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Cover: A flock of white-fronted geese, also known as specklebellies, lifts off from a pond near Louisville. See page 32.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

This page: Sandhill cranes return to their roost on the Platte River after feeding in the surrounding fields as the sun sets in Hall County. About 1 million cranes stop on the river in central Nebraska during their annual northward spring migration.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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magazine

Published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission since 1926. The Commission is dedicated to the conservation and protection of all the state's natural resources and the people who use them.



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Rates: \$18 for one year; \$33 for two years; \$44 for three years. Nebraska recipients must add appropriate sales tax. To subscribe call 1-800-NEBLAND (632-5263), or go online to: NebraskalandMagazine.com.



Look for pasque flowers toward the end of March. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever in Nebraska



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CRANES IN THE FOG

A sandhill crane calls from the roost on a foggy morning on the Platte River in Hall County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND





Beavers play a pivotal role in the health and biodiversity of local ecosystems. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

THE BUILDERS OF THE WILD

By Monica Macoubrie

Beavers (*Castor canadensis*) in Nebraska serve as keystone species, playing a disproportionately large role in the health and biodiversity of local ecosystems. Their engineering skill is particularly significant, as they create and maintain habitats that support a multitude of species.

By constructing dams across streams and rivers, beavers create ponds and wetlands that serve as critical habitats for fish, amphibians, waterfowl and numerous plant species. These wetlands act as natural filters, improving water quality by trapping sediment and pollutants, and they also regulate water flow, which can help mitigate downstream flooding and maintain water levels during dry periods.

Beyond their direct impact on water dynamics and habitat creation, beavers’ selective tree cutting promotes forest regeneration. The presence of beavers enhances ecological resilience by creating mosaic landscapes of successional stages, which can buffer against environmental changes and disturbances.

Beavers and humans share a complex relationship characterized by beneficial and challenging interactions. For humans, these benefits can translate into reduced flood risks, improved water resources and enhanced opportunities

for wildlife observation and eco-tourism.

However, beaver activities also can lead to conflicts with human interests. Their dam-building can cause flooding of agricultural lands, roads and properties, leading to economic losses and necessitating costly management efforts. Additionally, beavers may fell trees that are valued for timber, landscaping or cultural purposes, further contributing to tensions.

In many regions, collaborative efforts between conservationists, landowners and government agencies aim to find sustainable solutions that allow humans and beavers to coexist. By understanding and managing the impacts of beaver activities, it is possible to harness their ecological benefits while mitigating their negative effects on human infrastructure and activities. For example, flow devices can control water levels around beaver dams, barriers can protect valuable trees, and sometimes, the relocation of beaver populations to less problematic areas is possible.

By recognizing beavers’ ecological importance and implementing sustainable management practices, we can ensure they continue to thrive and contribute to Nebraska’s natural landscapes for generations to come.

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The property’s rolling topography is ideal for hunting, with natural pinch points and funnels that enhance your chances of success. A recently refurbished dam with a new tube adds to the land’s value and functionality. This well-maintained property is teeming with deer and turkey sign, making it a premier destination for hunters.

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A turkey vulture strikes a pose on a dead tree. Almost all of the United States is in the species' breeding range, and it resides year-round in the Southeast and throughout Mexico and South America. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

RETURN OF THE VULTURE: SOMETHING TO CELEBRATE

By Justin Haag

A friend likened them to the famed “Swallows of Capistrano.” It’s once again a joy to see the return of the migratory “Vultures of Chadron.”

Our house is on a hill, so we get a good view of the turkey vultures as they fly over the city. Occasionally, they “buzz the tower,” flying just feet above our house. I captured this photo by stepping out the back door last week. Not great, but not bad considering how little effort I put into it.

As one who photographs wildlife, I sometimes get asked what animal I’d like to be. After considerable thought, this is the species.

For one, the big group with its biker gang vibe seems to be having fun as individuals, effortlessly catching wind gusts and thermals to soar above the city with minimal wingbeats, assumedly searching for roadkill or some other dead thing to eat.

“Roadkill? Yuck,” you might say. It’s certainly no deal-breaker. Unlike other wildlife species deemed to be more charismatic, vultures aren’t obligated to expend energy in the uncertain task of chasing and killing dinner. Sure, roadkill may not be attractive to us, but they seem to like it, and personal taste is what matters.

Some say they’re ugly, but let’s not forget that these birds with their massive wingspans are often mistaken for the

more esteemed species known as eagles. Of course, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and apparently these birds look good enough to one another to procreate. Heck, they might think we’re ugly.

Finally, I won’t complain about spending winters in the South.

Yes, vultures do leave considerable droppings below their roosts, and they can deface buildings and other structures if they congregate above them. Note, though, that a vulture superpower is the strong acid in its digestive system kills most disease-causing bacteria and viruses. Therefore, the feces is relatively “clean.”

Other than some unsightly poop, vultures do more good than harm surely even from the most judicious humans’ standpoint. No predation of livestock and other wildlife. No damage to crops and garden. Just out there cleaning up dead things.

Just as the people of San Juan Capistrano, California, created a big celebration around the annual return of cliff swallows, I suggest my fellow citizens soar in merriment at the return of the revered (at least by me) Vultures of Chadron — or the turkey vultures of wherever else you may be seeing them throughout their expansive range. They deserve a warm welcome.

Saving Wildlife and Wild Places



The Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund improves land and water for native fish and wildlife, supports important research projects, and connects people with nature. Learn more about the fund, the projects it supports and how you can help at:

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Look for the Peregrine Falcon image on your Nebraska tax return.





This recipe blends rich, savory flavors with the first taste of spring. It is perfect for using the rest of last year’s turkey meat. RYAN SPARKS

WILD TURKEY WILD RICE SOUP

By Ryan Sparks

This recipe is double wild, containing both wild turkey and wild rice. With wild turkey thighs, a slow cooker is your friend to ensure the meat is tender and delicious ahead of time, so you don’t have to worry about overcooking the rest of your ingredients while waiting for the thighs to cook.

My wife and I like to make this recipe between late winter and early spring. It is a perfect dinner to enjoy the night before Nebraska’s archery spring turkey opener in late March. It goes well with toasted and buttered bread.

Servings: 6
Prep Time: 15 minutes
Cooking Time: 5 hours

- Ingredients:**
- 4 tbsp. butter
 - 4 carrots, cut into half-inch pieces
 - 1 medium white or yellow onion, chopped
 - 1 lb. cremini mushrooms, sliced
 - 4 garlic cloves, minced
 - 1½ tsp. fresh thyme, minced (or substitute dried thyme)
 - Salt
 - Pepper
 - ¼ tsp. cayenne pepper (optional)

- 1 bay leaf
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 1 heaping cup wild rice
- 2 quarts turkey or chicken stock
- 4 cups cooked and chopped wild turkey thigh meat (from 2 wild turkey thighs)
- 1 cup heavy cream
- Chopped parsley or chives for garnish, optional

1. Place the turkey thighs in a slow cooker on the high setting, cover with water, and cook for about 5 hours. Around the 4-hour mark, start to test them with a fork. When the meat easily flakes away from the bone, they are done.

When the thighs are tender, remove them from the slow cooker to a cutting board and allow them to cool slightly. Using your fingers, pull the meat from the bone and shred it. When you have a pile of shredded turkey meat, roughly chop it with a knife. (See optional step at end of the recipe.)

2. In a large saucepan or Dutch oven, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the carrots, onion, garlic, mushrooms, thyme, cayenne and a generous pinch of salt and pepper. Cover and stir occasionally until the mixture has softened but not browned,

around 10 minutes.

3. Sprinkle the flour over the mixture and cook, stirring constantly until evenly coated and the raw flour taste has been removed, around 3 minutes.

