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JUNE 2025



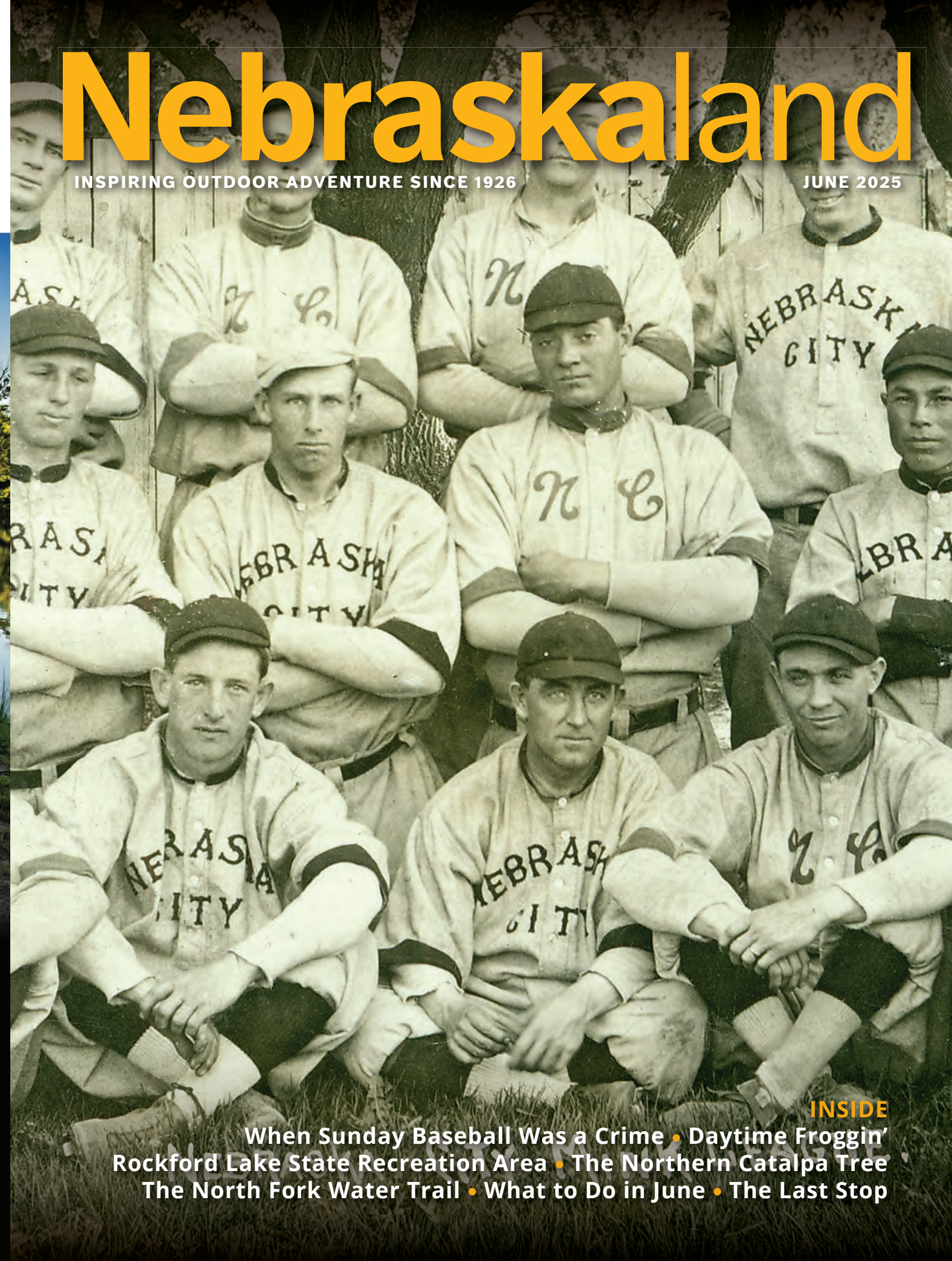
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Cover: The Nebraska City Foresters, circa 1910-1913.
It was illegal to play baseball on Sunday in Nebraska
until 1913. See story on page 30.

NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This page: The sun sets beneath a passing thunderstorm
at Cottonwood Lake State Recreation Area near
Merriman.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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Yucca plants are in bloom. GERRY STEINAUER

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Please include your postal address and telephone number. Letters may be condensed and edited. Photographs are also welcome.

JUNE MOON

A waning gibbous moon hangs over the rugged landscape of Buffalo Creek Wildlife Management Area in the Wildcat Hills.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND





Wes Batman of Gretna holds a channel catfish he caught while fishing at Flanagan Lake in Douglas County. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

SHALLOW CATS

By Jeff Kurrus

Channel catfish are Nebraska’s last spawners, making them the ideal fish to catch during the summer months — as long as the angler understands what’s going on beneath the water’s surface.

“Catfish spawn in July,” said Nebraska Game and Parks Commission fisheries biologist Daryl Bauer, “which means in June they’re moving shallow.”

Males are the first to arrive, looking for cavities, holes and even riprap to stake their claim. This is when Bauer and his colleagues get a number of reports of surprise catfish catches as males guard their newfound territory and become aggressive as they attempt to coerce a female.

The aggression continues as males fight off other males and even drag females into the shallows, leading to many of the summertime scars that anglers often see on these fish when they’re caught.

“You’ll see all kinds of wounds on catfish,” said Bauer. “They’re very rough on each other.”

To use this aggressive behavior to your advantage, keep

baits shallow and off the lake bottom. Close to the bottom is fine, but these predatory fish will gladly feed just above the riprap or submergent vegetation. Topwater also works well, with reports coming from across the state of catfish destroying any number of topwater options during the spawning season.

“Fresh-cut bait is always good,” said Bauer. “Bait doesn’t have to sit in the yard until it stinks. Cut up a bluegill and use it.”

Anglers should also be active, similarly to flipping or pitching for largemouth bass.

“Take a jig and fill it with nightcrawlers,” Bauer added. “This works especially well later into June and July when fish are sitting on the nest. Dangle it right in front of their face.”

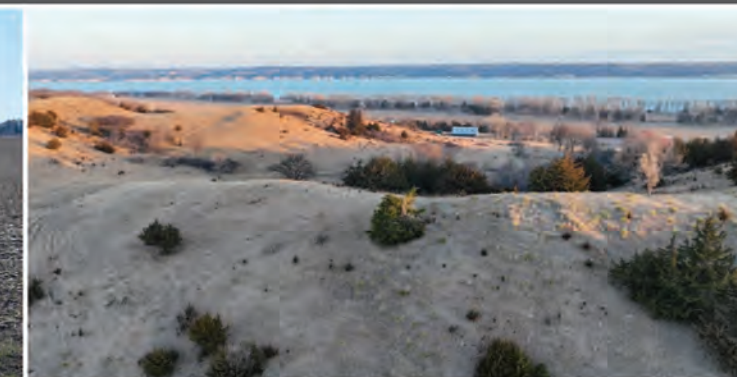
These “surprise” catches should encourage anglers to spend some time in the shallow water each year, knowing that middle-of-the-lake casts aren’t nearly as effective. Rest the shoulders and pitch just a few feet from the bank — some of the lake’s biggest fish are just a stone’s throw away.

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THE DECEPTIVE CONEFLOWERS

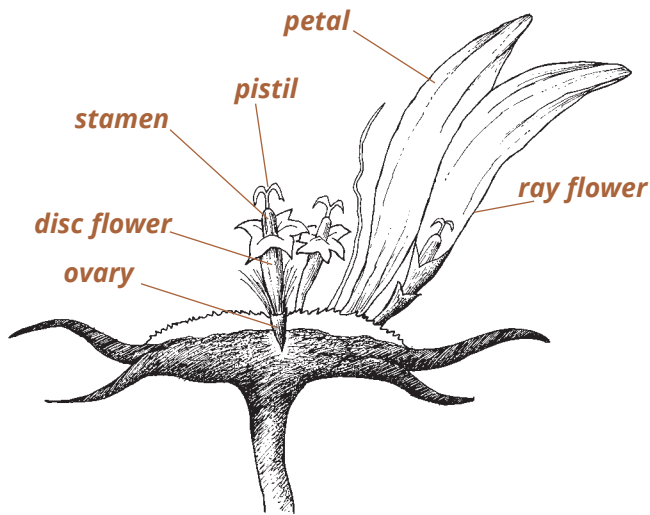
By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

The prairie coneflower and pale purple coneflower are native perennials that grow in dry to moist prairies in Nebraska, while the non-native purple coneflower is commonly planted in flower gardens and prairie restorations. In early summer, each coneflower stem develops a single flower head with a ring of pink to rose-red, spreading to drooping petals.

Like most wildflowers, the coneflowers' showy, colorful blooms are designed to attract pollinators, mainly butterflies and bees. However, these plants, along with other members of the sunflower family, use a bit of trickery. What looks like a single large flower is actually a cluster of many small flowers, arranged to mimic one big bloom.

About 60 to 70 million years ago, when sunflowers first appeared on Earth, their flowers were small and drab. Back then, their pollen was carried between plants by the wind, so there was no need for nectar or bright colors to attract pollinators. But as insects diversified and more became pollinators, it became more efficient for the plants to rely on them instead of the whimsies of the wind. This shift led to more seeds and better survival.

To attract pollinators, coneflowers adapted by arranging their small flowers into a domed, reddish-brown disc, with those in the outer ring developing petals. The tubular, petal-



The typical flower structure of a sunflower family member.
ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND

less disc flowers contain both male, pollen-producing stamens and a female pistil that produces a seed. Surrounding them, the ray flowers — those with petals — are sterile, serving only to attract butterflies and bees.

