



During spring when striped skunks breed they can sometimes be seen during the daytime, like this one along the Platte River in Hall County. Photo by Greg Wright.

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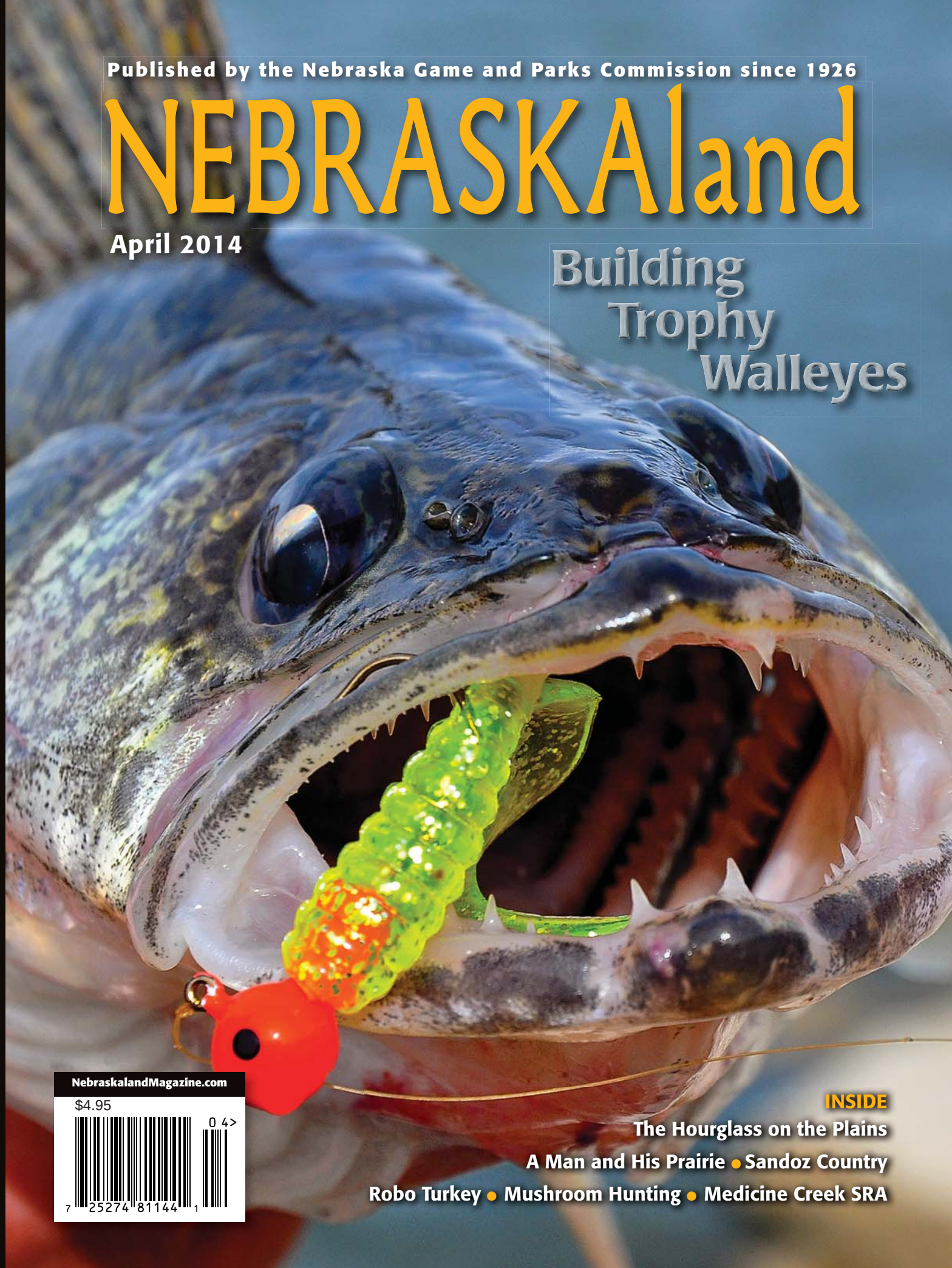
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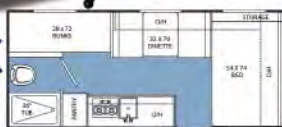


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The Hourglass on the Plains
 A Man and His Prairie • Sandoz Country
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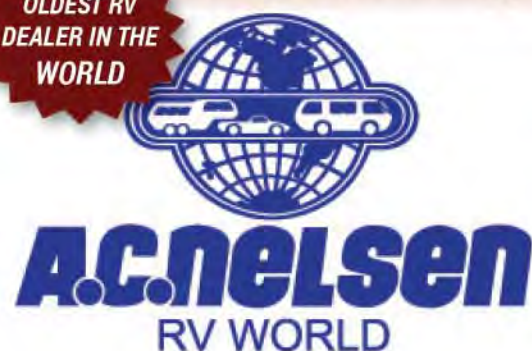
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NEBRASKAland Magazine

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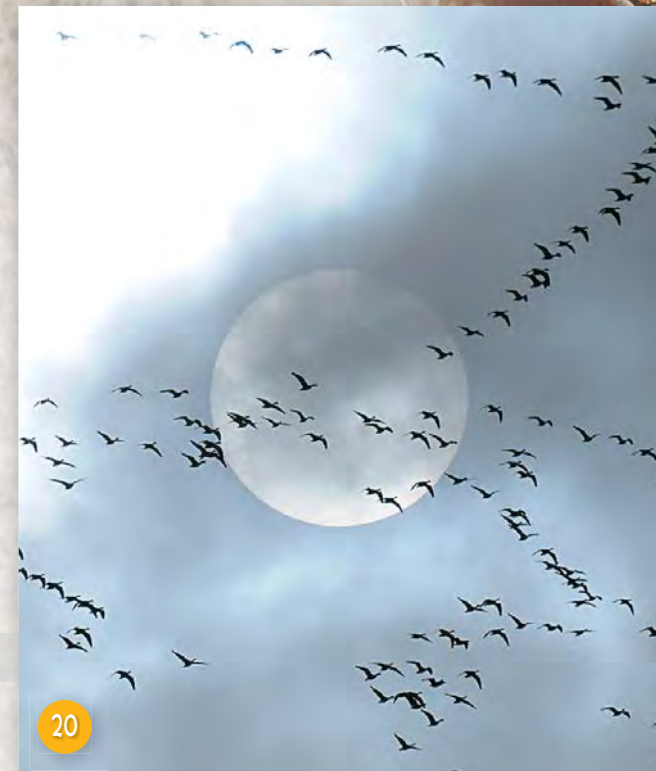
Cover: A 22-inch walleye caught in the canal system below Jeffrey Reservoir in Lincoln County is the desired result of the production and management of this species in Nebraska. See story on page 38. Photo by Greg Wright.

ON THE WEB...

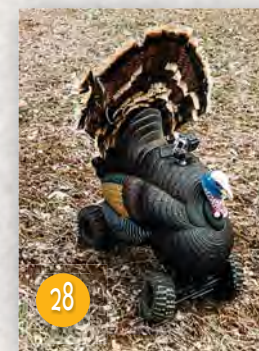


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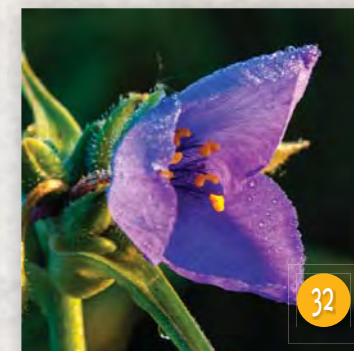
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A NEBRASKAland Visitor Letter

I believe that fuzzy little creature on the upper right-hand corner of page 29 is a daring jumping spider (*Phidippus audax*). I am very proud of my daughter, Kim Schaaf of Scottsbluff, for finding last month's grasshopper. Kim is a great outdoors person – she loves fishing, hunting, boating, camping, etc.

Enclosed is a picture of Kimberly and myself with a 19½ pound pike I caught in a backwater slough south of Emmet on the Elkhorn River in 1962 or '63. We lived in Chambers at the time.

We think your magazine is the greatest thing since sliced bread!

Lyle T. Clemens
Kenesaw, Nebraska

Last fall my wife and I went camping at Ponca State Park. I had not been there since I was 12 years old (I'm 52 now) and my wife had never been there. May I just say "Wow!" What an awesome state park!

I still cannot get over how clean it was, including the roadside, campground areas, hiking paths, around the pond and near the river. All of the staff were also friendly, kind, respectful and very helpful. Our stay was one that was a real pleasure and honor! Anyone who has thought about going to Ponca State Park should do so as soon as they can.

Todd L. Bouton
Lincoln, Nebraska

Hawk at Lake

Last spring I was riding my bike by Oak Lake. I spotted a red-tailed hawk perched in a tree. I always carry my camera on me, so I moved in a little closer to get a photo. It hung around for about 5 minutes then flew off across the lake.

Steve Andel
via e-mail



Lonny Holman of Omaha photographed this turkey at Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue.

Correction: In the March, 2014 issue of NEBRASKAland Magazine, the incorrect date was listed for the Free Fishing and Park Entry Day. Always held the Saturday before Memorial Day weekend, this year the Free Fishing and Park Entry Day is May 17.

-Editor



Jason Hertz of Lincoln snapped these flying starlings at sunrise near the state capitol.



Tractors at Lake Mac

This photo was taken this past November by our daughter, Megan Borman, near the end of our driveway at our home on the south shore of beautiful Lake McConaughy.

During the chilly months, these neighborhood tractors get to take a rest from their summer duties, which might include hauling boats and jet skis in and out of the clear waters of Big Mac, extracting a tree stump from the shore or even rescuing each other from a muddy sinkhole! Whether working or vacationing, this photo captures the image of a steadfast, but charming, cog in the wheel of our unique community.

We count down the weeks and days until we can spend time during any season in this special place near Ogallala, Nebraska, where we feel "at home" among our neighbors (and their tractors)!

Sincerely,
Rich and Kristin Borman
Ogallala, Nebraska

Send your comments to:
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NEBRASKAland Magazine
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or e-mail Jeff.Kurrus@Nebraska.gov
Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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Hammock Camping

By Cristina Woodworth

Sprawling out on a brightly-striped hammock strung between two palm trees is often the picturesque scenario for a summer day at the beach. In recent years, though, outdoor gear stores have seen an increasing number of backpackers and campers showing an interest in the age-old product, citing its lightweight material, relatively low cost and ultra sleeping comfort as reason to purchase one for their next camping trip.

Native Americans were documented by Spanish colonists in the early 16th Century as using nets strung between two trees to sleep in. Cultures around the world have embraced hammock-sleeping for centuries as well, including areas like Mexico, Venezuela and India. Such countries often weave homemade hammocks of traditional materials and colors, adding on features like mosquito nets to make them more practical.

Modern popularity of the hammock can be traced to Naval ships, where limited space prevented the installation of permanent bunk beds. Hammocks also worked well with the constant motion of the ships, because they have more flexibility than a traditional bed.

Modern backpackers and campers will find a wide variety of hammocks currently on the market, usually made out of lightweight nylon materials that are compressible and dry quickly. A variety of different features are available, and some hammocks include a mini-tent to protect sleepers from the elements.

Sales associates at Cabela's in La Vista, Nebraska, said customers have been praising the comfort and versatility of hammock camping. People with back or neck problems may find it uncomfortable to sleep on the ground, but find relief sleeping in the naturally curved position a hammock offers.

The only caveat with hammocks? Make sure there are enough trees in the area you are visiting to string one up. Campers should also tuck a piece of cardboard or soft blanket around the tree first, so the hammock doesn't damage the tree's bark.

Price ranges for camping hammocks can range from \$30 to several hundred dollars, depending on the quality of the material and special features of the product. Popular brands include ENO, Hennessy and Eagles Nest Outfitters. ■



In "The Discovery of America," a 1630 engraving by Theodor Galle, Amerigo Vespucci awakens a sleeping Native American, represented by a person on a hammock.

Ghost Talk

Congratulations to *NEBRASKA*land contributor Margaret Lukas on her debut novel, *Farthest House*. The novel, set on a Nebraska hilltop and narrated by a ghost, weaves together the lives of four enigmatic generations and has been compared to the work of Alice Hoffman and Anita Shreve. For more information, visit Farthesthouse.com.



My Life as a Turkey

By Gregory Porter

Joe Hutto is a wildlife artist and naturalist from Wyoming. He arrives home one day to a bucket of wild turkey eggs and rushes out to buy an incubator. What begins as a simple science experiment becomes a life-changing journey as Hutto raises a group of wild turkeys. He documented his experience in a journal which became a book and then a film, *My Life as a Turkey*.

"Turkeys," Hutto says, "believe that their needs will be met at the moment and nothing more." To illustrate this, we watch the young turkeys at different stages – serene images that complement the narration and create vivid images through beautiful cinematography.

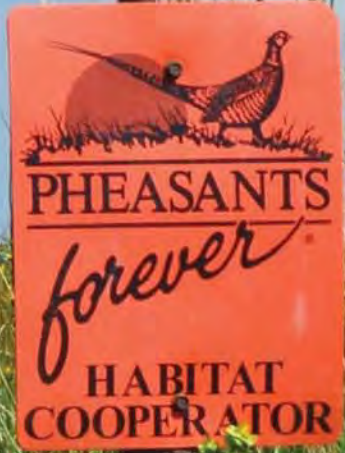
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Mixed Bag

Travelogue

By Justin Haag

Sandoz Country

In the early 20th Century, Mari Sandoz earned acclaim for books about the hardened characters of the High Plains of northwestern Nebraska. Those immigrants included “Old Jules,” her father and the namesake of her 1935 classic book.

