



Captain Roy, a Labrador retriever and excellent photographer's assistant, sits in a blind watching sharp-tailed grouse on a booming ground in Cherry County. Photo by Bill Hager.

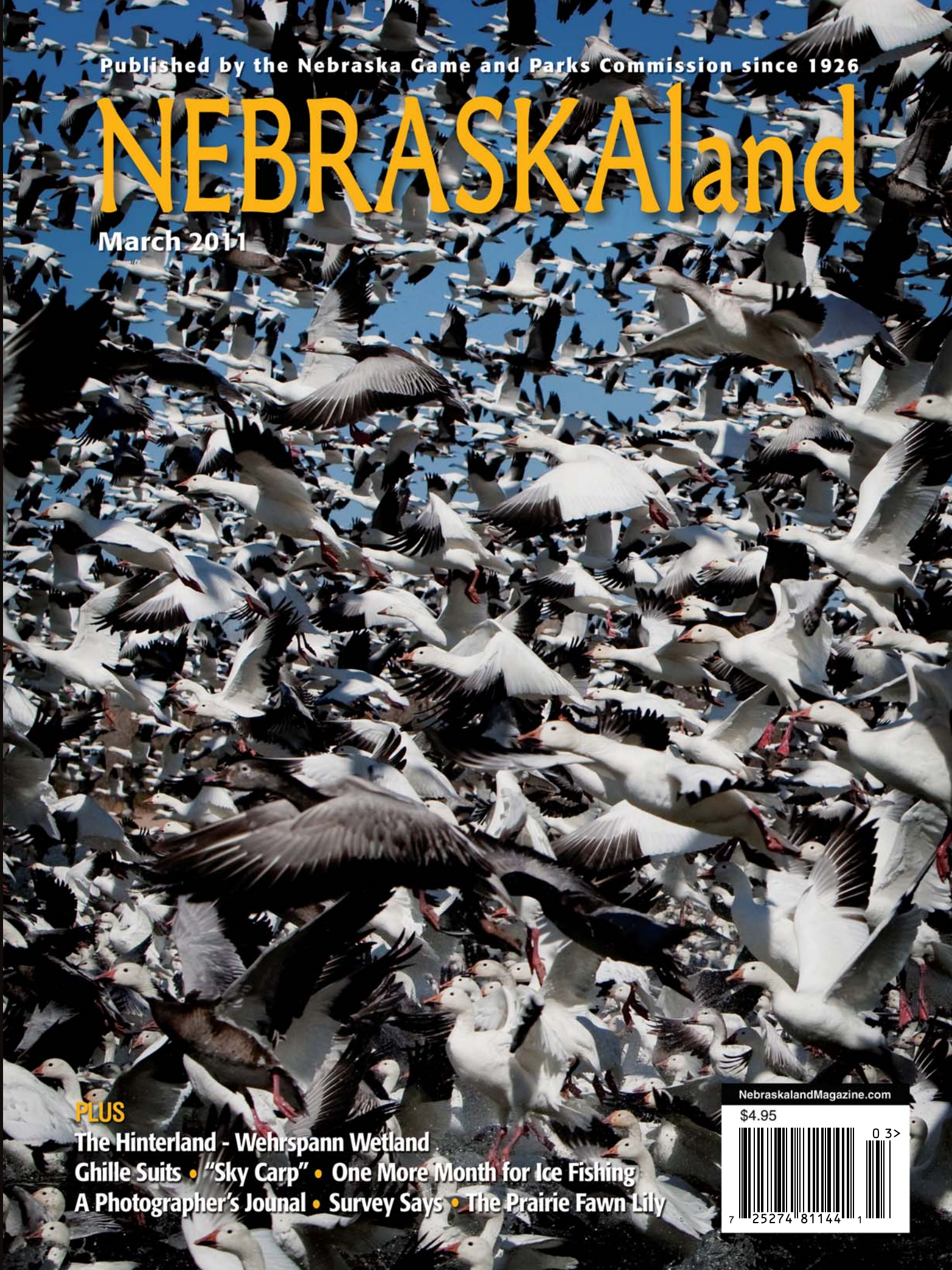
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NEBRASKAland

March 2011



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The Hinterland - Wehrspann Wetland
Ghille Suits • "Sky Carp" • One More Month for Ice Fishing
A Photographer's Journal • Survey Says • The Prairie Fawn Lily

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NEBRASKAland

Volume 89, Number 2, March 2011

FEATURES

14 The Hinterland - Eastern Nebraska's Wehrspann Wetland

This natural area on the edge of Omaha is a welcome site close to town for birders and nature enthusiasts.

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY JEFF KURRUS

20 Ghillie Suit

Often advertised as new and innovative in the outdoor accessory world, ghillie suits have been around for more than 100 years.

BY JON FARRAR

24 "Sky Carp" - Persecuted for Being Too Successful

For 30 years biologists have known lesser snow geese had become too abundant and were destroying not only their Arctic nesting habitat but that of other birds. Their numbers need to be reduced, but the birds still deserve respect.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JON FARRAR

32 A Photographer's Journal

A morning on the Platte River proves memorable for this Nebraska photographer. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL FORSBERG

34 One More Month

While many Nebraskans pray for the first day of spring, these hardwater diehards want a few more days on the ice.

BY JEFF KURRUS

40 Survey Says

Anchored in science, fish surveys are an invaluable part of fisheries management. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS



DEPARTMENTS

Comment	4
Mixed Bag	6
Parks & Places	44
Nature Notes	46
Outdoor Update	47
Classifieds	48
Portraits from the Past	50

Cover: Photographer Doug Steinke captured this mass of snow geese less than 15 feet from his photo blind on a Platte River sandpit in Hall County. To see Jon Farrar's essay on snow geese, see page 24.

Opposite: Crane watching is a favorite pastime each spring as more than 500,000 sandhill cranes migrate through Nebraska. Photo by Eric Fowler.

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Sophia and Chloe's First Deer

I get NEBRASKAland Magazine for the reception area of my pediatric dental practice and noted the 38-point buck photo on the cover. I thought your readers might enjoy a photo of my daughter and her best friend. They recently became interested in hunting with their dads this year. They are 12 years old and both in the 7th grade at Hastings Middle School. On opening day of deer season, they each shot their first deer.

I've never been a big fan of hunting and had some concerns even about its safety, particularly with children, being in the health care field. You could say that I basically tolerated my husband hunting but never really appreciated it. However, it was my daughter that has this new found love, and she has now learned a great deal about wildlife, conservation and the virtues of patience and safety through this sport. I can't tell which she enjoys more, the hunt itself or spending special quality time with her dad. I think it is also a great activity that she and her father can do together.

Sophia and Chloe waited all day to take their shot. They hit their prey about 30 minutes apart from each other just before sunset after patiently waiting quietly all day long. According to one dad, they heard a young girl squeal, "YES!" just after the shot.

When they went to the checkpoint, there were 170 or more deer checked and only three were taken by youth. Several men and their hunting groups didn't get one that day. Furthermore, let's just say the boys in her class were jealous on Monday!

Jessica Meeske, D.D.S.
Hastings, Nebraska

Ditto from Missouri

I practically could have written Marvin Konopik's letter myself in the comments section of the December 2010 issue.

I lived with my parents and three siblings on a farm 35 miles from Omaha that had a small stream running for miles through our land. We too had frequent visits by a group of four to five black hunters who had good equipment, great manners and were all big, good-looking guys in excellent shape. I don't recall any names but vividly recall them bringing pop and candy for us kids and gifts of a more serious nature for Dad and Mom. The folks didn't drink and from the hunters' first trip, after learning they didn't drink, until their last trip to visit and hunt, they always brought the family something we could enjoy.

These guys always wanted to share some of the game they harvested, but we ate very well from the farms livestock and wild game that was available to us. They treated our land and the game with great care. My father was a biology teacher besides being a farmer, and became very comfortable with how they conducted their hunts and cared for the game.

Like Marvin, I don't recall any conversation about what they did for a living but they were welcome guests for several years from about 1946-1953.

Keep up the good work, I really enjoy the magazine and recently got a subscription of my own.

Gary Wiles
Sunrise Beach, Missouri

Careful With Them Boots

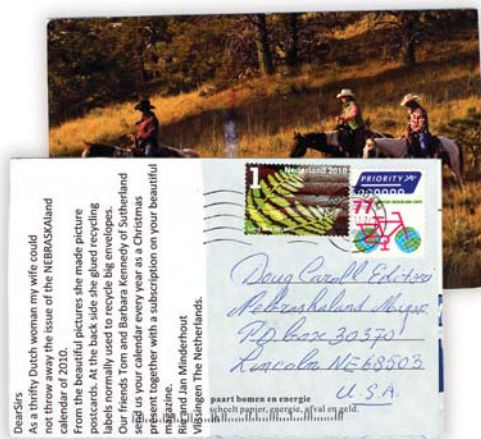
My husband and I enjoy your magazine, but, I was very unhappy to see Mr. Turpin's "little tip" for drying his hunting boots. Shame on you for even printing it. What about the poor person who comes into the laundry mat to do their clothes after he has been there putting his muddy, filthy



boots in the same dryer that they are putting their freshly washed towels? The dryers in "small towns" are meant for their residents and guests to use for CLEAN clothes. I am appalled that anyone would show such disregard for others. There are several specialty catalogs that sell boot dryers. Maybe he should purchase one.

Ellen Bonsall
Fremont, Nebraska

You bring up a very valid point – perhaps the hunters need to make sure that boots are as clean as possible before putting them in the dryer, and should take care to clean the dryer after they are done using it. Another option might be to bring along an old hair dryer that they could use on the boots during lunch. – Editor



Recycled Calendars

As a thrifty Dutch woman, my wife could not throw away our issue of the 2010 NEBRASKAland Calendar.

From the beautiful pictures she made picture postcards. At the backside she glued recycling labels normally used to recycle big envelopes.

Our friends, Tom and Barbara Kennedy of Sutherland, send us your calendar every year as a Christmas present together with a subscription to your beautiful magazine.

Rie and Jan Minderhout
Vlissengen, The Netherlands

NEBRASKAland Visitor Letters

We want to thank all 105 readers that sent e-mails and letters for last issue's visitor, a millipede that was on page 49 (see page 13 for the winner,

rules and this issue's hint). Here is one of the many wonderful responses we received:

I found the visiting millipede on page 49 my first time through this month's issue. Also, great article about Nebraska's potash history – I was not even aware of this information until last year when my participation in BRAN (Bicycle Ride Across Nebraska) took me through Antioch, where I could read the roadside historical marker. Thanks for all the additional information and another great issue of NEBRASKAland!

Ralph Martin
Ceresco, Nebraska

The long, round, worm-like creature is a millipede. Like centipedes and roly-polies, the millipede is in the arthropod family, but in the class Diplopoda. You can tell it isn't an insect, because insects have only six legs. Millipedes obviously have more than six legs – lots more. They are generally born with three pairs of legs and add additional pairs each time they molt. Millipedes prefer a moist habitat, and can often be found in rotting logs and leaf litter, and under rocks. They feed on decaying vegetation and other organic matter. Frequently millipedes will find their way into homes, especially moist basements and garages. They are not harmful to the house or humans, but can be a nuisance. Vacuuming or



sweeping them up is an easy, safe way to dispose of them.

– Julie Van Meter,
State Entomologist,
Nebraska Department of Agriculture.

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Freezing Fruit

Jeff Kurrus

Anyone who has spent any significant time hunting with me has seen the small containers of frozen fruit that often accompany me into the field. The concept of these snacks was born in a home where fruit was often purchased but rarely consumed before spoiling. In an attempt to preserve some of our purchases, my wife and I started freezing fruit. Grapes, orange slices, pineapple, blueberries, blackberries and cherries have been my favorites to eat while going to or from the hunting blind or fishing boat.

Pulling your selection from the freezer when departing the house is the best

method, and on these cool, late-winter and spring mornings, these healthy options are a welcome snack after a long walk back to my vehicle. If the weather is just right, my grapes are just starting to thaw, and I start eating them like candy.



PHOTO BY PASQUALE MINGARELLI

What to Plant First

Pasquale Mingarelli

Spring is here. Well, maybe it is almost here. Depending on where you live in the state, you may have had some springlike days already this year – the type of days that make you and many other Nebraskans itch to get a vegetable garden going. The good news is that you don't have to wait until May to get some seeds or plants in the ground.

The cole vegetables (Brussels sprout, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, kale, broccoli, etc) as well as lettuce, peas, Swiss chard and spinach can all be planted a month or more sooner than the date of the last average frost.

According to John Fech of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Office for Sarpy and Douglas counties, these plants are frost tolerant. The key is the temperature of the soil, which should be at least in the lower 40s. Fech recommends keeping the soil uncovered and exposed to the sun to get the ground to warm quicker and added that the best way to prep the soil is to put a layer of compost down and work it into the ground when the soil is dry, preferably in the fall.