The continued survival of coneflowers shows that deception has its rewards.



Purple coneflower growing in a flower garden on Nebraska Game and Parks Commission property in Lincoln.
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



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Daytime frogging can be just as productive as midnight frogging. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

DAYTIME FROGGIN’

By Jeff Kurrus

There is a 10 p.m. cap for some people. Regardless of how late they slept that day, by the time the local news hits the TV, they may not make it to the weather.

Yet they still have a desire for pan-fried frog legs. No fear, early sleepers, for daytime bullfrogging can be just as productive as its midnight counterpart of flashlights and hand-grabbing. There are just a few more things to consider.

Beware the Hunters

A bullfrog’s field of vision is nearly 180 degrees, allowing them a panoramic view. Because of this trait, nighttime hunters shine lights into their eyes, disabling their most powerful attribute. But there’s no amount of light during the day that will offer a hunter the same assistance. Therefore, approach from behind when bank hunting, maintaining as much distance as possible before striking.

What to Strike With

Is daytime hand-grabbing possible? You bet, especially at dawn and dusk, but a preferred method is casting or even cane-poling for them. The first tactic involves using some sort of topwater plug, such as a scum frog, and casting toward the frog from a good distance. The key to this method is the lure itself. Its body has to be soft enough for the frog to get it in its mouth and for the hunter to set the hook. Hard-bodied frogs are often ineffective. If the frogs are on sand or other bare banks where vegetation is low, then traditional treble-hooked lures, such as torpedoes or other prop lures,

also work. From the bank, approach the frog from behind with a cane pole baited with anything from a scum frog to nightcrawlers and dangle this offering in front of the frog. Because of their extreme aggressiveness, bites will be plentiful. Using nets is another effective tactic, but there’s just something about talking a frog into striking a lure that conjures a smile.

Time of Day

If a hunter maintains distance, and can stay out of eyesight, then time of day doesn’t matter. Later in the summer, it’s common to see bullfrogs on the surface near mats of aquatic vegetation. Casting or cane-poling will continue to work in these circumstances.

New Water

How bullfrogs and other amphibians find water is an amazing act of nature. New water can be golden for frogs, so access it if possible. Early-season trips are also best, such as this time of year west of Highway 81, where the season is open year-round, or on Aug. 15 east of Highway 81, where the season is open until Oct. 31 and a minimum length of 4½ inches from snout to vent is required. Regardless of when the desire to hunt begins, just know it doesn’t have to be at midnight to be productive. Check out the Fishing Guide at OutdoorNebraska.gov for more information.



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Savory hushpuppies made of catfish and sweet corn. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

CATFISH HUSHPUPIES

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Why are hushpuppies called hushpuppies? One often-told story tells of a group of anglers or hunters cooking at camp. In an effort to quiet their excitable, hungry dogs, the cooks fried up morsels of cornmeal bread as a treat, thus hushing the puppies and quieting their evening.

While most hushpuppy recipes I’ve seen are sweet, often enjoyed with honey or syrup, I decided to make a savory meat-filled version. This recipe is perfect for using up those odds and ends in the freezer or fish that’s slightly freezer burned.

Although traditional hushpuppies include cornmeal, I skipped it. Instead, I added sweet corn kernels to the batter. Use drained canned corn if you have to, but we all know nothing beats Nebraska summer sweet corn.

Servings: 2-4
Prep Time: 40 minutes
Cooking Time: 20 minutes
Ingredients:
• 1½ pounds boneless catfish fillets

- Salt, to taste
 - Vegetable oil for frying
- Batter**
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
 - 2 tsp. baking powder
 - ½ tsp. paprika
 - ½ tsp. sugar
 - 1 tsp. onion salt
 - ¼ tsp. garlic salt
 - ¼ tsp. cayenne pepper
 - 1 tsp. Lawry’s Seasoned Salt
 - 2 green onions, finely chopped
 - 1 large egg, lightly beaten
 - ¼ cup sweet corn kernels
 - ½ cup buttermilk, plus extra
- Dipping Sauce**
- ½ cup mayonnaise, preferably Kewpie
 - Hot sauce, to taste
 - 5 dashes Worcestershire sauce
 - 1 tsp. Cajun/Creole seasoning, such as Tony Chachere’s
 - 1 tbsp. honey

1. Season catfish fillets with salt. Heat 1 tablespoon of oil in a pan and sear fish until cooked through. Break

up fish into very small pieces and set aside to cool.

2. In a large bowl, combine flour, baking powder, paprika, sugar, onion salt, garlic salt, cayenne and Lawry’s seasoned salt. Then add chopped cooked catfish, green onion, beaten egg and corn. Finally, mix in buttermilk and stir until a sticky, thick batter forms. Use more or less buttermilk as needed.

To test for seasoning, cook a small dab in a pan with oil and taste. Then cover the bowl and chill for at least 30 minutes in the refrigerator.

3. Meanwhile, combine dipping sauce ingredients. Chill until ready to use.

4. Heat frying oil to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Lightly grease a spoon with oil or cooking spray to prevent sticking. Use the spoon to scoop and drop ping-pong-ball-sized fish batter into the hot oil, and fry until golden on all sides, flipping as needed. Do not crowd the pan or fryer. Drain and serve warm with dipping sauce.



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Rockford Lake SRA

Forever Away

Story and photos by Jeff Kurrus

Skarlett Jones of Gretna and Delaney
Madson of Lincoln fish from the bank
at Rockford Lake State Recreation Area
in Gage County.



‘How have I not been here before?’ I said as I pulled into the park’s entrance, camera in my lap as I eyed the blues of the water and greens from the surrounding forest.

“Uh, where are we?” said Skarlett Jones, a family friend who, along with her friend, Delaney Madson, had decided an afternoon away from the metro to relax and fish a little seemed like a fantastic idea.

“Rockford Lake,” I replied, sitting atop a hill overlooking the state recreation area as a lone boat and accompanying skier made waves across the water while one RV sat in the campground.

“It’s gorgeous,” Jones said, her eyes surveying everything in front of her.

The area was so beautiful that questions naturally began to form. How have I not fished here before? Is this area always so void of people? Is this place new?

No, not new. Just new to me.

The History of Rockford Lake

The Rockford Township was founded by William Girl in 1858 and is named for the rock quarries near Mud Creek. More than a century later, Mud Creek featured a prominent role in the development of Rockford Lake State Recreation Area. According to records from the Gage County Historical Society, the Mud Creek Watershed in the Rockford Township became Nebraska’s first watershed to include recreation as an additional primary purpose.

The lake had originally been planned as a 62-acre flood-control structure, but the Small Watersheds Act of 1962 broadened its scope, increasing its size for recreation purposes as well.

In a 1970 *Lincoln Journal-Star* article, Dean Terrill writes: “What distinguishes the 150-acre recreation jewel [Rockford Lake State Recreation Area] is the funding behind it, first of its kind in Nebraska.”

The article states that the combination of federal and Game and Parks Commission funds, a 50/50



TOP LEFT: A group of teenagers swim at Rockford Lake State Recreation Area.

BOTTOM LEFT: Midweek boaters pulling tubers have the entire lake to themselves.

BELOW: Delaney Madson of Lincoln fly-fishes from the bank at Rockford Lake SRA.



split, was unique. The price tag of \$300,000 was to pay for the land and gravel roads, as well as the beach, boat ramp, two shelter houses and picnic tables.

Construction began in 1964, and Rockford Lake State Recreation Area opened in 1970. “Rockford,” Terrill wrote, “will further Gage County’s claim as ‘the Watershed capital of Nebraska.’”

And judging from a photo of the packed beaches on Memorial Day weekend that year, that statement seemed to hold true.

Forever Away

On the day we visited, however, there were no crowded beaches or campgrounds. Just a couple of kids taking in the sun between casts. Meanwhile, a group of other teenagers

goofed around in the water nearby while a handful of RV campers enjoyed the afternoon quiet.

Usually on days like this, I approach and ask everyone about their day. But I already knew that answer. They had come to Rockford Lake State Recreation Area to get away from everything. To ski, to fish, to hike, to simply be — and do so just a few miles from Beatrice and what seemed like forever away.

Rockford had been constructed with recreation in mind. And sometimes recreation is best spent in a quiet place away from everyone, including a newcomer like me. 

For more information about Rockford Lake State Recreation Area and the rest of the Nebraska park system, visit OutdoorNebraska.gov/Parks.

TOP RIGHT: Skarlett Jones of Gretna sits lakeside at Rockford Lake SRA in Gage County.

BELOW: People recreate at their RV campers at Rockford Lake.



Rockford Lake State Recreation Area consists of approximately 300 land acres around a 150-acre lake. The area offers boating, fishing, picnicking, swimming and camping.





TOP RIGHT: With 90 picnic tables on-site, there is always a place to have a picnic or chat at Rockford Lake SRA in Gage County.

LEFT: Kayakers float at Rockford Lake.

Amenities

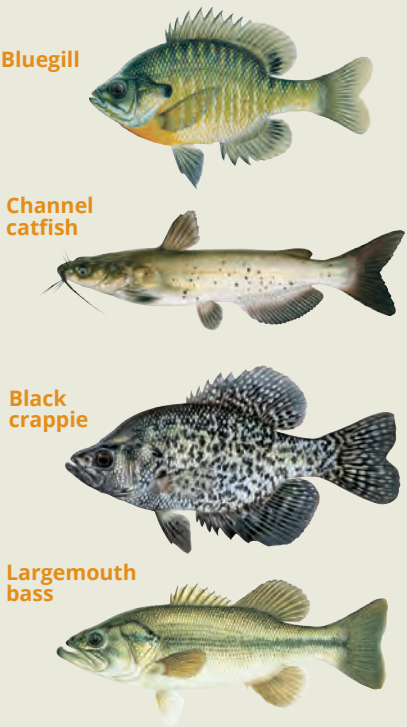
Rockford's first-come, first-served shaded campground offers a variety of camping options. It offers 30 camping pads with 30- and 50-amp electrical hookups, as well as two camping pads and 40 non-pad sites without electricity.

