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information, visit
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Cover: A juvenile drake wood duck stands on a log next to a hen woodie at Holmes Lake in Lancaster County.

CHRIS MASADA

This page: Indiangrass sunrise at Lincoln Creek Prairie near Aurora.

CHRIS HELZER

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magazine

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Snapping turtle eggs are round and leathery and resemble ping pong balls. In Nebraska, young turtles will hatch between August and October.

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MID-SEPTEMBER SUMAC

Smooth sumac provides early fall color at the Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve.

CHRIS HELZER



Hope, a Labrador retriever, watches the sky during a teal hunt in the Rainwater Basin. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

TEAL ESSENTIALS

By Todd Mills

For many, the opening of teal starts the beginning of hunting season. Use these tips for a good start.

Scout Early and Often

Several years ago I showed up on the opening day of teal season to hunt a series of potholes I had scouted a month earlier but, to my detriment, had never returned to scout closer to my hunt. When I walked to the hole, it was bone dry. During late summer and early fall, water tables can change rapidly. Take time a couple of days before your hunt to make sure you have water and birds. Check Rainwater Basin water tables if you're hunting that area at OutdoorNebraska.org/waterfowlchecklist.

Equipment Check

Hunting teal brings a series of challenges that you won't face later in the year. Make sure you have your list ready before you start and don't forget the following items.

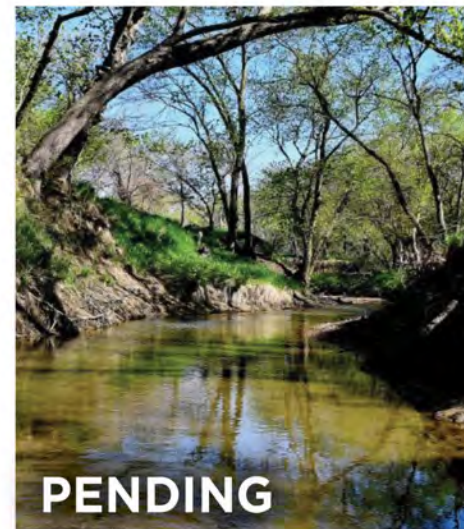
- Bug spray — Mosquitoes can be nasty that time of year.

- Portable chair — You don't need a great hide when hunting teal, so a comfortable, low-profile chair works in most walk-in areas,
- Plenty of shells — I've learned this one the hard way. Don't underpack on bullets as teal can be challenging to hit. Keep your shot size at 4 and 6 with hi-speed velocity.
- Camo — Think green this time of year. Anything brown and you'll stick out from the surrounding vegetation.

Retriever Check

If you use a retriever, and I hope you do, make sure you've taken time to get them in shape before the season starts. Temperatures can be high, and finding teal in heavy vegetation can be challenging even with a dog. Retrieve downed birds quickly if possible to avoid too much scent in one area. And if at all possible, work them into the wind. Teal can be shifty when crippled. If you're not using a dog, well good luck. But remember, taking birds home that you've downed is always essential.

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A double rainbow decorates the sky above the Republican River west of Indianola. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

SEEING DOUBLE

By Martha Shulski

Roy G. Biv — my make-believe weather friend that helps me recall the colors of a rainbow. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet are the colors in this spectrum and also their order of appearance.

Rainbows represent optical phenomena that are a function of time and place. They also require just the right combination of atmospheric water droplets, sunlight and viewer perspective. Often they are a nice conclusion to a passing rain shower.

Similar to a prism, water droplets suspended in the air both reflect and refract sunlight, separating the wavelengths enough so we can see white light's colorful display. The angle of reflection when visible light goes through water droplets is 42 degrees.

Red is the longest wavelength in the visible spectrum and bends the least; violet is shortest

and bends the most. Position is everything with these charming optics, as the water droplets must be in front of you with the sun's illumination to your back.

Sometimes you are fortunate to see a secondary rainbow positioned above the primary, and typically brighter, rainbow below. This second bow is simply due to one more bounce of sunlight in the water droplets. The extra reflection causes the light spectrum to exit drops at a 50 degree angle. It also results in a reversal of colors with red on the bottom and violet on top.

Next time you are treated to a bright rainbow, look slightly skyward to perhaps see double.

Martha D. Shulski, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is the director of the Nebraska State Climate Office.



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Eastern bluebird at Pawnee State Recreation Area in Lancaster County. CHRIS MASADA

MISSING BLUEBIRDS?

By Joel G. Jorgensen

If you think you are seeing fewer eastern bluebirds in 2021, you are not imagining things, and you are not alone.

Eastern bluebirds are familiar, popular and, usually, fairly common songbirds that inhabit many of Nebraska's rural landscapes in summer. Even when not enjoyed visually, a male bluebird's cheery song is a delight to the ear. Eastern bluebirds declined during the mid-20th century, in part because of competition for nesting cavities from introduced European starlings and house sparrows. Nest-box campaigns that began in the 1960s and 1970s have helped bolster bluebird numbers. The species has increased by about 2% annually in the state since 1966, according to the national Breeding Bird Survey.

So, what happened to bluebirds in 2021? Harken back to the intense February cold spell. That extreme and unusual weather event descended from Nebraska all the way south into Texas and Mexico and remained in place for an unusually long period. Eastern bluebirds are a semi-hardy species that does overwinter in Nebraska in small numbers, but adequate food resources are essential for fending off chilly temperatures. Bluebirds become vulnerable to extremely cold weather when food resources are limited, and, presumably,

this susceptibility surfaced this past winter.

While a complete picture of their dramatic decline in 2021 may not be fully understood for some time, initial estimates and anecdotes suggest numbers may be down more than 80%. It is also too early to be certain whether other factors may or may not have contributed to the decline.

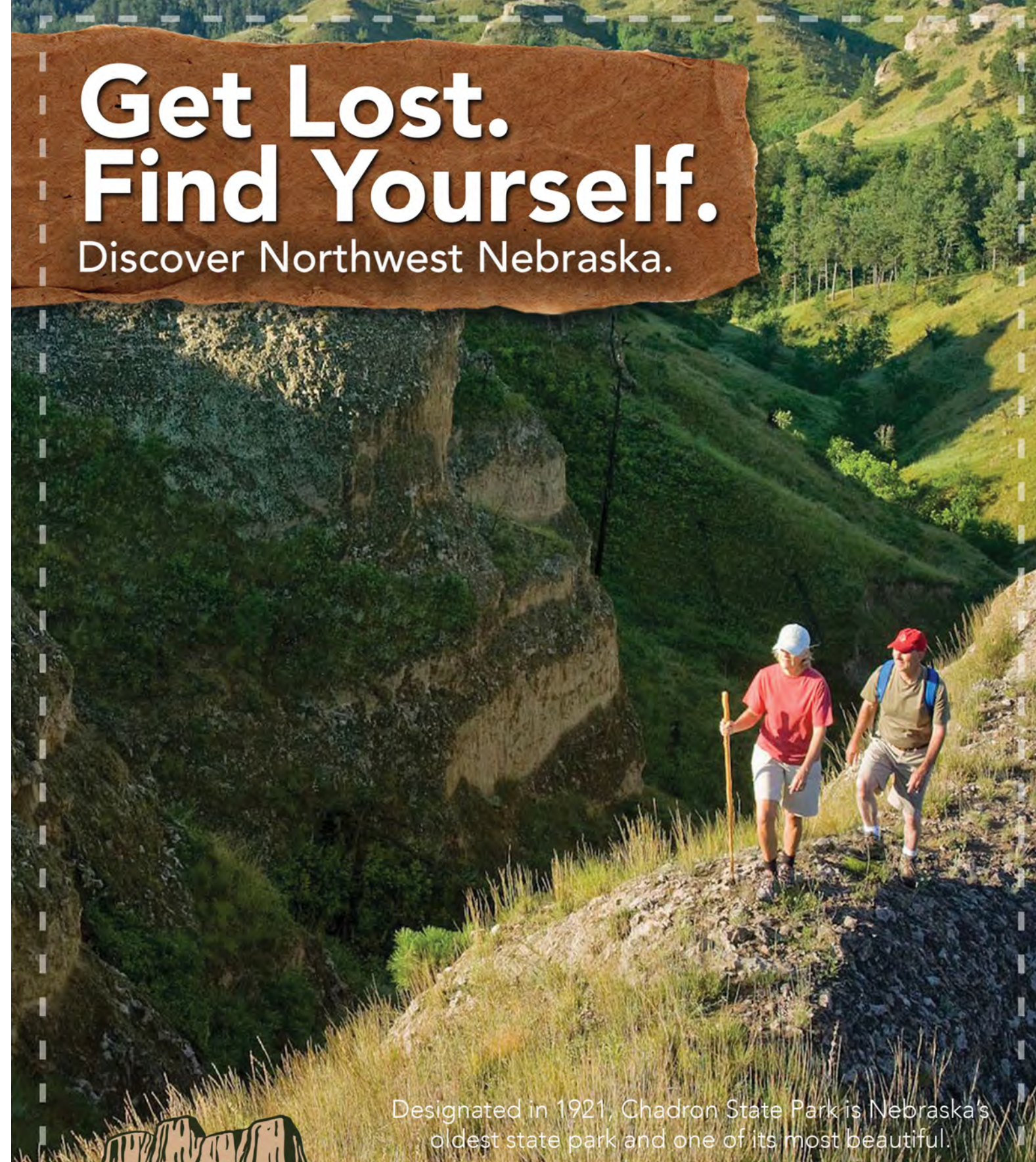
The absence in many places of such a delightful avian species is disappointing. Long-time bluebird enthusiasts with Bluebirds Across Nebraska have stated they have never seen a steep drop in numbers like this one. These observations are not just limited to Nebraska, as similar reports have come in from nearby states. Furthermore, several other species that overwinter in the southern U.S. and summer in Nebraska, such as eastern phoebes and tree swallows, also appear down.

The 2021 decline in numbers of bluebirds and other species requires attention going forward to ensure some other factor may not be affecting these birds. Even if the cold spell is the sole culprit, it likely will take several years for eastern bluebird numbers to recover.

