

Nebraskaland

INSPIRING OUTDOOR ADVENTURE SINCE 1926

MAY 2026

LEARN HOW TO FISH LAKE MAC

page 46



INSIDE

Disc Golf Explosion • Camp Critters • Kinkaiders
250 Miles of Fun • Alexandria SRA • Crofton's Dam Race
Birds From the Big Apple • Calling All Morel Hunters



Trail Trek

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SCAN TO FIND A TRAIL NEAR YOU!

PATHWAY FOR WILDLIFE

CREATING HIGH-QUALITY HABITAT THROUGHOUT NEBRASKA



Program Overview

Pathway For Wildlife (PFW) offers incentives to enhance wildlife habitat on cropland, working lands, and within local communities. Participants will apply specific wildlife and pollinator conservation practices to benefit pheasants, quail, grassland songbirds, monarch butterflies, native bees, and other wildlife. Additionally, the program aims to reduce soil losses, encourage soil health and improve water quality.

Program Highlights

- 1 to 3-year contract options
- 75-100% cost-sharing
- No cropping-history necessary
- Incentive payments
- Annual payment option



PATHWAY FOR GRASSLANDS

Plant native grasses and wildflowers to transition cropland or degraded grassland areas to working lands better suited for landowner objectives. Incorporate grassland management practices including brush management, prescribed fire, shrub thicket establishment, and chemical control.



PATHWAY FOR PRECISION AG CONSERVATION

Plant a diverse cover crop mixture as part of a cropping rotation with benefits of soil health, weed competition, grazing utilization, wildlife and pollinator habitat providing awareness and an economic incentive to farmers considering alternatives. Limited to Rainwater Basin.



PATHWAY FOR COMMUNITY HABITAT

Plant native wildflowers, including milkweed for monarchs, in backyard habitats and urban green spaces to provide wildflowers blooming from April to October. Eligible project sites include city parks, colleges, libraries, churches, and other frequently visited areas.

Eligible Land

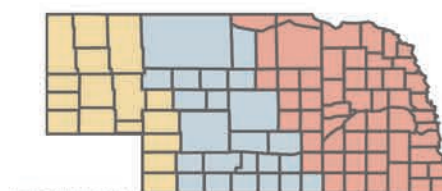
Land must be suitable for one of three program areas and its objectives. Cropland, grassland, community, business, and residential sites are eligible. Cropland must be in the Rainwater Basin area to be eligible for the Precision Ag Conservation project area. Pheasants Forever biologists will evaluate sites to determine program eligibility based on feasibility and other conservation programs available.

Contract Length

1, 2, or 3-year contracts are available.

Payments

Pheasants Forever provides cost-share assistance for seed and seed establishment. Additional cost-share is available for brush management, prescribed burning, and shrub thicket establishment. Annual payments for grassland projects are based on location.



Monitoring and Evaluation

To increase awareness and increased personal investment, participants will monitor project areas. Pheasants Forever will evaluate seeding success rate, management needs, and wildlife use.

Enrollment and More Information

Please complete and return a Notice of Interest form if you wish to join us in creating a pathway for wildlife. Pheasants Forever staff administers PFW and provides technical assistance. For more information about Pheasants Forever and its programs, visit NebraskaPF.com or contact your local Farm Bill Wildlife Biologist.

PARTNERS IN CONSERVATION



Nebraskaland

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Cover: Kory Lewis of Golden, Colorado lands a wiper on the fly at Lake Mac. See story on page 46.
DOUG STEINKE

This page: A mink (*Neovison vison*) walks the bank at Summit Lake State Recreation Area near Tekamah.
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland
magazine

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



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The Acmon blue butterfly is found in Nebraska's northwestern panhandle. You might see it flitting over prairie hills, roadsides and sunny, weedy fields. Its caterpillars feed on buckwheat, milkvetch and trefoil plants, munching their way through the prairie before transforming into sky-colored butterflies. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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Curt Blum, Lincoln
Milkweed Bugs on Milkweed Plants



Peyton Weller, Lincoln
White-tailed Doe



Connie Allen, Grand Island
Bunny



Amber Tull, Omaha
Harris's Sparrow

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

“Up to that point of the morning ...
we’d all rise and blast away.
Then we’d argue about who shot what.
One member of our group must have
been a very accomplished shooter
because to listen to him, he hit
every goose that fell.”

*From the unpublished essay “You Shoot First” in Memories
From My Life as a Duck Hunter by E. Joseph Banset, Jr.*

NEBRASKA LAND IS IN DEMAND

UNDER CONTRACT IN LESS THAN 30 DAYS

CEDAR COUNTY, NE | 140 ACRES± | CEDAR COUNTY CABIN AND HUNTING

This peaceful and secluded hunter's paradise is located in the hills just south of the Missouri River. The 42x66 steel building is finished off in a more than comfortable fashion. Two bedrooms and a ¾ bath help make it ideal for a weekend getaway. The shop portion is insulated and heated with a concrete floor and a well-set-up meat prep area.

Not far from the cabin is a large food plot with a very comfortable and well-built tower blind. Many ideal bowhunting locations are throughout the property with abundant deer and turkey populations. Plus, the area offers many great opportunities for fantastic fishing, boating, and waterfowl hunting. This turnkey hunting property is set up for comfort and success for the entire family to enjoy.

LISTED OTOE COUNTY, NE | 79.09 ACRES± | EAGLE FARM AND HUNT

Located just 3 miles from Eagle and approximately 9 miles east of Lincoln, this multi-use rural acreage offers a rare combination of income production, recreational value and residential potential in a tightly held area of eastern Nebraska. With convenient access just off Highway 43 and less than one mile from Woodland Hills Golf Course, the property provides strong proximity to amenities while maintaining the privacy and function land buyers are seeking.

In addition to its recreational value, the property includes productive tillable acres currently cash rented for the 2026 season. This lease provides immediate income, helping offset holding costs while maintaining agricultural productivity. The balance of cropland and timber offers flexibility for an investor, recreational landowner, or buyer seeking a long-term hold with income characteristics.

CALL TODAY FOR MORE DETAILS OR TO SCHEDULE YOUR PRIVATE TOUR!

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In the Field

It Starts With One Step: Your 250-mile challenge can begin at Agate Fossil Beds National Monument in Sioux County. See story on page 16. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



The 250-Mile Challenge

By Julie Geiser



Kayakers float Logan Creek, also known as “the dredge,” in Thurston County. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

As warmer weather approaches, head outside and participate in the Outdoor Nebraska 250-Mile Challenge. The challenge is hosted by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to celebrate America’s 250th anniversary.

Enjoy a quiet walk at sunset and listen to the sounds a park makes as it settles in for the night or feel the rush of running, biking or kayaking on a scenic trail. While you’re at it, watch wildlife, take photos, relax and create many lasting memories.

Spending time outside has significant benefits for both physical and mental health. This challenge offers individuals, friends and families the opportunity to get active, reduce stress and connect with our state’s beautiful trails and outdoor spaces. It is an opportunity for each person to take their own journey of discovery and wellness.

This free challenge encourages Nebraskans to complete 250 miles of outdoor activity this year to promote physical and mental well-being through

outdoor adventures. Miles can be accumulated from a single activity or a combination of many.

Jesse Petersen, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s recreational trails manager, has been a mountain bike enthusiast since the early 1990s. For him, the challenge is more than logging miles.

“For me, the 250-Mile Challenge is about discovering the recently created natural surface trails in our state parks and state recreation areas. Celebrating America’s 250th birthday from the saddle also means celebrating the planning and hard work put into these bike-optimized dirt trails,” Petersen said.

Those participating can track their progress using their preferred personal fitness tracker or app. Once the 250 milestone is completed, a photo and proof of the miles completed can be submitted at OutdoorNebraska.gov. On the website, search for “250-mile challenge” to access the submission form. A commemorative sticker

will be sent to participants, and that person will have their name entered into a random drawing for a chance to win prizes, including an outdoors package donated by sponsors. The package includes a two-night stay at a Nebraska state park cabin, a Nebraskaland Magazine one-year subscription and a 2027 state park permit.

More than the chance to win a prize, the challenge is also “about the celebration of trail development and the cooperation with Nebraska Game and Parks that got us here. These 250 miles will show just how far we’ve come since the ’90s,” Petersen said. “Happy Anniversary America — each mile we ride is a true gift.”

Share your progress and adventures throughout the year with Game and Parks by posting photos and tagging Nebraska Game and Parks in your social media posts. Visit OutdoorNebraska.gov and search for “trails” to find scenic areas across the state.



LOG YOUR MILES, WIN GREAT PRIZES!

Join us for this fun challenge in outdoor Nebraska. Use your fitness tracker and log all your miles in 2026. Hiking, walking, biking, running or your favorite activity.

OutdoorNebraska.gov



Scan the QR code to enter and find sponsors, or learn more at



Share your pictures on social and tag @NEGameandParks



Camping with Critters

By Monica Macoubrie, Wildlife Education Specialist

There's nothing quite like unzipping your tent in the early morning, smelling the dew on prairie grass and hearing the distant call of a western meadowlark. And maybe — if you're lucky — there might be a set of deer tracks leading past your site.

Camping in Nebraska means sharing space with some truly incredible wild neighbors. Whether you're pitching a tent along the Niobrara River, stargazing in the Sandhills or nestled in a cottonwood pocket along the Missouri, it's important to know what critters you might encounter — and how to be a respectful guest in their home.

Expect Company, Even if You Don't See Them

First things first: You're not alone out there. From raccoons and owls to bullsnakes and bats, wildlife is active all around you, especially once the sun starts to dip. Many of Nebraska's critters are nocturnal, or crepuscular, meaning they come alive during the hours around dawn and dusk. So, while you're toasting marshmallows or settling into your sleeping bag, the forest, prairie or riverbank around you is just starting to wake up.

You might hear rustling in the brush, the deep hoot of a great horned owl perched in a cottonwood, or the distant, high-pitched yip of a coyote echoing across the hills. These sounds can be thrilling — or a little unnerving if you're not used to them. They're all part of the Nebraska wild experience. It's like nature's nighttime soundtrack, reminding you that even if you can't see your wild neighbors, they're definitely out and about.

And let's not forget the smallest — sometimes most noticeable — creatures: insects. Mosquitoes are a given

during summer months, especially near water or after rain, and Nebraska ticks are tenacious little hitchhikers, so checking yourself and your dog after a hike is necessary. Horseflies, especially out west or in wet meadows, are surprisingly bold — and if you've met one, you know what I mean. Long sleeves, bug spray and a good sense of humor go a long way.

The takeaway? Wildlife is all around you, from the tiniest tick to the clever raccoon sneaking around your camp at night. Expect company — and treat them with curiosity and respect.

Store Your Food

If there's one guaranteed way to attract a curious raccoon, a sneaky opossum or even a bold skunk, it's leaving your food out overnight. Nebraska's wild animals have incredibly keen senses of smell — some can detect food from quite a distance. And once they associate campsites with easy meals, they tend to return for more.

To avoid visitors rustling through your marshmallows and granola bars, always store your food in tightly sealed containers, preferably in your vehicle. Coolers alone aren't always enough — raccoons are shockingly clever and strong, and they've been known to undo bungee cords, open lids and even unzip tents.

Speaking of tents, never store food inside one. Even empty wrappers, toothpaste or the faint scent of snacks can invite a late-night rummaging.