The area of which the author wrote remains a place like no other and a serene getaway at any time of year. Within the pages of “Old Jules” and other classic works by Sandoz, readers are taken to interesting locations, immortalized by the author’s words, in **Sheridan County** and beyond. Many of those locations, mostly south of **Hay Springs**, **Rushville** and **Gordon**, are still accessible for travelers today.

Imagine the days when Old Jules ran traps for muskrat and beaver along Pine Creek, which is near to **Smith Lake Wildlife Management Area** and a tributary of the Niobrara River.

A number of museums, including the **Mari Sandoz Room** in Gordon and the **Sheridan County Museum** in Rushville, can help visitors find the right places to visit. And, no tour of Sandoz Country would be complete without a visit to the **Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center** in **Chadron**. The modern facility has permanent exhibits paying tribute to the author and the history of cattle ranching. Other exhibits in 2014 are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, which protected 9.1 million acres of federal land and created a legal definition for wilderness.

Once “outside of town,” don’t expect a lot of amenities, let alone modern ones, while touring the region. If the weather has made road conditions questionable, a four-wheel-drive vehicle is advised.

Despite the challenges, be inspired by the spirit of Old Jules and set out on an adventure in his old stomping grounds.

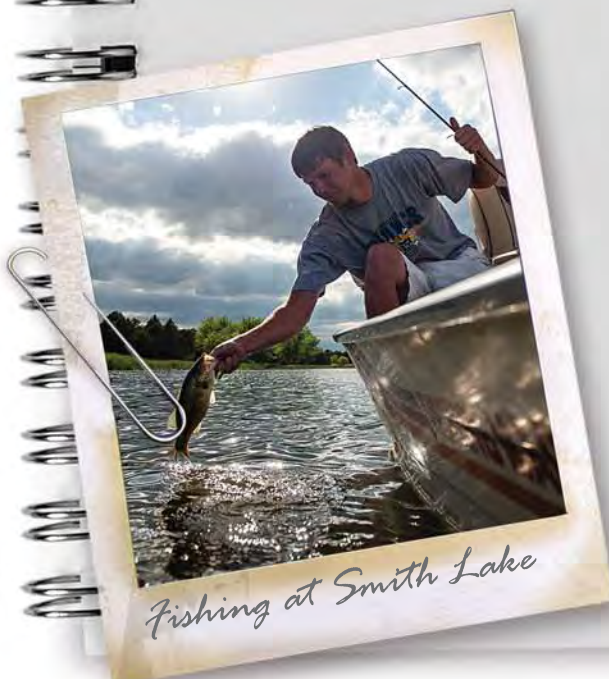


Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center at Chadron



Sheridan County Museum in Rushville

Sheridan and Dawes counties



Fishing at Smith Lake



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Preparing Fishing Equipment for the Open Water Season

By Nebraska Outdoor U!

As the water warms up and the open water fishing season begins, you may want to take some time to prepare your equipment for the rigors of an intense summer fishing season.

Check your rod eyelets for rough edges that could abuse your line, and sand these smooth or replace them as needed. To preserve cork handles, sand out any bumps or dirt, then apply a cork sealing agent or varnish of some sort to protect them from excess moisture and dirt. To clean and maintain a healthy reel, take the reel apart, keeping track of the order in which each part was assembled. Thoroughly clean each component and apply a quality lubricant of your choice to the moving parts to guard against friction damage. If you are unsure in your reel mechanic abilities, many fishing shops will clean reels at a cost. It is also a good idea to replace the line on your reel spools for the upcoming fishing season, especially if you know the line received a lot of action last season or if it is monofilament line. Give your tackle

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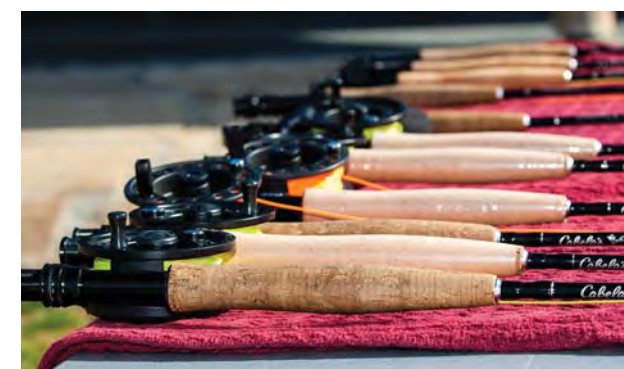


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box a quick run-down as well. Clip any line knots off of any hooks you didn't completely clip off before. Replace any broken or heavily rusted hooks, and sharpen your hooks, because you don't want a dull hook to be the reason why you missed the big one.

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PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG



By the 20th century it was easier for anglers to prove their fish stories with snapshots. Here is a 75-pound catfish, caught March 20, 1949, near Wilber, Nebraska.

A Brief History Early Catfish Tales

By Patricia C. Gaster,
Nebraska State Historical Society

One of the early encounters of Europeans with catfish in this area of the country is found in the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Just north of an Omaha tribal village they reported catching 318 fish of various kinds, and the next day caught “upwards of 800 fine fish,” 490 of which were catfish.

The value of this creature is acknowledged by Lewis C. Edwards, whose *History of Richardson County, Nebraska* (1917) praised “the great value of the catfish as a means of assisting the early pioneers in maintaining body and soul together.” He includes in his book the recollections

of Margaret H. Maddox, who recalled that catfish was an integral part of her 1855 Christmas dinner in Nebraska City: “Besides a wonderful roast turkey we had baked catfish, the largest I ever saw cooked. It weighed twenty pounds and was browned and cooked to a turn.”

Edwards also stated that catfish oil was “used for a variety of purposes such as to grease the boots of the entire family, oiling or greasing the harness, and to oil the gun locks, the oil also being considered a fine specific for rheumatism and sore throat.” Senator John J. Ingalls of Kansas bestowed the name “catfish aristocracy” on indolent settlers along the bottomlands of rivers in eastern Kansas and Nebraska because they supposedly lived by fishing and hunting instead of cultivating the land intensively.

Stories of oversized catfish dot the columns of Missouri River area newspapers. The *Nebraska Advertiser* of August 13, 1857, reported the catch of a 120-pound catfish at the Brownville wharf. The *Omaha Nebraskan* of May 5, 1860, reported

a 175-pound specimen captured when it went aground a short distance below Omaha.

A curious episode in Nebraska territorial history, the so-called “Catfish War,” was only indirectly associated with the fish. In July 1855 near Fontanelle, then a recently established village on the Elkhorn River 20 miles west of Omaha, C. L. Demaree and a Mr. and Mrs. Porter met a small group of Sioux. Accounts of the hostile incident which followed vary, but all agree that Demaree and Mr. Porter were killed; Mrs. Porter was not harmed and she fled to Fontanelle. Afterward, Mark Izard, Nebraska territorial governor, sent a detachment of thirty men to the Fontanelle area. However, the general Indian uprising which had been feared never materialized. The soldiers had little to do for the rest of the summer besides enliven the social life of Fontanelle and shoot catfish in nearby lakes and rivers – from which the episode became known as the “Catfish War.” ■

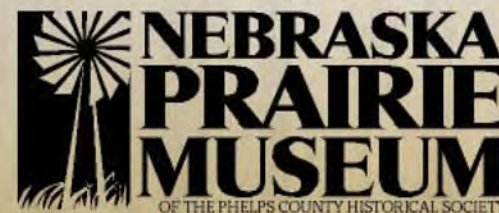


Emil Bartu and Joe Kozak, Wilber, Nebraska. The larger yellow channel catfish weighed 56 pounds.

BEST KEPT SECRET IN NEBRASKA



Bring your family, bring your friends and make plans to visit the **Nebraska Prairie Museum in Holdrege**. See **original photos** of the Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, and cars and implements from the turn of the century. For **more information** about visiting the museum and the interactive museum map of our exhibits, **check out our website**.



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Richard Cabela Dies at 77

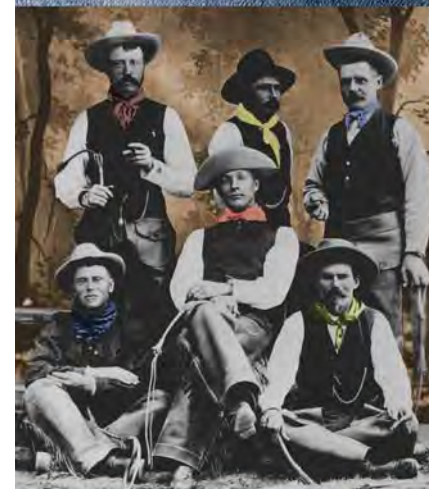
Richard “Dick” Cabela, co-founder of Cabela’s, Inc., died February 17 at his home in Sidney. He was 77.

Dick, along with his wife, Mary, and brother, Jim, founded Cabela’s somewhat inadvertently in 1961 when he purchased \$45 worth of hand-tied fishing flies while in Chicago on a furniture and housewares buying trip with his father for the family’s Chappell furniture store. With the flies not moving off the store shelf, Dick came upon the idea of selling them through the mail. His first ad, in a Casper, Wyoming, newspaper, produced one sale. Rethinking his situation, Dick placed an ad in *Sports Afield* magazine: “FREE introductory offer!!! 5 popular Grade A hand-tied flies. Send 25c for postage and handling ...”

Orders started coming in, and Dick purchased more fishing gear to sell. Realizing the potential for mail-order sales, they began producing a catalog. Growth led to the opening of a retail store in downtown Sidney and today, Cabela’s is a \$3.6 billion company with a worldwide catalog and Internet business and 50 stores in the United States and Canada.

“Dick and Jim made it possible for sportsmen and women to get quality outdoor products no matter where they lived,” said Tommy Millner, Cabela’s Chief Executive Officer. “They weren’t the first to offer outdoor goods through the mail, but nobody did it better or with more care about providing customers a good value for their money.... He pushed for research and development in every outdoor field. Dick always looked out for the customer and if he couldn’t find a vendor to provide what he wanted, he pushed Cabela’s to design and make it. Because of that passion, the Cabela’s brand and its products are iconic throughout the world.”

Dick is survived by his wife, Mary, their nine children and their families, two sisters and three brothers. ■



Backwater Project to Create Wildlife Habitat

By Eric Fowler
Excavation work is set to begin this spring on a backwater project that will provide critical shallow water habitat for endangered pallid sturgeon and also a quiet place for visitors to fish at Indian Cave State Park.

The 20-acre backwater will be dug on the riverbottom below the park's boat ramp and measure about 3,000 feet in length. It will be 50 to 250 feet wide, with varied depths of 5 to 15 feet in the summer months.

Two angler access points will be built near the deepest part of the backwater. Some of the trees cleared to make room for the project will be placed in the finished backwater to provide fish habitat. Anglers can expect to catch flathead and channel catfish, bluegills, crappies, largemouth bass, carp and other fish in the backwater.

While the park boasts 4.6 miles of Missouri River frontage, the water is swift and the banks steep, making it uninviting to most anglers.

The backwater is being built as part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Missouri River Recovery Program, which is designed to restore shallow water habitat (SWH) that will provide feeding, spawning and rearing habitat for the federally endangered pallid sturgeon and other native Missouri River fish species. The backwater will also provide habitat for native wildlife including waterfowl, shorebirds, reptiles and amphibians, and mammals such as muskrats and beaver.

The Indian Cave project is one of several underway or planned for the Missouri River along Nebraska. Others include:

- Two projects near Brownville in Nemaha County, including converting a previously restored backwater at Langdon Bend Wildlife Management Area into a flow-



A 20-acre backwater will be built on this portion of Missouri River bottomland at Indian Cave State Park, connecting to the river at the lower right portion of this image.

through chute.

- The reopening of a connection between the river and a backwater lake at Middle Decatur Bend Wildlife Management Area near Decatur. About 2,500 feet of the channel was filled with silt and sand during the 2011 flood.
- Construction of a backwater at Glovers Point Bend on land owned by the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska in Thurston County to create 55 acres of SWH.
- Completion of a chute complex creating 25 acres of SWH at Sandy Point Bend north of Blair in Washington County that is expected to expand to 60 acres.
- Work to increase the top width of the Missouri by about 400 feet for 1.5 miles on Lower Little Sioux Bend west of Tekamah, creating 182 acres of SWH. ■

Man Cave

By Tyler Brown
My "man cave" is also my home office. All of the work was done by myself with the help of my wife and friends. The wall that my bear rug is hanging on was finished with barn wood from my wife's grandparent's barn north of Boelus, Nebraska. The barn was close to a century old before it was torn down a few years ago.

In the back corner of the room you will see a log. That log was found by my dad in a blowout on our family ranch south of Valentine that we owned years ago. The cattle rubbed the log



smooth so it has a really neat finish to it now.

The big photomural on the wall is of my dad and aunt moving registered Herefords on horseback across a clover covered meadow at the ranch.

In the room are my wild game mounts, pictures of hunting and fishing

trips with friends and family, master angler awards, and my John Wayne collection. All of my game was taken in Nebraska except for the bear.

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

Toast Nebraska

By Jane Gustafson
Fans of Nebraska wine can raise a glass at the first annual "Toast Nebraska" wine festival, scheduled for May 3-4, 2014, at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park near Ashland.

Highlighting vintages from 17 Nebraska wineries, the weekend will include live music, wine sampling, an amateur wine making competition, unique food pairings, art and jewelry vendors and trolley tours through the park. Pass prices for the event range from \$25 to \$65, with the latter including commemorative items, limited edition samples and special gourmet cuisine buffets.