Joel G. Jorgensen is the Nongame Bird Program Manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

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Participating students in the Trout in the Classroom program release the fish they have grown from eggs in their classrooms into the canyon ponds at Schramm Park State Recreation Area. **JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND**

LEADERS IN CONSERVATION — DIRECTOR JIM DOUGLAS AT THE FOREFRONT OF EDUCATION

By Jeff Kurrus

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has been known as Nebraska's source for conservation and outdoors participation, particularly hunting and fishing, since its beginning. However, Jim Douglas, director of the Commission, saw a need to connect people with nature at an early age in ways that went beyond traditional hunting and fishing activities.

Over time, the agency has become a nationally known leader in outdoor education for its variety of opportunities for those of all ages. From outdoors skills workshops and nature events in parks to educational programs such as Aquatic WILD and bioblitzes to count wildlife in wild spaces, Nebraskans have an outlet to develop a passion for nature. But what really places the education team at the forefront of conservation nationwide is its focus on education curriculum, and so in 2020, Douglas created the Fish and Wildlife Education Division.

This builds upon the work Lindsay Rogers completed with Lincoln Public Schools. Rogers, who now leads the education division, contacted Dr. James Blake, then LPS K-12 science curriculum specialist, about Project WILD, a program that provides conservation and environmental curriculum to educators.

From there, Rogers and her team began working with LPS on a revision of the district's entire science curriculum. This partnership was a necessity, Blake said, as Game and Parks staff worked with all 40 elementary schools and more than 900 teachers who needed science training.

"We were blown away by how Rogers made science so

approachable," said Blake. "It was like having a commercial publisher at our fingertips, and she had pieces to get kids excited about the natural world." So far, more than 18,000 students have been affected in the district alone by this division's creation.

One of these curriculum pieces is the Trout in the Classroom program. Kenneth Pyle, a seventh grade teacher at Dawes Middle School in Lincoln, loves what it has done for his classes. "Many of my students are reluctant to participate in science, but this program gets them interested," said Pyle. Trout in the Classroom is offered to Nebraska second to 12th graders and gives classes the opportunity to raise trout eggs in their classrooms. "From studying water quality and natural resources to the life cycle," said Pyle, "this has been so good for my students."

Dayna Derichs, a teacher and librarian at Wheeler Elementary in the Millard Public Schools system, agrees wholeheartedly. "We have a Trout in the Classroom tank in the library, and students see all parts of the process," she said. Observing these fish leads to discussions about conservation and coldwater streams, and Derichs incorporates technology and books into the experience as well. "We have pre-school kids read to the trout; we have other groups sing songs to them. All the fun things kids do. I'm just so thankful for the funding that comes through to experience this program. We get so many 'oohs' and 'ahhs.'"

And much of this credit goes to Douglas. "He had the foresight to know this was needed for our agency," said

Rogers, "and that this type of education is critical for the future of conservation and our natural resources."

Game and Parks' Jeff Fields agreed. Fields, Douglas and a team of educators created a strategic plan to focus on education from 2020-2024, with goals for science and research, education in Nebraska's state park system, people and their relationships with the state's natural resources and how to sustain them and myriad other topics. "It's a credit to Douglas to know the importance of education moving forward and bringing a group together to form a plan," Fields said. And, in 2024, the vision for education will be re-evaluated and improved for the next generation of educators and participants.

"This plan will evolve to stay relevant for all facets of education within our agency," said Douglas. "To better serve our public, we will continue to grow the knowledge and understanding of our outreach and education programs, which will afford Game and Parks the ability to build conservation-minded engaged citizenry to protect the vested interest of our wildlife and natural places."

While there are several states that devote resources to education, Nebraska remains uniquely innovative in how they administer it. "Helping more people become curious about the natural world and comfortable in the outdoors are our goals," said Rogers.

Yet there remains a crossover appeal to hunters and anglers

as well across multiple platforms, including at Nebraska's state parks. Nebraska's Outdoor Expos, held each year at Ponca State Park and Fort Kearny State Recreation Area, feature a host of outdoor activities including shooting sports, fishing, archery, kayaking, rock climbing, wildlife viewing and a host of other attractions.

These activities are woven together so seamlessly by Game and Parks and their partners that participants feel compelled to visit each activity, whether they regularly hunt and fish or not. "Anytime you encounter people that aren't hunters and anglers and relate them back to what you do, that audience is going to continue to grow," said former Game and Parks Commissioner Jerrod Burke. "Jim has been a great leader here. He's also helped align these outdoor expos with Nebraska's education standards," thus affecting thousands more across the state.

Education remains at the forefront of Douglas's work for the Commission, mentoring our next generation of outdoor participants and their teachers in discovering the opportunities nature has to offer, whether you're wildlife viewing, catching a fish or something in between.



DIRECTOR JIM DOUGLAS



Alie Mayes, community science specialist, shows students jelly fungi found on a bird-watching hike at Two Rivers State Recreation Area. **AMBER SCHILTZ**

Wing Commander

Commission biologist Randy Stutheit's experience evaluating duck wings over the years has helped formulate waterfowl regulations across central U.S.

By Jerry Kane and Shawna Richter-Ryerson



Mallards and pintails cup their wings to land in a Hall County wetland. DOUG STEINKE

By quickly studying a duck's wing, Randy Stutheit plays a role in determining waterfowl regulations and seasons in states throughout the central portion of the country.

But he's been doing it awhile — 35 years — and that experience means a lot in the Central Flyway, which stretches from Canada to Mexico.

Stutheit, a longtime wildlife biologist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, is a “wing checker” on behalf of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It's a small group. In the Central Flyway there are just six. There are another two biologists who check tail feathers from geese.

In the flyway's waterfowl parts-collection survey, which includes a

process called a “Wingbee,” as many as 40 or 50 people crowd into a large room to ID harvested waterfowl. They evaluate duck wings and goose tails in a scientific process of data collection.

Checkers use their expertise to verify the assessments of the less-experienced people working the Wingbee. Enough information is gathered to get a detailed picture of what the waterfowl harvest looked like in states of the flyway during the previous season.

“This is critical data we collect relating to the waterfowl harvest in the Central Flyway,” Stutheit said. “It helps formulate the waterfowl regulations for the next year based on the species composition of the harvest



Jake Heard holds three mallards his dad shot in Cass County. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biologist Randy Stutheit examines mallard duck wings during a mini-Wingbee at the Commission's headquarters in Lincoln. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service collects wings and tails of ducks, geese, doves and woodcock harvested by a random sample of hunters. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

and age and sex structure of that duck harvest. It's pretty meaningful data.”

The Wingbee typically takes place at the Flint Hills National Wildlife Refuge near Hartford, Kansas, each February. Thanks to COVID-19 and the necessity for social distancing and smaller group sizes, the Wingbee this year was parceled into several sites throughout the flyway, including Lincoln.

How it Started

“Bee” is an Old English term meaning, a prayer or a favor. By the late 18th century, it had become

commonly referred to the joining of neighbors to work on a single activity to help a neighbor in need, such as a sewing bee or a quilting bee.

The Service applied that concept when the first Central Flyway Wingbee took place in 1964 in Fort Collins, Colorado. In 1987, the Wingbee moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, then in 1992 to Hartford, Kansas, where it has stayed – until this year.

The Central Flyway includes Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, South Dakota, North Dakota and the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan

and the Northwest Territories. The Wingbee, however, is for the U.S. harvest only. The Canadian Wildlife Service conducts its own monitoring. Wingbees also are held in the other flyways: Pacific, Mississippi and Atlantic.

How it Works

The Service asks a sample of waterfowl hunters, through the Harvest Information Program, each season to voluntarily mail to it a wing from a harvested duck or tail feathers of a harvested goose in postage paid envelopes. The Service determines

the species of each wing or tail that is sent to the Flint Hills National Wildlife Refuge, then packages them individually in bar-coded envelopes.

Until this year, the envelopes would be collected, sorted and stored at the Flint Hills NWR for the Wingbee. This year, after they were sorted and species of the waterfowl determined at the refuge, they were shipped to several sites throughout the flyway, including Lincoln's “mini-Wingbee.”

When individuals evaluate duck wings, they first determine the sex of the bird, then determine if it was an adult or juvenile. They do this by assessing the shape, color, condition

and markings of a duck wing's feathers. The envelope then is marked with that wing's sex and age. The empty envelopes get mailed back to the Service, where a person will scan the barcode to record age and sex.

For geese, species and age are determined; sex of geese can't be determined from the tail feathers. For goose tail feathers, color, length and shape are evaluated. All goose tail feathers were shipped to checkers in Texas for evaluation this year.

Lincoln's mini-Wingbee

Over several days in late January and early February of this year, Stutheit led Lincoln's mini-Wingbee. He was joined by a group of wildlife biologists, wildlife technicians, professors and university students. They evaluated 1,685 duck wings of mallards, northern pintails, American wigeon, blue-winged teal and green-winged teal from across the flyway.

As a wing checker, Stutheit kept a watchful eye over everyone else's work. The data they collected will be used to help formulate waterfowl regulations for 2022.

"It's pretty cool that they just didn't cancel the Wingbee this year because of COVID-19, but that they did choose to go ahead and ship wings and tail feathers out to various experts across the Central Flyway to work on them in our home states," Stutheit said.

While some of the work was done at Game and Parks, other sessions were hosted at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Students in the Waterfowl Ecology and Management class of Dr. Mark Vrtiska, Professor of Practice, at the School of Natural Resources, got to participate.

"I think it's a pretty special opportunity for college students that are majoring in this field to take part in a survey like this," Stutheit said. "You just don't get that opportunity otherwise."

The students get hands-on

experience and much-needed practice identifying ducks.

"What they gain from it is that practice of doing it and knowing how to age and sex duck wings and recognizing you can do it," Vrtiska said. "But part of my waterfowl class has a waterfowl ID component that we'll have a quiz on. It helps them not only just to gain some experience but to help them in their ID of waterfowl."