Water and vault toilets are available, but showers, modern restrooms and a dump station are not. The nearest dump station is at Rock Creek Station SRA, a 45-minute drive away.

The lake holds a variety of fish species, including bluegill, channel catfish, crappie, largemouth bass and other species.

A 1-mile hiking trail, swim beach, 90 picnic tables, 88 grills and two shelters are also available.

For more information about parks near Rockford or across the state, visit OutdoorNebraska.gov/parks/find-a-park.



FISH ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOSEPH TOMELLERI

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Summer is here, with great fishing, camping and plenty more to do outside. Find a loved one and try one of these opportunities this month! 📅



Boat and fish at Lake Minatare

All month | Lake Minatare State Recreation Area

At over 2,000 acres, Lake Minatare is the Panhandle’s largest body of water. June is a prime time for both boating and fishing at this popular destination, with many visitors combining the two. Boaters and campers alike love the wooded scenery, and in June, water levels typically reach the tree-lined shores, offering prime fishing opportunities for species like walleye and channel catfish. Learn more and make reservations at OutdoorNebraska.gov.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Participate in the Nebraska Bumble Bee Atlas

June 1 – Sept. 30 | Statewide

Have fun exploring, learning and helping wildlife with this fun community science project. Since 2019, hundreds of Nebraskans like you have participated in the Nebraska Bumble Bee Atlas, helping scientists document bumble bees across the state. Participating is easy, and no previous experience is required. Attend an in-person training in June and July or use the online training portal to get up to speed. Learn more and sign up at BumbleBeeAtlas.org. BRIANNA NUGENT

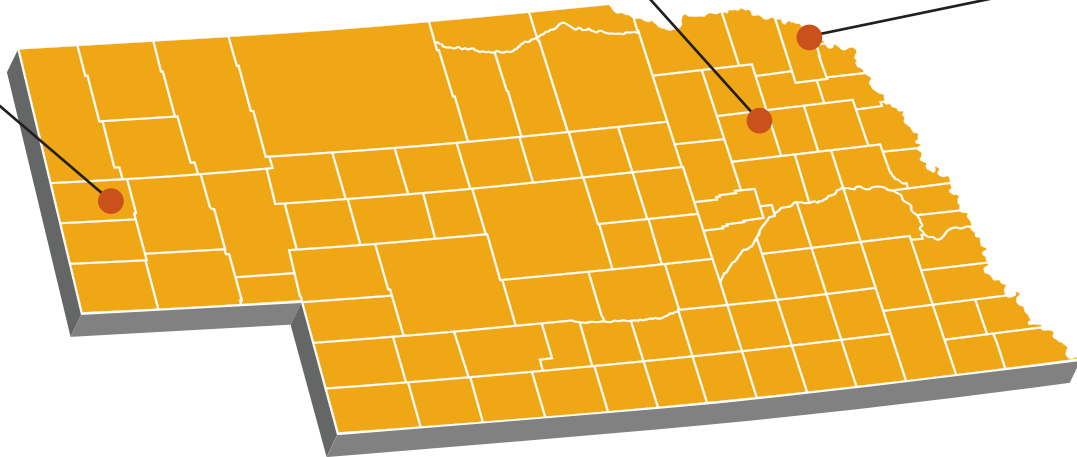


Attend a ‘Moon Walk’ on the Cowboy Trail

June 11, 7:30 p.m. – 9:30 p.m. | Meet at the Cowboy Trail parking lot about 5 miles west of Norfolk

Help celebrate 30 years of the Cowboy Trail with a fun evening stroll. The “Stars, Strolls & S’mores” event on June 11 kicks off with a scavenger hunt and hike to Broken Bridge, followed with s’mores by the fire and presentations from local experts. This event is free and open to the public, so invite your friends and family. See more details and what to bring at Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



What to Do in June



Attend a bioblitz

June 21, 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. | Ponca State Park

If you enjoy exploring nature, this event is for you. A bioblitz allows you to work alongside wildlife experts, discovering and documenting as many plant and animal species as possible in a single location across a short period of time. No experience is necessary, all ages are welcome, and the data you collect contributes to real scientific research. Bring water, sunscreen and bug spray, and dress for the outdoors, with comfortable walking shoes. For details on different sessions throughout the day, see the calendar entry at Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov. RENAE BLUM, NEBRASKALAND

Catch smallmouth bass in the Missouri River

Peak is May and June
Northeastern Nebraska

The Missouri River in northeastern Nebraska — specifically the stretch above Lewis and Clark Lake — is considered the best smallmouth bass fishery in the state, and right now is a peak time to catch them. As they prepare to spawn, the bass will be relatively shallow, active and easier to catch. Bring your boat and have fun exploring this wild stretch of river, which changes constantly, forever providing new things to find. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



When Sunday Baseball Was a Crime

By
David L. Bristow,
Nebraska State
Historical
Society

The
Nebraska City
Foresters,
circa
1910-1913.
NSHS, RG3064-21

NEBRASKA CITY MINK LEAGUE. NEBRASKA CITY, NEB.

It was illegal to play baseball on Sunday until 1913. It was one of Nebraska's so-called "blue laws" restricting Sunday activities.

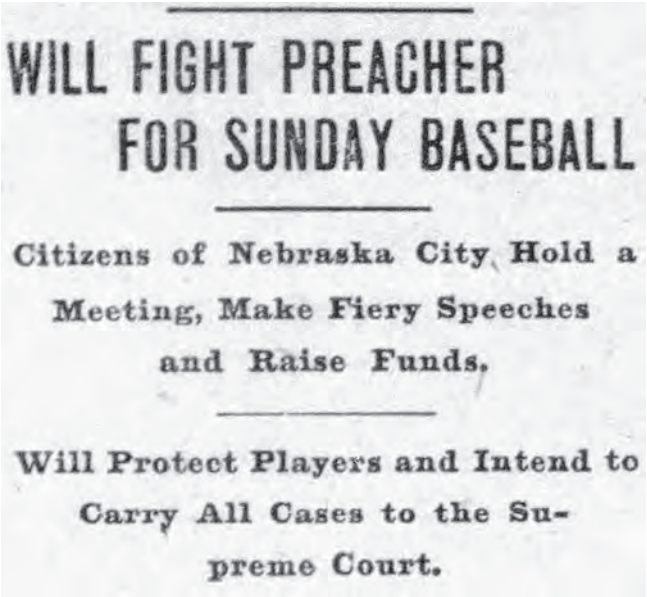
Nebraska City ignored the law until a local group called the Law & Order League pressured the sheriff in 1902. But when the sheriff tried to stop a game, "an angry crowd surrounded him and hustled him violently," in the words of the Nebraska City *Daily Tribune*. "His revolver was taken away from him."

Nevertheless, the sheriff arrested four players and took them to the courthouse to post bond. "A number of the city pastors were at the justice's office and when they left, friends of the players threatened and jostled them," and one man was hit with a thrown rock.

Baseball was unquestionably America's sport. It was also an intensely local sport. The major leagues existed, but without TV or even radio, the only way to enjoy a game was to attend in person. Many Nebraska towns had minor league or semi-pro teams, and even relatively small towns recruited out-of-state players.

But passion for baseball ran up against an older tradition of keeping the Sabbath. A state statute prohibited not only baseball, but any "sporting" on Sunday, including hunting and fishing.

Various Nebraska teams were arrested at one time or another, but some cities did not enforce the law. In 1902, the



Omaha Evening World-Herald, July 15, 1902.