Also, don't forget about pet food. If your dog is tagging along, feed them away from your sleeping area and clean up immediately afterward. Dirty bowls, crumbs and half-eaten biscuits are fair game to a hungry critter.

Keeping a clean campsite not only protects you and your



Raccoon raiding a picnic basket. NEBRASKALAND



LEFT: Camping along Long Pine Creek at Long Pine State Recreation Area in Brown County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

RIGHT: A wild turkey walks through Lee and Pat Miltner's campsite at Indian Cave State Park. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

belongings, but also protects wildlife. When animals learn to seek food from humans, it can lead to conflict, dependence or dangerous behavior. Storing your food properly is one of the simplest ways to show respect for Nebraska's wild residents.



Eastern fox squirrel feeding on a discarded camp snack. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Don't Feed the Wildlife

I know, it's tempting. A fox squirrel scurries up to your picnic table and gives you those pleading eyes. But feeding wildlife — intentionally or accidentally — can have serious consequences. Animals that become habituated to humans can lose their natural fear, get aggressive or become reliant on unnatural food sources. In some cases, it can even lead to relocation or euthanasia of the animal. So, as hard as it is, keep your snacks to yourself. Watching wildlife act wild is a much more rewarding experience.

Stay On the Trail and Leave No Trace

It's not just about avoiding poison ivy. Staying on trails helps protect fragile habitats and keeps you safe from stumbling onto a ground-nesting bird's eggs or surprising a sunbathing snake. Nebraska is home to all kinds of reptiles and amphibians, many of which are secretive and easy to step over without realizing.

Every candy wrapper, piece of fishing line or abandoned glow stick has the potential to harm wildlife. So, pack out everything you brought in and leave your site better than you found it. That includes biodegradable waste — yes, even orange peels and sunflower seed shells.

If you're camping with your dog, be extra mindful. Dogs can chase wildlife, trample nests or disturb dens without meaning to do so. Keeping them leashed helps protect them and your wild neighbors.

Leave Wildlife Wild

As tempting as it may be, resist the urge to take wild animals home with you. That box turtle crossing the trail? That frog your kid found near the creek? They're doing just fine right where they are. Wild animals belong in the wild, not in aquariums, backyards or shoeboxes.

Turtles help keep ponds clean. Frogs eat mosquitoes. Even snakes help control rodent populations. When we remove these animals from their habitats, we're disrupting that balance — and chances are, the animal won't thrive in captivity anyway. Most wild reptiles and amphibians have specific needs that are hard to meet at home, even with the best of intentions.

It's also important to know that moving wildlife around — especially reptiles and amphibians — can spread disease, such as ranavirus or the fungus that causes snake fungal disease. And depending on the species, taking certain animals from the wild may even be illegal.

Instead, take a photo, share a story or just enjoy the moment. Teaching kids (and adults) to admire wildlife without needing to collect it helps build respect for the natural world — and ensures future campers enjoy those same wild encounters.

Soak It All In

Camping in Nebraska offers an opportunity to connect with nature on a deeper level. Whether it's watching fireflies blink over a pond, hearing coyotes echo across the prairie or discovering tracks in the morning mud, it's a chance to slow down and truly see the world around you. These wild moments are why we camp — and why we must camp with care.

So, the next time you're out under the Nebraska sky, remember: You're in someone else's home. Be curious, be cautious and most of all, be respectful.

Birds from the Big Apple

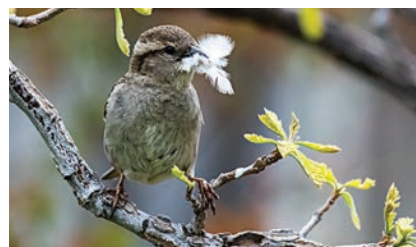
By Justin Haag

At least three Nebraska bird species have a history with the East Coast's largest city.

As about 400 species make their way northward through Nebraska and the Central Flyway during Migratory Bird Month, here's a story about three birds that moved into the region in a somewhat different manner.

Three of our most common non-native bird species have a relationship to a place more than 1,200 miles east of here — New York City.

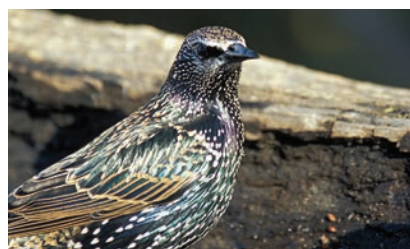
The first is one people likely see in abundance in whatever town they live in, in Nebraska and beyond. It's the house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).



House sparrow
JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

It all started in the 1850s when the sparrows were collected in England and brought into New York to control inchworms that were damaging trees in Central Park. Regardless of how the inchworm population fared after that, the house sparrows flourished. By 1900, the species had done so well it had spread to the Rocky Mountains. The house sparrow is now despised for displacing native bird species, and are sometimes referred to as “flying rats” because of the way they take over bird feeders and make a mess.

Another often despised prolific species in North America with ties to Central Park, as well as to history's most famous author, is the European



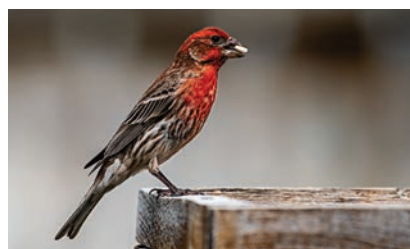
European starling
JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*).

In the 1890s, a group of Shakespeare enthusiasts released 100 starlings in Central Park for no other reason than they wanted every bird species Shakespeare ever mentioned in his writings to be present in America. Shakespeare's one and only mention of the bird was in Henry IV, Part I.

These black birds with spotted plumage surely made themselves at home. Now it's estimated that more than 200 million starlings range from Alaska to Mexico, sometimes inspiring more profanity than prose as they compete with native bird species.

Third on the list is the house finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) native to Mexico and the southwestern United States.



House finch
JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Some of the handsome little birds were captured and taken to New York

to be sold as “Hollywood finches” in the early- to mid-20th century, coinciding with the rising popularity of movies. The red heads and breasts of the males made them attractive. In the 1940s, when pet shops and finch owners faced possible prosecution under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, they released the birds. The finches multiplied in the wild and spread west to the Great Plains within 50 years.

House finches have moved into Nebraska from both the western and eastern populations, and have been more welcomed than the other two species, surely thanks to those Hollywood looks and singing abilities.

These are just a few examples of unintended consequences when people move wild animals. If people get the urge to capture and release an animal species in Nebraska, they should know that it's illegal. The intruders not only compete with native species for habitat and food, but also introduce diseases. Also, it's illegal to relocate wild mammals beyond 100 yards of where they are found. For reptiles and amphibians, it's 50 yards. No live fish can be moved from one body of water to another.

For more information about the state's many avian species and Nebraska Bird Month activities, visit OutdoorNebraska.gov. Activities throughout the state are listed, including the family-friendly statewide competition known as the Nebraska Birding Bowl — which, despite its name, has no connection to Yankee or MetLife stadiums.



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Cold-Pan Goose with Red Wine Sauce

By Ryan Sparks

I have been cooking wild goose since I was 15 years old and have tried countless recipes and methods. This David Tanis-inspired recipe is currently my favorite way to cook goose breast. The result is on par with the quality you would expect at a nice restaurant.

Even if you skip the sauce — which you probably shouldn't — learning this cold-pan method for waterfowl like ducks and geese is an essential wild-game-cooking skill. We like to serve it with mashed potatoes to soak up the sauce, but bitter greens or wild rice would also work well.

Servings: 2

Prep Time: 10 minutes

Cooking Time: ~45 minutes

Ingredients

- 1 boneless goose breast, plucked, skin on
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 shallot, sliced
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- ¼ teaspoon dried thyme
- 2 cups goose stock (chicken stock/broth also works)
- ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons dry red wine
- 1 tablespoon Cognac or brandy (optional)
- 2 teaspoons potato starch dissolved in 2 tablespoons water

1. Remove the tenderloin (the thin strip of meat on the underside of the breast) and reserve for the sauce. Trim away any gristle from the undersides of the breast, reserving it for the sauce. Score the skin in a diamond pattern, cutting through the fat but not quite reaching the meat. Lightly sprinkle with salt on both sides.
2. While the goose rests, heat 1 tablespoon butter in a saucepan over medium heat. Add the shallot, tenderloin and any other goose trimmings from the breast. Brown them well, stirring occasionally, 4 to 6 minutes. Stir in the tomato paste and the thyme and let them cook for 1 minute.
3. Add the stock and ¼ cup red wine. Crank the heat and let the mixture reduce for 15 minutes. Strain the sauce and return to the heat. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons of wine and the Cognac or brandy (if using) and cook for 1 minute more. Stir in the potato starch/water mixture. Whisk in 1 tablespoon of cold butter. Taste and season with salt and black pepper. The sauce can be kept warm over low heat while you cook the goose breast. If it becomes too thick, thin it out with more stock.
4. Place the goose breast in a cold, cast-iron pan just large enough to hold it, skin-side down. Put the pan over low heat. The fat in the goose skin will slowly begin to render and sizzle. Be patient and allow the skin to become crispy and golden, checking every few minutes to prevent burning. To fully crisp the skin, it often takes 10-15 minutes. Once the skin is crisp, turn the breast and cook on the other sides, keeping the heat low. When a meat thermometer in the thickest part of the breast reaches 130°, transfer to a warm plate and let rest for 10 minutes. Slice the breast and serve with the sauce.



A photograph of two young girls riding bicycles down a dirt path in a wooded area. The girl on the left is wearing a light green jacket and blue pants, while the girl on the right is wearing a pink jacket and pink pants. They are riding away from the camera. The path is surrounded by large trees with green and yellowing leaves, suggesting autumn. In the background, a black pickup truck and a white camper are parked on a grassy area. The text "Alexandria State Recreation Area" is overlaid on the left side of the image in a large, white, bold font.

Alexandria

State Recreation Area

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

After visiting the playground, girls ride their bikes back to their campsite at Alexandria State Recreation Area.

Talk to the people who go to Alexandria State Recreation Area, and they will tell you how great it is. And why: because no one's there.

Indeed, the campgrounds at the quiet, secluded getaway northwest of Fairbury are rarely full. About the only time they are is during the annual Camp Spook Halloween celebration in October. The rest of the year, even on holiday weekends, you can almost have your pick of the 53 sites in the park's two campgrounds.



The main draw at the park, affectionately known to locals as the Alexandria State Lakes, is the two spring-fed lakes. The lakes didn't exist when the Game, Forestation and Parks Commission purchased the 40 acres in 1930; there was only a spring-fed marsh with a muck bottom known to grab ahold of the feet of duck hunters and wayward cattle and not let go.

ABOVE: A haunted tunnel graces a campsite during the annual Camp Spook Halloween event at Alexandria State Recreation Area.
RIGHT: The 95-acre park features two lakes covering 43 acres and two campgrounds.
BELOW: The glow of a lakeside campsite is reflected in Lake 2.



Tent camping sites are located next to both Lake 1 and Lake 2, at Alexandria.



Zed Summers of Filley fishes with his grandsons, Cole and Levi, next to their campsite on Lake 1.

ABOVE: Layne and Dalton Wolfe of Tobias play with their remote-control boats on Lake 2.
TOP LEFT: Brylee Eyer of Jansen holds a largemouth bass she caught while fishing on Lake 2.
TOP CENTER: A white-tailed doe and her fawns stand in the middle of the road between the park and the adjacent Alexandria Wildlife Management Area.

