



Originally a resident of Hall County, this young Woodhouse's toad was photographed in Hamilton County. Photo by Chris Helzer.

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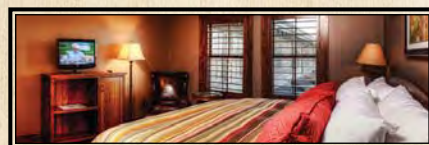
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GOLF WEEK 2012

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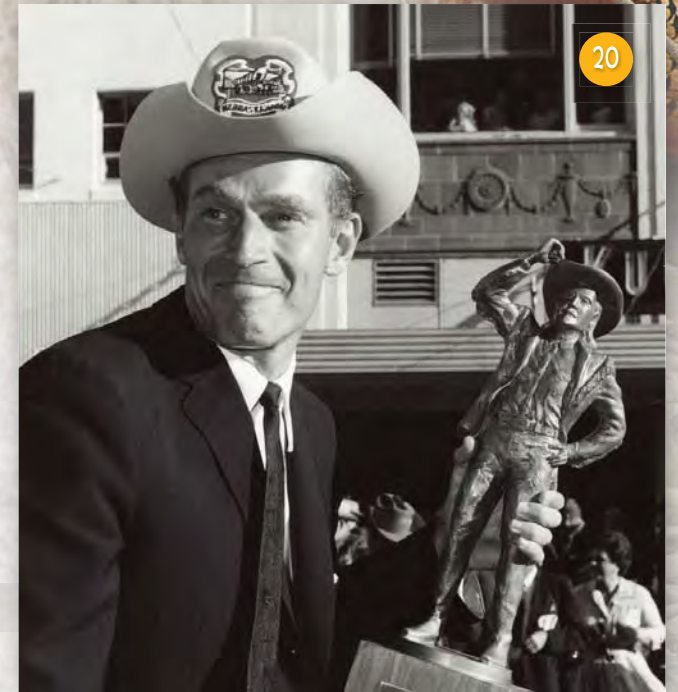
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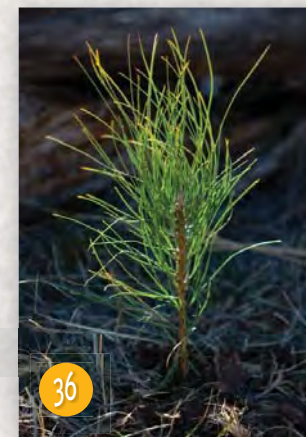
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Cover: Mike Hiram of Lincoln spends a July evening tossing his children into the air on the swimming beach at Wagon Train Lake State Recreation Area. Photo by Eric Fowler.

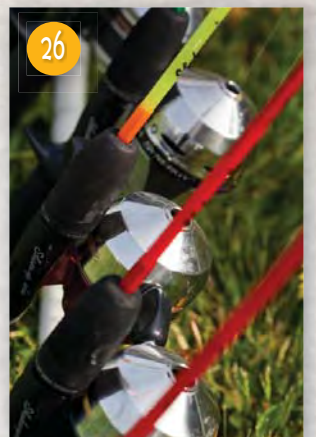
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PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER



Bet You've Never Seen This Before

My cousin, his son and I were up pheasant and grouse hunting in Box Butte County and saw a young deer when we first started walking a tree row. It never ran but insisted on following us as we walked. We stopped about 100 yards into the tree row and the deer walked right up to us.

The dog in the picture is my hunting



Mike Gould found this pair of red fox kits in his tractor shed in North Platte.

yellow Lab. The deer jumped around with the dog, playing and running around for a good 10 minutes. Then the deer walked up to my cousin Bayden and he petted it for a while. We then continued walking the tree row and the deer followed us to the end and then back to the truck! It was a pretty cool thing to see. My cousin named the deer Buckmaster.

Chris Patin
Ogallala, Nebraska

Visitor Letters

I am a transplanted Nebraskan that lives with my wife and family in Ridgecrest, CA, near Death Valley. I always look forward to your magazine and enjoy the pictures and articles very much. We enjoy family reunions at Fort Robinson and visit family in Bellevue and Omaha almost annually. *NEBRASKAland Magazine* always elicits a comment or two of "... and why do we live out here and not back there?" from someone in our family!

As I searched the magazine this month, I think the visitor bug is on page 49. It looks like a tan moth laid out with the rocks and bones in the photo that highlights Roger Welsch's article. I hope I am right and in time, I would love to use one of those *NEBRASKAland* coffee mugs at work!

Thanks for a great magazine,
Mark Nazeck
Ridgecrest, California



Marian Ball of Arlington shared a photo of her husband, Dennis, with a couple of 14-inch crappies from Lake Wanahoo.



Trophy Fishing in Nebraska

I'm a native Nebraskan who grew up in Loomis, and now lives in West Omaha. I went fishing with a friend on April 22 and in a span of 30 minutes, we had landed the two biggest largemouth I'd personally seen caught in Nebraska in my 30 years of fishing. One was 21.5 inches and the second was 22.5. We didn't weigh either, we released both back immediately into the private pond we were fishing.

It was a very fun day of Nebraska fishing, and proof that Nebraska fisheries can produce the kind of trophy bass that you commonly see in Texas and the Southern states.

Ben Cruise
Omaha, Nebraska

"Good Life, Great Rides" in May

The only thing I see missing is the Peckemeck Trail located along Harlan County Lake near Alma.
Jeremy Collinson, via e-mail

Send your comments to:
Jeff Kurrus, Editor
NEBRASKAland Magazine
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Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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A License to Feed

By Justin Haag

Readers have long been sending us photos of their outdoors-themed personalized license plates for publication. As people have a fondness of their vehicles, they also take pride in the government-issued items that identify their chosen rides.

If you're like me, your hoarder instincts kick in when it comes time to get a new set of license plates and find a place for the old ones. Thankfully, I've found a way to save those plates and help wildlife while I'm at it: bird house construction.

To make one all you need is a license plate, some scrap lumber, a drill, hand saw and some screws and nails.

I didn't start out with any measurements. I just fashioned a little scrap lumber to the form of a tray for holding seed that is smaller than the roof. I cut the ends of a couple of equal-lengths of 1x1 to a point and attached those boards to the sides of the tray in vertical fashion. I bent the license plate to match the angle on the pointed boards and drilled two screw holes along the crease, then attached the roof to the vertical boards, and voilà ... bird feeder.

I went shiny-side up with the roof, but I don't think it makes much difference. For hanging, I drilled a couple of holes near the crease and inserted an s-hook from my junk drawer. I expect the feeder to last a long time, thanks to the anti-corrosive aluminum construction of the roof.

Best of all, I'm satisfying those hoarder tendencies while creating a place for birds to take refuge from the weather for a hearty meal. ■



With a little scrap lumber and an old license plate, a backyard bird feeder can be easily made.

Purple Poppy Mallow

By Kimberly Stuhr

From its deep taproot to the bright magenta flowers it sports atop deeply cut green leaves, purple poppy mallow (*Callirhoe involucrata*) is a gardener's dream. Sure, individual landscape goals and aesthetic preferences differ, but most would agree that an ideal plant is one that is beautiful and robust, and performs reliably with very little input. Purple poppy mallow fits this bill, and more.

Thanks to that taproot, purple poppy mallow tolerates heat and summer drought. Though it only rises to one foot in height, it scrambles along the ground to about three feet in width, forming a dense mat that helps blanket bare soil, retain soil moisture and helps choke out weeds. Unlike its hybrid and imported companions, there is no need to vigorously prune flowers to keep the blooms coming. This native perennial naturally blooms continuously, from late spring to mid-summer with some continued bloom into fall.

Purple poppy mallow's cup-shaped, satiny flowers provide nectar for butterflies and bees, and it's a larval host for the gray hairstreak butterfly. When planted near rocks or in a hanging basket, the stems cascade beautifully over the side. Its trailing form fits into formal garden areas as well as wild or naturalized areas.

Purple poppy mallow has a long history. Michael Haddock, author of *Wildflowers and Grasses of Kansas: A Field Guide*, says, "The Lakota and Dakota burned the dried roots and inhaled the smoke as a treatment for colds. The

roots were also boiled and used for a tea to treat intestinal pains." Today, purple poppy mallow is used mostly for cosmetic purposes. The petals dress up a mixed green salad, and look especially nice lightly pressed into cake frosting.

The trick to growing purple poppy mallow is simple: have a sunny, well-drained site. It is definitely an easy-keeper, and a beautiful and showy addition to any landscape. ■



Purple poppy mallow in Sarpy County near Gretna.

Nebraska's 2014 Habitat Tours

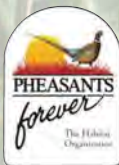


Wildlife Biologists from across the state will be hosting a series of Habitat Tours this year. Tours are designed to demonstrate habitat management practices, available conservation programs, how to create the best results on your next habitat project and much more.

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Tour Topic	Date and Time	Starting Location
Bobwhite Quail habitat needs workshop & habitat management.	June 11, 2014 11:00 am - 2:30 pm CST	Alexandria Community Center 506-510 Nebraska 53 - Alexandria, NE
What's the Buzz about Pollinators?	June 19, 2014 10:00 am - 2:00 pm MST	Mid-Plains Community College 1324 Broadway - Imperial, NE
Panhandle Pollinators: A closer look at pollinators and how they affect you!	June 19, 2014 9:00 am-1:00 pm MST	Wildcat Hills Nature Center 210615 Hwy 71 - Gering, NE
CRP Upgrades with High Diversity Seed Mixes, SAFEs and Pollinator Habitat. What is it supposed to look like?	June 19, 2014 10:00 - 2:00 pm CST	Rosemont Trap Club Rosemont, NE
Developing seed mixes for your habitat project	June 25, 2014 11:00 am - 3:00 pm CST	USDA Service Center 36465 Hwy 34 - Trenton, NE
Benefits of Prescribed Fire	June 26, 2014 5:30 - 9:00 pm CST	Curtis Cattle Company 223 Center Ave - Curtis, NE
Pollinator Habitat Past & Present	June 26, 2014 9:00 am - 2:00 pm CST	Lexington Public Library 907 N Washington - Lexington, NE
Where are all the Pheasants?	June 27, 2014 12:00-4:00 pm CST	UNL West Central Research & Extension Center • WCREC Auditorium 402 W State Farm Rd - North Platte, NE
Prairie & Wetland Restoration in Eastern Nebraska	July 10, 2014 5:30-8:30 pm CST	Tekamah Memorial Park 613 N 13th St - Tekamah, NE
Lake Wanahoo Wildlife & Wildflower Walk	July 19, 2014 9:30 am - 1:30 pm CST	Lake Wanahoo; Main Boat Ramp Wahoo, NE
Upgrading & Managing CRP & WRP for Grassland Birds, Pollinator Habitat & Plant ID	July 24, 2014 11:00 am - 4:00 pm CST	Williams Cabin: from Fullerton: 4 miles South on Hwy 14 to Rd. Z turn East, 2 miles to Rd 19, turn North go 1/3 mile
CRP Mid-Contract Management Activities	July 24, 2014 9:00 am - 2:00 pm CST	One Box Gun Club 79681 Road 435 - Broken Bow, NE
Sandhills Plant ID Tour	August 7, 2014 10:00 am- 2:00 pm CST	Myrtle Hall WMA 82267 445th Ave - Sargent, NE
Northeast Nebraska Focus on Pheasants Efforts	August 14, 2014 12:00 - 3:00 -pm CST	Southwester Knox County: 6 miles West of Verdigre & 5 miles South, Intersection of 518 Ave & 876 Rd
Rangeland Management	August 21, 2014 7:00 - 9: 00 pm CST	Mid-Plains Community College 2520 S E St - Broken Bow, NE
The Critical Role of Pollinators	September 19, 2014 7:00 - 9:00 pm CST	Lewis & Clark Visitor Center 100 Valmont Dr. - Nebraska City, NE



For more tour details & to register, please visit:
NebraskaPF.com or
call Pam at 308-850-8395

Travelogue

By Justin Haag

The Fossil Freeway: The Panhandle's Route to Prehistoric Times

Travelers wanting to step back in time thousands of years need to do little more than get off of Interstate 80.

