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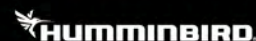
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Nebraskaland

Volume 99 • No. 4
May 2021

Cover: A fox pup sits outside its den
in a Lincoln backyard.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND
This page: A burrowing owl stares
down the photographer. LUKE KATHOL

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magazine

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Lake Ogallala at Sunset



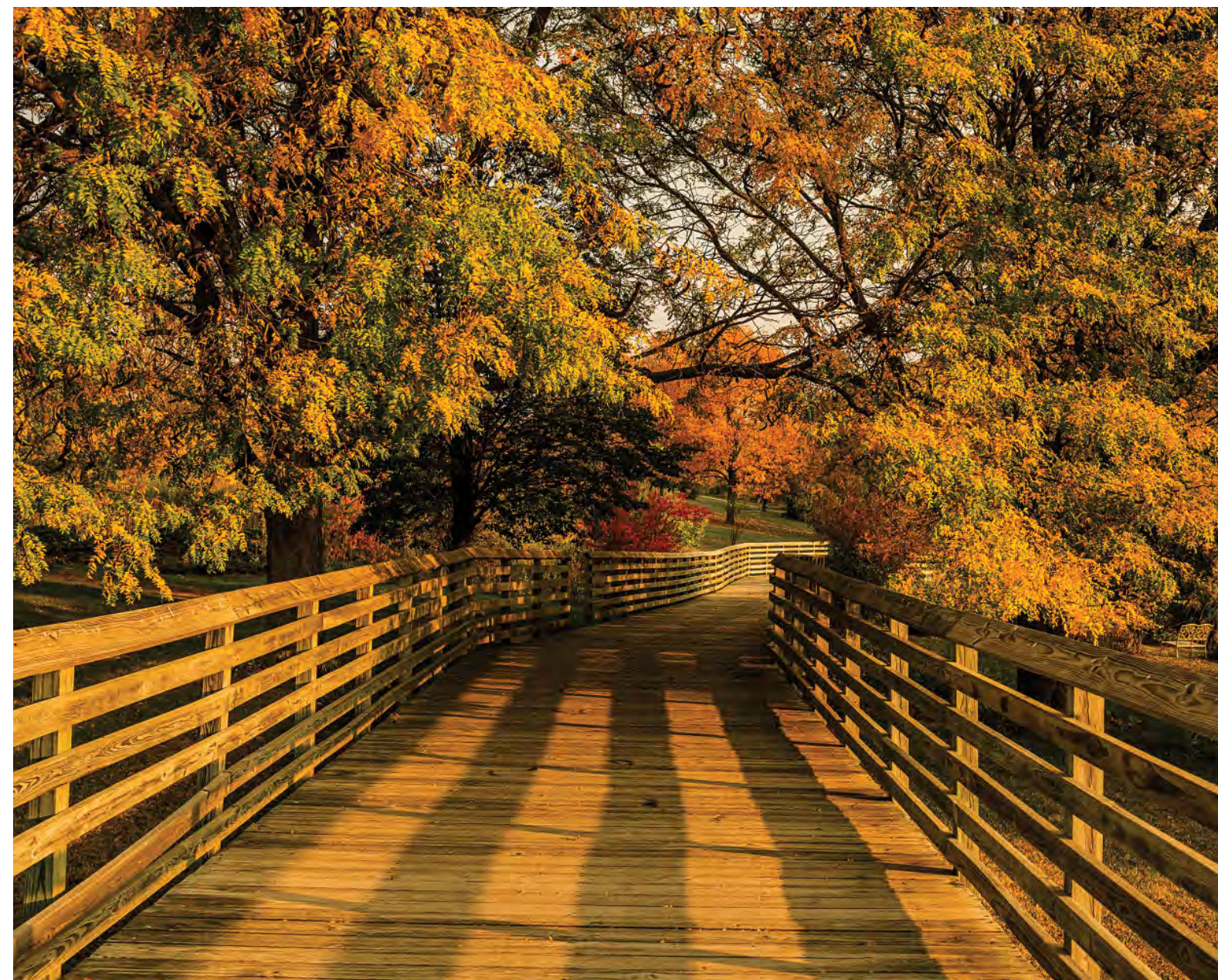
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Prairie Chickens on the Lek





Kirk Pridell, Papillion
Bald Eagles at Johnson Lake

Karen Linot, Gibbon
Frozen Bubble



@wildrose_photography
Fall Color at Mahoney State Park

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



IN THE MIDDLE OF MAY

An immature crab spider on a dandelion seed head in a prairie near Stockham.

CHRIS HELZER



Commissioner Rex Fisher (left) and Director Douglas hunt pheasants in 2016.
JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

DIRECTOR JIM DOUGLAS TO RETIRE

By Christy Firestone

The director of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission recently informed the agency Commissioners he intends to retire this November.

Director Jim Douglas said, “In April of this year, I will have served as director for nine years of my nearly 47-year career with the Commission. I want to provide extensive advance notice of my retirement to ensure the Commission has more than ample time to develop and exercise a robust recruitment and hiring process for my replacement.”

“Throughout his career, Jim Douglas has been a strategic leader and manager with the vision to make sure the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s internal organization, processes, staffing and resources are aligned to achieve the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s mission for both the short-term and long-term,” said Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Chairman Dan Kreitman. “Jim’s ability to look to the horizon, share a vision and strategically align resources has been instrumental in positioning the agency for success. Under Director Douglas’ leadership, the agency has accomplished tremendous success and overcame many challenges.”

Some of Douglas’ accomplishments include creating a communications division responsible for strategic marketing, public relations and outreach efforts; expanding wildlife research for big game, small and upland game and non-

game species; increasing agency law enforcement to ensure greater protection for the people and resources of the state; leading the charge to upgrade fish hatcheries and improve coldwater streams; enhancing parks across the state for the next generation of park guests, including Nebraska’s Outdoor Venture Parks; growing conservation education with the development of the fish and wildlife education division and increasing educational opportunities in parks; and creating a planning and programming division to help best prepare the agency for future success.

Director Douglas began his career as a conservation aide in the North Platte Fish Hatchery in 1974 and served increasingly responsible leadership positions during his career in three divisions, including as district supervisor and chief of the resources services division, chief of the wildlife division, deputy director of administration and agency director.

Douglas, a life-long nature enthusiast said, “I love and enjoy serving the Commission and Nebraska’s citizens and visitors because we have the opportunity to affect our constituents in so many positive ways. Since I have several months left to serve, I will devote all of my time and energy to doing so; and, as such, I will save most of my public reflections of service and share them closer to my retirement.”