Dikes were built to capture and hold the spring water and create three terraced lakes. It appears, however, that the Commission decided the north lake, likely shallow and better at raising mosquitoes than fish, had to go. In what may have been the first aquatic habitat project in the state, the lakes were drained in 1942, one dike removed and others raised, and the two remaining lakes deepened and restocked with fish.

The Commission purchased another 55 acres on the west side of the park in 1949 and built a third lake, the largest, increasing the amount of water on the area to 43 acres. In 1996, a portion of the dike separating the two east lakes was removed as part of another aquatic habitat project, and the park once again had just two lakes.

When the park opened in 1933, it was one of 26 that had been established in the state by the Commission and its predecessors. Hungry for places to recreate, the park was a hub of activities, including church picnics, family reunions and an annual fireworks show on Independence Day.

Alexandria and Alexandria West wildlife management areas, featuring native tallgrass prairie, oak woodlands and nearly 2 miles of Big Sandy Creek, cover more than 1,200 acres to the north and west of the park. The areas are popular among deer, small game and quail hunters, as well as birdwatchers and nature lovers.

The lakes aren't what they used to be, which might be why the park is so quiet these days. The aging outlet structures are leaking, which has left the lakes a few feet lower than they should be, and common carp have muddied the waters. Yet the area still has a quality channel catfish population, as well as some largemouth bass and other panfish, that keep anglers busy. And the lakes remain a great place to paddle a canoe or kayak. Game and Parks hopes to find funding to fix the outlets, but the repairs will carry a hefty price tag.

While some regulars wish more people would visit the hidden gem, others are happy that few people know about the park — part of the reason it is so quiet. Whether more visitors come or not, the park will likely remain a peaceful retreat, and a great place to park a camper or pitch a tent, sit around the campfire and look up at the stars. 🌌

Outdoor Nebraska

WHAT TO DO IN MAY

By Jeff Kurrus

The most difficult part about May is deciding what to do. From all parts of the state this month the outdoors calls in so many directions. Just make sure you listen. 📺



Visit an Invasive Species Event

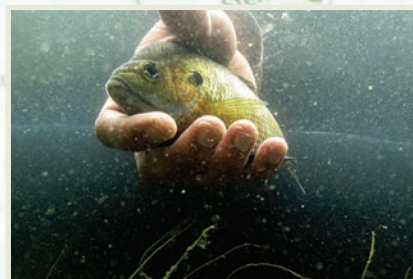
May | Select Locations

Choose from events during Invasive Species Week May 24-30. On May 27, take a break from your outdoor activities and compete in the Invasive Species Online Trivia event 6-8 p.m CDT. Using Zoom and Menti, trivia will be conducted by Nebraska's invasive species experts.

On May 28, join the Invasive Species Trivia and Wine Tasting event at Billy's restaurant in Lincoln 5:30-7:30 p.m. All ages are welcome with non-alcoholic options. Tickets are \$20 and pre-registration is required.

On May 30, attend Know Your Invasives Day at Schramm Education Center 12-3 p.m. Designed for all ages, this educational event includes a guided nature hike, zebra mussel scavenger hunt and live filming of Backyard Farmer.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



Get to a Bluegill Bed

May | Statewide

Bluegill beds are prime locations for catching gillies this month. Big, colorful males will be guarding eggs deposited by females and will strike at a variety of lures and baits — from popping bugs casted from a fly rod to a worm and bobber.

Beds can be found in shallow water and are often visible right beneath the surface. Catch fish on the outer beds first before working into shallower water. Whether fishing from bank or boat, keep your distance to assure fish don't spook.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



One Last Gobble

May | Statewide

By this point in the turkey season, birds are wary. They've seen every decoy set-up and heard every call possible. To counter these educated birds, try a different tactic by going decoy-less and hunting midday. Or bring a friend, split up and simulate a hen and tom calling back and forth to each other, emulating an adversary for a last-minute tom still trying to mate.

The same tactics that worked a month before may not work now. Be ready to adapt.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

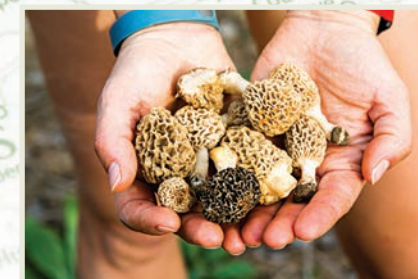


Herp Hike

May | Crete

On May 16, 10 a.m. to noon, join Nebraska outdoor educators for a guided hike near Crete to search for reptiles and amphibians. The hikes will reveal the many herps nearby. While there will be no collection of animals, there will be plenty of opportunities for photography. Registration is required for this event at tinyurl.com/herphike. Exact event location will be emailed to registered participants. Wear hiking clothes and be prepared to uncover a stone or two in search of these always fascinating animals.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Morels in May

May | Statewide

Take to the hills! That's the cry of morel mushroom hunters in May. Hilly, wooded areas above rivers and their tributaries are often productive for gathering morel mushrooms now. A reliable indicator is lilacs nearing bloom. The key is to slow down and look carefully for morels in moist, loamy soil amid vegetation near dead and dying hardwood trees such as cottonwood, elm, ash and apple. Focus on south-facing slopes in early May and north-facing slopes later in the month. Search for morels just after a soaking rain and when daytime temperatures have been consistently at or above 68 degrees Fahrenheit.

BY GREG WAGNER, PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



DISC GOLF EXPLOSION

In parks throughout Nebraska, and far beyond, visitors are finding entertainment in slinging plastic toward metal.

By Justin Haag

It's Monday night, so the summer air will soon be accented with faint sounds of flying plastic clinking on metal chains over the Pine Ridge terrain of Chadron State Park.

The group arrives one by one, parking vehicles, grabbing bags and congregating at a concrete slab without need for instruction. Soon, they take turns flinging plastic discs across countless greenspaces, then follow the discs from place to place with the familiarity of moving around their homes.

This is the weekly scene at the Chadron State Park disc golf course, which has become special to this group, just as courses throughout the state, nation and world have become to others. It got its start when Jake Rodiek was working as an assistant superintendent at the northwestern Nebraska attraction. He designed the layout before being promoted to the head superintendent position at Mahoney State Park.

Zane Hesting watches his disc fly to the basket at Chadron State Park.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



ABOVE: A group tees off toward hole 17, one of the fairways at Chadron State Park featuring a drop in elevation. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND
 RIGHT: A group collects its discs under the pines at Chadron State Park. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Grant Gartner and son Eli play on the well-manicured course at Windmill State Recreation Area. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Temporary baskets introduce the sport to attendees of the annual Outdoor Discovery Program at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Rodiek's interest in the sport came before he was hired by Chadron State Park when he was a college student.

In high school, the South Dakota native participated in disc golf tournaments at the world level and also collaborated with his father, Dusty, to design courses. Their Nebraska work from those days includes courses at Medicine Creek, Lewis and Clark, and Fort Kearny state recreation areas, as well as high-ranking courses at McCook's Kelley Park and Kearney's Cottonmill Park.



Jake Rodiek plays a round with his children at Mahoney State Park. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Now, as an assistant administrator for engineering for Game and Parks, Rodiek carries even more influence on the

development of courses throughout Nebraska. "The agency has shown initiative to continue to add courses across the state," Rodiek said. "It's a growing sport. In the past 10 years, we've probably added 10 courses."

Disc golf courses are attractive to park managers for many reasons. Rodiek said courses at the state parks cost only about \$6,000 to install. Materials consist mostly of baskets, concrete and signage. Beyond the initial investment, there's not much extra maintenance required and people bring their own equipment to play.

Rodiek considers the Chadron course and a newer one he helped design at Windmill State Recreation Area near Gibbon jewels in the state park system.

The latter was completed in August 2024 with thoughtful design considerations and regulation tees and baskets among the park's six lakes and namesake windmills. "The course is well-manicured and everything is built to specs," he said.

Rodiek said the Pine Ridge scenery makes Chadron, Nebraska's first state park, a top offering as well — especially hole 12 that features a dramatic drop of elevation with buttes in the background.

"Chadron has a lot of elevation shots," he said. "There's a lot of different varieties of golf as you play that course. It's in a unique location."

A SPORT FOR ALL

Much of the sport's popularity is attributed to its accessibility.

"It's an easy outdoor activity that anybody can go out and do. It's a good excuse to go for a walk and meet up with people," Rodiek said.

Baskets have sprung up in city parks across the world, and the equipment to play is inexpensive. A set of six discs, including driver, putter and mid-range options, can be had for under \$25.

"It can be really affordable, but like any hobby you can make it more costly and buy hundreds of discs," said Rodiek, who carries 12-15 discs when playing in tournaments. "You don't have to do that. You can pick up just one and go out and play."

When finding places to play, disc golfers refer to UDisc.com with its interactive map, detailed descriptions and player reviews about courses throughout the world — including information regarding a top-notch experience in Lincoln.

AN ELITE COURSE

For what could be called an elite experience for the sport, players flock to the Beal Slough Disc Golf Course in Lincoln, a rarity with its green fees.

The \$5 helps maintain the course, solely dedicated to disc golf capitalizing on the woody, hilly terrain of the 47-acre Beal Slough Greenway, an important part of the city's drainage system.

Development of the course was spearheaded by James Fleege and fellow members of the Lincoln Flying Disc Club, a non-profit organization that helps manage all of the courses in the capital city.

UDisc rankings have put it at the top of the state's offerings, and as high as 70th in the world. Fleege said about 50,000 rounds are played at the course each year with people from almost every state.

"We regularly get visitors traveling in for the weekend," he said. "Trips from Kansas City, Des Moines, Colorado, stuff like that, just specifically to play this course, which is very cool."

High praise from those who play the game is appreciated, but a lofty ranking on UDisc isn't the primary goal when constructing disc golf courses in places such as state park and recreation areas, Rodiek said.

"When putting them in state parks, you have to avoid the fishermen, campers, cabins, trail rides, and all sorts of things," he said. "We're installing them for a family-friendly park activity that people can do when they're staying at the park."



LEFT: Discs are tailored to throw various shots and distances. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND
 ABOVE: James Fleege of Lincoln plays the Beal Slough Disc Golf Course in Lincoln, one of the top rated courses in the United States. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

DISC GOLF PRIMER

There’s a lingo to it, and, of course, special discs tailored to different shots. Drivers are aerodynamic for distance while others are built more for control.

Sidearms, forehands and backhands get the disc down the fairway. Butterflies and flappers are for putting.

“Each type of disc is designed to do something a little bit different. It depends on how you throw it for which direction it’s going to go,” Rodiek said. “If you throw a disc backhand, it will go left; forehand makes it go right.”

Sometimes, improvisation is necessary.

“There are a lot of get-outta-trouble shots like thumbers and tomahawks,” Rodiek said. “Sometimes you feel like you’re doing yoga when playing disc golf.”

The average tee-to-basket is about 270 feet with a par 3. Championship level courses have fairways of 400-500 feet — a distance that proficient players can accomplish with a good drive.

BIG DREAMS AND HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Had disc golf been born earlier than the sport with clubs and the dimpled ball, would it just be called “golf” and the other “ball golf”? The popularity of the disc game has picked

up steam since emanating from the West Coast. The number of disc courses is nearing the number of “regular” golf courses throughout the United States, even though ball golf got a big head start.