The event is hosted by the Nebraska Winery and Grape Growers Association. Activities run from 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. daily. Vendor and volunteer opportunities are still available. To learn more or to purchase tickets and reserve lodging at the park, visit ToastNebraska.com or call 402-882-2448. ■

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Cowboy Trail Tour 2014

Join Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Wildlife Educator Jamie Bachmann and *NEBRASKAland* Regional Editor Jenny Nguyen this May as they bike the entire Cowboy Trail from Norfolk to Valentine. Come ride with them for just a few miles, the whole day or the entire way as they travel near your town. The duo will be stopping at certain locations below to hold possible Project Wild Outdoor Education activities for kids, a fishing clinic, a Dutch oven cobbler demo and an outdoor guided hike.

All biking participants, especially long-term, will be responsible for their own equipment, food, lodging and transportation. All dates and activities are subject to change due to unpredictable weather and unforeseen delays.

Saturday, May 17 – Norfolk to Neligh (37 miles) – Meet at Ta-Ha-Zouka Park at 8 a.m. in Norfolk, with a Project Wild Outdoor Education activity at the newly built Cowboy

Trail Bridge over the Elkhorn River at 9 a.m.

Sunday, May 18 – Neligh to O'Neill (44 miles) – Project Wild Outdoor Education activity at Red Wing Wildlife Management Area (WMA) at 9 a.m.

Monday, May 19 – O'Neill to Stuart (28 miles)

Tuesday, May 20 – Stuart to Long Pine (31 miles)

Wednesday, May 21 – No travel – Tentative fishing clinic and Dutch oven cobbler demo at Keller State Recreation Area (SRA), with camping at Long Pine SRA.

Thursday, May 22 – Long Pine to Plum Creek Valley WMA, Johnstown (20 miles) – Evening guided hike at Plum Creek Valley WMA, families welcome.

Friday, May 23 – Plum Creek Valley WMA to Valentine (36 miles).

Follow the adventure, including updates, photos and event schedule at Nebraskalandmagazine.com/author/jenny-nguyen and the Commission's Facebook page. ■



Send Us Your Trail Cam Photos!



Austin Kober supplied this trail camera confrontation taken near Palmer, Nebraska.

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

Off-Season Conditioning for Your Bird Dog

By Nebraska Outdoor U!

When you condition your dog year-round, you're not just getting your dog in shape; you're also building a stronger bond and maintaining a healthy metabolism and immune system for your dog. So here are a few tips for this spring:

- Earlier in the off-season, allow your dog time to recover from any injuries while maintaining proper fitness levels. If your dog made it through the season without injuries, you should be able to safely maintain your dog's fitness with a food mix of 20-25 percent protein and 13-17 percent fat, along with moderate exercise.

- Exercise sessions should be fun and beneficial. A 30-minute sustained run on a gravel road in the morning, once or twice a week, is a great way to build your dog's endurance, and the gravel will toughen up their feet. Take caution against doing this in the hot afternoon as heat exhaustion and injured feet will be highly likely.

- Swimming is a prime full body workout for your dog. It improves cardio functions, works many different muscles that usually don't get worked and is easy on your dog's joints. Spending about an hour at the lake once or twice a week will do the trick.

- On afternoons, letting your dog free run fields for 30-45 minutes will keep them in the hunting mind-set and allows them to sustain fitness at their own pace. Use this workout to fill days between road runs and swimming.

As the trainer, you must show you are a strong pack leader because, as your subordinate, your dog will want to obey and please the leader and caregiver. Understand your dog's needs throughout the entire year, and you'll both have great success and joy afield. ■

Nebraska Bird Library

Greater Prairie-chicken

Song or calls: Courting males, deep "oo-loo-woo" called "booming."

Description: A stocky, brown grouse, considered a large chicken-like bird. It is heavily barred with paler stripes above and grayish brown below and has a short tail. The male has yellow-orange air sacs inflated during courtship display and long feathers on sides of the neck that erect into "horns" during courtship; females also have "horns," but they are shorter. Both males and females have obvious dark eye-stripe and pale throats. When in flight, the wings are rounded and the flight is swift with a series of rapidly beating wings.

Behavior: Multiple males display for females at a group display site, called a lek. They perform striking courtship dances where they strut about and stamp their feet, with "horns" erect and yellow-orange sacs of skin inflated on the sides of the neck, meanwhile uttering a deep cooing call referred to as "booming" that may be heard a mile away. They leap and whirl in the air, and threaten each other by short runs with tail raised, head down, and horns erect.

Food: Leaves, seeds, buds, cultivated grains, fruits and insects.

Habitat: Greater prairie-chickens require undisturbed prairie, preferring open sweeps of permanent high grass and minimal brush and trees. It uses vegetation 10-18 inches in

height for roosting and nesting. Hens avoid nesting or rearing their broods within a quarter-mile of powerlines and within a third-mile of improved roads. In eastern Nebraska, the greater prairie-chicken is heavily dependent on CRP grasslands.

Where in Nebraska: The Sandhills are the heart of the greater prairie-chicken range. Numerous outfitters and nature centers now offer viewing trips during the spring lekking season. Once found throughout the tallgrass region, greater prairie-chicken populations have been reduced by habitat fragmentation in eastern Nebraska.

Fun Facts: Greater prairie-chickens use a lek-mating system, where the males defend and dance on a territory that holds no valuable resources to attract females. ■

To learn about more birds visit: NebraskaBirdLibrary.org.



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PHOTO BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

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Harrison Village Mall
168th & Harrison
Omaha, NE 68136
(402) 504-4450

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Prairie Chicken Viewing Opportunities

Calamus Outfitters
Burwell, Nebr.
calamusoutfitters.com
(308) 346-4697

Big Blue Ranch & Lodge
Burchard, Nebr.
bigblueranch.com
(402) 865-4335

The Sandhills Motel and Glidden Canoe Rental
Mullen, Nebr.
sandhillsmotel.com
(308) 278-6167

Prairie Chicken Dance Tours
McCook, Nebr.
prairiechickendancetours.com
(308) 345-1200



Upcoming Events

by Jerry Kane

Contact the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at 402-471-0641 or visit OutdoorNebraska.org for more information. Visit HuntSafeNebraska.org for a list of hunter education classes and BoatSafeNebraska.org for a list of boating safety classes.

April 1
Light Goose
Conservation Order closes

April 1-14
Archery Paddlefish
permit application period

April 5
Bird Banding Workshop
Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium, Gretna
402-332-3901

April 5
Beyond Becoming an
Outdoors-Woman Beginning
Bird Watching
Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium, Gretna
402-471-6009

April 5
Spring Youth Shotgun
Turkey
season opens

April 5-6
Platte River Art Show
Eugene T. Mahoney State Park
(SP), Ashland
402-944-2523

April 5-6
ATV Jamboree
Lake McConaughy State
Recreation Area (SRA), Ogallala
308-778-5651

April 11-12
Becoming an Outdoors
Family Camp
Two Rivers SRA
402-471-5547

April 11-13
Outdoor Cooking Camp
Weekend
Ponca SP
402-755-2284

April 12
Spring Shotgun Turkey
season opens

April 15-16
Outdoor Discovery Program
East
Platte River SP
402-471-6009

April 19
Spring Extravaganza
Ponca SP
402-755-2284

April 19
Indian Cave Outdoor
Adventure
Indian Cave SP, Shubert
402-883-2575

April 25
Arbor Day
Game and Parks offices closed

April 25-26
Arbor Day Celebration
Arbor Lodge SHP
402-873-7222

April 26
Beyond Becoming an
Outdoors-Woman Horses
and Camping Weekend
Platte River SP
402-471-6009

April 26-May 4
Fire School Academy
Fort Robinson SP
308-665-2900

April 26-May 18
Roger G. Sykes Outdoor
Heritage Education Complex
open to public on weekends,
Platte River SP, Louisville
402-471-5547

April 28
Family Fishing Event
Terry's Pit, Scottsbluff

April 29-30
Outdoor Discovery Program
West
Scottsbluff
402-471-6009

Emerald Ash Borer Update



By Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist

Emerald ash borer (EAB), an exotic, invasive beetle that infests and kills ash (*Fraxinus* spp.) trees, is moving steadily toward Nebraska. This includes infestations in the Kansas City metro area, Creston, Iowa, and Boulder, Colorado. Each of these infestations is roughly an hour from Nebraska's borders.

Due to these most recent finds, state and federal quarantines regulating the movement of items such as hardwood firewood and ash logs and lumber have changed. Missouri and Iowa are now under full state quarantines. Kansas has two counties quarantined, and an area around the Boulder metro area is quarantined in Colorado. The quarantines require that any regulated item be inspected and certified prior to it leaving the quarantine area.

EAB and other pests such as walnut and gypsy moths can easily move in firewood. As camping season approaches, leave your firewood at home. Get your firewood from a local source at your destination, and leave any unused firewood behind. No one wants to be responsible for bringing a pest to their favorite campground, or taking it back home with them.

You can also help to monitor for EAB infestations in Nebraska. Look at the ash trees on your property for signs and symptoms of an EAB infestation. Excellent information on these can be found on the Nebraska Forest Service web site at Nfs.unl.edu/eab. Report any possible infestations to the Nebraska Department of Agriculture (402) 471-2351 or USDA (402) 896-8256. ■

Firewood Alert – Burn Local

By Mike Groenewold, NGPC Park Horticulturist

We know that a campfire is an important part of your recreation experience at Nebraska's state parks and recreation areas. However, whenever firewood is transported any distance it can harbor the emerald ash borer or other invasive pests that are harmful to Nebraska's woodlands and landscapes. To help prevent the spread of invasive pests, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission will be asking visitors, for the second consecutive season, to comply with a voluntary firewood restriction at our parks and recreation areas. Park visitors may see signs posted with a "Firewood Alert" requesting that firewood brought from another state be burned immediately and not transported to another Nebraska park or destination.

The Commission has also initiated a voluntary firewood exchange program at Niobrara, Ponca, Eugene T. Mahoney and Indian Cave state parks as well as Lewis and Clark, Branched Oak and Pawnee state recreation areas. Therefore, if you visit those parks and bring wood from another state, please visit the park office or campground host to exchange it for locally acquired wood. ■

Decomposition Worth Watching

By Jeff Kurrus

"This is an experimental piece," writes filmmaker Peter Stegen about his short film production titled *Persephone*, "exploring how scavengers, insects and seasons encourage decomposition; it is a story of life from death. Decomposition is a daily reality though few see it as a thing of beauty. My hope is to simply show you the beauty in death and the life that comes from it."

Stegen's hope comes through clearly in his video about a process that repeatedly occurs in our natural world but few have witnessed – a fascinating way to spend six minutes of your life. ■



Filmmaker Peter Stegen sets up a camera trap as part of his short film *Persephone*. Visit Flickr.com/peterstegen to see more of Stegen's photographs.



News From Abroad

Black-footed Ferret Returns to Colorado

Matt Moorhead, The Nature Conservancy's Southeast Colorado Project Director

After a 100-year absence, the reintroduction of 35 black-footed ferrets from captive breeding programs (including Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo) to their historic home on eastern Colorado's prairie began last November. A predator with a taste for prairie dogs, ferrets were an unintended victim of widespread poisoning campaigns and introduced diseases.

A Colorado rancher near Pueblo has long wanted ferrets to help manage prairie dog populations. A ground-breaking agreement between the rancher and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service cleared the way for the release by providing "safe harbor" for the landowner to manage his ranch without fear of regulatory burdens on him or his neighbors. The Colorado state legislature and livestock associations have supported this effort as a way to give additional prairie dog management tools to landowners who want them.

After putting young ferrets through training programs, or prairie dog hunting "boot camps," successful ferrets became eligible for release. Having cleared those requirements, ferrets have been released at sites from South Dakota to Arizona, returning a key predator to prairie dog towns. Now, thanks to this project, more private lands in Colorado may offer a welcome mat to this endangered species.

PHOTO BY CHRIS PAGUET/NC

NEBRASKAland Visitor



Last issue's winner of the Visitor drawing was Roger Hanneman of Friend, Nebraska, who found the **bold jumping spider** on page 29. Readers are encouraged to contact *NEBRASKAland* within 10 days after this issue's publication with the correct page number and name of this issue's "Visitor" – a critter found in Nebraska. We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a *NEBRASKAland* Magazine mug. To enter each month, write:

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

Or e-mail:

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

HINT: This issue's visitor is not on page 9, 11, 18, 19, or 55.

The bold jumping spider, Phidippus audax, is native to Nebraska and most of the U.S. A small, stocky spider, usually around half an inch in length, its hairy appearance has earned it the nickname "little tarantula." They have a striking color pattern of black and white, a large triangular patch of white hairs and a pair of smaller white spots on their abdomen. Their large chelicerae (fangs) are metallic green to blue, and sometimes purple or pink. Their powerful legs allow them to jump 10 to 50 times their own body length. From grasslands to urban areas, these spiders are found in a variety of habitats. While they look menacing, they are beneficial creatures, feeding on other spiders and insects. Bites to humans are rare, and usually result in nothing more serious than soreness around the bite location.



Special thanks to Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture. Visitor image by Chris Helzer. Bugguide.net is a good site for identification.

The Hourglass

Photos and text by Michael Forsberg

An immense hourglass lies over the center of North America. Its top half stretches up and across the Arctic tundra wilderness from Hudson Bay to eastern Siberia, as its bottom half reaches from the humid Texas Gulf Coast west to the arid desert lands of northern Mexico.

Ducks and geese at Hultine Waterfowl Production Area in the Rainwater Basin, central Nebraska.



In this hourglass there are millions of grains of sand. Not uniform particles of silica, but birds from small sandpipers to tall cranes, moving between these two vast geographies, set in perpetual motion by a solar-powered clock beating out the rhythm of the seasons.



Sandhill cranes stir among sandbars before leaving their river roost at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary in the Platte River Valley.