4. Add the wild rice to the pan and gradually stir in the stock. Bring to a low boil, add the bay leaf, then simmer over medium/low heat, stirring occasionally until the vegetables are nearly tender, around 20 minutes.

5. When the vegetables are almost tender, add the chopped turkey meat, stirring occasionally until the wild rice is tender, 10 to 15 minutes more.

6. Lower the heat and stir in the cream. Stir until evenly mixed and then taste for salt and pepper. Ladle into bowls, garnish with parsley or chives and serve.

A Simple Wild Turkey Stock

Once you have removed the turkey thighs from the cooking liquid, toss in 2 carrots, 2 celery ribs and 1 onion, all roughly chopped. Then add 1 bay leaf, whole black peppercorns, 1 teaspoon of dried thyme and 1 teaspoon of dried parsley. Keep the lid off the slow cooker and allow to slowly reduce for 4-5 hours.



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GO FISH



Box of Surprises

Box Butte Reservoir attracts a variety of outdoor lovers

Story and photos by Justin Haag

Long before the Niobrara River carries the multitudes of tubers and kayakers in north-central Nebraska, it entertains a variety of outdoor enthusiasts at a recreational hot spot in the Panhandle.

This far west, where the river would be better described as a creek, stands a dam that was constructed by the Works Progress Administration in the 1940s to create what was first known as Lake Felton. Visitors now know the reservoir north of Hemingford at the western edge of the Sandhills as Box Butte Reservoir State Recreation Area and Wildlife Management Area.

The 1,600-acre reservoir, with 587 acres of public land surrounding it, is full of fun surprises for an array of outdoor pursuits, perhaps most notably fishing and camping.



ABOVE: A tree swallow peers from its nest in Box Butte's flooded timber of spring.

OPPOSITE: The Niobrara River flows into Box Butte Reservoir on a crisp fall morning.

Whether casting for bass, walleye and pike in the flooded timber of spring, or dropping waxworms below the thick ice for winter panfish, a diverse fishery awaits anglers.

The lake has a reputation for northern pike and large bluegills. It's also become one of western Nebraska's best walleye lakes, along with largemouth bass, yellow perch, channel catfish and crappies. As a testament to the lake's diversity, Nebraska's fish records show an array of other species, mostly less targeted, registered from Box Butte: European rudd, white sucker, rock bass, smallmouth bass, brown trout, common carp and gizzard shad are on the list. Many of those are in the category of underwater spearfishing; with the lake's clear waters, it's a popular place for that activity.

Recent upgrades have made the lake even more attractive. An expansion of 20 electrical campsites in 2024 brought the total number of available spaces to 60. A modern shower house and dump station also were installed. Visitors have been enjoying an improved two-lane boat ramp since 2018 and a state-of-the-art fish cleaning station.

In spring, the water usually rises into the cottonwoods and willows, providing spawning habitat and an ideal opportunity for fishing by kayak or other small watercraft. When summer's irrigation season brings extensive drawdown, the lake's big catfish are often targeted.

Most of the property around the lake is open to hunting. The expanse of tall cottonwoods, something of a rarity for public lands in the Panhandle, provides ideal habitat for whitetails, turkeys, cottontails and furbearers. The river at the lake's west end welcomes waterfowl hunters long after the region's water bodies have frozen over. Opportunity also exists for dove, pheasant and grouse.

The lake's surprises are often seen through binoculars as birdwatchers enjoy the variety of avian species attracted to the water



BOTTOM LEFT: Tubers beat the heat in August. An improved ramp has helped people get on the water even when the water is low.

TOP RIGHT: The sunrise creates colorful reflections on a still morning on the lake's north bank.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A bullsnake, one of lake's countless wildlife species, swims across the water.





and its 14 miles of shoreline. Woodpeckers, nuthatches, bluebirds, orioles, finches, warblers and many songbirds can be located around the lake in spring and summer. Spring is also prime for viewing shorebirds and waterfowl, with the occasional sighting of common loons and trumpeter swans.

The fun doesn't stop there. Take into account a swimming beach and four picnic shelters, and there's something for everyone. Whether it is what's below the water's surface or above it, people surely enjoy the pleasant surprises of Box Butte. 📺



Box Butte Reservoir SRA encompasses 2,212 acres on the western edge of the Sandhills, 9 miles north of Hemingford. It includes a 1,600-acre lake. The area is a good spot for fishing, camping and picnicking and also features some of the best birdwatching in the state.

ABOVE: A spotted sandpiper is among the many avian species observed at Box Butte, a popular destination for birdwatchers.

BELOW: Whether it's panfish by jigging rod or northern pike by tip-up, Box Butte provides ample opportunity for ice anglers.

OPPOSITE: Snow and frost decorate the towering cottonwoods at the lake, which offer scenic value year-round.



Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Whether it's sunny or cold, you can find an adventure waiting for you this month, including fishing, viewing sandhill cranes and more. [N](#)



Fish for early spring crappie

As soon as the ice goes out, through May | Statewide

Fishing for crappie in early spring, as soon as the ice has gone out, can be a great opportunity this time of year. They'll be staying shallow clear into May, searching for food so they have energy to spawn. Early on, while the water is cold, look for bays, coves and protected areas where temperatures are warmer, and then fish slow. Take the kids, because when crappies are shallow like this, anyone can catch them. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

View sandhill cranes at Fort Kearny State Recreation Area

March 10 through the first week of April; peak is the third and fourth weeks of March
About 10 miles southeast of Kearney

A popular choice for viewing the sandhill crane migration is Fort Kearny State Recreation Area. Visitors flock to the bridge on the park's hike-bike trail, located on the east side of the park about 600 yards from the parking lot. Arrive 30 to 45 minutes before sunrise and sunset for the best view. For those staying overnight, the park offers 120 first-come, first-served campsites; learn more at [OutdoorNebraska.gov](#). A park entry permit is required. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

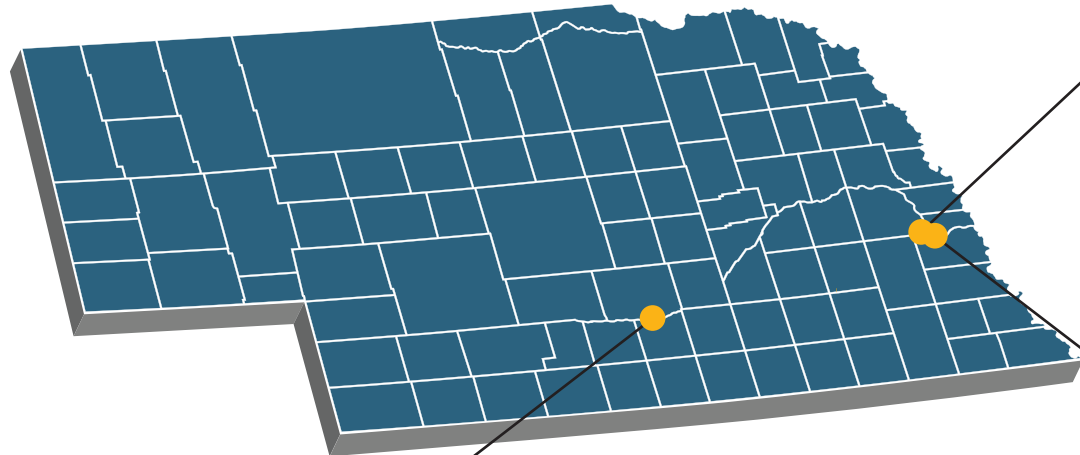


View red fox pups

March through early June | Statewide

Commonly found in urban areas, these fascinating native animals are a delight to watch as pups, busy wrestling and playing as their parents care for them in the early months of their lives. Litters often range from one to seven, typically born from late February into April. Dens can be anything from a dug hole in a field or repurposed badger den to a space underneath a shed, garage or old barn. View pups from a distance, use binoculars and keep your dogs leashed.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