It’s impossible to know who first made a game of throwing a flying disc, or perhaps a pie pan, at stationary targets. However, the late “Steady” Ed Headrick is given credit for being the “Father of Disc Golf,” a title he earned dating back to his work as a key figure at Wham-O. It’s the company that invented the Frisbee. His obsession with the disc golf concept began in the early 1970s as he and others informally walked around challenging each other to hit objects such as trees and trash cans with their flying discs.

Wham-O didn’t share Headrick’s dream of building the sport of disc golf. When Headrick walked away from his lucrative job at the company in 1975, he put his passion to work developing and promoting disc golf and established Oak Grove, the nation’s first public course for the sport at Pasadena, California. It first featured poles as targets but then installed the “disc pole hole” that Headrick and his son patented. It’s the same basic design of today’s baskets with chains that are found across the nation.

It would be a while before the craze reached Nebraska. Roper East at Interstate Park in Lincoln, which was built in 1992, has the distinction of being Nebraska’s first course.

That summer, a newspaper story about the new attraction boasted that courses were being built “everywhere,” with more than 300 across the United States. Now, the number of courses in Nebraska alone is approaching that figure and there are about 16,000 courses in the world — two-thirds of which are in the U.S. “There are pros making six figures playing disc golf now,” Rodiek said.

SPINNING AHEAD

The public’s interest in disc golf remains strong, and, similar to many outdoor activities, it saw a big boost of participants during the COVID pandemic. In 2024, 1.26 million players used UDisc.

Clubs and groups can be found in most places the sport is played, the flagship organization being the Professional Disc Golf Association.

While Rodiek has had a lot of great memories playing the game and developing places to play the sport, a highlight was watching his father, the course designer, be inducted to the Nebraska Disc Golf Hall of Fame during a ceremony at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park.

For a growing segment of the population, the development of courses is a legacy that will long be noticed for park visitors far and wide. 

UDISC.COM LISTING OF NEBRASKA STATE PARKS AND STATE RECREATION AREAS DISC GOLF COURSES

Branched Oak SRA: 9 holes, 1.2 miles, “Flat”

Chadron SP: 18 holes, 2.3 miles, “Extremely Hilly”

Fort Kearny SRA, 9 holes, .8 miles, “Flat”

Fremont Lakes (State Lakes Disc Golf Course): 9 holes, 1.3 miles, “Flat”

Indian Cave SP: 9 holes, 1.1 miles, “Very Hilly”

Lake Maloney SRA (Jaycee Park Disc Golf Course): 9 holes, .7 miles, “Flat”

Lewis and Clark SRA (Weigand Disc Golf Course): 9 holes, 1.2 miles, “Flat”

Medicine Creek SRA: 9 holes, .6 miles, “Flat”

Mahoney SP: 18 holes, 2.5 miles, “Hilly”

Pawnee SRA: 9 holes, 1 mile, “Flat”

Willow Creek SRA: 9 holes, 1 mile, “Flat”

Windmill SRA: 18 holes, 1.8 miles, “Flat”



Big bluestem flowers covered
in morning dew.

INCONSPICUOUS BEAUTY

Did you know grasses have flowers?

Story and photos by Chris Helzer



Red anthers dangle from big bluestem flowers.

What comes to mind when you think of a flower? If you're like most, you probably picture something that looks like a daisy or sunflower, with multiple colorful petals radiating out from a center disk. While many do look like that, flowers come in a dizzying array of designs, all of which are intricate and beautiful, even if they might not look immediately familiar.

Many people are surprised to learn that grasses have flowers. They must, of course, since grasses make seeds, and seeds come from flowers. Grass flowers are tiny, and don't have big, showy petals or attractive scents. For all that, they're still beautiful, even if you have to look closely to appreciate them.

The primary function of a flower is to produce seeds for reproduction. Seed production usually requires an exchange of pollen, so flowers have to both produce pollen and capture pollen from other flowers. Usually both those functions happen on the same flower, but some plants produce separate male flowers — which make pollen — and female flowers, which receive it and create seeds.

To move pollen from one flower to another, most plants use one of two methods; they either induce animals to move the pollen for them, or they rely on the wind to do it. Flowers that rely on animals have to work for that help. Many make themselves big and colorful and/or produce strong odors to attract visitors. Visiting animals are rewarded with food — either pollen, nectar or both. In return, those visitors carry some pollen away with them that hopefully gets rubbed off on another flower and stimulates seed production.

It takes a lot of energy for plants to produce big, attractive petals, essential oils and sweet nectar. Because of that energy expenditure, lots of plants choose the cheaper option of throwing their pollen to the wind. Instead of investing in all those extras, wind-pollinated plants stick to the basics. They have anthers that produce pollen and stigmas that capture it. Simple, elegant and inexpensive.

Grasses — along with sedges and rushes — are wind-pollinated, including grass species we use as row crops such as corn, wheat, rice and oats. They're joined by many tree species, including pines, junipers, oaks, walnuts and others. Ragweed is probably the most infamous of the wind-pollinated plants because of the number of people who suffer from hay fever, but other broadleaf plants like plantain, nettles and hops are at least mostly wind-pollinated.

Look closely at grass flowers and two structures stand out. The first is the anther, which contains the pollen the flower is releasing into the wind. Anthers are usually long and slender, often nearly cylindrical in shape. A single anther can contain thousands of pollen grains. The second structure is the feathery stigma, which catches wind-borne pollen. The stigma is connected to the ovary, where seeds will be produced, if everything goes well.



Indian grass



Plains oval sedge



Buffalo grass



Junegrass in full bloom has inconspicuous flowers, but a subtle beauty.



Sun sedge is common throughout Nebraska but rarely recognized because of its short stature and non-showy flowers.



A hover fly feeds on pollen from a big bluestem anther.



A tree cricket feeds on a big bluestem anther.



Leaf beetles eating big bluestem pollen/anthers.

Grasses don't need animals to move their pollen around, but some animals visit grass flowers anyway. Pollen grains contain lots of protein, carbohydrates and other nutrients, so they make an excellent food source. Some bee species feed on grass pollen, but flies are much more common visitors. In particular, hover flies — aka syrphid flies — are commonly seen on grass flowers, often holding anthers like big ice cream cones and licking the pollen from them.

Beetles, grasshoppers and crickets are a few other examples of insects that take advantage of the nutritional value of grass pollen. Most grasses probably don't get much benefit from these insect visitors. While the insects can move pollen from one flower to another, they often damage or consume the operational parts of flowers while they're at it. For the most part, the wind does a sufficient job for grasses, and the overwhelming number of pollen grains flying through the air means there's a good chance some will be caught by the right stigma on the right flower.

Grass flowers don't have to show off. If they went to parties, they wouldn't be the attendees wearing big flashy hats or dresses with plunging necklines. They'd show up in faded jeans and whichever shirt from the laundry pile smelled least bad.

Daisies and sunflowers are gorgeous, but it costs them a lot to look that good. Grasses prefer to spend their energy elsewhere. They've been dominating prairies for a very long time, so it must be working for them. 🌾



Tree cricket on prairie cordgrass.



A hover fly larva feeds on big bluestem.

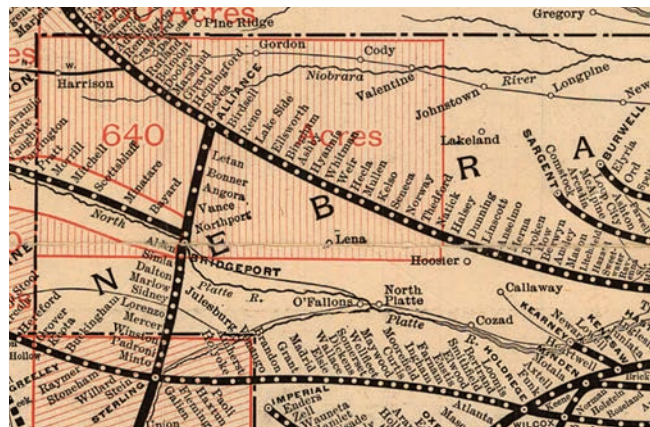
The Kinkaiders

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

In some places, 160 acres was not enough. The Homestead Act of 1862 promised a free quarter-section to claimants who “proved up” on the land by building a home and farming for five years. That was considered a good-sized farm, plenty of land to support a large family. But as the land filled up, settlers proceeded westward into a progressively drier climate.

For a few decades a popular notion held that “rainfall follows the plow”—in other words, that farming the prairie increased its evaporation, leading to greater rainfall. The severe droughts of the 1890s brought that idea to a painful end. By the early 1900s, it was clear that a farmer needed more than a quarter section to make a living on the High Plains of western Nebraska.

In, 1904 Nebraska congressman Moses P. Kinkaid authored a new law that allowed 640-acre homestead claims — a square mile — in non-irrigable lands in the Nebraska Sandhills and Panhandle.



Detail of a map from a 1912 brochure, free government lands in Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and South Dakota along the Burlington Route. Red areas show regions eligible for the Kinkaid Act (640 acres) and the Enlarged Homestead Act (320 acres). NSHS M78 1912 B961h

The new law led to a land boom as “Kinkaiders” came to western Nebraska to claim farmland. Mari Sandoz — whose father, “Old Jules” Sandoz, helped locate the new settlers — described it in her book “Love Song to the Plains.”

“Two weeks before the opening, covered wagons, horsebackers, men afoot and finally railroad trains long with

extra cars for the boomers toiled into Alliance, Valentine, North Platte and Broken Bow. The more serious, the more intelligent homeseekers got information at the land office and vanished into the sandhills. Many turned back at the first soft yellow chop hills pockmarked by blowouts and warted with soapweeds, yuccas, their elegant spikes of waxy greenish-white blossoms standing tall.” Others found better land, but even on opening day, settlers often found that somehow the best parcels had already been claimed by local cattlemen.

A railroad promotional brochure for Kinkaid lands included a thank-you letter from J. W. Crouse of Read (Arthur County), who said his Kinkaid farm “has released us from the thrall of city life and put upon us the highway to independence and prosperity.”



Church at DeWitty, built by members of the congregation, circa 1910. NSHS RG2301-1-3

That was the dream the railroads and land offices were selling — a final chance at a fading frontier. In 1907, a group of black Kinkaiders founded the town of DeWitty in Cherry County. The town had 100 families by 1917, making it Nebraska’s largest black settlement. But similar to most other Kinkaid settlements, it declined after World War I and was gone by the mid-1930s.

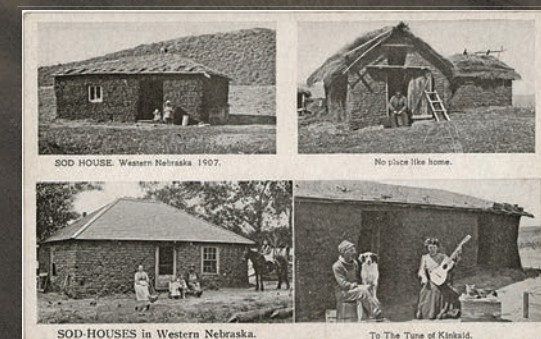
The Sandhills proved to be poor country for farming. Plowing opened the sandy ground to wind erosion, with dunes forming along fence lines. Most of this land soon reverted to rangeland, but even 640 acres was not enough for a viable ranch. Most Kinkaiders either failed to prove up on their claims or eventually sold out to large ranchers. Few physical traces remain of Nebraska’s final homesteading era, but thanks to photographers, descendants and writers such as Mari Sandoz, the story remains part of western Nebraska lore. [N](#)

Learn more at the NSHS’s website at history.nebraska.gov



Nebraska Congressman Moses Kinkaid introduced the 1904 legislation for enlarged land claims. NSHS RG2411-0-2943-b

OPPOSITE: Alliance Times-Herald, June 28, 1904.