When the soil temperatures reach the 50s, sweet corn, peas, onions, asparagus and carrots can all be planted.

Upcoming Events

Here is a list of upcoming outdoor events across Nebraska. For more information about these and other events, click on the calendar at www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

February 27

• **Cowboy Poetry and Music Jam – Bowring Ranch SHP, Merriman**
2:00 pm-5:00 pm
Come out to Bowring Ranch and enjoy a day of poets and musicians as they portray cowboy life. Then stay and enjoy a potluck supper; bring a covered dish to share with everyone at the meal. There is no admission charge for the event, but a park entry permit is required on each vehicle.

Contact: Bowring Ranch SHP
(308) 684-3428
diane.burress@nebraska.gov

March 9-12

• **International Ornithological Conference**
All day, Saturday, March 12th
The annual conference of the Association of Field Ornithologists, Cooper Ornithological Society and Wilson Ornithological Society will be held in Kearney on these dates.
Anyone with an interest in ornithology is welcome to attend. For more information or to register, visit snr.unl.edu/kearney2011.
The conference will be at the Younes Conference Center, 416 Talmadge Street, Kearney NE 68848
Additional questions can be directed to Mary Bomberger Brown by calling (402) 472- 8878 or e-mailing ternsandplovers@unl.edu.

March 18

• **Board of Commissioners Meeting**
8 am-12:00 pm
3rd Floor Conference Room,
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
2200 N. 33rd St.
Lincoln NE 68503
Contact: Lynn Hartog
(402) 471-5539
lynn.hartog@nebraska.gov

April 1

• **Ashfall Fossil Beds SHP, Royal**
Ashfall SHP will conduct school and tour groups by special arrangement from April 1-October 20 with advance reservations. For details and to make reservations, call the park at (402) 893-2000. Open to the public May 1, 2011.

Nebland Flashbacks



The caption to this April 1967 photo reads... "NEBRASKAland deputies are dressed for action, armed with tourism know-how about 'where the West begins' state." This was a new state program adding assistants (deputies) to help out Nebraska's 128 boosters. Also called "NEBRASKAlanders," these volunteer/ambassadors could buy jackets and other items. To qualify, they had to pass an open-book test on facts about scenic, historic Nebraska and her many attractions.

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Farm Bill Wildlife Biologists

These biologists are available through a partnership with the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission and the Natural Resources Conservation Service and offer landowners one-stop-shopping for technical assistance on the available conservation programs and incentives in the state. Landowners may contact them for site visits and program enrollment options.

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Coordinating Wildlife Biologists

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A Look Back - March 1966

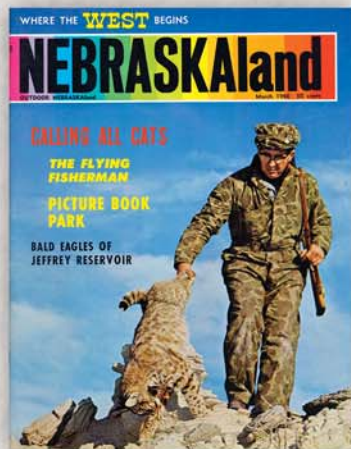
Jeff Kurrus

Sometimes the best laid plans don't work out, but occasionally they do, as was the case this month when I wanted a mid-1960s "A Look Back" and found one well worth the billing.

It must have been an exciting month for readers when they received their March 1966 *NEBRASKAland*. A predator hunting piece entitled "Calling All Cats" was followed by "The Flying Fisherman," a story about Lincoln dentist Charles Carothers and his weekend fishing trips by plane throughout Nebraska.

Dick Schaffer, then editor of *NEBRASKAland*, next featured author Warren Spencer's historical "Return of Standing Bear" and a historical piece entitled "Branding." "Monograms for cattle help solve ranchers' quarrels," read the subhead. "History of the idea goes from the Nile to Nebraska."

This issue also featured two destination stories – one on eagle watching at Jeffrey Reservoir and a second on Ponca State Park entitled "Picture Book Park." In addition, Scottsbluff artist Charles S. Simmons' paintings were shown, as was a safety reminder for the use of life preservers in "The Defenders." Lastly, fauna notes on the badger and a tutorial on dog training, "My Gal Sal," rounded out an excellent month of content. To read "Branding" go to NebraskalandMagazine.com and click on "A Look Back."



After a flood, the number of ants in this prairie was revealed as they all started rebuilding their tunnels at the same time.

The Density of Ants in Prairies

(Editor's Note: The following was one of Chris Helzer's "The Prairie Ecologist" blogs that can be found on NebraskalandMagazine.com along with "Afield and Afloat" – a blog written by our magazine staff and contributors)

About five years ago there was a major rainstorm in early May that dropped 12 inches on our Platte River prairies within 24 hours, flooding most of them for several days. I wasn't too worried about most of the prairies (after all, they're floodplain prairies and should be used to flooding), but I was concerned about the possible influx of purple loosestrife from the out-of-bank river and about the fate of a few young prairie restoration seedlings. At the same time, I was hoping the big rain would help end the drought we'd been in for more than five years (it didn't).

As the prairies dried out, I started checking to see how things looked. I was walking through a 5-year-old prairie seeding looking at the plants (which were looking very good) when I suddenly noticed the ant hills. Everywhere I looked, there were ant hills. I couldn't take a step without trampling one. I had a quick, illogical thought that we'd been invaded by fire ants, but once my brain kicked back into gear, I realized that I was probably seeing the simultaneous rebuilding and repair of all the ant tunnels that had been in place prior to the big rain.

Ants are extremely important to prairies as predators and earth movers (and fill other roles as well), and I knew that they were really abundant, but until I saw the density of hills after that flood I didn't really have a good idea HOW abundant they could be. After all, the hills are the tip of the iceberg and only indicate the presence of numerous and extensive tunnels beneath the surface. Before writing this post, I contacted James Trager at the Missouri Botanical Garden to see what he could tell me about the phenomenon I'd observed.

James thought most the hills were probably made by *Lasius neoniger*, the "cornfield ant," an abundant species common to prairies with sandy soil. He also said ants can survive floods by finding refuge in air pockets within their underground nests. That's something I hadn't thought about either – all the invertebrates living below ground have to be able to survive saturated soils in floodplain prairies.

I thought about using these photos and story as the basis for a larger post on prairie ants, but decided that it would be redundant – James has already written an excellent and succinct synthesis of the fascinating world of prairie ants. Rather than trying to steal his ideas and re-write them, I suggest you go to www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/insects/ants/index.htm and look at his piece. If you haven't read his introduction to prairie ants, it's well worth the few minutes it'll take you to read it.

PHOTO BY CHRIS HELZER

Cowboy Trail Flood Damage

The cost of cleanup and repair of flooding and storm-related damage to Commission parks, recreation and wildlife management areas last year totaled more than \$5 million, including an estimated \$4.5 million in damage to the Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will cover 75 percent of the cost of the damages, which included washed out bridges, roads and trails and removal of silt, sand and debris from roads, boat ramps and bridge pilings.

A 72-mile section of the trail remains closed from Norfolk to O'Neill. Large sections of the trail and bridges were washed out near Norfolk and Clearwater. Replacing the aptly named Broken Bridge and rebuilding a 100-foot section of trail three miles west of Norfolk on the most heavily used segment is a priority. Contractors removed the iron bridge from the river this winter and a consultant is working on designing its replacement, which will

cost an estimated \$2.2 million. The agency is currently lining up its 25 percent share of that cost, the remainder of which FEMA will cover.

A mile of trail east of Clearwater was heavily damaged, including the loss of a 1,000-foot section of the trail to the Elkhorn and two bridges. Duane Westerholt, trails coordinator with the Commission, said no timetable has been set for repair of that section. Crews have repaired the trail bed in other parts of the trail that were not as heavily damaged and will begin resurfacing it with crushed limestone this spring.

The final segment of the 195 miles of trail between Norfolk and Valentine had been completed only months before the flooding. Work to convert the abandoned Chicago and Northwestern Railroad to a recreational trail began in 1994. The 26-mile section from Norfolk to Oakdale was completed in 1998. The 123-mile stretch of trail from O'Neill to Valentine remains open.

Twenty Commission areas were damaged by flooding along the Elkhorn, Platte and Missouri rivers.

See You Out There ... But Where?



Do you know where this Nebraska photograph was taken? See answer at the bottom of page 13.

PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

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Hunting Spot Names

Jeff Kurrus

In the December 2010 edition of *NEBRASKALand*, I queried our readers to send us some of their most creative hunting spot names. And they did not disappoint.

It was quite evident through the pile of letters that hunting and fishing spot locations are named for a variety of reasons. Some are best known for results, as seen at Jeff Ward’s Bird Salad, a patch of CRP MAP land on the edge of the Sandhills that produces just above everything, including pheasants, quail, grouse, and dove. John Morrow’s Turkey Road and Muley Station also speak to locales known for what they produce, as does John Flor’s Stumpy and John Jacobsen’s Three Pheasant Road.

Yet Jacobsen also included a separate category of how hunting spot are named – those that do not produce, as seen at No Pheasant Road, or cannot produce, as seen at The Mean Farmer’s Land, also sent in by Jeff Ward. “There is a giant field of red grass just adjacent to a piece of property that we have permission to hunt. I’m convinced that every pheasant in Valley County lives in this field; and we have been told to leave it alone as the person that owns it has been known to get quite grumpy with hunters close to his property.”

Another category commonly named are those that naturally fit the spot they were hunting. Leon Gillespie’s Wolf Den, that was historically known as such, Damon Ott’s The Meadow, Tim Iburg’s Horseshow Draw, Mark Matulka’s Buffalo Pond, and Chris Polenz’s Mossy Oak, which is a treestand in a mossy oak tree that Polenz claims “was named before Mossy Oak became Mossy Oak.” As well as those whose names were created out of actions by the hunters,



Monsterbuck Manor

after “a notorious brother-in-law.” And other spots named after the stands themselves, including more than one Deck, multiple Tripods, and a multitude of Hotels, tree houses where morning coffee and an afternoon football game could be partaken of with rifle in hand.

There are also common names, or at least common to many of these hunters, including The Honeyhole. And those not so common, including Iburg’s Turd Hill, and John Morrow’s Spud Webb and Buster Douglas.

Lastly, there are those hunting locales who speak as much warning as they do place name, including John Flor’s The Suicide, an aptly named tree stand that begs its user to wear a safety harness for “it’s so high that if you fall from it, you’re dead.” And Deatrich’s Cardiac, named for one’s inability to get to the locale without feeling as if you’re going to die.

Hunting names are a great part of the hunting experience. Do something tremendous, or tremendously ignorant, and you have a chance to be remembered forever. For while I’ve seen many people change hunting locales, I’ve never heard of people changing their hunting locale names once they are firmly established.

including Monte Deatrich’s The Chair, named for an old metal chair located at the ambush site.

There are also places named after friends and family, including Iburg’s Mom’s Bottom and Flor’s Jimmy, named

Grouse Season Expanded

At their January meeting, the Nebraska Game and Parks Board of Commissioners voted to expand the grouse-hunting season starting in 2011.

This year’s grouse season will be Sept. 1 through Jan. 31, 2012. Regulations previously called for the season to open on the Saturday nearest Sept. 15.

By making the change, the Commission is providing more hunting opportunity for a lightly hunted species and is aligning the dove and grouse season openers on a common date.

In other action the board also approved a revised Focus on Pheasants plan. The new plan seeks to create new focus areas and incentive programs to promote habitat improvements and to work with game biologists to maximize effectiveness of habitat program delivery within those areas.

The plan also intends to continue researching the amount of wildlife habitat needed to establish and maintain a huntable pheasant population across Nebraska, and it will try to secure more pheasant habitat through U.S. Department of Agriculture conservation programs.

Stay Safe This Spring



While a turkey’s eyesight is impeccable, a hunter’s is not. It’s never a bad idea when walking to and from your spring turkey hunting spot to wear hunter orange. Multiple manufacturers make vests that are reversible or incorporate strips of orange fabric. Use one of these while transporting your bird and stay safe.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Outdoor Message Plates

For more than 20 years, the trucks Dave Folda has driven from his home in Schuyler to the cabin on the Platte River where his family has hunted and fished since 1969 have carried this message plate.

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) of it to Eric.Fowler@Nebraska.gov, along with your name, hometown, and a brief description of the interests expressed on your license plate.



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

Disturbed while sunning itself near the prairie dog hole where it had spent the winter, a prairie rattlesnake takes a defensive posture against potential danger.

When Do Snakes Emerge?

