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INSIDE
A Drive Through Smiley Canyon • Margarita Walleye
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FEATURES

20 SMILEY CANYON

Story and photos by Justin Haag

28 OUTDOOR NEBRASKA

What To Do in April

By Renae Blum

30 FISHING FLANAGAN

A Lake in the City

Story and photos by Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

36 TICK TACTICS

Story and photos by Chris Helzer

40 NEBRASKA’S OBSCURE PRAIRIE MILKVETCHES

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer

42 BUILDING A SOD HOUSE

By David L. Bristow, History Nebraska

DEPARTMENTS

8 Your Nebraska

12 In the Field

46 Mixed Bag

56 Portraits from the Past

58 The Last Stop

ON THE WEB

For more articles and information, visit NebraskalandMagazine.com

Cover: A tom turkey struts across a grassy hill in Cass County. If you are unfortunate enough to shoot and miss a bird like this, read our next-step tips on page 16.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

This page: A greater prairie-chicken displays on a lek at Burchard Lake Wildlife Management Area in Pawnee County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland magazine

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Beaver kits are born in April. GETTY IMAGES

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



TRAINING TIME

Mae, a Labrador retriever puppy, readies herself for a spring training session.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Matthew Marx, of Gretna, pulls a johnboat across Open Fields and Waters land after a morning turkey hunt and fishing trip.
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

BE OPEN TO OPEN FIELDS

By Jeff Kurrus

Hunting or fishing on Open Fields and Waters land requires work. Sometimes a lot of it. Even so, looking for birds to hunt and fishing holes to cast a line on a patch of OFW land should be a spring rite of passage.

Follow these steps:

1. Search for accessible land in the newest installment of Nebraska's Public Access Atlas. There, you will find where these lands are located and how they can be accessed.
2. Use some sort of mapping app, such as Google or OnX, on your phone to scout the land before spending an ounce of gas money. What you're looking for are creeks, ditches and draws with roosting timber for turkeys, either on the OFW land or on adjacent land where talking a bird into walking across the road is possible.

If fishing, how far is the parking area from the water? Too

far for a kayak or small johnboat? Is the land accessible by bank?

3. Once a spot is located, spend an afternoon scouting. Are there bird signs — feathers, scat, tracks or birds themselves? Also, is there a place where hunters or anglers regularly park? These can be found by looking for any sort of human remnants. You might just have the place to yourself.

4. On the day of your trip, be patient if others are around. Spring birds are just as active at noon as early in the day. Use a fellow hunter's impatience to your advantage by not leaving the woods before noon.

When fishing, be prepared to target various species and bring along hiking boots to beat any traffic.

OFW lands remain underutilized by many hunters and anglers, so don't be one of them.

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JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

AFTER THE MISS

By Jarrod Spilger

If someone tells me they've never missed a turkey, I typically figure it's because a) they haven't shot very many turkeys, or b) they're lying. The reality is, it happens, and the longer you hunt turkeys, the better your odds of missing one. I've certainly missed more times than I'd care to admit over the last three decades of turkey hunting. When I was younger, a miss would certainly derail me, but not anymore. Here are some ways I've learned to manage my misses.

First of all, if you shoot a shotgun with adjustable sights or a scope, something might have gotten knocked out of alignment. That's why it's so important to pattern your shotgun before each season, just like checking a rifle before hunting deer. If a miss does occur, go back to the patterning board, check your sights or switch loads or chokes. Do whatever it takes to get back on target.

If your trusty old shotgun is still trusty, analyze what happened. Maybe some unseen obstacle was in the way. This happened to me a few seasons ago. I called in a gobbler and thought he was in range, but at the shot



TOP: A hunter, out of arrows, watches a tom walk away. BELOW: A small obstruction can lead to a wayward shot. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

and persistence are a turkey hunter's two best friends. Sometimes you don't even have to wait a day or two to rectify a failed attempt. Like I saw during a hunt with my dad a few years ago, an early morning dud can quickly turn into a banner day still celebrated.

Remember, you miss 100 percent of the shots you never take. And if you do miss, simply keep trying.

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JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

GRILLED ‘MARGARITA’ WALLEYE

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Try this recipe on the grill this spring or summer: Walleye fillets are gently cooked in butter, loads of garlic, spices and a splash of tequila. It’s fine to skip the tequila if you’re avoiding alcohol. Those sensitive to cilantro may exclude the herb as well.

I cooked the fish on the grill, but this recipe will be just as tasty in the oven. This recipe also will work with other white-fleshed fish, though cooking time will vary. Try it with catfish, bluegill or crappie. Ocean fish such as halibut, sablefish or cod will also do nicely.

Servings: 2

Prep Time: 10 minutes

Cooking Time: 20 minutes

Ingredients:

- 2 walleye fillets
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- ½ teaspoon of chili powder
- ¼ teaspoon of cumin
- 3 cloves of garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon of fresh cilantro, chopped
- Juice of half a lime, plus extra wedges for serving
- Splash of tequila
- 2 tablespoons of cold butter, cut into small pieces
- Half a serrano pepper, thinly sliced (optional)

1. Preheat the grill to about 300° Fahrenheit, and prepare it for indirect heat cooking.* Cut out a large piece of heavy-duty aluminum foil and fold the edges and corners to form a rim to keep liquids contained. Spray foil with non-stick spray, and then place it onto a rimless cookie sheet.

*This recipe may also be prepared in the oven. If you go this route, skip the foil and prepare fish in a greased baking dish. Don’t use a dish that is too big — fish should fit snugly in one layer.

2. Lay walleye fillets in one layer in the foil “tray” you just made. Season fish with salt and pepper, and distribute chili powder, cumin, minced garlic and cilantro on top of both fillets. Squeeze juice of half a lime on top and add a splash of tequila. Dot with pieces of cold butter.

3. Use the cookie sheet to transfer fish to the grill, sliding the foil onto the grates. Close the lid and cook for 20 minutes at 300° or until fish becomes flaky and is cooked through. If the walleye starts browning too quickly, move the foil “tray” to a cooler area of the grill.