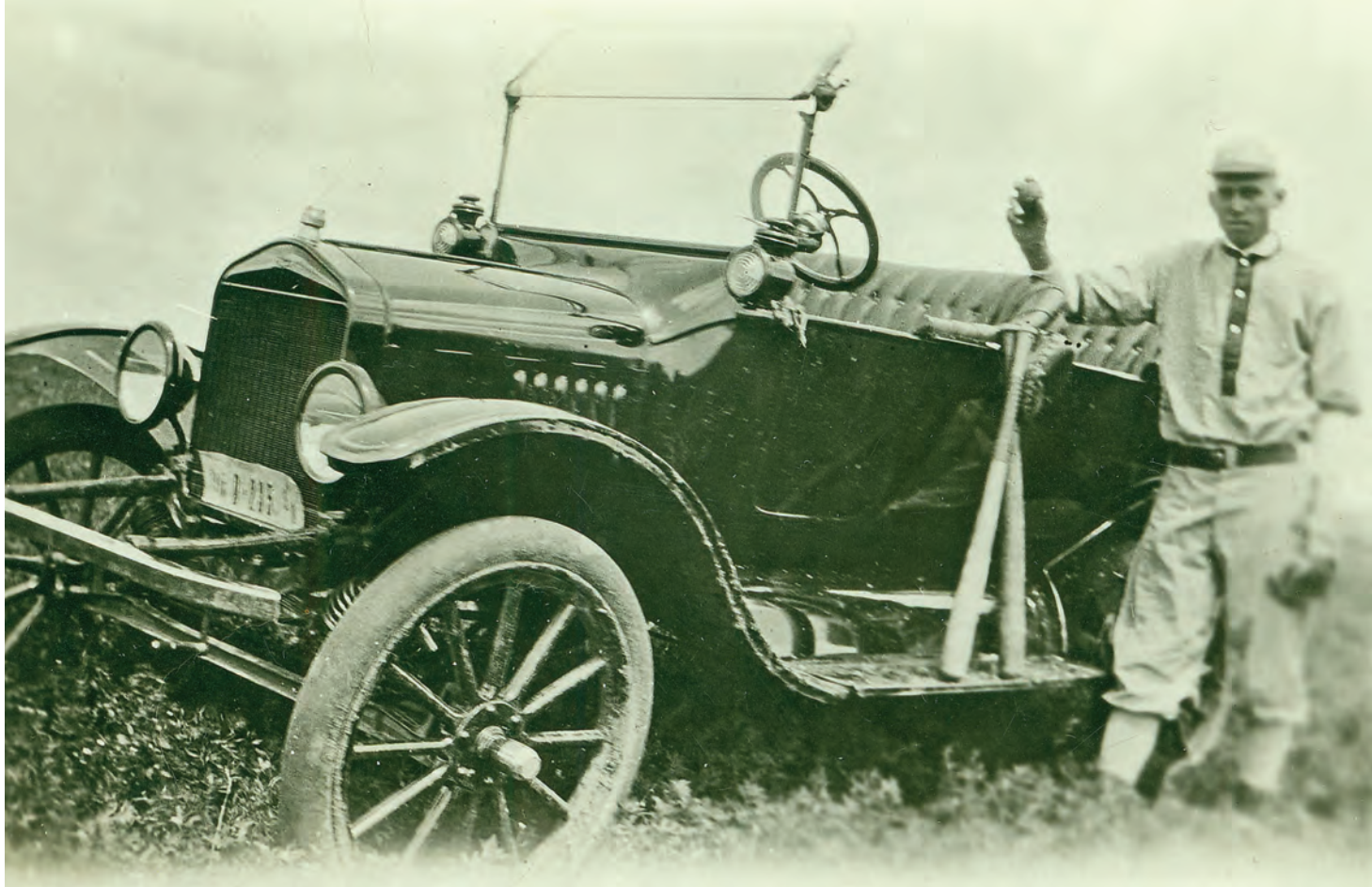
"Look Who's Here Again," *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 12, 1913.

Lincoln Evening Journal noted that "Omaha is the principle one, but there everything is wide open on that day." ("Everything," meaning bars, brothels and gambling halls — Omaha had a reputation.) The *Journal* complained that the "inability to play Sunday baseball has kept Lincoln out of any league for some years," because teams struggled to remain solvent without the big crowds a game could draw on Sunday.

Back in Nebraska City, the sheriff eventually ticketed the entire team, but a local judge threw out the case. The Otoe County Attorney appealed all the way to the Nebraska Supreme Court, which upheld the law and cited the Bible's fourth commandment in doing so.

After that, Sunday baseball became as much of a hot-button issue as the death penalty or votes for women. In 1913, the Nebraska legislature changed the law to allow counties and towns to make their own decisions. Baseball bans and other Sunday laws began to go away as Nebraskans let their neighbors decide for themselves how to spend their day of rest. [N](#)

Visit NSHS's website at history.nebraska.gov.



Unidentified ballplayer with Nebraska plates on his car, 1910s. NSHS RG3064-0-20



Opening day in Falls City, Thursday, May 18, 1911. NSHS RG3064-0-4

The Natural History of the Northern Catalpa Tree

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

The northern catalpa is a tree you likely recognize but may not know by name. Perhaps you've seen it adorned with striking clusters of large, white flowers, standing out like a snow cone amid otherwise green woodlands. Or maybe, as a child, you were grudgingly sent outside to rake up its huge fallen leaves cluttering the yard. Most memorably, you and your friends may have ventured into the woods, plucked a few of the catalpa's cigar-shaped seed pods and pretended to smoke them.

The tree is native to the central Mississippi River valley where it is called the Catawba tree (cuh-tah-buh). For reasons unknown, early settlers

or botanists in this region named the tree after the Catawba people, a local Native American tribe. The northern catalpa has been widely planted in the eastern half of Nebraska, mainly as an ornamental and as a source of fence posts, where it has escaped cultivation and now grows in the wild in moist bottomlands with well-drained soils.

Several years ago, I gathered seed pods from a catalpa tree growing near an abandoned house up the road from our farm. I planted seeds in pots and transplanted several seedlings into our yard. I've been impressed by the trees' rapid growth, shapely form and diversity of pollinators attracted to the flowers. Recently, I read that catalpa

worms, a prized catfish bait, live on the trees. This summer I plan to pay even closer attention to this interesting tree ... as I love to catfish.

Natural History

The northern catalpa is a stout-trunked tree that, in Nebraska's drier climate, can reach about 40 feet in height and live up to 150 years in age. Its pale-colored wood is weak yet durable when in contact with the soil, making it historically popular for fence posts. To form the best post, saplings were cut back to the ground after the first or second year of growth and then only one or two of the best sprouts were left un-thinned to grow to post-size.

The tree's telltale heart-shaped leaves can reach an impressive 4 to 10 inches long and 3 to 8 inches wide. The bell-shaped, 2-inch-long flowers bloom from late May to mid-June. The seed pods, which can reach an amazing 20 inches in length, ripen from green to purplish-brown in late summer and hang from the tree through winter. These distinctive pods give the tree two of its other common names: the Indian bean tree and cigar tree.

The nectar-rich flowers attract a variety of pollinators including hummingbirds, native bees and bumble bees, and night-flying moths. The lower flower petal has purple lines and yellow blotches that act as guides



Northern catalpa seed pods release their many flat, winged seeds, which the wind spreads in late winter or early spring. GERRY STEINAUER



A young northern catalpa tree in bloom at the author's farmyard in southeastern South Dakota. GERRY STEINAUER



Northern catalpas bloom for just a few weeks in late spring. Native Americans and early settlers reportedly used the flowers in herbal remedies for respiratory problems and infections. GERRY STEINAUER

for incoming pollinators, which are drawn to the blooms by their sweet, citrus- or jasmine-like fragrance. Honeybees also swarm to catalpas, making the trees a beekeeper’s delight.

In Nebraska, the northern catalpa can only be confused with its cousin, the southern catalpa. The latter is native to the Gulf Coastal states, is less suited to the rigors of the Plains and has been planted sparingly in our southeastern towns and cities. A few distinguishing characteristics: the northern catalpa has larger and more pointed leaves, larger but fewer flowers, and longer, thicker seed pods than the southern catalpa. Interestingly, their leaf scents also

differ — when crushed, northern catalpa leaves emit a sweet fragrance, while their southern cousin’s leaves produce a foul odor.

While the southern catalpa has never escaped cultivation in Nebraska, the northern catalpa escape into the wild has raised concerns among conservationists. For instance, along the central Platte River valley, the tree is taking hold along wet riverbanks and sandbars, displacing native vegetation.

In addition, this stretch of the Platte River is critical spring roosting habitat for migrating sandhill and whooping cranes. There, the open, sandy channel provides the birds with a clear view of approaching predators

and encroaching trees obstruct this visibility, reducing the cranes feeling of safety and potentially limiting their use of the area. Local conservation groups are cutting and grinding larger catalpas and other invasive trees on the riverbank and disking sandbars to uproot saplings in an effort to maintain an open channel.

Catalpa Worms

The catalpa sphinx moth is named for its caterpillars, called catalpa worms, which feed exclusively on catalpa leaves, sometimes defoliating entire trees. The moth has migrated northward and westward



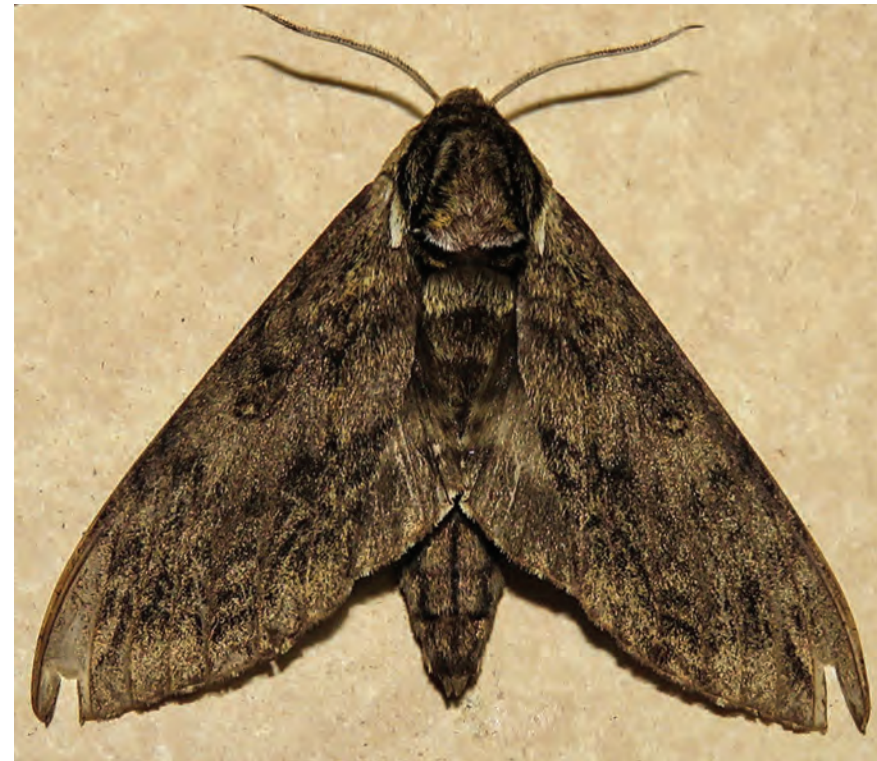
A catalpa worm feeding on catalpa leaves. GETTY IMAGES

in length and are usually black on the back with a broad yellow stripe along the side. They have a single thorn-like, black horn at the tail end. When fully developed, the caterpillars drop from the leaves and burrow into the soil where they overwinter, metamorphosize and emerge as adult moths the following spring.

