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NEBRASKAland

December 2007



Christmas lights outline an antique wagon in front of the starlit barn at Buffalo Bill's Ranch State Historical Park outside of North Platte. Photo by Rocky Hoffmann.



NEBRASKAland Magazine

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Dog Sledding in Nebraska?

PLUS

A TALE OF TWO DEER
COACHING AND HUNTING NEBRASKA
THE GOLDENEYE EXPEDITIONARY FORCE
THE ONE-LEGGED DUCK
LITTLE BOYS AND TRAINS
FISHING THROUGH THE ICE



NEBRASKAland

Volume 85, Number 10, December 2007

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Cover: "Mushnuk", a 5-year old Malamute/Siberian husky cross, is one of the "wheel dogs" on a dogsled team assembled by North Platte grandmother, Joyce McNeil. See story beginning on page 10. Photo by Rocky Hoffmann. **Opposite:** A blanket of fresh snow adds sparkle to Toadstool Geological Park on the Oglala National Grasslands north of Crawford. Photo by Bob Grier.



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Comment



This elk was photographed swimming in a pond at Gilbert-Baker WMA.

Cooling Off

This photo was taken at Gilbert-Baker Wildlife Management Area, an area where prairie meets pine trees, and the elk population seems to thrive.

This particular bull gave me and two of my friends the opportunity of a lifetime when we found him just 100 yards from where we had parked our truck. He was in an opening when we initially stumbled upon him on our morning hike. The young bull soon discovered we were watching him and bolted for cover.

We thought the excitement was over until we reached the parking area and found the bull swimming in the pond next to the lot. He took his time finding his way out and provided us with some great photos.

It's these once in a lifetime opportunities that make me thankful to live in such a great state like Nebraska.

Seth Hulquist
Alliance, Nebraska

Buy a Bigger Freezer

Eric Fowler wrote in the October edition of *NEBRASKAland* magazine that hunters should voluntarily harvest more does, before regulations require it. Nonresident hunters, such as myself, pay quite a premium for deer

permits compared to Nebraska residents. Maybe it's time to reduce the difference between resident and nonresident permits to encourage doe harvesting, or at least make the second nonresident permit the same price as for a resident.

Regards from a *NEBRASKAland* reader in Europe, who, thanks to great friends near Grand Island, has the opportunity to hunt each year and enjoy the nature of beautiful Nebraska!

Chris Nendick
Belgium

In 2007 the price of nonresident season choice antlerless permits was reduced to \$55 (they had been \$178) and many of the antlerless permits also have bonus tags.

Hopefully many resident and nonresident deer hunters alike will take advantage of these permits and help control the deer population.

— Editor

November Cover a Hit

I picked up the November issue of your magazine at a newsstand the other day and just had to comment on the wonderful cover photo of the Pine Ridge horseback riders. Also, the rock formation on the back of your magazine — is this a hoax? I have never seen such a face on a

Comment

rock. It reminded me of someone we all may know from our childhood — Oscar from *Sesame Street*.

What a wonderful magazine. I love the glossy cover, is that something new?

John Roth
Lincoln NE



4-year old Ryley Hoke peeks out of a goose blind while helping his dad and granddad hunt near Lisco.

Eagle Eyes

"Grandpa, bird coming" is what Ryley Hoke, my four-year-old grandson, is saying. He was helping me and his dad, Todd Hoke, hunt geese near Lisco. Ryley can see the geese coming long before his grandpa can.

Lyle Hoke
Scottsbluff, Nebraska

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Stacey Anderson of Curtis poses with the 6-by-7 bull she harvested this fall in the Box Elder Elk Management Unit.

Elk Harvest Sets New Record

As of November 1, a record 77 elk had been harvested in the state this year, according to preliminary data by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, with one elk unit still open through the end of the year.

This year's elk harvest, including partial harvest from the still-open Boyd Unit, included 36 bulls, 32 cows and nine calves. That compares to 73 elk taken total in Nebraska in 2006.

"The elk herd continues to expand across the state, as do hunting opportunities for Nebraska residents," said Kit Hams, big game program manager for the Commission. "Numerous sightings have occurred this fall in southeastern Nebraska, leading one to wonder if elk are becoming established in new areas. The elk herd has increased from 50 to more than 1,000 over the past 20 years."

The success rate on bulls was 68 percent, compared to 76 percent last year. Bull quality was outstanding, with 22 of 23 Pine Ridge bulls (Ash Creek, Bordeaux and Hat Creek units) being 6-by-6 or better. Success on bulls was highest in the new Niobrara River unit, where five of

six hunters took bulls.

Fifty-three either-sex and 113 antlerless permits were issued. The success rate on cows was 36 percent. "Cows usually are more difficult to hunt and landowners usually give preference to those hunters with bull permits," Hams said. "It also is likely that hunters with bull permits put forth more effort."

Hunters have harvested more than 500 elk in Nebraska since 1985.

Buy Lifetime Habitat Stamp Now

The price of the Lifetime Habitat Stamp, now priced at \$260, will go up to \$320 on January 1, 2008, so if you've been thinking about purchasing one, you might want to do so before the first of the year.

Every Nebraska resident 16 years of age or older, and all nonresidents regardless of age, must have a Habitat Stamp to hunt game species or harvest furbearers in the state. The yearly stamp is valid for the calendar year as dated, but Lifetime Habitat Stamps are valid throughout the holders life, whether they live in Nebraska or not.

The stamp makes a great gift for

the holiday season and, in addition to the paper version, comes with an enameled brass plate engraved with the holder's name, permit number and date of birth. Stamp proceeds go into the Nebraska Habitat Fund, which acquires, manages and restores land for wildlife. Income generated from Lifetime Habitat Stamp sales is invested and only the interest is used.

The stamp may be purchased at Commission offices throughout the state, online at www.OutdoorNebraska.org or by calling 1-800-742-0056.

Habitat Art Contest Begins New Direction

After 30 years, the Commission will no longer hold a contest for Nebraska's Habitat Stamp. "In the early years, the contest was popular and we possessed the resources to facilitate it. These aspects have changed in our analysis. We acknowledge some may be disappointed with this decision, yet most will understand it was necessary," said Commission division administrator Doug Bauch.

New Ponca SP Addition

The Ponca State Park (SP) Northern Addition is a newly acquired 682-acre tract of public land in northeastern Nebraska.

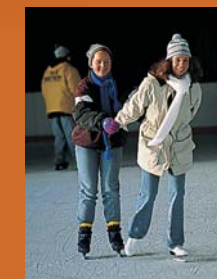
The new area boasts canoe/kayak access to the Missouri River and the Lewis and Clark legacy campsite, with officer and wedge tents resembling a Lewis and Clark campsite. "This area will become very popular for boy scouts as well as adventurous canoeists and kayakers," said Nebraska Game and Parks Commission federal aid administrator Neal Bedlan.

This addition is adjacent to 688-acre Elk Point Wildlife Management Area and both have newly restored wetlands that will "enhance the outdoor educational opportunities of Ponca," added Bedlan.



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Officer's Notebook



We're Tough

A few years ago some conservation officers were issued kayaks to patrol river systems throughout Nebraska. At the time I didn't think a lot about them, but after trying one out I found them to be a useful tool. One cold day (very cold) in December, my neighboring officer to the north, Mike Luben, called and wanted to do a detail on the Platte River checking duck hunters with the kayaks. I jokingly told him that I did not think it was cold enough to be on the river that day. In reality it was near 10 degrees and the river was slushing up badly. But it was near the end of the season and Mike and I believed we might surprise a few people with the new equipment.

Before driving to meet Officer Luben I looked at the temperature to see how many clothes I would need on our journey. I decided to put on the old Filson coat and matching gloves. I forgot my chest waders so I had to use my hip boots, which were nearly 10 years old. When Mike and I arrived at the river's edge he asked me how far down we wanted to go. I bravely told him all the way to the park, well, that was just over 20 miles. But we were tough!

We had not even made it a mile down the river when I realized I had made a grave error (but I wasn't about to tell Mike). I remember looking back towards my patrol vehicle and thinking: "So long buddy it was nice knowing ya." A little further down the river we started running into hunters, they not only were surprised to see us but gladly took us in to show us their birds. I recall one particular hunter asking us what we thought we were doing. Ah, we're tough!

Continuing our trek we ran into a dry spell of occupied blinds, which was particularly bad news for me because I had been drying my gloves off on the blinds' heaters. You also know it's too cold to try something like this when ice makes them too heavy to lift. My high-end, supposedly water-proof gloves were failing badly when we rounded a bend and I could see two duck blinds, one with hunters in it. Mike stated later that he wondered what I had seen because I started paddling straight for the empty blind. He hadn't realized I could see a 200 lb. propane bottle behind it. I rushed inside thinking I would leave a 5-spot with a note thanking the hunters for saving my life, but I couldn't write because my hands didn't work and my pen was frozen. At this time I could have witnessed someone shoot a hundred ducks across the way ... my priority was heat! I looked across the frozen river and noticed Mike was getting along fine with the other blind (as if I could have been of any help anyway). I opened the propane valve and struck a match ... nothing! The bottle was empty!

I grabbed an empty coffee can and made a small fire to warm my hands and dry my gloves. Mike came over and with a smile mentioned we had about 12 miles to go. A couple of ice jams later and several near capsizing we reached our other vehicle. Almost too frozen to get out, I finally had made it.

This last winter while crossing the Platte River I noticed it was almost completely frozen except for a small stream with open water. My once-frostbitten fingers called up Mike and asked if he wanted to put in because the ducks were really flying. He laughingly said it wasn't cold enough yet.

— Stacey Lewton, Conservation Officer, Lincoln



Fishing Records Broken Across State

The following fish have been recognized as new state records by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

In the hook and line category:

— a 4-pound, 8-ounce spotted gar taken from a private sandpit in Dawson County by Dustin Noble of North Platte on July 13.

— a 29-pound, 6-ounce freshwater drum taken from Gavins Point Dam Tailwaters by Roque Ramirez of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on June 23.

In the archery category:

— a 17-pound, 13-ounce silver carp taken from the Missouri River by Michael Holly of Belden on May 16.

— an eight-ounce orange spotted sunfish taken from a Loup River backwater in Platte County by Mike Gutzmer of Columbus on July 1.

— a 3-pound European rudd taken from Box Butte Reservoir by Will Leef of Fleming, Colorado, on July 7.

— a 22-pound, 13-ounce freshwater drum taken from Gavins Point Dam Tailwaters by Ronald Anderson of Omaha on July 23.

— a 62-pound, 1-ounce grass carp taken from Buckskin Hills Lake by Ronald Anderson of Omaha on August 10.

In the underwater spearfishing category:

— a 2-pound, 11-ounce European rudd taken from Box Butte Reservoir by Josh Adamson of Alliance on July 4.

— 5.5-ounce pumpkinseed taken from Box Butte Reservoir by Hunter Schafer of Alliance on July 7.

— a 1.97-ounce redear sunfish taken from a private sandpit in Lincoln County by Dustin Noble of North Platte on July 11.

— a 20-pound, 4.8-ounce northern pike taken from Box Butte Reservoir by Joshua J. Adamson of Alliance on July 26.

— a 4-pound, 10-ounce white sucker taken from Box Butte Reservoir by Joshua J. Adamson of Alliance on July 28. ■

Banding

Flagship initiative focuses on uniquely diverse Wildcat Hills.

By Bob Grier

Introducing young students to birds in western Nebraska's Wildcat Hills is easy when you're gently holding a red-breasted nuthatch or a spotted towhee, birds caught just moments before in mist nets at the Wildcat Hills Nature Center, 10 miles south of Gering.

The daily banding station and outdoor educational workshops at the Nature Center for four weeks in September and October are part of a newly developed

"flagship initiative" focused on the uniquely diverse Wildcat Hills and implemented as part of the ongoing Nebraska Natural Legacy Program.

The center hosted school groups, families, landowners, educators and others from across the Panhandle and entertained them with guided nature trail hikes, outdoor activities and workshops on migration, adaptation and habitat hosted by biologists and education specialists from the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO), Prairie Partners and the Commission.

The bird banding station provided an opportunity for participants of all ages to watch as biologists captured, measured and released shortgrass prairie and pine forest bird species. Events like the Wildcat Hills Nature Center's educational bird banding station and outreach programs, which are funded by the Nebraska Environmental Trust, are a rare and popular resource for the region's K-12th grade schools, families and the public, according to Anne James, outdoor education specialist at the Wildcat Hills Nature Center.

"The participating biologists and resource and educational specialists



Certified bird bander Dana Ripper shows off a recently captured bird to grade school students and their teachers.

have the flexibility to offer programs for students of all ages, as well as parents and other adults that visit the Nature Center," she said. "The events drew large numbers for the daily two-hour sessions and our Saturday event on September 15 gave the public that couldn't attend during the week an opportunity to participate as well."

Visitors learned about the ecology of migratory birds, bird adaptations, the science of bird banding, as well as bird migration and its many hazards. Those attending were also able to observe up close the birds harmlessly captured in mist nets.

In addition to the daily programs, the information gathered at the bird banding station is forwarded to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of nation-wide bird research. "Most of the RMBO bird banding stations serve as a research tool," certified bird bander from RMBO Dana Ripper explained, "but our priorities also include outreach and education. While we collect all of the standard data that each of the banding stations collect, we can explain and demonstrate to the participants how we capture and

band birds, gather standard data, including wing and tail measurements, determine the bird's fat and molt characteristics as well as age and sex."

James, Ripper and wildlife education coordinator for Prairie Partners Laura Barr tailored their programs to specific ages, making the learning both fun and educational for participants.

Each of the students received a Prairie Partners pocket guide to the prairie birds and also had the

opportunity to hike the Nature Center's trails to find and observe the numerous species of birds using the habitat in the immediate area. In addition, Barr, based in Scottsbluff, also offered landowner workshops, pre-service teacher training and teacher workshops in Project Wild, Aquatic Wild and Flying Wild.