4. Serve immediately with extra lime wedges on the side and slices of serrano pepper garnished on top. Spoon butter sauce over the fish. I like to serve this dish with Mexican rice.



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An aerial photograph of Smiley Canyon at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the landscape. The terrain is characterized by rolling green hills and ridges, with a winding road that snakes through the valley. The hills are covered in dense vegetation, and the road is a light color, contrasting with the darker green of the hills. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

Smiley Canyon

Story and photos by Justin Haag

A scenic drive at Fort Robinson State Park has a colorful, and sometimes treacherous, history.

Smiley Canyon Road winds its way through the Pine Ridge.

Smiley Canyon Scenic Drive has long allowed visitors to immerse themselves in the grandeur of the Pine Ridge without leaving their vehicles. The winding road has surely brought some smiles to drivers — and, yes, some frowns in its early years.

Believed to have been named for a family of Smileys that settled in the vicinity in 1893, the drive is one of the best ways to see the park’s bison herd, pronghorn, mule deer, the occasional bighorn sheep and an array of bird species. The 5½-mile paved road climbs about 900 feet from just west of Fort Robinson State Park’s central campus to the top of the ridge and its butte-top vantages.

BELOW: A brown thrasher perches on a pine branch in Smiley Canyon. The canyon is a popular destination for birdwatchers.

RIGHT: A blooming plum thicket and the rising sun signify new beginnings where the road courses along the canyon and its deep ravine.



Smiley Canyon Scenic Drive has a colorful history, beginning with its planning. Few who visit the drive today realize what a challenging engineering feat it was.

The road was not only born as a way for locals to finally have a reliable route between Crawford and neighboring Harrison, but it also was part of a larger concept with excitement propagating well beyond northwestern Nebraska. The road would be a vital link for what was being billed as the Washington Highway. Named for the nation’s first president, the new automobile route would connect the Atlantic to the Pacific and provide a vital link for easterners to visit Yellowstone National Park. Today, it’s known as U.S. Highway 20.

Prior to Smiley Canyon Road’s construction, locals traveled “two miserable trails of the poorest sort which followed White River and Soldier Creek,” wrote one reporter.

In 1914, Col. Chas Thatcher, a national road expert, visited northwestern Nebraska while being tasked with marking a route for the Washington Highway. He wrote that he much preferred creating a course along Soldier Creek — long before it was the federal wilderness area of today — instead of Smiley Canyon. For reasons not found in research for this article, the latter option was chosen, though.

The road brought so much anticipation that even the arrival of road equipment in 1920 garnered headlines. Gov. Samuel McKelvie visited the construction site in 1922.

The 2-mile canyon posed great challenges for both drainage and grade. Workers used 15 tons, that’s 30,000 pounds, of TNT for the removal of 65,000 yards of material to create the road bed. About 20,000 yards of that was solid rock.

About a month after its June opening, the first of many vehicle crashes was

A buck pronghorn grazes near the canyon’s lower entrance.





reported in print. A man in a Paige luxury car, believed to be a retired Fort Robinson officer, “was found to have crashed into the embankment with such force as to drive the top and windshield on top of the engine, crushing the life out of the driver,” wrote the Harrison Sun.

The winding road, with its steep 7-percent grade, became especially treacherous to unfamiliar nighttime drivers who speedily approached the canyon from the relatively flat section to the west. A prime example of the road’s tendency to turn drivers’ smiles to frowns occurred in October 1963.

“Smiley Canyon, the truckers’ nemesis, claimed two trucks and a car in less than 48 hours in some sort of record the past week,” a Crawford Tribune reporter wrote, introducing a tale of the two cattle haulers that went off the road hours apart in nearly the same spot, spilling a combined 123 head yearling steers and calves. The drivers survived, but the 105 bovines



TOP: In the early years, the road’s three bridges were considered a contributing factor to many fatal accidents. In the 1950s, they were replaced with culverts.

HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG1517

BOTTOM: The bison are a favorite photo subject of those traveling the road.

RIGHT: A horseback rider enjoys an outing on the Smiley Canyon Loop Trail, just north of the road. Trails for non-motorized activity intersect with the road at six places.

that weren’t killed in the crash had to be rounded up in the rugged terrain.

After Smiley Canyon had claimed a number of lives and countless dollars in wrecked vehicles over more than four decades, today’s much less perilous route bypassing Smiley Canyon to the south was completed in 1967. Billed to be even more scenic than Smiley Canyon, the 6-mile section was named “Middleswart Pass” — a tribute to Tom Middleswart, the district road engineer from Bridgeport who designed the route.

Later in 1967, with Fort Robinson’s role as a state park in its infancy, the Game and Parks Commission filed to purchase the 640-acre tract of school land encompassing the canyon to be added to the park’s many attractions.

Today, the most challenging part of the road allows only one-way traffic uphill, lessening the chance of wrecks. There is also no hiking or cycling allowed in the section that goes through the bison pasture. Visitors can stop at a scenic overlook at the top of the ridge to take in the 22,000-acre park’s beauty.

Much of Smiley Canyon burned in a 1989 wildfire but retains scenic value. There are also parking areas near a historical marker and near the head of Turtle Rock Trail, a popular pathway that takes hikers, horseback riders, cyclists and the park’s Jeep rides to the top of the Cheyenne Buttes.

The dreams from the early 1900s have been realized as U.S. Highway 20 stands as the nation’s longest highway, spanning from Boston to Newport, Oregon. In Nebraska, the section between Valentine and the Wyoming border has been designated the Bridges to Buttes Scenic Byway.