Baird's sandpipers fly low over a Mormon Island grassland.



This hourglass is the Central Flyway, the largest of five major aerial superhighways that funnel winged travelers on migration through the heart of the continent. Twice a year, birds move between breeding grounds in the north and winter quarters in the south in an ancient rite of passage passed down from generation to generation.



Northern pintail ducks fly in courtship formation at Hultine Waterfowl Production Area.

The proverbial pinch in this hourglass lies in the heart of the Great Plains – the Platte River Valley of Nebraska, the flyway’s greatest stage.

Each spring this stage showcases one of the greatest bird migration spectacles on Earth. From the first signs of receding ice in late winter until cottonwoods burst forth with April green, roughly 20 million sets of wings will seek refuge and sustenance in this broad valley. Waste grain in corn fields left from fall’s harvest provide needed fat, protected wetlands and grasslands afford critical nutrients, and carefully managed braided river channels allow restful overnight sanctuaries. The primeval memory of traveling this territory is shared within and among different species, from puddle ducks to divers, snow geese to Canadas, sandhills to whooping cranes, white pelicans to peeps.

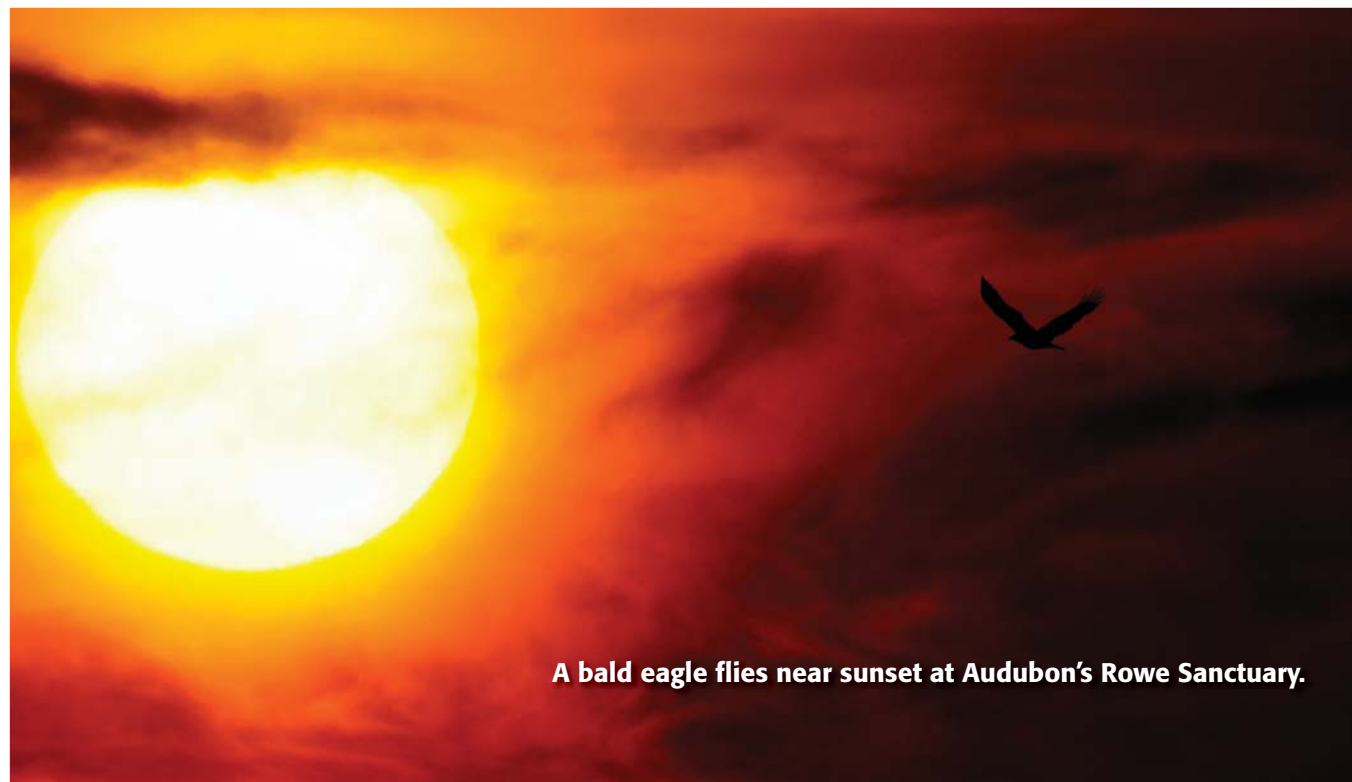


Shoreline feathers and leaves at Hultine Waterfowl Production Area.

But this most critical migratory habitat coexists with one of the most productive modern day agricultural landscapes in the world, where every drop of water is spoken for and conservation is not free.

For millennia, birds moved freely across the continent's interior, their migratory journey dictated only by nature's boundaries and rules. But since settlement, we have re-engineered watersheds with dams and diversion. We have de-watered wetlands and plowed prairie. As habitat has dwindled, the hourglass has slimmed. Now the tremendous spectacle of migration we celebrate each spring is partly our own invention as these creatures crowd into smaller and smaller refuges, moving along a series of carefully arranged stepping stones on a path we've laid out for them.

Snow geese roosting on the Platte River at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.



A bald eagle flies near sunset at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

This is the backdrop to the incredible life force winging over the Platte each spring. But surely if this powerful experience can renew our spirits and fill us with wonder and awe, it can also reinforce our commitment and re-double our efforts to continue to restore habitats and protect this annual rite of passage, one that has marked time for as long as we can remember, and will for generations to come. ■

Michael Forsberg is a professional nature photographer and contributing editor to NEBRASKAland. To see more of Mike's images, visit MichaelForsberg.com.



Robo Turkey

Motorized Turkey Decoy Changes Game for Wahoo Hunters

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

Wayne Stang watches as his daughter, Darian, steers Robo Turkey through a pasture on the way back to the truck after unsuccessfully trying to use the highly-modified decoy to bring a turkey into bow range last spring near Wahoo. (Right) A pair of toms gobble after running toward Robo Turkey on its maiden deployment.

“Dad, can I drive the decoy home?”

That question, asked by 11-year-old Darian Stang to her father, Wayne, after a turkey hunt last spring, has probably never been uttered before in history.

It might not have been if not for Wayne’s invention, a unique adaptation of a turkey decoy which I’ve dubbed Robo Turkey. More specifically, it’s a Carry Lite Pretty Boy decoy on a Mad Torque Rock Crawler remote-controlled truck chassis.

The RC performs just like its full-sized namesake – 4-wheel-drive Jeeps, pickups or dune buggies with big tires, a highly flexible suspension and low gear ratios that allow them to drive over almost any terrain.

The mobile decoy allows Stang to take the concept of “adding life to the decoy spread” to an entirely different level, and lets him do something most turkey hunters have dreamt of: take the decoy to turkeys.

The idea was born on a windy, spring day in 2012. Wayne and Darian had spotted a flock of turkeys, and sneaked as close as they could to the birds without being spotted before setting up their blind and then crawling ahead to set the decoy where the birds could see it. But that still left them more than 200 yards away.

“I called and called and they looked at the decoys and there was no response,” Stang said. “They were so far out and windy that day they could not hear me calling.” After 45 minutes of nothing, “I told Darian, ‘We’re going to do something drastic here.’”

Wayne crawled out of the blind, grabbed the decoy and, holding it above him, crawled back and forth in full view of the turkeys. “I got the tom’s attention and he came in to 100 yards,” Stang said. But by the time he got back into the blind, the tom had hung up and soon was heading the wrong way. So Wayne repeated his show, making wider circles with the decoy and not crawling back to the blind until the tom was 75 yards out. “As soon as I sat down, the bird came in at a full run,” he said.

With a tree stopping her swing, Darian didn’t get a shot at that gobbler, but tagged three birds by season’s end. Those hunts gave Wayne time to think about an alternative to adding movement to his decoy spread that didn’t involve crawling.

Stang’s co-workers have nicknamed him MacGuyver, after the 1980s TV secret agent who used ordinary items to get himself out of extraordinary predicaments. “Growing up

on the farm, you learn how to make stuff out of nothing,” the North Dakota native said.

Hours of internet research led him to the Rock Crawler. Not only did it fit his decoy perfectly, but it was the only one he found with an aluminum frame that would allow him to easily attach his mounting bracket.

When youth season rolled around in 2013, the decoy was ready. And on its first deployment in a cornfield near Wahoo, it worked flawlessly. From their blind in the woods at the field’s edge, Wayne occasionally moved the decoy around the corn stubble as he called. When a flock of turkeys rounded a bend in the field and spotted it, they ran full steam ahead, stopping and gobbling just feet from the decoy, which was about 30 yards from the blind.

Darian, who was 11 years old at the time, had filled three turkey tags with a shotgun in 2012, but chose to start this season with a bow instead. That move didn’t automatically give her the confidence to make a quick shot, and as she worried about the decoy being between her and the birds, the turkeys walked back around the corner before she could take a shot. “I was nervous,” she said.

Wayne followed with Robo Turkey, called some more and brought the gobblers back, but they didn’t come as close this time and again Darian passed. “I was afraid they were farther than they were so I didn’t shoot,” she said.

Meanwhile, Wayne was wondering why the birds came and left as quickly as they did. “Was it our movement in the blind, the movement of the wheels on the decoy or the sound of the servos that turned them, or the size of the decoy intimidated them?” he wondered, then settled on another theory. “I think it’s still a little early for them to be real aggressive,” he said.

Two more attempts that day backed up that theory: when Wayne drove the decoy into plain sight of gobblers who were already busy displaying for hens that surrounded them, he got zero reaction.

But that wasn’t the case on a later hunt last spring. After spotting some toms strutting in a field, Wayne and Darian sneaked through the woods as close as they could, and settled in behind some natural cover 15 feet from the edge. “I drove the decoy 10 feet out of the woods and they just came barreling straight to it. She pulled the trigger at about 40 yards and rolled one with her 20 gauge,” the proud father said. “They had no clue whatsoever that we were there.”

Without Robo Turkey, Wayne said they would have had



What You Need to Know About Turkey Hunting

For those who are wondering, there are a lot of things you can't do when hunting turkeys in Nebraska – like using electronic calls, bait and the biggest taboo of all, using a live decoy. But, like Robo Duck, remote-controlled turkeys are perfectly legal.

Here is the rest of what you need to know about Nebraska turkey hunting:

Spring Season Dates

Youth Archery: March 25-May 31
Archery: March 25-May 31
Youth Shotgun: April 5-May 31
Shotgun: April 12-May 31
(required for all but resident youths)

Fall Season Dates

Archery and Shotgun: Sept. 15-Jan. 31

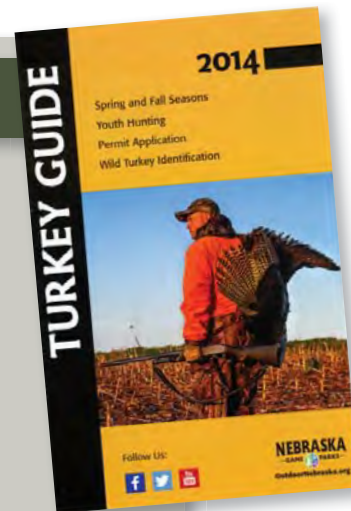
Bag Limit

Spring: 1 male or bearded female per permit
Fall: 2 turkeys per permit

Permits

Spring: 3 permit limit
Fall: 2 permits per person
Resident: \$24
Nonresident: \$90
Youth: \$5
Resident Landowner: \$11.50
Nonresident Landowner: \$45
Habitat Stamp: \$20 (required for all but resident youths)

For more turkey hunting information, visit OutdoorNebraska.org



A trio of turkeys, one in full strut, stop yards away from Robo Turkey on its maiden deployment near Wahoo last spring.



Darian Stang readies for a shot as her father, Wayne, drives Robo Turkey around a corn field in front of their blind near Wahoo.

two options: belly crawl to the edge of the field and try to set up a decoy, or just blind call with no decoy at all. Either might have worked, but it might not have, too. Wayne thinks the decoy is a definite advantage.

"Everybody that sees it thinks it looks so real, driving it around out in a corn field or alfalfa field," he said. "You get off in the distance a little bit and if you didn't know what it was you'd be fooled, for a little bit anyways."

Robo Turkey is also adaptable. When conditions warrant, Wayne can swap the Pretty Boy decoy out for the Pretty Girl hen version. And he's also rigged it with an electronic caller and a big, floppy teddy bear to call coyotes. "It would actually drive around so when you would turn left or right it would direct sound in a different direction," Wayne said. That hasn't been successful yet, but he's certain being able to move a decoy around 50 yards from his shooting position will help bring coyotes the final distance.

It also helps keep Darian and her younger sister, Deena, who has been tagging along in recent years and will get her own tag soon, entertained, both in the blind and on the walk back.

Stang toyed with the idea of patenting his invention, but the expense was too great. "If you know of any investors ..." he joked.

I'm sure they'll be knocking soon enough. ■



See a GoPro video shot from Robo Turkey's perspective.

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The Jessen Ranch

The Story of a Man and His Prairie

Text and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

Last July, I drove north from the small town of Lindy in Knox County on the gravel road to Santee. For a few dusty miles the scenery was typical of eastern Nebraska – rolling fields of corn, soybeans and alfalfa. Then, as I crested a high hill, as if taken back

in time, the prairie-covered Missouri River breaks spread out before me. The rugged hills, cut by bur oak-lined draws, stretched far to the east and west. To the north, they descended to the waters of Lewis and Clark Lake, formed by the damming of the Missouri River.



Gene Jessen holds a fossilized mammoth tooth he found in a gravel quarry on his ranch.