During the first week of this year's programs at the Wildcat Hills Nature Center, 10 species of birds were captured and banded. These included: pine siskins, black-capped chickadees, red crossbills, spotted towhees, chipping sparrows, red-breasted nuthatches, pigmy nuthatches, Wilson's warblers, house wrens and house finches. For more information on programs at Wildcat Hills, the Nebraska's Natural Legacy Program, or RMBO and Prairie Partners activities, contact Emily Munter, partners manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's district office in Alliance, (308) 763-2940; Anne James, Wildcat Hills Nature Center outdoor education specialist, (308) 436-3777; or go online to the Commission's web site at www.OutdoorNebraska.org ■

MUSH!

Photos and text by Rocky Hoffmann

“Everyone thinks it odd that a 73-year-old grandmother is running a team of dogs in front of a sled...especially in Nebraska.”

When Joyce McNeil of North Platte goes for a sleigh ride, it involves a whole lot more than a simple slide down a hill on a Flexible Flyer. In fact, McNeil’s style of sledding doesn’t even require a hill, because gravity has little to do with it. Powered by as many as six huskies, McNeil can run her sled up or down most hills and go flat out fast on level ground.

“Everyone thinks it odd that a 73-year-old grandmother is running a team of six dogs in front of a sled ... especially in Nebraska,” Joyce said of her unique sport as she led each dog from the kennel to a tie-out chain near her sled.

Joyce is a small lady, and it wasn’t without difficulty that she handled each dog across icy footing to the sled.

“They were born to pull. It doesn’t matter to them whether they’re pulling the sled or me around in my boots. In fact, while I’m hitching them up, I have to tie the sled to a tree until everything is in place and ready to go, including me,” said Joyce.

Each dog is hitched in an assigned order depending on his or her ability and skill. The “wheel dogs,” Mushnuk and Yukon, are the hardest-working dogs of the team and are the dogs closest to the sled. The “team dogs” in the center of the hitch are Mushski and

Zorro. Team dogs are used to provide extra power to the hitch. There may be as many as eight team dogs on larger hitches of twelve or more dogs.

“My ‘lead dogs’ are Mushdog and Shammu. Ideally, these are the dogs that direct the team upon my commands. I have no reins or lines to the dogs like one would have with a team of horses, but as with horses, the commands are ‘haw’ for left, ‘gee’ for right and, of course, ‘whoa’ for stop. Those are the three primary commands, but in reality my lead dogs don’t respond as I would like them. A while back my veteran lead dog was run over and killed, and Mushdog and Shammu stepped in with no experience in that position. Because they don’t always listen, I don’t know where we’re going to end our run. I have a brake on my sled, however, which gives me the ability to enforce the ‘whoa’ command before we get too far in the wrong direction. Then I get them back on trail and off we go again. They’ll eventually learn the commands.”

All the dogs are husky and Samoyed-cross except for Mushnuk, who is a Siberian husky/Alaskan Malamute cross. Siberian huskies, Alaskan Malamutes and Samoyeds are all northern breeds of working dogs. Siberian huskies originated in eastern Siberia and were first bred by the Chukchi tribes. They



Joyce McNeil and Erin Weaver mush a four-dog sled team through deep snow last winter near North Platte.

are medium-sized dogs but quite capable of working in severe Arctic cold. Malamutes descend from dogs of the Mahlemut tribe of northwestern Alaska. Malamutes are large dogs that are capable of pulling heavy loads long distances. Samoyed dogs derive their name from the Samoyedic people of Siberia. They were used to herd reindeer and to pull sleds during nomadic journeys.

Joyce's past is not typical of most "mushers." Being a native Nebraskan, selecting a snow sport would usually rank far from the top of the list of favorites, and taking up such a

demanding sport is not normally something begun at age 66. Coming from a farm and ranch background and running a large dairy herd while raising five children, however, Joyce was not afraid of the work that caring for and handling a team of large dogs requires.

Even when she adopted her first husky from the North Platte animal shelter, she had no intentions other than making the dog a pet and providing it a good home. The dog had belonged to a man who had moved into the North Platte area from Colorado and didn't have a place to keep him. Joyce was amazed at how fast and strong the



Mushdog, a nine-year-old male Siberian husky, is a lead dog on McNeil's team.



Joyce McNeil mushes her six-dog team through a pasture gate in Snell Canyon southeast of North Platte.

animal was. In order to exercise him, she'd take him down a country road, holding the leash out the window of the pickup truck.

About the time Joyce was wondering what in the world she was doing with such a hard running dog, another man, this one moving to Colorado, gave Joyce a purebred Siberian husky female. Things began to click in Joyce's mind, and soon she adopted two more huskies. Now she had a team, be it small and consisting of only wheel dogs and lead dogs. Son Mike built a wheeled cart for her summer use and a sled for winter.

Joyce recalled her frustration. "I knew absolutely nothing about dog sledding. I had never seen a dog harness

and had no idea how to hook sled dogs up other than tying the whole bunch together with ropes. As fast as I'd tie one to the hitch and go to another, the first one would chew through the rope. As expected, they were all eager to run, but I had little understanding at the time how difficult it would be to handle them while hitching the team to the cart or sled. There had to be a system."

While she was building makeshift harnesses and learning to handle her dogs, she was also building kennels, doghouses and a large exercise pen. Fencing had to be strong enough and tall enough to keep them confined.

"They are working dogs, and they'll work hard to get out and run because that's what they like to do!"

Then tragedy struck in 1998. That very desire to get out and run resulted in Joyce losing three of her dogs. The heartbreak wasn't over – that same year, both of her parents and four close friends passed away. Grief pushed its way into Joyce's life and took over.

"I had one dog, the purebred female, and a big empty kennel. It was decision time. My answer surprisingly came in the mail in 1999. It was a brochure about an expedition-type adventure in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota. The advertisement, among other things, was for a hands-on experience in dog sledding. I would drive a sled, perform health checks on dogs, camp in the snow, cross-country ski, travel by snowshoes, navigate and learn winter

survival. Most inviting to me was this was also a 'life renewal' course, something that I desperately needed at that time."

Joyce deeply believes in fate and is strongly vested in faith. When she finally called for reservations, there happened to be one opening left, and the expedition was to begin on her 67th birthday. Her age, however, sent up a red flag with the expedition hosts.

"They required me to have a complete physical examination and my doctor's written permission," Joyce recalled.

She was informed by the expedition that she would be required to run three miles in 35 minutes on uneven terrain while toting a 45-pound pack. Not a problem, it was only July and the



Joyce and Erin find warmth from the fire and steaming chili in the Dutch oven while the sled team rests.

expedition didn't start until December 27.

"Regardless of all the preparation in store for me, the first thing I did was get my lone surviving purebred female bred. What could be more uplifting than a box full of warm fuzzy puppies?" Joyce said.

Joyce remembered that the expedition was everything it was advertised to be, an absolutely unique learning experience for novice dog handlers. What was most rewarding was that she was with people that talked about and enjoyed the same sport. Not many people talked about dog sledding back in Nebraska.

"I also enjoyed the wilderness, the quiet and peaceful setting, where the only interruption was the nightly howling of the dogs and the answer from gray wolves," Joyce recalled.

She arrived home eager to get started

and much more knowledgeable about her sport. Being an accomplished leather craftsman, she reenlisted her old heavy-duty Singer sewing machine and began fashioning harness. She purchased an authentic gang line to replace the cobbled up ropes that her previous team had chewed. The wheel cart was an excellent training device for the five puppies that arrived in March following her expedition, but Joyce knew that as the dogs matured, the cart would be too light and therefore too dangerous for her to handle.

In the procession of wheel carts, Joyce then found a stripped down ATV to which she welded a horseshoe for a hitch and mounted a metal seat from a hay rake. Last summer, daughter Julie presented her with a commercial, heavy-duty child's coasting cart, that she adapted to be pulled by dogs.

"I may have raised a few eyebrows from neighboring ranchers with some of my past contraptions, but I was proud of all my adaptations. If you know ranchers, you know they can't help but poke a little good spirited fun at you, especially if you have a hobby as unique as mine. One rancher accused me of running all the deer out of the country on the opening day of deer season. I couldn't help it that it snowed on that particular day, but I sure wasn't going to waste the first snow."

Another dog sledding expedition in 2000 put her in the company of instructor Paul Schurke, who was a member of the team that made the first dog sled expedition to the North Pole without support of new supplies since Robert Peary accomplished the feat in 1909. Joyce faced much greater

challenges and rougher territory in this expedition and returned ready to take on anything Nebraska had to offer. Later that year, however, tragedy struck again when Joyce suffered a debilitating back injury that resulted in chronic pain.

Unable to exercise her dogs, she did what she knew was best for them and gave them up to a dog sledding business in Leadville, Colorado, along with harness, kennel and trailer. A year later the pain still continued to plague her, but fate stepped in once again. The sledding business in Colorado had done well and the folks who bought her team asked her to come out and drive the van picking up guests at Vail and serve as a tour guide. Along with her new responsibilities came renewed vigor for life as she would again be with her dogs.

Joyce returned to Nebraska in the

spring, bringing Mushski with her. Mushski had become too slow for the rest of the 12-dog team that she was a part of. She provided companionship while Joyce sought alternative medical treatments for her back injury. One of the procedures finally worked, and she became pain free. Another call came from Colorado, this time with bad news – one of her dogs had gotten free and was killed on the highway.

"Do you want your other dogs back?" asked the kennel owner, knowing how upset Joyce was about her dog and how much she missed all of them. Fate had intervened again.

"My dogs are coming home!"

The dogs had worked for three years and Joyce estimated they ran at least 1,000 miles each year. They had matured and become much easier to handle, even jumping onto a bench to be harnessed. Joyce now shares her sport and her experience with various organizations, churches and youngsters in the North Platte area.

During last winter's final snow, she hitched four dogs to an antique racing sled given to her by daughter Shannon, and tucked nine-year-old Erin Weaver of North Platte into a wool Hudson Bay blanket. Striking off through shelterbelts that lined a Sandhills trail, the dogs were at their best. The ride was stunning and so fascinated her young rider that they returned to the kennel and hitched all six dogs to a safer, more sturdy sled required by the additional dogs. This time Joyce mushed her team into the deeply dissected, cedar-lined canyons southeast of North Platte. An eerie fog dampened nearly all sounds, while amplifying the icy song of the steel runners on the sled. That evening, as the dogs rested in the snow and Joyce and Erin stared into the fire, Erin told Joyce that she had just had "the best day of her life."

Joyce, a remarkable lady, who had nearly given up on her hobby as well as life in general, could not have been more rewarded. ■



Joyce poses with Mushnuk, the five-year-old Malamute/Siberian husky wheel dog that she raised and trained from a puppy.

The Things We Do For Deer

By Jeff Kurrus

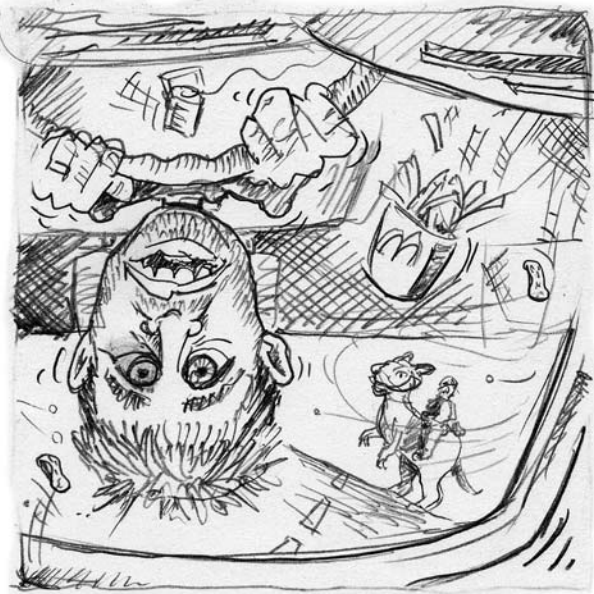
Two different deer, two different situations. This “tale of two deer” tells the absurdities and calamities of my pursuit of this most coveted Nebraska hunting species.

On a backroads drive through southeastern Nebraska a couple winters back, I spotted what had to be a 400-class buck standing at the edge of a field. Stopping the truck, I greedily stared at the behemoth before he calmly sauntered into the woods. I went home but couldn't seem to get the deer out of my head. On my next free day, I would drive back down to find the landowner and ask if I could hunt.

However, when that day finally arrived, a snowstorm had settled in on the area two days before, giving southeastern Nebraska nearly nine inches and making it the imperfect time for a road trip. Yet I went anyway, and as I pulled off the main highway onto the gravel stretch leading to the field, I rehearsed my permission speech in my head.

But I never made it to the field. Instead, my truck began to fishtail at one of the icy road's intersections, sliding me toward a street sign, then a mailbox, back toward the street sign, and then toward a very small ditch. Perfect, I thought, an easy glide into the cutout and I would be a four-wheel drive switch from getting out of this. However, the ditch, the small ditch, turned out to be not so small.

I had never flipped my truck before, so I was quite impressed with my calmness throughout the situation. “I’m flipping again,” my mind said, a year’s worth of McDonald’s wrappers, water bottles, dental floss, socks, sunflower seed hulls and peanut shells flying in every direction of the cab. Then it stopped. Everything that had been in my floorboard now rested on the passenger door as I hung in midair by my seatbelt. I unbuckled myself, cursing the huge buck, and climbed out



of the wreckage.