See a live magic show

March 8, 7-8 p.m. and March 9, 2:30-3:30 p.m. | Kountze Memorial Theater at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park

Enjoy live, family-friendly magic shows at the beautiful Kountze Theater. March 8 will feature a showcase of top magic acts from the region, including Des Moines, Kansas City and Omaha. On Sunday, enjoy a matinee show by Omaha magician Ryan Chandler. With a camera acting as a giant magnifying glass, be sure not to blink as magic is projected on a large screen. Admission is \$10 for adults and \$8 for ages 12 and under; reserve tickets by calling 402-944-2957. A park entry permit is required. PHOTO BY ROSEANNE SCURTO

Become a certified youth fishing instructor

March 23, 2-5 p.m. | Schramm Education Center

Do you want to share your love of fishing with others? This free course will give you the training and tools to do just that, whether you're interested in teaching a Scout, church or family group, or if you'd rather assist at a Nebraska Game and Parks event. There is no minimum required time commitment; volunteer as often as you wish. Visit [Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov](#) and search "Youth Fishing Instructor Certification Class" to sign up. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



A Grouse Tour and More

at Niobrara State Park

By Renae Blum

Last spring, when I decided to try out the new sharp-tailed grouse viewing blind at Niobrara State Park, I wasn't prepared for how funny the birds would be.

A dozen of them were gathered on a pasture west of the park's entrance, performing spring mating rituals. The

males moved incredibly fast, like video game characters. They rushed along with wings extended, stamping their feet rapidly.

They would freeze in place for about 10 seconds, the moment drawing out until you wondered if something was wrong. Then, out of nowhere, the flurry



Sharp-tailed grouse engage in standoffs during their spring mating rituals at Niobrara State Park, as seen from a new viewing blind. CURT BLUM



Teri Farha (left), Kris Wilshusen and Ted Farha, all from Wichita, Kansas, watch sharp-tailed grouse from a new blind at Niobrara State Park. RENAE BLUM, NEBRASKALAND

of activity would begin again, just as furious as before, and everyone in the blind would chuckle. Pairs of males also faced off in intense staredowns, occasionally leaping into the air.

The sounds they made are hard to describe — squeaking, chittering, squawking and even a low thrumming that is a bit like a frog's. It was a symphony of sorts that began before the sun rose and lasted more than an hour.

The entire thing was delightful, and our group was spellbound. At 7:33 a.m., the last of the birds took flight at once, their morning ritual complete.

"That was fabulous," a woman commented.

This was the second year the park offered this wildlife watching

opportunity, and the three-and-a-half-hour drive from Lincoln was worth it. But the rest of the park was calling. My family had three days to explore Niobrara State Park, and we soon discovered that watching sharp-tailed grouse isn't the only spring activity the park offers.

Day One

"This is an amazing view." That was the first thing my mom said upon walking into our cabin. Niobrara State Park's cabins are arranged atop a forested bluff overlooking the Missouri River Valley. Glance out the windows or step out the back door, and you face a sweeping view of trees and water.

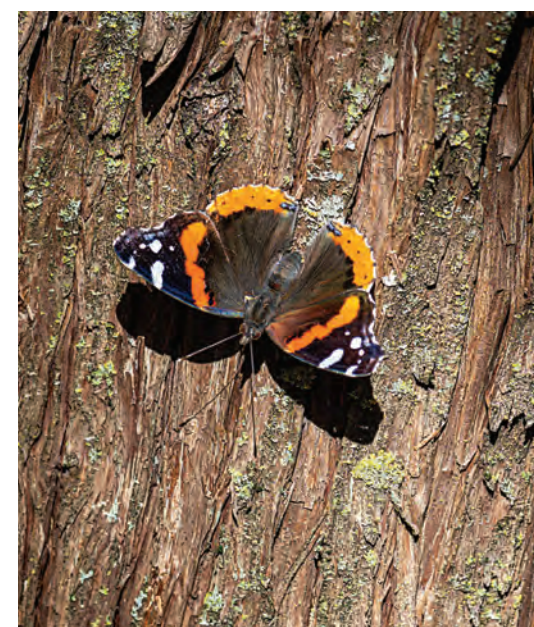
My parents were also impressed by the cabin itself. "It's like a little

house," Mom said, taking in the living room with sofas and a fully-furnished kitchen. "I didn't know how modern it would be."

We wouldn't head out to see the grouse until morning, so we took some time to explore. Park superintendent Cogan Thompson told us we could see eagles at Niobrara Confluence Wildlife Management Area, a nearly 3-mile area spanning the entire north edge of the park and beyond.

Bathed in golden evening light, two mature eagles watched us quietly from the trees. I had never been that close to one before.

That evening, we also saw about a dozen turkeys along the roadsides. We would spot many more throughout our stay and hear their gobbling often.



One of many red admiral butterflies observed along Deer Creek Trail. CURT BLUM



A beautiful sunset brightened the sky during the second day of the author's visit to Niobrara State Park. CURT BLUM



Curt Blum, the author's dad, watches the Milky Way during an early morning at Niobrara State Park. RENAE BLUM, NEBRASKALAND

Day Two

The next morning, we got up early to ensure we'd get to the blinds before the birds did. An eerie chorus of coyotes howled in the distance as we climbed a steep slope to reach the blind, a small trailer built by a local high school shop program.

It had a couple of space heaters, a carbon monoxide detector, bench and chairs. Dad, who has made similar trips to photograph birds, commented that it was one of the nicest blinds he had been in.

Afterward, I was ready for more adventure. I knew the park had an unusual amount of geocaches — about 60, all placed by Liz and Gary Doerr of Creighton, a husband-and-wife volunteer team. I was eager to find out

if the caches were as creative and well-maintained as I had been told.

Geocaching is a bit like a high-tech treasure hunt. Using the Geocaching app, we navigated to different locations around the park, searching for hidden caches at the coordinates listed. We found five out of the eight we searched for and were impressed at the variety of containers and clever hiding spots.

That afternoon, Dad and I hiked Deer Creek Trail, a gently sloping wooded path. To my delight, we were accompanied by dozens of red admiral butterflies. We also spotted a rabbit munching on a leaf and saw deer tracks and scat.

As the sun set, the sky turned golden, then shades of purple, blue and orange. The colors seemed to last

for hours, and with expansive views of bluffs and rolling hills all around us, it made a stunning sight.

Day Three

The best time to see the Milky Way in the spring is in early morning, and Niobrara State Park is fairly remote. So we dragged ourselves out of bed at 3:30 a.m. to see if we'd have any luck.

Parking by a picnic table overlook, we were greeted by a spectacular starry sky with zero percent cloud cover. As our eyes adjusted, the Milky Way revealed itself. "I've seen it better, but not much better," Dad said.

Having lived most of my life in or near Lincoln, it was my first time seeing the Milky Way. There seemed to be layers of stars, like pebbles in a stream. It was one of my favorite moments of the entire trip.

Back at our cabin, we made our way to the group lodge to watch the sun rise over the Missouri River Valley, capturing dozens of photos. Then it was time to head home.

Even though it wasn't peak season, we found plenty at Niobrara State Park to keep us busy for a weekend — and at all hours of the day and night. [N](#)

Viewing Blinds at Niobrara SP

Experience the natural wonder of the sharp-tailed grouse mating dance. Niobrara State Park is now taking reservations for its viewing blind, free of charge, for March 7 to April 20.

The large blind holds up to eight guests. A two-person popup blind will also be available for photographers with larger equipment. Both blinds are first-come, first-served by reservation only. Book your spots by calling the park office at 402-857-3373. A Nebraska vehicle park entry permit is required.