A drake mallard lifts off from a pond near Hay Springs. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

How Collected Data is Used

The information gathered at Wingbees not only breaks down harvest by species, it breaks it down by state and county. Each wing or tail envelope includes information about where the waterfowl was harvested.

"What this does is break down duck harvest by species composition," said Vrtiska, a former Game and Parks waterfowl program manager. "For example, if it's determined that there are a million ducks shot in the Central Flyway, with this Wingbee, you can determine out of that million birds harvested that there's 500,000 mallards, 200,000 green wings, 100,000 gadwall, etc.

"That data can be useful for looking at trends of where ducks may or may not be harvested. You can break that down by state. In Nebraska, duck

harvest will be about 100,000 birds. We know 50,000 of those birds are mallards."

A Checker's Beginning

Stutheit had been participating in five or six Wingbees when, one year, a checker who was planning to retire noticed his work examining wings.

"He'd been watching how I'd been doing, aging and sexing wings and he thought I was getting fairly proficient at it," Stutheit said. "He asked me if I'd be interested in becoming a checker. I said, 'Oh, yeah, definitely'."

Stutheit and three other biologists from California and Oregon in the Pacific Flyway were then flown to Laurel, Maryland, for training to become checkers. "Really what we did is just look at more wings. The only way to really become good at this is to look at a lot of wings."

He took a test in which he had to correctly identify at least 95 out of 100 wings. "If we did well, we would get a slap on the back, and they would say 'Congratulations, you're checkers!' "

Vrtiska has been to several Wingbees with Stutheit, around 15. He's not an official wing checker, but he has aged and sexed wings and goose tails. He said the comradery that builds among the individuals present results in a familiarity with each other's skills in evaluating wings and tails.

"The checker will know because he's going through everybody's wings at his table and he or she can determine that person isn't missing very many of these wings," Vrtiska said. "There is a little bit of an art – and there is definitely a science to it – but I think the cream rises to the top, and you get to know people who are very good at it. They just don't miss very many."

Stutheit hasn't missed many Wingbees or wings over the years. A very good thing for the waterfowl, whose numbers have remained healthy because of checkers like him. [N](#)

Pilot Duck Program Launches Simplified Regulations Intend to Draw Hunters

Duck hunters in Nebraska and South Dakota will choose between two daily bag limits for the 2021-22 duck season as part of a five-year pilot project designed to grow the number of waterfowl hunters in the states. New regulations approved in March created a two-tier system that all duck hunters will select when registering for their Harvest Information Program numbers beginning Aug. 1. Hunters will be bound to the tier they choose for the hunting season.

How Are the Tiers different?

Tier I is the traditional six-duck limit, with hunters able to take no more than five mallards, of which no more than two may be hens; three wood ducks; one scaup; two redheads; one pintail; and two canvasbacks. Possession limit for the season is 18 ducks.

A HIP number is required for Nebraska hunters age 16 and older and for all nonresidents, no matter their age.

As usual, a random selection of hunters will be required to send in a wing from some harvested birds, per federal collection efforts to estimate harvest.

Tier II is a three-duck limit, with no species or sex restrictions. Possession limit for the season is nine ducks.

All hunters wishing to register for Tier II — no matter their age or place of residence — will be required to obtain a HIP number.

These hunters will be given a journal, where they will record information on hunting activity and harvest, and return to Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at the end of the hunting season.

They also will be required to send in a wing from each duck harvested as part of efforts to estimate harvest. Game and Parks will provide the postage-paid envelopes.

What's the Same?

Both tiers will still require all other state and federal licenses and permits.

Are There Any Caveats?

The new tier regulations will not apply to the early teal duck season in Nebraska. Hunters selecting Tier II may hunt teal but must follow early teal regulations: no more than six teal per day and no nontea species.

Why the New System?

The goal of the program is to grow the number of waterfowl hunters into the future. Nationally, duck hunter numbers have fallen nearly 44% — or about 464 hunters per year in Nebraska — since 1990.

A recent survey determined duck identification skills were a major factor preventing potential hunters from coming to the sport.

The two-tier regulations are an effort to combat the problem. The test program will run through 2025, when it will be assessed to determine the effect it had on waterfowl hunter numbers or duck populations.

Duck populations will be assessed annually and over time by comparing wings sent in by those hunting in Tier II to harvests by hunters in Tier I.

For more information on the new program, visit OutdoorNebraska.org/DuckTiers.



Setting a spread of duck decoys at Whitney Lake Wildlife Management Area near Crawford. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Wood-Sorrels

A Burst of Tartness

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

On a hot summer day, I often pop a wood-sorrel's clover-like leaf into my mouth to experience a burst of citrusy tartness. The practice is a long tradition, as for millennia Native Americans have enjoyed them.

Three species of wood-sorrel are native to our state. The yellow-flowered yellow wood-sorrel (*Oxalis stricta*) and gray wood-sorrel (*O. dillenii*) are common, weedy species that bloom spring through fall in lawns, gardens, pastures and other disturbed habitats. The former is an annual to short-lived perennial of eastern Nebraska, while the latter

is a perennial found statewide. The two species are nearly identical in appearance, and even botanists must resort to a hand lens or microscope to distinguish them: gray wood-sorrel has more hairy, gray-green leaves while yellow wood-sorrel has less hairy, green leaves. Botanists once considered them a single species.

Violet wood-sorrel (*O. violacea*) is an uncommon, perennial of eastern Nebraska prairie. This spring-blooming, colony-former has vibrant violet flowers and larger, fleshier leaves than the yellowed-flowered *Oxalis*, which I find more

sumptuous. According to early 20th century ethnobotanist Melvin Gilmore, the Pawnee shared my opinion. They ate its leaves, bulbs, stems and flowers fresh and boiled.

Similar to early American botanists, Native Americans did not distinguish between the two yellow-flowered wood-sorrels. The Pawnee have several names for the plants. One is “skidadihorit,” which means sour like salt. The Kiowa’s name for the plants translates to salt weed, and on long journeys, they consumed the leaves to relieve thirst and perhaps to replace salts loss through perspiration.

The tartness of the wood-sorrels, as well as many other plants such as rhubarb, results from an abundance of oxalic acid in their tissues. In plants, oxalic acid forms salts known as oxalates. In wood-sorrels, the oxalates can be somewhat toxic if consumed in abundance and dissuade grazing by insects and larger animals. If humans consume an excess of wood-sorrels over a period, say as a salad garnish, they can suffer discomfort; a Kansas botanist confessed to having suffered swollen and irritated taste buds.

Please, do not let this dissuade you. Try munching on a leaf or two of *Oxalis*. You will find it refreshing. 🌱



Wood-sorrel seed capsules (foreground) explosively expel their tiny seeds.



Yellow wood-sorrel growing in the author's Aurora garden.



Violet wood-sorrel blooming in a southeastern South Dakota tallgrass prairie. Several Native American tribes used the plant as a medicine. The Cherokee, for instance, made an infusion of the plant that was consumed and used as a wash for children with hook worms.

The Dewy Bug Guy is Back

Story and photos by Chris Helzer

All the photos in this article were photographed on the morning of Sept. 15, 2019, at Lincoln Creek Prairie in Aurora.

When I first started working with Nebraskaland as a college student in the mid-1990s, my nickname among at least some of the magazine staff was “the dewy bug guy.” It was completely fair. A large part of my portfolio, such as it was, consisted of insects covered in tiny water droplets.

At the time, my parents had recently helped me acquire my first macro lens, and I immediately became entranced by insects and other tiny creatures I’d mostly overlooked before. I spent countless hours crawling through prairies, peering at these minute wonders. Unfortunately, that enthusiasm was tempered by the harsh reality that it cost me about 30 cents every time I clicked the shutter on my slide film camera.

If you’ve ever tried to look closely at insects, you know how difficult it is to get them to sit still. Compounding the problem, the plants they’re on are usually waving around in the breeze. That combination means that a strong majority of insect photo attempts result in useless, blurry images. In today’s glorious world of digital photography, those misses are free, so who cares? As a young hobbyist photographer shooting slide film on a budget, however, I literally couldn’t afford many of them.

The struggle was real. However, my life hack, before I knew to call it that, was to restrain my insect photography urge most days and then release it on glorious, late summer mornings when dew covered everything on the landscape. Not only was the light from the rising sun perfect for photography on those mornings, but also the wind was usually calm, or nearly so. Most importantly, the prairie was full of lovely glittering insects that were too cold and wet to jump, fly or crawl away from me.

I was in heaven on those dewy mornings. I could edge my tripod and camera right up to a dragonfly or bumblebee and



7:17 a.m.
**By the time the first
sunlight hit the prairie
on Sept. 15, 2019, I
had already found this
migratory dragonfly
and had my tripod and
camera ready.**

it would just stare at me as I captured its gorgeousness on my pricey slide film. I hardly noticed that my pants were soaking wet and my feet were sloshing around inside my sodden boots. The world was sparkly and still and perfect.

Now, more than 25 years later, I'm still entranced by insects and tiny creatures, but my budget is a little bigger and I can just delete blurry images from the memory card of my camera. I can chase active little critters around on breezy days, pressing my shutter button like I'm sending a telegram, and it doesn't cost me a thing. Sometimes, I even get a good photo that way.

The freedom afforded me by digital cameras and a paying job, though, hasn't lessened my love for dewy mornings and sparkling bugs. During the summer, I still scan weather forecasts daily, paying special attention to cloud cover, dew point and wind speed. When all those factors line up, I set my alarm and arise before the sun so I can be in place, socks already soggy, by the time the first shaft of morning light hits the prairie. Then, I spend a happy hour or so trying to defend my title as "the dewy bug guy." 🐛

Chris Helzer is the Nature Conservancy's director of science in Nebraska.



7:28 a.m.
Another dragonfly (variegated meadowhawk) waits for the sun to warm and dry it enough that it can continue its southward journey.



7:56 a.m.
This male bumblebee had spent the night beneath this native tall thistle flower and endured the presence of my camera.



8:04 a.m.
Dewdrops covered the pollen-filled anthers of big bluestem and other grasses.



8:06 a.m.
Tiny hoverflies were shaking off dewdrops and starting to feed on grass pollen. I watched this one pause briefly in between flower visits to, I assume, scan for potential dangers and wipe stray pollen grains from its legs.