The Jessen Ranch occupies the Missouri River breaks of Knox County and is home to one of Nebraska's largest remnant tallgrass prairies. Lead plant flowers are in the foreground.

I turned onto a long driveway that led through the tall grass. Wildflowers colored the hillsides; most resplendent, the red-violet of lead plant and the fading pink of prairie coneflower. A cut bank revealed a thin veil of rocky, glacial till soil unsuitable for farming, but fine for growing prairie.

The drive ended at a farmstead tucked into a wide creekbottom with scattered trees and a spring-fed stream that carried but a trickle. There was a corral, a few outbuildings, scattered old machinery and the two story wood-framed home of Gene Jessen.

I had come to visit Jessen and his

2,400-acre ranch. For it is no ordinary ranch, but home to one of Nebraska's finest tallgrass prairies, one blessed with both size and botanical richness.

More diverse hayed prairies exist in eastern Nebraska, but nearly all are less than 100 acres in size. Most larger tallgrass pastures have suffered from overgrazing, or have been seeded with non-native grasses and are in poor ecological condition. I had heard of stories of Jessen's early use of prescribed fire and skilled livestock grazing and wanted to pick his brain to see how he has managed such a gem of diversity and beauty.

The Plight of the Tallgrass Prairie

In early September of 1804, the Lewis and Clark expedition, struggling against a "Swift current," pulled their keel boats up the Missouri River through what is now Knox County. In his journal, Sergeant Patrick Gass described the yet untouched landscape. "There is no timber in this part of the country; but continued prairie on both sides of the river. A person by going on one of the hills may have a view as far as the eye can reach without any obstruction, or intervening object; and

enjoy the most delightful prospects."

Wildlife was abundant. "Several wild Goats [pronghorn] Seen in the Plains they are wild & fleet Elk & Buffalow is verry plenty," scribbled Second Lieutenant William Clark.

At the time, tallgrass prairie covered the eastern fourth of Nebraska and ranged east to western Ohio, north to southern Manitoba and south to eastern Texas. To the west, it merged with drier mixed-grass prairie. Its namesake tall grasses – big bluestem, Indian grass and switchgrass – often grew head high, and below their canopy grew plentiful wildflowers.



Prairie coneflowers grow among boulders deposited on the landscape by a retreating Ice Age glacier. Lewis and Clark Lake is visible in the background.

Earlier French explorers had no term in their vocabulary to describe these expansive grasslands and so labeled them “prairie,” meaning meadow. Later Euroamerican travelers often described it as “a sea of grass.”

Settlers, who arrived in eastern Nebraska en masse after passage of the Homestead Act in 1862, were awed, not by the prairie’s wide vistas or tall grass, but by its deep, rich soils formed over the millennia. Soils that when plowed and sowed yielded a bounty in crops, which, in time, led to the prairie’s demise. By 1900, most of Nebraska’s tallgrass sod

had been plowed, and today a mere 1 to 2 percent of the original prairie remains. A similar fate has befallen the tallgrass prairie nearly range-wide, earning it the title “North America’s most endangered ecosystem.” With recent high crop prices, farmers are again breaking prairie sod. In 2012, for example, more than 3,500 acres of non-cropland, including prairie, was plowed in Knox County.

Most of Nebraska’s tallgrass prairie remnants have survived as small hay meadows or pastures – isolated fragments amid a sea of cropland. There are, however, a handful of larger

tallgrass remnants in landscapes with shallow or rocky, mostly untillable soils. The largest are located on the sandstone breaks of the Little Blue River and its tributaries in southern Jefferson County; the rocky, glacial till hills of Pawnee County; and the steep Missouri River breaks of Knox County. Encompassing thousands of acres, these landscapes consist mostly of pastureland interspersed with smaller tracts of native hay meadows, abandoned cropland reseeded to grass, and active farm fields.

The more hardy prairie grasses and wildflowers remain abundant here,

though non-native plants can dominate extensive areas. Cessation of the sweeping pre-settlement prairie fires has allowed trees and shrubs to invade the grasslands. Though the historic elk and bison herds are but memories, other prairie wildlife still survives: insects, smaller mammals, reptiles, and birds, including remnant prairie-chicken populations, the quintessential tallgrass prairie bird.

The Jessen Ranch

In 1905, Gene Jessen’s father, John, at the age of 14, immigrated by himself



Spiderwort is a common wildflower in Jessen’s prairie. A mucilaginous juice found in the plant’s stem is responsible for its other local names – snotweed and cow slobber.

from Germany to Knox County. For several years, until he mastered English, he lived with his uncle. He then began farming on rented land, married and raised 12 children, Gene falling in the middle of the pack. In 1940, John began acquiring the cropland and pasture north of Lindy.

“My dad was European and he thought like a European,” said Jessen. “His interest was farming and he considered pasture as wasteland where the cattle spent the summer, hopefully grazing as much as possible.” After his father retired in 1950, Jessen took over management of the place, and like his father, focused on farming. “Like all farmers, I was too busy planting and cultivating corn to worry about what the cattle were doing in the pasture in summer. My prairie was probably in pretty poor condition,”

said Jessen.

At that time, Jessen grazed his cattle the entire growing season, May through October, in one large pasture. Not bred to withstand the rigors of the Plains, cattle tend to lounge near water and

under the shade of trees and avoid grazing steeper slopes, preferring level areas. When left in a pasture all summer, they can overgraze these areas and cause soil compaction and erosion and stress prairie vegetation.

In 1980, Jessen stopped farming to concentrate on cattle ranching. It was then that he came under the influence of his “conservation-minded neighbor,” Robert Harms,

and his perception of prairie changed. “Harms was a believer in the classic take-half, leave-half approach to grazing. He taught me about rotational grazing and how not to overgraze. I owe

“When I first started burning I got flak from some neighbors. They equated prescribed fires with the devastating wildfires of pioneer days.”

– Gene Jessen



An April 2009 prescribed fire burns across a Knox County tallgrass prairie a few miles west of the Jessen Ranch.

a lot to Harms,” said Jessen.

“I first split my pasture in half with a cross fence and moved the cattle from one to the other in mid-summer, and that was a big step for me,” said Jessen. Now his ranch is divided into 18 pastures ranging from 40 to 250 acres in size. In summer, the cattle are moved to a new pasture every few days to a week depending on pasture size. Each pasture is grazed twice a year, except the ones scheduled for burning the following spring: those are grazed only once to allow grass fuels to accumulate. When carefully managed and properly stocked, rotational grazing, which gives plants extended periods of rest, can reduce impacts to soils and enhance prairie vegetation. Like all grazing systems though, if done improperly, rotational grazing can degrade prairie. Jessen said that leaving cattle in a pasture even a few days too long can damage prairie.

Jessen cultivated his growing interest in prairie by other means. “I started reading,” said Jessen. “A book on how Native Americans used prairie

plants really stirred my interest in plants. I also started reading about poisonous range plants, especially after I lost some cattle to prairie larkspur one year,” added Jessen. He began attending pasture walks and grazing seminars sponsored by local extension agent Terry Gompert, who he also credits for his conversion.

Jessen also continued to experiment with his management. “I had quite a musk thistle [a noxious weed] problem in my prairie in the early 1980s,” he said. “I had heard about this guy down in Ord using imported beetles to kill the thistle, so I drove down there and filled 50 feed sacks with bug-infested thistle plants and brought them back. The bugs took a few years to establish, but they more or less wiped out my musk thistles.”

In the mid-1980s, Jessen took a leap of faith and decided to sell off his cow herd and run other ranchers’ livestock on his ranch. The pasture rent matched profits from his own herd, and by grazing cattle only in summer he increased his management flexibility,

which benefited the prairie. “For example, areas of the prairie where I fed cattle hay in the winter would get pretty beat up and I no longer had to worry about this. They call these sacrifice areas, but I don’t like to sacrifice anything,” said Jessen.

Around this time, Jessen and a few neighbors began contemplating using prescribed burning to control the eastern red cedars and brush that had invaded their pastures. In 1988, they had gathered the courage to conduct their first burn. “We hadn’t seen anybody burn prairie and that was the scary part,” said Jessen. “We started out burning what we thought were safe little patches and learned as we went. We always burned with a south wind so if a fire escaped it would burn to the river. Then a fellow came up from Texas A&M and put on a prescribed fire workshop. He had a good booklet with drawings and the whole ball of wax and that really helped,” added Jessen.

Acquiring the proper burn equipment took time, and Jessen built much of his own, including three water pumper

units. Eventually, his burn units increased in size, up to 1,000 acres, and some of his pastures have now been burned 4 or 5 times. “I’ve controlled my cedars and brush as much as possible with fire. Whole hillsides that were once cedar thickets are now prairie. Now if I burn a pasture about every five years I can stay ahead of the cedars,” said Jessen.

Jessen also noticed that spring burning of his prairie reduced smooth brome, a non-native, cool-season grass that displaces native plants, while increasing native grasses, which he considers better forage. “I also see more wildflowers since I started burning,” he said. “I’ve never seen so much prairie coneflower as in the pasture we burned two years ago.”

Well over 100 species of prairie plants are common on Jessen’s ranch. This diversity of natives, as well as the low abundance of non-natives, reflects his caring management.

Qualities of a Prairie Manager

Jessen credits rotational grazing and prescribed fire for his prairie’s exceptional quality. Scott Wessel, a Nebraska Game and Parks Commission wildlife biologist who has known Jessen since the late 1990s, gives credit to Jessen himself. “Gene has always been willing to try new management practices and evaluate their effectiveness. For example, he was the first to use prescribed burning in Knox County, and he taught others how to burn. He’s open to learning from others and willing to share his knowledge with neighbors. His education has been a life-long process,” said Wessel.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson Jessen has learned over his ranching career is that managing for healthy prairie is profitable. “In the long run, well-managed prairie will produce more and better forage,” he said. “One needs to view the ranch as prairie, not just as a place to run cattle, or it will go downhill. If you graze short, for example, you’ll get more runoff, more erosion and more brome, and it is a losing situation. One thing I’ve learned is that restoring a prairie is a slow process, but you can wreck it in a New

York minute.”

Jessen knows his land well and cares deeply about it, a requirement of all good prairie managers. Years of chasing cattle, fixing fence and hunting down noxious weeds have taken him into its every wooded ravine and onto every rocky hilltop. While we walked his prairie, his ample knowledge was evident. For example, he knew the name of most prairie plants and how they responded to fire and grazing, and he pointed out deep, grassed-over ruts he deduced were cut long ago by years of bison herds filing down hillsides to

drink from the Missouri River.

Jessen realizes that someday his prairie will change hands, and he worries about its future – will the next owner keep ahead of the weeds, properly rotate the cattle and burn when necessary? “I hope to find someone who manages the prairie better than I have. A young, ambitious, bright person, someone who went to range management school, is a nature lover and values every wildflower,” said Jessen. Until then, Jessen will keep a watchful eye over his cherished prairie. ■



Prairie larkspur grows in prairies statewide. Jessen once lost cattle to the plant which contains a toxic alkaloid poisonous to livestock if consumed in large quantities.

The Life of 'Eye

By Jenny Nguyen

In Nebraska, when the winter ice has melted and the water has begun to warm, walleye, one of the state's most sought after sport fish, sense it is time to reproduce. In early April, the fish begin to move from deeper waters into shallow, rocky areas to spawn. Some of the fish will succeed in producing young on their own. Others will get some help from Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's fisheries biologists, who collect eggs annually at Sherman and Merritt reservoirs and, if needed, Lake McConaughy. These eggs are then sent to hatcheries, where they are grown to be stocked as fry or

fingerlings in Nebraska reservoirs to ensure that anglers will continue to have fresh walleye fillets for their table.

The Night Crew

The egg collection at Sherman began early last April as three boats left the shoreline at dusk – two equipped with gill nets specifically sized to catch mature female walleyes and the third an electrofishing boat for collecting males. Each boat was manned by three to four biologists: one to operate the boat and the rest to set nets or haul in fish.

Gill nets, designed to suspend vertically in the water with meshes that allow the head of a fish to pass through but entangle the gills upon withdrawal, were set out parallel to the shoreline in likely spawning locations, including rip-rap covered dams and breakwaters. After nets were set, the crew headed back to shore for a break before returning to check them. After about an hour, the females were hauled in, eyes aglow under the Sandhills stars, fat and ready to burst with eggs. Biologists made every effort to free them as quickly, but carefully, as possible.

"We typically get in three rounds each night and we run the nets every 60 to 90 minutes, so the fish aren't in there long," said Phil Chvala, a biologist in the Commission's Norfolk office. "If we have one that's tangled badly, we will cut the line to pull them out more easily. It's less stressful on the fish, and if we have to sit there and work it out for a long time, we could end up losing a lot of eggs that wind up on the boat floor."

Meanwhile, male walleyes, which are typically smaller, were collected through electrofishing, a common tool used in fisheries management today. The shocking boat sends an electric current through the water, which momentarily stuns the fish. The stunned fish float to the surface, where the crew can easily collect them with dip nets.

At the end of each round, the netting crew loaded their catch into boat tanks and ferried them to shore, where they were sorted out into net cribs, a floating, rectangular frame of PVC pipe with a weighted net attached that creates a crib in the water, by the docks. There, the fish awaited the morning crew, which would extract eggs and sperm from the night's catch.

