatched was laid. This new technique, which takes advantage of the insect's predatory nature, has led to much greater survival of larvae than the previous method of simply breaking apart the soil to retrieve the larvae and transferring them to rearing containers.

and caused bank erosion that buried others, conditions that affected release sites as well. Similar flooding is suspected to have trimmed the wild population from 365 in 2013 to 143 in 2014.

"We know we still have some alive, but that probably resulted in mortality in some of those larvae," Fritz said. "It may be very critical that we have those [captive-reared] adults out there to supplement the low wild population."

Fritz said they may rely solely on captive-reared adults for breeding this year if the annual survey again shows a low count of wild adult beetles.

The Salt Creek tiger beetle was listed as endangered in 2005. In 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife revised the amount of habitat deemed critical for the species' recovery, including 1,110 acres along Little Salt, Rock, Haines Branch and Oak creeks. All of the habitat is in Lancaster and Saunders counties. Only 35 acres of habitat hold beetles, a fraction of the 20,000 acres of saline wetlands that historically were found in the region but lost to urban and agricultural development and stream channelization.

A revision of the species' recovery plan is underway and expected to be complete this year. With that in hand, the next true test of the breeding program will come when larvae or adults are released in areas that previously held tiger beetles, allowing researchers to monitor survival that is difficult due to the presence of wild beetles in release sites. ■

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from NEBRASKAland's Trail Tales magazine for kids

junior journal

interesting notes for readers of all ages

by Lindsay Rogers and Donna Schimonitz

Wild in the City

Jamie Bachmann, Wildlife Education Assistant
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

From small towns to big cities, wildlife is everywhere. As human populations continue to grow, critters will have to find new homes or adapt to an urban lifestyle. Overhunting and deforestation almost rendered squirrels extinct in New York. City planners soon realized that the artificial living of urban life, completely void of anything natural within cities, was not healthy and was not good for humans. So they began to "re-green" cities, adding parks and trees, and soon the squirrel moved back in and adapted to the city lifestyle.

Raccoons and opossum have also adapted quite well to urban living. Being omnivorous, meaning they eat both meat and plants, they are not so picky about their food source. By cover of night raccoons are known to raid garbage cans, compost bins and gardens. Both enjoy eating from an outdoor pet bowl. Opossums help humans by keeping down rodent populations, cleaning up carcasses of dead animals, and eating food scraps that may attract mice or rats. The general lack of predators in towns and cities also contributes to the raccoon and opossum survival

in an urban landscape.

Urban lakes are home to many waterfowl, including the Canada goose. The open water and neatly manicured short grass of city parks suits the Canada goose. People often feed them bread or grain, resulting in geese that don't make their annual winter migration. Instead they live year round in or near cities and towns.

Peregrine falcons, which historically nest on rocky cliffs, will nest on skyscrapers and other tall city structures. Great horned owls and sharp-shinned hawks find an ample food supply in doves and pigeons. They can also be found scoping out bird feeders for songbirds.

Coyotes were once skittish and avoided humans. They have adapted to an urban landscape by feeding on rabbits, squirrels, and insects but are also attracted to pet food left outside and small pets.

Woodhouse toads are often scooped up by children in shady backyards during the summer, and garter snakes slither along in the garden. Wildlife continues to adapt and grow in our cities and towns right along with us. Wildlife is everywhere, just step out your door look for it. 🌿

NATURE CALENDAR

- **Black-eyed Susans in bloom:**
June through October
- **Snapping turtles lay eggs:**
May and June
- **Great blue herons fledge:**
July through late August
- **Baby bats are out flying:**
August through mid-October



Let's Draw!

Follow the steps below to draw a western meadowlark.

Take a few minutes to look at the meadowlark. Do you see basic shapes making up its body?



Draw the meadowlark's head with a circle. Next, draw a long diagonal egg shape for the body. Continue drawing each part of the bird by looking at the shape it looks like, for example, the beak looks like a boomerang, the legs resemble hockey sticks. When your "shapes" are complete, and you have the proportions (sizes) correct, start adding details with curved and zigzag lines. The shapes start to look like a real meadowlark. Remember to draw the dark area on the upper chest. Add a perch for it to stand on. Color or shade your bird so it looks more dimensional (real).



The western meadowlark is Nebraska's state bird.