The temperature was in the low teens, and a north wind was ripping through the countryside. I huddled against the underside of the truck and suddenly remembered the scene from *The Empire Strikes Back* when Luke Skywalker, while stranded on some icy planet, is forced to seek refuge inside the body cavity of the giant dead horse/camel/dragonlike thing he had been riding on. This was his only means for survival, which meant I too had to make an important decision. I didn't have a horse/camel/dragonlike thing to crawl inside of, much less the light saber to make this dream a reality. So if I didn't want to become “Hatchet Jack, being of sound mind and broke leg,” I had to seek shelter.

I made my way toward one of the few farms I had passed on the road, walked down the icy driveway and reached a glass door that gave way to a view of the living room. I knocked. Someone had to be home, I thought. *The Price is Right* was on the TV, so I continued to knock, watching the next contestant play Plinko.

No answer. I waited, feeling heat creeping out from each corner of the door frame as I debated curling up next to the 1/8-inch crack to bathe in its radiant heat.

Finally, after several minutes and still no answer, I began to walk back to what was left of my truck. That is, until I heard the 18-wheeler in the distance. Then I ran toward the road. I would not question the truck's motive for being down this gravel road or my decision to hitchhike with this stranger in his toasty truck.

“Flip your truck?” he asked before I climbed in.

“Nope,” I thought, looking back at the undercarriage of the truck. Then, much more appropriately,

“Yep.”

He took me to a tow truck operator in Nebraska City, who drove me back toward the carnage.

“Be careful down this road,” I said, never shy of stating the obvious. “It sure is slick.”

When he flipped my truck back over, the shocks creaked and cracked upon contact, but no windows were broken and the only significant body damage was on the passenger side door and roof. “Try and crank her up,” he said, and the truck turned over as soon as I did. No leaks and no sparks. She was ready to drive.

I handed him a credit card. He peered at it as if I had just handed him a library card. “I don’t take credit cards,” he said. “Only cash.” I had no cash, and I imagine the look on my face said this. I also imagine he didn’t like where this conversation was going. “Do you have anything for collateral?” he finally asked.

I searched in my wallet, bypassing the library card. Now was not the time for a bad joke. “How about this?” I said, pulling out a Wal-Mart gift card.

He eyed me suspiciously. “I guess that’ll do. I’ll mail this back to you after you mail me my money.”

I drove my truck home that day with a little bit of pride. When other cars passed me, and several did because my truck was now making a loud screeching noise when it got above 50 miles per hour, I nodded and tipped my cap. I was a warrior, a demolition derby man, and had the truck to prove it.

The first time I saw the other big buck that still haunts me and my wife’s car, I was driving down 25th Street in Bellevue on my way back from Wal-Mart. There had been snow on the ground for several days, but the road itself was clear. The sun-bright moon reflected off the fields lining the road, and as I peered out the passenger window, I could see a silhouetted object walking the edge of a cut bean field. The shape was a large-bodied Nebraska deer, and its gait immediately told me it was a buck. While I couldn’t see his rack, I imagined the mass he carried on his neck. I went home and told my wife Laura about the big deer.

“I’ve seen deer on that road, too,” she said. “Don’t go down that road anymore.”

“Huh?”

“That road has deer near it.”

I told her how all roads in Nebraska have deer near them.

“Don’t go down that road,” she repeated.

Over the next few weeks, I continued to think about that buck, but hadn’t had a reason to drive down that street. Until the night I was elected to take Laura’s friend, Jessica, to the airport for a red-eye flight.

Again it was a moon-filled night, and I could nearly drive without using my lights at all. Taking a left on 25th Street toward Jessica’s house, I scanned the fields around me. Empty. I reached for a CD in the sun visor and looked back down. The road had turned a dark brown. I had no time to stop, or even tap the brakes, before slamming into the deer broadside.

With heart in throat, I inched my way toward a gas station, listening to a host of new and interesting sounds belching from Laura’s car. Since we are the last

people in the English-speaking world without a cell phone, I grabbed 35 cents and went to the pay phone.

“Hello,” she groggily answered.

“I just hit a deer.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, but your car isn’t.”

“Where are you?” At this point I had a decision to make, and I knew it was a critical one. I said nothing.

“You’re down that road, aren’t you?”

“Quick,” I thought, “Hang up, hang up.” I could clunk the car to the next gas station, find 35 more cents, and tell her I had lost connection. Then sidetrack her by telling how bad we really needed a cell phone.

“I told you not to go down that road,” she started in again. “Why don’t you listen to me? Why my car? You knew there were deer there. Any other road but that one...” she continued, but I had stopped listening. I had a good feeling I was going to hear this a few more times before she was done. Why listen now when I could hear the re-run later?

I finally interrupted. “It’s a big deer. We’ll get to take it home,” I said.

She hung up the phone. Ten minutes later, she picked me up, again reminding me of all the other times I had failed to listen. We then took Jessica to the airport, who also agreed with Laura that I shouldn’t have driven down that road.

“What are you guys paying attention to when you drive?” I thought, thinking it harder to not see a deer driving down a Nebraska road than to actually see one. Their answer would have been,

“The road,” which is why I kept the question to myself.

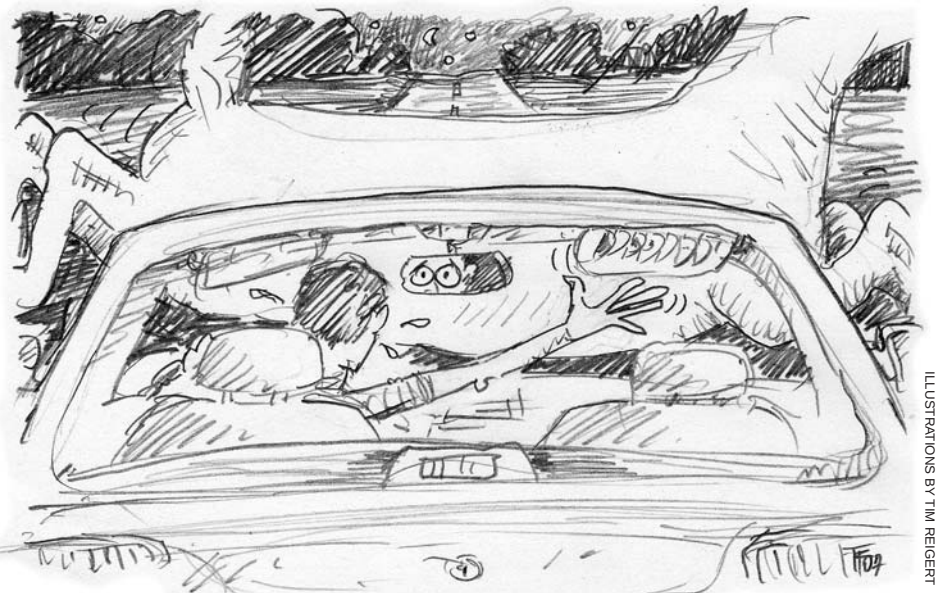
Later that morning, I went back down 25th Street with my newly fixed truck, whose body had been totally reconstructed after its flips near Nebraska City. The only indication it wasn’t a new truck were the 40 or so hail dents that had fallen the night after I had gotten my truck back from the shop, causing another \$3,000 in damage. It hadn’t been a good automobile year.

I saw the deer lying in a ditch next to the road, and loaded it into the back of the truck. It was a buck, yet one that had recently shed its rack, leaving only antlerless indentions a shovel handle wide. I took the deer home and called a state trooper, who then came to my house and proceeded to ream me for not calling the authorities as soon as the wreck occurred. He didn’t care that I had the deer, but he did care that I had left the scene of an accident.

“But no one else was involved,” I told him, thinking it might help. It didn’t. I apologized profusely, saying I didn’t know any better, and ended the conversation with a long series of “Yes sir’s.”

Which brings me to my current state in life, when every time my wife’s car makes a noise, pulls to the left, or is a bit louder than it was yesterday, I have to hear the dreaded statement that will follow me for the rest of my life. “I told you not to go down that road.”

“I just knew he was a big buck,” I’ll respond, again seeing the silhouette as it walked across the moonlit field. ■



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TIM REIGERT

PLUS THE HUNTING

FORMER UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA BASEBALL COACH SHARES THE BENEFITS OF LIVING AND HUNTING IN NEBRASKA

Photos and text by Jeff Kurrus

For Andy Sawyers, each hunt was critical. Six inches of snow the night before did nothing to deter him, and not even the 30-mile-per-hour wind and subzero temperature could stop one of his final hunts of the year. Not that the pheasant season was nearing its end, but that another was about to begin – the 2007 spring baseball season. As an assistant coach for the University of Nebraska baseball team, Andy took advantage of his windows to hunt anytime he could open them. No matter how cold that opening might be.

January 2007- End of a Season

“I started hunting with a teammate that became one of my best friends, Jay Sirianni, while I was playing at the University of Nebraska in 1997 and 1998. Now he thinks I’m absolutely crazy with how much I go,” said Sawyers, ice covering his eyebrows as he walked across a piece of land in Platte County.

“When we were in college, the worse time of the year for us was between the end of pheasant season and the start of spring baseball practice. Just to have something to do, a group of us would go to Branched Oak to hunt rabbits. We’d maybe shoot one rabbit in half a day.”

It was a transitional time for Andy on several fronts, even more than he could have ever realized at the time. “I couldn’t hit a lick at the University of Nebraska,” Andy said. “I had a

decent swing; I would just swing and miss.” So playing as a career was not going to be an option for him. However, since he was catcher and already accustomed to running the team from behind the plate, coaching was an option, one he began exercising at the age of 22.

“When (former Nebraska coaches) Dave Van Horn and Rob Childress came to the University of Nebraska, they talked me into assistant coaching at their old school, Northwestern State.” While there, Andy had the opportunity to learn under then-head coach John Cohen, who later won the national coach of the year award at

Kentucky in 2006. “With Cohen, then Van Horn (now at Arkansas), Childress (now at Texas A&M) and Coach Anderson (Nebraska’s current head coach), I’ve had an excellent chance to work with several good coaches.”

After leaving Northwestern State, Andy took the head coaching job at Hutchison Community College in Hutchison, Kansas, then, two years later, accepted an offer to coach at Nebraska under Anderson. When asked why he came back to Nebraska, it was evident there was more to it than baseball as soon as he climbed from the truck that bitter January morning.

The north wind did not bite, it gnawed, ravaging his face and freezing every bit of moisture he had on his skin as he trudged through ankle-to-knee deep snow. After hunting for three hours and flushing more than 50 birds on land he had only hunted once before, Andy and his pointing Lab, Drake, walked one last dike.

Suddenly Drake went on point and the bird, still buried in the brush, flushed. As Andy moved in he shot once, then twice, at point-blank range, missing with both efforts. “That’s why I bought a pointing dog. For the chance at shots like that.” Moments later, Kevin Brandl, who owns the land, drove up in his pickup.

“If you would have been here a minute earlier, you would have seen me miss the biggest layup of the day,” Andy laughed.

“That’s all part of it,” Kevin replied.

Kevin told Andy to get in his truck and he would drop him off at his next spot, watch Andy



With eyebrows already frosted, Andy Sawyers walks yet another field for pheasants.



Andy looks on as a hen pheasant flushes at the feet of Drake, his pointing Lab.

God gives you a strong-willed dog to make you a better pack leader.

— Andy Sawyers

walk it, then pick him up on the other end. “Take your time,” he told Andy.

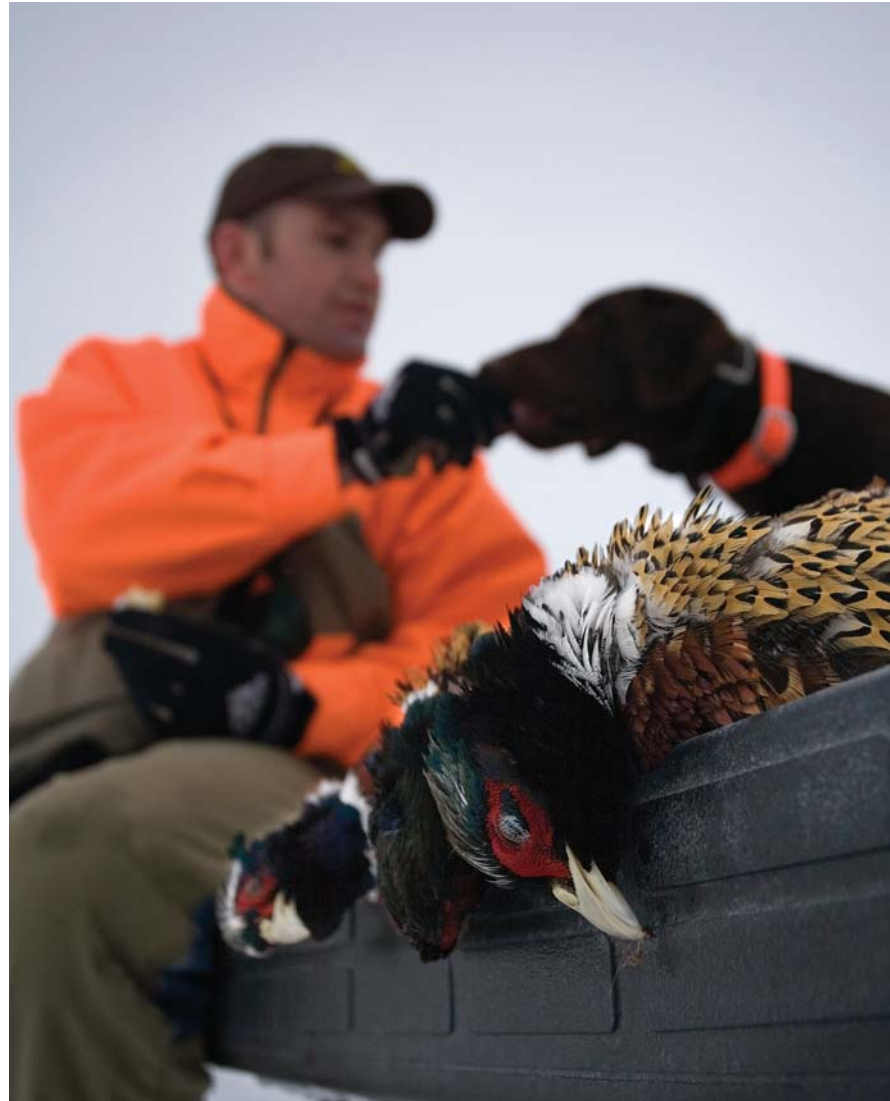
“It’s unbelievable how giving people are here,” Andy later said. “I started hunting years ago. Everything I’ve been able to do or learn is because people like Kevin have been nice enough to take me along and show me.”