ABOVE: Kinkaid-era postcard by photographer John Nelson of Ericson, Nebraska. NSHS RG3542-132-15

RIGHT: Another John Nelson postcard shows Kinkaid humor. NSHS RG3542-PH132-12



HOW TO FISH LAKE

Story and photos by Doug Steinke



The author celebrates his first pike on the fly as his son, Blake, lands the fish.

In the late 1970s when I was 8-12 years old, my dad was working for Central Public Power and Irrigation District as a civil engineer. During the summer, he would take me to his office on the top of the dam at Lake McConaughy. As soon as I got out of the car, I'd scurry down to the face of the dam and the rocks next to the spillway and boat dock. I would spend the entire day fishing and combing the shores for lost lures.

I once found a fluorescent orange Rapala wedged underneath a pizza box-sized flat rock. As I flipped it over, three crawdads took off. One of them went directly toward the deeper water of the lake. Instantly, a huge smallmouth snatched it as it fell to the depths. The light bulb went off.

I then spent my days flipping rocks and trying to catch those 2- to 3-inch crawdads. I found a method of putting them on a single hook with no weight and casting them into the dark shadows that were in between the boulders on the shore. As a kid, I imagined the crawdads yelling, "Help me, help me" as they disappeared into the darkness below.

Within seconds, my line would thunk, and I would try to wrestle in one of these spectacular fish. More times than not, they would snap my line before I could get them onto shore.

This was how my Lake McConaughy fishing education began, and it hasn't stopped since.

Dad and I were diehard walleye tournament anglers in the 1990s and 2000s, even placing in the top 10 several times. He also guided on the lake for 10 years. For me, I was a walleye-all-the-time type of fisherman. But as my boys grew up they wanted to catch other fish, and we found ways to do just that.

Some days we'd try to catch a bass slam — wiper, white bass, smallmouth and a largemouth. On other days we'd target channel catfish on the dam throwing Rat-L-Traps or pull out the fly rods and cast for smallmouths with poppers, wipers on scroungers or carp on white rabbit fur - also known as "puke" — flies. Variety became the name of the game.

Despite having more than 50 years of experience fishing Lake Mac, I'm well aware that many of you may have limited knowledge at this lake or might be fishing it for the first time. These words are for you.

GETTING STARTED

To begin, I follow a few rules of thumb I have figured out over the years. One, Mac is a wind-driven fishing lake. Most times, when the wind is blowing, the fishing is good. When it is not, it can be quite difficult.

Two, every day, five separate fish species eat a bug, a leech, a shad, an alewife or a crawdad at five different places on the lake. Rare is the day when nothing is biting somewhere on the lake.

Three, often whatever's working on the north side of the lake is also working on the south side of the lake. So, say there is a live bait dragging bite going on at Admiral's Cove in 5 to 15 feet of water. Chances are you can go directly across the lake to Vans Lakeview and drag bait in 5 to 15 feet of water and duplicate it.

And four, probably my "golden rule" is fish your own fish. If there are a hundred boats dragging bait in 5 to 15 feet of water, chances are you can go find your own spot and fish all by yourself doing the exact same thing on the lake.

MY SETUP

When I am fishing McConaughy, I have six rods rigged up and ready to go at all times. These rods include:

- 1. A 10-foot, 7-weight fly rod with an alewife imitation clouser.
- 2. A medium-weight 7-foot spinning rod with a quarter-ounce lipped jig.
- 3. A heavy-weight casting rod with a 1-ounce white-and-chartreuse spinnerbait with a gold blade.
- 4. A 7-foot medium-weight spinning rod with a quarter-ounce jig rigged with a 4-inch chartreuse flash Keitech or 3-inch silver grub.
- 5. An 8-foot, 6-inch medium-heavy rod with a low ratio bait casting reel and a bone-colored Whopper Plopper.
- 6. An 8-foot, 6-inch medium-heavy rod with a low ratio bait casting reel and a 5-inch silver flutter spoon.



This family came down for a swim where minutes before the author was catching walleyes even shallower than they are wading.



The author targets jagged mudlines intersecting the bank as opposed to solid, larger mudlines.

SHALLOW WATER

One of the most overlooked fishing opportunities at McConaughy is the ultra-shallow bite that occurs May through as long as July some years. Over the past 10 years, I almost exclusively fish with a fly rod from March through most of June. One of the indirect results of fly-fishing is that I am always on the shorelines seeking out shallow active fish.

This method has allowed me to understand why fish hold on certain shorelines and not on others. Often at McConaughy, the wave action has created a trough or drop directly off the shore that enables predator fish to push and ambush bait fish feet off the bank. Many times, I have walked the shores and casted my fly rod 5 feet off the bank and watched a 28-inch wiper tail walk like a tarpon after I've hooked it in the ultra-shallow water.

In May and June, I never enter the water without throwing a long cast or land the fly right along the shore's edge. If there are fish in that area the strike will be near instantaneous. After probing the area without any fish, I will then wade into deeper water, gradually working the shallows until I'm waist deep.

While working these shores, especially in a windy environment, you will get a mudline that creates an ambush point as well. Often when people say they are fishing the mudline they are out deeper on a more expansive mudline blowing off of a shore.

I am most interested in the 10- to 30-foot-wide mudlines with jagged shapes or a variation within the mudline. Wherever one of these mudlines intersects the shore directly, that is the ambush point I'm looking for. Knowing other structures on the shore, like a small cup or a steep 1- to 3-foot drop to deeper water, is the magic point where you will find almost any species of fish in May and June.



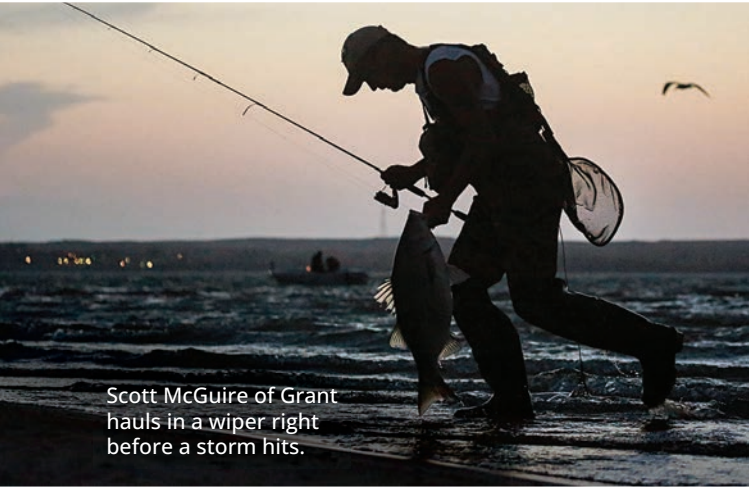
Big Mac's weather can change quickly, sometimes going from glass-calm to 4-foot waves in minutes. If you see storm clouds, it's best to get off the water.



Blake Steinke of Grand Island casts to a school of alewife.



Algae blooms can act as a mudline, activating a shallow bite.



Scott McGuire of Grant hauls in a wiper right before a storm hits.



Tate Florell from Holdrege learns when the water level of the lake rises in the late spring, flooded vegetation is the place to fish.



Jared Hawn of Silverthorne, Colorado, releases a wiper that was tricked by his hand-tied streamer.



Slowly reeling or “rolling” a heavy spinnerbait on the bottom is a preferred method for catching walleyes at Big Mac.

NOW, FOR A SPECIES-BY- SPECIES LOOK.



Jerry Steinke of Ogallala and Kevin Jenny of Gretna hold a pair of big walleyes.

WALLEYE

Walleye is by far the most chased species on the lake. And people are targeting them immediately after ice out from Admirals Cove all the way to the dam on the north side of the lake throwing jigs or slab spoons. These fish will be located in this area in a pre-spawn condition.

One of the biggest fishing spectacles of the year is the actual walleye spawn. Spawning usually takes place on the face of the dam, but do not overlook the southern rocky points and also the rocky area from Admirals to North shore.

The end of walleye spawning coincides with alewife spawning in the lake. At this point, a majority of the walleyes are in the shallows, where a lot of wind-driven bites occur. Throwing jigs, crankbaits and spinnerbaits, and trolling or dragging live bait can be done all over the lake in 1 to 15 feet of water. It is not uncommon to have strikes in 1 to 2 feet of water right off of the banks. Often I see people wade out waist deep from the bank to throw jigs out deeper to catch walleyes. On many occasions, they are probably behind you if the water is murky.

Once the alewife spawn wanes, the bait moves deeper and, from late June through October, most of the walleyes are in 10 to 40 feet of water. This is when trolling spinnerbaits, worm spinner rigs and crankbaits shines.

If you do get a super windy day, fish you caught in 20 feet of water the previous day will move into a churned-up bank in 5 feet of water. They also turn back up on the dam at nights during the summer.

When the fall sets in August to ice up, the primary method is slabbing spoons off of points and humps all around the lake.



The smallmouth bass fishery seems to get better each year.

SMALLMOUTH

When you arrive at Lake McConaughy and seek smallmouth, you will obviously see the dam and southern rock features of the lake. These are the primary areas for smallmouth fishing. Almost everything you use with smallmouth in other lakes will work here as well, including Ned rigs, creature baits, topwaters and black jigs.

But in May and June, do not overlook the sand points on the north side of the lake extending all the way out to Sandpoint. With the alewife spawning, you can often find nice smallmouth in these areas chasing bait as well.

For fly-fishing, top waters, brown woolly bugger and the ever trusty micro black leech are my go-tos when I’m fly-fishing.



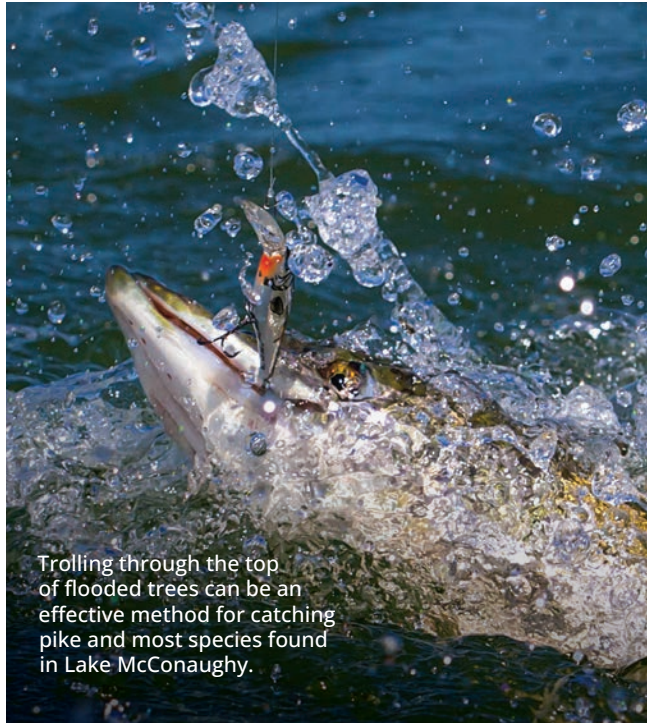


Blake smiles with a big northern pike.

NORTHERN PIKE

There can be at times a good population of northern pike in the lake. Solid population numbers usually coincide with a large jump of inflow from the river — for example a 6- to 20-foot rise May through July. When such an influx occurs, pretty much every bay and vegetative bank on the north side of the lake will have these toothy critters.