Dan Fogell

What makes you wake up in the morning? An alarm clock? The smell of fresh brewed coffee? Or are you one of those people who can just pop out of bed at the same time every day? Whatever the motivation may be, eventually you have to get up. Here in Nebraska, harsh, cold winter months force snakes and other reptiles to “go to bed” for months in the fall. But every spring, without fail, they wake up. And just like us, some snakes are early risers and some snakes just like to sleep in. Snakes are ectotherms, so they depend on a heat source outside their

bodies to warm them up. From spring through fall that heat source is the sun and the seasonally warm air temperatures. But in winter, air temperatures get bitterly cold, so during fall snakes seek refuge from the upcoming winter. Sub-freezing temperatures will kill a snake by freezing its blood and other tissues, so getting underground below the frost line is crucial. Burrows, rotted tree roots, rock crevices, and even basements and attics are all potential hibernation sites for Nebraska’s snakes.

When winter passes, snakes emerge from their hibernation sites to once again slither through the grass and over the rocks to find water, food, and mates. Warmer temperatures, longer days, and melting snow are all cues that signal it’s time to emerge. Mid-March is when the first wave begins. Small snakes like brown snakes and ringneck snakes warm up quickly due to their small body size. By late-March, garter snakes and racers begin to crawl out of holes and bask in the early spring sun. Once the first week of April arrives, prairie rattlesnakes, bullsnakes, and nearly all of Nebraska’s other snake species have emerged from their winter dens. The last snakes to yawn, stretch and roll out of their winter slumber are the largest snakes: timber rattlesnakes and black rat snakes. Babies and younger snakes usually come out before adults, but by the first of May, all snakes are out and on the move.

Dan Fogell’s recent book, “A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Nebraska,” is available at nebraskamaps.unl.edu or amazon.com.

News From Abroad

Arkansas Blackbirds

Kelsea Nore

Revelers enjoying New Year’s Eve in Beebe, Arkansas woke up on the new year to a grim surprise. Approximately 5,000 Red-winged Blackbirds died in mid-flight and littered the area. Early speculations ranged from electromagnetic waves to UFOs but the cause of death has since been determined. The flock of birds, likely physically weakened by migration, were spooked by the holiday fireworks and quickly emerged from their roost. Red-winged Blackbirds can reach flying speeds from 17 to 28 miles per hour and the blunt force trauma that killed the birds is likely the result of the birds crashing into each other, surrounding buildings and trees.

Dan Schieman, Ph.D, conservation director of Audubon Arkansas in Little Rock said that Red-winged Blackbird ‘roosts can reach up to 10,000 in areas of the country.’ The birds are known for their sharp hearing and the booms and crackles of the fireworks startled the birds to their ultimate demise.

Sandhills Duck Production

Duck nesting success is typically highest in grassland-dominated landscapes, but a recent study found reproduction of mallards in the Sandhills to be surprisingly low.

Biologists suspect the variety of nest predators found there, including bull snakes, which were not present in other areas where nesting success has been studied, to be the prime factor. They also found the population to be dominated by young females that put little effort into nesting.

PHOTO BY BILL HAGER

Officer's Notebook

What Are the Odds?

In 2009, Nebraska's resident annual fishing permit cost \$26.00. Some sportsmen are not sure that they need a yearlong permit. So, the NGPC offers them a one-day permit for \$7.50 or a three-day permit for \$20.00. In the routine of my patrol I do see them from time to time.

In August 2009 I checked two adult fishermen at Walnut Creek Lake in Sarpy County. One fisherman had an annual permit, while the other had a one-day permit and stated that he'd never fished before that day and his friend had encouraged him to try it out. Two weeks later, I checked the same two fishermen at Zorinsky Lake in Douglas County. Again, the neophyte had another one-day fishing permit. He stated that he'd had so much fun fishing the first time that he decided to give it another try.

What were the odds of that person being checked by a conservation officer for compliance? He'd fished twice in his life, in two different locations and at both was checked by the same conservation officer.

Then there is the other side of checking fisherman. During the same month I was checking fishing permits at Wehrspan Lake in Sarpy County when I met a 49-year-old fisherman who stated that he'd never been checked by a conservation officer in his entire outdoor life. He'd purchased fishing permits for 33 years.

What are the odds? Yet, I see it all the time. There are a large number of fishermen who will tell you that they get checked several times a year and that we're on a first name basis, yet, I still run into those who believe conservation officers are a myth. Once again, just recently at Wehrspan, I observed five adult males fishing on a stretch of shoreline. They turned out to be family of uncles, brothers and cousins. I checked the first three and they had no fish yet, but were enjoying the day, just the fella's hanging out fishing. I went on to the next two. The other three fishermen pulled in their lines and followed me. All of them were grinning.

The next fisherman was 68 years old. He shook his head at me as I approached and handed me his veteran fishing license and stated, "I've had fishing permits since age 16 and have fished in 14 states. This is the first time that I've ever been checked by a fish cop." We all laughed and I told him that I was sorry and was glad that I'd finally got around to checking him.

Nearby, his 40-year-old son was sitting in a chair with a fishing pole in his hands. He was shaking his head too and grinning. He handed me his one-day fishing permit and stated, "I hate fishing, and I haven't went fishing since I was a child. I just went along today because it's a family outing. I wasn't going to buy a permit. Dad says game wardens are ghosts, a myth. You hear stories sometimes, but you never see one. Dad said that I'd never get checked. But my cousin told me that he'd once been checked up at Desoto Bend. They told me that one never knows. So, I went ahead and bought a one-day fishing license. That was one hour ago!" Everyone was laughing. His dad had fished for 52 years and his son had fished for one hour and both were checked together for the first time. They now have a good family story to remember and share.

— Dan Evasco, Conservation Officer, Papillion



Bone Broth

Kelsea Nore

There are few things as satisfying as a warm bowl of soup on a cold winter's day. Making and freezing some 'bone broth' is simple way to start any kind of soup. If you're as determined as I am to avoid getting a cold or coming down with the flu, go to the freezer and dig out that turkey you nabbed in October. First you'll want to dress it, roast it and eat the meat clean to the bones. However you do that is up to you, but save the bones and whatever is left over and toss all of it into a large stock pot.

Fill the pot with enough water to cover the bones. Next, add some chopped celery, carrots, one diced onion, garlic and some pepper. A bay leaf and some sage add nice flavor as well. Place it on the stove top and bring to a boil. You'll want to skim the surface for fats or other small bits. Reduce your stock to a low temperature for six to seven hours at the least but ideally, cooking it overnight will produce a more flavorful broth. Using a sieve or cheesecloth, strain the broth to use or freeze.

Aside from being economically smart, bone broth (of any kind) is a healthy decision. Homemade broth contains a myriad of minerals from the cartilage, bone and marrow and the natural gelatin aids digestion. For those watching their sodium intake, using homemade bone broth ensures a healthy, delicious bowl of soup.

Thank You

Jeff Kurrus

NEBRASKAland would like to thank the following freelance writers and photographers who made such valuable contributions to this publication in 2010, and hope for their continued involvement in 2011:

Julie Anderson, Ken Bouc, Don Brockmeier, Zane Dickinson, Caroline Gaia, Michael Forsberg, Kristen Friesen, Cory Gregory, Bill Hager, David Hemmings, Chris Helzer, Luke Kathol, Jody Keisner, Lisa Knopp, Elizabeth Mack, Patrick Mainelli, Matthew Marx, Pasquale Mingarelli, Kathy Nelson, Kelsea Nore, Steve and Bobbi Olson, Rick Rasmussen, Frank Reid, Joel Sartore, Tom and Hope Scheimo, Doug Steinke, Kimberly Stuhr and Dick Turpin.

NEBRASKAland would also like to acknowledge the many conservation officers, biologists and other Nebraska Game and Parks Commission employees and Commissioners, and all the nature professionals who provided such invaluable knowledge and support during this magazine's 85th consecutive year of publication.

Lastly we would like to thank all of the nature enthusiasts who allowed our writers and photographers a few minutes of their time in our attempt to reveal all the great offerings the Nebraska outdoors has for those who step outside.



Hager



Friesen



Kathol



Knopp



Mack



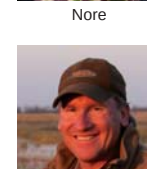
Mainelli



Scheimo



Steinke



Nore

Record Deer Harvest

According to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Nebraska deer hunters had a big year in 2010, setting records for both overall harvest and antlerless whitetail harvest.

These records will go a long way in helping the Commission reach its deer management goals throughout the state, including reducing the burgeoning whitetail population in eastern Nebraska.

The total deer harvest during the 2010 season was 88,034 (77,028 whitetails and 10,709 mule deer). While a record 37,967 whitetail bucks were killed, a record 39,198 antlerless whitetails were also – marking the first time the antlerless whitetail harvest surpassed whitetail buck harvest.

The antlerless whitetail harvest increased by nearly 9,000 from 2009. Bonus tags, antlerless-first mandates in some units, additional hunting opportunities and \$6 youth permits all contributed to the antlerless whitetail harvest.

Here are other highlights to the 2010 big game hunting seasons:

- A record 141,573 deer permits were sold. The number of firearm permits sold increased while the number of archery and muzzleloader permits sold decreased from 2009.
- Deer hunter success rates were 68 percent for firearm, 40 for archery and 37 for muzzleloader.
- Electronic checking helped wildlife managers obtain harvest information faster. There were 25,000 deer checked via telephone or online.
- The first year of the \$6 youth deer permit was popular, with 11,255 permits sold.
- Age structure of whitetails and mule deer bucks continues to improve. A record 75 percent of whitetail bucks and 83 percent of mule deer bucks taken were age 2 or older.
- Record numbers of youth (11,255) and nonresident (15,300) permits were sold.
- A record 166 elk were harvested – 77 bulls and 89 cows.
- There were 793 antelope harvested, including 509 in the firearm season, 185 in the archery season and 99 in the muzzleloader season.

Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

Coke, ginger ale, milk... there are lots of ideas out there for what to marinate your meat in. Any citrus juice can work for freezing some game. This should be the breast of a mallard duck but all I have for demonstration purposes is a rubber chicken. This tip involves a marinade – you can put this in one of those zip lock bags, the breast of your mallard duck – in this case a rubber chicken. You dump in orange juice to cover it, throw that in your freezer, eat that a month or two later and that is going to be delicious duck. Even those folks that don't like wild duck might change their mind. You know what I think I'll do? Think I'll throw this rubber chicken in the deep freeze because I know when the Mrs. finds it she's going to scream... she'll have some comments for me I'm sure. ■



NEBRASKAland Visitor Winner and Hint

Last issue's winner of the NEBRASKAland Visitor drawing was G. E. Dave Fuller of Lincoln, Nebraska, who found the **millipede** on page 49.

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 bug found in Nebraska that just happened to find its way onto one of the pages of our publication.

We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a **new 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 page 5, 15, 18 or 38.





The Hinterland

Eastern Nebraska's Wehrspann Wetland

Photos and text by Jeff Kurrus

Ask most people in eastern Nebraska where Wehrspann Wetland is and odds are they'll point you to Wehrspann Lake Recreation Area, a 245-acre lake in southwestern Omaha that has a boat ramp, great shoreline access, concrete hiking trails and roadside wildlife-viewing opportunities. Things are a bit different at the wetland across street. Sure, it also offers fishing, but anglers are limited to a float tube or small boat. It also has a hiking trail, even though rain makes it muddy and it lacks the concrete that many 21st century walkers demand. What it does have is tremendous wildlife viewing opportunities. You'll have to venture out from behind the steering wheel to see most of them, but if you're looking for an escape from the hustle and bustle of city life, this short trip from the blacktop may be well worth it.



*Opposite: With Omaha's lights in the background, a lone angler fishes at Wehrspann Wetland.
Above: Wildlife viewing, and photographing, opportunities abound at this public wetland.*

Wehrspann wetland, located just north of where Interstate 80 crosses over Nebraska Highway 370, is the last piece of sediment retention measures above the lake. Functionally the area, a cooperative project between the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District and the Army Corps of Engineers, was constructed to slow runoff from heavy rains, providing an area for sediment to collect instead of entering Wehrspann Lake, thus providing additional life to this popular Omaha fishery. Visually, the wetland offers an escape into nature rarely found in metropolitan areas. When a visitor slips on rubber boots and takes the short hike surrounding the water it's almost, I say



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

almost, like being 100 miles from the nearest roadside. It's the perfect place to carry your Starbucks vinti chai in one hand and a pair of binoculars in the other. It's also the perfect location to take your little girl or boy for a walk in the woods and still meet your tee time or soccer practice at 11 a.m. Mentally you just have to get

Above: Wehrspann wetland (right side of photo) helps protect Wehrspann Lake (left) from storm runoff.

Right: A white-tailed deer plays peek-a-boo during a recent hike on the trail surrounding the wetland.