8:18 a.m.
I got distracted from my hoverfly-watching by this Chinese mantis sitting in ambush on a goldenrod flower, waiting for the first big pollinator of the day to stop by.



8:25 a.m.
When I returned to hoverflies and grass flowers, I got to watch this fly feeding on the pollen in this anther like it was an ice cream cone.



8:36 a.m.
This was the last photo I took before reluctantly leaving the prairie on that magical morning. The prairie was drying out, but this milkweed seed had been in the shade until just a few minutes before I found and photographed it.

The Other Ones

Eurasian Collared-doves in Nebraska

By Jarrod Spilger

My first encounter with Eurasian collared-doves occurred 20 years ago when I spent some time down in Houston with my parents. We frequently noticed these “big doves,” as we called them, flying around our hotel’s neighborhood, which was right across the street from the Astrodome. They were much larger than the doves we hunted back home and appeared to be between a mourning dove and a pigeon in size. Shortly thereafter, the big doves started showing up in Nebraska.

According to Birds of Nebraska – Online, Eurasian collared-doves have expanded their range and increased their numbers dramatically in Nebraska since 2000. By 2001, they were residing in many of the larger Panhandle towns.

However, a few were in the state before that. The first collared-dove recorded in Nebraska was at a feeder in Shelton on Nov. 29, 1997, while the first breeding pair was recorded in Kearney on April 22, 1998. Prolific breeders, by fall as many as nine birds were in the Kearney neighborhood.

Since then, numbers have steadily increased, most notably in the west. Christmas bird counts in the winter of 2016-17 reflected a record high of 1,359 Eurasian collared-doves in Scottsbluff, 166 in North Platte, 50 at Harlan County Reservoir, and 33 in Omaha, which was also a new high.

Many may wonder where these doves came from. Dr.

Jeffrey Lusk, former Upland Game Program Manager with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, said they are thought to have originated in India before spreading into Turkey and southeastern Europe near the Balkans. The birds were then introduced to the island of New Providences in the Bahamas in the 1970s, and by the mid-1980s, they had made landfall in Florida.

“By the early 2000s, Eurasian collared-doves had colonized much of the southeastern U.S., including eastern coastal Texas,” Lusk said.

That timeframe correlates to when I saw them in Houston.

The Eurasian collared-doves rapidly expanded northwest and throughout most of the country, except the northeast and upper Great Lakes states, Lusk said, and even into northwestern Canada and down into Mexico and Central America.

“In its native range, studies indicated collared-doves can be long-distance dispersers, which is thought to account for their rapid colonization of the continent,” Lusk said. “They are not migratory, so once they colonize an area, they are year-round residents.”

Habits and Habitats

That non-migratory nature differentiates Eurasian collared-doves greatly from their mourning dove cousins, which are quick to depart the Great Plains at the slightest hint of colder weather. Experienced mourning dove hunters know they must hit the early season hard, especially the first two weeks of September, because birds likely will be gone after just a few chilly nights.

The two species also tend to prefer different habitats. At least one study showed collared-doves do not directly compete or exclude mourning doves from feeding areas, as the two species typically choose different-sized food items. Lusk also has noticed collared-doves do not use the same breadth of habitat types as do mourning doves.

“Collared-doves seem to prefer living in proximity to people, in towns, and around grain bins on farms,” he said.

Indeed, that’s where I shot my two Eurasian collared-doves last year: the first one near an active farm site where I had permission to hunt, and the second near an abandoned barnyard also on land I could hunt. That said, collared-doves can be found in many of the same wild places as mourning doves, just like mourning doves can be frequently found



A Eurasian collared-dove perches near a feeder in Chadron.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

in towns. During the overlapping hunting seasons, I’ll occasionally encounter Eurasians while hunting near a stock pond far from any buildings, indicating there is some habitat sharing.

Hunting

Regardless of where they’re found, Eurasian collared-doves offer Nebraska hunters another hunting option. Game and Parks considers them a non-native species, Lusk said, which is why harvest is allowed year-round. “They were included in the dove season regulations mainly to protect mourning doves from accidental harvest, which is why it is an aggregate bag during the regular dove season.”

The total number of doves of any species that can be harvested daily is 15 during the regular season. During the collared-dove season, there is still a 15 bird daily bag limit which, obviously, must contain only collared-doves.”

The same hunting tactics that put mourning doves in the bag also will work on Eurasians. Staking out a stock pond, harvested wheat field, or flyway in between can all produce doves of both species. Collared-doves also are just as responsive to decoys, both static and spinning-wing, as their mourning dove counterparts. Both species are social and seek out other doves, especially if they think it’ll lead them

to better feeding or watering opportunities.

The best time to hunt collared-doves is probably during the general September/October dove season and into November, although I have bagged them earlier and later as noted. It’s been my unscientific observation that Eurasians tend to “flock up” in late December or early January, disappear for a month or so, and then reappear in late February or early March.

“They’re not migratory,” Lusk reiterated, “but may shift their habitat use seasonally.” Any lateral migration that occurs is likely caused by changing availability of food sources or protective cover during the harshest winter months.

Enjoyable Exotics

As I wrote this, a pair of collared-doves had taken up residence in my backyard cedar tree, likely drawn to my yard by an unlimited availability of straw nesting material in my dog’s kennel.

They may be an invasive species, but Eurasian collared-doves provide Nebraskans with yet another hunting and bird watching opportunity in a state already known for its avian diversity. Although their strange, belch-like calls differ greatly from the peaceful cooing of mourning doves, I still enjoy their presence, both in the field and at home. 



A mourning dove (pictured) weighs, on average, 20 percent less than the Eurasian collared-dove. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

The Wonderfully Named Jelly Fungi

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

Jelly fungi have great names. Some are delicious sounding: jelly drops, orange jelly, golden jelly cone, apricot jelly and black jelly roll. At the other extreme, some are graveyard spooky: willow brain, goblin ear, jelly tongue, Judas' ear and, best of all, witches' butter.

Growing in forests, the appearance of these gelatinous mushrooms ranges from blobs of jelly spilled onto a decaying log, to ears sprouting from a tree trunk, to globs of brain tissue smeared on a branch.

Like other mushrooms, jelly fungi consist mainly of masses of extremely thin strands, called hyphae, that spread unseen through wood and function to digest and absorb nutrients. Their spore-producing fruiting bodies, the mushroom, are the gelatinous blobs.

Jelly fungi are not all closely related, as the gelatinous form has evolved separately in several mushroom families. Whereas typical mushrooms have rigid cell walls, those of the jelly fungi are extremely flexible. When moisture is present, such as during

rainy spells, this flexibility allows the cells to swell with water and expand and the mushroom to produce spores.

During dry conditions, the cells contract to extremely thin, firm sheets, and the jelly fungi shrink into a dormant state. They can swell and shrink several times during a growing season. Whereas typical mushrooms fruit only once a year, the jelly fungi's unique cells allow them to swell and produce spores several times a year, a great adaptation in periodically dry habitats. [N](#)



Whereas other jelly fungi are laden with interesting common names, the poor, neglected *Dacryopinax elegans*, as far as I can tell, has no common name. Collectively, members of the genus *Dacryopinax* are known as fan-shaped jelly fungi, and that name will have to suffice for this tough, yet gelatinous mushroom. Common in North America from the Great Plains eastward, the mushroom's spores develop on the shiny, bald inside surface of the fan-shape, while the fuzzy outer surface is sterile.



The amber jelly roll is also known as willow brain because of its brain-like appearance and because the scientist who first described it found it growing on a willow tree in Germany. This specimen grew on a pin oak branch in Aurora.



Tremella mesenterica, with its buttery color and amorphous lobes, has been bestowed with ghastly common names. Among them: yellow trembler, yellow brain and witches' butter. Even its scientific name translates to the creepy "trembling middle intestine." Shame on those who profess that scientists are a boring lot with no sense of humor.

Appearing spring through fall and even during winter warm-spells, witches' butter grows and feeds on dead hardwood trees, mostly oaks. The mushroom is widespread, occurring on every continent except Antarctica. The name witches' butter originated in eastern Europe where, according to folklore, if you found it growing near or on your door or gate, it was a sure sign that you were under the spell of a witch. Fortunately, the curse could be broken by sticking straight pins into the yellow blob to drain its juices and power.



Firm, yet gelatinous and nearly translucent, snow ear, also called snow fungus and silver ear fungus, is primarily a subtropical and tropical species that strangely also occurs in Indiana, Missouri, Kansas and southeastern Nebraska. Although found on the dead wood of hardwood trees, it is actually a parasite that feeds on the living tissue of other fungi that have infected the wood.

For millennia, the mushroom has been popular in Chinese cuisine and medicine. Foodwise, snow ear has little flavor and is mostly used in soups for its texture and as a thickener. Medicinally, it is purported to boost the immune system, reduce inflammation and embellish the user with clear, beautiful skin.



Sweet osmanthus ear is so named because its shape resembles that of an East Asian Osmanthus flower petal. The mushroom is a common ingredient in the dish Buddha's delight.

Ranging from disc to ear-shaped, wood ear grows on decaying hardwood logs and sticks. In various Old World cultures the mushroom has been graced with the names jelly ear, pig ear, goblin ear and Judas' ear. The latter name stems from the legend that the mushroom was first discovered on the tree on which the biblical Judas Iscariot hanged himself.

Recent DNA analysis has shown that the North American form of wood ear is a distinct species from the identical-appearing European and Asian form. Although a unique species, it would be a disgrace if Americans renounced those wonderful Old World names long ago bestowed on this eerie mushroom.

All photos in the article were taken in oak woodlands at Indian Cave State Park in Richardson and Nemaha counties unless otherwise noted.



Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Whether you like to hunt, fish, visit parks or interact with nature, you can find something to do in August and September. Learn more about the events listed here at Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov. 