The Fossil Freeway is a collection of seven paleontological sites that are conveniently located in a north and south corridor along the western Panhandle of Nebraska and into South Dakota. The sites offer a variety of attractions that appeal to both beginners and advanced enthusiasts of prehistoric times.

An aggressive traveler could visit all the sites in two days. A more thorough traveler will find enough to do for an entire week or more. The entire route is a little more than 205 miles.

Travelers approaching the Fossil Freeway from the south exit I-80 at Kimball and travel Highways 71, 26 and 29 northward. Stops in Nebraska include **Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area**, **Scotts Bluff National Monument**, **Agate Fossil Beds National Monument**, the **Trailside Museum** at **Fort Robinson State Park**, the **Hudson-Meng Bison Bonebed** and **Toadstool Geologic Park**. The route ends at the **Mammoth Site** in **South Dakota**.

Each site offers something a little different. Those who want to step out of the vehicle and see the remains of an adult mammoth will enjoy the **Trailside Museum**. Those wanting to hike and explore for fossils will enjoy the unique landscape of **Toadstool Park**.

Some of the sites have camping available, while motels and numerous bed-and-breakfast establishments may be found along the route.

For in-depth information, including lodging, dining and other attractions, visit Fossilfreeway.net. ■



Trailside Museum at Fort Rob



Agate Fossil Beds



Wildcat Hills SRA

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The Pursuit is On

By Jane Gustafson

The 2014 Nebraska Great Park Pursuit is underway, but there is still plenty of time to get your team together and join in the fun.

The Pursuit involves making visits to as many of the 20 parks in the program as you like between May 1 and September 17, 2014. Your first step is getting a team together and registering at NeGPP.org. Once registered, you'll be able to print off impression sheets that provide information about each park and clues on how to find the Pursuit post.

The parks are located across Nebraska; when visiting, you need to locate the Great Park Pursuit post, make a rubbing of the face plate in your impression sheet and then send in the rubbing as proof of your visit. But be warned – there will be some walking and searching involved in this adventure.

Sending in an impression sheet also enters you for a number of prizes, such as an Ipad, a \$1,000 AAA Travel gift card, backyard bird packages, Scheels gift cards, a digital camera or the grand prize of a \$1,500 outdoor recreation package. As a bonus, a traveling post will be available at a number of summer events throughout Nebraska. Locations will be announced on the Great Park Pursuit's Facebook page.

This is the seventh year for the Pursuit, a free program sponsored by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the Nebraska Recreation and Park Association to promote active lifestyles and increase awareness of the nature-rich outdoor recreation opportunities throughout Nebraska. ■

Primitive Skills: Pine Pitch Glue



By Nebraska Outdoor U!

Pine pitch glue is what American Indians used to secure arrow heads on arrows and knife blades in knife handles. To make pine pitch glue you'll need pine sap, charcoal powder, a non-flammable container to hold your liquid pitch and small finely ground grass fibers (optional). You can gather hardened pine sap from any injury spot on a pine tree. After you've gathered your ingredients, put the pine sap in the nonflammable cup or container and start heating your sap over hot coals (NOT an open flame because pine sap is highly flammable and will flame up and burn). Once the sap is a consistent liquid, add enough charcoal powder (and fine grass fibers) to make it the consistency of glue; this step gives your glue tinsel strength when it dries. You can now apply this to any object you need glued, or simply let it cool and harden for later use. You will need to re-melt your dried glue for later use.

Visit OutdoorU.org and start your own pathway to memorable experiences in the outdoors. Get outside and see what the Nebraska Outdoors has for you. ■





Emigrants passing Fort Kearny, as remembered by William Henry Jackson. From the William Henry Jackson Collection at Scotts Bluff National Monument.

A Brief History Accidents Along the Trail

By Patricia C. Gaster, Nebraska
State Historical Society

The greatest dangers along the Overland Trail were disease and accident. Except for sanitary precautions, then little known, disease was perhaps unavoidable. Accidents,

however, were “a built-in, do-it-yourself hazard,” according to historian Merrill Mattes’s *Great Platte River Road*,

published by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1969.

Mattes classified trail accidents as “shootings, drownings, crushing by wagon wheels, and injuries resulting from handling domestic animals. These were the four big causes of maimings and killings. All other discoverable causes combined, such as sharp instruments, falling objects, rattlesnakes, buffalo hunts, hail, and lightning, did not equal one of these four major causes.

“The emigrants were walking arsenals, armed to the teeth with rifles, shotguns, and revolvers, supposedly used to hunt buffalo and defend themselves from Indians. More often what they managed to do was blast, wound, or annihilate themselves instead, and in alarming numbers. Firearms did not have the safety features that exist today.... Many emigrants were strangers to their deadly weapons, and all underwent the fatigue which impairs judgment ‘Shot himself accidentally’ was the monotonous refrain on emigrant grave markers and the primary cause of accidental death.

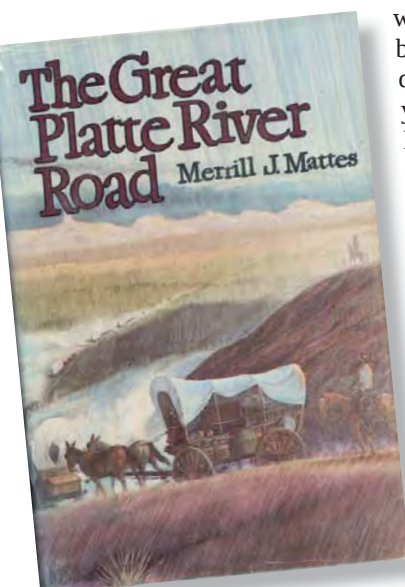
“A close second were the drownings at the river crossings, the result of

wagons or ferries tipping over, of some tired teamster getting snarled in harness, or of a fatigued hiker perishing in the cold water. Drownings were routine on the Kansas, the Blue, the South Platte and the Laramie.

“The big emigrant wagons were efficient when rolling forward with a load, but clumsy and inefficient when it was necessary to stop. From a variety of causes an impressive number of men, women and children got caught in or fell under their monstrous wheels and (with some amazing exceptions) were mutilated or killed.”

Domestic animals proved more dangerous to emigrants than their wild relatives. “The dangerous animals were the friendly beasts of burden. Not only did they rotate the wheels that crushed people, but when temperamental they committed mayhem on careless teamsters.” Kicking mules, plunging horses, runaway teams and stampeding herds caused emigrant injury and deaths.

“Generally speaking,” Mattes concluded, “one who could swim and had a healthy respect for firearms and wagon wheels had an excellent chance for survival – if he didn’t get the cholera!” ■



BEST KEPT SECRET IN NEBRASKA



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Bowhunter Education

By Cristina Woodworth

Nebraska bowhunters looking for more information about education classes and bow and arrow field days should check out Huntsafenebraska.org. The website, run by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, lists all of the additional requirements for hunters ages 12 through 29 who hunt deer, antelope, elk or mountain sheep with a bow and arrow. Bowhunters can register for hunting events and classes on the site as well as read up on the latest rules and regulations for both bow and firearm hunting.

Bowhunters around the country will also find useful information at Nbef.org, the National Bowhunter Education Foundation’s website. The NBEF is an organization that promotes responsible bowhunting through educational hunting classes and activities. The site also lists contact information for the bowhunting agencies in every state so visitors can get more facts about the specific location where they’ll be bowhunting. ■



PHOTO BY JEFF KURBUS

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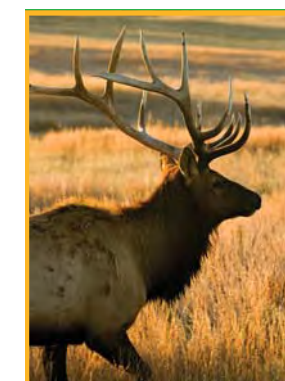
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In the Field with Nebraska Master Naturalists

By Amy Kucera
The Nebraska Master Naturalist program has been educating and empowering volunteers in conservation since 2009.

Through a variety of guided experiences in nature, this citizen science certification turns into an experiential vacation, enhanced by a series of courses in the classroom, all designed to empower Nebraskans to aid in natural resource conservation within the state.

One such opportunity is the program certification at The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve. This June, Nebraska Master Naturalist trainees and volunteers will unite here for the third year to engage in the biologically unique landscape of the Niobrara River valley near Johnstown, together with the region's experts in the field – or, in this instance, bison pasture. Field tours, buffalo cookout and a kayak trip down the Niobrara National Scenic River round out the nearly week-long adventure in the Sandhills backcountry.

Since late 2010, more than 140 volunteer members have contributed over 15,000 hours of public service within the state. The program is a



Gerry Steinauer, Commission botanist, leads Nebraska Master Naturalist volunteers on a wildflower hike at the Niobrara Valley Preserve near Johnstown.

partnership of The Nature Conservancy, Environmental Trust, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

For complete program information, visit Snr.unl.edu/naturalist. ■



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Man Cave

By Clint Livingston

My man cave reflects my passion for Old West history and hunting. It's also an extension of my hobby-turned-business, Blue Creek Traders. Basically, I converted the garage into an early 1800s trading post. When you open the door, it's like stepping back into the mountain man era. Buffalo robes are piled on the wood floor, beaver pelts and antlers hang from ceiling rafters, animal heads and black powder guns adorn the walls, wrought iron stands display leather clothing and fur hats and crudely designed shelves hold antique pottery. I've given tours and talks to local schoolchildren, and the trading post is a favorite hangout for friends and family, especially my sons and grandsons.

Submit your man cave images to jenny.nguyen@nebraska.gov, along with your name and brief description of your man cave. ■



Nebraska Game and Parks

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Eating the Samples

By Jeff Kurrus

Sometimes companies send us products to try out so we can share with you, our dear NEBRASKAland readers, our favorites for you to try yourselves. Because we don't do this all the time, we rarely condemn a product that we don't like, practicing the "if you don't have something nice to say" axiom.

But every once in a while I run into another problem, as was the case with Usana protein bars and the Celsius company's "Your Negative Calorie Drink."

I kept eating the samples before I could photograph them for the magazine's purposes. Soon after receiving them, they were gone – the best testament I can give for products I'll continue to use on my days afield.

For more information on these products, including nutritional information, visit Usana.com and Amazon.com to see the full line of both of these excellent in the field snacks. ■



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PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER

Choosing Binoculars

By Julie Geiser

Binoculars are a must for watching wildlife, but there are several considerations to ponder before your first, or your next, purchase.

Buyers must first understand the numbers associated with binoculars. For example, if a pair is described as 7x35, the first number is the magnification power. Seven power, or 7x, means the binoculars make subjects appear seven times closer than with the unassisted eye. Most birdwatchers prefer 7x or 8x binoculars mainly because a higher magnification power will also be more difficult to keep steady while handholding. Lower power binoculars are usually lighter, tend to have a wider angle of view than more powerful models and often have a shorter minimum-focus distance – which is handy if you’re trying to look at a butterfly or a bird at a feeder.

The second number is the diameter (in millimeters) of the objective lens. The “50” in 7x50 means that the front lenses of the binoculars (the ones farther from your eye as you look through them) are 50mm in diameter. The larger the front objective, the more light entering the binoculars and the better you can see in dim light. Brighter images help reveal field marks and the beauty of bird colors, but in general the larger the objective lens, the heavier (and pricier) the binoculars.

Field of view is another facet to consider, and is the width of the area you see while looking through your binoculars. The wider the field of view, the easier it is to locate your subject.