Opposite: Milkweed and other native plants can be seen during hiking trips at the wetland.





Left: A garden spider approaches a captured grasshopper.

Opposite: An overcast morning view of the wetland looking back toward Nebraska Highway 370.

Opposite bottom: Waterfowl, including mallards, teal and Canada geese (pictured) can be seen throughout the year at the wetland.



past the nearby Wal-mart, interstate, highway and constant line of cars buzzing past the wetland. Instead, listen to the white-tailed deer's warning blow or the rustling leaves of nearby trees. Most of all, listen to the sound of boots on fallen limbs, grass and water. After just a few moments of these sweet sounds, concrete will be the last thing you want to see in a place that seems so far from civilization. ■



GHILLIE SUIT

By Jon Farrar

The gist of the old saying “there is nothing new under the sun” is that someone oftentimes comes up with what they think is a new idea only to have reinvented the wheel. That seems to be much the case with today’s ghillie suits used by hunters, if one is willing to call essentially the same thing by a different name.

An Internet search for the origin of the ghillie suit produces a handful of slightly different versions of the same story. When the British were engaged in the Second Boer War (1899-1902) in South Africa, a Scottish Army Commander named Lord Lovat commanded Northern Scottish Highlands troops. He formed some of his men into two groups; one specialized as snipers and the other for surveillance. The troops were said to be largely composed of former gamekeepers; and during that war the gamekeepers used the same sort of body camouflage they had used to “wait for an unsuspecting deer to amble by and then leap out and grab it with their bare hands.” These gamekeepers were known as ghillies, hence their camouflaged suits came to be called ghillie suits. The word ghillie is derived from Gaelic for “servant.” After reaching out, grabbing a passing deer, and wrestling it into submission (believe what you will of what can be found on the Internet) they would “haul their prize back to keep so the Lord could shoot it in the castle courtyard in a ‘mock hunt.’” There is a parallel explanation that Lovat’s troops also included shepherds who employed body coverings made of native vegetation to conceal them while lying in wait for

poachers or predators. In Scotland today, the word ghillie means a professional fishing or hunting guide.

Ghillie-clad soldiers were used even more extensively by the British during World War I, and they are credited with having the world’s first specifically designated military snipers. The U.S. military apparently was slow to adopt ghillie suits. They were not employed

Knowles declares he has a cinch on the ducks, as he has purchased one of Lawrence’s grass suits. He simply scatters a lot of corn around on the ground, squats down amidst this, and when the ducks come he just reaches out from his grass clothes, grabs them by the neck, wrings it, and chucks them in a convenient hole.”

Lawrence grass suits were often mentioned in national sporting publications and widely advertised in catalogs in the late-1890s and two decades into the 1900s.

“Frank Lawrence, the Chicago sporting goods dealer, 88 and 90 La Salle street, has made a big cut in the prices of sporting supplies this spring and his fame among the men who shoot and fish is bound to

become much more extended,” Griswold wrote in the *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 3, 1895. “He handles everything from the best made guns and fishing paraphernalia down to the most insignificant article used in the field or on the stream. Lawrence’s hand-loaded shells are lauded from one end of the land to the other, thousands of the most prominent sporting men using nothing else. His grass suits and grass blinds for wild fowl shooting have given him an enviable reputation, and his prices on decoys, hunting apparel, whistles, calls and everything pertaining to sport cannot be beat.”

A decade later, Lawrence, in addition to his sporting goods business, was a representative for the Winchester Repeating Arms Company.

“Mr. Frank Lawrence lived when a boy in the West in a locality where field shooting was of the best – a



Although thought of as a relatively recent invention, body camouflage such as ghillie suits have been commercially marketed for over 100 years. Shown here is advertising art from *The Complete Hunters & Sportsmens Manual and Trappers Guide*, 1903.

to camouflage snipers and advance reconnaissance men until the Vietnam War. Ghillie suits captured the American imagination after the release of the 1993 movie “Sniper” starring Tom Berenger as a U.S. Marine sniper in a covert operation in the Panamanian jungle. That is about the time ghillie suits started showing up in hunting catalogs.

At least as early as the mid-1890s, similar body camouflage was used by American hunters, especially wildfowlers, and particularly the “Lawrence grass suit.”

“Jack Knowles, the veteran duck killer, and John J. Hardin, put in last Sunday in the bottoms near Hamburg [Iowa],” Sandy Griswold, then a sports writer for the *Omaha Daily Bee*, wrote in March 11, 1894. “They made a big kill of pintails—fifty-five they claim, but there is a copper on the claim....



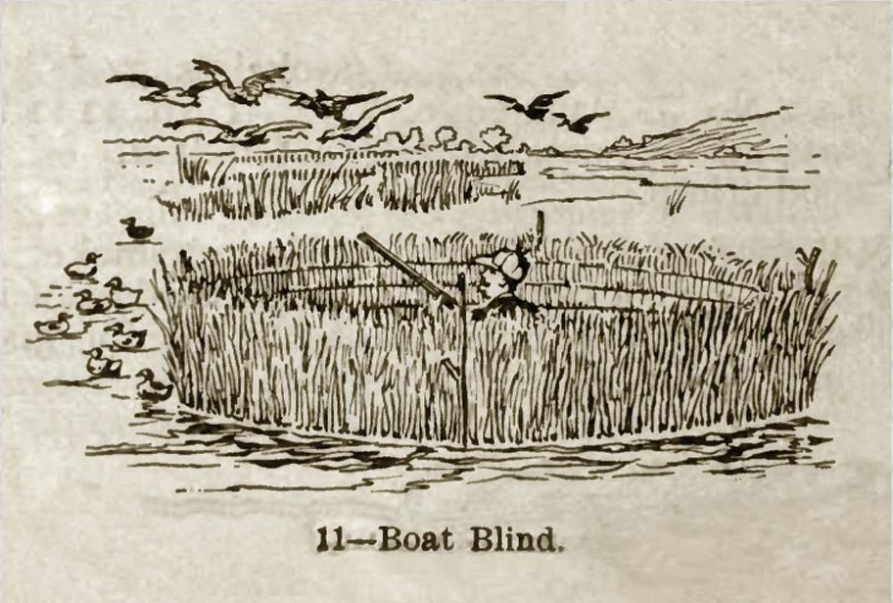
Ghillie suits were apparently first employed by the British military during the Second Boer War (1899-1902) in Africa, both for snipers and for surveillance. The suits were used by the British in both World Wars, but apparently not by U.S. troops until Vietnam.

section of the country that has turned out some of the best shots in the world,” were the words in the September 26, 1908 edition of *Sporting Life*. “He has been interested in trap shooting from the days of Bogardus and live wild pigeons, up to the present time, and is probably as well posted on trap shooting affairs as any man in his business. For a number of years he loaded shells for the market, and was widely known as a leader in hand loaded shells. He engaged with the Winchester Repeating Arms Company some years ago and for some time looked after their interest in the State of Pennsylvania, where he is well known to both the trap shooters and the merchants who sell ammunition and guns.... Mr. Lawrence is also well known to the sportsmen of the United States as the man that invented the grass suit and the portable shore and boat blinds for wild fowl shooting which he is still placing on the market, and which have met with much favor with the field shooters who enjoy that

kind of sport.” Francis H. Buzzacott, in his 1903 book, *The Complete Hunter’s and Sportsman’s Manual and Trapper’s Guide*, wrote that “Grass Hunting Suits” were then “extremely popular for wild Goose, Duck, or all kinds of water fowl shooting. These are made ready for immediate use, of dry, long, tough marsh grass, into suits (cape, coat and hood) convenient to wear and shoot from; weighing about 4 lbs. and really making good snow and rain proof garments as well. Hunters appreciate these, as it really does away with the thankless, difficult work of building blinds or bough houses, so necessary before these were introduced. They fit practically any person, really converting them into a semi-natural growth of rushes, hay or wheat stack.” In addition to grass hunting suits, Lawrence was perhaps the first to market woven grass panels for use as portable blind on boats or shorelines, the early-day equivalent of today’s “Fast-Grass” type blind panels.

“In these days it is unnecessary to go into details as to the methods of constructing blinds, stands, etc., for the reason that the Sportsman or duck hunter can obtain them at slight cost, put up in portable form for either wear, boat or shore, as occasion requires,” Buzzacott wrote in the same publication. He continued: “If shore blinds are desired, they are made in standard lengths and rolls 6x3 feet, by which a shore blind can be made of any length, size or shape desired, giving ample room or a seat, and supplied even with ‘stocks’ or supports, to be fastened and set up anywhere. Usually two of these lengths construct an admirable, roomy sized “shore blind.” On the other hand if a ‘Grass boat blind’ is desired they are made in lengths of 5 ft. 10 in. by 27 inches, made to resemble wild rice, rushes, marsh grass, etc.; rolling compactly in a small roll, each piece being supplied with sticks which fit into screw eyes screwed in rail (or gunwale) of boat, making them easily adjusted. Usually four pieces are

sufficient to go around an ordinary boat, while if desired one side of the boat only need be used for a blind.” Griswold occasionally mentioned he and his hunting associates used Lawrence’s grass suits with resounding success, in exchange for which he no doubt was kept supplied with them. A humorous account of using a grass suit appeared in the April 8, 1894 issue of the *Omaha Daily Bee*. In those times, many Omaha sportsmen regularly hunted the Iowa side of the Missouri River. This obvious fictitious account is from the floodplain near the small town of McPaul, situated on the east side of the river roughly half way between Plattsmouth and Nebraska City. “A friend has sent me an account of a recent thrilling experience of that genial and versatile sportsman, Arthur J. Webb, former police court clerk but now accountant in the office of the Grant Paving company. ‘Webby’ has an old college friend, a smart fellow, too, for his name is Mustard, living about five miles from McPaul on the Waubuncey [Waubonsie] flats. A few days ago Major Mustard sent A.J. an invitation to join him in a duck shoot near his place, adding that the birds were a foot thick all over the marsh and that they were sure of a royal shoot. Of course, Arthur quickly developed the fever in its most malignant form, and supplying himself with one of Lawrence’s celebrated grass suits and a small vial of Goodley Brucker’s choicest distillation of maize, he took the first train bound for McPaul. Before arriving at the station Webby thought he would have a little fun with the natives by donning his grass suit before leaving the Pullman, and he put it on. Major Mustard was not at the depot to meet him, and A.J. started across the fields to his place. He got along swimmingly until about a mile from Mustard’s ranch, when he had to cross a large pasture in which were quietly feeding two or three hundred innocent looking Texas steers. Suddenly the cattle caught sight of our guileless friend and in his grass suit evidently mistook him for a moving haystack. They started for him, and suspecting their designs, he cut a beeline for the nearest barb wire fence. The wild bovines snorted and reared in the enthusiasm of the chase, and noting that they were rapidly overhauling him,



Frank Lawrence, a Chicago sporting goods dealer, not only marketed “grass suits” but also grass panels for use as portable blinds as early as the mid-1890s; an early-day equivalent of today’s “Fast-Grass” type blind panels.

Webber dropped his \$150 Lefever and let out a few more links. Major Mustard saw him coming and started to the rescue with a pitchfork. A.J. beat the steers to the fence by a small margin, but alas, got tangled up in the wire. Major Mustard, however, was on hand, and the ex-police clerk was landed in a graceful heap on the safe side sans his gun, grass suit, duck call, hat and Brucker’s bottle. He also lost his handsome solid brass Waterbury gold watch, and for a time Webby was mad enough to bite a rail in two with his teeth. He says he’ll never go hunting any more, anyway not

until after the Texas steers have all winged their way north.” Why the idea of three-dimensional, personal camouflage vanished with the Lawrence grass suits and did not reappear until decades later is anyone’s guess. Today, ghillie suits can be purchased in a variety of materials, designs, colors and patterns matching about any setting except a cocktail lounge; and a hunter can again go afield dressed as the “Grass Man from Borneo,” as Griswold once described one of his hunting companions wearing a grass suit. ■

“Sky Carp”

Persecuted for being too successful?

Text and photos
by Jon Farrar



I started writing this article several times and each time knew I wasn't writing what I wanted to write. I had spent too much time reading everything in two, too-fat file folders I had built on snow geese over the years. I assembled 23 pages of notes lumping like material from many sources – not transcribing the actual information, just where I could find it. I photocopied all the articles that have been in *NEBRASKALAND* about how snow geese are destroying their Arctic nesting grounds because there are too many of them, the first one published 20 years ago. All the same information has been published in countless other publications, both technical and popular. I finally realized there really isn't anything new to write about the “lesser snow goose problem” unless something dramatic happens – a massive die-off due to a disease such as avian cholera that reduces the population by half and solves the problem; or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) deciding to hire thousands of people every year to step on snow goose eggs, with animal rights groups sacking the Department of the Interior building in Washington D.C. in protest. A crisis persisting for 30 years seems to be less of a crisis.