Without fanfare, Smiley Canyon reached its 100th year in 2023. While it’s no longer a vital link to Yellowstone or the coasts, it’s always worth a short detour for those with a park permit — as long as they don’t let the animals and scenery distract too much attention from the road. [N](#)



Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

The doldrums of winter are behind us, and fresh signs of life are all around. Here are some ways you can get outdoors and experience it this month. [N](#)



Fish pits and ponds for largemouth bass

As weather allows | Statewide

Warm days in early spring are an excellent time to catch big bass, as females will feed heavily to prepare for spawning. Pits and ponds warm faster and provide good bass habitat; you can find public waters along interstate lakes, Fremont Lakes, Louisville and Bridgeport. Small reservoirs like Hedgefield and Redtail lakes are options, too. Don't be afraid to use big baits, reel slowly and look for areas where the water will warm first — like a cove protected from the wind or a north shoreline catching the sun's rays. [JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND](#)



Archery turkey season

Season is March 25 – May 31 | Statewide

Few things are more challenging to chase on the Great Plains than spring gobblers with a bow and arrow. Enjoy the chance to get out there early and have a more laid-back hunt. The birds will be less pressured and likely easier to locate, and you'll have all season to punch your tag. A few tips for hunters: Scouting is still important, don't forget about public lands, and warm afternoons can be fantastic times to call in gobblers.

[JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND](#)

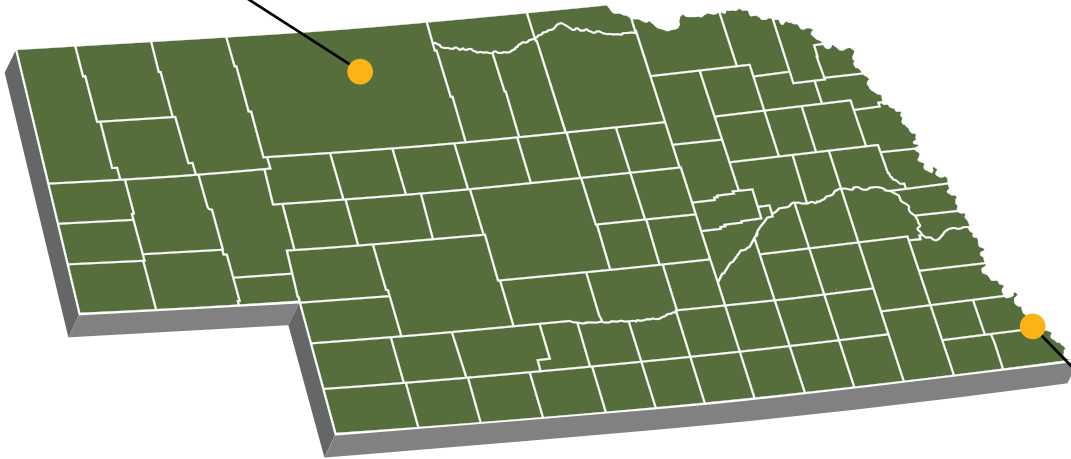


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Throughout the month | Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area

This year, International Dark Sky Week is April 2-8, and what better way to celebrate than by experiencing Nebraska's first International Dark Sky Park? Merritt offers some of the darkest skies in the world, making for spectacular stargazing. During your stay, you can also enjoy boating, picnicking, camping and some of Nebraska's best fishing. Learn more or book your campsite at [OutdoorNebraska.gov](#).

[ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND](#)



Hunt for morels at Indian Cave

As weather allows; typically mid-April through May | Indian Cave State Park

Indian Cave is a popular morel hunting destination, with plenty of space to accommodate foragers. Mushroom enthusiast Chance Brueggemann recommends getting creative and searching areas most people won't go — away from main roads or into brushy areas. He finds most morels by elm trees, ash trees or cottonwoods. Look for trees that are dying or recently dead, and head out after a good rain followed by some nice, sunny days. [ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND](#)



Celebrate National Frog Month by listening for frogs calling

As weather allows; peak time is typically mid-March to early June | The eastern half to eastern third of Nebraska

Just before dusk or in the early evening, head to wetlands, ponds and marshy areas where you can hear the mating calls of different frog species. Woodhouse's toads make a nasally "waaahhh" sound like a calf or sheep's bleat, while cricket frogs make a "rik, rik, rik" sound like two marbles hitting together. Boreal chorus frogs sound like a finger running over a comb. Plains leopard frogs make a "chuck-chuck-chu-u-u-ck" noise, and bullfrogs make the distinctive baritone "jug-o-rum" sound. What can you hear? Frogs are sensitive to disturbances, so limit noise, be patient and use a red filter on your flashlight to navigate to your spot.

[JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND](#)



Fishing Flanagan

A Lake in the City

Story and photos by Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley



The black crappie population in Flanagan Lake in Omaha is dominated by 8- to 10-inch fish, with opportunities for anglers to catch 10- to 11-inch fish.

“You call this a lake?” said my friend Hank Shaw as we unloaded out of the truck on a weekday morning in April. From the southwest parking lot near Fort and 168th streets, Flanagan Lake in Omaha looked little more than a pond. Hank didn’t know that the rest of the lake was obscured, and I had forgotten it. The last time I was here, the lake hadn’t been filled with water — construction of Flanagan began in 2015 and finished in 2017.

Accustomed to ocean fishing along the coast of California and Mexico — even commercial salmon fishing in Alaska — Hank, then of Sacramento, California, scoffed at the new-ish metro construction located just 15 minutes west from our house. I chuckled sheepishly in response, not knowing if I had blown my chance to impress a visitor or if it was just Hank’s sense of West Coast superiority teasing.

Our guide Dean Thielen of DAB Fishing was already on the lake. He waved to us from his Lund, and after customary introductions near the boat ramp, the four of us began flinging Gulp! minnows across the water. We worked the deeper, south end of Flanagan near the dam first, slowly floating back north toward the boat ramp and kayak launch.

Dean was informative, but not pedantic in his instruction.

And just because an angler might be a master on saltwater, doesn’t mean they will instinctively know what to do on freshwater, and vice versa. Dean reeled in several nice crappie with practiced hands before Hank landed a four-inch “ditch pickle” — a largemouth bass — his first fish of 2023. My husband, Rick, followed up with a crappie. And I wouldn’t catch my first fish — a crappie — until several moments later.