The term “exit pupil” refers to the shaft of light transmitted through the binoculars to the eye and indicates how well the binoculars will perform in low light. Larger exit pupils transmit more light, thus a brighter image, and can be calculated by dividing the diameter of the objective lens by the magnification number. For example, 7x35 binoculars have an exit pupil of 5mm (35 divided by 7). And finally – always choose binoculars with fully coated optics. Most manufacturers coat exterior lenses, but the interior optics of some inexpensive binoculars may be uncoated, causing a loss of light. The quality of coating varies; more expensive binoculars usually have better quality optical coating.

With so many choices available, always remember one thing: you get what you pay for. Use your personal preferences, budget and intended usages to determine what will be the best fit for you. ■

Nebraska Bird Library

Eastern Bluebird

Song or calls: Musical, rising “chur-lee.” Extended in song to “chur chur-lee chur-lee.”

Description: Uniformly deep blue above; orange-red throat, sides of neck, breast, sides and flanks; contrasting white belly; white undertail coverts. Female is duller overall. Juvenile is brown above; white below with brown mottling and has blue on wings.

Habitat: Breeding birds favor open hardwood forests, especially those bordering grasslands. Breeding birds and migrants can also be found in forest edges, shelterbelts, city parks and farmsteads.

Where in Nebraska: Spring and fall migrant across the state, most common in the east and rare in the extreme west. Common summer resident in eastern areas, and local breeder in the west.

Status: Serious population decline in recent decades due to competition with starlings and house sparrows for nest sites. Specially designed nestboxes and concerned birdwatchers have resulted in a promising comeback.

Fun Facts: The Eastern bluebird is also known as “blue robin” and “blue redbreast.” ■

To learn about more birds visit:

NebraskaBirdLibrary.org.



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

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Wingtips by Wild Bird Habitat Support Nebraska's bluebird recovery program at Bluebirds Across Nebraska www.bbne.org



Bluebird nest boxes & feeders available at Nebraska's Wild Bird Habitat Stores



Upcoming Events by Jerry Kane

June 2, 16
Pistol League
Platte River State Park (SP),
Louisville, 402-471-5547

June 3
Family Fishing Event
Skyview Lake, Norfolk, 6-8 p.m.

June 4
Family Fishing Event
Pawnee Park East Pond,
Columbus, 6-8 p.m.

June 4, 11, 18, 25
Beyond BOW Archery
Clinic Platte River SP,
Louisville, 402-471-5547

June 7
Family Fishing Event
Yanney Lake, Kearney,
10:30 a.m.-1 p.m.

June 7
National Park Service
Outdoor Event Niobrara SP,
Niobrara, 402-857-3373

June 7
Outdoor Education Center
Grand Opening
Lincoln, 402-471-0641

June 7
Fishing is Fun Clinic and
Water Expo
Lake McConaughy State
Recreation Area (SRA),
Ogallala, 308-284-8800

June 7-8
Scheels 3-D
Archery
Tournament
Ponca SP,
Ponca,
402-755-2284

June 7-8
Shut Up and Fish
Walleye Tournament Lake
McConaughy SRA, Ogallala,
308-284-8800

June 7-Aug. 3
Swimming Pool Open
Daily Niobrara SP, Niobrara,
402-857-3373

June 9, 11
Rimfire Sporter Rifle
Clinic Platte River SP,
Louisville, 402-471-5547

June 9-27
Residents and nonresidents
may apply for one deer permit
in any draw unit

June 9-27
Residents and eligible
landowners may apply
for one buck or either-sex
antelope permit in available
units

June 9-27
Residents may apply for one
elk permit

June 10
Family Fishing Event
Fremont SRA Lake No. 3,
Fremont, 6-8 p.m.

June 11
Family Fishing Event
Benson Park Pond, Omaha,
6-8 p.m.

June 11
Family Fishing Event
Recharge Lake, York, 6-8 p.m.

June 12
4-H Horse Camp
Fort Robinson SP, Crawford,
308-665-2900

June 13
National Park Service
Campground Program
Niobrara SP, Niobrara,
402-857-3373

June 13-14
Ash Hollow Pageant Ash
Hollow State Historical Park
(SHP), Lewellen, 308-778-5651

June 13-15
Intertribal Gathering Fort
Robinson SP, Crawford,
308-665-2900

June 14
Buffalo Cookout and
National Park Service
Program Niobrara SP,
Niobrara, 402-857-3373

June 14
Beyond Becoming an
Outdoors-Woman
Geocaching, Maskenthine
Lake Recreation Area,
Stanton

June 14
Chadron State Park's 93
Anniversary Event Chadron
SP, Chadron, 308-432-6167

June 14
Fly Fishing School
Aksarben Aquarium and
Schramm Park SRA,
9 a.m.-3 p.m. 402-332-3901

June 14-15
Bugs and Bones Weekend
Ponca SP, Ponca,
402-755-2284

June 15
Father's Day Fish Fry
Ponca SP, Ponca,
402-755-2284

June 15
Father's Day Fishing
Tournament Niobrara SP,
Niobrara, 402-857-3373

June 15
Father's Day Buffet
Fort Robinson SP, Crawford,
308-665-2900

June 17
Family Fishing Event
Walnut Creek Reservoir,
Papillion, 6-8 p.m.

June 18
Family Fishing Event
Bowling Lake, Lincoln, 6-8 p.m.

June 19
Panhandle Pollinators
Workshop Wildcat Hills
Nature Center, Gering,
308-436-3777

June 20-22
Spanish Mustang
Breeders Fort Robinson SP,
Crawford, 308-665-2900

June 21
Carp-O-Rama Pawnee SRA,
Emerald, 8 a.m.-1 p.m.

June 21
Beyond Becoming an
Outdoors-Woman
Introduction to Trap, Skeet,
5-Stand and Sporting Clays,
Fort Kearny Shooting Range,
Kearney

June 21
Dirty Bird Mud Run Ponca
SP, Ponca, 402-755-2284

June 24
Family Fishing Event City
Pond, North Platte, 6-8 p.m.

June 25
Family Fishing Event
Cottonmill Lake, Kearney,
6-8 p.m.

June 26
Family Fishing Event
Mormon Island SRA Lake No.
1, Grand Island, 6-8 p.m.

June 27
National Park Service
Campground Program
Niobrara SP, Niobrara,
402-857-3373

June 27-28
Becoming an Outdoors
Family Camp
Two Rivers SRA, Waterloo,
402-471-5547

June 28
Beyond Becoming an
Outdoors-Woman
Summer Walleye Fishing,
Lake McConaughy SRA,
Ogallala, 308-284-8800

Contact the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at 402-471-0641 or visit OutdoorNebraska.org for more information.

Visit HuntSafeNebraska.org for a list of hunter education classes and BoatSafeNebraska.org for a list of boating safety classes.



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

Although less than a minute from I-80, Windmill SRA offers an escape for passers-by.

An I-80 Hotspot

By Julie Geiser

North of exit 285 at Gibbon, Windmill State Recreation Area (SRA) is a stone's throw from Interstate 80. Sporting six lakes with largemouth bass, bluegill, crappie, channel catfish and more, there is fishing galore at this SRA. Camping with modern facilities along with restrooms, showers and a laundromat will suit every type of camper. Come for the day or an extended stay and take a swim, ride a bike or come learn the history of Windmill SRA. ■

Send Us Your Trail Cam Photos!



"Not that an elk in Nebraska is odd," wrote Chad Marsh, "but the fact that this was in Antelope County is." He also saw him several times while deer hunting.

Please submit your trail camera photos by e-mail to: nebtrailcam@gmail.com. Also include where you're from and any information that will help explain your photo.

NEBRASKAland Visitor



Last issue's winner of the Visitor drawing was Lynn Kaufmann of Lincoln, Nebraska, who found the **chickweed geometer** 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 critter found in Nebraska. We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a *NEBRASKAland Magazine* mug. To enter each month, write:

NEBRASKAland Visitor
2200 North 33rd Street,
Lincoln, NE 68503.

Or e-mail:

Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov
with "Visitor" in the subject line of the message.

HINT: This issue's visitor is not on page 8, 9, 11, 14, 19 or 47.

*This small, light brownish-yellow moth with pink bands on its wings is the **chickweed geometer**, *Haematopsis grataria*. It is a common moth in Nebraska, and adults can be found flying from May through October. The large feathery antennae tell us it is a male moth; the antennae of females are threadlike. Geometer caterpillars are called inchworms, and move by pulling their rear segment up to their front legs, forming a loop, and then extending the body forward. These caterpillars feed on a variety of plants, including chickweed and knotweed, and are not considered to be pests. There are multiple generations each summer, with the last generation overwintering in the pupa stage.*

Special thanks to Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture. Visitor image by Eric Fowler

Bugguide.net is a good site for identification.

NEBRASKAland DAYS

A Tradition for 50 Years

By Julie Geiser

Celebrating western style has been occurring for 50 years in Nebraska – a tradition originally started by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Celebrating western style during NEBRASKAland DAYS has been going on for 50 years in the Cornhusker state – a tradition started by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Put in motion by then Nebraska Game, Forestation and Parks Commission Director Mel Steen, “NEBRASKAland on Parade” was organized by Dick Schaffer, editor of *NEBRASKAland Magazine* predecessor *Outdoor Nebraska*, to promote Nebraska’s tourism on a national scale. Schaffer and his staff sent letters to

communities statewide, asking for assistance with floats, riding groups or any other type of portable hometown attractions available for display in Lincoln.

Not long after its conception, the first parade, featuring several Nebraska communities, was held on O Street on July 23, 1964. Attractions also included pageants, rodeos, an American Indian powwow, the naming of the Commission’s oxen contest, square dancing, shoot-out reenactments and other Wild West-related activities for the five-block celebration. An estimated

45,000 people were in attendance for the first year’s show – with about 40 Nebraska towns and cities bringing more than 75 parade entries.

With the success of the first year, the Commission set the dates for the 1965 celebration, newly named NEBRASKAland DAYS, from June 3-6. Scheduled events included downtown parades, a Mari Sandoz essay contest, Jaycee rodeo, theater performances and vacation booths. It was also the first year for the Miss NEBRASKAland pageant and the Buffalo Bill Cody Award.

The prestigious Buffalo Bill Cody Award is given to celebrities for their contributions to western culture. Cowboy actor Dale Robertson was presented the first award with his performances in television series’ *Tales of Wells Fargo*, *The Iron Horse* and *Death Valley Days*, as Connie Svolopoulos of Omaha was crowned Miss NEBRASKAland.