What I really wanted to write is that snow geese are incredibly beautiful and mysterious creatures. It breaks my heart to see them so devalued, classified as vermin to be eradicated, and sport hunting should not be about killing as many as possible to save the environment. We all know why sport hunting was the tool chosen to attempt to bring the population back in balance – it was the most palatable solution.

I am not suggesting we should stand idly by and let nature take its course; that we do not bear a responsibility in regulating the size of some wildlife populations. That was forced upon us because we have so intensely modified where these wild animals have always lived to the detriment of some, driving them to extinction or nearly so; in other cases benefiting a species by providing for them in abundance, as we have snow geese. We have provided food in our grain fields, corn and rice in particular, and we have provided

sanctuary in wildlife refuges. Snow geese are adaptable because they so readily modify their habits to capitalize on changes in their environment. In that way they are much like us. There are too many pairs of snow geese on traditional Arctic nesting grounds, they are destroying a part of the natural environment they, and many other species, require and so the size of their population must be reduced. Should we apply the same logic to New York City or Los Angeles – too many breeding pairs of humans per square mile? This

comes from thousands of real birds; or as corpses tossed in a pile to stand behind and have a photograph taken with while holding your unplugged, semi-automatic shotgun. I know snow geese are not such reprehensible creatures that it is morally acceptable to cut away the breast meat from those already killed and grind their naked breast bones down into the loose soil of a cornfield to use what is left of the corpses to lure more of their kind when a hunter already has more birds than he can eat or give away. Yes, I have killed



A gregarious species, most people only see snow geese as swarms over wetlands or grain fields. Up close, they are marvelous creatures.

sort of thinking, frankly, is too big and complex on too many levels to even contemplate. There are no simple answers.

What I can comprehend, albeit sketchily, are my own times with snow geese. It mostly has been me pitted against the snow geese, but in a different way than were I carrying a shotgun. It has been a photographer trying again and again to be smarter than snow geese, to fool them just long enough to make photographic portraits. In the course of all those attempts over all those years, I came to see them as more than masses of white specks in the sky too smart to come down to massive decoy spreads and electronic callers simulating the incredible babble that

snow geese with a shotgun, and yes, I enjoyed the hunts because I was hunting with others who also admired snow geese as more than targets, hunters who did not gauge the day's success on the body count. And I enjoyed eating them, including the legs.

I cannot really say when I saw my first snow goose, either passing sky-high during migration or dead in the hand. In Platte County, where I grew up, I have no memory of snow geese, although they surely passed overhead unnoticed. I do not recall any hunter there ever shooting a snow goose, but likely it happened now and then. My point is that in those days, the 1950s and 1960s, snow geese in Nebraska were essentially birds of the Missouri

River Valley. That was probably not always the case, as there are pre-1900 hunting accounts of snow geese being exceedingly plentiful on the Platte River as far west as North Platte. Probably even then, though, the Missouri River Valley was their major migration corridor both spring and autumn. Relatively few snow geese were shot by Nebraska hunters during the first half of the 1900s, even along the Missouri. All that changed beginning in the 1960s, as refuges along snow goose migration routes provided sanctuaries. By the 1970s, snow goose hunting along the Missouri was good enough that private and commercial shooting setups sprouted up like asparagus shoots in the spring. It was along the Missouri in the early-1970s that I came to know snow geese.

I first attempted to photograph snow geese in 1975. I wanted photographs more personal than the massive flocks rising up or landing that can be made from a car window. It was a humbling experience. They are not easily had, in part because they seem to do almost everything in masses, so there is not

just one pair of eyes searching for danger behind every clump of grass, but thousands.

Long before autumn migration reached Nebraska, I dug a small, shallow pit on the west bank of the neck-shaped, manmade lake on the Plattsmouth Wildlife Management Area (WMA) just below the mouth of the Platte River. The refuge was subsequently renamed Schilling WMA in memory of Randy Schilling, a game commission biologist who later managed the refuge and died in an airplane crash while surveying deer. On the advice of the refuge manager, I dug my pit near the north end and built a two-foot-high dome of arched willows covered with chicken wire, burlap, little bluestem and fireweed. I first sat in the blind for about eight hours on November 17. The bird’s normal daily pattern was to move off the lake (which was at the center of the area where hunting was not allowed) at first light and move into grain fields on or off the refuge to feed. By mid-morning they began returning to the lake to loaf away the midday before moving out late in the afternoon to feed again.

On my first day in the blind, the geese gathered in mid-lake. I made no photographs, but was impressed. The refuge manager estimated there were about 162,000 snow geese on the refuge, and if he was right it was a record number. I had never seen so many waterfowl in one place. I was young and my field notes gushed and strained trying to describe the spectacle: “A thousand geese are absorbed into the resting birds without noticeably swelling it. The exhilaration of the sight distorts one’s judgment.” My hastily scrawled field notes were laced with words like “awestruck” and “incomprehensible.” I wrote: “There is a swelling roar of thousands of wings from the north, a flock rising up from the cornfields. The geese barely cleared the dike and fill the northern sky, their shadows running down the dike and disappearing at the water’s edge, like lemmings marching to the sea.” Never mind that I had never seen lemmings marching to the sea – I had fallen under the snow goose spell.

I sat in that pit blind for five days without exposing one frame of film. I was too stubborn to move to the snow

The Lesser Snow Goose is probably the most abundant of all the geese of this continent.
– *The Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America* by Francis H. Kortright, 1941

geese. I stayed in the pit even after a cold front passed and the northern end of the lake froze over. I tried baiting, spreading ears of corn on the ice in front of my pit, hoping to lure a few birds within camera range. But why would they come? Their bellies were full of corn when they returned to the lake. They wanted water, and the open water was at mid-lake.

Still, I could watch them through the 500mm lens, and write more notes: November 18, 1975 – “New arrivals generally dip for two or three drinks, ladling up water, and after are occupied with preening. They rise up on the water to flutter and vigorously shake their tails. The splashing of the water sounds as if as many frisky children were just liberated in a swimming pool. There are chases as one goose trespasses within the personal territory of another, especially if the transgressor is an immature drifting too close to an adult.

Some geese are so vigorous in their splashing that they completely submerge, only to pop up four or five feet from their starting point. Some do quite respectable somersaults, pivoting end over end at the water’s surface.”

The estimated number of snow geese on the refuge grew to record high of 172,000 birds. By November 28, after three days with high temperatures never rising above freezing, the number of snow geese on the area dwindled. I continued to make no photographs and write more notes: “Even though a scant 35,000 geese remain, it is an impressive spectacle as new birds tumble from the sky into the grain fields just ahead of the already feeding geese. From this distance the feeding birds lose individual integrity. The flock of slaty-blue and white is like a rush of water sweeping across the field. An additional 100,000 birds could hardly heighten the scene.”

That day I hastily constructed a cornstalk blind on the edge of unpicked corn bordering picked corn, hunkered down and watched the geese feed. Even though there was more corn in the unpicked portion of the field, the birds were reluctant to enter it.

“Several immature snows walked nervously along the rows. One spied a dangling ear of corn inches higher than it could reach with its neck fully stretched. Several times it fluttered up and grasped the ear with hopes of dislodging it or some of its kernels. One low-hanging ear was immediately seized by an immature snow goose. For several minutes the prize belonged to it alone. It raked the ear with its open bill more efficiently than I would have imagined possible with a bill designed for digging succulent roots from the earth. Within minutes the cob was half bare and only half-a-dozen kernels had fallen to the ground. These kernels and



During their time in Nebraska, snow geese gather on wetlands overnight, not moving to grain fields to feed until first light.



At one time the blue-phase snow goose, above, and the white-phase, below, were believed to be separate species. They are, however, only color phases of the same bird.

the bobbing cob drew a crowd of five other immature geese that challenged the first goose for the corn. Squabbles erupted and feathers were pecked. A mature blue approached, extended its neck and pulled at the back feathers of the immature that had temporarily managed to dominate the ear of corn. The young goose relinquished its claim without challenge and the adult bird

feasted without interruption.”

I stubbornly sat in my pit blind for two days in early-December and neither day were geese close enough for photos. At the end of the afternoon of the second day, while the geese were in the fields feeding, I dug a new pit at mid-lake and moved the dome cover. The next day, the snow geese let me have my way with them, but ever so briefly.

December 4, 1975 – “Arrived 8:30 a.m. Mid-lake open but with slush ice. Clear with light south breeze, expected to reach low 50s. 1:45 p.m. – 10-15,000 geese returned to lake, put in 100 yards north of me. Within five minutes the water in front of my blind was filled with geese. Behaviorists be damned! These geese are ‘happy’ to return to the water now their bellies are full of corn. They side-slipped and careened more than seemed necessary to fall from the sky to the water. Each bird followed nearly the same ritual once on the water. First dipping their generous necks to drink, raising their heads slowly to allow the water passage to the gullet. The skin and short feathers below their mandibles throbbed as the water passed. They dunked their heads repeatedly and then vigorously shook the water from their feathers. Some birds flipped completely over, their head and neck underwater with only plump bellies and kicking feet above the water line. All this cavorting was followed by long preening sessions. Not a feather escaped their attention. Some birds, it seemed to be predominantly adults,



There have always been intermediate plumages between white-phase and blue-phase snow geese, as seen in this “blue goose” with a white breast, but they have become increasingly common as the population swelled and breeding colonies became less distinct.

climbed onto the three-foot ice shelf in front of my blind, only a broom handle away, to finish preening their belly feathers. Shot film as fast as I could reload, and 15 minutes after the birds came, they lifted off in a massive eruption.”

Since those days I have recorded, in a simple and unscientific way, my times with snow geese, scrawled pencil notes in my field diary from here and there. The spring after my days with the geese at Schilling, my affairs with snow geese moved to the Rainwater Basin of south-central Nebraska. Most springs I spent some days on wetlands there, and some springs many days. I continued to track the course of the mid-continent snow goose population, stuffing ever more reports and surveys into my snow goose file folders.

In 1974, the USFWS estimated only 15,000 snows were in the basins at the peak of spring migration. The snow geese liked what they found – state and federal wetlands managed for migrating waterfowl, including pumping of water as needed in the spring, surrounded by grain fields as far as the eye could see. The increasing use of the basins by

snow geese during spring migration in the 1970s was incremental, so gradual as to nearly escape attention, but in a crude way my sporadic and piecemeal notes traced it.

In the spring of 1976 I spent most of my time photographing on wetlands in Clay County, on Harvard Marsh Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) in particular. Almost all of my notes mentioning geese are of Canada and white-fronted geese. By 1980, my notes suggest a preponderance of dark geese, but snow geese were on Massie WPA in significant numbers. During the early-1980s, snows were largely restricted to the eastern half of the Rainwater Basin, the western half having almost entirely Canadas or whitefronts. My field notes from Massie WPA in early-March 1981 paint an uncertainty in my estimation of the abundance of different species of geese – from “Impressive numbers of snow and blue geese” to “My impression thus far is that whitefronts are the most abundant of geese, a tossup between Canada and snow geese.” And I noted that white-phase snow geese far outnumbered blue-phase snow geese. Because of the location of their Arctic breeding

grounds, the blue-phase snow goose had traditionally migrated in greater numbers through the Mississippi Flyway. I shot aerial photographs of some of the larger wetlands on March 6, starting with Harvard Marsh WPA just before sunrise. Later that morning I wrote: “Large number of snow geese on both Harvard and Massie. Roughly estimate that 25-40 percent is snow geese.”

In March 1981 I had another milestone experience with waterfowl, snow geese among them. I spent the late afternoon and early evening on Massie WPA in Clay County building a pole blind. I hoped to photograph ducks and geese, frame-filling portraits as at Schilling WMA in 1975. It was dark by 6:20 p.m. when I finished covering the blind with three-corner rush and cattail, but I stayed for over an hour, sitting in a 10-foot johnboat in the dark in the middle of the marsh. It was as close as I have come to having a mystical experience, as if I had been accepted into the natural world, but my rational mind told me it was only because it was too dark for the birds to see me. Excerpts from my field notes:



Snow geese may pair for life or until one of them dies, so probable pairs are seen together during autumn and spring migration.

“Once dark, there was an uninterrupted movement of ducks and geese returning to the marsh. Canada geese landing only 15 yards from me. Pintails and baldpate whistling overhead, searching for their place in the marsh for the night. And the sound, ah the sound, beyond description, of so many ducks and geese so close, overhead and sorting out their affairs in the darkness. The scene is beyond what can be expressed in our inadequate language. To be in a marsh. The rich, stagnant fragrance of the marsh. The gray sky. Drizzle on the neck. Squads of snow geese and courtship flights of pintails. The scene cries out for description yet defies it. A glimpse back to our origins, a closeness to life other than our own, as if we belong somewhere, finally belong somewhere. A scraping away of the veneer, a fleeting sight of the core.