As expected during that time of year, the fish would be lethargic at that deeper, colder end of Flanagan. So, we abandoned that south side and trolled up toward the north end, and that’s where the waterscape opened up.

“Whoa, this lake is a lot bigger than I thought,” Hank admitted, sitting back and admiring the view and soaking in the warmth of the spring sun.

For a metro-area lake, 225 acres of surface water at full pool isn’t half bad. The surrounding land adds an additional 505 acres of green space, a playground and park area on the northeastern side south of Ida Street, and over 5 miles of paved trails. Despite being located in the middle of the city and surrounded by homes, our time on the water was peaceful. We delighted over the myriad of songbirds and waterfowl that zoomed close as the boat slowly made its



Game and Parks fisheries biologists put in a variety of fish structure at Flanagan Lake, a few of which were “new” or unique to those done before in past lake constructions. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

How to Fish Flanagan Throughout the Year

By Dean Thielen

Bait - The No. 1 bait for multiple species of fish is a jig and a plastic, using different sizes for the different species of fish. With bluegill, use a 1/64-ounce jig with 1-inch Gulp!

minnow. For crappie, move to a 1/32-ounce. For bass, throw a Ned rig, a mushroom jig tipped with a short plastic worm or creature.

For crappie and other panfish, simply put a jig and a bobber about a foot, 2 feet or 3 feet above that, depending on the kind of habitat you’re fishing. You just twitch it back slowly.

Pike and bass might want something with more aggressive action, like a spinner. Crankbaits certainly work.

Overall, I find plastics and jigs to be much more effective in this part of the country than crankbaits and spinnerbaits because of what the food source is in Flanagan. The jig will catch every fish in the lake, including catfish. We’ve caught 36-inch pike on 1-inch Gulp! minnows.

Early Spring - When the water starts to warm up in April, occasionally in March, fish will typically start to move into the shallow coves and shallow bays and stay there starting April through May. There’s a lot of habitat in Flanagan, especially right in the bay down from the boat ramp at the cove. There will be a lot of fish there starting in April and through May and a little bit into June.

Late Spring - After that, the fish will move out to their summertime location to spawn. The crappie will spawn in May. The bass will spawn at the end of May. The bluegill spawn in June. Spawning areas will be along the

rocks and riprap at the end of May and into June. And they’ll also be along the bottom of some of those flats.

Summer - After the spawn, figure out where food is located. A lot of the food will be along the weed edges. So, if you’re fishing from shore on Flanagan, it will be tough during the summertime because the weeds get thick. When temperatures get hot, usually in July and August, the weeds start dying off, and then shoreline fishing gets good again. But if you’re out on a boat, focus on weed edges because a lot of fish will be there.

Flanagan also has a lot of timber. When temperatures rise in the summer, the shade provided by timber becomes valuable. Big horizontal logs are better than vertical logs because they’ll provide a lot more shade.

Fall - After that, it’s basically looking at what the food source is doing and what’s going on with the weeds. The remaining vegetation will hold some weeds into the fall, and as it totally dies off, so do the bug hatches. So, the fish might move into the trees again if the trees are providing cover and food. That can vary a little bit, but not a lot. Spots that are good one year are typically going to be good the next year.



Hank Shaw of Minnesota holding a largemouth bass. Shaw founded the *Hunt, Gather, Cook* website.



Fishing guide Dean Thielen holds a northern pike caught out of Flanagan Lake.

way through the submerged trees that dotted the length of the lake, which provided fish structure.

At the north end of Flanagan, a wetland area could be credited for much of the avian life we witnessed. Although the wetland was primarily constructed to slow down water and prevent siltation of the reservoir, it also functions as a great place for wildlife viewing, said Game and Parks southeast district fisheries supervisor Aaron Blank.

Dean took us under the Ida overpass and to the very north end of Flanagan, where his boat could go no farther past the wetland. There, shallow water warmed by the sun created the ideal conditions for active, hungry fish, and during the next

several hours, picture-perfect, spring-fishing fun ensued. We fished until 4 o'clock that day, steadily hooking into more than 100 fish: loads of nice black crappie — one possible Master Angler-worthy specimen caught by Hank, several impressive largemouth bass, some bluegill, one channel catfish and a beautiful northern pike caught by Dean.

When we set out that morning, we'd agreed to only catching and releasing fish, but by 3 p.m., Hank decided he was hungry for a fish fry. So, we started throwing some crappie in the livewell, which didn't take long to accomplish, considering how late in the day it was. We also threw back several fish over the maximum length of 10 inches, a special regulation that is unique not only to Nebraska but also to the

country (read sidebar page 35).

On the way home, we stopped by Walmart to pick up a pack of Louisiana Fish Fry, frozen french fries and a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon. I cooked our fish dinner on the back deck that evening. It was nothing fancy — just good Nebraska eating to end a productive spring day on the water.

Flanagan took us all by surprise. 📍

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission manages the fishery at Flanagan Lake. The City of Omaha maintains the lake's facilities. The Papio-Missouri River Natural Resource District operates the reservoir.

Why Special Regs at Flanagan?

By Jacob Werner, Fisheries Biologist

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission began implementing a 10-inch maximum length limit for crappie and 8-inch maximum length limit for bluegill and redear sunfish at Flanagan Lake on Jan. 1, 2023. These limits are not only unique to Nebraska, but as far as we know, are unique to the country. The ultimate goal is to create a "trophy" fishery.

Crappie in southeastern Nebraska tend to hit a growth bottleneck at around 8-10 inches, where they stack up in that range with few pushing past the bottleneck to larger sizes. Similarly, bluegill tend to stack up in the 6- to 8-inch range, with few growing larger than 8 inches.

The thinking behind the regulation is that by reducing the density of the most abundant size groups of crappie, bluegill and redear sunfish, we can increase the amount of resources available for the remaining fish in the water body to hopefully increase growth rates. And by releasing fish that are over the limit, we retain those larger fish in the water body.