Drake went on point twice, both hens, then pointed a third time, holding

this one firmly. The rooster flushed and Andy tracked it with a shot that quickly found his dog atop the bird. Kevin again drove up.

“That was a nice shot,” Kevin said, ushering him into the truck. He had another spot to take Andy.

While riding, they compared notes from the morning hunt. “Were there any in the far food plot?” Kevin asked.



For Andy, time spent with Drake is just as important as the hunt itself.



“If you would have been here a minute earlier,” Andy told landowner Kevin Brandl, “you would have seen me miss the biggest layup of the day.”

“How about near the milo? Did you see the strips I cut on the one field? I just want you to have some luck. Get yourself warmed up, then I’ll wait for you on the other end.”

As Andy worked the next field, it was evident that this part of life was just as important to him as balls and strikes. Like most bird hunters, however, Andy also knew that there was more to bird hunting than walking ditch rows and food plots. He had to have a plan. One that started with a bird hunter’s most reliable commodity, his dog.

Drake

“Be calm, be consistent. Don’t be emotional about it,” Sawyers said.

“You talking about baseball?” I asked.

“Well, that too, but I was actually talking about Drake.”

Andy bought Drake from a breeder in Wisconsin, but had concerns early on with their relationship. “Drake wouldn’t point a wing on a string. Wouldn’t point pheasants, quail or even chukars I bought.”

Andy began asking questions to other

breeders and trainers, trying to gather as much information as he could concerning his new commitment. Then, when Drake was seven months old, Andy left him with a trainer who, after seeing Drake simply pause when he set a pigeon on the ground, told Andy he could get Drake to point. Two weeks later, Drake was doing just that.

“His prey drive was so much better than his pointing instinct. The trainer would release a bird to teach Drake he couldn’t catch that bird, that he wasn’t hunting for himself. Once I got him

back from the trainer, I realized I had spent a lot of money on a pointing Lab only to find out I would have to work my butt off to get him ready to hunt.”

Work with Drake includes something nearly every day of the year, a relationship that has not only benefited Drake, but also his handler. Andy and Drake work out together in the morning before work, incorporating exercise with obedience. They jog, stop to do five minutes of obedience, run some more, then do additional obedience. At the end of their workouts they do



Drake looks on as Andy thanks landowner Brandl for the opportunity to hunt on his land.

retrieves. “Even tonight, after a long hunt, we’ll do three minutes of training around the house. At halftime of the football game, I’ll put him in front of the sofa doing holds.

“Anytime that I’m working with him, it makes him mind Dena (Andy’s wife) better when I’m not around. And I add a little bit more each time.” Andy was currently working on his “Whoa” command, which he had waited to install because he did not want Drake apprehensive around birds early on.

He also admitted that Drake did not quarter well with bigger hunting groups or handle great at long ranges. “Fifty yards is about as far as he will go before stopping,” he said. “But I want him to range farther. I know he’s not going to be a field trial dog, but I want someone to have a better hunt with us because of him. Maybe it will be that they have never seen a pointing Lab before. I just don’t want him to be a nuisance. I haven’t hunted him with a lot of people because I didn’t want to

be ‘that guy.’ You know, the one with the unmanageable dog that everyone has to chase around the field all day instead of hunting. I don’t want to mess up anyone else’s hunt.”

Watching Andy with Drake, it was clear how the hunt wasn’t a hunt without the dog, who is just as important as the flushing pheasant. What he has learned from training Drake has also transferred over to the challenges of his everyday demeanor. “One of my weaknesses as a coach is exhibiting

self-control. Each year umpires will eject me from a few games for disputing calls. Every time, it’s been in defense of a player and, at the time, I feel my guys need defending. In practice, I once broke a bat after a player dropped a pop fly. I freaked out. When I do it in a game, the players know I’m sticking up for them. But after that situation in practice, I went to the player and apologized.

“With my dog, I can’t do that. So any time I start to get frustrated with him,

A Plan for Pheasants

There is no doubt Kevin Brandl had a plan for pheasants when he bought 104 acres in Platte County, a plan that could be accomplished by other landowners as well. “Last summer we farmed the land and planted several stands of milo, even fertilizing it to make sure it would take. In the spots that had tall weeds, I shredded them and planted sweet clover.”

Brandl also has pasture areas for nesting, as well as thick areas of cattails for heavy cover. And his land is surrounded on all sides by open farmland since it rests in the middle of a section. “We’re in the process of learning what in the hell we got and what to do to make it better,” Brandl said.

Jeff Lusk, upland game program manager, said that Brandl’s land is already a pretty good example of proper pheasant habitat. “You must have habitat for different life stages, plus heavy cover in case of severe weather, including residual vegetation (last year’s growth) for nesting that occurs prior to the emergence of this year’s vegetation. Landowners should also have open areas abutting heavy cover that males can use as crowing territories. Broods seem to prefer cool season grasses interspersed with legumes, because they provide better insect habitat than monotypic grass stands with no forbs, and chicks need abundant arthropods for growth and development.”

“It’s hard to believe you can pull that many birds in on 100 acres,” said Sawyers after his hunt last season. But that’s just what Brandl is doing through proper management.



any time I get emotional, I stop messing with him altogether. Same thing when coaching players. Energizing a situation emotionally does nothing to help it.”

July 2007- Carousel in Motion

For coaches, moving is a way of life. Look at any coach’s resume and very rarely will a person find a coach who has spent their entire career at one school. Andy is no exception. Now in his early 30s, Andy has already moved from California to Nebraska, Louisiana, Kansas, back to Nebraska and is now at Texas A&M in College Station. As much as gloves for ballplayers and shotguns for hunters, transition is the norm when it comes to coaching. Which makes Andy’s latest move his toughest yet.

He recently spoke about his time in Nebraska and the relationships he developed. “The state of Nebraska is phenomenal. I loved working at a school

that really cares. It was also important for me to be with Coach Anderson, who wants his players to be good citizens. Then, after players graduated, we still remained close to them.

“One time while I was still coaching at Nebraska, I was out of town and made a phone call to Jeff Christy, a former Husker and recent sixth round draft pick of the Minnesota Twins. I asked him if he would snowblow our driveway while Dena was home and I was gone. I liked feeling that I could make phone calls like this to players we had, and I like when they still call me for help.

“It was a fun place to coach and a great place to live when you have great people around you. Plus the hunting,” he said, pausing in mid-sentence. “You know, I bought a Nebraska lifetime permit and habitat stamp a couple years ago. I’ll be putting a lot of miles on my truck come hunting season, because I’ll definitely be spending time back in that part of the world.” ■

Two Rivers

Seven Lakes, Ten Caboosees

Photos and text by Eric Fowler

Great angling opportunities, outstanding campgrounds, and the rare chance to sleep in a caboose cabin make Two Rivers State Recreation Area, on the banks of the Platte River, a terrific place to relax.

I knew boys liked trains, but I didn't realize how deep that fascination ran until I had a son of my own. Actually, with four-year-old Mace, it's beyond fascination – it's more like infatuation. You might say he has a one-track mind. So you can imagine his excitement when he found out he was going to spend the night in a caboose at Two Rivers State Recreation Area (SRA) near Venice.

Caboosees, which originated in the 1840s when an enterprising train conductor converted an old boxcar into his rolling office, provided train crews both a place to observe the train and a

home away from home on long trips. By the 1980s, however, technology had changed the way trains were operated and cabooses became obsolete.

Soon after, Eugene Mahoney, then director of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, approached Union Pacific Railroad with the idea for a caboose park at Two Rivers SRA. Railroad officials were easily sold on the idea and delivered 10 of them to the park, where they were remodeled as cabins. At the time, it was the only park in the nation offering such an opportunity.

The cabins are air-conditioned, a



Mace Fowler plays with his Thomas the Train set in a caboose cupola at Two Rivers SRA.

must during humid eastern Nebraska summers, sleep six, include a kitchenette with a stove and fridge, and have a deck for outdoor dining. "There's two bunk beds and an adult bed way, way upstairs in the cupola," Mace will tell you emphatically when he recalls his visit. The cupola, a raised portion of the caboose surrounded by windows to give crews a view of the entire train, and the ladder leading to it instantly drew Mace's attention. He wore a big smile as he climbed the ladder, but it

grew from ear to ear when he got to the top and saw the bed. Not only was the cupola his favorite place to sleep (a fact he'll relay to anyone who listens and even those who don't), it also was the place to play with the Thomas the Train toys he brought along.

There's plenty more to do at Two Rivers SRA, which opened in 1960 on the banks of the Platte River just upstream of the mouth of the Elkhorn River, with many of the activities involving water. Visitors can splash in the Platte or in

Lake No. 4, the only one of the area's seven sandpit lakes that has a designated swimming beach.

The sandpits cover 320 of the park's 622 acres and provide year-round fishing for largemouth bass, bluegill, crappie, bullhead, channel catfish and carp. Feeders on two of the lakes help fish grow fat and happy, and two catch-and-release-only lakes give anglers a chance at a lunker. The secret bait for catfish? "Hot dogs," Mace says with a snicker. The cheaper the tube steak, the better.



Located one mile south and one mile west of the town of Venice in southwestern Douglas County, Two Rivers State Recreation Area offers camping, fishing, hiking and hunting opportunities in season. Visitors can also stay at one of 10 caboose cabins located on the area.



Mace Fowler stands on the deck of a cabin caboose at Two Rivers State Recreation Area.



Mace Fowler heads up the ladder to explore the caboose's cupola.

The park's trout lake is the place to be April 1, after Commission staff deliver the first of approximately 40,000 pan-sized rainbow trout from the Grove Trout Rearing Station. Opening day is always popular at this put-and-take fishery, where anglers pay \$4 for a tag that allows them to keep

four trout and fishing remains good through June. Nonpowered boats are allowed on all but the trout lake. In the river, anglers might catch carp, channel and flathead catfish, and shovelnose sturgeon.

For anglers who like to camp, there are several spots where they can cast from their front door into the Platte or a sandpit. In all, the park has 206 camping pads (61 with electricity) spread throughout five campgrounds, as well as 10 primitive campsites for tents. Located a short drive from both Lincoln and Omaha, the campgrounds are jammed to capacity on summer weekends and see plenty of use during the week and well into the fall. Shower facilities are available at three of the campgrounds. Of course those aren't as interesting to a four-year-old as the primitive restrooms. "The outhouse had a poop potty and a pee potty," Mace said.

New to the park is an equestrian area where horse owners can park their trailers and ride some of the trails and open spaces. They can also stay there overnight. "This is a really nice park to ride in," Vickie Gautier of Ashland said while riding last October with her daughter, Megan. "There are a lot of



Tom Perkins of Omaha casts from his kick boat at Lake No. 1, where he'd parked his RV in the Fawn Meadows Campground last fall.

nice trails and the grounds are nice."

Bicycles are a common sight on the park's roads, and those who don't bring their own can rent one from the park office. Hiking trails wind through the park's riverbottom woodlands and the adjacent wildlife management area.

Wildlife is abundant at the park, including waterfowl and bald eagles on the river in winter, songbirds in the woods and white-tailed deer throughout. Archery deer hunting is allowed on the WMA and portions of the recreation area in the fall.

But if you like trains, the cabooses are enough reason to visit the park. Make your reservation soon if you want to spend a weekend in one. Demand is high for this unique lodging option, and last summer they were booked on all but a

few days of the season, which runs from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

"We get people from around the country who stay in them," said Kathy Barton, who works in the park office. "They plan their vacation a year in advance so they can stop here on their way to wherever they're going."

Just be sure you bring your bedding and kitchenware, a tip I overlooked in the fine print when we signed up for a caboose cabin. "We brought yogurt for breakfast, but Dad forgot to bring spoons," Mace said. "So you know what I had for breakfast instead? Pop tarts and milk. And they were blueberry."

Ahh, to be four again.

"It was lots and lots of fun," Mace said. "It was so fun, I'm going to stay there forever." ■



Sierra Goodwin, Leslie Newburn, Silkee Park and Dan Newburn splash in the Platte River at Two Rivers SRA.



Jeff Blatchford of Omaha takes his daughters, Kourtney and Kassi, and friends Colton McPeak and Julie Christenson on a bike ride around Two Rivers during a weekend stay.

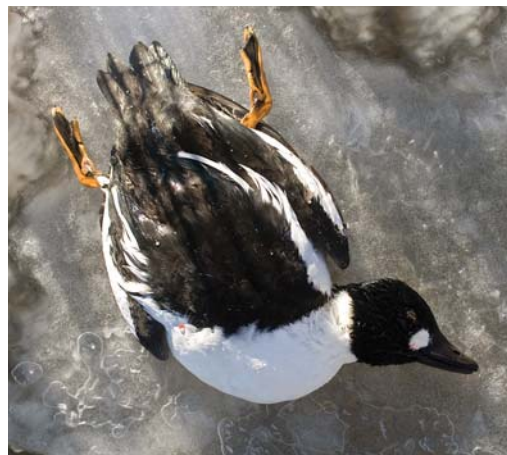
Winter Whistlers

Photos and text by Jon Farrar

As I inspected that first drake I felt that somewhere in the northern fastness where he dwells there must be a duck valet who lacquers his short bill, shines his yellow shoes, grooms the snowy, immaculate breast and, as a final touch, affixes the round white boutonniere just below either eye.