The primary baits to attract Northern pike are spinnerbaits, topwaters and creature jigs. northern pike also can be excellent fodder with the fly rod when you have found them. But that's not to say they cannot be found all the way around the lake. It just can be hard to target and catch them while you are shaking off wipers and walleyes.



Trolling through the top of flooded trees can be an effective method for catching pike and most species found in Lake McConaughy.



The west end and vegetated bays are home to the amazing northern pike.



Blake hooked this big channel catfish along Kingsley Dam. Flutter spoons are great for white bass (right).

CHANNEL CATFISH

One of the most overlooked species that roam Lake McConaughy is the channel catfish. It is one of the more dependable fish that can be caught on a daily basis, from ice out all the way to ice up.

In the spring, they can be caught on cut-up baits, chicken livers or other bottom-dwelling recipes with fairly common regularity.

Once June arrives, and their spawning occurs, a lot of these male catfish will be protecting beds in shallow water from 1 to 8 feet. Any type of vegetative structure could hold eggs and the males watching those eggs. Anything from spinnerbaits, crankbaits and jigs will catch fish, and slip bobbers with leeches and crawlers is a preferred method.

As the summer goes on, catfish will suspend with alewife schools right along with the walleyes and wipers. Trolling crankbaits 10 to 20 feet below the surface in 40 to 100 feet of water is the preferred method here. Watching a planer board being taken down by a 5-pound catfish is like watching a bobber go down in the shallows.

Once you find a pod of feeding catfish, they pretty much bite the entire day. This is a great time to take a kid out on the boat and tire them in an hour reeling in catfish with 200 feet of line out. Occasionally, they will stack up on the face of the dam during the late summer and throwing Rat-L-Traps or any other types of crankbaits or spinnerbaits is an excellent way to catch them.

As fall settles in, channel cats follow the wipers and walleyes, and slabbing spoons are the preferred method.

Casting lipped jigs like the Luck-E-Strike Scrounger tipped with a plastic fluke is an effective way to find fish.



WHITE BASS

White bass are making a strong comeback in the lake after a die-off a couple years ago. Again, like with most predator species, they can be caught in the shallows on windy days.

With the onset of June, white bass tend to suspend out in 10 to 30 feet of water off the sand banks and points. You can fish for them at night over lanterns, but this technique doesn't seem to be quite as effective at Mac like it is at other lakes.

In the summer, fish will get deeper following the baitfish. Trolling crankbaits is the preferred method to go after white bass. This is also the time that I like to throw flutter spoons over the top of them in deeper water.



If the author had to choose one color of spinnerbait to throw at Lake Mac, this is it.



Mitch Rother of Grand Island catches wipers on the fly.

WIPERS

I have broken down wipers in their own category outside of white bass. White bass and wipers tend to run with one another up until about the 15- to 18-inch length in their lifespan. Once wipers exceed this length, they operate on their own program.

Similar to most predator species in the lake, they are well-tuned to alewife locations at all times. In the spring, they can be found searching the shallows in schools I call wolf packs. You will often see these packs of 24- to 30-inch fish as they search the shallows for food. They will even push water like redfish in the coastal shallows.

In March and April, my favorite way to target wipers is with a fly rod. They seem to favor a very light streamer that acts almost like a jerkbait. Common colors are white, white and purple, and white and chartreuse. These flies are anywhere from 3 to 7 inches in length. On a warm and windy spring day in the shallows, there can be quite a good bite.

When the alewife start to spawn, I switch over to more bass-like techniques of casting spinnerbaits, jerkbaits and topwaters. I like to chase them during the midday throwing flutter spoons off rocky points and deeper sand points as they retreat to deeper depth with the bait fish.

Another great technique in targeting wipers is to fish for them at night. During May, June and July, the alewife will seek the shallows and the wipers will be right with them. There are times you can camp on the beach and throw for wipers feet from your camper.

As late summer and fall appear, the wipers really start to disperse throughout the lake and can be found trolling or throwing slabs spoons over fish that you mark in 20 to 60 feet of water.



Blake lands a common carp with a fly rod.

COMMON CARP

Another species that seems to be getting more and more attention each year at McConaughy is the common carp. You will see several people targeting them with fly rods in the spring and summer months. I like to fish for them in the shallows throwing small crayfish and micro leech patterns as June and July roll around. I like to throw imitation cotton seeds or puke flies (white rabbit fur) on top of flat glass water. It is a sight-fishing exercise that is a lot harder than it sounds, but at times carp have chased these surface cotton imitations 20 feet, the takes are just like watching trout sip a hopper.



Jack Wemhoff and Blake Steinke wait on the photographer to head out fishing.

As you can see, McConaughy gives you many options to get a bite on your trip. Even after fishing this lake for 50 years, almost on every trip, something new surprises me. It could be a new spot, a new technique or even seeing something new for the first time. Ultimately, I'm still chasing my boyhood feeling of "the thunk" and what is on the other side of the line. It's the catalyst that invokes the same emotions I had when I was 10 years old and the pure joy of just fishing. 

A RACE FOR EVERYONE

Crofton's Dam Race at
Lewis and Clark Lake

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Explorers Credit Union hosts a water station in Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area every year. Volunteers host about 12 water stations along the route. Racers vote on their favorite, and the winning water station gets a prize.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND





Julie Moeller of Crofton participates in the full triathlon: kayaking 1.5 miles, running 5k and biking 12 miles. COOPER DAVIS

region. The event consists of a 1.5-mile kayak on the lake, then a 5k run through the state recreation area, followed by a 12-mile bike ride into the town of Crofton. The event is unique in that racers have a multitude of options on how they want to participate — organizers are continually thinking of ways to encourage and accommodate racers of different abilities.

“You can do the whole thing yourself — do every leg of the race. Or like a lot of

people new to racing, they’ll jump in with a team,” Marsh explained. “You can just do the kayak portion, or you can just do the running portion, or just the bike portion with a team. And often, those teams are made up of family members or coworkers or people you just want to have fun with.”

For example, Marsh’s cousin Kyle is a teacher in Hartington with cerebral palsy. For his 40th birthday, Kyle entered the race with Marsh’s husband, Craig. Kyle was able to race the kayak portion while Craig did the running and biking portions. The 2025 event was the team’s third year of competing together.

Marsh’s daughter, Claire, also raced for the first time when she was 14 years old, training with her dad all summer, and she almost beat him.

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Northeast Region Park Superintendent Tyler Wulf’s brother-in-law also did the race after having quadruple bypass surgery. “He set a goal to be able to do the race after surgery, and he did a great job. And he finished,” Marsh said.

Additionally, two more events were added in 2025.

Stacy and Terry Thoene of Eagle racing with their 7-year-old son, Oliver, who is battling CLN2 Batten’s Disease. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



If you’ve ever dreamed about participating in a triathlon, but don’t want or can’t do the whole thing — Crofton’s Dam Race is the answer. The three-sport event combines kayaking, running and bicycling and kicks off at Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area and ends on Main Street in Crofton, where an after-party and “the best dam bloody Mary” awaits competitors and visitors.

The race was started in 2018 by a small group of community members looking to encourage more tourism to their town by the scenic Lewis and Clark Lake. The July event grew from 58 racers in its first year to over 350 racers from 12 states in 2025 — some came as far away as California, Maryland and Florida.

The race is not about competition, said Heidi Marsh, a Crofton volunteer who has been part of the event’s planning committee since the beginning.

“We have elite racers come, and we love them and they’re welcome, but that’s not our target,” Marsh said. “People come because they want a unique racing opportunity and to have a really good time.”

Organizers have made the race as accessible and inclusive as possible, with participants ranging from 14 years old to their 70s. A true grassroots effort, Crofton’s Dam Race is about community spirit, hospitality and getting people outside and moving.

A RACE FOR EVERYONE

During its inception, committee members wanted to offer a triathlon that would embrace the Lewis and Clark Lake



The 12-mile bike ride from Lewis and Clark Lake into downtown Crofton can be completed as part of the triathlon or as a standalone race.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Participants have the option to bypass the triathlon. Instead, they can run the half marathon that starts at the state recreation area and ends in Crofton or, they can make the trek by bike — e-bikes are allowed.

The race is also popular among half marathoners looking to run in every state. Marsh remembers a couple of septuagenarians who flew into Nebraska to race several years ago. They wore capes with the map of United States sewn on, with states highlighted where they had run half marathons.



Crofton locals Jeff and Jolene Steffen showing their handcrafted kayak to curious children.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Some participants, such as Crofton husband-and-wife team Jeff and Jolene Steffen have gone so far as handcrafting their own wooden kayak for the occasion. The Steffens have been participating since 2018; their daughter won the female individual triathlon in 2024.

Even younger children are encouraged to join the fun. Crofton Physical Therapy offers a kids race the Friday night prior. Kids ages 8-13 can sign up for a short run, short bike ride and a swim in the Crofton public pool. It’s been a nice add-on for racers who are also bringing their children into town, Marsh said.

“It’s \$10 a kid, and they get a goodie bag. The race is untimed, even though my son claims he won last year,” she said.

Crofton Dam Race Registration

Thanks to sponsors, including Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska, Crofton Community Club and Explorers Credit Unit, organizers have been able to keep registration fees low (fees will increase after July 10):

- Individual triathlon: \$70
- Team triathlon: \$105
- Youth team triathlon (ages 14-18): \$80
- Half marathon only: \$70
- Bike race only: \$40

Participants may borrow a kayak from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at no cost. However, they must bring their own life jacket, bike and helmet. Register at croftonsdamrace.com.



COOPER DAVIS



State park employee Daryl Ausdemore helps a kayaker.
JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

volunteers are extra special,” Marsh said. “Our community loves this event, and we see the value in it. We love introducing our families to new racers from across the country, and so we welcome them. People just find lots of joy out on the road.”

RACE AFTER-PARTY

On race day, the Knox County town of 800 swells to a lively crowd of 1,300. Racer or not, everyone can partake at Crofton’s Dam Race famed after-party at

the finish line. Set on Main Street, racers, family, friends, locals and volunteers gather to celebrate with cold drinks, food, a live band and an awards ceremony. The after-party started after the 2018 race, when organizers realized something was missing.

“My husband was really excited to have that camaraderie of racing. But he felt getting a pat on the back and a tavern sandwich afterward wasn’t enough,” Marsh explained. “And it was at that moment we realized we needed to make this a celebration. If we’re going to invite people to our community, let’s really show them something special.”

Marsh credits locals Doug and Juliet de Shazer, owners of Crofton Haymarket, and Lewis & Clark Pulley Museum for preparing the amazing food that participants get to enjoy at the end of their race — delicious chicken sandwiches, salads, homemade cookies and Crofton’s “best dam bloody Mary.”

UNBEATABLE HOSPITALITY

Organizers do their best to make racers feel safe and welcome, and the sense of hospitality is palpable on race day. Over 150 volunteers make Crofton’s Dam Race possible, and that number includes Crofton’s entire fire department, Yankton County Search and Rescue, an EMT ambulance squad and the support of state and local law enforcement. Because a large portion of the race is on the highway, safety is a top concern.

Also, race announcers, cooks and local families running water stations are integral to the event’s success and charm. The water stations are set at every intersection throughout the race, and volunteers dress up in fun, silly costumes, carry uplifting signs and enthusiastically cheer on every racer to help keep up their morale.