Make an early arrival easy by staying at one of the park's electric campsites or fully-equipped cabins. Visit OutdoorNebraska.gov and search "Niobrara State Park" to make a reservation. Use the promo code "SHARPTAIL25" for discounted weekend rates. Weekdays during the off-season are already discounted.



Sandy Blum, the author's mom, reaches for a geocache dangling from a tree at Niobrara State Park. RENAE BLUM, NEBRASKALAND

The Re-emergence

Photos and story by Jeff Kurrus

March is a re-kindling of hope. A time to peek at the 10-day weather forecast and celebrate when we see above-freezing temperatures, hoping we also see below-freezing winds.

It's T-shirt weather. It's parka weather.

It's migration days on the Platte River watching birds from the tailgate, closing our eyes and allowing the sun to hit our cheeks like a long-lost friend.

It's watching cranes come to roost from the heated confines of the same vehicle, pointing from behind the glass.

We try hard in March. We force hikes along our trails in less clothes than we need, hoping beyond hope we can shed our

hoodie for the layer beneath.

We use our spud bars on ice, wishing for one more fish through the hard water, while also dressing the line on our fly rods for the first open-water bite.

As photographers, we always answer the phone for tips, for wildlife repeatedly ends up in places they don't normally frequent, a re-emergence for them as well it seems.

We know winter isn't quite over, despite the official calendar dates telling us spring begins this month, but many of us hope to see the few remaining morsels of what winter brings while also waiting very impatiently for the world to green around us. [N](#)



ABOVE: At Eugene T. Mahoney State Park near Ashland, a wild plum shrub blooms.
OPPOSITE: A flock of specklebelly geese flush from a Cass County pond.

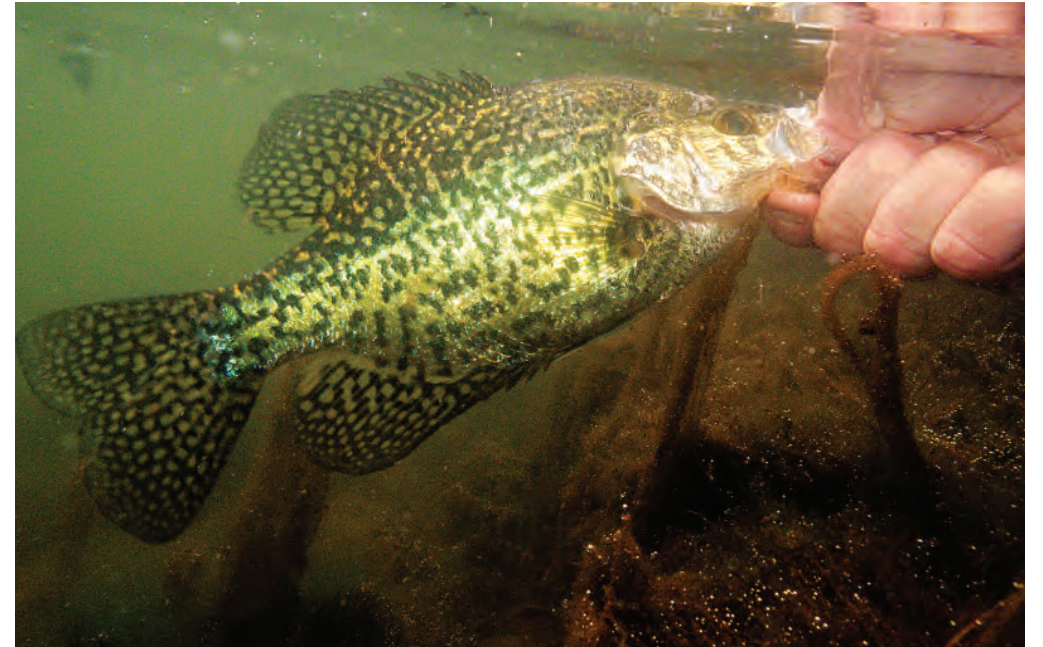




OPPOSITE: Antique fishing reels from an estate sale drew anglers, including the author, itching for anything associated with spring.

TOP RIGHT: A crappie is released at Towl Lake in Douglas County.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Wood ducks prepare to mate in a wetland near Gretna.





TOP LEFT: The NASP tournament in Lancaster County draws a wide array of visitors to this indoor competition where students compete.

BOTTOM LEFT: Wesley Batman, of Gretna, shoots his bow at the Larry D. Elston Archery Range in Sarpy County near Schramm Park State Recreation Area.

TOP RIGHT: Ellie Piersol, Jamie Reigert, Francisco Grace, Alex Saw, and Cassidy Allen talk around a fire pit at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park in T-shirt and shorts weather.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A white-tailed deer walks through the snow in Sarpy County.



Frontier Luxury

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

Nebraska frontier life involved hardship, deprivation and ... luxury?

One of the striking things about pioneer narratives is the important role of luxuries where such things were hard to get. When Nebraska Territory opened to settlers in 1854, a string of crude villages sprang up quickly along the Missouri River. People staked out farms and town lots and lived in tiny cabins or dugouts while they speculated in real estate and dreamed of the future. For the first few years, “Everybody considered himself rich or likely soon to be,” in the words of early Omaha historian Alfred Sorenson.

Mrs. Fenner Ferguson, wife of the first chief justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court, had a piano shipped from St. Louis in 1855. Her daughter-in-law later recalled that “Mrs.

Ferguson’s piano was one of her greatest comforts in those early days. I have often heard her say that many times when she would be practicing, the room would suddenly become darkened and she would find the Indians looking in at the windows to see and hear what was going on. She often asked them in and played for them.”

On New Year’s Day, 1855, Acting Gov. Thomas Cuming bought a basket of eggs so his wife could make “Virginia egg nog, Mrs. Cuming being a Virginian.” While sipping the beverage, Cuming joked that the eggs were “extra fine” and quoted the price — a dollar an egg, roughly \$37 in today’s money. It isn’t clear how Mrs. Cuming reacted to that news, but she was still telling the story 50 years later.

That winter, Tom Cuming suggested holding an “executive



The Thomas P. Kennard house (with cupola) in 1872. Located on H Street just west of 17th Street in Lincoln, the house is owned by the Nebraska State Historical Society. The view is to the southeast from the capitol. NSHS RG2432-1-337



Twentieth century interior of the Kennard House, furnished in the style of the 1870s. NSHS RG2158-0-1251-A

ball” for incoming Territorial Gov. Mark Izard. It was at Omaha’s City Hotel, a single-story frame building at 11th and Harney streets. The weather was so cold and the building so drafty that ice formed on the floor after it was scrubbed. Few women lived in Omaha at the time, and only nine ladies attended the ball. The band consisted of a solitary fiddler from Council Bluffs. During the dancing, several people slipped and fell. Gov. Izard was from Arkansas and not used to Nebraska winters. He “stood around shivering with the cold, but bore himself with amiable fortitude.”

By the latter 1850s, Omaha still “looked as though falling down from the skies onto the bare plains,” in the words of Emily Doane, wife of the new district attorney. The streets, she recalled, were “mostly a sea of mud” with only one sidewalk in town, but Doane also wrote of social events at the Herndon House, the city’s finest hotel:

“At the dances and evening parties, it was most unusual to see a man not in full dress suit, while women wore spreading skirts containing yards and yards of material, and the



Even a nice end table was worth showing off. George Copsey and family, Westerville, Custer County, 1886. Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. NSHS RG2608-0-1008



Built in 1858, the Herndon House at 9th and Farnam streets was Omaha’s first big hotel, the fanciest place in the territory. NSHS RG2341-2-P46

low-cut bodices of Victorian times. The skirts were long and had trains, for no lady would have allowed an ankle to be seen in those days”

In each of these stories, people accepted inconvenience or great expense to recreate something from their old life back east. But sometimes extravagance had a political point, as in 1869 when Thomas Kennard and a few other prominent men built expensive houses in the new state capital of Lincoln. At the time, many people doubted that the state government would remain in such a tiny, out-of-the-way village. Spending money on a fancy house demonstrated confidence and prompted others to invest in the would-be city.