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Video production at Bowring Ranch State Historical Park in Cherry County with Dan Newburn, Clifford Cady and Stephanie Arne. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

ONE HISTORIC ROAD TRIP

By Shawna Richter-Ryerson

Take a trip back in time, right here in Nebraska. Watch Pony Express riders race across the plains, soldiers fire a cannon from Civil War times and Philip James Little Thunder Sr. perform a traditional Native dance in his ancestors’ honor — all in a new documentary, *Adventures in History: Discovering Nebraska’s State Historical Parks*. The documentary, from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and NET, Nebraska’s PBS & NPR Stations, invites viewers to come along on a journey that crosses the state, exploring Nebraska’s nine historical parks with program host and narrator Stephanie Arne, an accomplished conservationist and the former host of Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom. Arne discovers Nebraska’s exciting history nestled among some of the most beautiful and storied landscapes in the state. Her trip is filled with a plethora of characters and quite

a bit of lore. She “meets” larger-than-life Western showman William F. Cody at Buffalo Bill State Historical Park, learns about the state’s first female U.S. Sen. Eve Bowring and her cattle ranch and why Ashfall Fossil Beds State Historical Park is called the “Pompeii of prehistoric animals.” She also learns the butt of every good barrel makers’ joke at Fort Atkinson and just what makes a Champion tree a champion at Arbor Lodge. Her journey is revealing. Through exploration and connection, Arne learns that Nebraska’s people, landscapes and history have important stories, ones that can help us understand Nebraska as it is today. But only if we’re willing to listen. Catch the documentary debut at 7 p.m. May 23 on NET, or the repeat showing set for noon May 30 on NET. Be ready to be inspired.

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JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

DUMMY LOADS

By Larry Kurrus

Still thinking about that day last duck season when you only got off one shot, or that time last week your gun jammed on that tom turkey at first light?

Most sporting goods stores have an item that can safely check for feeding and ejecting problems. They are called “dummy loads,” and the cost is nominal at around \$12 for two to three shells.

Or, for those that reload or have a friend who does, you could make some custom dummy loads.

Here how:

- 1) Take three empty shotgun shells and resize them so they will chamber in any like-gauge shotgun.
- 2) Re-insert the old primers. (No live primers, please!)
- 3) Substitute sand for powder — same volume.
- 4) Insert wad cup, add shot and crimp.

Using dummy loads, you can safely and effectively prepare your shotgun for the rest of turkey season or this fall’s wide array of shotgunning seasons.



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RAMPS - OUR FOREST ONION

By Gerry Steinauer and Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Ramps, also called wild leek, is Nebraska's only forest onion. It grows singly or in colonies in moist Missouri River bluff oak forests from Dixon County southward to Omaha. First discovered in our state in the late 1980s, botanists might discover the plant in other Missouri River counties. Although more abundant eastward, here at the dry western fringe of its range, it is uncommon.



JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

In early spring, the onion's fiber-coated bulb sprouts one to four fleshy, tulip-like leaves. Like many woodland wildflowers, ramps (*Allium tricoccum*) start growth before trees leaf out, limiting sunlight from reaching the forest floor and, therefore, photosynthesis. An adaptation to shade, ramps' leaves are wide for an onion, providing more photosynthetic surface. For comparison, prairie onions have very narrow leaves with far less surface area. By June, ramps leaves have withered, and only then do the bulbs send forth a leafless flower stalk topped with a cluster of small, white to yellowish, bell-shaped flowers.

Ramps' bulbs and young leaves are edible. Native Americans ate the leaves and bulbs raw, boiled and fried. They harvested bulbs in spring, when they could be located by the presence of leaves, and dried them for later use. Concoctions of the plant were used medicinally to treat colds, earaches, croup and worms in children, among

other afflictions.

European settlers learned from the Indians how to harvest and use ramps and to this day, towns in the forested eastern United States celebrate annual spring ramps festivals. Unfortunately, over-harvest of the bulbs have caused populations to decline, and furthermore, harvested populations are slow to recover, as it takes seven years for germinating seeds to mature to flowering, seed-producing adults.

Harvest of a few bulbs and one leaf from multiple-leaved plants may not damage large populations. Also, do not harvest too heavily from a single patch. Small populations, however, should be enjoyed solely for their beauty and left unharvested.

In recent decades, ramps planted from seed and bulbs are being grown as a crop in eastern woodlands. The best way to enjoy these tasty veggies, yet conserve wild populations, is to purchase known cultivated ramps online or at farmers markets or select grocery stores.

—G.S.

Wild Garlic Bread

This recipe utilizes both wild ramp and garlic mustard leaves. If you have access to only one species, substitution is fine. Note that ramps are much more pungent than garlic mustard, so adjust amounts accordingly. Visit foodforhunters.com for step-by-step photos of this recipe. For further information on garlic mustard, see my story in *Nebraskaland's* May 2020 issue.

—J.N.W.

Ingredients:

- 1 loaf of frozen Rhodes Bake-N-Serv® White Bread, thawed
- 3 tablespoons of salted butter, softened
- 3 to 4 wild ramp leaves, minced

- 1 tablespoon of wild garlic mustard leaves, minced
- ¼ cup of grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 egg, beaten

Special equipment:

Bread pan, cooking spray, parchment paper.

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. In a small bowl, combine softened butter, ramp, garlic mustard and Parmesan cheese. Set aside.

2. Turn out thawed, risen dough onto a lightly floured surface and roll into a ¼ to ½-inch-thick rectangle, the short side no wider than your bread pan is long.

3. Evenly spread wild garlic butter onto the surface of the dough — you may or may not have to use all of it. Then starting from the short edge of the rectangle, gently and tightly roll it; try not to stretch the dough too much. For presentation, you want the middle of the loaf to be slightly thicker than the ends.

4. Turn the roll seam side down. Then with a sharp knife, cut the roll in half lengthwise. With the cut sides facing up, lay one piece perpendicular to the other to resemble a cross. Then overlap the ends to form a figure 8. Gently pinch the ends together. Spray a bread pan with Pam, if you haven't already, and line with parchment paper. Transfer the garlic bread dough into the pan, and cover with a kitchen towel to rise for 30 minutes before baking.

5. After 30 minutes of resting, lightly glaze the top of the dough with egg wash (you won't use all of it). Then bake on the middle rack of a preheated 350-degree oven for 20-25 minutes, or until bread is golden and cooked through. Allow bread to cool slightly before slicing.



JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Western Fireworks

In the pursuit of captivating photography, it sometimes pays to aim low.

Story and photos by Justin Haag



ABOVE: Purple coneflower (*Echinacea*) adorns a roadside at Ponderosa Wildlife Management Area near Crawford.

LEFT: The white flowers of prickly poppy (*Argemone polyanthemus*) stand out against blackened timber in the Pine Ridge.



When developing an interest in nature photography years ago, capturing the subjects on these pages were at the bottom of my list.

Yet, on countless mornings of taking photos of landscapes and wildlife, there they were: Little bursts of color around my feet. I already knew that pretty sunrises, sunsets and fauna were even more attractive with wildflowers in the scene.

Soon, though, I learned a macro lens focused at various parts of these plants could provide imagery rivaling any burst of fireworks. The radiating petals of a flower feature the lines

that we photographers crave. The presence of a pollinating insect makes a scene akin to those provided by our biggest wildlife species. All the while, the plants congenially remained still enough for me to set up off-camera flash and multiple poses.

Along the way, I have also learned some things about the plants, which I value just as much as the imagery. Still too often, though, some unfamiliar petals catch my eye, and I think to myself, “You sure are a pretty little thing, but are you worth the trouble?”

By “trouble,” I mean shooting the photo, entering it into



LEFT: Hoary vervain (*Verbena stricta*) always makes a suitable photo subject.

RIGHT: Wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), also known as bee balm, decorates the landscape in the Nebraska National Forest near Chadron.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Narrow-leaved musineon (*Musineon tenuifolium*) blooms on rocks along the Lodgepole Valley below the dam at Oliver Reservoir Recreation Area.



the digital workflow and, finally, getting the identification right. That last part usually involves poring over ID books — the foremost resource is *Nebraskaland* great Jon Farrar’s incredible *Field Guide to Wildflowers of Nebraska and the Great Plains*.