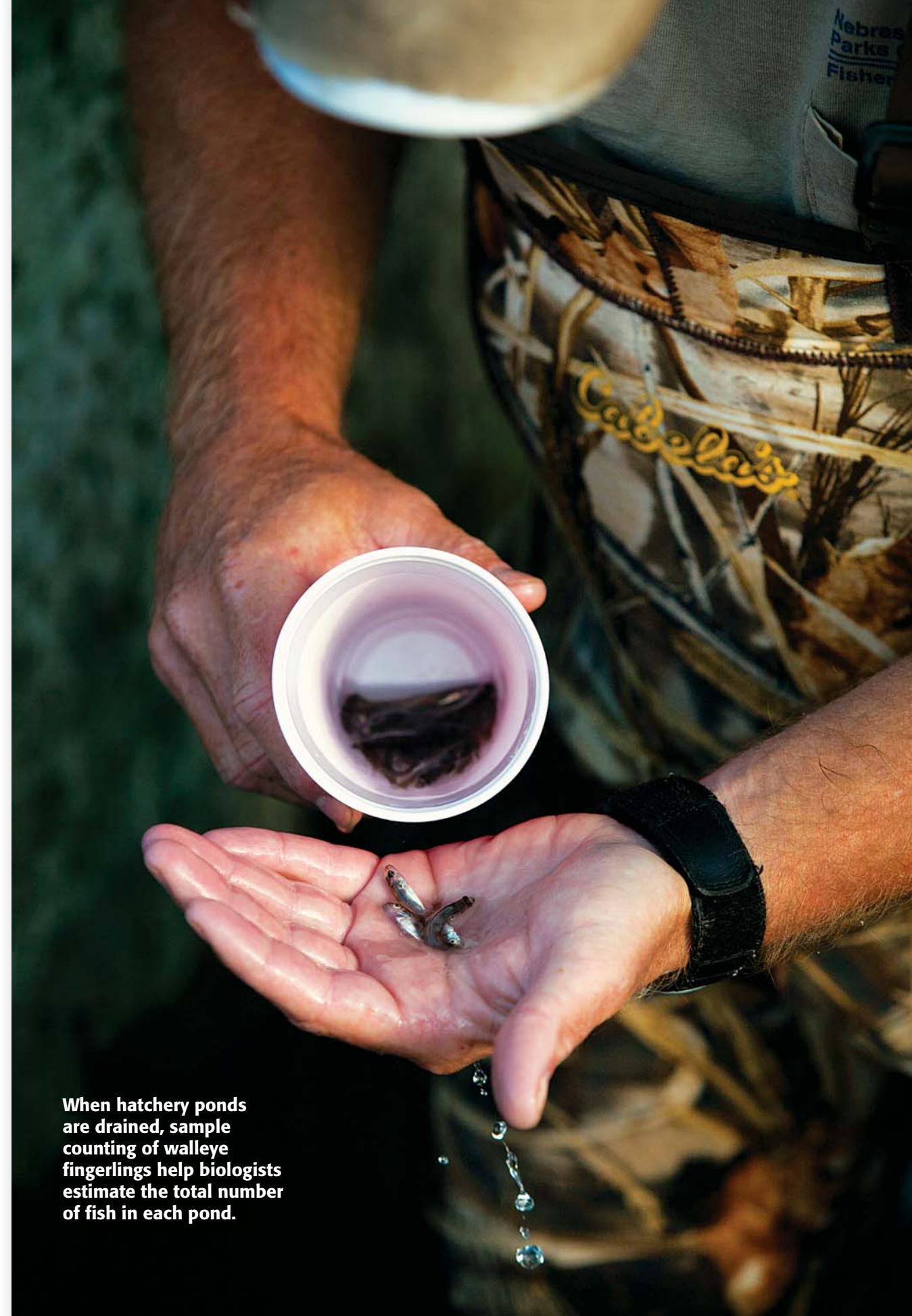
By 1 a.m., the night crew's work was done.

The Morning Crew

The following morning, the spawning crew arrived and began sorting the female walleye. Josh Cloeter, conservation technician for the Commission, gently squeezed each



Before spawning begins at Sherman, the morning crew first checks each female walleye for ripeness. Ripe females are sorted into a separate tub to be spawned.



When hatchery ponds are drained, sample counting of walleye fingerlings help biologists estimate the total number of fish in each pond.

The “Swimming Fillet”

According to data from the 2002 Nebraska Licensed Angler Survey, “walleye were the number one sought species by a fairly substantial margin when participants were asked what single species they preferred to fish for,” Chvala said. Although the 2012 survey is still being completed, that number isn’t expected to change. So what makes these fish so popular among anglers?

“I do think that the biggest draw to walleye is their reputed palatability,” said Chvala. “They are referred to in some circles as a ‘swimming fillet’ because of their reputation as great table fare due to their mild flavor. They don’t have the strong ‘fishy’ flavor that some other species are known for and which some people shy away from.”

Or perhaps it’s because they’re “different.”

“Largemouth bass, bluegill, crappie and catfish are readily accessible in most areas through rivers, farm ponds and our smaller flood control reservoirs. Conversely, walleye fishing typically involves fishing larger reservoirs,” Chvala said.

So whatever your reasons for fishing walleye, there are several great opportunities available in our state. For trophy-sized walleyes, Merritt Reservoir and Lake McConaughy are your best bets. For those wanting to catch numbers for the table, Davis Creek Reservoir, Lake Maloney, Johnson Lake and Lake Minatare are good spots.



To collect eggs, one person holds the head while a second person holds down the tail with one hand and gently presses the abdomen with the other to transfer eggs into a bowl.

fish’s belly to determine which were “ripe,” or ready to release their eggs, and those that were still “green,” which would be put into a different net crib to be checked later.

After the females were sorted, biologists towel dried the ripe ones and began stripping eggs. With one person grasping the head of a fish, another held the tail with one hand and gently pressed the abdomen with the other to transfer eggs into a bowl. Once most of the eggs were removed, the fish were released into the lake. Green females still not ripe were held for the next day’s work.

Using a similar process, biologists added the sperm from three males to the bowl of eggs to initiate fertilization. This increases the likelihood that fertilization does occur in case one or two of the males happen to be sterile, and to ensure genetic diversity. To prevent eggs from clumping together, a mixture of Diatomaceous earth – a fine clay-like material – and lake water was stirred in with the eggs using a goose feather – a gentle, readily available tool that does not damage the eggs. After about one minute, fertilization was complete.

Eggs were then rinsed and poured into large coolers for transport to the Commission’s fish hatcheries at

Calamus Reservoir and North Platte. Eggs collected at Merritt Reservoir were transported to the Valentine Fish Hatchery before being shipped to Calamus and North Platte, where the hatching process was completed.

According to Jim Gleim, fish production manager at Calamus Fish Hatchery, each female walleye collected at Sherman Reservoir in 2013 produced an average of 1 quart of eggs. A total of 493 quarts of eggs were collected from Merritt and Sherman reservoirs. With each quart containing approximately 137,250 eggs, about 65 million eggs were collected.

“To fill our egg quota, spawning operations are usually completed within one week,” said Brett Brunken, also a fish production manager at Calamus. “But this does not mean the walleye are done spawning naturally.”

Quotas change every year and are determined by requests from Commission fisheries managers and demand from outside states. Additionally, the North Platte Hatchery will also take some of the walleye eggs from Sherman and fertilize them with sauger sperm to produce the hybrid species saugeye. In 2013, 37 quarts of walleye eggs were used for this purpose.

Post-Collection

Once in the hatchery, eggs incubated in clear, cylinder hatching jars. At an ideal 59 degrees, it takes about 9 to 11 days for eggs to hatch. According to Gleim, hatching eggs in a hatchery is largely more advantageous than gambling on the eggs surviving in wild. “We are able to keep the water cleaner and at a more consistent temperature, and keep the eggs away from possible predators,” said Gleim.

Once hatched, fry were held in hatch tanks until they were 3 to 5 days old, and sometimes as long as 6 days old to make them stronger swimmers. At 7 to 8 days, the fry have consumed their yolk sac, a membranous sac attached to an embryo that provides early nourishment until the fry develops mouth parts and is able to eat on its own, and were ready to feed on zooplankton. The fry were stocked just prior to this point, either in reservoirs or in the production ponds at the hatchery, where they would remain until they grew into fingerlings.

“At Calamus, we stock about 125,000 fry per one-acre pond,” said Gleim. “We typically have about 20 ponds for walleye fingerling production

each year, so that requires 2.5 million fry. It takes about 40 days to produce a 1.4-inch walleye fingerling.” These fingerlings are then stocked in Nebraska reservoirs and lakes as requested by fisheries managers.

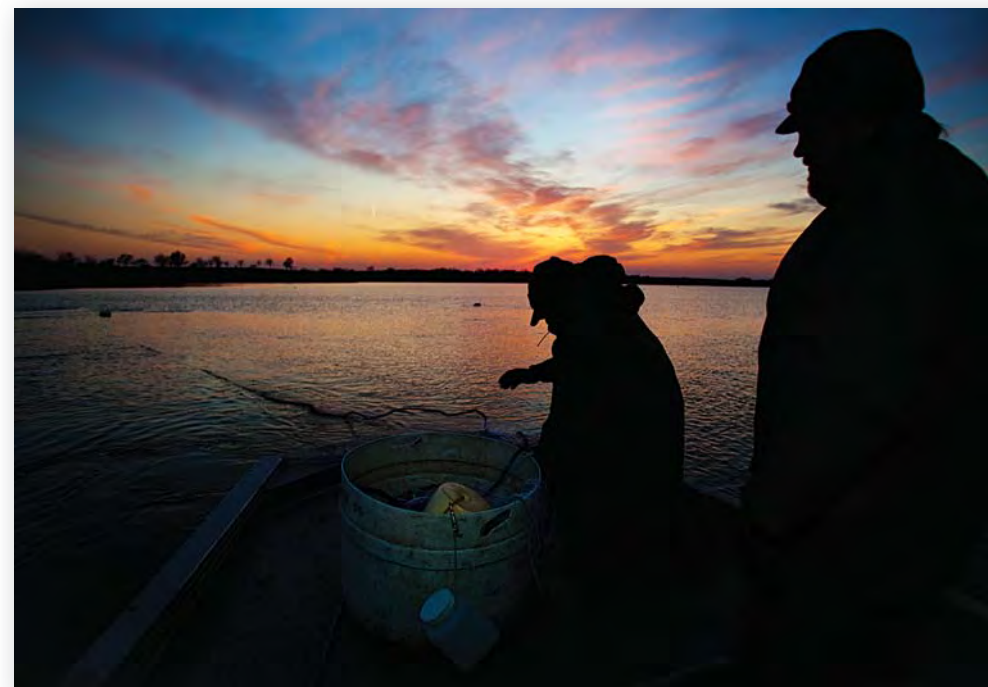
Walleye typically reach 15 inches in length – the legal harvest size in most reservoirs – in their third growing season. For reservoirs where 18-inch size limits are in place, some of those fish will reach that mark in their fourth growing season, and most in their fifth.

“I consider walleye a relatively fast growing fish,” said Chvala. “It varies by reservoir or lake, but they reach legal harvest size in 3 years,” right about the time they end up on someone’s dinner plate – hopefully yours. ■

In addition to those mentioned, the author would like to thank Doug Kapke, a recently retired fish and wildlife program manager at the Calamus Hatchery, for being instrumental in the completion of this story.



See the entire photo gallery of the walleye spawning process.



Each night, the netting crew’s work begins at dusk and concludes around 1 a.m. Gill nets are set out along likely spawning locations at Sherman Reservoir to catch female walleye.

OTC Marking

One method used to determine the survival of stocked fish is to mark them with oxytetracycline (OTC), a chemical that leaves a yellow halo, or stain, on the bony structures of fish.

At the hatchery, fry are exposed to a bath of this chemical for about six hours, during which some of the chemical is absorbed by their bone tissue. Biologists can then capture a sample of adult fish and look for that chemical stain on their otolith or “ear bone.”

“This sample is cut or sanded to reveal the growth layers – like tree growth rings – and looked under a microscope fitted with a filtered light. If one of the earliest, smallest rings will fluoresce, that means it is a marked fish,” explained Gleim.

Currently, the Commission is conducting a multi-year study at Calamus and Elwood reservoirs by concurrently stocking fry and fingerling walleye to determine if one stocking method is more advantageous. “We mark the fingerlings with OTC so we can differentiate between our fry stockings and our fingerling stockings to see which one is more successful,” said Chvala. “If we see a pattern, we’ll continue with the stocking type that has shown the best return. Different stocking strategies have been analyzed in the past by alternating the stockings of fry and fingerlings on an annual basis. However, in that scenario, we risk losing an entire year class if one of the stocking types doesn’t work.”

For Thousands of Years

Medicine Creek State Recreation Area

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

Watersports, camping, fishing, hunting and scenery make this southwestern Nebraska reservoir a popular destination for all seasons.



Medicine Creek Reservoir, also known as Harry Strunk Lake, is rated by many visitors as one of Nebraska's most scenic recreation spots. Medicine Creek State Recreation Area and Wildlife Management Area include nearly 9,000 acres of public land and water in southeastern Frontier County, 2 miles west and 7 miles north of Cambridge.

For thousands of years, man has been drawn to the waters of Medicine Creek in southwestern Nebraska. And with the camping, cabins, boating, fishing, hunting, bird watching and other outdoor activities available on 14 square miles of public land and water that make up the state recreation and wildlife management areas named for the creek, not to mention the scenic beauty of the property, that isn't likely to change any time soon.

The top attraction on the area is 1,850-acre Harry Strunk Lake. Located north of Cambridge in Frontier County, the reservoir lies in a canyon in the picturesque loess hills above the Republican River. The lake is fed by Medicine Creek, which bubbles from the ground in springs east of Dickens



A boater cruises the lake at sunrise at Medicine Creek State Recreation Area north of Cambridge.