— Gordon McQuarrie, Gallopin' Goldeneyes

The best madcap adventures have long incubation periods. So it was with the “Goldeneye Expeditionary Force” hunts in the winter of Ought-Six and Ought-Seven. The hunt’s first fetal movements came in the early 1970s, back when I was doing a fair amount of taxidermy work. I had decided I should have a mounted pair of all species of ducks and geese that frequented and were fair game in Nebraska. That figured out to about 42 species; times two for one of each sex, minus one each from that number for those species where the sexes are similar, such as the geese; and minus rare and accidental species such as garganeys and black-bellied whistling ducks that I had no hope of ever seeing, much less gathering.



I made it to thirtysome mounted waterfowl. Then, realizing I was never going to shoot some species, I enlisted assorted biologists and game wardens that hunted places I did not, to shoot species I would not. The deal I offered was that for every two species on my list they brought me, I would mount one

of anything for them. Within months I was awash with pheasants, wood ducks and mallards, but not a single goldeneye. I was so discouraged I abandoned the project, bought off the wardens and biologists with birds I had already

mounted, and gave all the unmounted birds in the freezer to the U.S. Park Service for their scientific collection. What remained, for some inexplicable reason, was a great desire to shoot a common goldeneye. But it wasn’t until December 2006, when two duck hunting

cronies showered me with stories of swarming goldeneyes on the Missouri River, that hunting these speedy diving ducks seemed a possibility.

Who Would Want to Eat One?

The common goldeneye is a medium-sized, cold-hardy diving duck found throughout the Northern Hemisphere. They are fast fliers with rapid wingbeats, about nine beats per second the experts report, producing a characteristic whistling sound, especially audible in cold and calm weather, hence their colloquial name “whistler.” Goldeneyes have also gathered other interesting colloquial names – brass eye, cob-head,

merrywing, bull-head, whiffler, fiddler duck, pie duck and winter duck. Northern Indian tribes held them in high regard, calling them conjuring-ducks and spirit ducks. In the Yukon, whistler skins were stuffed to make toys for children. Whistlers breed in forested regions of Canada and are one of several tree-cavity nesting ducks on the continent. They are among the last waterfowl migrants to arrive in Nebraska, often not until December, and some winter here where open water is available. Goldeneyes are big-water ducks – big rivers, big reservoirs. Good places to observe winter whistlers are the spillways below Kingsley Dam on Lake McConaughy

or Gavins Point Dam on Lewis and Clark Lake. During the breeding season whistlers, feed principally on small aquatic animals, such as insects, mollusks and crustaceans, and aquatic plants, a diet similar to other diving ducks. During the winter months their diet becomes almost entirely animal, including fish, although stomach sampling by researchers suggests fish do not comprise a large part of the whistler’s diet. Unlike mergansers, whistlers did not evolve to capture fish and lack the merganser’s serrated bill and ability to pursue small fish underwater. But alas, for their part-time aquatic-animal diet, even though shared in varying decrees

with other diving ducks, including the esteemed canvasback, waterfowlers, most of whom have never eaten a whistler, label them as unfit for the table. “While the whistler is one of our most beautiful ducks,” wrote George Bird Grinnell in *American Duck Shooting*, published in 1901, “it is not highly regarded by those who have an opportunity to kill better fowl, and, like the little dipper [bufflehead] and ruddy duck and the mergansers, it is often allowed to pass over the decoys without being shot at.” Subsequent wildfowl writers were a bit more generous. Dwight W. Huntington in *Our Feathered Game*,



Gary Ebert pulls his boat blind onto a Missouri River sandbar in the predawn of a January morning.



Mike Livingston cuts a basswood head for a drake goldeneye decoy in a courtship display posture.

1903, wrote: “About the coast the golden-eye feeds on shell-fish, and is therefore not very good to eat, but in the interior it feeds on grasses and roots and is better.”

“While the species is not prized as highly as are some others for eating,” Dr. William Bruette wrote in *American Duck, Goose & Brant Shooting*, 1929, “still the flesh is good provided a certain amount of vegetable food has been eaten to offset the too gamy taste of the animal-fed bird. Naturally, different localities offer a various assortment of food, hence it depends somewhat on the particular feeding grounds as to just what sort of eating the Golden-eye will be.”

The quintessential wildfowler and story spinner Gordon McQuarrie, in his short story *Gallop in’ Goldeneyes*, did not shy from whistler shooting: “The solemn truth is they are not as good in the roaster as most other deep divers. Unquestionably their fishy diet tends to make their flavor strong. But if they are hung a week, soaked in vinegar and water and then roasted with an onion inside, it will take an expert to decide what they are. Also, their flavor varies greatly. We have eaten some almost as

mild as mallards and others very strong.”

Whistlers are not shot in great numbers anywhere in the United States. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates the annual kill has not exceeded 100,000 during any of the last five years. Only about three percent of the whistlers reported shot in North America during recent decades were taken by hunters in the Central Flyway. The lack of interest in whistlers in the Central Flyway probably reflects fewer whistlers here and hunters’ preference for other species, especially mallards. During the last 10 years, the

estimated mallard harvest in Nebraska has ranged from 91,602 to 131,487. During the same period only once has the estimated whistler kill in Nebraska topped 1,000. The small kill of whistlers in mid-continent is mostly a reflection of the belief they are unfit for

the table and because they do not arrive in significant numbers until late in the season, after most Nebraska hunters have hung their decoys in the back shed.

A Grand Experiment

Gary Ebert and Mike Livingston, the two hunting cronies who regaled me with accounts of whistlers renting crisp December skies, are not casual waterfowl hunters. They eat, sleep, breathe and seemingly think of little other than hunting ducks and geese. They will never have enough of it. If not actually hunting, they are making ready to hunt or putting-away after the hunt – fussing with retrieving dogs, decoys, shotguns, calls, blinds, boats and all the paraphernalia proper waterfowlers are blessed to require.

Our goldeneye affairs started in the muggy days of July. First there were e-mails from Livingston – photos of whistler decoys, photos of whistlers in flight, photos of East Coast hunters with game straps of whistlers. Talk turned to making our own decoys. More e-mails – photos of drake whistlers courting hens, and decoys imitating courting drakes. Then came accounts of the inability of whistlers to fly past a spread of decoys of their own kind without diving like kamikazes into the muzzles of waiting shotguns. It was just too bizarre a scheme to not play out. So,



Cork and wood goldeneye and bufflehead decoys ready for painting.



Zach Livingston shapes a green-winged teal body in cork while Ebert fashions a basswood head for a goldeneye.

starting in August, Ebert, Livingston and often Livingston’s son, Zach, and I gathered most Wednesday nights in my small woodworking shop to produce the required fake whistlers for the coming winter hunts.

When whistlers arrive in Nebraska in December they are already about the business of courtship and forming pair bonds for the coming breeding season. During courtship, drakes pursue hens in jet-fast aerial flights and strut their stuff around hens on the water with ritualized displays bearing curious, but descriptive, names such as nodding, masthead, ticking, head-flick, head-up, head-up-pumping and bowsprit. The showiest display of the drake’s repertoire is called the “head-throw-kicks,” where the drake thrusts his head forward, then snaps it onto his back, bill pointing skyward, uttering a single, grating call before again thrusting his head forward while kicking water with his feet. Our intent was to produce at least one drake decoy in that posture. It would, we were sure, drive the other boys wild, a visual signal that a drake was courting and an available hen was nearby.

By December we had three all-wood and five cork whistler decoys. In

defense of our low productivity, there were peripheral items produced during this time – a dufflebag full of a dozen bufflehead decoys; a wooden broadsword with metallic-silver paint fashioned by Zach for Halloween; and early-stage production on redhead and canvasback decoys. Still, a conservative estimate, even at minimum wage (which we did not deserve, as a fair amount of diversionary fun accompanied each working session) put the cost per goldeneye decoy in the neighborhood of \$328, more-or-less, depending on whether refreshments were factored into the equation. The whole operation reminded me of words written by Earnshaw Cook in his 1957 book *Holica Snooze*, addressing the expenditure of time and money to be a proper duck hunter: “It requires a prodigious amount of effort, organization and equipment. The cost per pound of game will simply not bear scrutiny.”

The official mantra of our decoy-making sessions was that so far as ducks are concerned, or imitations of them, “symmetry is over-rated” because in part, as anyone who looks closely at waterfowl knows, they get in some very asymmetrical postures, lumpy

even. More importantly, imposing symmetry to a block of wood or cork requires a fair amount of skill we may not have possessed. Symmetry, we concurred, probably only matters in decoy competitions where judges, who have spent more time looking at decoys than live birds, apply calipers. Symmetry, we reasoned, cannot be a huge factor in luring a squad of goldeneyes cruising by at 50 miles an hour.

Our whistler spread grew marginally in mid-December when Livingston converted two old Herter’s balsa diving duck decoys with broken bills to whistler decoys and added two or three cork whistler decoys he acquired from an East Coast hunter. In all, our misfit whistler spread numbered about a dozen, more than enough, we calculated, as whistler courtship is typically done in small groups, four or five drakes and one hen. Furthermore, whistlers move about in small, compact flocks, although larger flocks sometimes form on wintering grounds. At the core of our plan was the theory most whistlers coursing the Central Flyway live and die without ever encountering a decoy of their species, and so a big spread would not be required.



This displaying drake goldeneye decoy fashioned from basswood was tall, top heavy and prone to roll. When coated with ice during a late-season hunt, it laid over on its side in the water. Our secret weapon was a hen goldeneye in a copulatory posture that looked like a brown-headed, gray and white torpedo.



Jumping the Gun

The baptismal voyage for our wood and cork whistlers, discounting repeated dunkings in a rubber hog-watering tank in the dog run to weight them properly, came the first day of December on the upper Missouri River. November had been mild and whistler reports discouraging, but the first significant cold front of the season was bearing down across the Dakotas. We were confident the northern horizon would soon be black with fleeing whistlers.

The night before our first hunt the wind vanished and the temperature plummeted. Missouri River bays and backwaters were coated in an inch or more of ice, ice that by mid-morning would be breaking away in sheets and plowing through our decoy spread. But the day was clear, with only a light west wind, not at all uncomfortable in the blind. We deployed 20 Canada goose floaters, 43 mallards, four pintails, one drake canvasback and seven goldeneyes, the latter in a string just downstream from the main body of decoys. Except for an occasional squad

of mallards on missions or a handful of whistlers running the main channel, the sky was nearly birdless the entire morning – no expected flocks of mallards or Canada geese trading between the river and cornfields, and no new birds arriving from the north. Apparently the horizon dark with mallards, whistlers, mergansers and thick-skinned races of Canada geese, the tail end of autumn migration, was still somewhere in the Dakotas. The slow morning, though, was a good time to see how our homemade decoys rode the water in the wind and current.

It is difficult to make a cork decoy that does not ride the water properly, as the density of the cork is consistent throughout. Some of our cork whistlers had wood baseboards, others only a wooden keel glued and screwed to the bottom of the cork body. The only weighting needed was to keep them from bobbing excessively and counterbalance the head. The wooden decoys were trickier, a challenge to hollow and weight so they were balanced front-to-back and side-to-side while riding at the proper level in the

water. We had two wooden drake decoys, one with its head in a traditional forward posture, the other with its head tossed back in display. The latter was a tall bird and prone to roll, even with ample lead in the keel. They were heavy decoys, perhaps because they were not hollowed enough, or because the basswood came from the central Niobrara River Valley, the westernmost edge of the tree's range, where growth is slow and so the wood denser and heavier. They were, frankly, only practical for hunting from a boat.

The third wooden whistler was a hen, designed as our secret weapon, or to provide comic relief during lulls in the shooting. It seemed that if we had

displaying drakes we should also have objects for their attention. A hen in a traditional posture would have served the purpose, but we went one step further and fashioned a hen in a copulatory posture, riding low in the water with her head and neck outstretched. She looked something like a brown-headed, gray and white torpedo. Not sure how she would ride in a current, we drilled three anchor line holes on both ends of the deep keel. We rigged the anchor line to the middle hole on the back of the keel, and she rode the water as well as any of the decoys, her long neck and head functioning as a rudder of sorts.

It was mid-morning before a single

drake whistler saw our decoys and literally dove into them. Tony Wiese, one of Livingston's regular hunting partners, killed the bird only two feet off the water. We were impressed with our decoys. All we required was more whistlers.

I had never shot a goldeneye, and so was the designated shooter for the next bird. As usual, I managed to distinguish myself by instead shooting a single scaup that decoyed while two whistlers were high but eyeballing the spread. Just before noon I had a chance to redeem myself when a hen whistler came to our decoys. I stood up to take her, decided I didn't want to shoot a hen, then decided I did, by which time

she was a bit beyond my range of competence with a shotgun. That was the extent of the day's shooting. But clouds were rolling in from the northwest as we picked up decoys just after noon, bringing the promise of new birds in the morning. The plan was to spread our decoys at a location closer to the whistler routes the next day.

The weather on the second morning was a horse of a different color. At 7 a.m. the temperature was 13 degrees and the day topped out at 20 degrees. The northwest wind was ferocious, a steady 25 mph by mid-morning with gusts later reported as high as 50 mph. It was a bitter day to be on the river, and again we only hunted until an hour



Livingston moves the mallard spread closer to the boat blind during our frigid December hunt on the Missouri River.



Jet, Livingston's black Lab, retrieves a hen goldeneye. Because of the Missouri's fast, powerful current, a dog can seldom retrieve more than one downed bird at a time.

after noon. While the horizon was not black with whistlers, it was a good mallard day, and so we settled for shooting second-rate ducks over plastic decoys. Ebert arrived the night before so there were four of us in the blind, along with Ebert's yellow Lab, Bart, and Livingston's black Lab, Jet. By shooting time we were set, but with fewer decoys than the previous day – about three-dozen mallards, a dozen Canada floaters and all the goldeneye decoys, including three esthetically unappealing, plastic drake whistlers.