When all that fails, my pursuit ends with “the email of shame”: a message to knowledgeable, patient colleagues such as Game and Parks private lands biologist Shelley Steffl, botanist Gerry Steinauer or Chadron State College professor Steve Rolfsmeier.

With identification in hand, I look back and think: Yes, it’s always worth the trouble. 📧





ABOVE: A grasshopper climbs the stem of goatsbeard (*Tragopogon dubius*) at Gilbert-Baker Wildlife Management Area in Sioux County.

RIGHT: A bumble bee (*Bombus*) visits the flower of a Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) along the White River in Sioux County.

OPPOSITE: Western wallflower (*Erysimum capitatum*) stands tall over other wildflowers as the sun sets on the Oglala National Grassland.



Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

The outdoors is calling. It's time to plan an outdoor adventure: grab a rod and reel, get your bird feeder ready, and start visiting Nebraska state park areas for the Your Parks Adventure Challenge, beginning May 22 (details at YourNebraskaParks100.org). 



Hike at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area

Throughout the month

Looking for some good exercise and beautiful scenery? Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area offers 3.5 miles of rugged groomed trails for hikers, bikers and equestrians winding through canyons and rocky bluffs. Trails vary in difficulty, from steep inclines to moderate walks. Along the way, enjoy great views, wildflowers and wildlife, such as deer and wild turkey. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



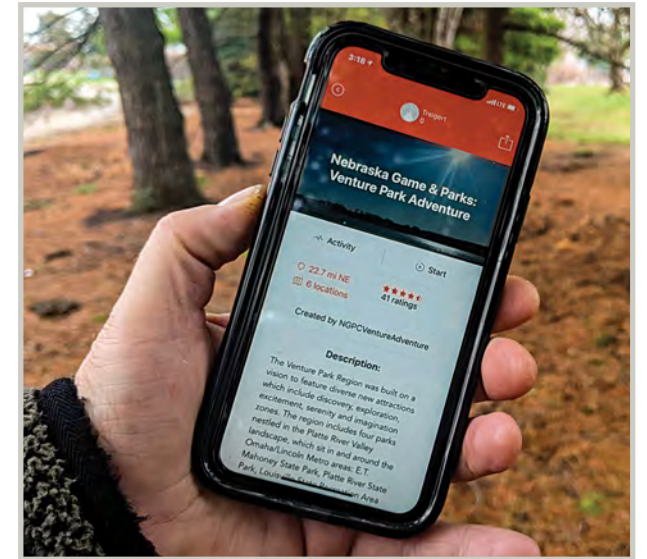
Attract orioles to your backyard

May through mid-June
Statewide

As orioles return to Nebraska, see if you can attract them to your yard with some sweet snacks, such as grape jelly, hummingbird nectar, oranges and grapefruit. Oriole feeders work well, but you also can place jelly in shallow dishes and hang fruit from a small nail. Remember to clean your feeding place every 7-10 days, and consider adding native plants and trees to your yard, which also attract birds.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

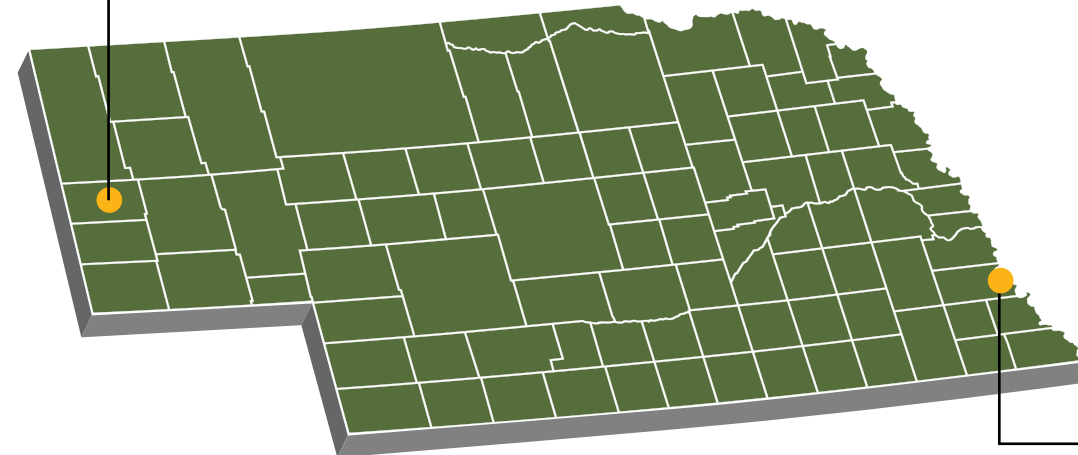
What To Do in May



Try the Venture Park Adventure

Year-round | Eastern Nebraska

This unconventional geocaching adventure will take you to four parks nestled in the Platte River Valley, where you'll follow coordinates to solve clues. All you need is a smartphone! Download the Adventure Lab mobile app and search for Nebraska Game and Parks: Venture Park Adventure to get started. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Fish for crappie

Throughout the month | Statewide

In May, crappie stay shallow as they spawn, making them a more accessible catch. Only simple gear is needed: a bobber and minnow is hard to beat, but if live baitfish aren't allowed, a bobber and small jig will work just as well.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Visit Arbor Lodge State Historical Park

Year-round | Southeastern Nebraska

This beautiful estate in Nebraska City was home to J. Sterling Morton, founder of Arbor Day. From its beginning in 1855 as a four-room frame house, the magnificent mansion grew to 52 rooms through several re-modelings. Make a visit — and mark this down for the Your Parks Adventure challenge!

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Buffalo Bill's Big House

By David L. Bristow, History Nebraska

The Wild West built this house.

At first glance, an 18-room French Second Empire-style mansion might not strike you as “Western,” but take a look at that huge barn! This is what a Western man would build for his family if he found himself with a lot of extra money in the 1880s.

William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody came to Nebraska in 1869 as a Fort McPherson cavalry scout. Later he made his fortune as a showman. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was a traveling outdoor show that combined elements of theater, circus and rodeo, with lots of fancy riding and shooting and mock battles against Native American performers. Buffalo Bill did a lot to create the popular mythology of the American West. His influence shaped the Western movies and TV shows of the 20th century.

With show money rolling in, Cody had the house at his Scout’s Rest Ranch built in 1886. The big barn was added a few years later. In the early days, Scout’s Rest was a working ranch with 4,000 acres. Cody hired others to manage it, but lived here with his family between tours.

Cody sold the ranch in 1911. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission bought it in 1964 and opened it to the public as the Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.

In January 2021, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior added Scout’s Rest Ranch to its list of National Historic Landmarks. [N](#)

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



“Buffalo Bill” Cody (front and center) at Scout’s Rest Ranch. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3004-0-44



Cody wanted trees on his treeless ranch, but it was hard to get them to grow. The solution? Plant prairie-adapted species such as cottonwoods and box elders. This early 20th century photo shows the result. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3004-0-41



Never shy about self-promotion, Cody had his ranch's name painted on the barn roof. Union Pacific Railroad travelers could read the name from a mile away. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3004-49



A circa-1950 photo from inside the barn shows old Wild West posters left over from Buffalo Bill's heyday.

HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG5741-5

Weathering Turkeys

Using the elements to your advantage

By Todd Mills

With Mother's Day being the target date to pursue lonely toms, you can find success at almost any turn if you've paid your dues scouting. However, even the best laid plans can go to waste if Mother Nature intervenes and makes your hunting, well, miserable.

On more than one occasion, I've scheduled a hunting trip around early to mid-May, only to be blindsided by weather that only Nebraska could provide at that time of year. On one such occasion, a good friend and I sat in rain for three days, including through a violent thunderstorm that had us holding the blind tent and laying on the ground to avoid being blown away or, worse yet, struck by lightning. Sticking and staying was not a good plan that weekend.

Can you harvest turkeys in adverse weather conditions? Sure, but to do it, you've got to be prepared to put in the time and wait for that one window of opportunity that only the hard-core hunter will persevere through.

Here are a few tips on pursuing toms in all types of weather conditions.

RAIN, RAIN GO AWAY

Although you can hunt turkeys in the rain, you'll need a good dose of luck to have success. They won't move much, and most likely will be in the wide open. Precipitation dulls their senses, so they tend to hang out in open spaces so they can hear and see better. If you plan to hunt in moisture, try and position yourself in a place they could cross when the rain lets up. Keep your calling to a minimum. They'll shut up in rain and most likely will have no interest in a lonely hen. And don't forget your rain gear — without it you'll be in for a long, miserable hunt.



JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

WIND AND WARY TOMS

Observing what birds do in different weather conditions can teach you so much. On a windy and hot day in late May several years ago, I watched several jakes lay in the grass for hours without moving much except their heads. I later came

to the conclusion that wind, much like rain, puts turkeys on high alert. Even the cracking of a branch can send them running. Success here will depend on location. Find a secluded area early in the day that provides shelter from the wind, especially if the wind picks up later in the day. Find a spot on the downside of the wind so that if you have to cut and run, you can use the wind to your advantage. Be patient, and time your moves based on cover and what you think birds will do if

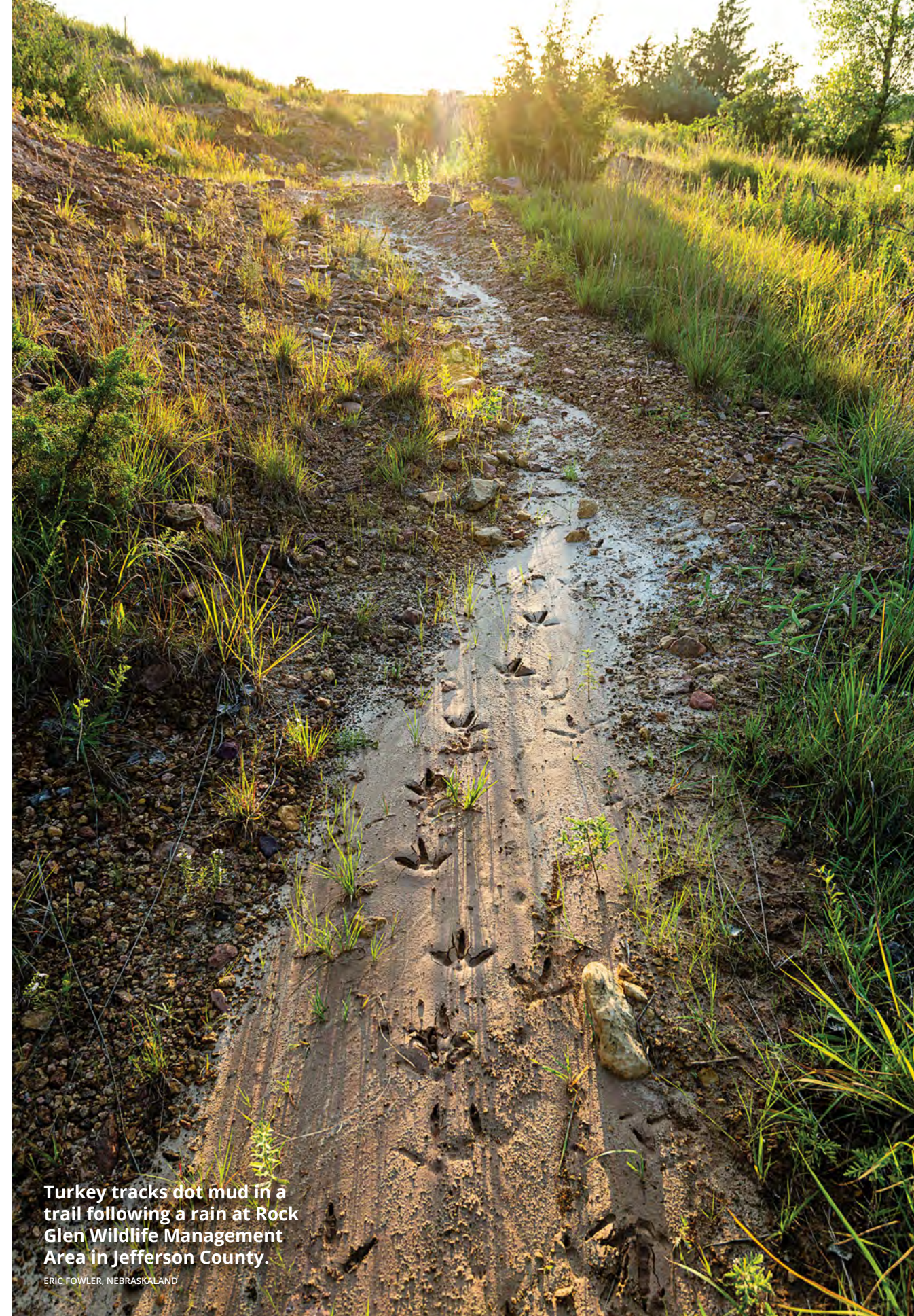
the wind lets up.

SUN AND MID-MAY TOMS

Everything works better in sunshine. Whether it's November mallards or mid-May toms, a steady dose of sunshine may be just what you need to fill that tag. As May ticks along, hens are anxious to nest. By the middle of the month, they are either nesting or looking to nest. They'll spend less time with toms off the roost. Throw in a sunny day and they'll waste no time moving on from the group. Lonely toms will be active when the sun comes up, and by the middle of the morning, they could travel miles to find a hen.

Now is the time to crank up the calling. Be aggressive and don't be afraid to move if they are not advancing. Chances are they could circle back. And try and position yourself or your tent in the shade to avoid any glare or movement that an educated tom could pick up.

Always use the weather to your advantage. 



Turkey tracks dot mud in a trail following a rain at Rock Glen Wildlife Management Area in Jefferson County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Your Camera Doesn't See Like You Do

Part 1 of 3

Story and photos by Chris Helzer

Have you ever taken a picture of a bird or other animal, only to have it show up as a mere pinprick on the resulting photo? Why do some photos have large portions that look blurry and only a few bits that are in focus? Simply put, your camera doesn't see the world the way you do.

The lenses on your camera are constructed very differently than the lenses in your eyes (though the basics of their function are surprisingly similar). More importantly, when you look around, your eyes and brain are constantly working together to interpret what you're seeing. Your camera isn't integrated with your brain, which creates a lot of discrepancy between the images captured by your camera and what appears to be the reality in front of you. In that context, your camera is giving you the truth; it's just not the truth you want to see.