Rick Meyers of Holbrook relaxes in a shady spot overlooking the lake with his daughter and granddaughter, Amy and Kaylea Watson, of Edison.

in south-central Lincoln County and flows past Wellfleet, Maywood, Curtis and Stockville before reaching the lake and then continuing past Cambridge before joining the Republican.

Runoff from rains and snowfall in the 880 square miles of farmland and rough loess canyons that make up the creek's watershed provide some of its flow, but the springs keep Medicine Creek flowing even in the worst of droughts. That's good news for the reservoir, which was built in part for irrigation, helping ensure the annual 10-foot drawdown is erased by spring, an attribute not shared by all irrigation reservoirs. Only in 2012, when drought slowed inflow, and 2013, when additional water was released to help meet the state's obligation to Kansas in a 1943 compact governing use of

Republican River water, has the lake failed to refill.

Medicine Creek Dam was completed in 1949, the first of four built by the Bureau of Reclamation in Nebraska to provide irrigation and to help prevent a catastrophic flood like the one that swept through the Valley in 1935 and killed more than 100 people and caused untold damage to livestock and property. The lake is named after Harry Strunk, a McCook businessman who helped lobby for the reservoir system.

The lake stretches more than 5 miles in length from north to south, but its shoreline spans 29 miles as it snakes down the canyon it fills and the smaller ones leading to it, including one that forms a deep bay a mile long. The lake is only a half-mile wide, which, combined with its shape, bays and the

“I’m somewhat biased, but I think it’s one of the best wildlife management areas in the state.”

– Chad Taylor, area wildlife biologist

hills rising more than 100 feet above it means that there is almost always a place for folks to escape the wind and fish, float or even water ski.

Camping

The Shady Bay Campground on the end of Trail 4 on the lake’s east shore is a bustling hub of activity on a summer weekend. It has 76 camper pads, 68 with electricity, most of which are in the shade and all near the swim beach. The area is also home to the lake’s newest amenity: four cozy two-bedroom cabins with full kitchens and baths and decks and patios overlooking the lake. The cabins have been extremely popular since they opened in spring of 2012: Summer weekends fill fast, and the deer hunters who stayed in the cabins the first season immediately booked them for the second and have them reserved for this year as well.

Visitors can also choose from 240

primitive camp sites scattered around the lake, most at Trail 2, 3 and 12. Trail 1 on the lake’s southwestern corner is home to The Lodge, a marina, bait-and-tackle shop, grocery and café, as well as day-use picnic shelters. Boat ramps at Trails 3 and 4 might be out of service when drawdowns are greater than normal, but the ramp on Trail 1 is always wet.

Fishing

Stable water levels also benefit the lake’s fishery, which, thanks to its topography, holds both open-water and shoreline-oriented species, with a mix of habitats including rocky shorelines, deep bays, underwater humps that appear as islands when the lake is low, and a good amount of arrowhead and other aquatic vegetation growing in the bays and on some points.

Walleye are a popular target for anglers, and a return to fingerling stocking after an experiment stocking



Cottonwoods rimming the lake’s high-water mark can put on a spectacular golden show during the fall.



Fish, including largemouth bass, and anglers are drawn to the long, deep bays at the lake,

fry, which works well in other area reservoirs but just didn’t here, is helping rebuild numbers of this favorite table fare.

White bass fishing can also be excellent on the reservoir, starting with a spring bite in the creek and peaking in late summer, when schools of fish chase gizzard shad to the surface, attracting gulls and giving away the location of the schools. Wiper stocking has resumed in the reservoir as well, setting the table for future trophy fishing opportunities.

The deep bays are a good place to find the lake’s white and black crappies. The fall bite is best, especially around the boat docks at Trail 1, but when it’s cold enough, anglers can pull good numbers of slabs through the ice. And the lake even holds enough largemouth bass,

including some big ones, that anglers specifically target them, another byproduct of stable water levels most irrigation reservoirs don’t see.

The lake ranks among the best in the state for channel catfish, producing both numbers of fish and big fish that rival trophy fisheries like Merritt Reservoir. More than half of the cats sampled by biologists during their annual fall netting surveys measure 24 inches or longer. Drifting cut bait over the deep water humps is a favorite tactic in summer. Unlike most reservoirs, biologists never have to stock catfish here: Constant inflows allow the fish to swim up Medicine Creek and spawn every year.

Fishing, access, aquatic habitat and water quality will all improve this year thanks to a \$550,000 Aquatic Habitat Program project. Eleven breakwaters

and other measures designed to prevent further bank erosion and to protect bays are being installed at nine locations around the lake, including Trails 1, 2, 3, 4 and 12. Sediment that has washed into the mouths of the bays will be used to build breakwaters connected to the shore. A wheelchair-accessible fishing pier will be built near the boat ramp at Trail 3. All of the work is expected to be complete by fall.

Nature

Off the water, nature lovers will find plenty to do at Medicine Creek Reservoir. The 7,000 acres of public land surrounding the reservoir and bordering Medicine Creek for 5 miles above it includes 4,300 acres of native mixed-grass prairie, an oasis for wildlife in the midst of country

dominated by dryland and center-pivot irrigated cropland. The prairie is stocked with goldenrod, sunflowers, leadplant, milkweed, Jerusalem artichoke and other wildflowers. Most of it is leased to area cattlemen, who graze their stock on it, a practice vital to maintaining a diverse mix of prairie plants in the absence of fire and buffalo, which historically did the job. Considerable effort has been put into removing the invasive species smooth brome grass and Siberian elm, and the battle against Russian olive is nearly over as most of that species has been eliminated.

This is rough country, with a maze of draws and canyons leading to the lake and creek. Many of the draws are filled with hardwoods including green ash, hackberry and box elder, with a sprinkling of eastern red



PHOTO BY JULIE GEISER

ABOVE: Four new two-bedroom cabins, which opened in 2012, overlook the lake in the Shady Bay Campground.
BELOW: For those who only require seclusion when selecting a campsite, there are plenty to choose from, including this one at the end of Trail 7.

cedar. Woodlands rim most of the lower half of the reservoir while the upper half is more open, and there are acres of riparian forest on the bottomlands along the lake and creek stocked primarily with cottonwoods. An abundance of shrubs including chokecherry, plum and skunk-bush sumac in the grassland benefit quail and other grassland birds. About 900 acres of food plots containing a variety

of small grains, alfalfa and other cover crops benefit wildlife and hunters.

The habitats and the layout of the lake make it what some believe to be the most scenic reservoir in the region, if not the state. In the fall, when the sumac, ashes and cottonwoods bathe the lakeshore, draws and hillsides in hues of red and yellow, the view can be spectacular.

Medicine Creek is a good birding

area where people might spot 70 or more species in a day, from mallards and Canada geese on the reservoir, barn owls and swallows nesting in the cut banks above it, wood ducks on the creek, yellowlegs on the mud flats, dickcissels and occasional lark buntings in the grasslands and woodpeckers and warblers in the woodlands. Last fall, a dozen whooping cranes spent five days on and around the lake.

Hunting

The white-tailed deer hunting on Medicine Creek WMA is excellent, as shown by the harvest of more than 130 deer during each of the past two November firearm seasons. That total is second only to Harlan County Lake, an area more than twice the size, among public lands in the state. While some may consider hunting pressure on the area high during deer season, many of the hunters from Colorado and other states consider it low compared to what they see at home, a factor that keeps them coming back each year. Outside of the rifle season, archery and muzzleloader hunters will have no trouble finding a corner of the lake they can have to themselves.

Like much of the state, pheasant numbers are down on the area

following the drought in 2012, but biologists hope to see the populations rebound to previous levels, which were considered good. Quail counts continue to be among the best in the state, enough to draw hunters from near and far who specifically target these fast little flyers. They are usually rewarded with a covey or more on each trail.

Spring turkey hunting is excellent, making the lake a busy place on opening weekend. A party from North Carolina shows up to hunt rabbits each fall and swears it's one of the best spots in the country to chase bunnies. A party from Indiana that follows the waterfowl migration from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico feels the same about duck hunting on the lake. While it doesn't hold as many ducks as other areas, hunting pressure is nearly non-existent, with only two or three blinds built on the lakeshore each fall. Hunters might also find a black-tailed jackrabbit, mule deer or prairie chicken. Trappers can find beaver, bobcat and more.



Will and Annabelle Taylor of Cambridge play in the shallows of the swim beach in the Shady Bay Campground area at Medicine Creek.

History

Hunters are believed to have frequented the area as early as 18,000 years ago. In 1987, an eroding bank of the reservoir revealed mammoth bones that, upon further excavation and study, led archaeologists to believe were part of a butcher site, providing evidence that humans lived in the Americas 6,000 years before previously thought.

While their theories, and others pre-dating the Clovis period, have been dismissed by skeptics, evidence of every Native American culture known to be present on the Plains for the past 10,000 years has been found at the reservoir, including some sites that were occupied for thousands of years. The Pawnee, Cheyenne and Arapaho settlers arrived in about 1870. History of the latter is found in two pioneer cemeteries, two other marked graves, a dugout house and a marker on Trail 12 commemorating the Fort McPherson Trail, which carried soldiers and

settlers along the ridge east of Medicine Creek from the Republican River to Fort McPherson on the Platte River near Maxwell from 1863 to 1880.

No doubt the first of those settlers to come up the trail staked their claim on Medicine Creek. Reliable water, abundant game and a picturesque setting are no doubt some of the reasons they stayed, and reasons people stake their claim in the lake's campgrounds today. ■

The author would like to thank Ken Cobb, manager of Medicine Creek SRA, Chad Taylor, area wildlife biologist, and Caleb Huber, area fisheries biologist, for the information they provided for this article.



See more information on this and other state recreation areas.



Farm Bill Passed

CRP and other programs will benefit wildlife and protect wetlands and grasslands.

By Eric Fowler

One of the most important conservation tools in America, the farm bill, was finally renewed in February, reauthorizing the Conservation Reserve Program and other wildlife-friendly programs, and adding new ones, like a sodsaver provision to protective native grassland.

Officially known as the Agricultural Act of 2014, the farm bill had been tied up in Congress and living on extensions since the last one expired in 2012.

Eric Zach, agricultural program manager with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, said while conservation interests didn't get everything they wanted in the new farm bill, no one did, and overall, the conservation programs it includes will be good for wildlife and landowners.

"These programs are the lifeblood of wildlife in Nebraska because we have so much cropland, and without these programs there wouldn't be incentives for those landowners to conserve wildlife habitat," Zach said. "They would have to be looking at more than just dollar signs in order to do this."

The sodsaver provision will reduce federal crop insurance subsidies to 50 percent for four years on lands converted from native grassland to cropland in South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Montana and Nebraska, states that include both the prime pheasant range and the prairie pothole region, a vital breeding area for North America's waterfowl. The provision also eliminates yield transfer options, meaning insurance for marginal farmland is based on the land's true cropping potential, not the county average, which will save taxpayers an estimated \$200 million.

The new farm bill also restores the link between crop insurance eligibility and conservation compliance, meaning farmers must follow measures set forth in the conservation plan set in place for their property with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service to qualify for subsidies, with emphasis placed on protecting wetlands. Previously, conservation compliance was required for participation in commodity support programs, which have been largely replaced by crop insurance in the new

farm bill.

These aspects of the new bill will help stem the loss of grasslands, wetlands and other wildlife friendly lands, which, as of late, has been accelerated due to a number of factors including high crop prices. Nebraska led the nation in 2012

with nearly 55,000 acres grassland converted to cropland.

While the farm bill capped CRP enrollment at 24 million acres by 2018, down from 32 million in the last bill and the 25.6 million acres currently enrolled, it does make it possible to retain most of the 9 million acres that are set to expire in the next few years. Nebraska currently has 848,000 acres enrolled in CRP, down from 1.38 million in 1993.

CRP has been vital to pheasants and hunters since it was created in 1985, often providing the only habitat for the popular game bird in farm country. In other states, especially the Dakotas, it also provides vital nesting cover for ducks and other waterfowl. The benefits reach far beyond those game species, as the grasslands provide habitat for songbirds and bees, butterflies and other insects vital to the pollination of many food-producing plants. And by taking highly erodible land out of crop production and restoring it to grasslands, CRP also improves water quality in streams and the

reservoirs they feed.

In other conservation highlights, the new farm bill:

- Includes more funding for conservation programs than for commodity programs.
- Allows up to 2 million acres of native grassland with no cropping history to be enrolled in CRP.
- Consolidates 23 existing USDA programs, including the Wetlands and Grasslands reserve programs, into 13 programs under the new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, which received \$1 billion in funding.
- Includes \$40 million for Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Programs (VPA-HIP), which supports access programs like the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Open Fields and Waters Program.
- Changes the Conservation Stewardship Program to increase wildlife benefits. ■



Sam Rowley and his Labrador retriever Izzy pheasant hunt in a CRP field near their home in Grant.

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

The Search for Mr. Big

The hunt of morels is more than a passion.

By Bryan Melage

From above, sunlight is being laid down on the forest floor as the shackles of winter have been broken. You stroll through the timber to the joyful sound of birds singing as they go about their duties, as do you. Stepping around and amongst the budding flowers, you gaze, ever watchful, for your quarry. The weight of the heavy bundle you carry is of no burden; there may be even a little boastful pride that you carry it with such ease.

You contemplate the trip home, maybe stopping by a friend's house and *accidentally* letting him see your prize. You visualize the agonizing look on his face as he says, "How did you...?" Just then, Tom, looking for a spring companion, gobbles in the distance, and you are brought back to the reality of the task at hand.

Ever vigilant, with eyes darting back and forth, you scour your wooded surroundings with acute concentration on the ground below. A pink-winged dragon could be perched in a tree, or a covey of forest-horned elves could be dancing ahead of you, and you would not see them.