So, we set up an experiment to test this hypothesis through regulation. We want to find out if we could push those fish populations into ones that have higher proportions of bigger fish.

The goal is for anglers to be able to regularly catch 9- to 10-inch bluegill and 13- to 15-inch crappie at Flanagan. We don't know if the experiment will be successful, but we are optimistic. We are just one year into a five-year study, and we'll continue to monitor the fishery and collect data to see how these regulations impact the fishery.



Fish survey of Flanagan Lake in March 2020.
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Tick Tactics

Story and photos by Chris Helzer

Just because ticks aren't your favorite creatures doesn't mean you can't admire their life strategies.

I found a deer carcass one April day while walking around my family prairie. I'm not a trophy hunter, but I'm pretty sure my friends who are would have been happy to see it beneath their tree stand the previous fall. I don't know how long the dead deer had been lying there. By the time I found the carcass, it had been nearly completely stripped clean.

I approached the deer with my camera, hoping to find and photograph any remaining carrion beetles or other invertebrates feeding on what remained. What can I say? I'm a weird dude.

I did find a few beetles moving around, but not very many. While I was photographing them, however, I noticed a dog tick perched high on an old grass stem. Then I saw another one. And another. Once I started actively looking for them, they were all over the vegetation near the carcass. There were even a few on the deer itself.



LEFT: Deer skeleton at the Helzer family prairie near Stockham.
ABOVE: A tick perched on one of the antlers.

As I continued to spot ticks all around me, I did two things. First, I did a quick tick check of my own body to confirm that I was still tick free. I was. Second, I tried to come up with a hypothesis to explain what I was seeing.

There seemed to be two possibilities. One was simply that the ticks had been on the deer while it was alive and had abandoned ship after its death. They're tiny creatures with tiny legs, so it might make sense that they hadn't traveled very far yet. It seemed possible, but none of the ticks I saw were engorged, which made me a little skeptical that they'd all been attached to the deer when it had died.

My second hypothesis was more fun to ponder and also seems more likely to me. What if the ticks had converged upon the deer carcass because it increased their chance of encountering animals like coyotes or opossums who might show up to feed on the carcass?

As far as I knew, ticks find their victims, known as hosts, by climbing up into the vegetation and waiting for a creature to brush past them. They hold on to the vegetation with some legs but keep their front legs free for latching onto passers-by. Lurking in random locations seems destined to fail most of the time. Ticks must have strategies for positioning themselves where they can increase their chances of success. I was pretty sure I'd read something about ticks being most common along well-used trails, for example.

While I wondered why the ticks were there, I photographed some of them. Later, after returning home, I did some research to see if I could find any other reports of ticks hanging out near dead animals. Sure enough, I found a few scientific journal articles in which researchers reported sightings somewhat similar to mine.

Scientists have documented ticks hanging out around decomposing mice and fish, as well as near a dead deer and a dead porcupine. In the case of the porcupine, scientists — also known as fellow weirdos — located its carcass in May and had spent about 15 minutes watching maggots and beetles on the carcass but didn't notice any ticks. Several weeks later, they returned to the same carcass and found more than 300 dog ticks within a few feet of it. It seemed clear that the ticks had been drawn to the dead porcupine.

None of the studies I read had definitive answers about why ticks might be attracted to carcasses, but my favorite hypothesis was shared by several of the articles. There was some discussion about whether the ticks might be attracted to the smell of decay or to the carbon dioxide released by the decomposition. Either way, the ticks seemed to sense the dead animals and moved toward them.

I can't be sure the ticks I saw hadn't just dropped off the deer when it died. Of course, that's a possibility. However, it makes a lot of sense to me that ticks would have evolved to be attracted to dead animals that would, in turn, attract animals for those ticks to attach to and feed on. If so, that's a fantastic little life hack and a much better alternative to simply climbing a random grass stem and hoping something happens to walk by.

I'm guessing most people reading this aren't huge fans of ticks. I can understand how you might be discomfited to learn that ticks have strategies for increasing their chances of encountering you in the wild. On the other hand, in this particular case, the only creatures that need to worry are scavengers like coyotes and opossums and weirdo photographers like me. 

Chris Helzer is the Nebraska Director of Science for The Nature Conservancy and is based in Aurora. When he isn't searching for obscure subject matter to photograph and write about, he conducts research and captures lessons from the Conservancy's land management and restoration work.

Chris is a regular contributor to Nebraskaland Magazine, with his first story appearing in 1995.



TOP LEFT: The first tick I spotted on a blade of grass nearby.



TOP MIDDLE: A tick on the hide of the deer.



TOP RIGHT: A cosmopolitan blue bone beetle feeding on the remainder of the carcass.



BOTTOM RIGHT: A Dermestes beetle, another scavenger insect.

Nebraska's Obscure Prairie Milkvetches

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

Wildflowers are like wildlife in that the big, showy species, such as sandhill cranes, mountain lions, roses and gayfeathers, get all the notice and attention, while small, less eye-catching species sadly go unnoticed.

A prime example of this are Nebraska's 24 native milkvetch (*Astragalus*) species. Most are rosette-forming plants with colorful, clustered flowers that inhabit dry rock outcrops and clay badlands in the Panhandle. Some are tall prairie plants with spikes of large blue, purple or white flowers. These two groups are the eye-catching milkvetches whose photos often adorn wildflower guides.

Yet four others — ground plum, Platte River milkvetch, Missouri milkvetch and lotus milkvetch — are short prairie species that bloom in spring with smaller, less pretentious flowers. These are often hidden among the prairie grasses and are easily overlooked.

Milkvetches belong to the legume or pea family and are characterized by five-petaled, pea-shaped flowers, compound

leaves with few to many leaflets and pods as fruits. The species can be difficult to identify if only their similar-appearing flowers and leaves are present. Fortunately, each has a seed pod that is fairly distinct in size, shape or hairiness, which greatly aids in identification. Yet, they still manage to challenge botanists and nature photographers.