Go to a Community Fishing Event

Throughout the month | Various locations

Would you like to learn to fish? Attend a community fishing event, where Game and Parks staff and certified fishing instructors teach the basics to people of all ages who have never been fishing or haven't fished for years. Make sure to bring your fishing permit if you're age 16 or older.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Enjoy fall hunting season

Dates vary | Statewide

Fall hunting season is here at last. Grab your gear and a sturdy pair of boots, and head out to enjoy Nebraska's hunting opportunities this season, which include archery deer, elk, turkey, grouse, dove and teal.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

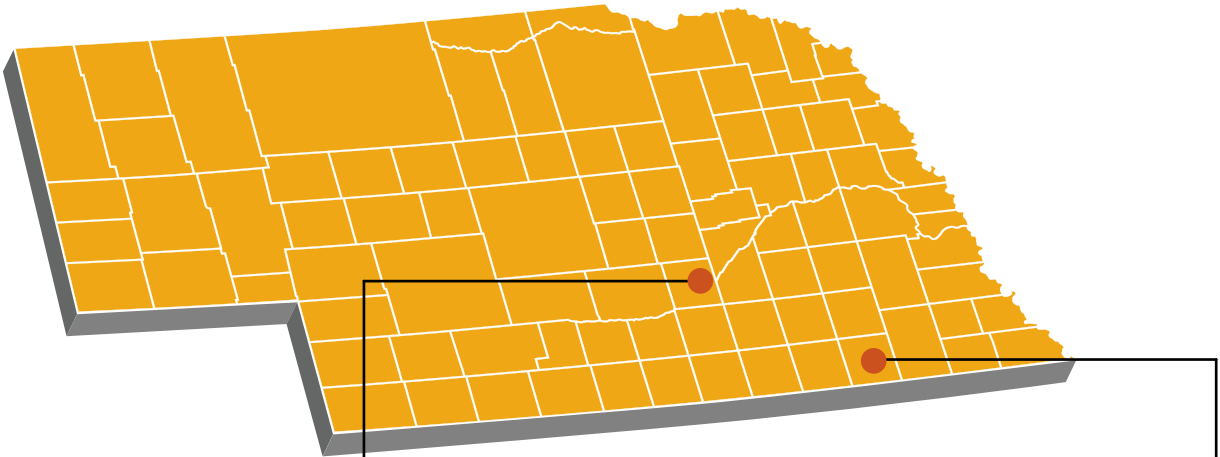


Tag migrating monarch butterflies

Late August through early October | Statewide

Help scientists uncover the mysteries behind the monarch butterfly's epic migration, and tag monarchs as they migrate through Nebraska this fall. Tagging takes just a minute or two — netting the butterfly, recording data, applying a small adhesive tag to the monarch's wings, and releasing it. Learn more at MonarchWatch.org/tagging.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



See Nebraska Game and Parks at the state fair

Aug. 27 – Sept. 6 | Grand Island

The Outdoor Encounter exhibit, located in the Nebraska Building, is one state fair exhibit you won't want to miss. It features a 6,000-gallon tank filled with Nebraska fish, an archery and air gun range, an outdoor playground and activity bags for kids and families.

CHRISTY FIRESTONE, NEBRASKALAND

Attend Rock Creek Station Ranch Life Saturdays

Aug. 21; Sept. 18 | Rock Creek Station State Historical Park

Every third Saturday of the month through October, visitors can get a glimpse of what a working ranch in Nebraska looked like. Reenactors will portray the historic daily life of Rock Creek Station with period dress, interpretation and demonstrations.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Becoming Part of Something Bigger

The Wildlife Conservation Fund

By Renae Blum

The Nebraska state income tax form isn't known for its wildlife illustrations. Yet, tucked on the second page is a small illustration of a peregrine falcon, along with a space to donate to the Wildlife Conservation Fund.

These tax-deductible donations play a vital role in conserving Nebraska's wildlife, said Melissa Panella, Nebraska Game and Parks' wildlife diversity program manager. They form the Wildlife Conservation Fund, which is "one of the primary means

that Game and Parks uses to conserve our species of greatest conservation need," Panella said. "Without it, we wouldn't be able to do a lot of the programs that we're doing."

Since 1984, the Wildlife Conservation Fund has helped the thousands of Nebraska species that are not hunted or fished. It's been behind some of Nebraska's biggest conservation success stories, including the comeback of the North American river otter and bald eagle in the state. It's also funding efforts to protect the



Nebraska's bald eagle populations have recovered with the help of the Wildlife Conservation Fund. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

monarch butterfly in Nebraska, such as milkweed plantings and habitat restoration.

"As much as possible, we would like to prevent the need to list species as threatened or endangered," Panella said. "We also want to recover species so that they may be removed from the threatened and endangered lists."

Nebraska Game and Parks zoologist Shaun Dunn said the Wildlife Conservation Fund is "absolutely vital" to a lot of the work he does, providing support for creatures like insects, bats and snakes that may not attract much grant money or public interest, but are still an important part of Nebraska's native ecosystems. Dunn is currently working on a survey of Nebraska's eastern spotted skunks, trying to get a sense of where this reclusive species still exists in the state. The Wildlife Conservation Fund is helping his team purchase equipment so they can cover more ground.

"Many projects I do are at least

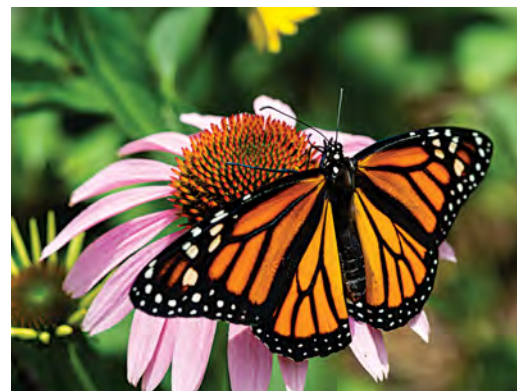
partially funded by the Wildlife Conservation Fund," Dunn said. "It provides support that allows these projects to happen."

The fund also is helping uncover the secrets of another species, the northern saw-whet owl, which is listed as a "critically imperiled" species in Nebraska. Starting in the fall of 2019, Game and Parks biologists captured, banded and released more than 20 saw-whet owls, hoping to determine whether saw-whets migrate in the eastern part of the state.

"We determined that, while still rare, this species does in fact move through eastern Nebraska during a short time frame in late autumn," nongame bird biologist Stephen Brenner said. "These banding efforts, supported by the Wildlife Conservation Fund, greatly expand our knowledge of this species in the state."

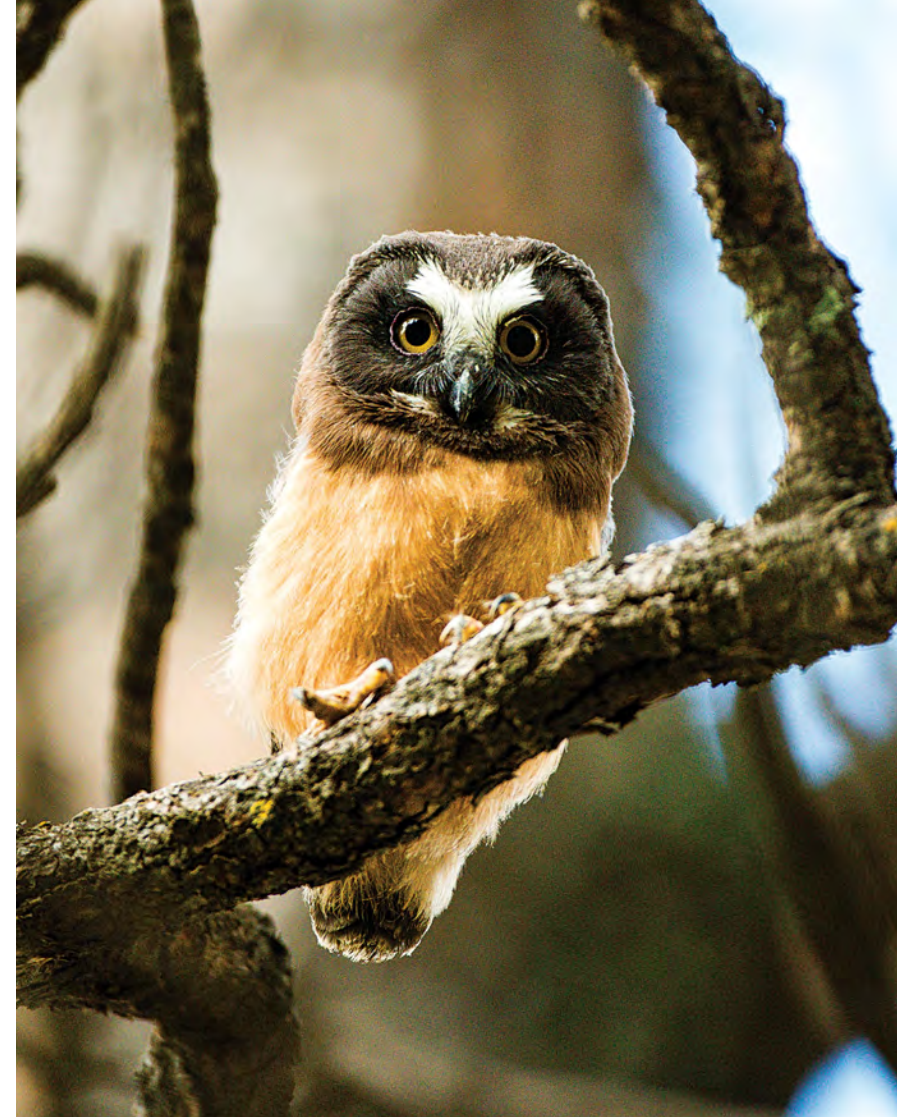
Seeing donations come into the Wildlife Conservation Fund "really impacts me on a personal level," Panella said, "because I realize that the person cares deeply about the issue. They care about Nebraska's fish and wildlife; they want to see threatened and endangered species recover."

And if people didn't care, Panella said, those species could be lost. "It goes beyond just the dollars," she said. "By people making that decision to give a donation to the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund, they're becoming part of something bigger in our state." 