While the disparities between your camera's view of the world and your own can be frustrating, they also provide great opportunities if you know how to take advantage of them. Once you stop expecting photographs to document a scene exactly as you experience it, you can concentrate on simply making great images. That requires you to understand the primary differences between you and your camera and learn how to compensate for them.

This three-part series will explore how your camera thinks and works and help you become a better photographer, whether you use your phone, a digital SLR camera or an old large-format camera with glass plates. Part one deals with

field of view, focus and basic exposure. Part two dives into depth of field and the trade-offs between shutter speed and aperture. Part three is all about light.

Focal Length

The focal length of a lens determines the size of an object and how much of its surroundings you can capture within an image. Shorter focal lengths make things look small and far away but include a broad field of view, which is why lenses with short focal lengths are often called "wide-angle lenses." If you've ever tried to photograph a small room and were frustrated with how little of that room you could capture at

once, you needed a shorter focal length on your lens. Wide-angle lenses also are terrific for photographing a dramatic sky over a sweeping landscape.

However, if you want a big bison to fill the frame of an image, a wide-angle lens would be a bad choice. You'd have to get so close to that bison you'd end up as a statistic instead of a renowned photographer. To make your camera make that bison — or bird or moon — look like it's much closer to you, you need a telephoto lens.

A telephoto lens has a long focal length, which magnifies an image, and greatly reduces the field of view. It also compresses what you see, making images at different distances from you look like they are closer to each other. The

binoculars you use for birdwatching have long focal lengths, which is why a bird looks bigger when viewed through them — and why you don't see much of the bird's surroundings as you try to figure out if its beak is straight or slightly curved.

On a 35mm camera, or the equivalent, a lens with a focal length of 35mm or less is classified as a wide-angle lens. A lens with a focal length of 85mm is a telephoto lens (though if you want to photograph birds, 300mm is about the shortest you'd want). In between those two focal length ranges is a "normal" lens, a 50mm lens. A normal lens is so named because it provides a field of view and perspective similar to what you see with your eyes. For that reason, they are a favorite of portrait photographers and others who want to



A wide-angle lens helps show the depth and breadth of this Sandhills landscape.

Both the badger and sunrise were photographed with the same telephoto lens.



depict people or scenes accurately. Interestingly, the nature photographers I know rarely use this focal length.

Focus and Depth of Field

Your eyes focus so quickly and naturally you almost never think about it — until you reach your mid-to-late 40s and can no longer focus on anything less than an arm’s length away. Your brain and eyes collaboratively decide what part of a scene is most important and focus on that. A camera doesn’t know what your brain thinks is the focal point of a scene, so you have to tell it what you want. Making conscious decisions about something you usually do unconsciously takes some practice.

Both your eyes and camera can only focus on a portion of a scene at a time. If one object is close to you and another is far away, you can only focus on one; the other will look fuzzy. As you scan your surroundings, your brain constantly concentrates on what’s most interesting, and you don’t even notice that everything else is out of focus. In a photograph,

though, the viewer has time to scan the entire static image, and portions that are out of focus become obvious, especially if they include something of interest. On the flip side, an out-of-focus background can help highlight the subject of a photo, increasing an image’s visual power.

“Depth of field” is the distance between the nearest and farthest objects away from you that appear in focus simultaneously. In other words, there is a limited range of space between you and the horizon that can be in focus when you take a photo. Focal length and the distance between you and the subject you focus on both influence depth of field, but the most important factor is aperture. The aperture of your lens is the hole through which light enters the camera. You can adjust the aperture, which is measured in f-stops. Confusingly, a smaller aperture means a bigger f-stop number, but remember that f-stops are fractions, so an aperture of f/8 is bigger than f/11.

Now, stop. Take a breath and read that last paragraph one more time. It’s a lot to remember all at once, but just know that aperture affects depth of field. A smaller hole creates

more depth of field and a bigger hole creates a shallow depth of field. In everyday life, your eyes and brain do this all the time; when you squint your eyes to see something better, you’re making a smaller aperture to increase your depth



The vegetation behind these sideoats grama flowers is blurred out because of a shallow depth of field. Depth of field becomes very shallow in close-up photographs, even when the aperture is closed down. Deciding what needs to be focus is key, as in the spiderwort photo on the right. The droplet is sharply focused and the unfocused flower in the background provides interesting context.

of field. Depth of field also is influenced by focal length and the proximity of your subject. Telephoto lenses have much less depth of field than wide-angle lenses, regardless of aperture





The only thing in focus in this photo is the eye of the jackrabbit, which is the most critical. Our eyes are always drawn to the eyes of other creatures.

settings — though aperture still controls depth of field within the possible range for each lens. Close-up photos always have a shallow depth of field just because the camera is close to the subject. Again, aperture matters, but only within the limitations set by how close the subject is.

Because not everything in an image will be sharp, you have to decide what the focal point of your photo is and make sure it's in focus. Often, the focal point of an image is what drew you to take the photo in the first place — your friend's face, the biggest or closest flower, or a silhouette of a tree against the sunset.

If you're photographing an animal, the eye is almost always the most important thing to have in focus. When you look at another creature, your eye is automatically drawn to its eye. Looking at a photo of an animal when the eye is out of focus is disconcerting. If the eye is sharp, it doesn't matter that the nose or ears look a little fuzzy.

If you're struggling to get multiple parts of an animal, plant or scene to be in focus simultaneously, sometimes the answer can be found by changing your own position. Moving yourself and your camera to a position where two or more important focal points are the same distance from the camera might help you defeat a tricky shallow depth of field situation. It's usually easier to do some repositioning with

landscapes, flowers and other non-mobile subjects.

If you're photographing a butterfly or deer and really want the entire animal to be in focus, asking it to turn slightly so that it is in a perfectly perpendicular position to your camera is unlikely to work. More likely, you'll have to move yourself and hope it stays put. Otherwise, just make sure that at least its eye is in focus and take the shot.

Of course, knowing what needs to be in focus and getting the camera to actually do the job are two different things. Most of today's cameras have an autofocus feature, and camera brains are getting really good at predicting what you'd like the focal point of an image to be. They're not perfect, however, so it's important to know how your camera makes decisions and how to override them, when necessary. Sometimes it's as simple as touching your phone screen on the part of an image you want to be in focus. With other cameras, it can be a little more complicated, but it's figuring out (and practicing) the procedure so you'll be prepared when the time comes. [N](#)

Look for part two of Chris Helzer's "Your Camera Doesn't See Like You Do" in the June issue of Nebraskaland. The author will cover depth of field and the trade-offs between shutter speed and aperture.

In this image at the Nature Conservancy's Cherry Ranch in Sioux County, the yellow flowers in the foreground are in focus, but there is enough depth of field for the rocky hill in the background to be relatively sharp, too.



The Beaches of Bridgeport

Five sandpits in the North Platte valley have created countless memories.

Story and photos by Justin Haag

You don't have to stray far from town-life to enjoy one of the Panhandle's premiere getaways with shady campsites and sandy beaches.

The 200-acre Bridgeport State Recreation Area is located along the North Platte River at the northwestern edge of the community for which it is named. It has 78 acres of clear water in five sandpit lakes with more than 70 first-come, first-served basic campsites. The lakes are among the Nebraska Game and Parks' designated family-friendly locations and have long attracted boaters, campers, anglers, swimmers and picnickers.