Even folks far from the capital worried about public opinion — as photographer Solomon Butcher found out when he visited the David Hilton homestead in Custer County in 1887. Historian John Carter writes that “the family still lived in a sod house, a situation of considerable embarrassment to Mrs. Hilton — so much so that she steadfastly refused to be photographed in front of it.

“To make the picture to her liking, Mr. Hilton and the photographer had to drag the pump organ out and away from the house so that she could show friends back east that she

had one without revealing the condition of their dwelling.”

Sometimes refinement had more to do with the kind of society that people hoped to build. Beatrice, for example, was still a rough frontier town in the 1870s when a group of local residents led by suffragist Clara Bewick Colby decided to open a library.

A letter to the *Beatrice Express* argued that a library was necessary to “give tone to the community while still in its youth, and to bring in more of those of whom we can never have enough, i.e., people who ask what opportunities the place affords for mental culture.”

We tend to assume that pioneers were a rough lot (and sometimes they were) or that they were plain-living people who spurned luxury — although that was often out of necessity rather than choice. Few Nebraskans could afford some of the extravagancies described here. But the taste for refinement reveals how people not only comforted themselves with nice things, but also how they looked to the future, not seeing their crude present reality so much as their dreams of future prosperity. [N](#)

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



David Hilton homestead with Mrs. Hilton’s beloved pump organ, Custer County, 1887. NSHS RG2608-0-3535



What this town needs most is a public library, said a group of Beatrice residents a year before this 1874 photograph. The view is west along Court Street from Fourth Street. NSHS RG4396-13-68

A Niobrara Turkey Hunt

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

Turkeys were already gobbling in their roost trees when Gabe Sovereign and his mentor, Greg Hesse, walked to the blind they had set up in a wooded creek bottom east of Verdigre 40 minutes before sunrise.

About 30 minutes later, the birds began to leave their roosts, making even more noise in the woods, clucking, purring and gobbling to the left, right and even over the hill in front of them, answering most of Hesse's calls.

"Geez, they're everywhere," said Sovereign, a 13-year old from Coolridge.

"Be careful not to move," said Hesse, a Nebraska Game and Parks Commission conservation officer based in Long Pine. "We've got a hen close to us somewhere. I can hear her clucking."

After that hen made a brief appearance next to the two-track road where they had set up their decoys, Sovereign settled the barrel of his shotgun into a shooting stick, and they waited. Soon, turkeys appeared on the hillside, scratching their way across it in search of food.

Thirty minutes after sunrise, Hesse's calls finally coaxed five of them, three hens and two toms, closer. As the hens cautiously approached the decoys, stopping at 30 yards, the toms strutted across the draw 50 yards away for five minutes before they all continued on their way.

The hunters moved their blind a few hundred yards east to the edge of a feedlot turkeys frequented and cows

weren't currently using, Sovereign losing a boot in the mud on the way. As he got lessons from Hesse on how to use a slate call, the residents of the feedlot returned, curiously gathering around their decoys and even licking and nibbling on them. "I wish turkeys were like this, just walking up here and staring at us," Sovereign said.

Sovereign had hunted ducks and deer with his father, harvesting a buck the previous fall. But this was his second day of turkey hunting ever, a guest at a mentored youth hunt hosted by conservation officers from northeastern Nebraska at Niobrara State Park.

The previous morning, opening day of the youth turkey season, he passed on a chance to fill his tag with a bearded hen that came to Hesse's call. "I thought there would be a bigger turkey come in," he said. "It was cool. It got me really nervous."

Sovereign was one of six youths who took part in the mentored hunt and one of four who didn't harvest a bird. But on this weekend, conditions were less than ideal for turkey hunting. With plenty of hens talking, toms don't respond to calls like they might later in the season. And with winds gusting to 50 mph, some couldn't even hear the calls. But whether or not the hunt was a success depends on how success is measured.

■ ■ ■

Conservation officers from northeastern Nebraska began hosting mentored youth hunts in 2010, when Jeff Fields, then the superintendent



Hunter Sonnenfelt of Battle Creek sets up a turkey decoy as and his mentor, Conservation Officer Trevor Stahlecker of Tilden, prepares a blind during a youth turkey hunt near Niobrara last spring.



Officer Jeff Jones of Hartington and Katie Leware, superintendent of Ponca State Park, watch as Gabe Sovereign of Coolridge takes his turn on a hunt simulator in the Eagle View Group Lodge at Niobrara State Park.

of Ponca State Park, and Tom Zimmer, the district conservation officer for the region, set up a muzzleloader deer hunt in the park. The following spring, they held a turkey hunt at Ponca and have alternated between the two each year since. Last spring, they moved the turkey hunt to Niobrara State Park.

Several organizations, including the Tri-County Chapter of Whitetails Unlimited, the Big Game Conservation Association, the Verdigre Niobrara Valley Sportsmen and the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation sponsor the hunt. Each youth leaves with a new shotgun, a hunting blind, turkey calls, hats and other gear, as well as a lifetime hunting permit. Area landowners provide places for the youths to hunt.

Participants are recent graduates of the Hunter Education program, nominated by instructors and have little, if any, hunting experience.

“We try to pick kids who don’t have

these opportunities to hunt and get them outdoors,” said Cory Krause, a conservation officer from West Point who helps organize the hunts.

The weekend-long event begins Friday evening with a turkey hunting 101 course, where safety, shot placement and calling are discussed. After spending the night in cabins at the park and an early breakfast, hunters head to blinds mentors have set up in promising spots scattered around northern Knox County.

Like all mentored youth hunts conducted by Game and Parks, the goal is to turn interest into passion and create future hunters. Often, that happens. Be it deer, turkey or pheasant season, Krause can expect to receive photos sent by parents of their son or daughter following successful hunts. “And these kids are hooked,” he said.

■ ■ ■

One of those hunters to send photos to Krause last fall was Austyn

Batenhorst, who harvested her first deer in November. The 14-year-old from West Point had hunted pheasants and coyotes with her dad. “It’s just always been something my family does, and I enjoy it a lot,” she said. But deer and turkey hunting were different. She took part in the mentored deer hunt at Ponca in December 2023 and was invited to the turkey hunt last spring.

The first morning, she was teamed with Kelbi Abke, a conservation officer from Craig, who was also her mentor on the deer hunt. In the blind, Batenhorst admitted she hadn’t slept much the previous night. She made sure to take a photo of the sunrise and enjoyed watching a squirrel run past the blind. But there were no turkeys to be seen or heard.

“With this wind, things might not move, but you have a smile, so that’s good,” Abke said. Batenhorst was smiling the entire weekend.

“I came for the food and the pretty

skies,” she said. “I’m good.”

■ ■ ■

Two hunters were successful on opening morning. One was Lilly Mortensen of Neligh. The 13-year-old was participating in the 4-H shooting sports program, and in order to move up and shoot .22-cal. rifles, she was required to take hunter education. There, she was selected to take part in a mentored pheasant hunt. No one in her family hunted, but this sparked interest, and she was chosen for the turkey hunt at Niobrara.

Paired with Katie Leware, superintendent of Ponca State Park, she saw several turkeys in the first hours of opening morning. The first was a tom that strutted for a while

at 80 yards, but came no closer. The second was 30 yards from the blind, but stayed behind some trees and didn’t offer a clear shot. “Then about an hour and a half later there was one that came from behind the blind, and it was messing with the decoy,” Mortensen said. “I didn’t shoot that one, but then after that one came a bunch of them from over the hill. I waited a while and there was one about 15 yards away from the hunting blind, and that’s the one I shot. It was really exciting.”