The pursuer of our obscure milkvetches must have knowledge of each species' specific prairie habitat and a keen eye to find them. For the photographer, these plants are best captured when in bloom, but the perplexed shutterbug may have to return to the site in early summer and observe the plant's pods to correctly identify their subject.

Ground Plum

Ground plum (*A. crassicaepus*), also called buffalo bean, is the largest and most common of our obscure milkvetches. It grows in moist bottomland to dry hilltop prairies nearly

statewide. Its whitish to lilac flowers, the petals tipped with purple, appear in late April through May and are soon followed by inch-long, green seed pods that lie on the ground. Native Americans and settlers ate the young, tender pea-flavored pods raw, cooked and pickled. Rodents, including prairie dogs and mice, cache the dry, leathery pods and eat the seeds later.

Platte River Milkvetch

In early June 1820, Edwin James, botanist, geologist and surgeon for the Long Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, first collected Platte River milkvetch (*A. plattensis*) in Nebraska along the Platte River in what is now either Dodge or Colfax County. This plant is limited to relatively undisturbed prairies throughout much of the state, excluding far eastern Nebraska. Platte River milkvetch is similar in size and appearance to ground plum and is often confused with it. The species are most easily distinguished by their mature pods. Platte River milkvetch pods are hairy and have a pointed tip, while ground plum's pods are smooth and blunt-tipped.

Missouri Milkvetch

Missouri milkvetch (*A. missouriensis*) grows mainly on dry, often sparsely-vegetated gravel, clay and loam soils in the western half of the state. A more delicate and less upright

plant than the two previously described species, Missouri milkvetch has a very short stem, and its leaves lie prostrate on the ground. The plant's leaflets are covered in short, appressed hairs that give them a unique silvery or greenish-gray hue. The flowers can be white but are usually rich purple in color with a splash of white in the center of the upper petal. The small pods are boat-shaped.

Lotus Milkvetch

In late June 1820, James collected lotus milkvetch (*A. lotiflorus*) along the Platte River in what is now either Keith or Lincoln County. This plant grows mostly in dry hilltop prairies throughout the state, but is more common westward. It is fairly tolerant of disturbance, such as heavy grazing, and can inhabit degraded prairies. Lotus milkvetch is similar in size to Missouri milkvetch, but distinguished from the latter species by its green, more upright leaves and white to creamy yellow flowers with purplish streaks in the center of the petals. The small pods are crescent moon-shaped.

These four milkvetch species are so often unseen that the only photographs of the largest and most common ground plum grace the pages of wildflower guides. As beautiful as these delicate wildflowers are, it is unfortunate. Come mid-April, a search for them would be rewarding. 🌱



Ground plum blooming in a moist tallgrass prairie in Hamilton County. Native Americans used various decoctions of the plant to treat sore throat, toothache and insect bites.



Platte River milkvetch flowering mid-slope on a Platte River bluff in Hamilton County. Seed pods from previous years are visible in the lower left of the photo.



Missouri milkvetch growing on a dry ridgetop in Keya Paha County. The plant accumulates selenium, but is little grazed and not toxic to livestock.



Lotus milkvetch flowering on a dry Platte River bluff top in Hamilton County. The white to creamy-yellow petals with purplish streaks are key to identifying the plant.

Building a Sod House

By David L. Bristow, History Nebraska



A breaking or “grasshopper” plow, distinguished by its adjustable rods. Such a plow turned the sod over in a smooth ribbon for better sod bricks. HISTORY NEBRASKA, 8902-1

Building sod houses, especially when the wind blows, is not quite as pleasant as being out buggy riding with a girl,” wrote 20-year-old Swedish immigrant Rolf Johnson in 1876. “One’s nose, eyes, mouth, ears and hair gets full of loose dirt. OK! It’s bad!”

Living in Phelps County, young Rolf was learning soddie-building skills shared by many Nebraskans of his era. They all faced a similar challenge — how do you build a home in a place with few trees, and where imported lumber is either unavailable or too expensive?

As with the earth lodges of Native peoples such as the Pawnee, sod houses were a clever adaptation to local conditions. Building one required not only a lot of hard work, but also planning, skill and neighborly cooperation.

First, you had to find good sod from which to cut bricks. A sod house may look like it’s made of dirt, but each brick is held together by a tough, dense network of prairie grass roots binding the soil. The savvy home builder searched bottomlands near the water table for places where the roots grew together in a mat. Roots were toughest in fall, but builders rarely had the luxury of choosing the season.

Cutting sod required a team and a plow. It was best to use a “cutting” or “grasshopper” plow that turned the sod over in a long, neat ribbon that could then be cut into bricks. Plowing virgin sod was hard work — people spoke of the tearing sound the plow made as it sliced through the roots. It took about an acre of sod to build a 12-by-14-foot house.

Rolf Johnson told of cutting bricks that were “2 feet long, 12 inches wide and 4 inches thick,” which were then hauled to the construction site. Putting up walls required at least two men, so it was common for neighbors to help each other. Bricks were laid grass-side down so each layer could be trimmed level.

Walls were usually two or three sods thick, staggered like regular bricks (but without mortar), and every third or fourth layer was laid crosswise to hold the wall together. Door and

window frames were held in place with wooden rods and topped with long cedar poles to spread the weight and keep the frames from buckling.

As the walls grew higher, the women shaved the interior walls with a spade to keep them balanced and to close any holes. (Interior walls were usually plastered as well.) Men used a wagon as a platform from which to lay the upper layers.

After reinforcing the base with planks, sod or even concrete, it was time to build the roof — the most important part. “If the roof failed, the house failed, for the endurance of the walls depended ultimately on the protection of the roof,” writes Roger Welsch in his book *Sod Walls*. While some builders could afford shingled roofs, most soddies relied on a sod roof.

A sod roof had the advantages of being cheap, a good

insulator and relatively fireproof. And it would keep you dry in the hardest rainstorm ... for a couple of hours. Then it would drip for two or three days after the rain ended.