The lakes were created by the Lyman-Richie Corp., which provided sand and gravel to the surrounding region in the early 1900s. The company was most busy in World War II, providing asphalt for the airfield in Alliance. The waterbodies

were acquired by Game and Parks in 1952.

Most of the park's campsites are under big cottonwoods along the shoreline. Forty-five of them are on Center Lake, the largest of the five. In addition to the many drive-up campsites, six walk-in sites for tent camping are available at the park's northwest lake.

Center Lake, which surrounds an island, allows motorized boats and personal watercraft as long as they travel counterclockwise.

Gary Shoemaker oversees the Bridgeport park in his role as superintendent of the Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area near Gering. He has ushered numerous improvements to the park in recent years.

Among the developments are an expanded swimming area at Center Lake, the addition of a campground host, and improved signage and boundaries for campsites.

Similar to most parks and public lands, Bridgeport attracted a lot of attention from people who were biding time and social distancing in the summer of 2020. He said the park nearly tripled its usual traffic last year.

"It looked like a Fourth of July crowd when we

first opened in May," he said.

Bridgeport boasts opportunity for catching a variety of fish, including bluegills, channel catfish, crappies, largemouth bass, rainbow trout, cutthroat trout, walleyes, yellow perch and northern pike.

Joe Rydell, Game and Parks fisheries biologist, said the lakes range as deep as 15-20 feet, providing ample room for fish to roam. Generally, he said sunlight moves fish into deeper water midday, but they swim shallow early and late.

"There are several shallow humps and ridges that run around the pits that typically have chara, a type of algae that looks like rooted vegetation," he said. "The trout will roam the open water, but panfish and bass utilize those chara areas to roam for food and cover. Fallen trees are also good habitat along the shores."

While Center Lake caters to boats and personal watercraft with gasoline engines, electric trolling motors and paddlecraft are allowed on the other four lakes. The close proximity of campsites to the water makes Bridgeport a perfect destination for those with kayaks, canoes and stand-up paddleboards.

The park also allows hunting by archery, muzzleloader and



Aerial of Bridgeport State Recreation Area in Morrill County. Fall colors adorn Bridgeport State Recreation Area in the North Platte River valley.



Park visitors enjoy boating, tubing and personal watercrafts at Bridgeport State Recreation Area.



Canada geese and goslings swim on Center Lake at Bridgeport State Recreation Area.

shotgun. Its proximity to the Platte River attracts a diverse set of wildlife. The park made news in 2015 when a moose, a rare sight in Nebraska, took up temporary residence on the island at Center Lake.

Even though moose-sightings are certainly not guaranteed, visitors are sure to find enough to keep them entertained and returning to this sandy destination. [N](#)

Our Fascinating and Fearless Foxes

**Foxes are continuing to populate
our urban areas**

*By Sam Wilson, Furbearer and
Carnivore Program Manager,
Nebraska Game and Parks
Commission*

Red fox puppies play in the backyard of the
author's home in northeastern Lincoln.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

A male fox and one of its pups sit on the edge of a city park in northeastern Lincoln.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



A big dog rushed into my backyard a few years ago, likely because it saw a red fox puppy playing under the bushes. It let out a deep bark as it saw the adult fox that was watching over the pups. That is when things really got interesting.

The adult fox leapt up and raced toward the big boxer — pretty brave for a 10-pound fox. It made a loud bark on its way — a warning that clearly meant for the pups to hightail it to the den. Suddenly my yard was churning with racing canids: orange fur flashing across the yard, faster puppies leaping over their slower siblings, and the other parent fox racing straight toward the big dog from an adjacent yard. The dog had keyed onto the first adult and was chasing it, allowing the second fox time to dart in and disrupt its focus. These adults were working in unison to distract, challenge and divert the dog, giving their pups time to escape. It was an amazing thing to watch. Their technique was perfect, and given the power of an 80-pound dog, they had to

be. The dog chased one and then the other as they jumped past, but they dodged deftly each time it got too close. After a minute or so of darting in and dodging out, the owner of the dog was there to get it back on leash.

The fox pair had protected all of their pups, also called kits, without so much as a scratch and clearly demonstrated how devoted they are as parents. That was the first of many displays of their commitment that I would witness thanks to this fox couple deciding to den next to my yard for the past six springs.

Growing up in rural Nebraska, my dad and I were in a constant, friendly competition to see who could spot wildlife first. So I have spent most of my life scanning field edges, creek bottoms, wetlands or any other habitat where I thought I might see wildlife.

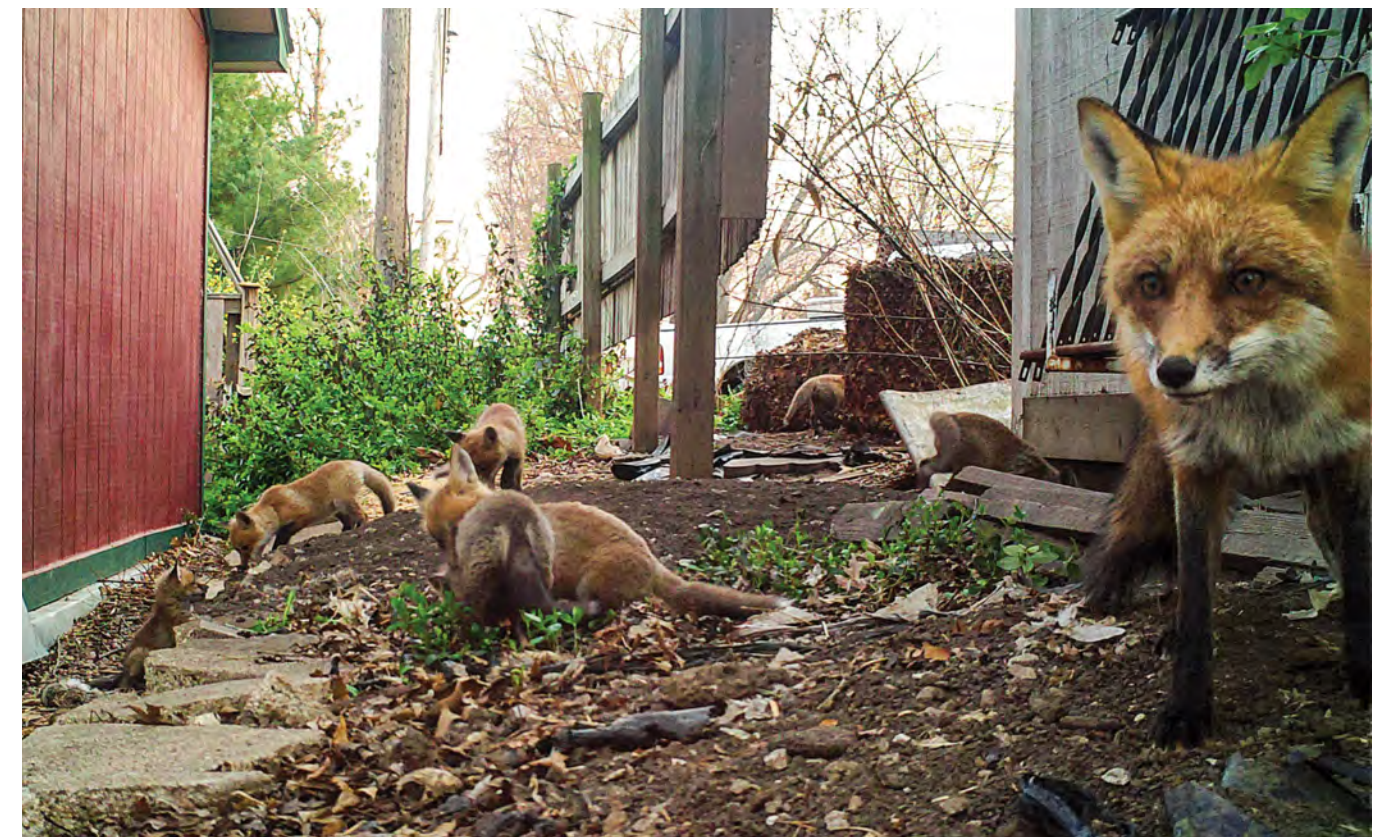
My brother often laughs and says, “Wildlife always comes to see you.”