“She couldn’t keep a smile off her face,” Leware said. “She called the birds in. She didn’t shoot the first one, and took her time and made sure she had a good, clean shot.”

Mortensen passed away the following October, surrounded by family. Her parents, Adam and Kendra, said she was ecstatic about the experience she had on the mentored hunt, and they shared her joy.

Another successful hunter was Lennix Chavez. The 13-year-old had moved to Verdigre from Colorado a year earlier and became interested in hunting. “It just sounded fun,” he said.

His mother, Cassandra, went to work trying to feed that interest. “I was worried we wouldn’t be able to find anybody to show him, but after I sent a crazy number of emails, somehow I got linked into these guys.”

After completing hunter education, Chavez was chosen to participate in



Successful hunters Lennix Chavez of Verdigre and Lillian Mortensen of Neligh pose with their birds and their mentors, Officer Mitch Johnson of Crofton and Katie Leware of Ponca, on the first morning of the hunt.



Gabe Sovereign of Coolridge and his mentor, Officer Greg Hesse of Long Pine, walk back to their truck after a morning hunt.

the youth deer hunt at Ponca, where he harvested a doe. He was just the kind of kid the officers like to have, so they invited him to the turkey hunt as well.

Paired with Mitch Johnson, an officer from Crofton, their hunt didn’t last long on opening morning. In the blind for 45 minutes, they started hearing birds.

“All of the turkeys we heard were behind us,” Chavez said. “They were about a half-mile away, but we kept on calling and waiting. And out of nowhere, this big tom comes and just gobbles.”

Out of range when it appeared, the bird turned to leave twice, but each time was called back by Johnson. The final time, the bird closed to 35 yards. “As soon as he stopped, I shot him.”

Quiet and reserved, Chavez simply said “yes” when asked if he was

excited.

Johnson provided more insight. “As we got out of the blind, he was shaking,” Johnson said. “I asked if he was cold, and he said maybe a little bit. I told him I knew the feeling — when you shoot something or are hunting something and have an encounter — of shaking when the adrenaline kicks in. He was definitely proud. And he should be.”

So is his mother. “It’s kind of our passion now, so it makes me happy,” Cassandra said of her son, who harvested more deer since his first mentored hunt. “Our freezer is full because of him.”

Not all of Chavez’s turkey made it home. He contributed some to the Saturday evening meal, where it was turned into a stir fry by officers assigned the cooking duties. Dinner that night, shared by hunters and a

few of their parents, was a wild game feed that also included deer roast and antelope taco salad.

■ ■ ■

The hunts aren’t all about turkeys and hunting. Mentors share their knowledge of the outdoors, the wildlife they see and their careers.

Jack Baumert remembers many details of the mentored pheasant and turkey hunts he took part in while growing up in West Point. His mentors became friends, people he would call for advice about upcoming hunts. “I felt like I was the king of the world when I could share hunting stories with an adult,” Baumert said.

They helped him grow not only as a hunter and outdoorsman, but also as a person, and played a pivotal part in his life, he said. One of those mentors was the late Pat Ellis of West Point, the school’s trap shooting coach, who took

him on his first pheasant hunt. “That was enough to set the hook in me, I guess,” Baumert said.

The other was Krause. “The few days I spent with Cory made me realize what I wanted to do when I grew up: I wanted to be a game warden,” said Baumert, who in 2023 did just that when he became a wildlife conservation officer with South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks.

Krause helped him decide which classes to take and which internships would serve him best. They still talk regularly, except instead of asking Krause for advice on an upcoming hunt, Baumert asks about cases he’s working. And now, Baumert has become the mentor, guiding youths on waterfowl hunts.

“It’s fun to be able to plant the seed,” he said. “You can see the kids who are interested when we do the mentored



Tom turkeys strut just out of range for Sovereign.

Conservation Officer Mentored Hunts

Mentored hunts organized by Game and Parks conservation officers give youths who have an interest in hunting, but not necessarily a place to go or someone to take them, a chance to go.

Donors provide hunting equipment the kids get to take home and food, and landowners open their property to the youths. Parks and Wildlife division staff assist in the hunts.

Southeastern Nebraska Deer Hunt: Six first-time hunters camp at Indian Cave State Park and hunt on private land nearby during the River Antlerless Season in October. Leg work and networking by Game and Parks staff help identify young hunters to participate in the program.

Ash Hollow Youth Waterfowl Hunt: Twenty-five youths ages 11 to 15 spend a morning learning about blind and boat safety, waterfowl identification, duck calling and decoy setup and placement, and shoot clay targets before spending the afternoon hunting ducks and geese from blinds at Clear Creek Wildlife Management Area. The event is on the second day of the youth waterfowl season in late October. Registration opens after Labor Day, with preference given to those with no hunting experience. Contact Ash Hollow State Historical Park for more information.

hunts. You can tell some probably won’t be game wardens, but they definitely seek out nature-related jobs in our department.”

■ ■ ■

Baumert may not be the only participant to become a game warden. Batenhorst has also set that as her career goal. That seed had been planted before she took part in the deer hunt at Ponca State Park, but her time in the blind with Abke really got

it growing.

“I like being out in nature a lot, and I would like to be part of protecting it,” she said.

Should that happen, Krause said, it will be another success story from the many hunts the officers have hosted, where success isn’t measured in birds harvested or game wardens created.

“It goes back to making memories and, hopefully, a little drive, and they want to keep doing it,” Krause said. 

Ready to Fish in 2025

By Eric Fowler

Excellent water quality and abundant aquatic vegetation have returned to Goose Lake Wildlife Management Area near Chambers, and fish populations have responded accordingly.

An Aquatic Habitat Program project in 2003 included the construction of barriers in Cache Creek to keep carp out of this shallow, Sandhills lake. Following a renovation, aquatic vegetation (which is the base of the food chain) and fish thrived. Record rainfall in the region in 2010, however, pushed stream levels above the barriers, allowing carp to reenter the lake, muddying the water and causing a rapid decline in vegetation and game

fish populations.

Biologists took advantage of low water levels in 2022 and renovated and restocked the lake. “The water is crystal clear without the carp in there,” said Jeff Schuckman, the Game and Parks regional fisheries biologist based in Norfolk, adding that there is an abundance of several varieties of pondweed and other submergent vegetation. “We wanted that water clarity to grow sport fish.”

And that it has. The 400 8½-inch northern pike stocked in the lake in 2022 now measure up to 30 inches, and the 13,000 fingerlings stocked in 2023 are up to 25 inches. The lake was also stocked with 128,000 largemouth

bass fingerlings and fry, 3,000 small adult bluegills and 130,000 yellow perch fingerlings. “We ought to have some bluegills that will be a half pound and there should be some nice perch,” Schuckman said. “The bass are doing well, too. They’re abundant. They’re not going to be huge, but there will certainly be bass in the 10- to 15-inch range, and they’ll be fun to catch. And they had a good spawn last year. Things are taking off.”

Other Aquatic Habitat and Angler Access Program projects that Nebraskans can enjoy this year include:

Grove Lake WMA: The north boat ramp on this lake north of Royal was replaced in 2024 and is now compliant



Shoreline clearing and grading and installation of a fishing dock improved access to the pond on East Monroe Creek at Gilbert Baker Wildlife Management Area north of Harrison. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Game and Parks biologists Zac Brashears and Derrek Schacht use an airboat to apply rotenone to Goose Lake Wildlife Management Area in 2022 to kill common carp and other undesirable fish in this Sandhills lake in Holt County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

with the Americans with Disabilities Act. A fishing pier was also installed near the south boat ramp, which was repaired.