Because of the bitter cold and powerful winds, and contrary to plans made the previous day, we again spread decoys in a sheltered spot, not the best to intercept whistlers running the main channel. It would have been unbearable to hunt the channel, and increased the likelihood of losing wounded birds. Even without the whistler shooting we hoped for, it was a spectacular morning on a river. Unlike the day before, the sky was seldom without mallards and Canadas. There was an almost constant shifting of birds between the river and the fields, or birds picking up from wind-battered exposures and moving to more protected water. Even birds we killed shortly after sunrise had crops full of corn. If anyone in the blind had cared about shooting limits of mallards

it was easily within reach, quickly. It had been years since I had seen flocks of 15 to 50 mallards commit so fully, come to the decoys with such reckless abandon. We had flocks backpedaling over the decoys, but no one called the shot, no shots were fired and the mallards were allowed to fly away.

For Ebert and Livingston, waterfowling is about selecting the best

spot, setting the decoy spread exactly right and precision calling. Once ducks are hanging over the decoys, shooting becomes nearly irrelevant. The banter had begun in the gray of pre-dawn with where to spread the decoys and how to deploy, and continued throughout the morning: Who was the blind master? Who was going to call the shot? Were we taking turns shooting? Was the one duck per flock rule in place? Which dog was retrieving? How many ducks had to be down on the water before both dogs were sent out? What time was breakfast and who was cooking? And there was the perennial exchange between Ebert and Livingston about the quality of the other's calling.

The best moment of the morning, like a Maynard Reece painting, was a flock of 30 mallards spiraling down above a flock of 50 or more already on cupped wings over our decoy spread. And I managed to delight the others when a drake pintail in full nuptial dress suddenly decoyed. There were, and will always be, two versions of the event – if I called the shot after missing the drake or before missing the drake. But I stray from the account of our whistler mission, deterred by mere mallards and a wayward pintail.

We decoyed but one drake whistler all morning, and even that was not as expected. We first saw the bird floating down the far side of the channel. When



Ebert dishes up a mid-morning breakfast of scrambled eggs, hash browns and sausage.



Goldeneyes come readily to decoys of their own kind but rarely to decoys of other species, even those of other diving ducks.

across from our spread he sighted his wooden brethren, nearly unscrewed his head gawking, ran across the water until airborne, and splashed down on the edge of our whistler decoys. For the next three or four minutes the drake swam from decoy to decoy looking for a gesture of life, perhaps a faint *peent* or grunting sound. When the drake grew nervous and flushed I took him. Even that was an education. My first shot seemed to be a solid hit but only slowed the drake, my second dropped him to the river but he was not dead and began quickly drifting downstream. It took a third shot from Livingston, and a long retrieve by Jet, to boat the bird.

It was a rigorous test for our homemade whistlers. All but one passed. As the morning progressed and the gusty wind whipped a fine spray across the river and the decoys, the coating of ice on the decoys grew thicker and thicker. By late-morning, ice was half an inch thick on some of the cork and wood decoys. As the ice grew thicker, the wooden drake with head tossed

onto its back weaved from side to side and finally laid down, the weight of the ice on the head equaling the weight of the lead in the keel. Oddly, the plastic decoys gathered little ice, no more than an icicle on the ends of the bills and a thin glaze on the backs.

Blame it on El Nino

We waited patiently through December for winter and whistlers to arrive, but temperatures remained above normal. Golfers were enjoying March-like weather. Snow and ice storms in central Nebraska, while severe, fell on unfrozen ground, and in eastern Nebraska it only rained. It was an El Nino year with the jet stream pushing north, bringing wetter and warmer weather from the Gulf. It was not the makings of a good goldeneye year in Nebraska. Whistlers only migrate as far south as needed to find open water, and in the winter of 2006-07, many no doubt lingered in the Dakotas. The scarcity of whistlers,

though, did not deter us. We spread our merry little band of whistler decoys on the Missouri River in southeastern Nebraska three different days at the end of December and during the first week of January. The weather was balmy. Mallards, Canada geese and bald eagles were far fewer than most years, Ebert and Livingston said. Flocks of robins flitted through riverbank brush, singing.

While we never had the one big shoot I had hoped for, never filled Ebert's leather game strap with drake whistlers for a photo, we had grand days on the river. Zach made his first solo kill on a drake mallard. He'd killed his first whistler the year before, beating my first by 49 years. We had one fancy sunrise, three good breakfasts, resolved none of the world's problems but added none to them. Two days we shot three whistlers, the last day of the season only one. Yes, we muffed some opportunities, but the weather was just too nice – highs in the 40s with no more than soft breezes – to keep the lids

closed on Ebert's boat blind or for Zach to not be out diverting little channels of Missouri River water across the small sandbar where our decoys were spread. We had small squads of whistlers slip past us, even land in the decoys, catching

and-white bullets, not rising nor falling, not weaving left or right, flying as if running a taut wire. Ebert and Livingston said whistlers seldom come to decoys of other species, including other diving ducks. When they see

decoys of their kind, though, they come without hesitation, never seeming to reconsider, committing far out, coming in a few feet above the water or dropping under full wing on an inclined plane as if they intended to bore into the river. Because they often fly low and blended into the gray band of woodlands of the opposite shore, we had birds tumble into the decoys before we saw them. We had as many shots at birds flushing as landing, and most were killed only a few feet off the water. Our experience and observations were not far from those of Gordon McQuarrie when he wrote: "Their charge into the decoys had been so sudden and direct that we did not take the easy incoming shot. For trimness with speed, for power with grace, no duck – not even the wedge-faced canvasback – has anything to beat the golden-eye."

Whistlers are tough to bring down, tougher still to kill because of their dense blanket of feathers and layer of fat under the skin; and expert divers, quick to escape if only wounded. The secret to not losing wounded whistlers is the same as with all waterfowl hunting, times four: Get them close, shoot one bird at a time, try for head shots and keep shooting them on the water until their head is down or their belly up. One dog will usually not be able to retrieve more than one bird dropped from a flock in the Missouri's fast current, so it is wise to position

your boat to be quickly launched for retrieves.

On the Table

At the end of each of our whistler hunts there was never an argument about who "had to take" the whistlers. If there were three whistlers and three hunters, each of us took one. I admit some disappointment. I had hopes of trying several recipes, but alas, my sampling was small. If the temperature is right, 36 to 45 degrees, I typically hang my ducks for several days, up to a week. It improves the flavor and allows enzymes to begin breaking down the muscle tissue, making even old birds

more tender. I hung the whistlers just the same as I hang my mallards. I marinated the breast fillets and legs in soy sauce, beer, garlic and fresh ground ginger, the same as mallards. I intended to roast a whistler, but did not. Then again, I have not roasted any duck for years.

If any game animal has a gamey taste, it is probably from the fat, so if you are nervous about eating a whistler, or just want milder meat from any duck or deer, bone out the meat and trim away the fat. I had whistler legs and breast cooked with sauerkraut in a pressure cooker and stir fried, and in both cases the meat was as good as most ducks I eat. Yes, it tasted like duck. Ducks taste like ducks. If you

don't like the way ducks taste, you should probably not eat ducks and probably should not shoot ducks. Were the whistlers we shot and ate enough to be a scientific sampling of their edibility? No. Perhaps there are whistlers with unpleasant tastes, but so are there mallards, canvasbacks and gadwall that do not taste as good as the average of their kind. This year, if we have a proper winter, there will be a larger sample.

Shooting any waterfowl over homemade decoys is an immensely satisfying hunt. It harkens back to wildfowling of old, when most hunters made their own decoys and boats, built their own blinds and trained their own

dogs. In recent times, hunters often pay others to do those essential preparations and rituals, and they are poorer for it. All that is left is shooting, and just shooting is not proper hunting. Slipping away, too, is the joy of hunting ducks other than drake mallards.

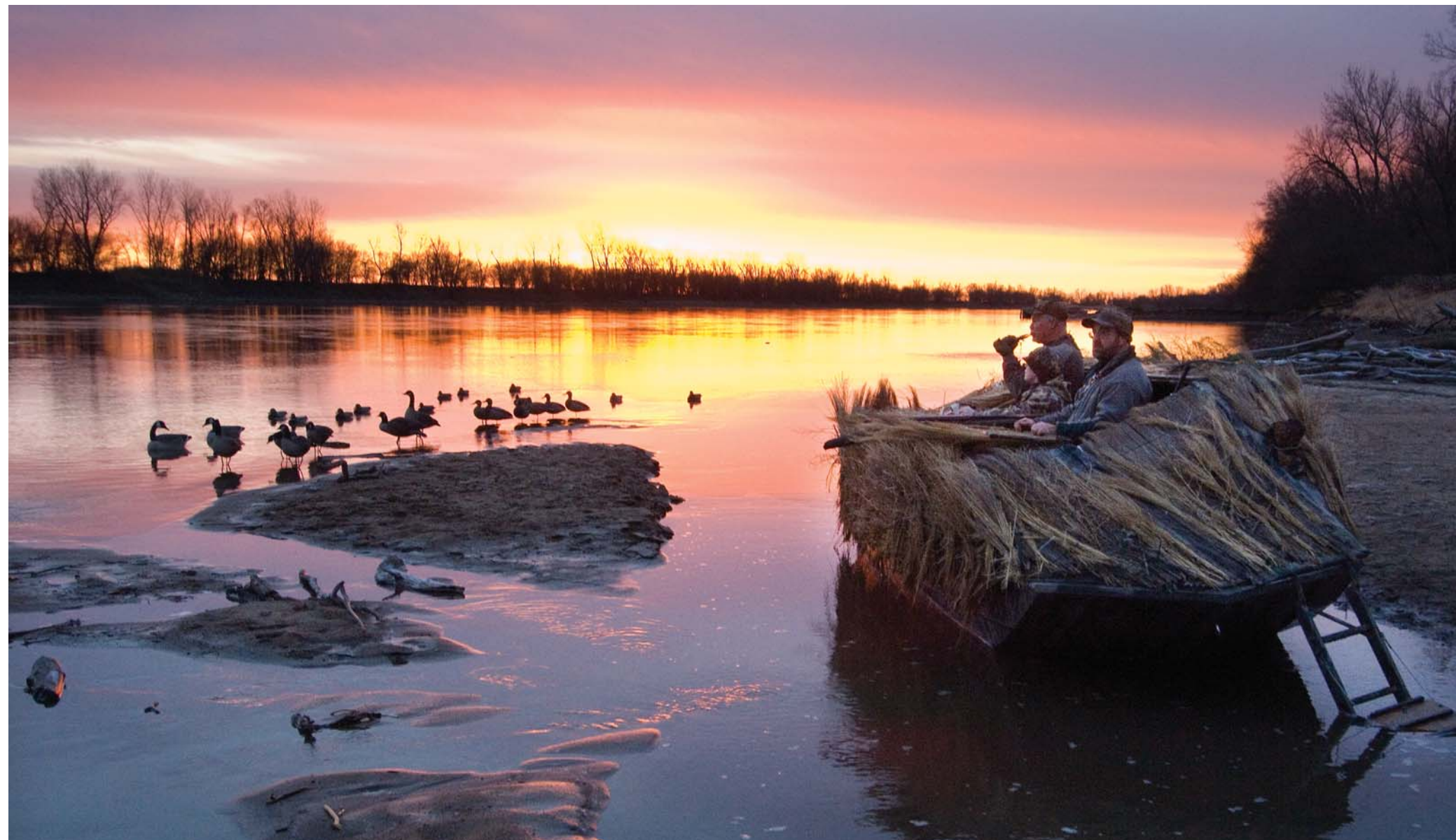
Ebert, Livingston and I still gather most Wednesday nights in my shop. Sometimes we even make decoys. Last summer we fashioned a modest stool of common mergansers and made a few coot decoys, what we hope will one day grow to be a raft of coots. It just keeps getting stranger and stranger, better and better. But alas, we might be forced to shoot some mallards this fall if nothing more interesting decoys. ■



Zach, 11 years old, made his first solo mallard kill on our January hunt. He shot his first goldeneye the year before.

us with our pants down. But there were lessons learned, especially for me, as before last season I'd never seen a whistler while holding a shotgun.

During decoy-making sessions, Livingston and Ebert said they usually see whistlers as singles, pairs, small groups of three and four, rarely a flock larger than 12, and that was the way it had been. They are busy ducks, always on the move, coursing the river apparently just for the joy of flying or looking for others of their kind for mates. They are fast flyers, like black-



Our mid-winter hunts were balmy days with one fancy sunrise, three good breakfasts and none of the world's problems solved.

The One-legged Duck

And Other Ways Birds Battle the Elements

By Jeff Kurrus

The question “Why does a duck stand on one leg?” is a lot easier to ask than to answer. And while it could be simply stated that a duck will stand on one leg to conserve body heat, that might be shortchanging you a bit. But let’s start there anyway.

A number of avian species, including ducks and geese, often stand on one leg to thermoregulate (control their body temperature) during cold weather

by keeping more heat close to the body, the same way a person might wrap their arms around themselves when cold. Much of our own heat escapes through our extremities – our arms, legs and especially head, where more than 40 percent of the body’s heat can be lost on cold days.

A lot of heat can also be lost through waterfowl’s feet, so ducks and geese will either sit in an attempt to stay warm, saving up to 50 percent

of their body heat, or they will stand on one leg. So how does that exposed leg stay warm? Counter-current exchange.