“Time and time again, we hear that people just really appreciate the hospitality of Crofton and that our

Racers and spectators enjoy the comradie, live music and the “best dam bloody Mary” at the finish line celebration. COOPER DAVIS



Neal Neuhalphen, right, names Cheryl Frederik of Springfield the winner of the 2025 “Spirit of the Jorts” award. COOPER DAVIS

In 2025, Hard Patch Brewery in Hartington also created a special edition beer for the event.

SPIRIT OF THE “JORTS” AWARD

Although competition isn’t the event’s main goal, trophies crafted by Crofton High School’s technical education class are awarded to first place individual triathlon male and female. Winning teams in different age groups also are recognized.

Additionally, “every half marathoner gets a medal, because if you’re going to run 13.1 miles, that’s pretty impressive,” Marsh said, “especially through our river region, which is bluffs and hills. It’s not an easy run.”

The most coveted recognition, however, is the Spirit of the Jorts Award, which was inspired by Crofton local Neal Neuhalphen. Neuhalphen’s son, a cross-country runner, convinced his father to enter in 2018. Although he agreed, Neuhalphen had no interest in buying or wearing new exercise clothing, so he did the entire race wearing cut-off jean shorts — also known as “jorts.”

“I don’t know if you’ve ever ridden a bike in jorts, but it’s really hard,” Marsh said. “Neil is a beloved character of the race. He did it for several years in jorts, and we’ve kind of started to identify him as the spirit of Crofton’s Dam Race. So, several years back, we created the Neal Neuhalphen Spirit of the Jorts Award, and we give that award out every year to somebody who embraces the Neal Neuhalphen spirit of the race.”

The award can be given to someone who might’ve had a challenge during the race but they persevered and finished. Or it could be awarded to a person who stopped to help a fellow racer on the road. Neuhalphen’s original jorts were mounted on a large plaque and each new winner’s name is added to it.

“It’s the most popular award. It’s the last award we give out, and people get into it. They’re excited about it,” Marsh said.

Crofton’s Dam Race 2026 will take place July 25 at Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area. To register, visit croftonsdamrace.com. Then read about the schedule, route and get your gear in order before the race.

“We’ll bring the fun and the good times otherwise” Marsh said. 

Fundraising for a Hike-Bike Trail

Registration fees and sponsor donations help raise seed money for the construction of a new walking-biking trail at Lewis and Clark state recreation area. Crofton’s Dam Race committee has pledged \$50,000 to the project thus far, said Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area Superintendent Leslie Donner.

The new trail would wind through the Wiegand and Burbach areas and connect the marina, campgrounds, cabins and other park attractions. It would also allow for additional 5k and 3k race options within the SRA. Nebraska Game and Parks recently hired an engineering firm, and permitting, budgeting and a construction timeline are in the works.

“Crofton’s Dam Race brings new visitors into the park and creates a deeper connection to the outdoors,” Donner said. “It’s incredibly exciting to see not only the committee, but also the many dedicated volunteers come together in support of this trail project. This event will be remembered for more than just race day — it will leave a lasting impact on our park and community for years to come.”

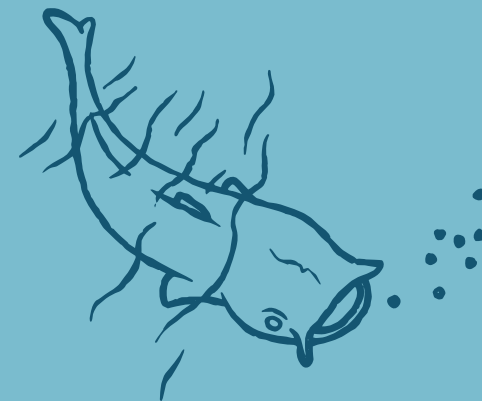


JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

WEDNESDAY NIGHT FISHING THERAPY

— A RAUCOUS BUNCH

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist



Before anyone makes a cast, a 25-pound channel catfish named Brutus must be fed. He's been hanging around the dock for five or six years, and the Wednesday Night Fishing Therapy group considers him part of the ritual.

"We know it's him because his whiskers are all rubbed off," Mark Dietz said. Some evenings a couple smaller buddies drift in behind him, but Brutus is the regular. When Mark tosses a few handfuls of cat food onto the water, the big fish surfaces and gulps it down, unfazed by the commotion just feet away. Only after Brutus has eaten does the real therapy begin.

The group of Sarpy and Douglas County friends fish together nearly every week, May through mid-September, at Mark's pond on the outskirts of Bellevue. They crowd onto a pontoon boat, christened The Barge, and circle the pond, casting until dark. The banter, joking and laughter are nearly nonstop. A poor cast or lost fish draws a barrage of good-natured jabs that only close friends can deliver. With this group, if you can't take the heat — and dish it out — you'd best not come aboard.

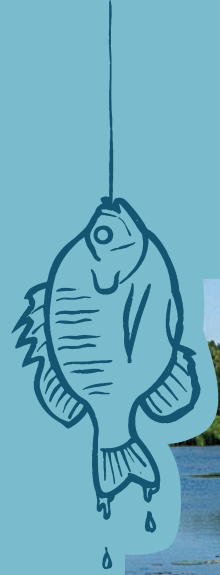
THE THERAPY GROUP

Mark, a Papillion native, is the heart of the group. In 1993, he started a Wednesday night fishing event at Lake Olivo, a Platte River sandpit where members had a cabin. In 2015, however, the group faced a crossroads: They were "booted from the cabin" when a campground was planned for the site. Undeterred, they began fishing a 6-acre flood-control pond adjoining 12 acres of grass and woods owned by Mark and his wife, Beth. They had purchased the land in 2002 from her grandparents, Glen and Mary Jane Miller, whose family had homesteaded there. The name Wednesday Night Fishing Therapy soon followed when, on a lark, Mark made it the title of a group text to see who would be fishing that week.

Today, longtime members include Dietz, Ron Koenig, Marty Giff, Todd Dubay and Steve Finley, along with a few newer faces. Each week, Mark texts seven or eight people to see who's in, and four or five usually show up. A few guys come only once or twice a year. "They always have to mow the lawn, walk the dog or something," he said.

The tight-knit group also takes part in other Dietz-organized events. These include the River Bottom Boys' annual deer camp at his Platte River cabin, where "we sometimes shoot deer, but mostly we eat really well and watch a lot of football." There's also his 35-year-running annual triathlon, when more than 30 friends and family gather for a grueling day of golf, horseshoes and lawn darts. Lastly, they occasionally get together to sample Mark's home-brewed beer and wine — some batches better than others.





*"YEAH, IT'S GOT A LITTLE LEAD UP FRONT," HE REPLIED.
"JUST LIKE YOU," MARTY CHIMED IN.*



AN EVENING OF FISHING

Last year, Mark — whom I've been friends with for more than 35 years — invited me for an evening of therapy. In early July 2025, I met Mark, Ron, Marty and Gene Braun, a newer member, at the pond at 5 p.m., their standard starting time. While loading the boat with fishing gear, folding chairs and coolers, I asked Marty if he had gone to school with Mark. "No," he said. "Dietz didn't go to high school — he's still trying to get his GED." The tone was set.

Before setting off, Mark was unanimously — and without his consent — voted captain for the evening, responsible for running the trolling motor. As I later learned, the designation made him the target of sarcasm whenever his steering failed to meet the approval of his mischievous passengers. We were soon underway, slowly trolling across the pond's quiet waters, quail whistling from nearby hills.

In the heat of summer, the group starts each evening fishing for bluegill and crappie in the cooler, deeper water in the pond's center, using ultralight rods and casting 1/32-ounce jigs, mostly road runners. It took Mark years to talk the others into using 4-pound-test line and light jigs for panfish. "They couldn't keep up with me," he said. "I told them, 'You gotta go light, baby.'"

They finally listened, and according to Mark, "now they catch fish." In the pond's clear water, heavier line is more visible, and fish avoid the jig. With an ultralight rod and

4-pound line, they can feel even the slightest bite, and casting light jigs is easier than with 6-pound line. On a good night, the group catches 30 to 40 panfish.

Before long, the guys landed three crappies. When Marty reeled one in, he gave an unexpected kudo to the captain for "steering him onto one," then slipped the fish back into the water. "You know it's going to be a good night if I catch a fish," he added.

Soon, small bass and bluegill were hitting. During summer, the group practices catch-and-release, mainly because, as Mark put it, "nobody wants to clean fish late at night." When ice fishing — when the fish are best eating — they keep moderate-sized bluegill and crappie and release the larger ones.

The pond holds mostly 10- to 11-inch crappie and 8- to 9-inch bluegill. After four decades of fishing it, Mark has noticed that panfish size tends to run in cycles — large for a few years, then smaller. He isn't sure what causes the swings but believes water clarity plays a role. In wet years, runoff clouds the water, limiting sunlight and reducing aquatic vegetation. With fewer plants come fewer insects, and with less food the fish don't grow as quickly.

As the evening wore on, the bantering and storytelling never let up. One frequent target was Steve — fortunately not in the boat that night — who has a reputation for being high-minded when it comes to fishing, spurning panfish

and casting only for big bass. "He uses \$75 lures that look like a muskrat swimming around the pond," Ron joked.

Mark then told a now-fabled Steve story. "One night, Steve had a big bass strike that yanked his \$800 rod-and-reel combo right out of his hands. He didn't hesitate — he dove into the water after it, phone in his pocket and all. He got the rod, and the phone survived, but he lost his \$100 Oakley sunglasses. We laughed our butts off."

SWITCHING TO BASS

As the sun neared the horizon and bullfrogs began croaking from the shallows, the anglers switched to larger rods and heavier line for bass. From about 10 yards out, they cast rubber frogs and worms and crankbaits near — and on top of — the dense mat of American lotus pads ringing the shoreline.

A big bass swirled deep among the pads, prompting Mark to pitch his frog to the spot. The fish struck in a flash, but missed. The performance repeated on the next two casts, then the fish gave up the game. Seeing the action, Ron was prompted to switch lures and asked Mark if his frog was weighted. "Yeah, it's got a little lead up front," he replied. "Just like you," Marty chimed in.

Gene, the least raucous onboard, gave me a smile and said, "Just like a bunch of kids. I'm nice to Mark because I'm new and want to be asked back."

The bass hit consistently, though most were small; the largest weighed about two pounds. Mark said bass fishing in the pond isn't what it used to be. They once caught many 3- to 4-pounders, but not anymore. He believes the decline may be part of a natural cycle, especially since they release all bass. But he also blames the American lotus along the shoreline. In spring, big bass hold in shallow bedding areas, but the lure-snagging lotus makes casting nearshore difficult. "Lotus are good for fish, but not fishing," he said.

When the sun slipped below the horizon, the group decided to call it a night. Mark turned the boat toward the dock and hit the throttle, allowing Ron one final jab at the captain. "I just got my last cast into the lily pads and now we're going 60 miles an hour," he said.

"Being captain stinks," Mark replied. "I've been harassed all night."

With the boat secured and gear loaded into trucks, the fishermen — keeping with tradition — sat in lawn chairs or leaned against tailgates and enjoyed a cold drink as they relived the evening. They agreed the fishing had been good, then headed home one by one until only Mark and I remained. As we said our goodbyes, I thanked him for the evening, and he invited me back.