“Snow geese hover overhead, forced earthward by heavy gray clouds, alive with talk. Ghosts of the marsh, portending the passing of their kind in this place? Their passing indistinct against the soft rain. Could they tell of days when wings filled the skies over marshes now gone? Days when only wild sounds could be heard?

“7:10 p.m. – Ducks and geese continue to return to the marsh, mud-laden feet from feeding in fields hanging heavily under them rather than stringing gracefully behind. All around me are small splashes of water as mud falls from their feet.”

The second week of November 1985, I was returning to Lincoln from Crawford. On the night of November 7, a cold front had pushed south out of Canada, leaving 10 to 12 inches of snow on Nebraska’s northern border. Ahead of it had been what in olden times was called the Grand Passage – a day or two when waterfowl push south en masse. Many ducks and geese went only as far south as necessary to find open water, and that was most of Nebraska. Snow geese were reported statewide in places where it was rare to see flocks even pass over. That was what I saw driving diagonally across the state – snow geese feeding in fields where I had never seen them before. Former Nebraska Game and Parks Commission waterfowl biologist Joe Gabig estimated, based on reports from

across the state, there were about 542,000 snow geese in Nebraska in the days after the storm, in addition to an estimated 300,000 at DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge on the Missouri River. The estimated fall flight of mid-continent snow geese at that time was three million. Some biologists speculated the snow geese had been pushed westward from their usual migration corridor by the storm.

Snow geese had discovered the Rainwater Basin prior to 1985, but that aberrant fall migration may have accelerated their use of central Nebraska, particularly Rainwater Basin wetlands, and contributed to a westward shift of their spring migration route. Whatever the reason, there were dramatic changes in the mid-continent snow goose population during the 1980s. In the spring it became more likely to see snow geese migrating from east to west across southeastern Nebraska, from the Missouri River to the Rainwater basins in south-central Nebraska, than north through the Missouri River Valley. Fall snow goose hunting along the Missouri River began to dwindle.

In the 1980s a red flag was raised about the burgeoning mid-continent snow goose population. A USFWS survey in the late-1960s estimated a North American wintering population of about 1.2 million “snow geese.” By 1982, the population was estimated at 1.7 million. A report issued in 1982 suggested the mid-continent snow goose population was exceeding the carrying capacity of some breeding colonies and causing permanent damage to tundra vegetation. Snow geese were also pioneering inland and establishing nesting colonies where they had never been known to nest before. The winter count crossed the two million mark in 1991, and the 1995 estimate was 2.7 million. More and more snow geese that had traditionally migrated through the Mississippi Flyway began using the Central Flyway.

The Central Flyway Management Plan for Mid-continent Snow Geese set a target of reducing the breeding population to between 800,000 and 1.2 million birds. Biologists decided the most socially acceptable tool to do so was to increase the legal kill by hunters. So beginning in 1986,



Blue-phased snow geese use to be more common in the Mississippi Flyway. Today they are equally common in the Central Flyway.

snow goose hunting opportunities have been incrementally liberalized – longer seasons and shooting later in the spring, unplugged shotguns, electronic callers and unlimited daily and possession limits.

Waterfowl biologists believe that in 2001, the bulk of the mid-continent snow goose population, an estimated seven million snow geese, was in Nebraska’s Rainwater Basin at one time. Today the mid-continent snow goose population is estimated to be between three and five million birds and growing at about six percent a year. The number of Ross’s geese, a

similar but smaller species of goose, has increased as well. At best, liberalized hunting has only slowed the increase in the size of the mid-continent snow goose population.

The last time I was close to snow geese was in 1995 on a Rainwater Basin marsh. Again I watched them through a small glass rectangle on the back of a camera; a single bird sometimes filling the viewfinder. They were not a swarm, not a flock, certainly not a mid-continent population. They were individuals – preening, drinking rising up in the water to shake cornfield

dust from their pinions. Some seemed to be paired for the nesting season. And just as happened in 1975 along the Missouri River, several snow geese crawled onto an ice ledge so close to my blind that I could not focus on them, preened, and then thrust their grinning bills into feathers between their folded wings, their eyelids blinking and then closing. They were not “sky carp.”

I understand the necessity of reducing the size of the North American snow goose population, that their overabundance is not only destroying their nesting habitat in the

Arctic, but those of numerous other species. I have no argument with game management officials pulling out stops to try and accomplish that as humanely as possible, in ways acceptable to as many people as possible. All I wanted to write, to turn an old cliché on its head, is that it would a shame if we can not see a snow goose for its flock. While the nearly incomprehensibly large masses of snow geese are what most of us see most of the time, seeing snow geese only as a mass of winged organisms steals away knowing them as individuals. Snow geese deserve greater admiration than that. ■

A Photographer's Journal

February 10, 2010

Text and photos by Michael Forsberg

ANYONE WHO HAS SPENT considerable time in a blind no doubt has a spectacular wildlife story to tell. Maybe it was the October teal hunt in the Nebraska Sandhills when a small flock of “white pelicans” circling high above turned into a family of whooping cranes that landed on a sandbar 50 yards away. Perhaps it was hearing a distinctive “rubble rubble rubble” while laying out a goose set in the half-light of a foggy dawn on the North Platte River before a family of otters materialized out of the mist and swam through the decoys just feet away from the hunters placing them.

These true stories, retold by people I have met, are just two of thousands of intimate wildlife encounters that we who cherish the outdoors have experienced. They underscore why wildlife and being in the outdoors matter – not because they are nice stories, but because they represent an indelible part of who we are and our natural heritage here on the wide prairies we call the Great Plains. For me, such an experience happened on the banks of a prairie slough connected to the Platte River.

It was early-February on the cusp of spring, the time when huge numbers of waterfowl begin pushing through Nebraska on their way north up the Central Flyway. I had fashioned a small

blind out of prairie grass and garden fence that sat on a high bank just feet away from the slough that led to the main river channel. Fed by powerful springs and protected from the north winds by surrounding prairie, this patch of water had been a magnet for wintering mallards most of the winter. Whenever I had a chance, I would slip off to the blind late in the afternoon while the ducks were feeding elsewhere, lay out a small sleeping bag and pad, get organized with my camera gear, food and water, and wait.

When the ducks would come back, as they always did right before dusk, I would have about a half hour to photograph (if I was lucky) before I could no longer see. Then I would quietly settle in for the evening, slide into the sleeping bag, and under a red headlamp eat a sandwich, read a book and sleep to the night murmurings of greenheads and the cracks and groans of ice giving way on the main channel.

In the morning the ducks would wake me well before dawn. I would quietly sit up and look out of the coffee can lid-sized opening in the blind, set my camera in place and wait till it was light enough to photograph the huge rafts of ducks that had settled in overnight, huddled together for safety and warmth just feet away.

Usually the ducks would mingle and

preen without incident, then leave in waves about an hour after sunrise to feed. Sometimes, however, an eagle would fly high overhead and the whole roost would blow out quickly, or a harrier in its low, loping flight would trace the winding slough and scatter small groups of ducks at right angles.

This particular morning there was a ruckus on the water just around the bend from my blind. Blocked by prairie grass, all I could see were ducks rising up in flight. They weren't blasting off the water in terror, though, like when an eagle flies through – they were leaving almost agitated, their voices scolding like they were being shooed away.

Then the scattering of ducks stopped. A moment later I heard movement in the grass and footsteps coming that halted just outside the blind. There stood a white-tailed deer, steam rolling off its coat. It looked up and down the slough, then went down to the water to drink. Another deer followed. Then two more arrived, then another and another. Six total, each in succession, came to drink.

The mallards that had roosted right in front of my blind had swam away but were still in clear view. The deer, now all standing ankle deep in the water, turned their attention to the ducks and slowly began to walk toward them. As they got closer their speed picked up



A band of white-tailed deer approach a flock of mallards before giving chase in a wetland slough along the Platte River.

and they began chasing the ducks out of the slough like my dogs chase squirrels out of our yard and up the trees.

Once all the ducks had been chased out near the point, the deer kept going and disappeared around the bend. For the next few minutes all I heard was splashing and quacking, with ducks continuously taking off from the slough until the deer either ran out of birds to chase or stopped where the slough met the deeper river. I couldn't believe what I just saw.

Just when I thought it was over, I heard splashing again coming toward me. The deer had turned around and

started chasing each other. Racing back around the bend, they retraced their steps until they were right in front of me again. They hopped and jabbed and kicked their feet and chased each other in circles, playing in the water. They would take off in a full sprint and race down the slough, out of sight, and back again. Finally, played out and tired, they stopped, took a final drink, walked up on shore and disappeared into the prairie from whence they came.

There are times as a still photographer where you really wish you had a video camera. This was definitely one of those times, because the pictures really don't

do justice to what I witnessed.

But I do have a bundle of photos to show that the story is true. And more importantly I have the experience, which I will never forget and in my mind's eye, like all of us who revel in the outdoors, will only get better with age. ■

To see a slideshow of additional images from this day, visit the March issue at [Nebraskaland Magazine.com](http://NebraskalandMagazine.com).

To see more of Mike's work, visit www.MichaelForsberg.com.



One More Month

By Jeff Kurrus

That's what many ice anglers are thinking right now. While they will not necessarily pray for snow and ice, they will kneel down asking for a few more days below freezing. This is their "go" time, their favorite season of the year, and they hope to take advantage of it while many of their outdoor counterparts huddle in their homes.



A lone ice angler cuts his first hole at Summit Lake SRA near Tekamah. Photo by Jeff Kurrus



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

To watch a true ice angler is special – one can never appreciate the preparation that it takes to catch fish through the ice until they see a hardwater expert at work. Seasoned ice anglers cut multiple holes along depth changes and underwater structure, carry as many lure choices as most fly-fishermen, and have more rods than most bass anglers.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Above: An ice angler at Merritt Reservoir watches a series of bobbers.
Opposite, top: Black crappies glow orange in an angler's bucket at Harlan County Lake.
Opposite, bottom: The serious ice angler's best friend is his Vexilar, which reveals fish much like an open-water depth finder.

One also can learn how to concentrate from an ice angler, who is able to recognize seemingly insignificant taps as bites while jigging and watching multiple bobbers in a series of holes around him. The ice angler, much like the open water angler, is always questioning if he is in the right location, fishing the right depth, the right structure, with the right lure. He is not merely staring into a hole in the ice, hoping something bites his offering. He expects a bite if he has cut this hole, and will readily move to a new spot on a pair of crampons or a 4-wheeler if he thinks fish can be had elsewhere.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Above: While sometimes a lonely pursuit, ice fishing can also warrant social gatherings, as seen by a group of anglers at Pelican Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge. Opposite: Beautiful panfish are prevalent when ice fishing, as seen by what will be a very tasty bluegill.

Most of the time, ice-fishing is a lonely venture. Even friends who fish together are often housed in different “shacks,” words crossing their barriers only when a fresh cup of coffee is needed or a fish has been caught. However, during those last few weeks when most of Nebraska is still under a foot of ice, daytime temperatures begin to warm and melt the last good times of winter away for this group of anglers. But these are also some of the season’s best times, as anglers finally emerge from their shelters, engaging in conversations with old and new friends alike as parties erupt on the ice and discussions about augers, vertical jigging techniques and the beautiful colors of fish through the ice abound. ■

SURVEY SAYS...

Text and photos by Jeff Kurrus

...a lot, as far as a fishery is concerned. Anchored in science, fish surveys are an invaluable part of fisheries management and provide both short- and long-term estimates regarding the health of a water body.

“How’s the fishing?” and “Catching any?” are two of the most asked questions heard on any of Nebraska’s approximately 500 public fishing waters. A better question, however, would be “How healthy is this fishery?” Each spring, summer and fall, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission fisheries biologists attempt to answer this important question

as well as they can, but it’s not always easy.

Numerous factors can affect the dynamics of a fishery – summer and winterkill; overharvest; drought and floods; and too much or not enough aquatic vegetation. Needless to say, maintaining a quality fishery is a difficult process and without constant attention many fisheries would be negatively affected.

In Nebraska, much of this attention begins in the form of fish surveys. Commission fisheries biologists essentially conduct two types of surveys. The first, and simpler, method is an angler survey that is used periodically to try and determine how many anglers are accessing a given body of water, how many hours they are fishing, and how many fish are they catching. This information is then compared to data from past years to help biologists determine whether any changes need to be made to management practices in place for that particular body of water.

Complementing that type of data are the annual netting surveys conducted on many of Nebraska’s lakes and reservoirs. These surveys, based in scientific theory and empirical data, provide consistent methods for analyzing a fishery’s health.