The fund is supporting efforts to protect monarch butterflies.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Banding efforts, supported by the fund, have greatly expanded our knowledge of the northern saw-whet owl. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

How to Give to the Fund

Buy a license plate: Show your conservation pride by buying one of three new Nebraska license plate designs that benefit the Wildlife Conservation Fund. The new plates, which became available Jan. 1, feature a bighorn sheep, sandhill crane and ornate box turtle. Each plate is \$5 or \$40 for a specialty plate.

On your Nebraska tax form: You may choose to donate all or a portion of your tax refund to the Wildlife Conservation Fund when you complete your taxes.

By check: Checks made payable to the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund may be sent to:

Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
P.O. Box 30370
2200 N. 33rd St.
Lincoln, NE 68503

Online: You can always make a donation to the Wildlife Conservation Fund through NebraskaWildlifeFund.org.



Now thriving, the North American river otter was removed from the state's threatened species list in 2020. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Beyond BOW Hunting

Where Skills Are Learned in the Field

Story and photos by Julie Geiser

Women are the fastest growing group of outdoor enthusiasts, and the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman program is a great contributor to this trend. In Nebraska, this program has taken hundreds of women into the field during its 30-

year run, and, personally provided some of my most memorable hunting experiences.

Many occurred during BOW's annual training event the first full weekend in October. This event is packed with three days of learning about outdoor-

related topics including kayaking; shotgun, rifle and muzzleloader shooting; archery; big game and turkey hunting; camping; birding; photography and more.

Women can attend more than one year to learn more about several topics,



Calandra McCool of Omaha, Lisa Citta of North Platte, and Julia Plugge of Lincoln at a Beyond Becoming an Outdoorswoman pheasant hunt at Clear Creek Hunting Lodge in Bartlett.

Kendall Pratt attended a Beyond BOW turkey hunt and harvested her first tom.





Tommi Gobber, Tea Parks and Sophie Gobber learned about Canada goose hunting and downed their first birds during this Beyond BOW hunt.

thus gaining the knowledge, skills and confidence to pursue outdoor activities.

The Beyond BOW program takes women one step further by pairing them with experienced hunters, anglers and other outdoor adventurers, with the hopes they'll later do these same activities on their own. Participants learn how to hunt, where

to hunt, what to wear, and tips and tricks from mentors.

Scheduled seasonally, these trips focus on deer, goose, turkey and upland hunts.

Goose Hunting

Almost every year, a goose hunt is offered as part of the Beyond BOW

program. During this hunt, women learn how to set up decoy spreads according to the time of year, study wind direction and the area that is being hunted and how to call. They also learn about public hunting locations, blinds and camouflage, guns and loads, and how valuable a good dog is when hunting.

And there is plenty of fun to be had,

such as breakfast in the pit, playing in the decoys and the times when birds decoy perfectly and come in range for the shot.

Deer Hunting

The very first Beyond BOW offered was a white-tailed deer hunt in eastern Nebraska. Since then, many

deer hunts across the state have been made available for women to attend.

In deer camp, the women learn how to approach landowners to ask for permission, where to look for deer trails, and which ones to put a stand or blind on. They also are instructed in firearms, ammunition, and sighting in a rifle or archery equipment. Lastly, participants learn about field dressing and preparing meat for processing and the table.

Turkey Hunts

Turkey hunting is a popular pastime for many new hunters as it's easy to find public hunting areas across the state. During these hunts, women learn how to find turkey sign, locate turkeys and where to look for them at different times of the day and season. Instructors discuss archery equipment and shot placement, as well as shotguns, ammunition, and patterning their weapon.

Upland Hunting

Pheasant, quail and grouse hunting

require fast, accurate shots, and, in some cases, a lot of walking. These upland hunts are designed to teach women all the basics and more about upland birds and how to down birds in corn fields and Conservation Reserve Program acres, as well as in the Sandhills.

Attendees learn about their quarry and its behavior, how to take safe shots while hunting with a group of people and dogs, and how to clean and prepare their birds for the table once harvested.

Regardless of the type of hunt, BOW and Beyond BOW participants develop a community of open-minded and helpful people who can be called upon for advice and tips long after their time together.

Nothing compares to seeing the look on a woman's face the first time she downs a Canada goose or shoots her first deer. The thrill and excitement, the high-fives and fist bumps, along with all the other emotions that come through, are so rewarding to those who squeeze the trigger, release the bowstring or teach these skills to a new legion of outdoor enthusiasts. **N**



Tara Sutcliffe and Ronda Cary settle into a ground blind for a late-season deer hunt.



BOB GRIER, NEBRASKALAND

THREATENED AND ENDANGERED: THE MOUNTAIN PLOVER

By Melissa Panella

Some birds just don't behave as one might expect based on their name. The mountain plover (*Charadrius montanus*) is a perfect example of this: a bird you might envision living at high altitudes in the mountains based on its common name, or perhaps strutting its stuff near water like most other plovers and shorebirds, but instead it nests in mixed-to semiarid shortgrass prairies, in agricultural areas, and sometimes in almost desert-like conditions. It finds suitable habitat in western Nebraska, primarily in Kimball and adjacent counties. Each fall, it migrates to Mexico, the southwestern United States, and prairies along the coast of Texas to overwinter.

Mountain plovers are easily overlooked, because the birds and their nests blend in so well with their breeding environment. The male plover uses his feet and chest to excavate a series of shallow, scraped depressions in the ground. He selectively makes them in places he considers prime real estate and may even decorate the scrapes with grass, leaves, and other natural materials he finds nearby. After all his work, a female plover will inspect the selection of nest scrapes. Ultimately, she chooses if the neighborhood offers acceptable amenities to raise a family and if the male plover is a worthy mate.

The female may lay a series of clutches of one to four eggs in multiple scrapes. Her male counterparts incubate the clutches, while she incubates one of her own. Because nests located on the ground are quite vulnerable to predation,

the adaptation of not putting all her eggs in one "basket" increases the chances of more eggs hatching and young surviving.

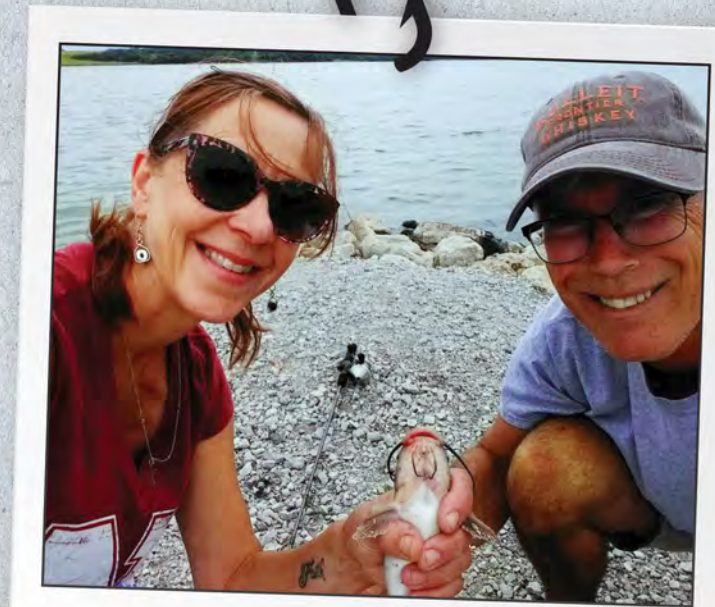
If a nest scrape is successful in hatching, the chicks will be off to the races as soon as their downy feathers have dried off. Quick little feet attached to long skinny legs help the young fluff balls run and hide in order to escape predators and other dangers. The parent plovers assist them in survival until the fledglings grow out their sturdy flight feathers and become completely self-sufficient.

Mountain plovers are a threatened species in Nebraska because much of their grassland habitat has been converted to various agricultural uses. Game and Parks has partnered in the past with Bird Conservancy of the Rockies to build positive relationships with agricultural producers who live and work in areas the plovers use for nesting. This effort raised awareness about the mountain plovers and presented simple steps producers can take to conserve habitat and avoid inadvertently destroying plover nests during regular agricultural practices.

This conservation effort helped to preclude the need to add the species to the federal endangered species list. Awareness, appreciation, and conservation are key to saving the mountain plover of the prairie.

Melissa J. Panella is a wildlife biologist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

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A DOVE TREE

By Ryan Sparks

Part of what makes dove hunting so enjoyable is its simplicity — find a field that doves are using, grab your shotgun, a box of shells, maybe a bucket to sit on, and you’re set. I’ve hunted doves like this since I was a teenager, but in the past few years, I started taking a few decoys along and it has greatly increased my success. Decoys not only bring doves closer to my position but can attract birds from a distance. Here’s how to set up a dove decoy spread of your own.

Be Visible

If you’ve ever watched doves feeding or picking grit on a gravel road, you’ve probably noticed a few doves feeding while others perch above and scan for danger. Placing decoys in an elevated position creates a realistic setup and makes your decoys more visible. Many dove decoys come with clothespins attached to the bottom for clipping on branches or wire fences. Make sure to place them as high as you can.

Sometimes there isn’t a suitable tree for attaching decoys, and even when there is, you can only place your

decoys so high. To solve this problem, I made a simple “dove tree” that I can place wherever I want.

To make a dove tree you need a piece of PVC or ABS pipe cut to your desired length (you also can link pieces together using plumbing fittings, which makes it more portable), a steel fencepost or stake, and a wooden dowel. Simply, drill a hole through the top of the pipe slightly larger than your dowel and glue the dowel in place to keep it from spinning under the weight of the decoys. To make the tree more portable, I didn’t glue my dowel, but duct taped it in place where I’m hunting. It’s not pretty but it works.

When you find the spot you want to set up — ideally where it can be seen from a long distance — pound your fencepost or stake in the ground and slide the end of the pipe over the top. Doves often will pass close to the tree so set it up 20-30 yards in front of you for the best shot opportunities.

Add Motion

I was blown away the first time I used a motorized dove decoy. Several doves

actually tried to land on the decoy, and its flashing wings drew doves seemingly out of nowhere. Adding motion to my spread was so effective, I’ve now started incorporating motion decoys into both my dove tree and my ground decoys.