A good ridgepole was crucial — or better, several good ridgepoles to distribute the weight. Heavy cedar beams were excellent if you could find them, but lifting them into place was difficult for a team of two or three men. The usual method was to lay two poles against the eave wall and use ropes to roll the beams into place. A combination of poles, brush, hay and earth completed the roof.

Most families moved out of their soddies as soon as they could afford a more spacious frame house. The sod house was then repurposed as a farm building. Some are still standing to this day. [N](#)

Visit History Nebraska’s website at history.nebraska.gov.



Heavy rains in 1887 caused Custer County widower George Barnes’s roof to collapse only 10 minutes after the family was out of bed. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2608-0-1190



The Peter M. Barnes place (Clear Creek, Custer County) shows how a farmstead developed. The family probably started out in the dugout before moving into a better soddie, which was then expanded. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2608-0-1788



An 1886 photo of the Leroy Leep family (West Union, Custer County) shows a gabled roof with three ridgepoles, plus a crooked pole bracing the sod above a window frame. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2608-0-1019



Building the sod house that served as Lakeland High School, Brown County, Nebraska, 1934. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG4290-0-1505

WILD COLUMBINE *A Spring Wildflower of our State Parks*

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist



Wild columbine's large and unique flowers will allow park visitors to easily locate and identify this spring wildflower.

Several of Nebraska's state parks are showcases for spring wildflowers and wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), also called red columbine, is one of the most delicate and beautiful of these early-bloomers growing in the parks.

This perennial is limited to our eastern- and northern-most counties where it inhabits cool, moist deciduous woodlands at the base of north- and east-facing slopes and ravine bottoms. The best places to seek the wildflower are the Missouri, lower Platte and Niobrara river bluffs and adjacent hills, including those at Indian Cave, Platte River, Mahoney, Ponca, Niobrara and Smith Falls state parks and Schramm Park State Recreation Area.

The flowers first appear in late-April in the southeastern counties and blooming continues through May in the northern counties. The flowers are unmistakably unique. Set atop the one-to two-foot-tall plants, the bell-shaped flowers, up to two inches long, hang in loose, branching clusters. The flowers have five petals. The lower half of each petal is yellow and, combined, they form a column from which projects a bundle of bright, yellow stamens, the pollen-forming parts of

the flower. The upper half of the petal consists of a long, red, backward-pointing spur. Five flaring, red, petal-like sepals extend outward between the spurs.

The genus name *Aquilegia* comes from the Latin "Aquila," which means "eagle" and refers to the spurred petals that resemble eagle talons. The upper end of the hollow spurs secrete nourishing nectar that attracts long-tongued hummingbirds and hawkmoths that pollinate the flowers. Pollen-gathering bumblebees also pollinate the flowers.

Native Americans prepared infusions from various parts of wild columbine to treat heart trouble, kidney problems, headaches, bladder problems and fever, and as a wash for poison ivy. They also used the pulverized seeds as a love charm and to detect bewitchment. Today, the plant is a common ornamental in gardens, and here the sweet, nectar-filled flowers can be picked and eaten fresh or used to enhance salads.

This spring, while hiking the woods in the above mentioned parks, keep a sharp eye out for wild columbine and the many other early-blooming wildflowers that grace these sites. You will be amazed by their beauty.

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by David Radler

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HELEN BRAZEE

Campground Host

By Eric Fowler

How long have you been a campground host?

I started as a camp host in the year 2000, when I retired, but we used to come out here and camp, from the mid-1970s all the way until now. It was in the early 1970s when they made this a park because of the interstate and the sandpits.

[Note: The sandpits or borrow pits along Interstate 80 were dug for material to build the highway and its interchanges. Mel Steen, director of the Game and Parks Commission when the freeway was built, asked that the pits be dug in a way that would be more useful as recreation areas and provide better fish habitat.]

We'd come every other weekend, as often as we could. I'd take a half-day vacation from Pfizer, and we'd come Friday at noon so we could get a spot. Now you've got to come Thursday morning to get a spot on the weekends.

When did you lose your husband?

Glen died in 2017 on Dec. 7. Our anniversary was Dec. 5, and we had 58 years, barely. Two days later he passed away. The doctor said, "Helen, he'll probably live another week." And I said, "I don't think so," because he couldn't eat.

Mark [Clymer, the former superintendent] and I planted three trees in 2017 in November, right up by the booth. I spent two weeks out here in the motor home by myself because Glen was in the nursing home. I'd have to put him in the nursing home in order to get a break. My insurance would pay five days, and I'd pay five days to come out here and play.

We planted those three trees in memory of Glen and my son, Alan, and that bench I put there with the sandhill cranes. Alan passed away same year Glen did in March. It wasn't a good year. That's why I'm living it up now. You've got to take every day to its fullest.

What made you volunteer to be a campground host?

I always respected this park because Mark always kept it as clean as he could and as nice as he could. I would pick up trash and limbs and whatever I could find, even when I wasn't a camp host, because I wanted things to look nice. Or if the bathroom was dirty, I would just take the toilet paper and wipe the sinks off.

Then I said to him one day, "If you ever need someone to work in the park when I retire, I'd sure like to." And he said, "Well, you're hired."

What are your other duties at the park?

I love planting trees and growing trees. We put mulch around them and water them in. Sometimes I run the water wagon and water all of the trees. I love doing that.

I've even got my own weed eater — well, it's kind of mine. Laura got it for me because it was smaller. I can't handle the big ones the boys use. This one's got a battery. I love it.

I used to ride my bike to clean the restrooms.

What do you like about the park?

It's my favorite little park. It's so peaceful. I could go over there in my little camper at night, and it's just wonderful to be out of Lincoln.

I don't enjoy the ones around Lincoln as much. They're way, way crowded all the time. This one's always clean. Perfection.

And the beauty of it. The other night we had six deer that came up behind the barn back there about 7:30 p.m., just when it was almost dark. Crazy.

I'm at the park from April to November. I go home once a month to get my mail. I basically live out here. It's really a comfortable little park. I call it my little jewel in the middle of the country. Not a lot of people know about it unless they do the internet and all that kind of stuff.