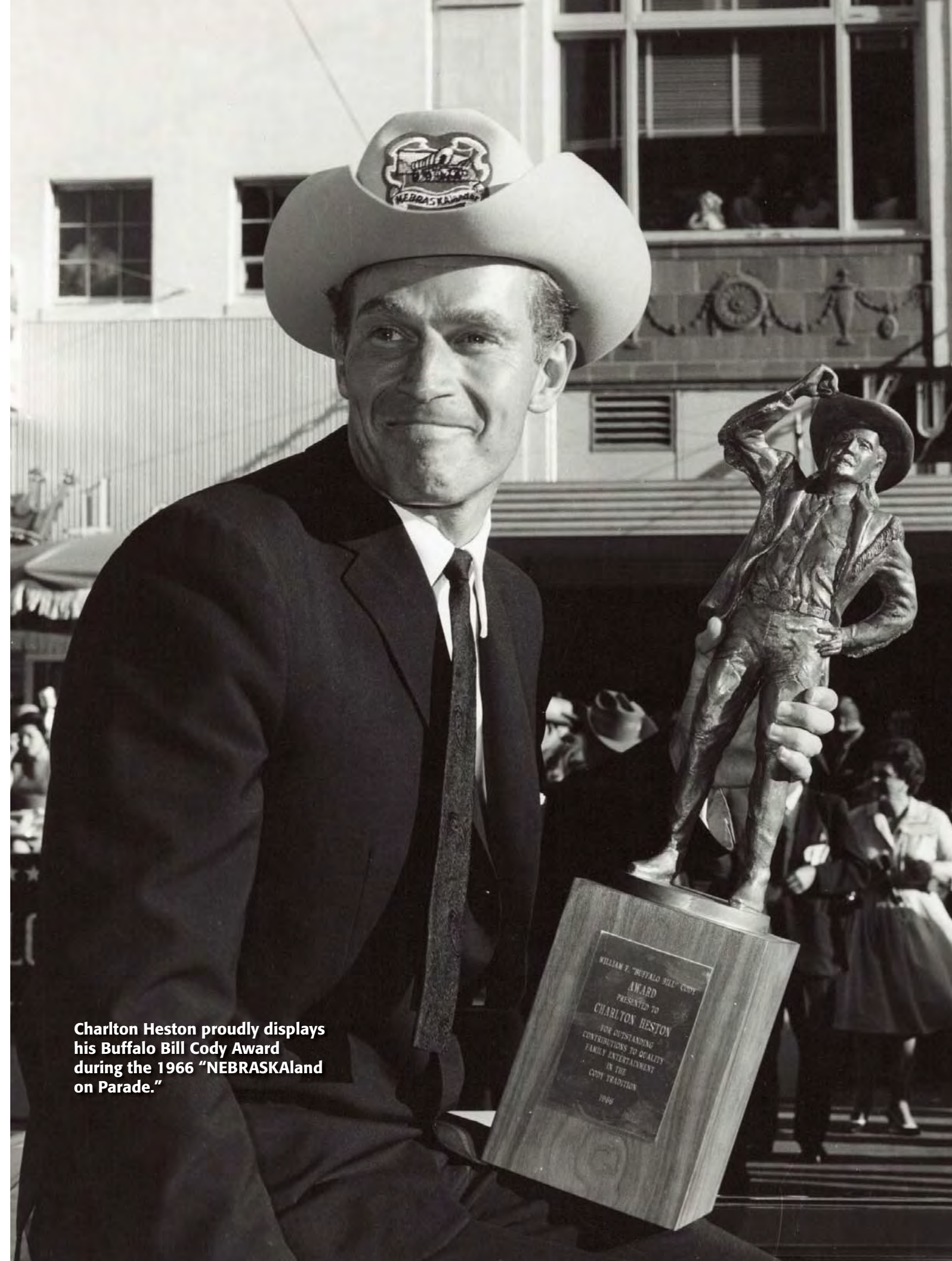
By 1966, NEBRASKAland DAYS was on its way to becoming a major tourist event and received priceless coverage throughout the United States



North Platte is the current home of NEBRASKAland DAYS, a celebration of the West that runs June 18-28 this year.



The Miss NEBRASKAland float was one of more than one hundred entries that marched, drove or rolled down the streets of North Platte in the “Where the West Is” parade.



Charlton Heston proudly displays his Buffalo Bill Cody Award during the 1966 “NEBRASKAland on Parade.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEBRASKAland DAYS INC.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEBRASKAland DAYS INC.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NEBRASKALAND DAYS INC.

Miss NEBRASKAland, Connie Svolopoulos, in 1965 with Barney Oldfield.

thanks to a visit from First Lady Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Taylor Johnson. Crowds were growing with estimates of 75,000 attending the parade, 10,000 at the Wild West Shows, 7,000 at the rodeo and 4,000

at the Miss NEBRASKAland Pageant. Even an estimated 3,000 were served pancakes at the Gateway pancake feed, not including the thousands watching the televised event.

After three successful years, the Commission sought a permanent home for the NEBRASKAland celebration as a major tourist attraction, and communities across the state were invited to bid for the location. North Platte was selected from several cities, including Lincoln, to become the host. With the historic Buffalo Bill Rodeo already established and the Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park being developed into what Steen believed to be one of Nebraska's top tourist attractions at the time, the celebration had found its new home as the Nebraska Legislature awarded North Platte NEBRASKAland DAYS in 1968.

North Platte's First Year

As newly titled general chairman of NEBRASKAland DAYS, Jim Whitaker became the head volunteer to organize committees and get the 1968

celebration ready in less than five months for North Platte's first festival. "We didn't know what changes to make and how exactly to do things," Whitaker said of the first celebration. "We only had an established rodeo committee, and I was on that too."

Whitaker spent all his spare time on NEBRASKAland DAYS. One night, tired of losing sleep, he sat down at his game table and, writing all night, created the organizational structure for the event that would last for many years. From location, to setup, to take down, every event was meticulously planned. By the end, Whitaker had created 33 different committees to organize the event, also commending Ken Hornbacher, the first president of NEBRASKAland DAYS in North Platte, and members of the Commission. "Rex Amack and Dick Schaffer were a God-send in getting us going," said Whitaker. "We had no background on how to do this."

Looking back, Whitaker said the first year was his most memorable out of the nine years he spent on the board. "We all had fears about how it



PHOTO COURTESY OF NEBRASKALAND DAYS INC.

A 1967 parade float in Lincoln recognizes that North Platte will be the permanent home of NEBRASKAland DAYS in 1968.

The Beginnings of Cody's Wild West Show



NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION

In 1882 the people of North Platte approached Col. William F. Cody about producing a Fourth of July celebration for the community; from this event the Buffalo Bill Rodeo was born. The first rodeo was called "The Old Glory Blow Out" and included buffalo riding, roping and bronco riding. This rodeo is also what evolved into Cody's Wild West Show that traveled the world bringing the untamed West to thousands.

The Buffalo Bill Rodeo was one of the world's first spectacular rodeos and was sanctioned by the

Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association in 1947. It remains today one of the most popular stops on the rodeo tour and the anchor event of the NEBRASKAland DAYS celebration.

Miss Rodeo Nebraska is crowned on the opening night of the rodeo and queens from across the nation, including Miss Rodeo America, attend the event. World champion cowboys, cowgirls, rodeo announcers, award winning acts and rodeo clowns attend the Buffalo Bill Rodeo along with championship livestock.



More than 400 youngsters dressed up for the Best Western Dressed Kids parade in North Platte in 1968. There were 36 prizes totaling over \$300 to winners in 11 age and gender divisions in three separate categories – western, pioneer and Indian.



The Buffalo Bill Rodeo is the anchor event for NEBRASKALAND DAYS and is one of the main reasons the celebration was awarded to North Platte.

would turn out, but it all came out all right. No one got hurt, we had enough money to pay our debts, we kept track of the money for the community and NEBRASKALAND DAYS was a big hit, instead of a miss. It made it easy for us to ask the board and committee members to stay on.”

The Future for NEBRASKALAND DAYS

Competing with other events throughout the state remains a challenge for NEBRASKALAND DAYS in 2014, but showcasing Nebraska’s best and keeping to its origins makes the event a draw even today for its celebration of Wild West heritage.

David Fudge, executive director of NEBRASKALAND DAYS, commented on the future of the event, saying the event puts such a high value on the production of the Buffalo Bill Rodeo.

“It was the original rodeo,” he said, “and I think it’s still one of the finest outdoor rodeos in the country.” Fudge also places great emphasis on the event’s entertainers. “What makes this place so unique is how close people can be to the performers. It really is the best of what we have to offer in outdoor entertainment.”

Keeping core events for the celebration – including concerts, rodeos and parades – will always be relevant, but NEBRASKALAND DAYS will evolve just like other events throughout the state. Because Fudge is passionate about what the event means to North Platte, “NEBRASKALAND DAYS is a point of pride for a good deal of our community in North Platte. It was awarded to North Platte as a result of a competitive bidding process. Several communities wanted it – so for it to have landed here, and for our community to have embraced it and made it what it is today, is something we should all be proud of.”

Fudge is especially thankful for the event’s board of directors. “If you take a look at a list of those who have served throughout the years, it’s a who’s who of North Platte. They’ve all played a role in shaping this celebration into

Event Schedule

Follow the fun during the 50th NEBRASKALAND DAYS Celebration. The schedule is packed with events for all ages. Celebrate western style with the Wild West Show and the Buffalo Bill Rodeo. Enjoy prime-time entertainment at the US Cellular Summer Jam Concert Series followed up by the Heart of America Shows Carnival along with many other activities every day that are sure to please.

The 2014 celebration runs June 18-28 and includes:

- Concerts by Lady Antebellum and Billy Currington
- Four nights of Buffalo Bill PRCA Rodeo
- Miss Rodeo Nebraska Pageant
- Wild West Microbrew Festival
- Heritage Festival
- Classic Car Show
- Woodcarver Show
- Frontier Revue
- Three Parades
- Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show
- Kids fun including the Fun Festival and Mutton’ Bustin’

what it is today, and a lot of them took chances along the way to make sure NEBRASKALAND DAYS survived.”

Today NEBRASKALAND DAYS is doing more than surviving. With more than 85,000 people attending the event in 2013, including visitors from all over the U.S. and even as far as Europe, organizers are looking forward to

another year of boot-stomping, Stetson-wearing, Wild West show heritage that has taken place for half a century – as are the visitors coming to see where the West truly is. ■

 Visit NEBRASKALAND DAYS website to get more information and a full schedule of events.



Carnivals have been a crowd pleaser for all ages as part of NEBRASKALAND DAYS since its early beginnings.

ONE STOP SHOP

SUMMIT LAKE STATE RECREATION AREA

By Jeff Kurrus

**Sunrise at Summit Lake State
Recreation Area near Tekamah.**

PHOTO BY BOBBI ANDERSON

Summit Lake State Recreation Area in northeastern Nebraska's Burt County is the answer for many modern nature enthusiasts with little spare time. It's close but not too close to home for many, has activities to satisfy every family member and is eye-catching for all who visit.

But let's be honest. It's the fishing that garners the most attention.

Summit Lake State Recreation Area in Burt County offers 345 acres of land, including 190 acres of water with a swim beach, two boat ramps and two miles of hiking trails. At the Bob Eckdahl Campground, there are also 30 camping pads with electrical hookups, 15 non-electric pads and 22 other non-pad sites





PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Jody Langley of Tekamah (left), and Jerry and Carrie Schmitz of Council Bluffs, Iowa, relax lakeside at the Bob Eckdahl Campground.

To be able to float a canoe, kayak or bass boat is the best of all worlds for anglers, and Summit accomplishes that very goal. With 190 acres of water, boat anglers can access deep wooded structure, points, rip-rap and shallow vegetation-covered coves for largemouth bass, bluegill, crappie and channel catfish.

Bank anglers also have it good, with 15 breakwater jetties spread around the lake and deep water within casting distance of each. Grass edges also line the majority of the lake, making wading a viable option as well.