Black-eyed Susan photo by Jeff Kuntz

Let's Draw! courtesy of Donna Schimonitz



▲ This old photo was taken in December of 1957 after squirrel hunting on my brother-in-law's farm south and east of Nebraska City. In those days we hunted mostly squirrels, rabbits and quail as there were not many pheasants in southeast Nebraska. The canyon-like woodlands there with their oak trees were very different than the woodlands on the farm east of Greenwood where I grew up. In the picture from left to right are my brother-in-law, Lloyd Cook (deceased); my brothers – Fred, Don, Ray, and Chuck; and myself. My oldest brother, John (deceased) took the picture.
– Roger Hammer, Lincoln, Nebraska



◀ This photo was taken in November of 1979. In the photo, Rudolph Pavlik Jr., proudly shows off his trophy from that deer season, taken west of Verdigre. This is just one of many memories from the almost 50 years of hunting at "The Shack." I wasn't born yet at the time of this photo, but I did have the pleasure to hunt with Junior when I was a young boy. What a great experience it was every time! I would've loved to hear the conversation about the cart used to haul this deer (as you can see in the photo it was in tip-top shape). The one thing I will always remember about him is how genuine he was. Even though Junior is no longer with us, we know that he watches over us every hunting season at "The Shack!"

– Justin Stark
Syracuse, Nebraska

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.

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Catfish and Coleslaw Po' Boys

Not Filet-O-Fish.

By Jenny Nguyen

I ate catfish from time to time while growing up, but I had no idea how good it could taste until I got to Nebraska. I suspect that most of what I ate before was farmed. Sometimes it tasted okay, and other times, it was fishy. I rarely ordered catfish at restaurants, and my family rarely bought it fresh at the grocery store. We just never knew what we would get. And no, there were no places nearby to catch our own fish to eat.

My first summer in the Cornhusker State, a friend took me onto the Missouri River. I caught my first catfish. They were small, but good for eating. I went home and fried some up for dinner, and then I had it again for breakfast the next morning with a tomato basil salad on the side. It is on my list of favorite breakfasts – though if one were a hobbit, I guess it would've been considered a proper "elevenes."

Then I had fish out of the Niobrara River. They were five pounders, which in my opinion is the perfect eating size for river catfish. The fillets were thick, yet delicate, sweet and succulent, and it was quite honestly one of the best fish I've eaten in my life. Occasionally I may sound like a snob, but I have to admit, breaded and fried catfish is my favorite way to devour this fish, with malt vinegar, Louisiana Hot Sauce and greasy fries on the side.

And, fried catfish tastes great in a sandwich. Well, most anything tastes great in a sandwich.

Servings: 2

Prep Time: 10 minutes

Cooking Time: 6-8 minutes

Ingredients:

- ½ to ¾ pound of catfish fillet(s)
- ½ cup of your favorite fish fry breading mixture
- canola oil, for frying
- 3 cups of shredded cabbage
- ½ cup of shredded carrot
- ½ cup of mayonnaise

- 1 teaspoon of rice/white wine/apple cider vinegar
- 1 teaspoon of sugar
- 1 teaspoon of Louisiana Hot Sauce
- salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1 vine tomato, sliced
- tartar sauce (optional)
- 1 loaf of fresh French baguette

1. To make coleslaw, combine cabbage, carrot, mayo, vinegar, sugar, hot sauce, salt and pepper, then taste to make sure the flavors are balanced. Too dry, add more mayo. Too sweet, add more vinegar. Too tart, add more sugar. Cover and store in the refrigerator to let flavors blend.

2. In a skillet, heat half an inch of

canola oil. Rinse catfish fillets in cold water and shake off excess water. Trim bloodline off fillets (reduces "fishy" taste), and then cut fillets to desired size. Coat pieces well with breading mixture, and then fry catfish for about 3 minutes on each side, or until golden brown. Drain on paper towels.

3. If desired, toast French bread slightly. Cut French bread in half lengthwise. Assemble sandwich with coleslaw at the bottom, tomato and then catfish. ■

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



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

Feather River VINEYARDS
NORTH PLATTE, NE

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View website for details and complete event schedule
Open daily – May thru Sept. 1:00–6:00 p.m.
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NEBRASKA
— GAME PARKS —



Nebraska: Home of Mountain Views

When *NEBRASKAland* produced *Beautiful Nebraska* last year, an exceptional compilation of photos representing the state's scenic and natural attributes, we received many accolades from readers. One letter about our special edition wasn't entirely complimentary, however.

A line in our publication stated that Nebraska has no mountain views, but has countless other scenic attributes. The reader pointed out in his letter that we do have mountain views. On a clear day from the right spot, observers can see Laramie Peak in Wyoming (bottom photo) and Harney Peak in South Dakota (top), he noted.

In October I stumbled upon both of those views while photographing other subjects. I was riding shotgun with a rancher through his pasture near Harrisburg in western Banner County when he pointed westward to Laramie Peak, which at 10,276 feet of elevation is the most prominent point in the Laramie Range. And, I was stalking elk with a rancher in northwestern Sheridan County last fall when he directed my attention to Harney Peak, which is the highest natural point in the Black Hills and South Dakota at 7,242 feet.

So, yes, we stand corrected. Nebraska does have mountain views. Really, when it comes to beauty, there's not much Nebraska doesn't have.

Justin Haag
April 22, 2015



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