Because not all fish use the same type of habitat, however, no single netting technique can be used to capture and analyze all fish species. Therefore, this article will define the three different fish surveying techniques commonly used in Nebraska – electrofishing, trap netting and gill netting – and how they are used by fishery biologists to help provide better angling across the state.

ELECTROFISHING

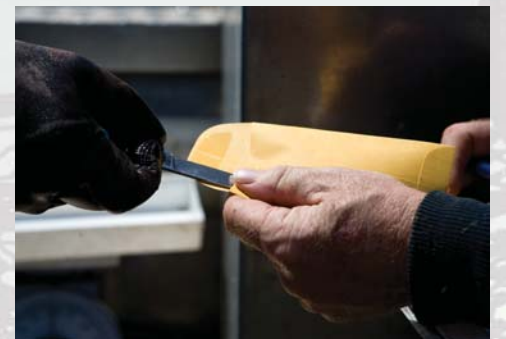
Electrofishing is a fish surveying method that uses electricity, specifically DC current, to induce temporary paralysis in fish within the current’s field. “Physiologically, shocking is hyper-stimulating muscles,” said Daryl Bauer, Commission Fisheries Outreach Program Manager. “The electric current will attract fish to a certain extent, and once the fish are within the current’s field, they get tetanus, meaning muscle contraction, forcing them to float to the surface.” The fish are then netted into a livewell on the “shocking” boat, where data is taken by the boat’s crew, usually a two-person assignment.

Despite being in an aluminum boat, the crew is protected from the electrical current by their rubber boots and gloves, as well as the size of the electrical field. The size of this field depends on water chemistry and the gear’s settings, but generally would extend as much as 10 to 30 feet around the front of the boat and as deep as 6 to 10 feet.

This particular survey strategy is primarily used for black bass species, including large- and smallmouth bass, because of this species’ propensity for shallow water. “This gear is effective in shallow water, usually 6 foot or less,” said Commission fisheries biologist



When surveying, scales are taken below the lateral line and at the tip of the pectoral fin from a subsample of fish.



These scales are then placed in a labeled envelope for later analysis.



The scales are placed on a clear plastic slide and examined using a microfiche reader, microscope or similar device.

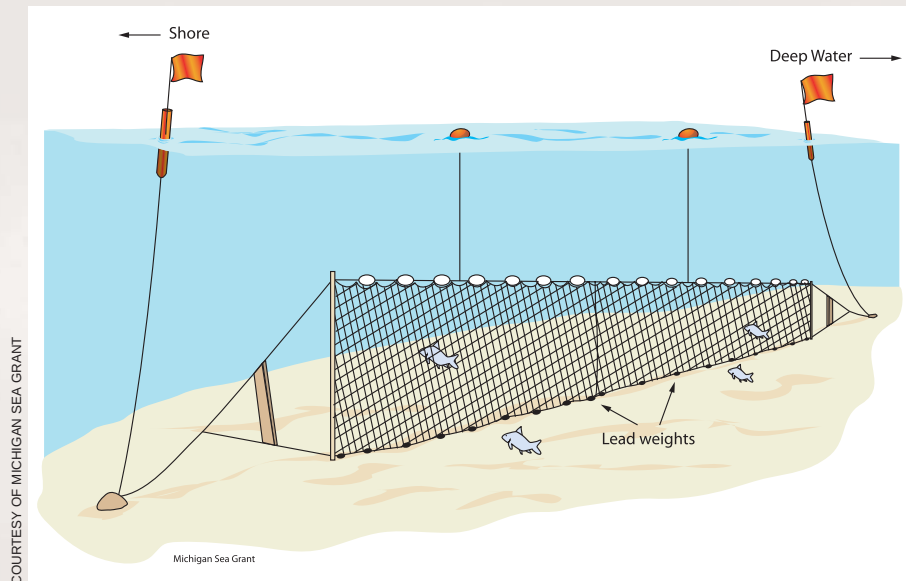


Biologists analyze each scale to determine the age and growth rate of the scale’s donor.



At Prairie View Lake near Bennington, Commission fisheries biologist Larry Pape and conservation technician Lindsey Richters prepare to electrofish just before nightfall. Electrofishing is a survey technique primarily used to analyze black bass populations.

PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL



Anchored perpendicular to the shore by surface buoys and lead lines, a gill net hangs like a curtain beneath the water. Made of monofilament line very similar to fishing line, the netting has holes of various sizes that ensnare fish when they attempt to swim through it. Fish usually become trapped when their gillcovers go through the hole in the net and the fish are unable to move forward or backward.

Larry Pape. “We run our stations right down the shoreline in bass habitat.” Stations are determined by either the length of an area surveyed or the time spent surveying. By standardizing the lengths and times, biologists are able to compare data from year to year in an effort to make appropriate management decisions regarding a body of water.

Those decisions start, as with all of the techniques mentioned here, with the number and sizes of the fish surveyed. “We’ll set management objectives that may state,

similarities, trap netting constitutes an entirely different method of fish surveying.

Trap nets are used primarily for bluegill, crappie and perch. Bluegills are targeted from late spring through early summer, crappie during the fall, and northern pike and yellow perch in the early spring. Trap nets are also occasionally used to capture walleye, such as when biologists use them during the spring walleye spawn at Merritt Reservoir in order to collect eggs for stocking efforts in other lakes across the state.

A trap net works by allowing fish to catch themselves: “Any fish that swims down the shoreline will hit a barrier net, eventually funneling them into the frame net where they can’t escape,” said fisheries biologist Jeff Schuckman. To keep variables as consistent as possible, trap nets are set during the evening and pulled the following morning. “At times, I’ve seen an entire net completely filled up,” said Bauer. “I’ve seen so many fish that two men couldn’t pull the net into the boat.”

Once in the boat, length measurements are taken and, just like electrofishing, scale samples are taken and weights are measured on a subsample of fish. “When taking scales and weights, we want to take a few fish from each length sampled, from the smallest to the largest,” said Bauer. “We will take, say, five fish per centimeter group.” By taking scales from fish of various sizes, Commission biologists are able to analyze the

various year-classes of the fish surveyed to determine their growth rates.

“If growth rates are declining at a water body,” said Bauer, “then water quality could be deteriorating, habitat isn’t strong or there is a potential competitor, such as gizzard shad, causing problems. These measurements don’t tell us exactly what is going on in a water body, but they do provide a few puzzle pieces and give us ideas of how to adapt.”

Just like electrofishing, fish are released back into the water unharmed, providing fisheries biologists with another technique for gathering reliable fish data while also keeping fish alive.

GILL NETS

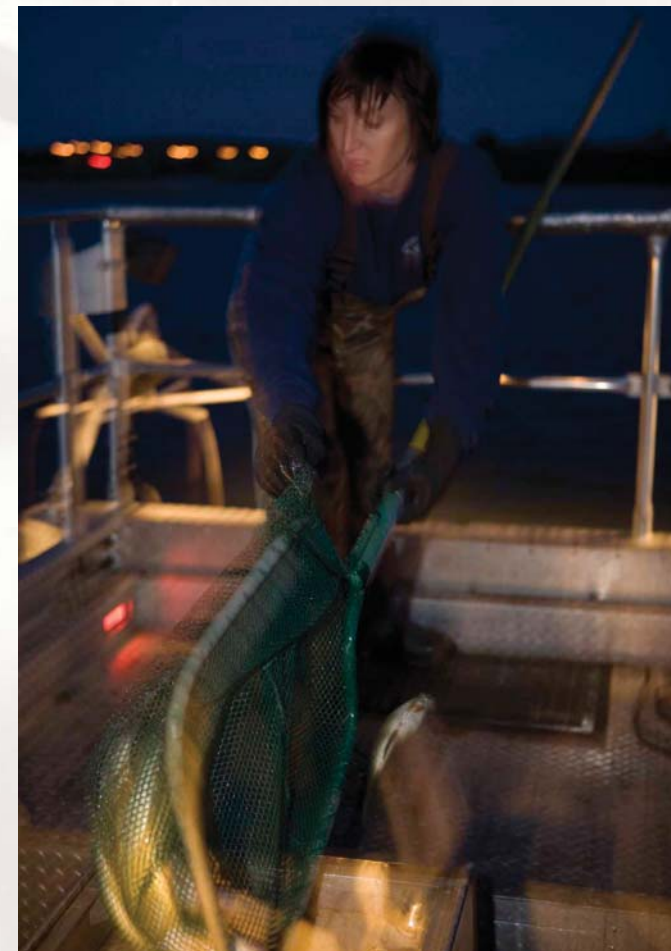
These hanging, deepwater nets, are suspended in the water column through the use of weights on the bottom of the net and floating buoys on top (see graphic on page 42). Gill nets are used to gather data on fish prone to using deeper, more open water, such as walleyes, wipers, channel catfish and white bass.

Measuring eight-feet-tall, these curtainlike mesh nets entrap fish that try to swim through them. “Our mortality rate is significant,” said Bauer, “but for these species there are no other ways to collect population data. We may kill 100 walleyes during a survey from all the gill nets set, but there are a lot more walleyes going to the cleaning station on Memorial Day weekend at a number of lakes – these fish are a very small amount of the population and give us invaluable data.”

Gill net stations, much like trap net locations, are marked by GPS coordinates to increase consistency from year to year, and nets are set for a consistent amount of time in an attempt to standardize effort.

When these surveys are analyzed collectively, Commission biologists are able to better determine the health of a particular fishery by analyzing each species’ recruitment, growth rate and individual year-classes. If you walk into Bauer’s office any time of the year and ask, he’s quick to hand you a copy of all the years of data that he and the rest of the fisheries biologists have processed. Even if you don’t ask, he’ll probably still tell you some places throughout the state where fish can be found

Fish surveying methods are guided by a science decades in the making, as seen in these fish surveying “manuals” known throughout the fisheries community.



Richters drops a group of largemouth bass into an electrofishing boat’s livewell. Biologists often survey fish at night because many species are more vulnerable to capture at that time.

and he may even point you to the Commission’s latest “Fishing Forecast” where anglers can look at color bar graphs to see which lakes have the most crappie and which ones have the biggest bass. Bar graphs that are remembered during those late afternoons and early mornings where the most common question asked of survey crews is “What are you doing?” Quickly followed by, of course – “Catching any?” ■



Commission fisheries biologists Jeff Schuckman (left) and Phil Chvala pull a trap net from the water last spring at Overton Lake southwest of O’Neill.



Crane Viewing Rules of Thumb

Here's a few tips to enjoying one of the world's greatest wildlife spectacles.

By Kristen Friesen

As the first of a half million cranes arrive here each spring, we Nebraskans respond to their familiar calls by flocking to our favorite viewing grounds. Some of us prefer to get up close and personal in blinds a mere 50 yards away from the birds, while others are content to carry binoculars and chase gravel roads that hug the Big Bend Reach of the Platte River. Either way, observance of the following rules of etiquette is sure to enhance crane season for all.

- Dress appropriately. Since the cranes' annual spring migration comes

on the heels of winter, experts suggest you wear warm boots, wool socks, mittens or gloves, an insulated hat, a warm coat, and yes, your long johns, if you plan on sitting in an outdoor blind. Avoid bright or light-colored clothing – dark clothing blends into the scenery and is less obvious to “flighty” cranes while going to and from blinds.

- Pack the right gear. Binoculars, spotting scopes, cameras (without the flash) and video equipment are all good to have on hand, but leave your flashlights, handheld games and cell phones at home. If you're well intentioned but forgetful, put a piece of dark tape over your camera's flash

so it doesn't automatically go off as the sun begins to set.

- Come prepared. Those satisfying their hankering for crane-viewing seldom make it home in time for supper. Pack plenty of quiet snacks and a thermos of hot cocoa.

- Be courteous. Most of the fields cranes use for feeding are private property, and while most Nebraska's farmers and ranchers are happy to have these winged friends as dinner guests, don't assume you're invited as well. Please refrain from trespassing and using or blocking private access roads as well.

- Be safe. When cruising I-80 or

various county roads known for spectacular crane-filled landscapes, it's not enough to sport an “I brake for cranes” bumper sticker. Try not to brake suddenly, slow down significantly or stop anywhere along bridges. Obey the rules of the road, pull off to the shoulder and turn on your hazards for the sake of other drivers and yourself.