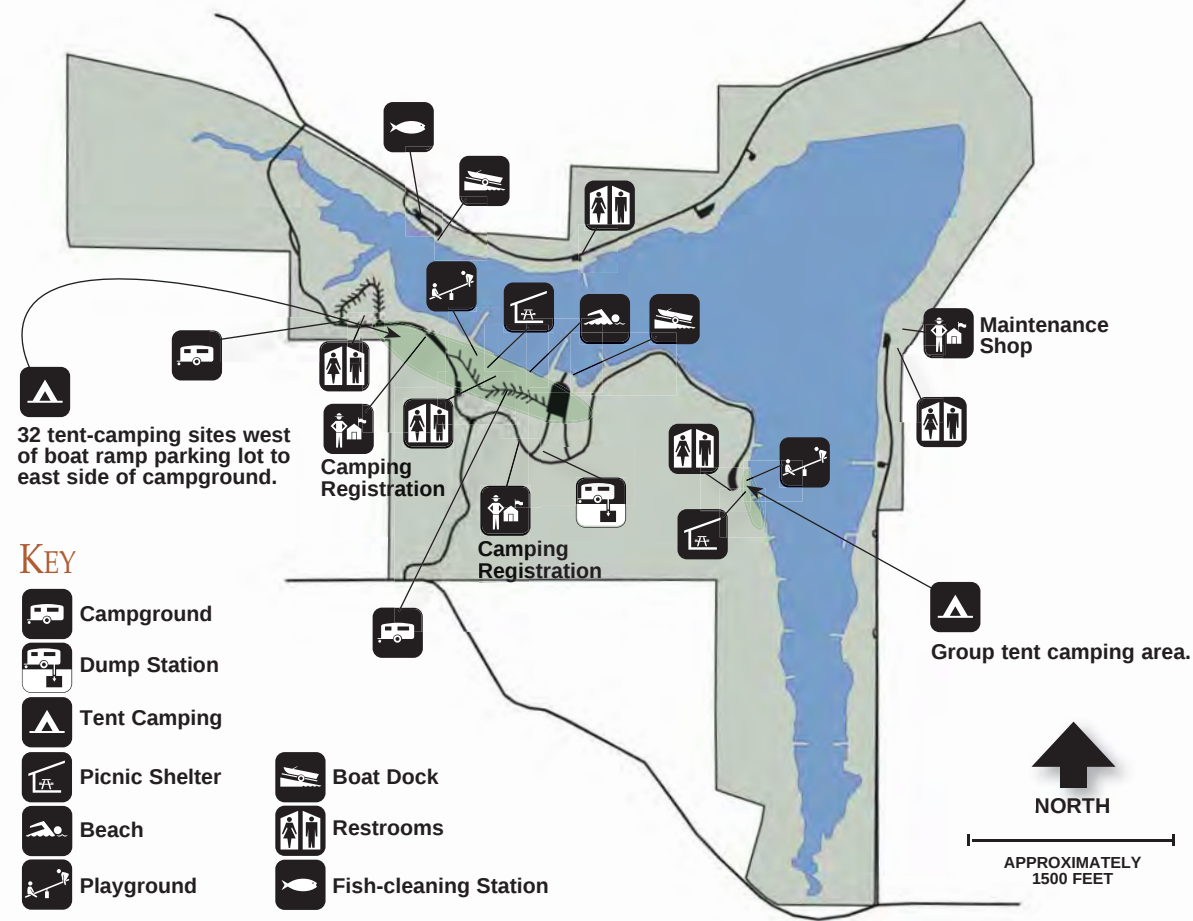
But the area is more than a fishing destination. A swim beach, hiking trail and picnic areas make Summit one of the region's most captivating hotspots. Plus, the area recently got even better with the addition of the Bob Eckdahl Campground in the summer of 2013. The campground, built in honor of Summit's former park superintendent, features electrical hookups and camping pads to make this great destination even greater.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Ice fishing remains popular at Summit Lake because of its underwater structure ideal for vertical jigging for various species, including largemouth bass.

SUMMIT LAKE STATE RECREATION AREA



MAP BY TRISHA SCHLAKE, GIS APPLICATIONS DEVELOPER

A short country drive off of Highway 75 west of Tekamah, Summit Lake is an area with enough for the whole family – or the solo angler looking for a few hours of time on the water a short distance away from Lincoln, Omaha or beyond. ■



Click to make a camping reservation at Summit Lake State Recreation Area.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Brittany (left), Emiley, mom Victoria and Kailey Voss from Tekamah fishing from one of the lake's 15 breakwater jetties.

Long Live Anglers

Text and photos by Jenny Nguyen

For Fred Egley, nearly a centenarian, the fish are still biting and the beer battered fillets are still enticing.

Many men don't live to be 98 years old, let alone have the ability to fish that long. Fred Egley, Jr., a Nebraskan born and raised, is one of those people who can boast both.

I had the pleasure of meeting Egley last winter, shortly after his ice fishing trip with long-time friend Don Kraemer. Kraemer had sent photos to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Norfolk office of his 97-year-old friend sitting on the ice, grinning wide with a fishing rod in hand. These days, Egley mostly fishes in the spring and summer, but after a couple years of being off the ice, Egley took Kraemer's offer to go ice fishing.

"I thought 'well, it might be foolish but I believe I'll try it,'" said Egley, recalling the day. "Don said he would do all the pulling of the sled and the equipment on the ice, and he could park near the lake so I wouldn't have far to go on my walker. But I did catch probably 10 fish before Don got ready to put his equipment into the water," said Egley, chuckling. "It was a pleasant day and we caught a few fish. We kept them and filleted them, as I recall. We ate them and they were good – they always are."



Fishing Is a Way of Life

For dabblers, fishing trips are merely occasional moments that dot a lifetime. For true anglers, life seems to happen around fishing. Egley's story starts in Holdrege, where he was born in 1916 and the fishing "bug" first bit him. "I had some older boy friends that taught me how to fish, but I mostly learned by myself," said Egley. "My dad fished as much as he could, but he was a railroader. He had to be on the road quite a bit."

Egley's love for fishing was also reinforced during visits with his grandparents in Washington. They had a fish

hatchery on Whidbey Island out in Puget Sound. Egley fondly recalled fishing for trout in his grandparents' ponds during his boyhood.

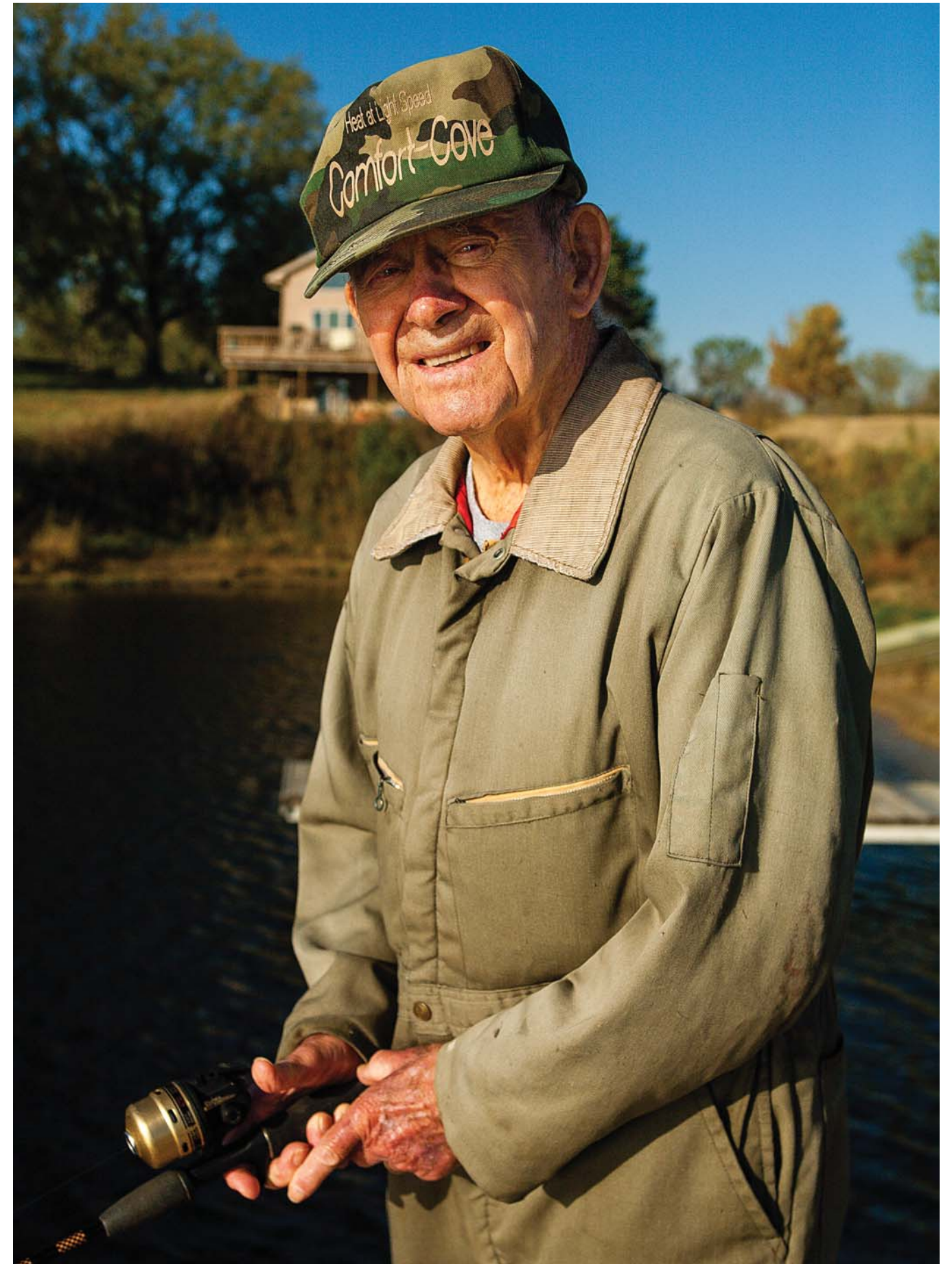
When Egley graduated college, he moved to Norfolk in 1939. His favorite places to fish were by Pierce and Yankton, but Egley also made many memorable trips to Canada, starting in 1955. "No one else went to Canada then.

Everyone else went to Minnesota, because it was the place to fish. But then it became out-fished, so everyone started going up north," Kraemer explained.

Egley remembered traveling with four other men his age on that first trip to Canada, all of whom are now deceased. "Where we caught the fish, they didn't have electricity but they had ice piles covered with sawdust, and we just buried the fish on the ice and covered them. And that's the way we brought them back into Nebraska, in boxes packed in ice. Later years, we filleted them and always brought them home frozen," Egley recalled. Over the years, Egley would make the fishing trip to Canada with 30 to 40 different men, and sometimes with his wife Marie as countless numbers of walleye, northern pike and bass were caught.

"Back then, it cost us \$8 a week to stay in a cabin for four people. That was when I was making \$100 a month. Marie enjoyed the fishing part of it and the camping part very much. We were high school classmates in Lincoln," said Egley. "I lost her in 2004."

Marie and Fred married in 1940, and in 1943 Egley accepted a commission in the U.S. Navy, which slightly altered his fishing activities. He was in the service for two and a half years, and was sent to New Guinea and later the Philippine Islands as commander of an 80-foot patrol torpedo boat during World War II. He and his crew had a close call in the Pacific, when they were attacked by kamikaze bombers



Above: In the 1950s, when Fred Egley was in his 30s, he walked more than one field for pheasants.
Right: Egley often fishes at his son's lake in Norfolk. This photo was taken early last fall when Fred was 97 years old.



After securing a commission in the Navy, Egley went into small boat training at several locations in the United States, including the University of Arizona. Egley is fourth from the left in the second row.

Back of photo: “December 27, 1944. Suicide attack by four Zeros – all hands lost on ship – over 300. Pace and Laker (gunner and cook) killed Dec. 31 by suicide plane while getting chow from Orestes, a PT tender. We shot at the planes but one got to the ship. We hit one that exploded behind my boat – PT-332. The explosion caused our boat to leak but we got to Mindoro Island ok. Bob and Andy were killed after we got to Mindoro Island. I wrote a letter to the parents.”

– Fred Egley

for three days and three nights; Egley lost two men.

“Then I got to come home. Shortly after, I was walking down the street with my wife at the PT base back on the East Coast, and I heard that the atomic bomb had gone off on Japan – and I never had to go back out again.”

Many years later, Egley would be responsible for erecting a Hall of Fame at the Johnny Carson Theatre in town to honor

“My torpedo man was very skillful. I had the men working on a hot day scraping paint off the boat and that’s why he drew that,” said Egley.



Norfolk “boys” who died in service during WWII, the Korean War and Vietnam War.