To add motion to my dove tree, I glued plumbing fittings (a cleanout adaptor and cleanout plug) to the top of the pipe and cut a square hole just barely big enough to fit the square post of my spinning wing decoy. Combining the motion of the decoy with the height of the dove tree creates a long-range dove magnet. Around my dove tree I place six to eight dove decoys on the ground along with four flicker decoys. Flicker decoys imitate doves on the ground stretching their wings by flashing for a couple of seconds and then going still. From a distance it looks incredibly realistic.

Compared to other decoys, dove decoys are inexpensive, but doves still respond amazingly well to them. The next time you go dove hunting I highly recommend the little bit of extra effort to put out a decoy spread.



A homemade dove tree will add motion and visibility to your decoy spread this season. RYAN SPARKS



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RAIL HUNTING

An early-season primer

By Julie Geiser

While I had seen the season dates for rails multiple times in Nebraska’s Small Game and Waterfowl Guide, I had never considered hunting them before. That was until John Laux, Upland Habitat and Access Program Manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, was headed out for a rail hunt and asked me to join. Always interested in new opportunities, I quickly accepted.

Hunting Rails

Finding rails is as easy as finding a marsh or wetland, many of which are on public hunting areas in central to southeastern Nebraska. Our hunt was during a wet year, which gave ample areas to find and hunt rails, which use temporary, seasonal and permanent wetlands with flooded vegetation. Many United States Fish and Wildlife Service waterfowl production areas along with Sandhills and Rainwater Basin wetlands, U.S. Corps of Engineers and Game and Parks wildlife management areas hold rails throughout Nebraska.

As we started our walk through the densely-covered marsh, spreading out like we were on a pheasant hunt, I soon learned most shots come from flushing birds into flight. Walking in the thick cover and using a dog to cover more ground forced birds to flush.

If you like the challenge of hunting with a 16, 28 or 20 gauge shotgun, now is the time to dust off these guns and get them in the field. Light 12-gauge loads also are the trick, as these birds didn’t take much firepower to knock down.



John Laux’s dog, Lucy, retrieves a downed rail. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

Steel shot may be required in some areas, so be sure of regulations. One-ounce of No. 7 steel is adequate and will be good for other early-season birds, such as teal or doves. Many shots we took on this day were less than 20 yards out.

About Rails

Rails are part of the *Rallidae* family, which includes several species found in North America. The Virginia

that often are heard and not seen, as they prefer dense marches and wetlands where they blend into their surroundings.

Their diet includes small fish, frogs, snails, slugs, insects, seeds, berries and leaves.

Season Dates

The rail season runs Sept. 1 through Nov. 9 in Nebraska, and hunters willing to hit the wetlands in hip boots or waders will like this fast-paced and exciting hunt. Rail hunting can fill a gap for hunters itching to hit the field for an early season primer and sharpen shooting skills.

Rails aren’t the strongest flyers and tend to be slow, giving hunters good practice for later pursuits and are good on the table. For those that like the dark meat similar to that of a dove, you’ll savor the flavor of rails.

It’s also not uncommon to find snipe and woodcocks in the same areas as rails. Season dates for snipe are Sept. 1 through Dec. 16, and woodcock are Oct. 2 through Nov. 15. These seasons overlap, so know your birds and be on the lookout for additional hunting opportunities. When in pursuit of these webless migrating species, hunters will need a Harvest Information Program or HIP number.

and Sora rail are the two found in Nebraska. Both may summer and breed in Nebraska, but those that do not summer here will head to southern U.S. and Mexico during the winter, traveling at night and corresponding to their secretive nature.

Rails are small-to-medium sized, highly camouflaged shore birds



Laux holds a rail he harvested. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

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A WIN-WIN WITH OPEN FIELDS AND WATERS

By Shawna Richter-Ryerson

The handwritten note is addressed to a Nebraska landowner who enrolled his land in the Open Fields and Waters Program; the loose cursive words fill nearly two pages.

“To say that I am grateful for your generosity of opening up your private ground for access would be a tremendous understatement,” writes Nick Barnes, of Fremont. “I had personally stopped hunting for several years due to lack of property access. This year reignited my passion and love for the outdoors, and if not for your generosity, this wouldn’t have been possible.”

The note is one of many that roll into Nebraska Game and Parks Commission offices each hunting season — from residents and nonresidents who utilize the public access acres enrolled in the OFW program. Another common refrain is the quality of the land enrolled, often spoken of by nonresidents who choose to hunt Nebraska for this very reason.

In 2009, knowing that more than 97% of Nebraska land was privately owned, Game and Parks initiated Open Fields and Waters to increase public access opportunities for walk-in hunting, trapping, and/or fishing on private lands, with a focus on a variety of habitat types. The program enrolls woodlands, farm ponds, wetlands, rangeland and stream frontage, in addition to traditional grassland habitats, all published and distributed annually in the Nebraska Public Access Atlas.

The program is voluntary and offers financial incentives in exchange for access, and since 2016 has made major gains, with a record number of acres enrolled across the state. More than 850 private landowners participated in the program in 2020-21, providing access to more than 372,000 land acres, 500 ponds or lakes, and 45 miles of streams.

Landowners can choose how much land to enroll and sign up for one-year and up to five-year contracts, with the ability to withdraw at any time.

The program addresses a top barrier for hunters and anglers in Nebraska: Finding places to hunt and fish.

But the program knows it needs to remain flexible over time, changing as hunter and landowner preferences, needs and satisfaction rates change. Studies conducted in 2012, 2014, and annually since 2018, inform Game and Parks on these variables and help focus enrollment efforts by location or habitat types.

Satisfaction rates with the program have been high, with 94% of hunters saying they expect to use OFW lands again and 83% of landowners saying they are very-to-somewhat satisfied with the program. Many landowners continually re-commit to the program.

“My dad always told me there should be a place to hunt for the average Joe, not just the rich guy,” said one such landowner in Keya Paha County, sharing his philosophy for why he enrolls his acres in OFW.

Communities where acres are enrolled also see hidden perks: tourism dollars from hunters visiting, eating and sleeping during a weekend or weeklong hunt. A 2020 study showed hunter expenditures were greatest in the southwest, a boon for the region.

Hunters themselves help fund OFW through their purchase of a habitat stamp or a hunting or fishing permit. Those dollars are matched with federal and private conservation group funds to grow conservation efforts and improve land access.

Because without access, no one wins; hunter and angler numbers would continue to drop and landowners would lose out on potential earnings. But OFW is an effort to bridge the gap.

A win-win for all.
Learn more at OutdoorNebraska.org/OFW.



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Fly-fishing on the White River via Open Fields and Waters property in Sioux County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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TREE CHECK

By Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist
Nebraska Department of Agriculture

August is National Tree Check Month and is the perfect time to step outside and examine the trees in your yard or favorite park for signs and symptoms of attack by invasive species.

A few pests are of particular concern to watch for during National Tree Check Month. These include Asian longhorn beetle, spotted lanternfly, and Gypsy moth. Each of these invasive species has the potential to harm the community forests and natural areas in Nebraska.

None of these insects are known to be established in Nebraska, and we want to keep it that way. Finding an infestation early is one of the best ways to stop the spread of invasive plant pests.

When checking trees for evidence of insect infestation, look for signs like exit holes, frass or saw dust, and chewed leaves. Symptoms that the health of the tree is declining may include yellowing of leaves, dying branches and overall tree decline.

Asian longhorn beetle adults create very large exit holes in the branches and trunk of the tree, nearly ½” in diameter, as they exit the tree. The females chew a niche into the tree