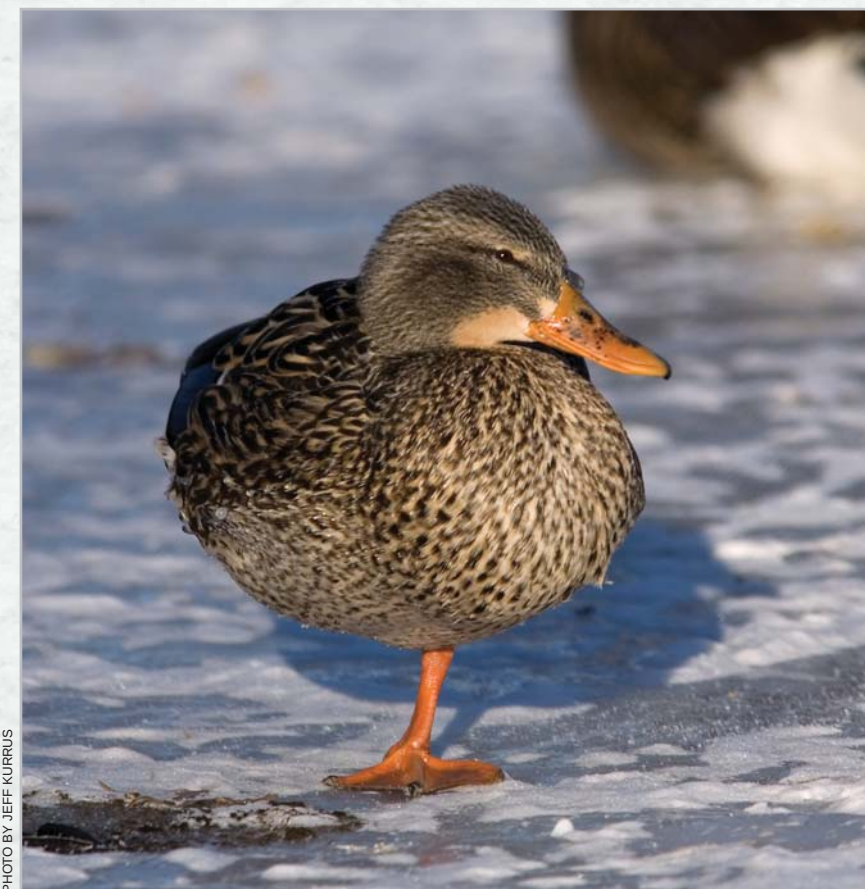
In simplest terms, counter-current exchange is the mechanism by which the property of one fluid is transferred to another. In this example, warm blood traveling through arteries from the heart to the duck’s foot transfers heat to the cooler blood returning to the heart by way of veins that lie adjacent to the arteries.

In effect, the heart does not have to pump as much warm blood to the extremities and can spend more energy maintaining a constant core body temperature. While a duck’s core temperature standing on ice may be 104 degrees F, its feet may be only slightly above freezing.

Yet counter-current exchange is not the only method by which birds thermoregulate, and some species can do so earlier than others.

Precocial species (those born relatively mature and mobile, such as waterfowl and shorebirds), hatch young who are covered with down, making them capable of responding to changes in temperature fluctuations as well as leaving the nest sooner than their altricial counterparts. Altricial species, including songbirds, are hatched helpless, confined in the nest and dependent upon their parents until their thermoregulatory processes develop.

Once birds begin to mature, their thermoregulatory processes vary. Shivering increases oxygen consumption and occurs at different temperatures depending on the bird species – birds native to southern climates, northern cardinals and blue jays, begin shivering at much warmer temperatures (near 64 degrees F) than northern species, gray jays and snow buntings (between 44 and 48 degrees F). Other species, including turkey vultures and hummingbirds, will actually lower their own body temperatures, reaching self-controlled levels of hypothermia in an effort to conserve energy.



A duck will stand on one leg to keep as much of its body’s heat as close to its core as possible. The temperature of the exposed leg is maintained by a process known as counter-current exchange.



PHOTO BY BOB GRIER

Panting is a thermoregulatory technique used by owls, such as the great horned owl, in an effort to aid cooling.

Bird weight will also increase during the winter months as birds add fat and plumage. House sparrows, for example, will increase their weight by 70 percent from summer to fall in preparation for winter. Other species, such as emperor penguins, huddle together for warmth; ring-necked pheasants burrow under snow during the winter; mourning doves fluff their feathers to create more air pockets; sandhill cranes constrict blood vessels carrying blood to their feet, which cuts down on heat loss; and many bird species simply migrate to more favorable climates.

Yet harsher climates are not limited to just wintertime. Summer heat can be just as difficult for birds to live through and they must also find ways to battle these extreme elements. Since birds don’t have sweat glands, some heat-stressed birds, especially if dehydrated, allow their body temperature to raise several degrees above normal. For example, ostriches will increase their core body temperature during extreme heat, saving liters of water per day that would be otherwise lost to evaporative cooling.

Panting, which increases evaporative

cooling from the nasal, buccal, and upper pharyngeal regions of the trachea and is used by many bird species, including owls, is another cooling technique. Similarly, sandhill cranes vibrate their hyoid muscles and bones in their throats, an action known as gular fluttering, to increase the rate of heat loss through evaporation of water

from the mouth and upper throat areas.

Wood storks increase their own heat loss through evaporative cooling by excreting directly onto their legs. Herring gulls, that often nest in open areas with little or no shade, constantly turn to face the sun on hot, windless days, thus using their most reflective plumage to deflect sunlight. Also, chicks of various bird species will stand in the shadows of their parents in an effort to thermoregulate.

Most of these practices are rarely seen by casual viewers. However, seeing a duck or goose standing on one leg at a local public park is quite common. And while the question has been answered concerning this behavior during the winter, why are waterfowl often seen standing on one leg in the summer?

Some researchers claim they have a much better sense of balance than we do, and are able to position their center of balance over their supporting leg, locking the tendons in their legs much more efficiently than we can lock our own knees. So, in a sense, the question could simply relate back to comfort. And just think, it only took a thousand words to answer that. ■



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

Mourning doves, in colder climates, fluff their feathers to create air pockets.

Ice-fishing 101

Or, the Art of Catching Fish Through the Ice

Photos and text by
Bob Grier



Ronnie Snyder of Rushville ice-fishes for bluegill at Smith Lake Wildlife Management Area as the last light of day disappears behind a cloud bank.

Competitors and friends fishing the big-name walleye tournament trails each summer know Ronnie Snyder of rural Rushville as an excellent walleye angler who's quick with a laugh and ready to swap fishing stories, but also routinely in the top tier when the awards are handed out at the end of the day. Snyder knows how to find and catch walleye, and his team regularly qualifies for the larger tournaments that mark the end of each season. Not one to give up fishing at the end of summer, however, Snyder is also one of the best hard-water anglers anywhere. When good ice forms, he's out in good and bad weather fishing for bluegill, yellow perch, crappie, walleye and northern pike.

Snyder has ice-fished ever since he was a young boy growing up along the Niobrara River on the western edge of the Sandhills, close to Smith Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) south of Rushville. His keen attention to the numerous details that produce good catches on the ice and willingness to share tips and techniques makes him a great source of ice-fishing how-to. A balmy, late-winter day on Smith Lake in early 2007 made an ideal classroom for Ronnie Snyder Ice-fishing 101, with graduate-level studies later in the day on the art and science of catching fish through the ice.

"It's probably an exaggeration," Snyder said as we unloaded his ice-fishing shelter and sled from the back of his pickup, "but I believe in the idea that 90 percent of the fish are in less than 10 percent of the lake's water. Just like searching for walleye in the summer, ice-fishermen have to be mobile, willing to travel at times and, once on the lake, prepared to move about looking for fish. You can use the best bait, the best technique and fish the very best times of the day, but unless you've found fish it's going to be a pretty dull day, and too often it is the lack of initial success that keeps new anglers from coming back."

It helps, of course, to know the lake like the back of your hand. Snyder said that even in typical, bowl-like Sandhills lakes, structure is really key to locating fish-holding areas. He also recommends visiting with other ice-fishermen on the lake, most of whom, like Snyder, are

willing to share information and help new ice-fishermen.

"During the first part of the season, I won't go out on less than four inches of good, safe ice, and during the early season it is possible to find fish just about anywhere on the lake. It does depend somewhat on the lake, of course, but when you arrive, begin looking for structure. Structure is important at any time of the year. Structure can be plant growth, submerged islands, drop-offs and points, even moss beds – actually, anything that is different in the lake, a submerged log, gravel bed or something like the "cribs" that crappie fishermen sometime place in lakes to attract and hold crappie. Sandhills lakes might appear to be uniform and without structure, but it is that lack of structure that can make small areas that offer something different so inviting to baitfish and feeding fish.

"It really helps to have fished a lake during the summer. The same places you found fish in the summer are excellent spots to begin looking after freeze-up, especially early in the ice-fishing season. The early season offers good dissolved oxygen and the fish will tend to be shallow and using areas in and near aquatic vegetation such as reed beds and submerged cattail stands. As the season progresses and the amount of oxygen is reduced, fish will move into the lake's deeper water and the angler has to be ready to move. Experienced ice-fishermen will drill a series of holes and often spend less than 15 minutes in an area without catching fish before picking up and moving. This is a good time to fish with friends – scatter out to find fish, and if someone is having success, you'll be able to move to the productive area."

To make his movements on the ice as safe and quick as possible, Snyder pulls a small, combination pop-up shelter and sled loaded with gear – buckets of

small rods, tip-ups, bait and a small, gas-powered ice auger. The quickly loaded sled with a long pull rope makes it easy to move even long distances on the ice. His clothing matches the expected weather conditions, but he always wears spiked cleats or ice grippers on his boots.

"In addition to cleats, ice-fishermen should carry something like a bridge spike or large nail in their outside coat pocket where they can be easily retrieved. You can be on thick, clear ice, but many of the Sandhills lakes have springs and when you're moving around, be constantly aware of the quality of ice. I've seen as much as 16 inches of ice that wouldn't be safe.



Colorful and tasty, bluegill are a mainstay for hard-water anglers across Nebraska.

Watch where the ice changes colors and be extremely careful if you start seeing the ice getting dark and greenish – there are spring holes in Smith Lake and most Sandhills lakes.

"If you do break through, that is when the spikes or homemade, short ice picks with dowel rod handles can be lifesavers. Don't try to pull yourself out vertically; start kicking and swimming. Once you're horizontal, try to swim out onto safe ice using the spikes – it will be a lot easier and quicker. Also, carry a long piece of stout cord or light rope. I've always

carried something in the sled that could be thrown if someone breaks through, but fortunately I've never had to use it."

Smith Lake is one of the Sandhills's best fisheries throughout the year for bluegill, crappie, yellow perch, pike and walleye. Snyder will often let the fish determine his methods and on-ice activities, but regardless, if fish aren't biting, he is constantly on the move.

"If you're after bluegill early in the season, for example, make sure you fish the evening. Bluegill will shut down at dark. Bluegill are 'stay at home' fish – if you find good bluegill using an area today, 95 percent of the time, they'll be there the next day as well. Largemouth bass are also 'stay at home' fish. They'll stay near habitat that offers concealment and concentrates

prey species that the bass use. Yellow perch are 'nomads' constantly on the move, and you need to be on the move as well, especially as the season progresses, to find and catch perch. There are times when just about anywhere on the lake will produce perch, but when they move, be ready to search."

Snyder started out the day on Smith Lake by cutting a row of holes in a direct line. After spending just a few unproductive minutes at each, he pulled the sled several hundred yards farther across the lake, trying to find a deeper channel close to the lake's southern shore. His movements were often guided by the amount of reeds extending above the ice.

"I'll try to fish in the reeds or right at the edge of the reeds and then move



Snyder's gas-powered auger allows him to quickly and easily drill fishing holes in the ice.



Late in the day Snyder began catching large bluegill on small, white and chartreuse teardrops baited with waxworms.

into deeper and deeper water, but still try to maintain contact with structure as I move out. That is really the key. Perhaps a point gradually extending from shallow water out to deeper water. Maybe the reeds and moss beds on the point are located close enough to deeper water that the fish will move in from time to time to feed.

"Fishermen will often use flashers or depth finders," he added. "The flasher will work in slightly deeper water, say 8- to 10-feet deep; but usually in shallow water, I find the fishing pole to be more effective for finding fish. In the deeper water, the flasher can give you the

bottom depth and provide a good idea of the depth the fish are using, and it's fun to watch a fish rise to your bait."

Snyder's bucket of small, ice-fishing rods contained some with sensitive, spring-like "bobber tips," and the spinning reels held light four-pound, even two-pound test monofilament. Several were spooled with low-stretch, low-diameter co-polymer line. Snyder won't use the floats or bobbers, no matter how light and sensitive, that are often seen in ice-fishing kits. He relies on line watching to observe the very light bites that often go unnoticed by other ice anglers.

"The smaller diameter, colored lines such as Fireline are very useful when you're fishing for bluegill or yellow perch," he said. "Line watching is often the only way to see that there is a fish working the bait. Use a line you can see and watch for any movement. Perhaps if you've lowered the bait to the depth you want to fish and the line goes slack, it could be that a fish has moved the bait upwards slightly, or if you see the line slowly moving – like there is a current pulling it across the hole – that could be a fish that is staying at the same depth but moving slowly."

Watching Snyder sit at one hole with

only one rod in the water is a study in concentration. With his fingertips touching the line near the front of the reel's spool, he intently watches where the line enters the water, using a large scoop to keep the hole free of floating ice. Occasionally he stopped his concentration long enough to drop an unhooked wax worm into the water.

"Sometimes a very small vertical movement of the teardrop and wax worm can be effective. I'll drop a wax worm into the water to see how fast it sinks and then try to duplicate that speed with the teardrop and wax worm. Always try different depths as well,



Snyder's highly mobile ice-fishing outfit allows him to quickly pack up and move as he searches for active schools of panfish.