A few instances of bucks waking me up while taking a “hunting nap,” or owls sleeping outside my office window

might give one that impression. To be fair, I also spend my time trying to see wildlife — so I always assumed it was a team effort.

But having a pair of red foxes raise pups right in my backyard, in the second largest city in Nebraska, really made me wonder. I am the furbearer and carnivore biologist for Nebraska Game and Parks, and red foxes are one of the species that I manage. It seems unlikely that they would raise their pups right off my patio for six years in a row. Serendipity!

The first time I knew of foxes in my neighborhood, I heard them before I saw them. I was startled awake at 2 a.m. one January by a periodic and horrific scream coming from right outside my bedroom window. In my tired state, it was hard to imagine what in the world could make a sound like that. I finally looked out the window and saw a fox open its mouth, tighten up its body and project a scream throughout the neighborhood. I actually get dozens of calls each year at Game and Parks



Trail cameras placed by the author near the den have helped him count the number of pups. This image captured the mother and all seven pups, her largest litter, in 2017. SAM WILSON

asking what animal could be making such a sound. Many think it must be a mountain lion. All of the recordings I have heard throughout the years have been the scream or bark of red foxes.

Foxes can produce a variety of sounds, from chirps and quick, quiet barks that communicate with nearby pups, to the very loud scream that is used during their mating season and as a territorial warning. The first time I heard this scream, it was during the mating season, but I have also seen adults challenge dogs at a distance with this call when they approach their den.

I had seen foxes in Lincoln many times before, often at the Commission headquarters on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s East Campus where habitat is plentiful. But in the last five to 10 years, the number of calls I have gotten about foxes in Lincoln and Omaha has increased dramatically. That is likely because the number of foxes has also increased; however, we

don’t track fox population trends in cities, so this is anecdotal.

Harvest estimates from rural areas have trended down slightly over the same time, but foxes remain common statewide. Biologists believe that foxes are using urban areas to avoid being killed by coyotes. Larger canids kill smaller canids, from wolves to coyotes, and coyotes to foxes. It is like picking on your little brother, but it is a matter of life or death for the smaller canid. Foxes are adaptable and a little more tolerant of human presence than coyotes, so the trade-off of living in town and risking being hit by cars or chased by dogs is worth it. Coyotes are found in urban areas, too, particularly if there are larger areas of open habitat like wooded creeks or grasslands. But they are not found as often in tighter urban neighborhoods that foxes will happily use.

The fox family moved in when my boys were just starting to run around

the yard, and they have thoroughly enjoyed growing up with them around. The pups get used to us pretty quickly, but it took years for the adults to become relaxed, especially the female. I should point out that we never feed them, and we give them enough space to keep them wild. Each litter is different, and we have a few fun memories every year. My boys are now in a friendly competition with me to see who can spot the first pups of the spring — the tradition lives on. The next game we play is “count the puppies.” This is much harder than you might imagine. For one thing, some puppies want to play while others just want to nap, so the count usually starts small and goes up as more decide to play at the same time. Even then, with all of the running, wrestling, jumping, hiding and fleeing, it is a pretty tall task to agree on a number. With the help of some trail cameras, we eventually get it figured out. The largest litter was seven and



A male fox stretches after waking from a nap in a northeastern Lincoln park. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



University of Nebraska-Lincoln students Katelin Nelson and Kyle Dougherty and professor Elizabeth VanWormer take blood samples prior to attaching a radio collar to a male red fox trapped in the author’s backyard. Dougherty was researching fox density and habitat selection in Lincoln. SAM WILSON

the smallest was four. Those numbers are pretty typical for red foxes. With seven pups in the den, it is pretty easy to understand why the female would slink off to the park for a nap when she needs some “me time.”

Both coyotes and foxes have plenty to eat in town. They take advantage of common roadkill like squirrels, rabbits and robins, but also hunt those same species plus mice, voles, moles, ground squirrels and other species. Foxes are carnivores, but do eat plants and will happily eat pet food or discarded human food that they find. We have seen the foxes bring all kinds of food, from blue jays to hotdogs, into our yard. One of the nice parts about having the foxes around is that they have kept rabbits out of my garden, something several varieties of “rabbit proof” fences have failed to do. When the pups are growing and hungry, the parents take turns hunting and pup sitting day and night. It is not uncommon to see them come



A fox lets one of her pups nurse while others wait their turn. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



ABOVE: A fox pup carries a vole dropped off at the den by one of its parents.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND **BELOW RIGHT: A pup practices its hunting skills by stalking a bluejay.** SAM WILSON

in with five or more mice, shrews or voles in their mouths, drop them off and then return to the hunt. This 24-hour-a-day effort is another example of the commitment and teamwork of both parents.

A few other fun memories include: having the fox pups watch back-and-forth in unison as my boys played soccer; watching the parents hide and bury mice to teach the pups to search, smell and hunt; and certain pups like the one we nicknamed “Floppy Ear” that had playful personalities. There was also the time the entire family came out to meet another adult fox, which I assume was a daughter from a previous litter. All 10 foxes celebrated the reunion, chasing and playing for a full hour. That third adult fox stayed for a few days and helped hunt and parent.

The pups usually show themselves

in March, and the family moves to a new den by June. Foxes typically have multiple dens, and it is thought that they move from den to den to help reduce the burden of fleas and other insects in the soil of their natal dens. The pups will disperse and look for their own territories by late summer or fall. Red foxes can reproduce at 10 months and typically live 2 to 6 years. Captive foxes have lived more than 10 years, but few wild foxes would reach that age.

The apparent increase in urban foxes led to a research project in 2018-2019 by Kyle Dougherty, a master’s student at UNL. His objective was to study the density and habitat needs of urban foxes. I offered to help Kyle trap the first fox for his project. Kyle had a good trap design, and soon enough, we had a male fox laid out on my patio for

measurements. We placed the latest GPS collar and ear tags on the animal. It was surprising how light and dainty the adult fox was when we had it in hand. The long legs and fur make it appear larger than it is. With several foxes around, it would be a few weeks before I knew this male was half of our fox couple. When the battery died, Kyle sent a command for the collar to release. That small ear tag remained, however, allowing me to still identify the male. The GPS collars showed that foxes were keying in on open areas like parks, golf courses and more open neighborhoods. They were also more active at night and in the morning.