After the war ended in 1945, and with much to be thankful for, life for Egley went back to normal and the fishing continued. The Egleys had two sons, and looking back, Egley’s fondest memories on the water were with them, as they took a number of trips to Minnesota with other families.

Currently, Egley has seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, to whom he continues to pass on his knowledge and love for fishing.

Fisherman’s Friend

“Don, get that trophy, would you?” Kraemer pulled a big, blue trophy from off the refrigerator and handed it to Egley, who proudly showed it to me. He told me to look at the engraving. I read aloud, “Oldest Fisherman,” and both men laughed.

“I took him to this tournament and he was the oldest fisherman there at Grove Lake up at Royal,” said Kraemer, “He was the oldest by about 15 years!”

“I didn’t seem to have any competition winning that trophy,” Egley quipped.

Egley and Kraemer’s friendship goes back a long time. In fact, it was Egley who taught his younger friend how to fillet a fish. To this day, Egley still gives Kraemer a hard time about how bad he was at it in the beginning. In Kraemer’s defense, the younger fisherman said it was because he’s left-handed, making all of Egley’s instructions completely backward.

Egley and Kraemer shared many exciting fishing moments together, but they also shared the most frightening one, which



Egley and his friends made many trips to Canada starting in 1955, traveling to different camps and areas to catch walleye, northern pike and bass.





Egley with one of his great-granddaughters at his son's lake house in Norfolk. Egley has turned many of his grandchildren into anglers.

happened eight years ago while ice fishing at night in Pierce. "There were several other men in the area and one of them had a three-wheeler," said Egley. "It was dark, and he drove out on the ice and started racing around. The first thing we knew, he was screaming, and he had gone through the ice. It was dark, and we could just tell the direction that he was in by his howling, and we both ran. Of course, I wasn't the fastest runner [being nearly 90 then], but Don had gotten to where he had gone through. He was standing on top of his three-wheeler under the water and he couldn't breathe."

"I had cleats on and I got clear down as far as I could go," continued Kraemer. "There was a flag

on a pole. Fred took that off and handed it to me. I reached out and the kid grabbed a hold of it, and we got him out. We didn't know him. He was just a kid from Madison. Fred brought his sled because he really thought we were going to have a corpse."

Kraemer was also a football announcer, which worked out for Egley, who is a die-hard Husker fan. "Fred was always with me. There we are up at the press box at the Memorial Stadium in Lincoln," said Kraemer, showing me a photo. "I was doing a play-by-play of the state football championship and Fred was up there with me. I took him everywhere. I did it for some 20 years."

Age Is Only a Number

Since retiring in 1981 at age 65 as vice principal of Norfolk Junior High, Egley still tries to fish every chance he gets, and he will continue to do so with Kraemer, his sons and grandchildren

by his side for as long as his body will allow him. Kraemer and I chuckled in admiration as Egley pulled out a recent photo of himself, clad in blue swimming trunks and goggles, about to take a leap off the diving board at the YMCA. Even at 98, he is still able to drive himself to the gym every week. If it wasn't for the pain in his back, he would have no need for the walker.

Having been a coach, gymnastics instructor and PT boat training school instructor in his lifetime, Egley knows the importance of staying healthy and in shape. It's allowed him to stay on

the water all these years.

"Some days, I think I'm a pretty good fisherman and some days not so good," said Egley, with a laugh. "It's still exciting to fish. I don't think I'll ever get bored of it."

"So tell me, Fred, what's the secret to living a long and happy life?" I asked.

His answer was simple: "Keeping in good physical condition is extremely important, and making every effort to be happy with your life and your job." Though easier said than done, that's what has made Fred Egley's life so special. ■



Egley's wife Marie made many camping and fishing trips with Fred. They were high school sweethearts and married in 1940. Marie died in 2004, just a day before the couple's 64th wedding anniversary.



Both Norfolk residents, Fred Egley and Don Kraemer have been close friends for years. The younger Kraemer still takes Egley fishing every chance he gets.

25 for Life

Text and photos by Justin Haag

For a quarter of a century, Boy Scouts have been growing memories while planting trees at Fort Robinson State Park. They gathered this spring to give it one last shot.



Three generations of Fort Robinson State Park tree planters, from left, Jonathan James, Tyler James and Royden James.



Jim Schmitt of Dalton hands out ponderosa pine seedlings for planting in the Spring Creek area of Fort Robinson State Park and Wildlife Management Area.

Jonathan James was barely a teenager when smoke rolled into his hometown of Torrington, Wyoming, on a hot July day in 1989. As the heavy air descended on the community, worried members of the local fire department drove the county roads to find the source of the smoke, he recalls. The search would turn up nothing. In this case, where there's smoke, there wasn't fire.

Southeastern Wyoming residents would later learn the smoke was not from nearby, but rather from a raging forest fire more than 100 miles away

in ponderosa pines of northwestern Nebraska – one that scorched 48,000 acres.

At the time, it went on record as Nebraska's largest forest fire and was viewed as a tremendous blow to the state's Pine Ridge. Despite the toll that was taken on what many consider to be the state's most scenic area, the fire ignited what would become a wealth of fond memories for James, his family and countless others in the coming years. For, without the fire, there would have been no reason for Boy Scouts of the Longs Peak Council to begin

meeting at Fort Robinson State Park (SP) each April.

Looking Back

As the smoke was clearing from the massive wildfire in the late summer of 1989, Scottsbluff physician Lou Kleager began talks with Nebraska Game and Parks Commission officials about getting Boy Scouts involved in helping the tourist destination rebound. With the support of Rex Amack, Commission director, and Vince Rotherham, Fort Robinson SP superintendent, Kleager

began organizing a tree planting effort for the Boy Scouts.

About 300-400 scouts and accompanying adults showed up in the spring of 1990 for the first planting. With seedlings in hand, they toed a line at the bottom of Smiley Canyon. After cued, they planted trees southward at 10-step increments.

In the coming years, the project picked up steam and the attendance multiplied as Girl Scouts and other volunteers joined the effort.

A number of trees from the first year are standing tall today, but future



Troop 5 of Scottsbluff, Nebraska, presents the colors during the flag ceremony to kick off the planting at Fort Robinson State Park on April 5, 2014.

plantings would be more successful. In coming years, the planters took a more random approach to placement so pines in rows wouldn't resemble a tree farm. Leaders also spent more time on instruction to ensure trees were planted with the best chance of survival.

The annual project was supposed to end after five to 10 years, but the popularity served as an impetus. Commission officials decided that if they had a large group willing to plant, they might as well put pines in the ground. The park provided lodging and a meal or two while scouts earned SOAR – Save Our American Resources – patches for their three hours of service.

Of course, one of the greatest challenges has been funding such a massive effort. In addition to support from the Commission, proceeds from the Nebraska Environmental Trust helped keep it going. A total of \$193,250 in grants has helped purchase pine seedlings and patches for the scouts.

The Lesson

From a distance, three boys appear only as dots on the hillside near Spring Creek on this mild April 5 – just a few heads among the army of 1,400 who have arrived to give the project one last shot. They carefully handle a seedling near a decaying ponderosa pine tree that met its demise in 1989. One of the boys uses a tree spade to penetrate the soil, while the others promptly begin measuring the hole and using their hands to make the width and depth just right. When approached, they excitedly tell the steps of planting a tree, from making the hole to creating a mote around the seedling to collect precipitation. “You want it to go in straight,” they advise. “You don’t want a J-root or an L-root.”

After the seedling is planted, they grab some of the decaying wood to place around its base as mulch. It’s just one small example of the circle of life on this scenic region of mixed prairie, rocky buttes and, still, ponderosa pines.

Like the thousands of volunteers before them, the children leave Fort Robinson SP with a hands-on experience in conservation that is better learned in nature than in a classroom. And, they’ve left a positive mark on the landscape and learned a lesson in the power of collective volunteerism.

The Legacy

To the casual observer, it may seem the tree planters haven’t made much of a dent on the land covered with grass and fallen pines. But, this year’s effort of 10,500 seedlings put the 25-year total number of trees planted more than 450,000. Using common survival estimates for pine seedlings, the organizers believe at least 76,000 have lived.

It takes a long time for a ponderosa pine forest to reestablish in such an arid region, especially in areas that burned hot where fire had been suppressed. Even trees that were planted perfectly are greatly challenged

if moisture doesn’t come at the right time. Organizers say all the benefits can’t be measured in number of trees still standing, though.

Mike Morava, Fort Robinson SP superintendent, said the project has not only provided outdoor education and conservation opportunities to thousands of youth, but has positively affected the Pine Ridge landscape with a lasting legacy that will be enjoyed by visitors to the park for generations to come.

Jim Schmitt of Dalton, who serves on the Longs Peak Council’s conservation committee, said the program has forged relationships and connected kids to nature. Not to mention, Fort Robinson SP, with its wide open spaces and diverse activities, has just been a fun place for them to be. He said the timing has been right for a gathering, as troops are looking for a suitable event to help remedy spring fever early in the year.

“We never really knew why this thing took off like it did,” Schmitt said. “We know the Fort is part of the secret. Fort Robinson is a draw.”

Schmitt said one of the greatest rewards has been visiting with past scouts who have returned to the park for a vacation and revisited their planting sites. Many have developed a special connection to the park.

One of the best places to see the fruits of the project’s labor is on the upper elevations of the park’s Smiley Canyon drive, where a marker is dedicated to the project. The informational display is situated near a large stand of healthy pines. In addition to Smiley Canyon and Spring Creek, trees have been planted near Mexican Canyon and Carter P. Johnson Lake.

One More for the Future

A quarter century has passed since that smoky July day in Torrington – the record-setting blaze in the Pine Ridge that has now been surpassed by other wildfires.

Jonathan James, now an assistant scoutmaster for his 11-year-old son Tyler’s troop in Parker, Colorado, returned to Fort Robinson SP for this year’s planting. The planting has become tradition for the James family, as Royden has become a member of

“We never really knew why this thing took off like it did, we know the Fort is part of the secret. Fort Robinson is a draw.”

— Jim Schmitt, Longs Peak Council Conservation Committee

the planning committee and two of Jonathan’s brothers planted trees at the Fort as scouts. Tyler, now in his second year as a Boy Scout, has been planting since his first year as a Cub Scout.

The Jameses are quick to share memories of plantings gone by, including the year they were stranded in a snowstorm 50 miles away, to the many others in which they planted in shirt sleeves.

In a tribute to the event’s storied past, the three-generation trio of Jameses was given the honor of planting the project’s final tree on the eastern side of the Smiley Canyon drive near the pines planted during the first year. “It’s great to be in that area and look at those trees again and think that we had a hand in helping get those trees, that are now 10 to 15 feet tall, in the ground,” Jonathan James said. “It’s great to see them established and replenishing the forest.”

Along with others in attendance, the Jameses described the project’s ending as bittersweet. As pines are beginning to sprout naturally at Fort

Robinson SP, organizers realize it’s time for volunteers to put their effort into other projects.

At a ceremony after the final planting, officials of the Boy Scouts and the Commission relived stories from past plantings. They paid tribute to many who were instrumental in making the event successful, including two park superintendents, Rotherham and Jim Lemmon. The two park leaders are now deceased, but the trees stand as part of their legacy.

All the fun isn’t over for the scouts, though. Even though the tree planting at Fort Robinson SP is ending, Schmitt said scouts of the Longs Peak Council will continue gathering at the park each April. Leaders have discussed future conservation projects there. Some may even plant trees at nearby Chadron State Park where wildfires struck in 2012.

The benefits of the work are just starting to be realized. And, as one storied conservation program has taken root, seeds will certainly be planted for others. ■



Kylie (left) and Karen Godman of Cheyenne plant a ponderosa pine seedling in the Spring Creek area of Fort Robinson State Park and Wildlife Management Area.