In the South, these caterpillars are called Catawba worms, and anglers prize them as bait for bass, bluegill, catfish and other fish. Fishermen pick the worms individually from the underside of leaves where they hang

out or shake a branch or tree to collect entire coffee cans full of the fallen worms. Some anglers turn the worms inside out on the hook, claiming that their soft, juicy insides better entice fish. Lastly, it’s rumored that smart fishermen never reveal the location of their favorite Catawba worm tree.

It’s likely that northern catalpa trees will continue to spread in Nebraska. How much of a nuisance they become remains unknown. On the positive side, in the coming decades, Nebraska anglers may have a new go-to fish bait. [N](#)



Catalpa sphinx moths are most active at night, using a strong sense of smell to find nectar-rich flowers. During the day, their brownish-gray color and speckled wings help them blend into tree bark and avoid predators. PHOTO BY MARK A. BROGIE

Surf's Up in Norfolk

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

There is a lot of screaming in downtown Norfolk these days, especially on a hot summer day. Some are screams of fear, but most are joy from children and a fair share of adults. You hear them nearly every time someone goes over one of the seven drop structures on the North Fork Whitewater Park on an innertube or kayak.

You might also occasionally hear someone say: “Surf’s up, dude.”

The water park, which opened last June, grew from an effort to revitalize the North Fork of the Elkhorn River and the riverfront around it, including

the historic Johnson Park. The end result includes the whitewater park and its unique surf wave, a 2.6-mile-long water trail that stretches across the city.

The number of people who floated the river and braved the new rapids during the park’s first summer of operation, even before the finishing touches were done, was more than most could have imagined.

A River Reimagined

One of the first endeavors of the settlers who arrived in what is now Norfolk in 1866 was to build the Sugar



Jacob Stuthman of Norfolk does a trick on a boogie board as his dad, Tony, rides a surfboard on the surf wave on the North Fork Whitewater Trail in Norfolk.



Jess Callahan of Enfield, Connecticut, paddles a whitewater kayak on one of the rapids with other participants during a University of Nebraska – Lincoln Outdoor Adventures trip.

City Cereal Mills. A dam was built on the North Fork north of what is now 1st Street and Norfolk Avenue to power the grist and sawmill. The pool below the mill dam became a swimming hole where people cooled off in the summer. In 1937, during the Great Depression, a Works Progress Administration crew built Johnson Park below the dam. The park and its ornate gardens, however, were no match for the power of the river and the 17 floods that occurred between its construction and 1962.

That year, following a spring flood that sent water spilling over 90 city

blocks, local officials and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers finalized plans to build a 4.5-mile-long canal to carry floodwaters around the east side of the city.

The river still flowed through town, with water levels controlled by gates where it branched off from the flood channel. But it was neglected and, for the most part, forgotten, so much so that Nebraska Avenue was built through Johnson Park, separating it from the river. The mill dam, which had also been producing hydropower before it closed, remained as an obstacle.

“The entire area was unsafe for recreation, and it was kind of an unsightly mess,” Josh Moenning, who served four years on the Norfolk City Council and eight as mayor before stepping down in 2024, said of the river flowing through downtown. “You would see, on occasion, people fishing down there, but certainly nobody was in the water.”

Efforts to revive the river began in 1974, when the Lower Elkhorn Natural Resources District and the city discussed removing the dam and creating a linear park along the North Fork. Other efforts followed, but they

remained ideas until local leaders formed a Riverfront Development Group in 2008 and began focusing on creating a River Walk.

Tony Stuthman also had ideas for improving the river after paddling a canoe down it with a friend in 2013. “As I floated, I wondered why in the heck nobody was using the river for anything,” Stuthman said. “It was beautiful, and it was neat that it felt like you were in a different place. It didn’t feel like you were in Norfolk, or in a downtown area.”

He spoke with someone working on a housing development along the



Elizabeth and Mya Silva of Norfolk body surf down one of the waves in Johnson Park.

North Fork on 1st Street on the north edge of town about creating a put-in for float trips. The developer donated the land to the city, which developed a put-in and parking area there. The city also built a take-out above the old mill dam and in 2014, Stuthman and his wife started outfitting kayak and tubing trips on the North Fork and on the Elkhorn River southwest of town.

“The first three years, it was relatively difficult to even convince people to float [the North Fork] because they considered it a drainage ditch,” Stuthman said. “Once I got them convinced, then it was plain. It wasn’t the excitement of Niobrara.” And the 1.5-mile trip was short, taking an hour in a kayak, 90 minutes on a tube. Stuthman hoped the dam could

be removed and the trips extended.

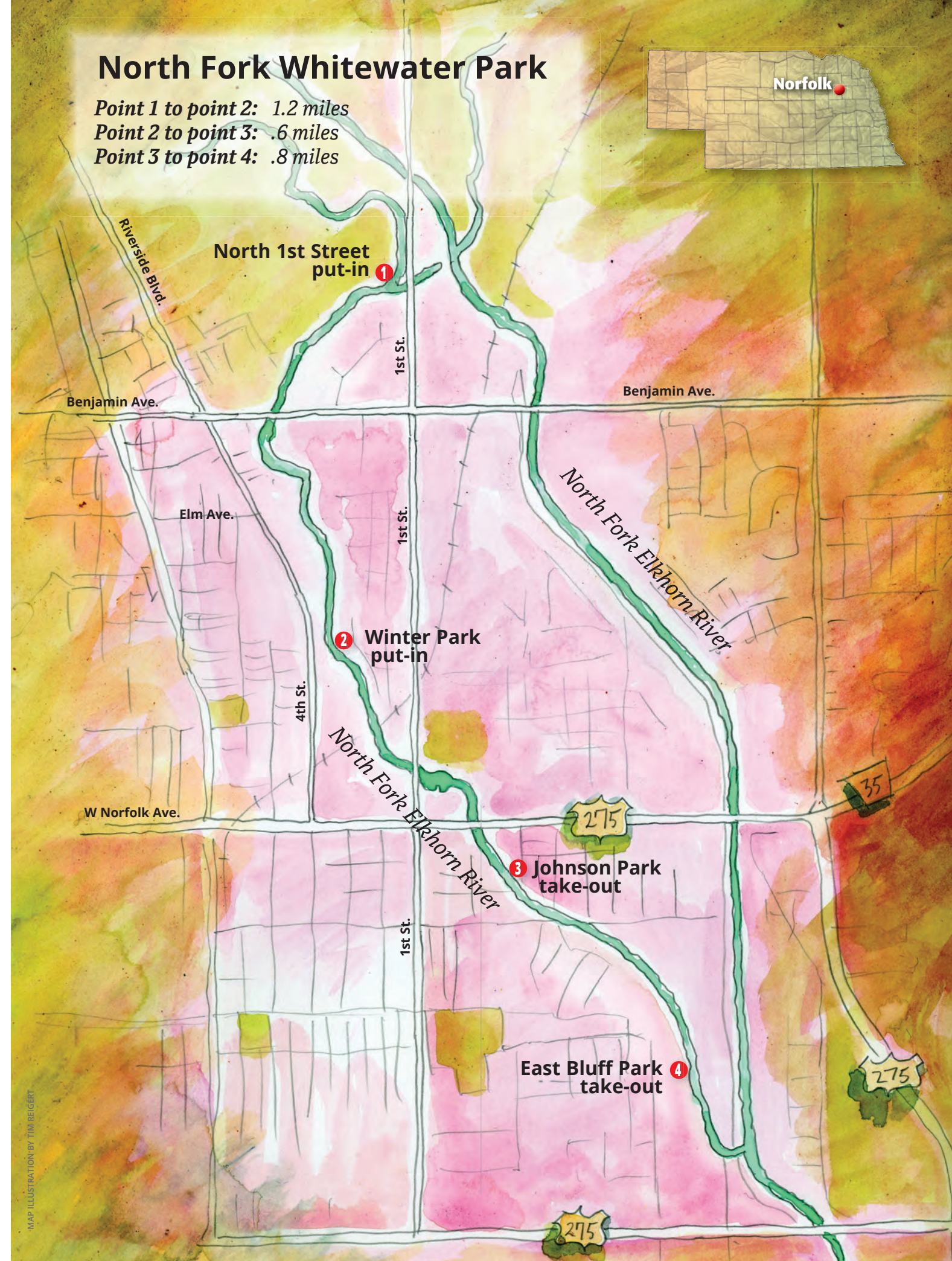
A few years later, when talk of a whitewater park surfaced, Stuthman and a friend floated over the old dam on innertubes and sent a video to Riverwise Engineering, a Colorado company specializing in building whitewater parks around the country. They asked, “What could we do with this?” Riverwise said the dam, while an obstacle, provided opportunity: The 12-foot drop below it could be spread across eight shorter drops that could create whitewater features. Riverwise also said the North Fork had two more features a whitewater park needed: sufficient river flows for most of the year and — being a block from downtown — the proximity to people who will use it.

Revitalization Realized

With city and other leaders sold on the idea, the Lower Elkhorn NRD contributed \$1 million to get the project started. Private donations and grants covered the rest of the



A family rides a stand-up paddleboard, kayaks and a tube down the North Fork beneath the 1st Street bridge.