Danish Alps State Recreation Area:

A new ADA-compliant kayak launch was built adjacent to the main boat ramp on Kramper Lake near Hubbard.

Hayes Center WMA: A concrete boat ramp was built near the camping area at this lake.

Defair Lake WMA: A primitive boat ramp was built on this Sandhills lake near Hyannis.

Louisville SRA: Fishing piers were built or improved, fishing pads added, and parking and sidewalks leading to fishing piers built in compliance with ADA on Lakes 1, 1a, 2 and 3. Additionally, 150 artificial structures, some as tall as 15 feet, were placed in the area’s five lakes to provide fish habitat.

Gallagher Canyon and Midway Canyon SRAs: Concrete boat ramps with ADA-compliant parking and sidewalks will be complete this spring, replacing gravel launches on these CNPPID canal system reservoirs.

Lake Maloney SRA: A fishing pier, retaining wall, benches and an ADA-compliant 1,500-foot sidewalk were built on the south side of the inlet to improve access. The project is similar to one at Johnson Lake SRA.

KEA West WMA and Archway

Lakes 2, 3 and 4: These Kearney-area borrow pits were renovated in 2020 and are all providing good fishing for smallmouth bass, yellow perch, bluegill and black crappie.

West Cozad WMA: This Interstate 80 lake was renovated in 2021 and should be providing good opportunities for largemouth bass and bluegill.

Starting in 2025

Windmill SRA: Work will begin in the summer to deepen shallow bottlenecks that cause portions of two lakes to become disconnected when water levels drop in the summer, as well as construction of a fishing jetty on Lake 2. A floating dock will be added to Lake 4. Access will be improved in several more locations on those and other lakes.

Fort Robinson State Park: The dam on Soldier Creek that formed Carter P. Johnson Lake — drained in 2023 because it posed a high hazard to the park’s campground — will be removed and an extensive stream restoration and access project will begin.

Willow Creek SRA: A covered fishing pier will be built on this reservoir near Pierce.

Smith Lake WMA: New fishing jetties will be built and areas deepened near the shoreline to improve angler access on this heavily vegetated Sandhills lake south of Rushville. 

New Aquatic Habitat Plan Approved

The third edition of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s Aquatic Habitat Plan, which details work that will be done to improve fishing and access at 71 waters across Nebraska in the coming years, was approved by the agency’s Board of Commissioners in January.

Since its inception in 1996, the Aquatic Habitat Program has been “providing new life for aging waters” in many ways, including removing sediment and rough fish and reducing shoreline erosion, all of which can make life tough for sport fish. A second plan was approved in 2008 and, in 2010, a companion Angler Access Program plan was launched to improve shoreline and boat access to waters where work was being done. Combined, \$112.5 million has been spent on projects in 135 locations using proceeds from the sale of Aquatic Habitat Stamps and matching funds. Projects have been completed at streams, ponds, sandpits and reservoirs around the state.

The new plan combines the Aquatic Habitat and Angler Access programs and has four goals: improving aquatic habitat; preventing the spread of harmful organisms; improving angler access; and evaluating the projects to see if there are better ways to do the work. The 71 projects selected were identified by fisheries field staff who best understand the needs of the water bodies they manage and what it would take to improve them. It also includes projects that will benefit all anglers, whether they fish from a boat or the shore, on a stream or large reservoir, or for bass, catfish or trout.

To see the projects included in the new plan, go to OutdoorNebraska.gov and search Aquatic Habitat.

ENDANGERED SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

The thick-billed longspur

By Ruby Rolland, Environmental Specialist, Nebraska Game and Parks



Thick-billed longspur, formerly known as McCown's longspur, in Kimball County.
JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

As the sun rises over the still-frosty prairie, so does the male thick-billed longspur. He's arrived in western Nebraska this spring in search of breeding territory and a mate to share it with. Good nesting ground has been increasingly difficult for him to find, as the shortgrass prairies that used to sprawl across the Panhandle have been lost to the plow, human development and invasive grasses and trees. Overgrazed pastures will provide a decent place to try and raise a family, but nothing beats a diverse, native prairie. Not wasting any time, he sets out in search of breakfast, a variety of seeds and insects, and a small plot of land for a family summer home.

Finding the perfect spot, the male now focuses on attracting a mate. To entice a female, he flutters into the air, flaring out his wings and tail feathers, and sings a metallic trilling song, over and over and over. His vibrant white, black and copper feathers, strong voice and stamina signify he is

genetically healthy and able to defend his female and territory. Lured by his flashy tail feathers and impeccable choice in nesting location, a female arrives. Much less showy than her black-bibbed counterpart, the streaky brown female evaluates the male, his territory, and chooses him as her mate.

Successful in his courtship, the male focuses on defending their home while the female builds their nest. Constructed on the ground, the nest is a small cup made of intertwined grass, delicately lined with collected feathers, hair and softer grasses. Inside are two to six small, speckled eggs that will hatch after 12 days into helpless, naked chicks. Facing imposter cowbirds, insecticides, prowling predators and fierce sibling rivalry, the chicks must survive 10 days until they can fly. Mom and dad spend those days frantically catching and dismembering grasshoppers to feed to their growing brood, whose appetites are insatiable.

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

Once the chicks can feed and fend for themselves, the family disbands and, as cooler weather creeps in, the thick-billed longspurs flock up and head south to ride out the winter on the southern plains of Texas and Mexico.

Nebraska lists 32 species of plants and animals as threatened or endangered. The thick-billed longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*) is listed as threatened in the State of Nebraska and is found out west in Banner, Kimball, Scotts Bluff and Sioux counties from April to November.

For more information on Nebraska's threatened and endangered species, visit OutdoorNebraska.gov.

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HOW ARE THEY GROWING HERE?

By Chris Helzer

I’ve always had a soft spot for plants that can thrive where rainfall is scarce. The saguaro cactus is a spectacular example, of course, growing up to 40 feet tall in the Sonoran Desert. It has numerous adaptations that have allowed it to flourish in an environment that doesn’t seem suited for perennial plants.

While desert plants are impressive, many examples of Nebraska species are equally inspiring. It’s tough enough to flower and produce seeds in the dry Nebraska Panhandle when you grow in the relatively fertile soils along creeks or rivers. The plants I admire most are the ones that don’t even appear to need soil at all. They seem to survive purely on grit and stubbornness.

Whenever I see a gumbo lily blooming prolifically in what looks like pure clay or sandstone, I feel like it deserves celebration. That’s not soil! It’s just soft rock, and not the kind Michael Bolton likes. How is that plant getting enough water and nutrients to survive, let alone to produce numerous showy flowers?

Similarly, little stemless hymenoxys plants growing out of a sheer stone cliff, or in the tiniest of cracks on a rock outcropping, deserve way more accolades than they get. We all learned about plants in school. You might even remember the five things plants supposedly need to grow: sunlight, proper temperature, moisture, air and nutrients.

Well, plants growing out of rock get sunlight and air easily enough, I guess. Proper temperature is up for debate. Being baked by the summer sun on a shade-less slab of stone or clay sure doesn’t seem “proper” to me. More to the point, where do those plants get moisture and nutrients?

Plants can apparently produce



Gumbo lily (*Oenothera caespitosa*) growing on sandstone bluffs at Fort Robinson State Park. CHRIS HELZER

acids that dissolve rock and release nutrients their roots can then absorb. That’s incredible, but also seems insufficient to support the nutritional needs of a plant. Depending upon the situation, rainwater can help carry nutrients from elsewhere into the thin crack a plant is rooted in. Fair enough, but that implies there’s enough rainfall to make that happen.