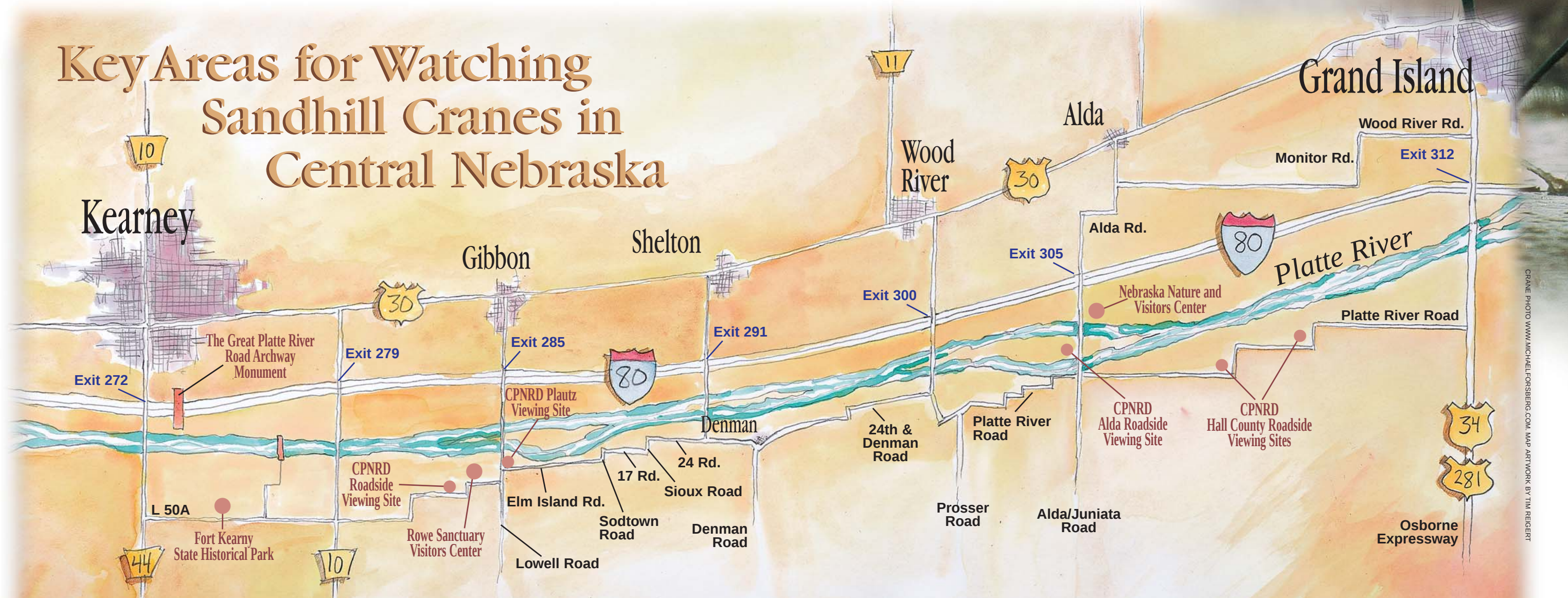
- Be quiet. If your seat-warmer has finally kicked in, you may prefer to sit in the coziness of your own car while viewing cranes. Many veteran craniacs insist that once the birds get accustomed to a vehicle's presence, they'll often approach. Imagine turning your family sedan into a wildlife blind on wheels! Whatever you do, don't honk, wave your arms or slam your car door. Remember – harassing the cranes is illegal.

- Keep a friendly distance. Cranes are wild creatures that are actually

hunted in other states, so they're understandably wary of humans. Never try to approach a crane – trying to sneak up on one will not only incite a mass exodus, but will also make you very unpopular among the rest of the nearby crane-viewing community.

- If necessary, find a babysitter. As a courtesy to your fellow crane enthusiasts, consider whether the pint-sized members of your party have the interest, ability and stamina to remain quiet without making a lot of movement while visiting a viewing blind or bridge. If not, find someone to look after them or stick to watching the cranes from your own vehicle. The good news is, the cranes will be back again next year! ■

For more information about viewing sandhill cranes, visit www.ngpc.state.ne.us/wildlife/guides/migration/moreinfo.asp.





The Prairie Fawn Lily

A look at one of spring's first splashes of color.

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

The harbinger of spring in my backyard wildflower garden is the prairie fawn lily (*Erythronium mesochoreum*). In late-March or early April the lily's pair of lanceolate leaves and developed flower thrust through the soil, followed by rapid elongation of the flower stalk and blossoming. The single, nodding, inch-long white flower blooms attractively for about a week, opening each morning and closing in the coolness of evening.

As its name implies, the prairie fawn lily is native to moist tallgrass prairies. Its range includes southeastern Nebraska and extends eastward to Illinois and southward to Texas, but due to the loss and degradation of native grasslands, the prairie fawn lily is now rare in this state and elsewhere.

Other common names of this flower include midland fawn lily, white trout lily, dog's-tooth-violet, star-strikers and midland adder's tongue. The names fawn lily and trout lily are derived from the mottled leaves of some *Erythroniums*, which resemble the spotted flanks of these namesakes. The name dog's-tooth-violet is a reference to a European *Erythronium*, whose root is said to resemble a dog's tooth. I'm clueless as to why it is referred to as a violet, which it is not, and to the origin of the name star-strikers or midland adder's tongue.

The prairie fawn lily is a perennial with a deep-seated corm (an underground, bulblike portion of the stem). The corms on young plants can produce downward-growing structures known as "droppers" that form new corms at the tip, which may explain the deep-seated corms of mature plants. The fleshy leaves emerge directly from the corm, grow to about six inches long and up to an inch wide, are partially



Native to moist tallgrass prairies of southeastern Nebraska, the prairie fawn lily is a harbinger of spring.

folded and have pointed tips. Young first- and second-year plants consist of a single leaf and don't flower.

The flowers are bell-shaped to spreading when open. Characteristic of the lily family, the flower parts are in threes – three white petals that become tinged with pink, purple or blue with age, three virtually identical sepals, six large yellow stamens and three stigmas. The fruit is a three-angled capsule up to an inch long. Under the weight of the developing capsule, the flower stalk arches to the ground and the ripe seed is deposited directly onto the soil. Fawn lily seeds have a white, oily appendage known as an elaiosome designed to attract and be eaten by ants. While foraging the ants disperse and possibly plant the seed.

Our state's second *Erythronium*, the white fawn lily (*E. albidum*), grows in

oak forests in far eastern Nebraska and is distinguished from the prairie fawn lily by its up to two inch wide, flat, more ovate, mottled brown leaves. Also, its petals and sepals are strongly reflexed at flowering and the stalk remains ascending when bearing fruit. The white fawn lily spreads vegetatively by stolons (above-ground creeping stems like those of strawberries) and often forms dense, matlike colonies on the forest floor.

The corms and young leaves of assorted *Erythroniums* are purportedly edible, either raw or cooked. In his 1912 book, *Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region*, ethnobotanist Melvin R. Gilmore wrote that Winnebago children ate prairie fawn lily corms raw "with avidity when freshly dug in springtime." The bulbs are said to be crunchy with a mild flavor, but a slightly bitter aftertaste. Contact with the bulb apparently can cause a skin rash in some individuals. The prairie fawn lily has no known medicinal value.

Various fawn lilies are cultivated as ornamentals and both Nebraska species are easily grown from seed. My prairie fawn lilies originated from the seed of wild plants collected for a prairie restoration. I scattered the seed, covered them lightly with soil and hoped for the best. From this original seeding several plants germinated and over the years have spread, rewarding my efforts. Digging and transplanting wild plants is discouraged due to the species' rarity, and few native plant nurseries sell prairie fawn lily seed or plants, although white fawn lily plants are more readily available.

For many prairie enthusiasts the flowering of the prairie fawn lily is a portent of spring, a sign that winter is at last over and more blooms will soon arrive. ■

PHOTO BY GERRY STEINAUER

What Else Do We Do?

By Eric Fowler

Living up to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's mission – stewardship of the state's fish, wildlife, park and outdoor recreation resources in the best longterm interests of the people and those resources – keeps the agency's staff busy with a multitude of projects each year. Here are some highlights of a few that are complete, underway or will soon begin.

Parks

- A four-year project to remodel and update all 34 standard floor plan cabins at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park (SP) began last winter. The biggest change will convert an outdoor screened porch to interior living space, creating a great room. Work will also include installation of new carpet, heating and air-conditioning units, satellite television and a Murphy bed in each cabin. Depending on the amount of funding available, the Commission hopes to complete work on eight or nine cabins each year until the project is complete.

- A new equestrian campground will open this summer in Area 2 at Branched Oak State Recreation Area (SRA). The facility will include 15 camper pads with electrical hookups, horse stalls and a ramp that will allow disabled riders to easily mount a horse.

- The final seven of 15 new mini-lodges will open at Ponca SP this spring. When finished, these ultra-modern cabins and two green cabins will complement the 14 rustic housekeeping cabins that have been welcoming park visitors since the 1950s.

Wildlife

- A two-year study will look at how spring snow goose hunting regulations, participation and intensity affect the behavior and distribution of snow geese and other migratory bird species in the Rainwater Basin. The results, combined with hunter surveys, will help managers determine if changes to regulations are warranted.



Don Cook of Bellevue and his daughters, Amanda (right) and Eliana, fish at Lake Ogallala last summer. Growth rates of the lake's rainbow trout following a Fall 2009 renovation have been good, with a few reaching 19 inches and 15- to 18-inch fish common. The renovation was conducted in conjunction with a project that lowered the lake level for planned repair and maintenance work by NPPD and CNPPID.

- Surveys of bats in Kimball County, the Wildcat Hills and the Pine Ridge began last summer and will continue this year. Biologists know little about the state's bat population, much of which is migratory. The study is using nets and new ultrasonic recorders to capture and/or identify bats in order to better understand the species found in Nebraska, how many of them breed here in the summer, their migration corridors and the timing of their migration. This information will be used to help guide the siting of wind farms, which have had major impacts on bat populations in some locations in the country. If the recorders work well, they will be used to learn more about bat populations in other parts of the state.

Fishing

- Aquatic Habitat Program lake restoration projects are set to begin at several lakes this year. Arnold and Victoria Springs lakes will be drained and deepened, have their outlet structures repaired and be restocked with game fish. At Willow Lake in Brown County, a barrier will be built to keep rough fish out. When complete, chemicals will be used to kill the existing population, which is currently dominated by rough fish, and the lake will be restocked. The

Commission is also working with the Corps of Engineers to remove sediment from Gremlin Cove and Patterson Harbor at Harlan County Lake to improve fishing there.

- Boat ramps have been built on the west and middle lakes at Mormon Island SRA. None of the three lakes on this SRA at the Grand Island Interstate 80 interchange offered boat access before now. An access road and parking lot south of the swim beach will service both ramps. While the west lake was renovated in 2010 and won't produce keeper-sized fish until 2013, the middle lake was renovated in 2005 and is providing excellent fishing for bluegill, largemouth bass, crappie and channel catfish. Boats will be limited to 5 mph.

- Plans are taking shape and work might begin this year on a 6- to 8-acre backwater on the Missouri River at Indian Cave SP. While the park has more than four miles of riverfront, the waters of the channelized Missouri are swift and not conducive to fishing. The proposed backwater project, which will be built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under its Missouri River Recovery Program and completed below the park's boat ramp, will provide slack water more inviting to both anglers and fish. ■



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◀ This picture was taken in July 1955 on Clyde Golder's ranch near Crookston. My mother, Kathleen Popken Edwards of Fremont, is feeding a bottle to a fawn whose mother was hit by a train. She and my grandmother, Loretta Golder Popken, cared for the fawn for a few days, only to hear that it ended up with the same fate as its mother.

My grandmother, grandfather and mother often visited the Golder ranch in the summertime, as Clyde was my grandmother's cousin.

— Alex Edwards, Elkhorn, Nebraska



▲ This picture was taken in Alliance on opening day of pheasant season 1967. Pictured are Gary Bussinger (Bassett) and his dog, Rosie; Kenny Bussinger (Bassett) and his dog, Lady; John Klatt (Ainsworth); and my father-in-law, Gerald Bussinger (Alliance) and his dog, Jiggs.

All four got their limit of roosters hunting north of Alliance. The area remains rich in roosters.

— Steve Merrill, Piedmont, South Dakota



► My dad, Owen Waechter, with a buck taken during the 1966 Nebraska deer season near Denman along the Platte River. Notice the absence of hunter orange! My father has hunted in every modern-day deer season in Nebraska, except for the first year and a year in the early 1980s when he didn't draw a tag. He is now 76 and anticipating next year's season just as he has the last 50! We still get together and pheasant hunt each year. My son, nephew and many of the friends I grew up with feel fortunate that Dad was there to take and teach us about the outdoors. This has given us countless hours of enjoyment and fulfillment. Thanks Dad!

— Jay Waechter, Topeka, Kansas

◀ I am a native of Ponca (six generations of my family are buried in the Ponca Cemetery). This photo was taken by my father, Oscar Peterson, in November 1936 on the Missouri River near Ionid Bend, northwest of Ponca and northeast of Newcastle. Pictured is Max Auge, from Ponca, a friend of the family and hunting companion to my father, and my uncle, Harry L. Peterson.

— Jim Peterson, Vermillion, South Dakota

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