People kayak, swim and relax around the North Fork Whitewater Park in Johnson Park, located blocks from downtown Norfolk.

\$3.8-million cost of removing the mill dam and building the whitewater park. Limestone slabs salvaged from a historic building at the Norfolk Regional Center were used to build the water features, line some of the banks and for landscaping and walking paths to the river.

It was all part of a \$17-million project that included a new vehicle bridge across the river on 1st Street and the removal of the portion of East Nebraska Avenue that separated Johnson Park from the river. The park also was renovated and now boasts a community festival space and amphitheater that can host concerts, markets and other events during the summer, and in the winter, an ice-skating rink. A multi-use trail follows

the river, passing beneath the 1st Street bridge and two pedestrian bridges cross it, providing spectators a birds-eye view of the action on the whitewater features below.

And with the dam removed, the water trail now stretches from the north to the south end of town. At the start of the trail, the North Fork flows beneath the branches of trees overhanging the river, opening up after it passes beneath Benjamin Avenue. After flowing past ball fields and businesses, through a few backyards and Winter Park (where another put-in was built) it crosses the first point in the whitewater park, a 3-foot drop structure that creates a wave people can ride on surf boards or kayaks, a feature few parks of this type have.

Six more drop structures dot the next third of a mile.

Most of the whitewater park is in Johnson Park, where the North Fork spreads out into a wide, shallow pond with a lush lawn on the north side and a beach on the south. On either, parents can sit back and watch their children splash in the water. Below the last feature, just past East Norfolk Avenue, floaters can haul their gear up a rock access to the parking lot and call it a day, or grab their tubes and walk the hike-bike trail back to the top and do it all again.

They can also continue floating the North Fork for nearly another mile to the final take-out point off Bluff Avenue on the southeastern corner of town.

Gates on the flood channel direct flows into the North Fork's original channel, allowing the city to keep flows at the optimum level for the whitewater park, as long as there is enough flow in the river. Excess flows are sent down the flood channel.

If You Build It ...

Officials estimated 30,000 people would use the river in a year. Stuthman said he thinks that number might have been reached in the first three months. He and his wife opened a surf shop steps from the North Fork and the surf wave. They rent kayaks, surf and boogie boards and tubes to folks who want to walk right down to the river and also offer shuttle service for those who want to float the entire trail.



North Fork Outfitting operates the Riverpoint Surf Shop steps from the whitewater park.

Most people using the river outfit their own trips, bringing tubes or kayaks from home, but Stuthman said he is doing as much business in one weekend as he did in an entire year before the whitewater park opened. On one August weekend last summer, he said all he could see looking up and down the river near his shop were groups of tubers and kayakers. And in the park, the beach “was just wall-to-wall people.”

Those visitors came from throughout eastern Nebraska. But the whitewater kayaking and surfing culture is unique, and those who are into it will travel long distances to visit water parks that are popping up around the U.S., especially people who live in the Midwest, far from mountains. In its first year, people from at least 13 states visited the park, including some from both coasts.

“It’s an amazing addition for the state of Nebraska and the city of Norfolk,” said Brett Mjelde, a whitewater enthusiast from Council Bluffs, during his second visit to the park last September with his son and daughter.

While city leaders anticipated an increase in tourism from the water park, Moenning is equally pleased, if not more so, at the local interest, especially youths who flocked to the river during the heat of summer.

“A lot of times, these were kids

whose families might not have been able to afford a pass to the water park. This was an opportunity for them to enjoy a natural resource in the middle of their community that’s easy to access. They can ride their bikes to it, and it’s free,” he said.

So if you find yourself in Norfolk this summer, don’t be surprised if you see kids, or adults, walking or biking across Norfolk with inner tubes or body boards slung over their back. Or if you hear screaming coming from the North Fork of the Elkhorn River. It’s all good fun. You might be wise to pack your swimsuit and join them. 

What’d You Call It?

The North Fork of the Elkhorn River is what gave Norfolk its name. The city’s founders had submitted Nor’Fork, or some other variation of a contraction of the river’s name, to the post office, but somewhere down the line, postal officials thought it was a spelling error and changed it. Ask anyone who lives there, however, and many from Nebraska, and you won’t hear an “L” in the pronunciation.

ENDANGERED SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

The Blowout Penstemon

By Ruby Rolland, Environmental Specialist, Nebraska Game and Parks



The sandy blowouts this penstemon needs are less common as the wildfires and grazing bison that created them have been eliminated. JON FARRAR, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraska lists 32 plant and animal species as threatened or endangered. The blowout penstemon, a species of flowering plant, is listed as endangered in the state of Nebraska and can be found in a variety of Nebraska’s northwestern counties within the Sandhills.

Where most other plants would wither, perish and be swept away by the wind, the blowout penstemon and its lavender blooms rise like a victory flag from one of the Sandhills’ most harsh ecosystems, an open and generally bare sand blowout.

Blowouts are a unique habitat feature born when topsoil loses its grip, and northwesterly winds swirl across the exposed surface of the sandhills to carve out a sandy crater. Tumbling amongst the grains of sand, blowout penstemon seeds are “scarified” or sanded down, and when settled into the earth, seedlings burst free of their thinned shells to take root. A pioneer species, the blowout penstemon was traditionally one of the first plants to

colonize these sandy hollows. As they spread by their roots, the plants quickly stabilize and branch out to withstand the eroding winds. Being the first to grow, the penstemon receives all the sun, nutrients and pollinators it wants; however, as time goes on and the blowout begins to form topsoil once again, the blowout penstemon proves to be a poor competitor and eventually dies. While you may think its rather submissive lifestyle must be the reason for the penstemon’s decline, it is actually the decline in blowout formation that has pushed this plant to the brink.

Today, the sandy blowouts this penstemon needs are less common as the wildfire and grazing bison that historically drove their creation have been eliminated from the landscape. Cattle now replace the bison, but do not graze in the same pattern or intensity, and while landowners are making strides with prescribed fire to restore grass and fight red cedar, it is still very

Nebraska’s List

Threatened Species
Eastern black rail
Piping plover
Rufa red knot
Thick-billed longspur
Mountain plover
Southern flying squirrel
Lake sturgeon
Northern redbelly dace
Finescale dace
American burying beetle
Timber rattlesnake
Western massasauga
Western prairie fringed orchid
Ute ladies'-tresses
American ginseng
Small white lady's slipper

Endangered Species
Eskimo curlew
Whooping crane
Interior least tern
Black-footed ferret
Swift fox
Gray wolf
Northern long-eared bat
Pallid sturgeon
Topeka shiner
Sturgeon chub
Blacknose shiner
Salt Creek tiger beetle
Scaleshell mussel
Blowout penstemon
Colorado butterfly plant
Saltwort

hard to mimic historic fire regimes in a space as large as the Sandhills. But all is not lost. Partners across the Sandhills have been working together to devise new grazing rotations, burn plans, transplantation of hand-raised penstemon, and maintenance of shifting blowouts already on the landscape. Advances in rangeland management and knowledge of the natural history of the Sandhills have continued to evolve and grow since the 1987 listing of this plant, and this author looks forward to what future landowners and biologists may bring to the conservation of blowout penstemon. For more information, visit OutdoorNebraska.gov.

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NEBRASKA
- GAME PARKS -

THE ‘WHY?’ OF BIG GAME CHANGES

By Eric Fowler

Reductions in deer and pronghorn permits approved by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission for 2025 will help those big game species recover from population declines caused by several years of drought, hard winters and disease, and cuts in elk permits will improve trophy quality of bulls.

Total deer harvest across all seasons in 2024-25 was the lowest since 1993, and the hunter success rate of 34.6 percent was the second-lowest on record, two numbers that are telling when it comes to the deer population.

About 8,000 fewer antlerless deer tags will be issued statewide in 2025, the fourth straight year those numbers have been cut. Antlerless tags issued had increased 45 percent to 110,000 from 2017 to 2020, when populations were high. Given four years of decreasing populations, that number has been cut to just 40,000.

The reasons for the population decline include drought, which has affected fawn production and survival, and recurring outbreaks of epizootic hemorrhagic disease, especially in whitetails in northeastern Nebraska, where EHD has been an issue for four straight summers.

Additionally, the area open for river antlerless permits has been reduced or eliminated in all or parts of seven deer management units. The area open to hunting within 3 miles of many of the state’s rivers this year covers 6,500 square miles, down from 15,500 in 2020. None of the Elkhorn River is open to that permit this year, nor are the North and South Platte and White rivers and large portions of the Republican, Loup and Missouri rivers that have been part of this season.

To further limit doe harvest, all November firearm permits in the Elkhorn, Frenchman Whitetail and Calamus East management units will be buck-only. A unit hasn’t been 100 percent buck-only since 1992, and the Elkhorn unit hasn’t been in that slot since 1968.

All permits were buck-only when deer hunting resumed in Nebraska in 1945. As the herd grew and the entire state



The number of antlerless deer permits was reduced for the fourth straight year for 2025.

opened to hunting in 1961, management shifted to issuing a certain percentage of buck-only and either-sex permits for each unit. Since 2009, all regular November firearm permits have been either sex.

“That’s a huge change from the way we’ve been doing things,” said Luke Meduna, big game program manager for Game and Parks. “The cuts that we made starting four years ago in normal years would’ve been fine to moderate what’s going on, but we’re finally to the point where there’s very little left to cut, particularly in the Elkhorn unit. Those populations just aren’t responding to the changes we’ve already made.”