Do you hear the interstate?

Never. You get used to it. People off the interstate that have never been here, the tent people, they don't like that. That's why we're trying to get more windbreaks.

That's the only drawback that I've ever heard from anybody is that the interstate is loud at night. I say just turn on your fan or some kind of music or something to knock that out and you won't have any trouble.

Where do visitors to the park come from?

We have a lot of locals from the Grand Island, Hastings and Kearney areas, but you'd be surprised how many people come in off the interstate, and they love it.

We had one couple this morning that stayed in a tent. They were going back to Boone, Iowa. They're very nice people. They've been here before, and they love it. That's why they stop on their way back and forth. We have a lot of people from back east that will stop here going west and a lot of Colorado people that are going east.

Windmill is one of two parks where campground hosts stay the entire season. Others are two-week stints. Which do you prefer?

I wouldn't like moving around. I knew when I retired that this was going to be the one that I worked at, or hosted at. But I wanted to try a couple of others, so I did Fort Kearny and Rock Creek Station. That was fun. I got poison ivy between



Helen Brazee sits in front of her camper at Windmill State Recreation Area in Buffalo County. She has been a campground host at the park since 2000. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

my fingers and saw my first bobcat running across the path. It was pretty interesting down there.

How old are you?

I will be 84 in February. So I've been doing it for a while, 20-plus years, and I love it. And I pray the Lord will give me one more year. I'd like to have two, but I'll just take it one at a time, that's all you can do. One year at a time, one season at a time.

Tell me about your camper.

This is my fifth new motor home. We started with a used pickup with a 9½-foot slide-in camper. We went all over California and everywhere with that thing.

We got a really nice one we wanted to retire in. When Glen got sick, he said, "We need to get rid of this motor home because you won't let me drive it anymore." I said, "You can drive it, but we need to get something smaller." His foot wasn't working real good. We thought it was a stroke, but it

was Parkinson's. So he said, "Why don't we trade it in and get something you can drive?" So that's exactly what I did. That's why it's small, and I can handle it.

What are some of your favorite park memories?

I have a lot of good memories in this park. There have been a lot of interesting people. We had some people from Denmark. They rented an RV in California, and they toured. They stayed here three or four days, and it was just fun to talk to them because they were from a different part of the world. We have had some good Fourth of Julys out here.

It's been just a pleasant place to work.

To read the complete interview, visit [NebraskalandMagazine.com](https://nebraskalandmagazine.com). To learn more about Game and Parks' Campground Host program and to apply, visit <https://outdoornebraska.gov/about/give-back/help-in-a-park/campground-host/>.

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Pheasant hunting near Greely, 1975

This picture was taken south of Greely on opening day when we limited out — one of our last good trips. We started with our dads in the early 1960s hunting at Verbas's farm.

Our group left to right: Jim McDonald (back), Bert Thompson, Terry Steele and Bill Thompson; Ed Christensen (front), Leroy Raabe and Bob Thompson. Gary Geise took the picture.

Terry and Bill have passed away. Bert Thompson is 99 and lives in O'Neil.

— Ed Christensen, Phoenix, Arizona



Pheasant hunting in Pierce County, early 1980s

This picture was taken in the early '80s in Pierce County, Nebraska, when pheasants were plentiful.

Left to right: Scott Lackas; Larry Lackas (Scott's dad/my brother); Gary Fletcher; Gary's dog, Mutt; my dog, Sam; Kevin Culbertson (Larry's son-in-law); and myself, Neil Lackas.

A good time was always had.

— Neil Lackas, Randolph, Nebraska

Carp fishing in Columbus, 1959

This picture is from Pawnee Park in Columbus. Often the Loup River would flood the park in the spring, filling the pond with carp. The pond provided many days of adventure to me and two neighbors, Mark Shields and Ronnie Braun.

Leave early morning after paper route, then pack a lunch, ride our bikes, and bring a can of corn and poles to fish off the bridge that went over the pond. This must have been a good day. There is still a rock water fountain in the park. Lunch always provided a slippery climb to the top of the fountain for a drink. Many a good summer's day spent at Pawnee Park.

I would have been 9 or 10 since I have a July birthday.

— Steve Shadle,
South Sioux City, Nebraska



Little Hunters, Custer County, 1985

My dad's deer is bigger than yours.

— Justin Stasburg,
Callaway, Nebraska

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



The skin of a bullsnake, finely preserved in the day trading offices of Kurrus and Sons. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

A DAY TRADING SNAKESKINNER

By Jeff Kurrus

Hiding behind an empty gumball machine on my son's bookshelf, I saw the snakeskin.

I couldn't help but shake my head.

Created during COVID, the snakeskin was one of many new-fangled hobbies the Kurrus family began. Deer scorers; military tank history experts; bird food creators; stock market day traders. You name it, we were in.

Everything was fair game when the entire family was home, with kids being schooled online and never-before-uttered words like Zoom and phrases like "CPE is on a run!" becoming commonplace.

But the snakeskin creation was also an example of common.

Riding gravel roads one afternoon in Cass County, our family came across a recently deceased bullsnake. We took it to the house and, after a video or two, began our newest hobby.

We rung the neck with a knife, then we peeled the snake's skin back with our hands.

Once off, we placed it over an old broomstick and generously rubbed table salt over the inside of the skin. We left the skin like this for several days, eventually rubbing the salt off, turning the skin right-side out, and covering the outside with Vaseline.

Now this is where you snakeskin aficionados will shake your heads, telling me this is the exact opposite of what we should do — how there are much better pickling solutions than Vaseline. Yet upon stumbling across the skin again the other day, it was still shiny and in great shape.

But that's not where its discovery took me.

It reminds me that I had no idea what I was doing when making a snakeskin, much like my bank account reminds me I had no idea what I was doing when I was memorizing stock tickers in an effort to accelerate my disastrous day trading ventures.

Yet I can't help but smile when I think about either.

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NebraskaWildlifeFund.org

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