River by Tank

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

Tank Down the Elkhorn customers float past Blackshirt Bend, a sandbar where tubing outfitter Uncle Scotts offers sand volleyball and a bar and grill. Trips down the Elkhorn begin at Elkhorn Crossing Recreation Area north of Waterloo.

The first float trip Frank Weitski took on the Cedar River wasn't his kind of trip. But it was part of the inspiration for his second trip, which may well have been the first time anyone ever went "tanking" in Nebraska, or anywhere else, for that matter. More than 20 years later, one of the laziest ways there is to float a river, and one that can be enjoyed by anyone, has spread from the Cedar River to three other Nebraska rivers, and beyond.

Not long after Weitski bought the Hungry Horse Saloon in Ericson in 1986, a friend asked if he wanted to go

down the Cedar. "I said, 'Sure, I need to get away,'" Weitski recalled. So Weitski hopped in a canoe for the first time and the headed downriver. "He's pretty much a health nut, and this is a bit of an exaggeration, but it took us like 15 minutes to get from the bridge up there down to the dock at the lake," said Weitski. "He stuck his paddle in the water and never pulled it out except to switch sides. I never had time to drink a beer ... or smoke a cigarette."

Other than the brevity, Weitski liked his first float trip. And he did need something to do when he had a day off from ranching and running his bars in



Calamus Outfitters of Burwell offers tanking trips on the Calamus River.



Michael Suelter of Ericson, right, is one of the founders of tanking outfitting. He still floats the river for fun, including this end-of season trip for his staff, including Jennifer and Jamie Tuma of Ord.

Ericson and two other towns. When he saw one of his empty steel stock tanks one day, an idea hit him. "I don't think it had ever been done before," he said. "I just thought, 'Well, I'll throw this in the river and see what it does.'"

So he set off with a cooler of cold ones, a grill and a lawn chair. The trip that took "15 minutes" with his buddy lasted hours. It was just what the doctor ordered. So he decided to throw in a picnic table and invite some friends. And they told friends, and before he

knew it he'd bought a few poly tanks and picnic tables and was outfitting tanking trips from his bar. But ferrying tanks and tankers to and from the river turned into something Weitski didn't need: more work.

The solution walked into Weitski's bar one day. Michael Suelter, who ran a hunting outfitting business in Ericson and was floating the Cedar in tanks of his own for fun, offered to buy the tanking business. "It was a Godsend," Weitski said. "I'll still get some

business from it and people will still enjoy it and somebody else will get to do the work."

That was 1987, and Suelter is still at it. His business – Get Tanked – has grown into much more than the part-time, summer venture he'd envisioned. "I thought it would be a weekend deal," he said, "but it kind of sucked me up into full time."

The effortless nature of tanking is what makes the pastime popular and keeps Suelter busy. There's an old

saying on the Niobrara River near Valentine, one of the first and still the most popular river recreation destination in the state, that goes something like this: You don't have to touch your paddle if you don't want to.

You could paddle a stock tank down a river, but hydrodynamics is not the vessel's strong point. And while some tanking outfitters might give you a paddle, others give you a 2x4 or a stick. Each has the same purpose: to push off obstructions when necessary.



Nick Robertson of St. Paul takes his turn jumping into a hole on the Cedar River on a float trip with Get Tanked of Ericson.

For the most part, however, when the steel or plastic tanks hit an obstruction, whether it is the bank, a snag or a sandbar, they usually spin right off and keep floating downriver. The tanks are practically impossible to tip over, so the biggest worry is overhanging tree branches. “You hope someone watches your back,” Suelter joked.

“It’s just different than anything else,” Suelter said. “It’s kind of hard to imagine unless you try. With canoeing, you’re always working. You’ve got to worry about tipping and you’ve always got to steer and paddle. With tanking, you’re on the water and you don’t have to do nothing. You kind of sit back and let the river take you.”

Suelter is now one of four outfitters between Spalding and Fullerton running tanks on the Cedar River, a narrow, winding stream that starts in the Sandhills and flows into farm country before joining the Loup River at Fullerton. Tanking outfitters can also be found on the Calamus, Elkhorn, North Loup and even the Niobrara. Most offer 8- or 9-foot diameter tanks with room for 6 to 8 people.

Rich Mercure of Little Outlaw

in Valentine started offering tanks alongside his canoe, kayak and tube rentals about eight years ago after seeing the popularity rise on other Nebraska rivers. When he did, he found out just how much the “Redneck Yacht Club” reputation, and the euphemism “getting tanked,” was tied to tanking.

“A lot of my competition looked at me funny,” Mercure said. And the first thing the folks at the National Park Service, who manage 76 miles of the Niobrara below Valentine as a National Scenic River, said was “imagine how big of a party they can have in that thing.”

Mercure found himself having to stave off an attempt to ban tanks on the Niobrara. He had been in the river outfitting business since the late 1980s, which is about the time the popularity of floating the Niobrara River, mostly in canoes, exploded. In recent years, he had watched much of the business shift to tubing, especially in the heat of July and August. The party in a tank would be no bigger than the one on a raft of 10 tubes rafts tied together and floating downriver, he contended.

And like outfitters on other rivers had discovered, Mercure found that tanks give people who have no desire to get wet and would never get in a canoe or on a tube a chance to experience the river.

“Generally the conversation with people who want to rent tank starts with, ‘We want to bring grandmother with us, and she’s 78 years old,’” he said. “Grandma can go on this trip, and so can young kids, even toddlers, who are happy to hang their hands over the side and splash in the water.”

“If we didn’t have tanks, those people never would have gotten on the river. This is of more than family thing than a party thing.”

Tanking trips on the different rivers range from two to six hours. All of the rivers get some or all of their flows from groundwater seeping from the Sandhills, meaning their flows, while tapped somewhat by irrigation pumps, are almost always high enough to float.

Jill and Steve Evers started offering trips on the Elkhorn River above Waterloo about six years ago after booking trips with Suelter on the Cedar when they were back in Jill’s

hometown of Spalding. “We had done it up there as a family, and I’m like, ‘Man, this would fly down here,’” Steve said.

They’ve taken note of tanking outside of Nebraska, too. At least two outfitters are offering trips in Iowa, one, ironically, on the Cedar River and another on the Nishnabotna. A businessman who picked up a tanking flyer in Nebraska recently launched his own business on the Yadkin River in Wilkesboro, North Carolina.

But not everyone who hops in a tank and heads downriver is looking to relax. If there is enough water in the river, about 50 teams of four will bring their own tank and paddles and race for cash in the annual Republican River Tank Float at Guide Rock on July 19. Prizes go to the top finishers and the best-decorated tank.

If you’re more of a winter person, you can sign up for the Polar Bear Tank Race on the Middle Loup River in Mullen. It was a balmy 0 degrees



Tankers float toward Waterloo on a trip with Tank Down the Elkhorn.

Tanking Outfitters in Nebraska

Calamus River

Calamus Outfitters, Burwell
308-346-4697
Calamusoutfitters.com

Cedar River

Broken Arrow Wilderness, Fullerton 308-536-2441
Brokenarrowwilderness.com

Cedar River Runners, Spalding
308-223-9525
CedarRiverRunners@gmail.com

Crazy Rayz Tanking, Spalding
701-690-4285
[Crazy Rayz Tanking on Facebook.com](http://CrazyRayzTankingonFacebook.com)

Get Tanked, Ericson
308-653-5469 or 308-750-5974
Gettanked.com

Elkhorn River

Tank Down the Elkhorn, Omaha
402-709-8693
Tankdown.com

Middle Loup River

Glidden Canoe Rental, Mullen
308-546-2206 or 888-278-6167
Gliddencanoerental.com

Niobrara River

Little Outlaw Canoe, Tube and Kayak Rentals, Valentine
402-376-1822
Outlawcanoe.com

and snowing for last year’s event on March 1. Started by Glidden Canoe Rental, a 12-year veteran of tanking outfitting, to draw attention to the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway, next year’s race is set for March 7.

But most folks who go tanking just want to kick back, soak up some sun and sip on a cold something. Many are now paying for the experience. But no doubt there are still some who, like Weitski, have an empty tank of their own, and when the chores are done on the ranch, kick off their boots and slide that old tank into the water. That’s the Nebraska way to float a river. ■

Prescribed Fire Training Exchange

The Niobrara Valley Preserve hosts participants from around the world interested in fire education.

By Amy Kucera

More than 100 students, professional firefighters, researchers and local managers gathered near Johnstown for the fifth annual Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (Trex) at The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve held on March 8-22. Trainees traveled from all over the country, as well as overseas, to conduct prescribed fire operations on 3,200 acres of various private, public and state lands.

"Fire is a need, no matter what type of ecosystem," said Jose Duce, a Helitak Crew Boss from Spain.

As more than 80 percent of vegetation growing in the U.S. is fire dependent, prescribed fire is a key tool shaping and maintaining a healthy natural landscape.

"We are drawing from lessons learned in Great Plains – the neighbors helping neighbors philosophy – to design a way to share responsibilities for implementing controlled burns," said Jeremy Bailey, Trex incident commander and the national fire training coordinator with The Nature Conservancy in Salt Lake City.

Bailey describes the training as an opportunity to "work together to increase the use of prescribed fire to improve forage and habitat for wildlife, range conditions and human safety."

Kelly Corman, coordinating wildlife biologist for the Northern Prairies Land Trust in Bassett, has regular conversations with landowners about the use of fire to control encroaching native and invasive species.

"It's an economic issue in terms of loss of forage, as well as an ecological concern," Corman said.

He regularly invites landowners to join him on "pasture drives" to take a closer look their land, particularly the intrusion of red cedars.

"When you get underneath the trees and look at what's actually growing beneath, it can be eye-opening," Corman said.



A prescribed burn at Smith Falls State Park near Valentine was part of the Prescribed Fire Training Exchange.

This training provides the logistics, planning and organization skills that fire practitioners need to be prepared in all types of situations.

"We have to communicate effectively to use fire responsibly," Bailey said. "In places around the world, we are working with people, including tribes and local communities, to reestablish the use of fire on the landscape."

While in Nebraska, crews had to adjust to the challenges of unpredictable spring weather, including tent camping in sub-zero temperatures and vehicles stuck in the sand and mud.

The training was an opportunity for participants with all levels of experience to acquire more practice. "Education is the key," said Amy Hunnewell, in her fourth year of fighting fires with a hand crew in Utah.

The Conservancy has been using fire for 50 years, with experiential training during the last 20, bringing together numerous agencies and organizations to assist landowners in the use of prescribed burns.

The Preserve is also no stranger to fire. What started as a lightning strike on the property ended in a destructive wildfire that scorched more than

29,000 acres of the Preserve, and more than 62,000 acres in the Niobrara River valley during the "Fairfield Creek Fire" during the summer of 2012.

The training was a collaboration between the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Firestorm, Fire Learning Network, Nebraska Forest Service, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Niobrara Council, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The personal relationships you establish are important. It feels like a family here in Nebraska," Duce said.

Additionally, Pheasants Forever and the Great Plains Fire Science Exchange joined forces to host a second exchange in the Loup River Valley, which included an additional 12 firefighters from Spain.

The use of prescribed fire is growing throughout the nation, and beyond.

"Word of mouth, people are starting to change their minds," Duce said. "We are spreading the news." ■



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◀ This is a picture of me, Paul Leeper (on the right), and my brothers Clay and Matt, sometime around December 1969. I was 12 years old. This would have been the beginning of my passion for hunting with my dad. We lived in Wood River and hunted all the little spots around there. Rarely did we go out to hunt pheasants, we hunted quail and took the roosters that came along. My dad has passed but the memories remain. The picture was taken by my dad, Don Leeper.