I've seen times when bluegill were directly below the ice and you have to fish only inches below the ice to get a bite. Many ice-fishermen concentrate on the few inches above the bottom. It is better to fish above than below the fish, but unless you try different depths, how do you know where the fish are holding?

"I have fished where the bluegill were about six inches below the ice, and at other times any depth to the bottom. I often try to start a good six to 12 inches above the bottom, raising and lowering the bait real slow. Often changing depth as little as six to 12 inches will make all the difference."

For bait that day Snyder used different colored teardrop lures baited with wax worms carried in a small tin. He quickly changed colors as he moved across the lake.

"Using different colors to find out

what the fish want that day is also a good time to be fishing with others – each fisherman can use a different color and everyone can change to the most effective color if someone starts catching fish."

For crappie, live minnows are usually the preferred ice-fishing bait. Live minnows are restricted on some of Nebraska's waters, however, and fishermen should be aware of the restrictions and study the current Nebraska Fishing Guide for fishing rules and regulations.

"When we are after walleye through the ice, it usually means night fishing. Be out on the lake while there is still light, set up your tip-ups, shelters and lights and be prepared before it gets dark. We'll often use a small jighead baited with a minnow head for walleye. For northerns, usually larger bait such as smelt or dead minnows works better.

"For northerns, I like to let the fish run with the bait until the fish stops and then set the hook when the fish starts moving again. Too many times, anglers will run to the tip-up and try to set the hook just because the flag is up. Northerns will take the bait by the tail and slowly move off carrying the bait, but then the movement will stop for a brief period while the fish begins turning and swallowing the bait. When the line starts moving again is the best time to set the hook."

True to his earlier call, it was shortly after sundown that the larger bluegill began biting. The brilliantly-colored bluegill were hitting a chartreuse or white teardrop baited with a wax worm, but as the light continued to fade, Snyder switched to darker-colored baits and continued to catch fish until they stopped biting at dark.

"Just like summer fishing, light

conditions and weather conditions have a real impact on fishing success," he said as we loaded the sled to return to the vehicle parking area.

"Low-pressure fronts can be like a light switch turning off the fish, but with patience and a willingness to explore different fishing spots and techniques, it is possible to catch fish even during cold front conditions.

"Ice-fishing requires that a fisherman be prepared to travel – we don't have as much water as many states and most of the ice-fishing is in the northern part of the state. But if you've traveled quite a ways to fish, don't let the weather conditions stop you. A good pop-up wind shelter or ice-fishing tent can make even blizzard conditions comfortable. Be prepared with the right equipment, a variety of bait and try to find the 'spot on a spot' where the fish are active. Talk to the other fishermen to see what is

going on. It is certainly possible to be completely "skunked" at the end of the day, and ice fishing takes patience at times – but most of the time, if you find the fish and try different baits, depths and be prepared to move if the fish do, you'll have a great time on the ice." ■

For additional information on ice-fishing, consult the annual Nebraska Fishing Guide, go to the Commission's web site at www.OutdoorNebraska.org or pick up a copy of NEBRASKAland's Ice Fishing Guide, available at Commission offices across the state.

What's Legal

A total of five lines with two hooks on each line are permitted while ice-fishing, unless restrictions are listed for that specific water body in the Nebraska Fishing Guide. Each line must be under direct supervision and within unaided observation of the angler. Ice-fishing holes may not exceed 10 inches in diameter on any area controlled by the Commission. A special \$5 permit is required for a permanent ice-fishing shelter on state recreation and wildlife management area lakes. Applications and regulations are available from conservation officers, Commission offices or by mail from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503. This does not apply to temporary shelters used and removed each day.

The Beginning of the End

Late-season hunting opportunities abundant in Nebraska.

By Jeff Kurrus

Keepest one thing in mind for next year. Mark it on your calendar if you have to. Desoto National Wildlife Refuge has a January doe hunt for season-choice area 21 permit holders. However, the 140 access permits for Desoto are usually gone by Thanksgiving, said assistant refuge manager Mindy Sheets, so you may already be too late for that hunt. Sorry. But you're not too late to hunt in general. End-of-the-year hunts are some of the most memorable each year, a time when too many hunters spend too much time watching football versus wildlife, trading waterfowl wings for chicken wings. Yet that should change, and here are a few reasons why:

Crowded: Let's get this out of the way first. There is obviously going to be less people in the field. The difference between the large number of people in the Pine Ridge during the rifle season compared to the handful of Pine Ridge hunters during the muzzleloader and late season-choice seasons is astounding, for example.

Yet there are still deer to be hunted there and across the state after the rifle season. As the season moves toward the new year, deer begin to spend much more time in their wintering grounds, moving to cut crop fields in search of food. While these deer may range too far for muzzleloading hunters, the two week antlerless hunt from January 1-15 is prime time to be afield.

There are also plenty of other game animals, such as pheasants, to hunt this time of year. If you have the opportunity in the new year, longtime Nebraska pheasant hunter Lee Rupp said some of the best days to hunt are after the holidays because a good number of hunters don't renew their license at the end of the year.



The light pressure of late-season deer hunting makes it a great time to take young hunters afield while also giving hunters the chance to hunt in snow.

Relatives: "You're telling me that all it's going to cost me is \$68 to deer hunt in Nebraska?" asked my dad before he came to visit. And he's not the only one thinking this. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission provides some of the best big game, as well as small game, hunting options for visitors to the state. In December, a season-choice permit holder can hunt the entire month with a bow or muzzleloader for \$68 (\$55 for the permit and \$13 for the habitat stamp), and are allowed one antlerless deer per permit. In addition, hunters in areas 1, 18, 21 and 22 have a bonus tag for an additional antlerless deer. In January, a season-choice permit holder can hunt January 1-15 using a muzzleloader or rifle. At press time, only season-choice area 13 was sold out for this year.

For small game hunters, there are also options available for nonresidents. The Commission offers nonresidents a two-day permit and habitat stamp for \$49.00. This allows the purchaser to choose two consecutive days to

hunt a host of small game, including squirrels, rabbits, quail or pheasants, from the Wednesday preceding Thanksgiving through the end of the year.

Snow: Not to get too philosophical, but Nebraskans often have a very unique opportunity during their wintertime hunting pursuits. Many hunters in traditionally deer-rich areas are seldom able to enjoy snow with their hunting. Compared to many areas throughout the country, the opportunity to hunt in these conditions occurs much more often in Nebraska than other places. The state capitals of Mississippi, Texas, Kansas and Illinois, each known for their deer hunting histories, all have less average snowfall than Lincoln does. And don't take this lightly. While battling snow elements during travel is treacherous, a number of hunters throughout the country would love to drive a bit slower to and from their hunting locales for even one day to hunt in their white coveralls.

The main point? Get out and hunt this time of the year, for each year is going to offer something different than the year before. For me, it was jumping rabbits at Rakes Creek WMA one year, another it was laying under a white bedsheet jack-in-the boxing mallards over a cut cornfield, a third was watching my father shoot his first two Nebraska deer, and another it was still-hunting fox squirrels with my .22 rifle on the last day of January without another hunter in sight. Each year of late-season hunting brings something different for those who do it. And look at it this way – if nothing happens at all, and it becomes the most uneventful hunting trip for yourself, your friends or your family, most of the time you're either back to the cabin or house shortly after 5 p.m., right about time to order some wings. ■

PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

Winter Events at State Parks

Parks offer history, exhibits, celebrations, rides and outdoor fun.

Festive Christmas dinners, holiday displays and sipping coffee in front of a cozy fire are just a few of the things to enjoy at Nebraska's state park and recreation areas this winter.

While some activities and amenities at the state parks close for the winter, most parks don't. Five parks have special holiday events planned and four offer cabin rentals at a 30-percent discount for winter weekday stays. The adventurous camper might choose to pitch a tent, while others will plug in their RV at a modern campground. Either way, the parks typically aren't busy during the winter, so you might feel like you have one all to yourself. And if Mother Nature cooperates, you can be the first to leave tracks on a snow-covered woodland trail.

Many parks are open to hunting and several have opportunities for ice-fishing or wildlife viewing. Check hunting/fishing regulations for details.

Buffalo Bill's Ranch State Historical Park

North Platte, (308) 535-8035

Christmas at the Cody's, Dec. 20-23, 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Christmas lights wrap the 1880s home of William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, as well as the barn and other buildings at this historical park. Visitors can stop in the mansion for roasted chestnuts, hot apple cider and cookies, listen to live piano music, visit with a Buffalo Bill impersonator and Santa Claus, or tour the park on a horse-drawn hayrack ride. Admission is \$4, and children 12 and under are free.

Eugene T. Mahoney State Park

Ashland, (402) 944-2523

The Peter Kiewit Lodge will be decorated inside and out from Thanksgiving through Christmas.

The restaurant is open daily and

will serve special buffets on Christmas, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Cabins and lodge rooms are available. The kids can run off some energy in the park's activity center, which features an indoor playground, climbing wall and an ice skating rink when the weather stays cold. Snowmaking machines extend the season on the park's sledding hill, located next to the Lee and Helene Sapp Riverview Lodge. A Christmas play will be presented at the Kountze Memorial Theater on weekends through December. Quest Lake is stocked with rainbow trout to provide winter ice-fishing opportunities. And if you're looking for a Valentine's Day getaway, the park has a special lodging package February 10-14.

Bowring Ranch State Historical Park

Merriman, (308) 684-3428

Bowring Christmas Open House, December 12, 6 p.m.

This year's holiday dinner, "Christmas at the Bowring," is already sold out for both the December 2 and 9 dates, but guests can be invited to stop by December 12 to enjoy the Christmas lights and decorations, play cards and board games, and enjoy music and refreshments in the ranch's Visitor Center.

On January 22, the park will host the third annual Cowboy Poetry and Music Jam. Poets and musicians will start performing at 2:30 p.m., and a potluck supper begins at 5 p.m.

Arbor Lodge State Historical Park

Nebraska City, (402) 873-7222

Christmas at the Mansion, November 25; December 2 and 9, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

The Friends of Arbor Lodge Foundation will decorate two floors of the 52-room mansion, home of

Arbor Day founder J. Sterling Morton, for the holidays. There will also be refreshments and music. Admission is \$8 for the public, and \$5 for Friends of Arbor Lodge Foundation. Outside the dates listed, the mansion is closed from late October through April.

Lake McConaughy State Recreation Area

Ogallala, (308) 284-2332

Bald Eagle Viewing.

The Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District's eagle viewing building at Lake Ogallala opens each winter to give visitors a front-row seat of the spillway below Kingsley Dam, where as many as 400 eagles have gathered to dine on dead and injured fish. Weather determines when and how many birds show up, but late January is typically best. Spotting scopes and binoculars are provided. The center is open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays and during the week by appointment when eagles are present, usually from late-December or early January through February.

Fort Robinson State Park

Crawford, (308) 665-2900

Fort Robinson Historical Christmas Dinner, December 1.

The 200 tickets for this event sell out in 15 minutes when they go on sale in early November, but visitors can still enjoy an evening drive though the park, where the historic buildings are decorated by area businesses and individuals through December 31.

Winter Cabins

Cabins are open year-round at Mahoney, Platte River and Niobrara state parks and at Lewis and Clark Lake State Recreation Area. Rates are discounted 30 percent for Sunday through Thursday nights, excluding holidays. ■

Classifieds

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS/VIDEOS

HOLIDAY SHOPPING: New 2nd Edition, *Ju-Ju Swallowed a Penny*, Hardcover, \$23; Softcover, \$13. Other Nebraska novels, *In the Shadow of the Bluff* and *The Courthouse*. Available book stores or Betty Dunn, 410 CR 324, Navasota, TX 77868; bdunn@mss-blue.net.

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Portraits from the Past



When I read your article in NEBRASKAland about the trout rearing station near Royal (Grove Lake Trout Rearing Station, July 2006), I remembered this picture – Fred Bentley of Lincoln beside his day's catch along with his fly rod and my spinning rod. I took this picture with my first 35mm camera, a Kodak fixed lens Retina IIa. I still have the camera, though I seldom use it as it has since been replaced by more modern equipment.

Fred and his wife, Elizabeth, were our next-door neighbors when we moved to Lincoln in October 1964. We became very close friends. He taught me how to fly fish, though I never perfected his skills, and rekindled my interest in waterfowl and upland game hunting. His rod was a traditional bamboo.

Fred moved to Lincoln in 1962 from Chagrin Falls, Ohio. He fished for many years in New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Alaska, where he was stationed during World War II. Fred was a lawyer and held the position of Adjudication Officer for the Veterans Administration here in Lincoln. He died in 1980.

– C.E. Paulson, Lincoln, Nebraska



This is a picture of my parents, Glen and Elva Stevens, after a successful afternoon of spear-fishing in September, 1944. The fish are carp taken from the North Loup River, which flows through my family's farm northwest of Taylor, Nebraska. My parents were courting at the time; Dad was home on leave from the Navy. After their marriage began, spear-fishing continued to be a favorite Sunday afternoon activity.

I remember splashing and playing at this site in the shallow river while Mom and Dad chased after fish. We then always ate those bony carp for Sunday supper. Dad has passed on, but Mom still lives on the farm very near where this picture was taken.

– Kate Morse, Sargent, Nebraska



My father, Mitch Knothe, is pictured with a limit of pheasants, shot west of St. Paul, Nebraska, in the early to mid-1950s. It was very common to easily shoot your limit during the 1950s in central Nebraska. The picture was taken at my parents' home in St. Paul.

Note Dad's Browning automatic 12-gauge, which was made in Belgium. Only my late brother, Gary, could shoot this full-choked 12-gauge with the accuracy that Dad did. Dad bought the shotgun new, sometime after WWI, and it still works fine.

Mitch was a lifelong resident of St. Paul and a businessman there, owning and operating Knothe's Cafe for more than 30 years.

– Ken Knothe, Ontario, Oregon

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKAland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1970. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Photos will be returned.

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