Parts of the Nebraska Panhandle average 15 inches of rain per year, with significantly less falling during frequently-occurring droughts. Any farmer or rancher will tell you how difficult it is to grow plants in that little rainfall, and that’s assuming those plants are rooted in soil. Growing plants in pure clay, sandstone or limestone seems impossible, even with abundant rain. Doing so in what

seems optimistically called a “semi-arid climate” is mind-blowing.

Can we all agree to extend these plants a little more attention and recognition? Maybe just a slow clap at Fort Robinson, Courthouse and Jail rocks or wherever else you encounter them? A few encouraging words on a hot, dry summer day? Or, at the very least, the courtesy of not stepping directly on them as you walk across an otherwise bare expanse of sandstone or clay?

As humans, we tend to admire pluck and hardiness. Those characteristics don’t just apply to people, or even animals. Some of the pluckiest, hardest organisms live right in our state, quietly persisting and providing beauty for all of us to enjoy. How lucky are we?

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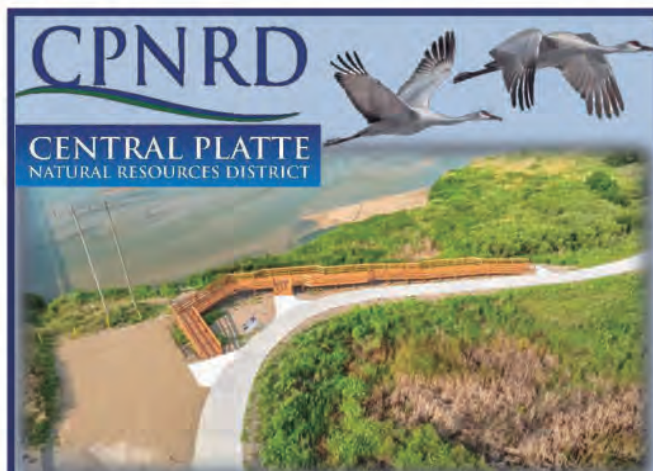
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PUCCOONS *Medicinal plants of the Sandhills*

By Gerry Steinauer



Hairy puccoon in full bloom in a Sandhills prairie in Brown County. GERRY STEINAUER

In spring, just around the corner, the bright yellow-orange flowers of hairy puccoon (*Lithospermum carolinense*) and the yellow blooms of its shorter cousin, fringed puccoon (*L. incisum*), add flashes of color to the grassy dunes of the Sandhills. Both species are thick, tap-rooted perennials in the borage family, whose members are characterized by their five-petaled, funnel-shaped flowers and hard, nut-like seeds.

Great Plains tribes valued the puccoons among their many medicinal plants. The Lakota referred to hairy puccoon as “peju’ta ha sa’pa,” which translates to black skin medicine or bark medicine. They used the plant for treating hemorrhaging of the lungs. Their name for fringed puccoon is “peju’ta sabsa’pa,” meaning black medicine. A powder made from the plant’s black roots was used to treat chest wounds, such as from arrows or gunshots.

The Cheyenne used dried, ground leaves and roots of fringed puccoon to

treat paralysis. When the powder was rubbed on a paralyzed limb, it acted as a counter-irritant, causing a prickling sensation. Additionally, they made a tea from the plant, which was applied to the face and head to treat delirium. The Kiowa-Apaches dug mature roots, using them fresh and chopped or dried and pounded to make tea for stomach aches and diarrhea.

In his informative 1992 book *Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie*, a source for this article, Kansas ethnobotanist Kelly Kindscher noted that Comanche women used an unidentified puccoon for birth control, though how they prepared the plant remains a mystery. Better documented, the Shoshones in Nevada prepared a contraceptive: a cold-water tea made from the roots of western stoneseed (*L. ruderale*). When consumed daily for six months, this tea ensured sterility thereafter. Recent studies have confirmed the plant’s effectiveness as a contraceptive, identifying lithospermic acid as the



The Blackfeet burned dried tops of fringed puccoon as incense during ceremonies. GERRY STEINAUER

active compound. This compound acts on the pituitary gland, suppressing hormone production that stimulates the sex glands.

In coming decades, scientists may discover new uses for the puccoons, further confirming their value beyond their beauty as wildflowers.



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Deer hunt near Valentine, 1984

An annual deer hunt on the DeNaeyer Ranch south of Valentine. Pictured from left: Bob Bobek; Bob Eads; Buzz DeNaeyer; Bob Smith (myself); my son, Toby Smith; Duane Dunbar; and Kevin Thorton.

We were always very successful hunting in the Schlagel Creek Canyons with Buzz as our guide.

– Robert Smith, Norfolk



Waterfowl hunting at Cedar Marsh, late 1990s

What we call Cedar Marsh in Garfield County was the site of one of many great hunts. From left: John Ludwig (O'Neill); John's father, Duke Ludwig; and Mat Pittman (Arlington).

– Larry Spangler, Columbus

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.



Rocky Ford Campground, 1981

Pictured is Rocky Ford Campground, set up for over 50 people. This would have been a Friday evening before starting a two-day canoe trip from Cornell Dam to Rocky Ford with an overnight camp at Fred Krzyanowski's pasture, with cattle and a few horses near Smith Falls, now Smith Falls State Park.

Loren Wilson owned Rocky Ford campground and Wilson Outfitters, and he had an office in Lincoln for a number of years. In spring, he would haul the canoes from Lincoln to the Niobrara and then back to Lincoln in the fall for repair or maintenance.

In 1980, I started working part time at the outfitter until a short time after Loren's death in 1986. Part of my job was to bring ice cream from the UN-L dairy store packed in dry ice. It was served with fresh Dutch-oven-baked pies or brownies on Saturday at Smith Falls after a steak dinner. Pancakes and sausage breakfast on Sunday morning. We hauled everything down river with us, including folding picnic tables.

– Tom Bouse, Lincoln

Fishing at Lake Ogallala, 1998

Pictured are my sons, Joel Tophoj with one of his catches and his brother, Mikkel, looking on. Earlier that day, their grandfather and uncle went fishing at nearby Lake McConaughy where they didn't have success. The boys, their dad and uncle lined up on a dock at Lake Ogallala to try their luck there. Within a few minutes, Joel caught his limit while everyone else turned up empty-handed. What an exciting day of fishing for Joel!

– Stephanie Tophoj, Brule





Brian Arp and his conservation officer colleagues wear many hats for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.
PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

WHEN SOMETHING BAD HAPPENS

By Jeff Kurrus

The line of conservation officers — often known to hunters and anglers as “game wardens” — was long. It stretched from one end of the hall of the Crete Carrier Riverview Lodge at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park to the other, small conversations between old and new colleagues forming a baseball-stadium-crowd-like hum.

With a black backdrop and portable studio lights, I had been tasked to photograph each of these officers after one of their rare meetings together.

I was working fast, the mood was light and this assembly-line process would be finished soon.

“Why are we doing this?” someone called out from down the hall loud enough for everyone to hear.

“For when they show you on TV after something bad happens,” another responded.

Pause.

Pause to the old stories between old friends.

Pause to the laughter.

But the interlude didn’t last long, and within a minute, the

banter resumed. Despite the dangerous nature of their jobs, often acting as first responders to non-wildlife incidents on top of their everyday duties, our conservation officers don’t have time to worry about what could happen.

The hats they wear are many, the least of which is checking to see if a hunter or angler has the appropriate license. They investigate poaching cases, make arrests, testify in court and respond whenever a person, or group of people, compromises the enjoyment of the outdoors for others.

They also mentor kids, volunteer at shooting ranges, make public appearances, teach classes, appear on radio shows and are handpicked because they are good with people. Through all the times I’ve been stopped by officers, I’ve never had a negative experience.

They understand their roles, and their demeanor can change on a dime depending on their complex job requirements. They are a special group of friendly people.

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