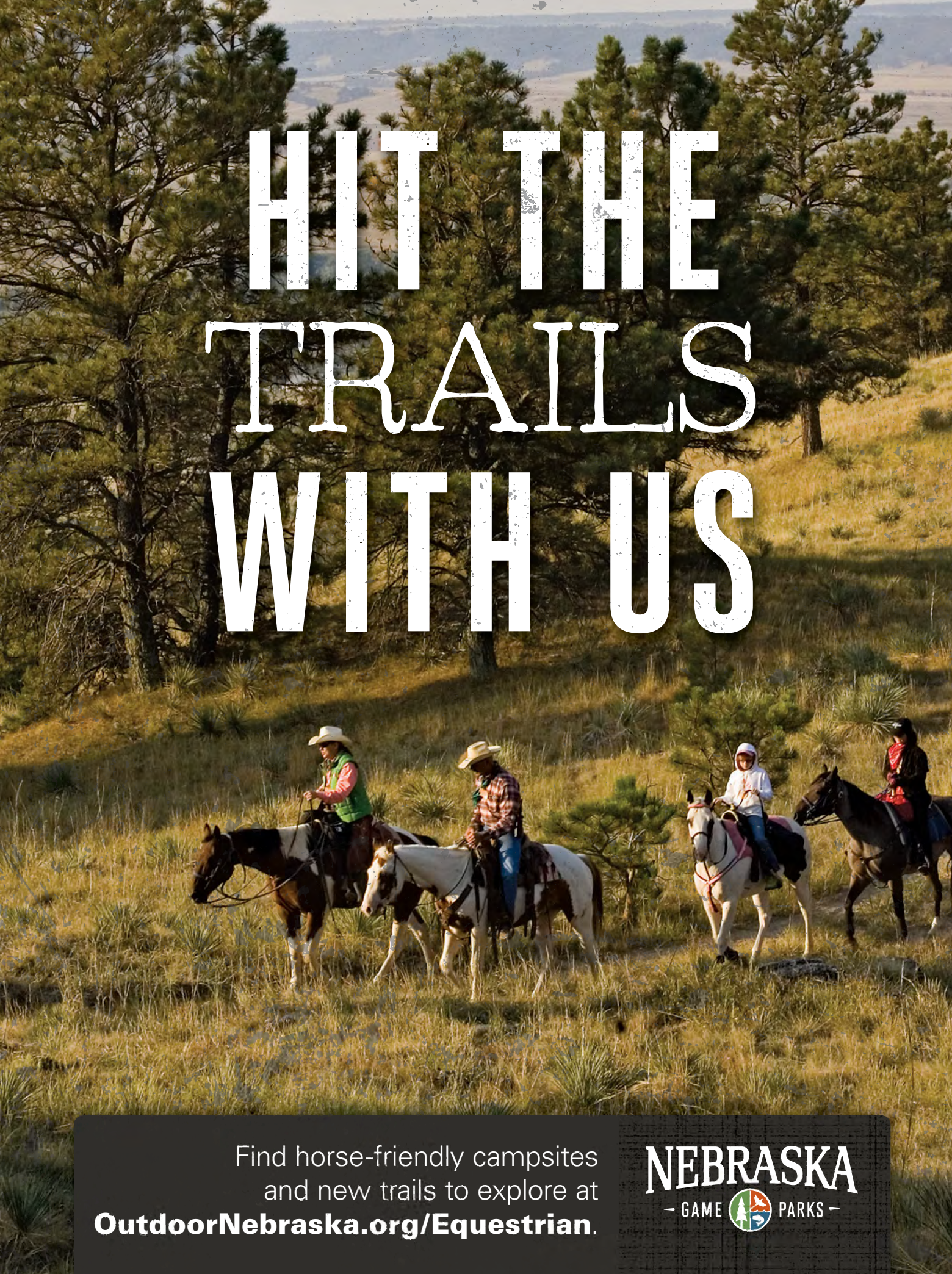
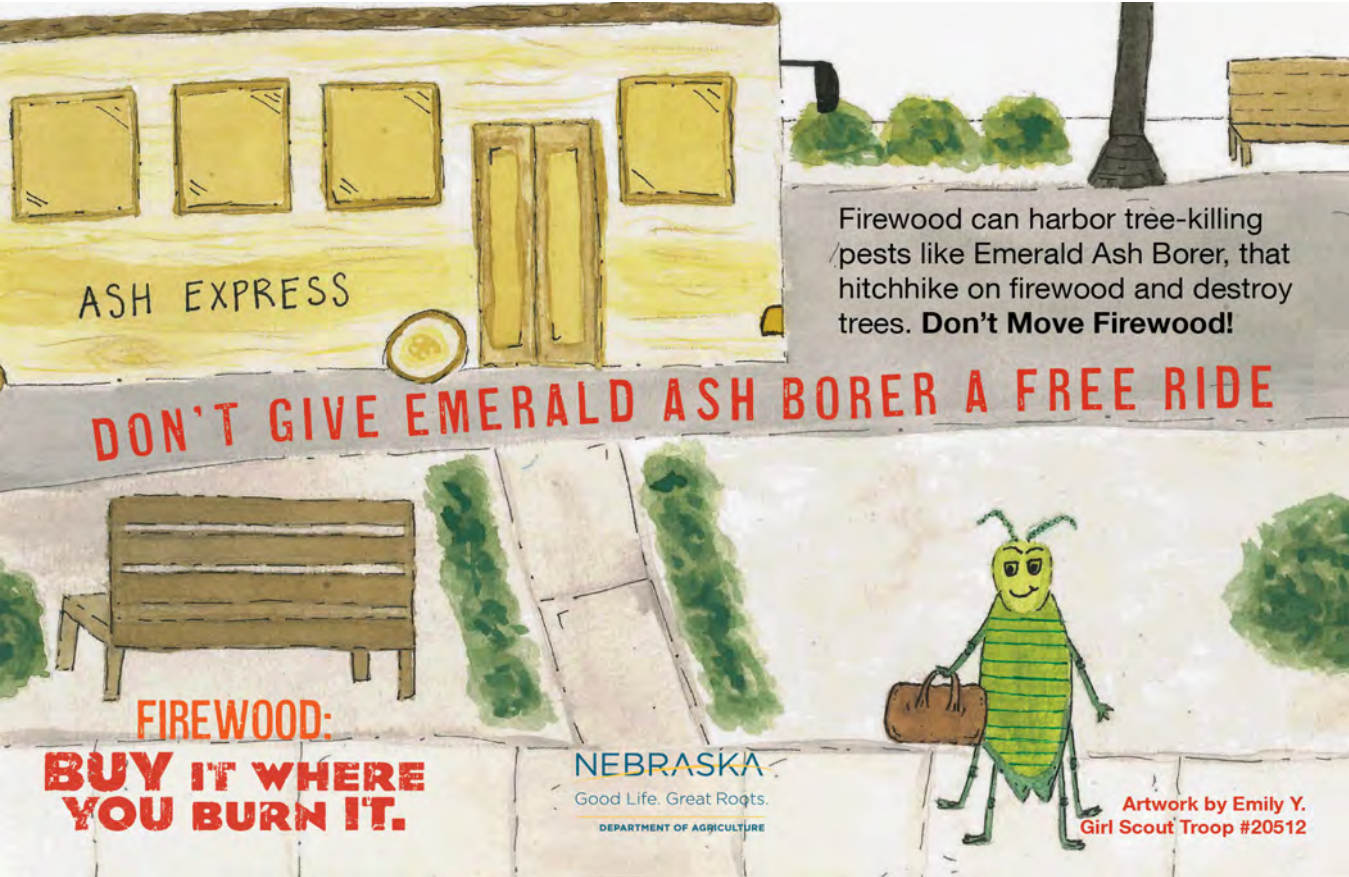
From left: Asian longhorn beetle, spotted lanternfly, and gypsy moth. BUGWOOD.ORG

bark, where they lay their egg. Asian longhorn beetles will infest a variety of trees but prefer maples.

Spotted lanternfly is a large leafhopper, with wings folded over its back in a tent shape. These insects prefer to feed on Tree of Heaven, which itself is an invasive species. But they will feed on other plants, causing damage with their piercing sucking mouth parts. Look for sticky trunks and sooty mold near the base of tree of heaven, especially in the fall, to try to find spotted lanternflies.

Gypsy moth caterpillars feed on leaves and defoliate trees in the spring and summer. They prefer oaks but will feed on many broadleaf trees. The caterpillar has five pairs of blue dots followed by six pairs of red dots on its back, and long hairs along its body. By August, adults emerge to mate and lay egg masses. Males are brown and have large feathery antennae, while females are larger, white, and do not fly.

Report possible finds of any of these invasive species to the Nebraska Department of Agriculture at 402-471-2351 or agr.plant@nebraska.gov, or through the Nebraska Invasive Species Program at <https://neinvasives.com/report-a-sighting>.



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Pheasant Hunting Near Palmyra 1963.

Opening day of pheasant hunting I hunted on my uncle's farm southwest of Palmyra. I was 16 years old and that is my dad's vizsla, Zipp, with me.

One of our best hunting buddies was Carl Wolfe, who worked for the Game and Parks Commission. We hunted together until the mid-1990s, especially grouse at Halsey and quail around Inavale.

Ken Bouc did an article on Dad and I and our dogs quail hunting in the December 1990 issue of Nebraskaland.

– Steve Stedman, Beatrice, Nebraska

Hunting Mule Deer 1983. Jim Scherbarth and son, Atone, of Hay Springs, myself, and nephew, Kelly Schafer of Evansville, Wyoming (currently). All really nice mule deer taken Northwest of Hay Springs that fall.

– Tim Scherbarth, Hay Springs, Nebraska



Hunting West of Elgin in the 1980s. My younger brother Doug Buffington (pictured left) and myself with a pair of prairie chickens we shot back in the '80s near Elgin, Nebraska.

– Alan Buffington, Fort Collins, Colorado

Coyote Pups 1938. My dad (Henry Petersen) and myself probably taken in the spring of 1938 on our farm northwest of Auburn. Dad and a neighbor, Henry Rogge, had come across a coyote den and dug it up. They brought the six pups home so we could see them. Dad is holding three of them, and I have the other three on my lap in the wagon. The pups were remarkably calm and didn't struggle as long as we kept our hands on them and didn't make any fast moves.

– Loren Petersen Green, Valley Center, California



Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, Nebraskaland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 2000. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Text may be edited and photos adjusted for reproduction. All photos will be returned.



JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

MY FIRST WOOD DUCK

By Jeff Kurrus

Somehow, I had never photographed a wood duck before. Growing up hunting woodies in the backwater sloughs of the Mississippi River, watching them maneuver through the cypress trees like they were Ewoks riding speeder bikes in Return of the Jedi, one would figure I would have taken a camera at some point and captured a shot or two of these beautiful birds. Nope. Or, maybe figured as a photographer for this publication, I would have accidentally run into one on any number of photoshoots across the state. Not then either.

I had added a wood duck to my “need to shoot” list, alongside a clutch of turkey eggs in the woods, a coyote with a fresh kill in its mouth and a family of raccoons perfectly lined up on a tree branch. (Note: This last example remains the most haunting image I could have made had I taken my camera along while riding with a farmer on his land.)

Then came COVID. Last spring, when the world shut down and I was resigned to my home, I began looking for photo subjects within walking distance. And on the first warm day of the year, I drove by a nearby wetland, recently formed by beavers, and

saw two woodies lift from the water along with a pair of mallards and a Canada goose.

The very next day, a hen and drake wood duck landed on the water not 30 yards from my photo blind. Despite the overcast morning, the drake’s head seemingly glowed, the menagerie of colors reflecting from the water. Watching him and his female counterpart, I was as nervous photographing that pair as anything I had ever seen in the wild — so much in fact that my viewfinder completely fogged over as I tried to manage my rapid heart rate and heavy breathing.

When the pair finally lifted, I climbed out of my blind and strutted back to my house as proud as I had ever been after a photo shoot. While I already knew I had seen many wood duck images more beautiful than what mine would be, I finally had my own to share.

I wish I would have made it a priority sooner.

So if you have the opportunity to capture a life list photograph, take it. And if the photo subject makes your heart skip a beat while you press the button, continue to do so until your camera card is full.



Nebraska Game and Parks biologists shock and net fish from a resting pool in a fish bypass built at Spalding Dam on the Cedar River in Greeley County. The fish were caught and tagged as part of a study to measure the effectiveness of the bypass.

We’re working to preserve beautiful Nebraska for years – and generations – to come. #MakingItLast

MAKING IT LAST