Additionally, the only firearm permits that will include bonus antlerless tags this fall will be for the Plains and Sandhills units, where biologists are primarily managing for mule deer. Roughly two-thirds of the units had bonus tags in 2020.

To help buck numbers rebound, there will be 800 fewer firearm permits combined in the Elkhorn, Frenchman Whitetail, Missouri and Platte Whitetail units.

Still, while pockets of Nebraska have few deer, there are still places with many.

Like deer, pronghorn have also suffered from several years of EHD, drought and a hard winter in 2022, all coming on the heels of an effort to trim the herd. This year, 13 fewer either-sex and 30 fewer doe/fawn permits will be issued.

For elk, there were 19 fewer general and landowner bull tags authorized for Units 1, 2 and 3 in the Pine Ridge, bringing the total back to where it was before harvest was increased in 2020 in response to landowner concerns about crop damage. Another change will be the split of Unit 13 in southwestern Nebraska to better manage the two distinct elk populations in the area and the hunters who pursue them.

The application period for landowner elk and pronghorn permits is May 19-30. Applications for general permits in deer draw units, pronghorn and elk will be taken June 2-13. Permits in remaining deer units go on sale July 9.

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Pictured: Parker Wise, Buzz’s great grandson

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WHOSE CATCH IS IT ANYWAY?

By Jeff Kurrus

The photo doesn't quite say it all.
Then again, it does.

My son, Eli, and I were fly-fishing for carp on a creek that feeds the Platte River outside of Louisville. Using mulberry imitations and a nine-weight rod has become a summer pastime for our family.

On this particular day, I eyed what I thought to be a big fish feeding on the surface, scooping up every mulberry it could find. Because of the fish's wariness to onlookers, especially those with fishing tackle in their hands, I kept my distance but was able to make a nice cast feet away from the fish.

It turned immediately and engulfed the mulberry, bending my rod double and stripping line as this species once again proved it's one of Nebraska's most ferocious fighters.

“E,” I called to my son, “get the net. Better yet, take this fish.” I extended

my arm to hand him the rod.

"No," he said.

“No?”

"I'm not touching that fish."

His eyes were huge, seemingly convinced that the carp was a freshwater shark.

“Then take the net.”

“No,” he repeated, the thought of being even closer to that fish raising even more red flags in his mind.

Meanwhile, the fish continued to make its runs up and down the steep-banked creek.

“You have to do something,” I said. “Take the rod.” This time, my tone must have changed, as he took the rod from me and fought the fish for the next few minutes.

I slid down the bank, net in my hand, and after several failed attempts finally scooped up the fish.

“Eli, hold the fish so I can get a



photo.” Curiously, this step took no convincing. He gladly pulled the fish from the net and smiled.

Later that day, when our family got back together, Eli turned to me. “Dad, can you show Mom my fish?”

"Your fish?"

“My fish,” he said with a grin. Then, “Dad, are you going to turn my fish in for a Master Angler Award?”

"Your fish?" I repeated.

"My fish," he said.

And, after talking to Tony Barada, division administrator for the fisheries division for the Nebraska Game and Parks, Eli might be right.

“Who had the rod in their hand when the fish was landed?” Tony asked during a recent conversation, his smile coming through the phone.

“Eli did.”

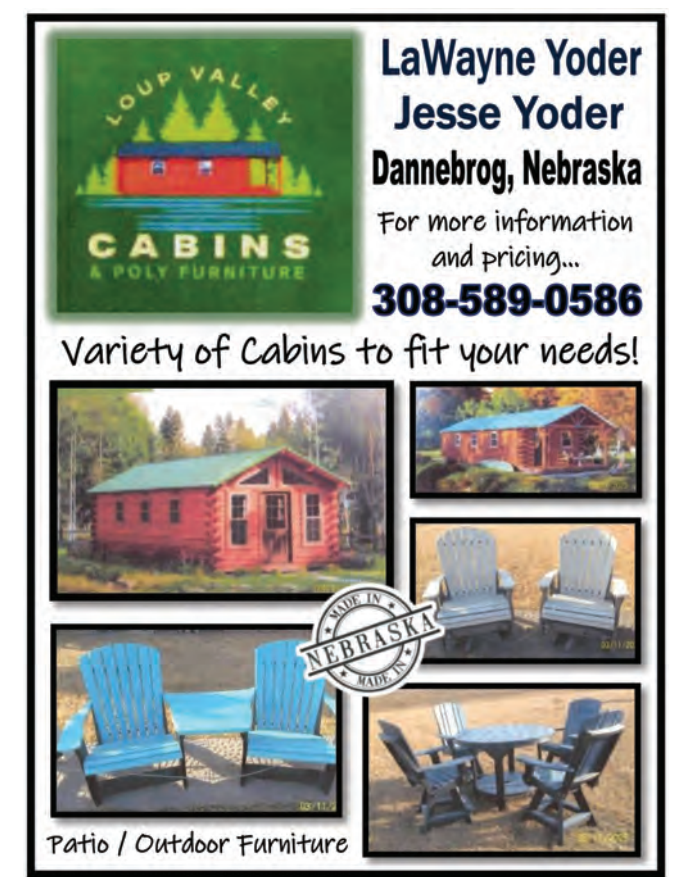
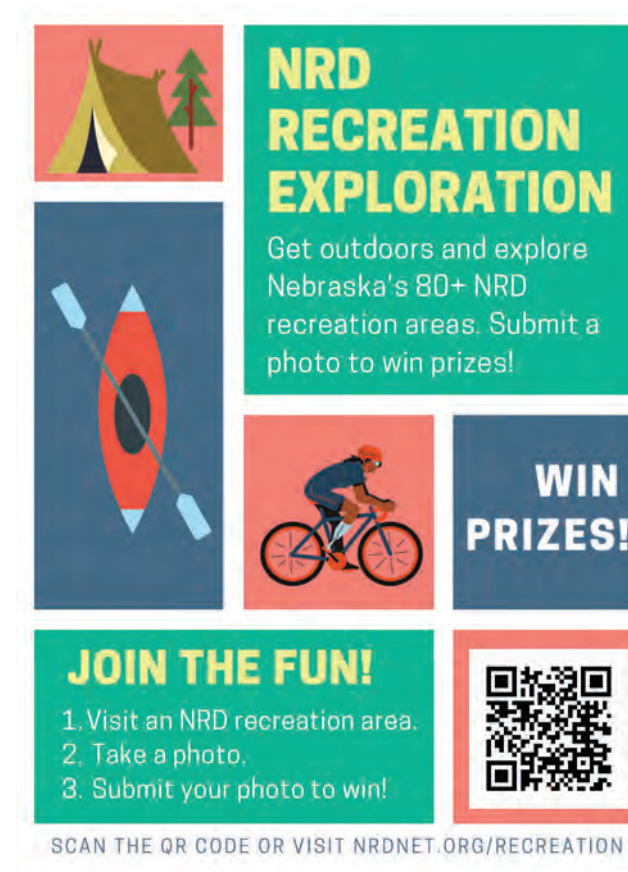
“Well, we don’t have a definitive policy on this issue,” Tony answered. “Having handed many fish to kids through the years, I always thought of it as their fish.”

“He definitely claims it’s his fish,” I said. “That Master Angler Award is the first thing you see when you enter his room.”

Tony laughed. "Who was it more meaningful to? That's the way I determine it."

The photo easily answers that question. Case closed.

Visit OutdoorNebraska.gov to see the species qualifications, including the length and weight requirements, for a Master Angler Award.



Eli Kurrus holding the Nebraska master angler carp he caught while fishing in a creek that feeds the Platte River in Sarpy County.

SAFETY TIPS FOR BOATING THIS SUMMER

By Julie Geiser

When warm summer weather hits, many people love to be out in a boat. If that’s you, follow these safety tips to keep everyone on the water safe this summer.

Take a boater safety course — Those born after Dec. 31, 1985, must take this course to learn about navigating Nebraska waters. Find an in-person or online class at OutdoorNebraska.gov; search for “boater education.”

Check equipment — Before you launch, ensure your boat, kayak, personal watercraft or other vessel is in good operating condition. Have a life jacket for every person on board. A throw cushion, fire extinguisher and bailing device also are required on most boats. An engine-cut-off device or switch also is a good idea. Check the 2025 Boating Guide for more information.

Tell someone your plans — Before leaving home, let someone know where you are going and when you expect to return. Carry a cellphone in a waterproof pouch in case an emergency occurs.

Wear a life jacket — Life jackets are no good stored away if an emergency occurs. Children age 12 and under, personal watercraft users, and those being towed on skis, tubes or similar devices are required by law to wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device. Life jackets are required

for all paddleboard users, no matter their age.

Be wary of surroundings — According to the U.S. Coast Guard, operator inattention, improper lookout, operator inexperience, excessive speed and machinery failure were the top five primary contributing factors in boating accidents across the United States. Pay attention to reduce incidents.

Avoid alcohol — Nearly one-third of all recreational boating fatalities occur when someone is boating under the influence, which is enforced in Nebraska. Always designate a sober driver.

Watch the weather — Storms can pop up quickly in Nebraska. Check the weather in advance and monitor it throughout the day.

Avoid hypothermia — Even though temperatures are rising, water still can be cold in spring and early summer. Hypothermia is caused by exposure to cold weather or water.

Keep it legal — Make sure you’ve registered your boat and, if a nonresident, purchase an Aquatic Invasive Species Stamp. Anyone operating a motorboat or personal watercraft in Nebraska must be at least 14 years of age.

Learn more about Nebraska’s boating regulations at OutdoorNebraska.gov; search “Go boating.”