Pressing forward with no regard to personal safety, your stride resembles that of a drunkard as you continually trip and stumble over fallen tree limbs and stumps. As branches slap and thorns jump at your face, armies of ticks attach

themselves to your legs. But you pay them all no mind. Bleeding from multiple wounds, legs stinging with fatigue, you plow through the brush with elephant-herd mentality. Noise is of no concern. You brush back the prickly undergrowth of a gooseberry bush and there is the one you've been looking for – Head of the Mushroom Clan. Mushroomious Gigantious. Mr. Big. He stays perfectly still with the knowledge and belief his camouflage makes him invisible to your keen hunter vision. But the mighty morel is wrong.

Before you make your move, you wait, listen, and cautiously check the perimeter to make sure no one is spying on you. Only when you are confident you are alone and the location will remain a secret, you remove him from his forest lair and lay him in the mesh bag with the others. The smile on your face tells the whole story, one that will be retold countless times back at the man cave with fellow "shr'room" hunters and appropriate hunting man fluids.

As the sun begins its descent, you begin the trek back to your recliner. As you meander, you hear Mr. Big speaking to the others. "Be calm, we have nothing to worry about. The way I hear it is they take us home with them, bathe us with clean cool water, oil our bodies with butter and then take us out to dinner."

Your smile turns to a smirk and you begin licking your lips. ■

PHOTO BY JON FARBAR

Morel Hunting at State Parks and Recreation Areas

By Amy Kucera

The coveted wild morel mushroom (*Morchella*) has developed a notorious reputation for eluding its captors, however, they can be relatively easy to find if you know what to look for.

The emergence of these "hickory chickens" generally occurs from mid-April to May in Nebraska. Growth is stimulated by soil temperature, and their abundance by moisture, making their arrival as unpredictable as the Spring weather. The fungi thrive in lush, loamy soil and amongst decaying vegetation and are often found in the deep woods, near rivers and old tree groves.

Hunting morels in Nebraska state parks, recreation areas and wildlife management areas is permitted (with no bag limit!) and only a park entry permit is required. Found more frequently in the eastern part of the state, the wooded bluffs along the Missouri River at Niobrara, Ponca and Indian Cave state parks provide prime habitat for morels. The Platte River near Eugene T. Mahoney and Platte River state parks have been known to harbor the tasty toadstools, as does the wildlife management and state recreation areas that comprise the Salt Valley Lakes of Lancaster County. A good time to search for these "dryland fish" is on a warm day after a rain.

Once located, cut or twist the mushroom at the stem, leaving the base in the ground. Keep morels fresh by placing them in a mesh bag, which may disperse spores and encourage the next generation to sprout. If you're a novice, be sure you can properly identify any wild mushrooms you harvest. Best eaten fresh, simply fry these "butter sponges" for an amazing appetizer or try them sautéed, deep fried or paired with soups, stews and salads. They can also be canned or dried for enjoyment in any season.



The 3rd Annual Spring Outdoor Adventure at Indian Cave State Park is April 19. Brady Kohler of Cheney, Kansas, won the morel mushroom hunt contest during the event last year.

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS/VIDEOS

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◀ This is a photo of my great-aunt Lydia Shavlik and her cousin Rudy Krska hunting along the Platte River near Linwood, Nebraska. The photo would've been taken sometime between 1920 and 1923. The area was a popular duck hunting spot.

– Anne Shavlik,
Bellevue, Nebraska

► This is a picture of myself at age 10 or 11 (1950-51) at either Dead Timber or Fremont Lakes. Those are the two places we almost always went picnicking and fishing on the weekends in the late 1940s and 50s.

I am now 73 years old and realized that we have had six generations of family – all holding stringers of fish. From my great-grandfather all the way to my grandchildren.

– Linda Bunnell,
Elkhorn, Nebraska



"50 MPH Stagecoach" (Held her at 50 most of the way)

We drove 600 miles this way to Estes Park, making it in 16 hours in 1939 (& back).

On top were 5 blanket rolls covered with heavy canvas which was tied with rope running to bumpers both "fore" and "aft."

On back was a platform that carried all of the grub, army cots, and cooking utensils.

On the left running board – carried all the suitcases and any additional junk.

There were five of us, Bill Rosencrans, Jim Mauzy, Bruno Riestadht and Chuck Grosshans & myself.

Had plenty of flats, bought 3 new tires between Lincoln, Nebr & home on way back. Same car made 2 more trips west – but with a trailer.

– Steve Rishel, Plattsmouth, Nebraska

▲ The picture is of my dad's car in 1939. My dad, John Rishel of Plattsmouth, along with buddies, had sometimes hitchhiked from Plattsmouth to Rocky Mountain National Park (Estes Park) during the mid-1930's when the Depression was in full force.

By 1939, he was able to buy a car so they could drive to the national park. They would follow Highway 34 all the way from Plattsmouth to Estes Park. My dad died in 1976 so I have not heard his stories about the trips for some time.

They would always camp at Glacier Basin Campground in the national park and did extensive hiking while there. I do not know if any of the other men are still alive. My dad would have been 22 years old when they made the 1939 trip.

The back of the picture has a commentary that dad wrote:

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

How to Pan Sear Fish

Pan Seared Walleye with Balsamic-Glazed Roasted Cherry Tomatoes.

By Jenny Nguyen

Firm, yet light and flaky, walleye is universally known as one of the best tasting freshwater fish in North America. Its meat is clean and white, and has a delicate, subtle flavor that is unrivaled by most any other fish found in Nebraska. Of course, it is fantastic breaded and fried, but I also like it seasoned with just some salt and pepper, and then pan seared in hot butter to give it a nice caramelized color and taste. This allows me to enjoy the fish as is, without any batter or breading to get in the way. And like many other acidic sauces and sides, tomatoes are always a great complement to fish.

For a slightly crispier end result, you can also dip fillets in milk and very lightly coat with flour, shaking off any excess flour before searing.

Servings: 4

Prep Time: 5 minutes

Cooking Time: 20-30 minutes

Ingredients:

- 4 walleye fillets
- salt and freshly cracked black pepper, to taste
- 2-3 tablespoons of butter
- 1 package of cherry tomatoes, halved
- 3 cloves of garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil
- splash of balsamic vinegar
- 2 tablespoons of brown sugar, packed
- pinch of dried thyme (fresh is better)
- ¼ teaspoon of dried basil, or 2 teaspoons of fresh chopped basil
- red pepper flakes, to taste (optional)
- lemon wedges, for garnish

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit. In a baking dish or rimmed cookie sheet, combine tomatoes, garlic,



PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN

olive oil, balsamic vinegar, brown sugar, thyme, basil, red pepper flakes, and salt and pepper to taste. Then bake in the oven for about 20 minutes, or until tomatoes start to caramelize.

2. Meanwhile, check walleye fillets for bones. Rinse under cold water and pat dry with paper towels. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Set aside.

3. Over medium-high heat, heat a non-stick skillet until it sizzles when you sprinkle water in it. Next, add butter and wait until it is melted and just turning a hazelnut color. Swirl the pan, then add fish in a single layer and sear on both sides for 1-2 minutes or until fully cooked and fish has turned a nice, golden color. Walleye is delicate, so take care when flipping the

fillets. It also helps not to overcrowd the pan.

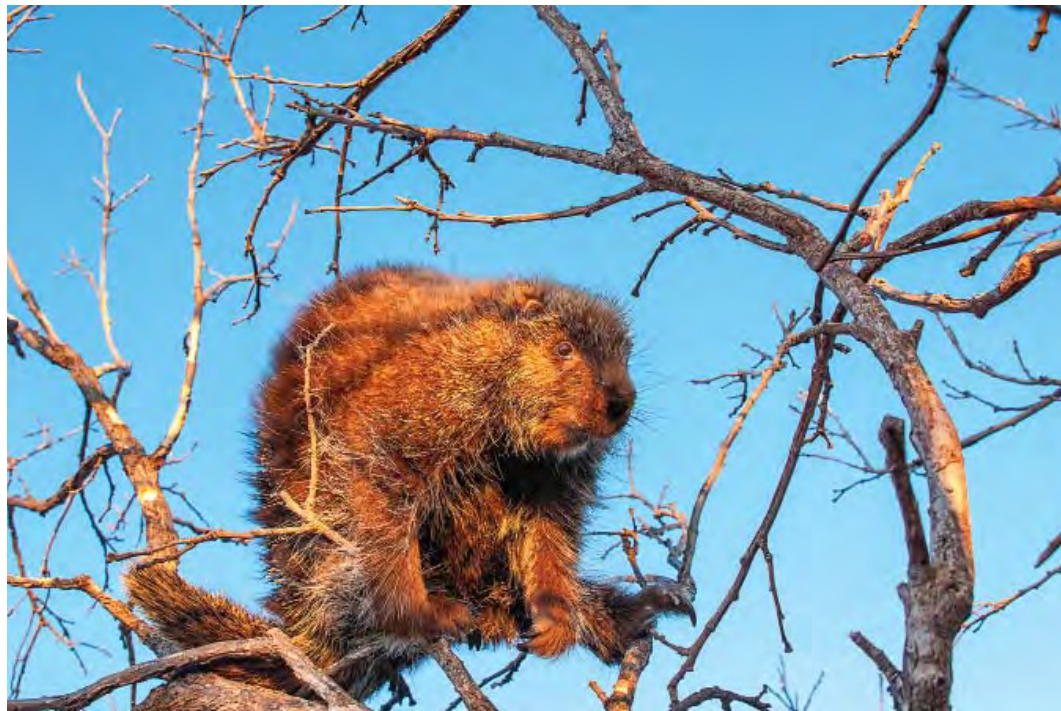
4. Spoon roasted tomatoes and their juices over the fish. Serve immediately with lemon wedges. ■

The author would like to thank Brett Brunken at the Calamus Fish Hatchery for making this recipe possible.

This recipe and photograph originally appeared on Jenny's Food for Hunters blog at Foodforhunters.com.

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





A Portrait of Reluctance

The porcupine was sitting in a small oak tree, bathed in perfect light when we spotted it. As we walked up to the tree, Jeff and David graciously allowed me to be the first to approach the porcupine. At the time, I assumed they wanted to be sure I got some photos in case they scared it off when they got closer. It's equally likely that they wanted to see if I'd survive the encounter unscathed before they joined in.

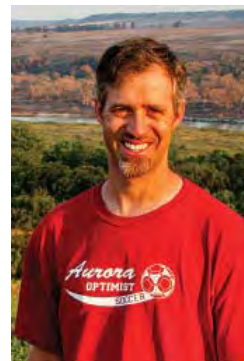
Because the tree was short and on a steep hillside, I could stand at the same elevation as the porcupine, and was only a few feet from it. The porcupine stayed put and didn't seem at all stressed by my presence. Everything pointed to a great photographic opportunity – except for one thing. The porcupine wouldn't look at me.

When I walked to the east side of the tree, the porcupine looked west. When I walked to the west side the porcupine looked east. This continued for several minutes while Jeff and David chortled inappropriately at my expense. Finally, I convinced David to come over and stand by the tree so I could stand on the opposite side and get a photo when the porcupine looked away from David. It didn't work. Instead, the porcupine stared straight at David, who got some very nice photos of it.

I finally took the above photo about 10 minutes after I first walked up to the tree, though it seemed much longer. I think the porcupine finally tired of the game and turned to look at me – probably hoping I'd leave if he let me get my shot. He was right.

The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve. Brown County, Nebraska.

Chris Helzer, Porcupine Whisperer
April 23, 2013



junior journal!

interesting notes for readers of all ages

by Lindsay Rogers and Donna Schimonitz

Nebraska Pollinators Super Heroes!

by Monica Keep, Wildlife Education Assistant,
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

It's a bat! It's a bee! It's a butterfly! It's a bird! It's a fly!... actually its all of these things! A pollinator can be many different things. Bats, bees, butterflies, birds, flies, beetles, ants, people, and even the wind can carry pollen. That means all of these things can be considered pollinators.

Pollination is when pollen is carried from one individual plant to another individual of the same kind. The pollen from the first plant is left on the second plant which allows the plant to produce seeds. For this pollen to be carried from one plant to the next, it often requires a pollinator.

Nebraska is home to many different kinds of pollinators. And, they are really important to pollinating our food, wildflowers, fruits... and making honey!

Bees

Bees are the most common and efficient pollinators we have in the state. There are over 20,000 different types of bees in the world, and over

4,000 species in North America! In Nebraska, our state insect is a bee – the Honeybee! The honeybee is responsible for pollinating one third of all the foods we eat.

Beetles

Beetles comprise the largest set of pollinating animals, simply because there are so many of them. Out of the 240,000 flowering plants in the world, beetles are responsible for pollinating 88 percent of them! Some flowers – like the magnolia – are pollinated only by beetles!

Moths

Moths are one of the pollinators that take over the pollination "night-shift." Moths are going to go after flowers that open, or flower at night. These flowers are usually going to be a pale white color and have a strong fragrance.

So, next time you see a bee, butterfly, or beetle remember, they help provide us with apples, blueberries, almonds, grapes and chocolate! 🍌

Who Can Pollinate?

Circle all the things that can pollinate flowers.



Bee



Beetle



Cell Phone



Bald Eagle



Hummingbird



White-tailed Deer



Moth

NATURE CALENDAR

- **Bullsnakes emerge from winter dens:** Early spring
- **Prairie Chickens Booming:** Early March to May
- **Look for Pawpaws blooming:** April
- **Young Bald Eagles begin fledging:** Late May to early June
- **Ticks!** Late March through June



Greater Prairie Chicken photo by Jon Farner

ANSWERS: Bee (yes), Beetle (yes), Cell Phone (no), Hummingbird (yes), Moth (yes), White-tailed Deer (no).