"Sure thing," I said. A bit more therapy couldn't hurt. ■



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Rattler: Herpetologist Dennis Ferraro is always ready to engage anyone and everyone about frogs, turtles and snakes — especially rattlesnakes, his favorite. *See story on page 72.* ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Thistles: The Good, the Bad and the Pretty

By Justin Haag



Brown-Belted Bumble Bee
(*Bombus griseocollis*) on Platte
Thistle (*Cirsium canescens*)

It was a busy scene even though I was the only person around for miles.

Far from the city streets were countless bees and other pollinators buzzing around the various white flowers dotting the surrounding green Sandhills grassland of the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

The species attracting so much attention with its yellowish-white flowers that spring evening was Platte thistle (*Cirsium canescens*). I took pleasure in walking from thistle to thistle to focus my macro lens on the bumble bees and other insects.

Does a poky thistle deserve so much love? Seems this one does.

Nebraska has 10 thistle species, half of which are native. Members of the sunflower family, some are perennials and some biennials with a two-year life cycle.

As non-native thistles have caused land managers headaches, the natives are considered proper species for our prairies. Sure, cattle do not like to eat their thorny leaves and stems, but if pastures are managed correctly, they don't grow in large enough numbers to cause problems. Still, they have often become collateral damage to methods of control for the bad actors as some have taken a "any thistle is a bad thistle" approach.

As evidenced by the show I saw that evening, the good thistles can

be important species for pollinators. Not only does Platte thistle have a name that should resonate well with Nebraskans, it is known to be a "butterfly plant" with nectar-rich flowers. Later in its life cycle, seeds provide food for birds.



Bicolored Striped Sweat Bee (*Agapostemon virsecens*) and Honey Bee (*Apis*)

Other native thistles in the state, generally not considered to be problematic in pastures, are tall (*Cirsium altissimum*), Flodman (*Cirsium flodmanii*), yellowspine (*Cirsium ochrocentrum*) and wavyleaf (*Cirsium undulatum*).

The thistles considered to be aggressive weeds in Nebraska — all non-native — are Canada (*Cirsium arvense*), musk (*Carduus nutans*), plumeless (*Carduus acanthoides*), Scotch (*Onopordum acanthium*) and bull (*Cirsium vulgare*).

The problematic thistles were introduced to North America via Euro-American settlers, maybe in contaminated seed and feed, or perhaps on purpose for their looks.

Without the natural enemies of their original lands overseas, the thistles thrived and displaced valuable grazing forage for livestock, native prairie plants and cropland.

They took root in our regions at different paces. Canada thistle, a native of Europe and Asia that some say was named by Americans blaming French traders for bringing it south from "the Land of Maple," has been considered a noxious weed since the 1800s. Musk didn't make the list until the mid-20th century.

How does one discern the good thistles from the bad?

Many resources exist, such as the Nebraska Weed Control Association and Nebraska Department of Agriculture's collaboration, "Thistles of Nebraska." I have it in print, but it is easily found with an internet search. The guide has a helpful flowchart to help people distinguish the natives from non-natives. One tell-tale feature, for instance, is whether the thistle has hair on its leaves. If it has no hair, or only sparse hair, on its upper side, it's a musk or plumeless thistle — the bad ones.

Landowners use a variety of methods to control the problematic species. With a little knowledge, they can get rid of the out-of-place thistles and leave the others for the birds and the bees, or whatever other pollinators find them attractive.

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Nebraska's Herpetologist — Dennis Ferraro

By Julie Thomas

Dennis Ferraro is always ready to engage anyone and everyone about frogs, turtles and snakes — especially rattlesnakes, his favorite. A much-revered professor of wildlife biology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, his enthusiasm and passion for the conservation of North American amphibians and reptiles has inspired generations of students, whom he goes to great lengths to engage. Ferraro is known for pulling snakes from his pockets during lectures and inviting students to join him on late-night excursions to look for injured herpetofauna that might need veterinary help. The professor's infectious love for amphibians and reptiles started when he was a child.

By age 9, Ferraro knew he wanted to become a herpetologist. His family home in Connecticut backed up to a wooded wetland, and Ferraro wandered around that wetland most days. Although this practice is highly discouraged and often illegal today, he began bringing home specimens and keeping them in a dresser drawer for observation. So, when Ferraro's mother began finding snakes and frogs throughout the house, she prompted his father to buy aquariums and set up a room in the basement — Ferraro's first real laboratory.

By age 13, the budding scientist was keeping an observation journal

and making notes about frog calls and snake hiding places. Certainly, young Ferraro was a determined, curious learner, but it was his parents' support of outdoor exploration, his science teachers' mentoring, and the Boy Scouts of America that guided him to the perfect career.



Today, Ferraro calls himself a conservation biologist, one who focuses on balanced-functioning ecosystems and their interdependent relationships. Ferraro's concern for snakes has defined his efforts as a teacher. Lectures and field courses for students weren't enough — he also needed to broaden public awareness: Reptiles, especially snakes like the eastern racer shown above, are largely misunderstood by the public, and often needlessly killed. To raise awareness, the herpetologist began collecting amphibians and reptiles for research and educational purposes.

Ferraro and his specimens, along with student mentees, have

supported education programs across Nebraska, including presentations at Nebraska Game and Parks Commission outdoor expos. He also has appeared on Nebraska Public Media's Backyard Farmer program where he helps viewers resolve conflicts with wildlife and damage control on their property.

As a scientist, Ferraro continues to travel Nebraska to update his 35-year database on herpetofauna populations — the rattlesnake birthing season being the most anticipated part of the year. He travels to protected areas, such as Nature Conservancy properties, where rattlesnakes fulfill an important part in that grassland ecosystem alongside prairie dogs and bison. While there, he counts, tags, weighs, measures and monitors baby rattlers. Ferraro finds the work immensely fulfilling.

In a way, we have the rattlesnakes to thank for keeping this talented scientist in Nebraska.

Julie Thomas is a University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor emerita and a Nebraska Master Naturalist. To celebrate our history of conservation storytelling, Nebraskaland will feature experts who have made a difference for Nebraska's wildlife and wild places. For without their work, Nebraskaland writers would have fewer stories to tell.



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Portraits from the Past



◀ Mule deer hunting near Cozad, 1965

My uncle Alan Anderson (left) and his neighbor Keith Vogt admiring Alan's mule deer. Keeping an eye on the situation is farm dog, Snowball. This photo was taken on my grandparents Ralph and Opal Anderson's farm in Roten Valley in Custer County.

– Doyle Shea, Ankeny, Iowa

Raising pheasants, ca. 1957 ▶

My sisters and I raised ring-necked pheasants for 5 years near Cedar Bluffs. Photographed is me with a Mongolian pheasant.

– Leonard Bouc, Mead



Loup City pheasant hunt, ca. 1927 ▲

My great-great-uncle Will Stricker, left, poses with four other hunters, unknown, in the Frederick Hotel in Loup City after a pheasant hunt. I believe this is one of the first years pheasants could be hunted in Nebraska. The first pheasant hunt was a three-day season in 1927 in Wheeler County and certain parts of Sherman County, which is where Loup City is located. The bag limit at that time was five birds, and the five men shot 25 birds. If anyone knows the identity of the other hunters, please reach out.

– Larry Jones, Lincoln

Coon hunting, 1977 ▶

That fall, my dad, C. Walter Korte (left), and I hunted coons with his white German shepherd and purebred Norwegian elkhound. The coons were sold to Smeal's Hide and Fur Co. in Scribner for \$24 each.

– Wendall Korte, Columbus



Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, Nebraskaland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to Jenny.Wheatley@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. Please send ORIGINALS if possible for best reproduction.

Tree Skull

By Eric Fowler

Things live in the forest and die in the forest. That's just the way nature works.

Those things include white-tailed deer and trees. Sometimes they live and die together in very interesting ways.

I spent a lot of time in the woods at Indian Cave State Park between 2017 and 2019 setting and checking camera traps that six times successfully captured photographs of a mountain lion that had decided to call the park and surrounding land along the Missouri River home.

One day, while looking for a new place to put a camera trap, I stumbled on life and death interacting: A pawpaw sapling had grown up through the eye socket of a white-tailed deer skull, lifting it 4 feet off the ground. I revisited the tree skull the next spring and captured the image you see here.

I had intended to return from time to time and see how high the skull would be lifted from the floor. But there are only so many hours in the day, and after moving my camera trap to a different part of the park, I didn't take the time to revisit the spot until recently.

On that visit, there were a few pawpaws growing in the draw that were 3 to 4 inches in diameter. At least one more had been crushed by a fallen tree. The skull was nowhere to be found. I'm not sure when, but I'm guessing after a few years, the diameter of the tree exceeded the size of the eye socket and broke the bone, which would've been very brittle after years of exposure to the elements.

I would've rather seen the bark grow around the bones, and the skull now 10 feet above the forest floor. But on the floor is surely where it ended up. There, it might have fed mice or other small mammals, which might have fed larger ones. Or it simply melted back into the soil, providing nutrients for the pawpaw and other plants.

Either way, the circle of life in the forest continues.





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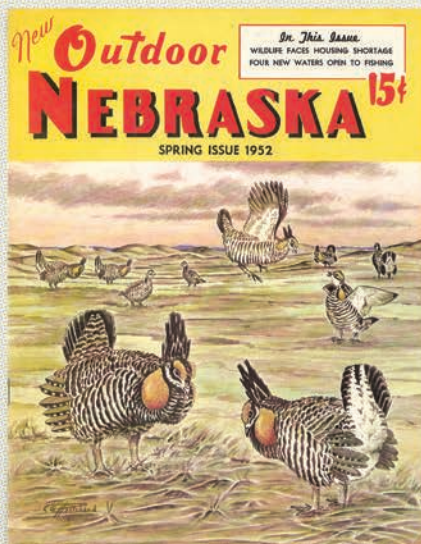
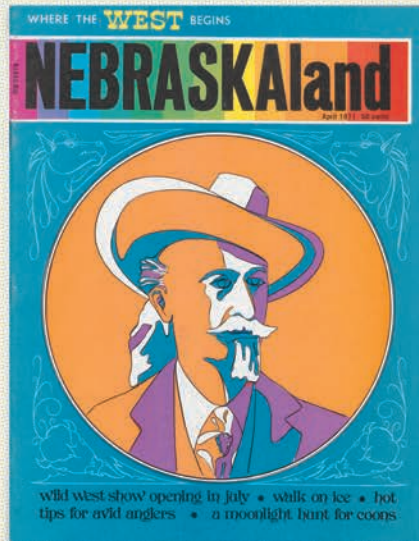
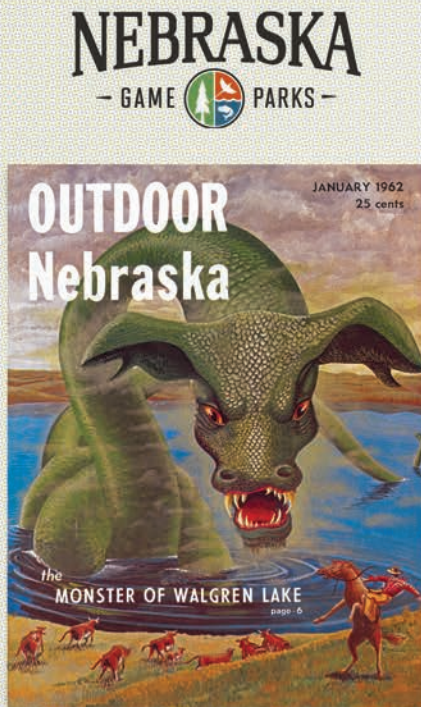
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