Boaters hold up the orange safety flag while the tubers they are pulling get back on board on Victory Lake at Fremont Lakes SRA in Dodge County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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QR codes for: O'Neill Summerfest, Holt County Fair, Atkinson Hay Days

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STURGEON — NEBRASKA’S LIVING DINOSAUR

By Monica Macoubrie, Wildlife Education Specialist

Sturgeon are in the *Acipenseridae* family, which globally includes about 25 species of large primitive fish. They are true living fossils, as these fish haven’t changed much over thousands of years.

Fish in this family are technically known as bony fishes, but their skeleton is largely made of cartilage. Other features include elongated bodies; rows of bony scutes, or plates on the body; barbels, which are whisker-like projections in the front of the mouth; and a protrusible, vacuum-like mouth. Specimens over 18 feet have been found in the wild and calculated at more than 100 years old.

The name sturgeon in European languages translates to “the stirrer,” on account of the fish using their barbels, located on the underside of their mouth, to direct food into it. Their toothless, protrusible mouth can extend in and out to vacuum aquatic insects, mussels, worms and crustaceans off the river floor. Sturgeon are opportunistic feeders and will pretty much eat anything they can suck up.

Sturgeon are one of the few fishes that have taste buds on the outside of the mouth, which is helpful for food selection; normally, the taste buds on fish are found on the tongue or the inside of the mouth.

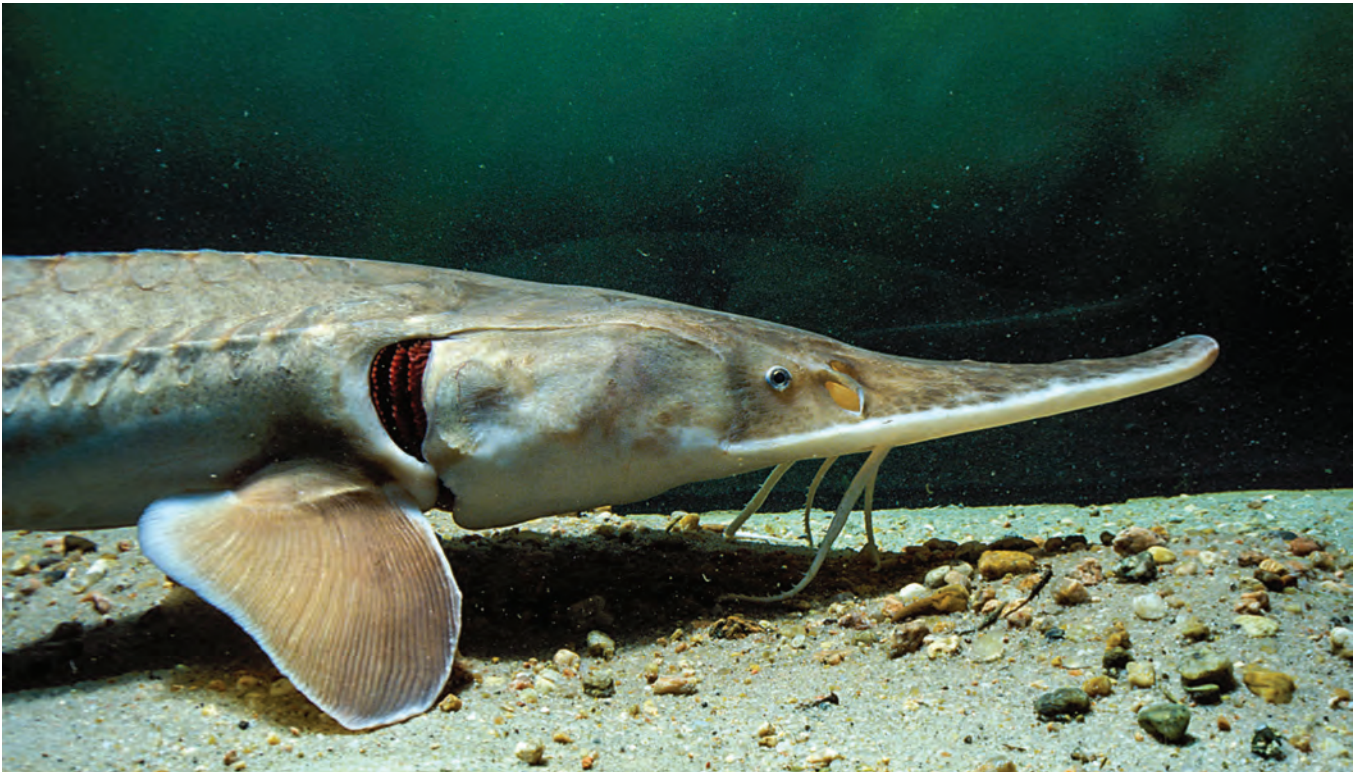
Acipenseridae is one of the oldest families of bony fish in

existence and sturgeons are one of the few vertebrate taxa that retains a notochord into adulthood. A notochord is a skeletal rod that supports the body. Most animals have this rod in the embryonic stage, but lose it as they grow into adults — sturgeons retain it.

Out of the roughly 25 species of sturgeon found globally, Nebraska is lucky to be home to three of those species: the shovelnose sturgeon, the lake sturgeon and the pallid sturgeon.

The pallid sturgeon was listed as a federally endangered species in 1990 due to extensive habitat modification, lack of reproduction, commercial harvest and hybridization with shovelnose sturgeon. Much like other long-lived species of fish, pallid sturgeon don’t reach sexual maturity until 7-9 years for males and 9-15 years for females. Males generally spawn every 2-3 years and females tend to spawn on a 3- to 5-year cycle.

Recovery efforts by many state wildlife agencies, including the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, include strategies such as protection from harvest, protection of habitat and stocking of hatchery-raised fish. These efforts also have been extended to include research and monitoring studies critical to the reproduction and spawning of these ancient fish.



The pallid sturgeon was listed as a federally endangered species in 1990 due to extensive habitat modification, lack of reproduction, commercial harvest and hybridization with shovelnose sturgeon. KEN BOUC, NEBRASKALAND



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Fishing at Enders Reservoir, 1963 ▶

Picture taken on our family farm south of Wauneta in 1963, I believe. We pulled these lunkers — white bass and one walleye — from Enders Reservoir in southwestern Nebraska. Farm work always came first, and we didn’t get to fish often, but when we did, it was like Christmas Day. From left: me; my sister, Kim, who joined us for the picture; my dad, Neil; and brother, Terry.

They are gone now; they left way too early for that big fishing hole in the sky.

 – Lonnie Kit, Schuyler



Fishing on the Republican River, 1998 ▲

Terry Fraser of Hastings, sons and grandsons enjoyed a fun day of fishing in 1998 on the Republican River near Alma. Pictured from left: sons Mark and Mike, dad Terry, and son Mitch. Grandsons helping to hold fish are Kellen, Travis and Tyler. Cheryl, Mitch’s wife, took the picture after helping with the catch. Thanks so much; we enjoy reading *Nebraskaland*.

 – Sharon Fraser, Hastings



Deer hunt on James Ranch, 1966 ▲

Back row, from left: Mel Steen, Dana F. Cole, George James, Jim Inzerello, Dr. Paul Hoff, Paul Coburn, Jack Clark, T.R. Hughes, Aage Peterson, Les Piper, John Kurtz, Alfred P. Minervini.

 Front row, from left: Fiki Zimmerman, Stu Hissam, Tom Darden, John Binning, Chip Coburn, Cletus Bender.

 – Randy James, Crawford

Hunting blind in Richardson County, 1973 ▶

This photo is my brother Bruce Morehead, age 11, and me, Karen Morehead Stevenson, 13, in 1973, at our blind in Richardson County. We were there with our father John H. Morehead, who together with my mother, Amy, took us and our other three siblings, Marc, Kristine and Amalia, camping, hunting and trapshooting. As kids, we spent every possible moment outside, planting trees, horseback riding, walking beans and detasseling corn — things that were near and dear to the hearts of many Nebraska kids. What an amazing privilege to grow up this way!

 – Karen Stevenson,



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



Blanding's turtles, which thrive in the Sandhills and hardly anywhere else, are moving westward as far as Chadron.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

BLANDING'S TURTLES ON THE MOVE?

By Justin Haag

While running the trails near Chadron State College's Briggs Pond in October, my neighbor Loni Watson encountered a turtle in her path that didn't look like all of the painted turtles (*Chrysemys picta*) she was so used to seeing there.

Turns out it was a darling species of our state's conservationists — a Blanding's turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*). The species, which seems to be thriving in the Sandhills but hardly any other place in the world, is listed on "tier one" among conservation needs in Nebraska's wildlife action plan, the Natural Legacy Project, and is rarely seen this far west.

After being told of the discovery, I remembered that coworker Matt Steffl, a Game and Parks Commission wildlife manager, had found a Blanding's turtle in Chadron years earlier and released it at the one-acre pond. "Ah, it's been rediscovered," I thought.

By examining photos of that turtle, found in 2015, we realized the patterns of the two shells' scutes didn't match, however. Different turtle!

Nebraska herpetologist Dan Fogell said it's the fourth Blanding's turtle to be confirmed in Dawes County in recent years, so he suspects the species is moving into the region — not just being captured elsewhere and dropped off, which is not legal. Besides the two in Chadron, one was found a few miles southwest of the city and another at Fort Robinson State Park.

After the turtle had become well acquainted with the kids in the neighborhood, I was given the honor of releasing it back to the pond. True to the species' reputation, it was shy. My daughter and I waited an hour and a half on the pond's bank before it stuck out its head for a photo. Such a fine-looking turtle, it was well worth the wait.

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