— Paul A. Leeper
Grand Island, Nebraska

► This picture is from 1950 or 51. The picture includes my oldest brother Jake Hild (as a very young boy) my uncle Orville Wiemers, my dad Jake Hild and family friend LaVern Ahrens. The hunting likely took place on the family farm north of Elm Creek. My dad and brothers always enjoyed pheasant hunting. Looks like they had a good day.
— Lori “Hild” Marshall
Kearney, Nebraska



◀ Pictured is my dad Virgil Simmons and I fishing on the Blue River in southern Gage County near Holmesville, Nebraska. A farmer would let us pass through his property and we’d camp on a sand bar in the river. Not pictured, but our family’s fishing friends, were the Fred Dorn family of Plymouth. This picture was probably taken in 1955. Fishing and friendship were great!

— Rick Simmons
Lincoln, Nebraska



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

Up, Up and Away

The Search for the Missing Drone.

By Justin Haag, Regional Editor

This is a story about a government agency and its drone. No, not that government agency and not those drones.

It all begins in early 2013, shortly after I was hired by the Game and Parks Commission. The wildlife staff in our district expressed a desire to get aerial video footage of wildlife. With the enthusiasm of a new employee, I researched the issue and found some pretty impressive videos of wildlife on the Internet, filmed using GoPro cameras attached to remote control helicopters.

“Hmm, piece of cake,” I thought. “I’ve played around with remote control vehicles before. It will just be a matter of finding the wildlife to film.”

So, the helicopter would become one of my first equipment requests. I was a little surprised to meet some reluctance by my division administrator for the purchase.

The conversation went something like this:

“We’d like to buy this helicopter to film wildlife,” I wrote in an e-mail.

“Hmm, I’ll have to check on that,” she replied, probably wondering what kind of crazy person had joined her staff and hoping this fantasy would wane.

Somewhere in ensuing requests, I attached a better description and imagery of the plastic item I was requesting, a far cry smaller than the two- or four-seat full-size chopper that she must have had in her mind.

“Oh, you mean a remote control helicopter? Sounds reasonable. Go ahead.”

So, I put in the order for the chopper, evoking visions of grand footage of bighorn sheep, elk, deer and pronghorn grazing on the beautiful terrain of the Panhandle.

Not long after the helicopter arrived, I got a call from wildlife staff members who were at Chadron State Park monitoring bighorn sheep. “Why don’t you bring that helicopter out and we’ll give it a try?”

“It’s a little breezy,” I thought. But that didn’t deter me. I was going to show them that this thing would work.

I arrived to the scene – one of the highest points of the park – and promptly retrieved the helicopter from my truck and readied it for takeoff. Without hesitation, I hit the throttle and up it went.

And went. And went.

The “stiff breeze,” which may be described as a full gale in some parts of the country, carried it away. We watched it spin circles as I tried in vain to get it back to home base. It was becoming obvious the flight was doomed, and my wildlife cohorts were getting antsy as it neared private land. So, I made the decision no pilot wants to make: It was time for a crash landing.

To retrieve the helicopter, we traversed up and down the steep walls of several Pine Ridge ravines that looked a lot smaller from a distance. I even managed to get beat over the



head by the wing of a hen wild turkey that didn’t like me poking my head over the ledge in which she was nesting. Little did we know, that was just the first of many steps and beatings we’d take in search of the helicopter.

I’ll admit, after that day, my confidence was shaken. Notions crept in that I may be past my prime when it comes to remote-control vehicle operation. So, I deferred to my younger wildlife division coworkers and let them take the aircraft to their Alliance office to practice.

About a week went by before I got the call. The helicopter was missing somewhere in a corn field near the office, I was told. Same story: wind carried it up and away. They obtained permission to search from the reluctant landowner, but finding it in the tall corn wasn’t going to be easy, I was told.

Later that day, my editor called from Lincoln. “I’m wondering if you can tell me where I could find a remote control helicopter?” he inquired, making my pulse rise and my palms sweat. “Crap, he must want it for a project,” I thought.

He’d later reveal to me he knew it was missing. Yes, news can travel fast from one end of the state to the other.

Despite a thorough search by several staff members, the helicopter wasn’t found that day. Or the next. Or the next week. Or the next several months.

As months went by, along with rain, sleet and snow, I’d pretty much written off the possibility of finding the helicopter. But, on a January afternoon, I sat down to my desk to receive a message from a coworker. He wanted my phone number so he could text me a photo of the helicopter. I was amazed to see the image of it lying face down in the field, looking much in the same condition the last time I saw it.

The staff member who piloted the craft to its troubled landing is the one who decided to give it one more look, and found it in the field that had been heavily searched during the summer. He tells me that the discovery brought so much joy that he rolled around on the frozen ground among the corn stubble. The batteries were dead, but, much to our surprise, both the helicopter and camera were in serviceable condition.

So, even though it hasn’t resulted in any prize footage, we once again have the helicopter that started it all. Problem is, we’re all too afraid to fly it. ■



PHOTO BY MICAH ELSTROM

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS/VIDEOS

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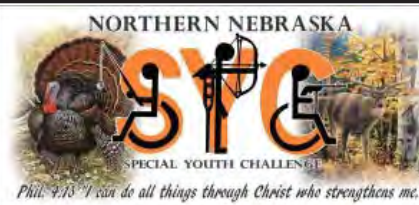
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Wild Chokecherry

An Important Wild Edible of the Great Plains.

By Jenny Nguyen

Early Uses

As a native, wild edible of the Great Plains, the chokecherry is highly valued by the Plains Indians of North America. It was a staple food, so esteemed that in the Dakota language, the month of July is “Chanpa sapa wi,” which translates to “Black-cherry moon,” signifying when the cherries ripen.

The chokecherry was also significant in that the time of their Sun Dance ceremony was determined by the ripening of its fruit. Additionally, historians have found chokecherry seeds in archaeological remains at a historic Pawnee village near Guide Rock, Nebraska, and at 11 of 62 sites in North and South Dakota.

Historically, chokecherry was one of the main ingredients in making pemmican, a mixture of pounded dried meat, fat and fruit, important to the diets of Plains Indians, as well as early trappers, traders and explorers of the region.

Because pitting each fruit was laborious, chokecherries were boiled or dried and pounded with their pits, a process that would alter the harmful hydrocyanic (prussic) acid in the pits and make them safe to eat. Some tribes also cooked chokecherries with their corn in the winter to make a chokecherry/cornmeal mush.

Other parts of the plant also had uses. Chokecherry twigs were stripped of their bark and used as skewers to flavor meat while cooking. Bark could also be boiled to make tea or a remedy for diarrhea.

Among settlers, chokecherries were used to make jellies, jams, syrups, wines and pies. Trappers have been known to wash their traps in a similar decoction to remove scent from former captures.

Identification

The chokecherry’s scientific name is *Prunus virginiana*. It is a shrub or small tree found on hillsides, open

woods, along streams, roadsides, fence rows and ravine banks, in rich, sandy or rocky soils. Trees often grow in thickets, and can grow up to 20 feet, but most stand no more than 12 feet tall. Branches are reddish-brown to dark brown. Leaves alternate, are elliptical in shape with toothed margins, and are dark green on top and grayish green on the underside. Flowers are white with five petals, and bloom in April and May. Fruits are smooth and round, deep red-purple or black when ripe and can be collected mid- to late-summer, and sometimes earlier in hot, dry years.

Chokecherries can often be mistaken for the invasive species buckthorn from Europe, which can make people sick when eaten. Chokecherries hang together in clusters on their own stalk off the main twig, while buckthorn berries grow individually directly on the twig.

Chokecherry trees showing signs of having been sprayed with herbicides, such as yellow, wilted or dead leaves or discolored fruit, should not be picked.

For more information, *Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region* by Melvin R. Gilmore, *Edible Wild Plants of the Prairie* by Kelly Kindscher, and *Wild Seasons* by Kay Young are great references.

Wild Chokecherry Jelly

Ingredients:

- 4 cups of whole ripe chokecherries, twigs and leaves removed
- 1 cup of water
- 1 box of Sure-Jell Fruit Pectin
- ½ teaspoon of butter
- 4 cups of sugar

Directions:

Wash chokecherries thoroughly. Place in a large pot with 1 cup of water and bring to a boil. Then



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

cover and simmer until cherries are soft, about 10 minutes.

With a potato masher, mash cherries to let out its juices as best you can. Then strain mixture through cheesecloth or a jelly strainer; you should get between 4-5 cups of juice. Pour strained chokecherry juice into a large saucepot, add butter and bring to a full rolling boil, stirring constantly. Add sugar, return to a boil and cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Skim off any foam. Immediately ladle mixture into sterilized (boiled) jars leaving ¼ inch at the top. Wipe off jar rims and screw on sterilized (boiled) 2-piece lids.

Place jars in a canner and process for 5 minutes in gently boiling water to seal. Remove jars and place upright on a towel to cool completely. After they’re cool, check seal by pressing down on the lids. If a lid springs back, that jar has not been successfully sealed and will need refrigeration. Allow jelly to set, which usually takes at least 24 hours for me. ■



Read Jenny's NEBRASKAland blog "Midland Musings" to see other stories from this NEBRASKAland Regional Editor.



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Calling Pronghorn

The prairie wildflowers have arrived abundant in the season at the Niobrara Valley Preserve and appear as quiet as the burnt pines overlooking the river below. I am fresh off a river float – a scenic scout in preparation to instruct a kayaking course for the Nebraska Master Naturalist program in the morning. As I unpack my gear, Gerry Steinauer, botanist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, walks by and invites me for an impromptu hike through the east bison pasture with a small group of naturalists. The urge to grab my camera overwhelms me but I make haste and reach for my notebook instead.

As we walk the sandy slope to the meandering prairie bordering the Niobrara River, he begins to photograph wildflowers in various angles and poses. Clouds bunch in an evening sky as golden as the tops of the hoary puccoon in bloom that he kneels before, camera in hand.

He steps through a buffalo wallow and continues to search for picturesque blossoms in the impeccable light of the waning day.

“What’s that?” I cut through the Sandhills solitude, seeking his botany expertise.

“An aster,” he says nonchalantly. “But I call it ‘old plainsman.’”

He stops to brush away the dried grass stems obstructing his camera view.

“Searching for a calendar girl?” I jest, studying the patch of prairie he has chosen for his composition.

“I just like how the blue and yellow of the flowers look, growing together,” he says, gazing through the glass. Crickets chatter softly as the sunset continues to unfold. I scribble a few notes and quotes as we hike higher up the hill, amid the yucca and larkspur and prickly poppy “... and that?” I implore.

“Six-weeks fescue,” Steinauer says as he picks up his gear and walks a few steps forward, “It takes five weeks to bloom,” he jokes.

“This is way easier than carrying around a field guide,” I say, scanning the prairie for other unknowns. He is concentrating on capturing the brilliant expanse of colored cloud layers converging with the prairie before us.

“Look! Pronghorn!” he points.

Spotted, they come to a sudden halt. Steinauer shuffles his camera, adjusts his view and focuses in. A breeze nods the grasses.

“Don’t move, animals,” he whispers.

They snort and wheeze, as if to scoff at us. Then, just as suddenly, they startle and flee.

“No, don’t go,” I say aloud. “C’mere kitties!” I cry out, and they pause. From my seat of grass, I continue calling, “Here kitty kitties!”

They turn and trot toward us, then stop and pose. The other naturalists have silently gathered nearby, all with cameras fixed, zooming in on the moment.

We sit together on the hill and stare out unto the prairie, until the curious pronghorn startle and scatter. Eventually, we all wander on. I am the last to leave, as I slow my pace and look back until the stately creatures have vanished, as the sun has, entirely from sight.

I should have grabbed the camera.

Amy Kucera, Associate Editor
June 21, 2013



That day, someone *with* a camera took this photo of Amy jumping into the Norden Chute.

PHOTO BY RANDY RUPERT



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