Foxes have been in Lincoln for

decades and the foxes that are born in town are very used to seeing people, cars and dogs. Because it is all they have ever known, they are not nearly as wary of people as rural foxes that have been hunted. They can be territorial with dogs during the pup rearing season in the spring and early summer. One example is an escorting behavior where they may bark at your dog while you are on a walk, and then follow you from a distance until you are no longer near their den or pups. Basically, they want to make sure they know where your dog is until it is safely away from their pups. They will also wait until you pass by on the sidewalk and then walk behind you a few dozen

yards, not being territorial, just trying to get where they are going.

While the foxes have been a delight for my family, there are some downsides beyond the screaming during mating season. I do have to put a few squirrel tails in the trash each year. Foxes can dig under sheds or porches in areas where they are not welcome and damage property. In most cases, they can be fenced out or convinced to move to another den with a motion alarm or battery powered radio. Foxes are not typically dangerous to people given their slight build and small size. Like all wildlife, people should not approach them. Foxes can kill small pets like kittens, cats, chickens and tiny dogs,

but common sense approaches, such as keeping cats indoors and dogs on leashes, prevents the vast majority of problems. I have seen adult cats square off with one fox, but go up a tree with two. We welcomed a small dog into our family a few years into this and made the decision to be with him on a leash when he is outside. It has worked well for us so far.

Many people across Lincoln have shared similar experiences where foxes have “come to see them,” particularly throughout the last decade or so. Hopefully, people and foxes can continue to live together in both rural and urban areas, as it seems certain they are here to stay. 



Walleyes

Five Top Places to Catch Them

By Julie Geiser

Every year, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission stocks millions of walleye fry and fingerlings in lakes across the state to provide anglers with plenty of opportunities to catch this sought-after fish species. This cool-water fish favors large bodies of water that have good habitat and an abundance of baitfish. Prized for their great-tasting filets, walleyes are a challenge to catch, but using Nebraska's 2021 Fishing Forecast can get you on the path to success.

Our Top 5

According to the sampling report, these are the top five walleye lakes from the 2020 surveys:

Winters Creek, Scotts Bluff County – had the most 10- to 20-inch netted walleye. Shad is the key prey species and Winters Creek's main predator species is walleye. Walleye are stocked annually as these fish grow well and replace what is harvested by anglers. The lake has not been drawn down by excessive irrigation during the past 10 years, making this a great lake for producing walleye.

Lake McConaughy, Keith County – second after Winters Creek for the most netted legal-sized walleye up to trophy class walleye. With an abundant forage base of alewife and gizzard shad, Lake McConaughy is always a top contender for big walleye, especially in the spring. Summer months can bring success if you know where to find walleyes in deep water.

Merritt Reservoir, Cherry County – has great walleye habitat, including flooded timber, sand points and smartweed habitat in the spring and early summer. It is a deep lake with excellent water quality, and inflows from the Snake River and Boardman Creek fill the reservoir to full pool each year. Merritt has an alewife prey base that grows healthy walleye.

Davis Creek, Valley County – has an aggressive, yearly stocking approach to eliminate missing year classes of walleye. Davis Creek also has habitat that produces good walleye populations, including good water quality, a sand



Doug Steinke holds a 31-inch walleye he caught from Lake McConaughy, home of plenty of big 'eyes. JERRY STEINKE



Merritt Reservoir is a perennial top pick for toothy walleyes. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

bottom, deep areas, flats and bays. Here, shad is the major prey fish for walleye, promoting a thriving population.

Calamus Reservoir, Loup County – has habitat conducive to good walleye populations with good water quality, sand bottom, drop-offs, flats, bays and coves. Gizzard shad is the primary prey, and Calamus has overwinter areas for gizzard shad to keep the predominately stocked walleye population thriving.

Once You're There

Spring brings the spawn, and both boat and bank anglers can have good success, as these fish concentrate in shallow, rocky shorelines to reproduce. Following a brief post-spawn lull, anglers often find the best bite of the year in late May and early June as fish move into shallow water in search of food. Later, in the heat of summer, catching walleye can be a challenge, but for those who pursue them, fishing in deep water can be rewarding. In the fall, anglers who can find schools of baitfish can find walleye. In the winter, ice anglers often target fish on structures.

More Than Walleye

For all of your fishing pursuits, take a look at the 2021 Fishing Forecast. The report shows the results of sampling efforts for several species of fish, including walleye, conducted by fisheries biologists in waters across the state in 2020. Charts detail the number and size of fish sampled. Anglers can pick and choose whether they would like to fish waters with lots of eating-sized fish, big fish or both. [N](#)

The Fishing Forecast can be found at local vendors or online at OutdoorNebraska.gov/fishingforecast/.



Anglers troll for walleye at sunset on Calamus Reservoir. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



A Thorny Subject

Puncturevine has long been an enemy of outdoor recreation.

Story and photos by Justin Haag

People riding bicycles, walking dogs or strolling barefoot have surely become familiar with *Tribulus terrestris*.

Puncturevine. Goathead. Whatever people call this plant, they likely agree it is a “terrible tribulation.” The bane of outdoor enthusiasts wherever it resides.

“Anybody that lives in a dry, arid climate just about anywhere in the world has probably experienced puncturevine,” said Lucinda Mays, a master gardener and horticulturist at Chadron State College. “It’s not native to North America, but it’s sure happy here.”

It’s not the plant’s pretty little yellow flowers people hate,

of course. Nor is it the fern-like leaves neatly arranged in pairs. Rather, it is that nasty, woody bur.

The fruit of the puncturevine, when it dries and separates from the plant, does so in five demonic pieces, each with two prominent spines. In most cases, one of those spines points upward as it rests in wait to inject itself into an unsuspecting foot or tire. It thrives in disturbed sites such as roadsides and footpaths.

With puncturevine, it is a numbers game. Each plant can produce hundreds of those burs, and each of the five pieces of those burs harbors up to four seeds. Do the math. Or don’t. In short, each plant can produce a boatload of hardy seed.

With the bur’s woody exterior, it can remain viable for about seven years before it finds the right conditions to spawn more plants. And, of course, those piercing spines often help the bur travel far and wide.

“It’s a real survivor of a plant,” Mays said.

Mays said she combats the species in a couple of ways



The burs of puncturevine, designed to point upward, have proficiently attached themselves to countless feet and bicycle tires.

on the college’s 281-acre campus that features more than 4 miles of trails.

On the trails, buffalo grass is used as a weapon. This native species, highly drought-tolerant with roots 6 feet deep, often out-competes puncturevine once it becomes established in a thick enough stand. In the southern United States, St. Augustine grass is the competitive species of choice.

Mays also encourages pulling puncturevine whenever it is identified. This works best in late spring and early summer before the plant begins dropping its burs.

“Carry a bag with you if you go on a hike,” Mays said. “If you see a goathead, pick the whole plant, put it in a bag and trash it.”

The plants are proficient at blending in with other species, so it sometimes takes a trained eye.

“If you can get it before it’s young, before it sets seed, you’ve done a great job of making sure you don’t have a seed crop for next year,” she said. “But we don’t usually notice it when it’s young. We notice it when it’s a big mat on the ground, maybe two feet across.”

Because puncturevine is an annual, people do not need to worry about that plant coming back next year or removing its entire long, skinny taproot. The seeds are the main issue. A piece of carpet or similar material can be used to lift seeds that fall on the ground when pulling plants.

Tribulus terrestris is native to southern Eurasia and Africa. Its list of positives is short. Pollinators (which unfortunately help the plant reproduce) are attracted to the yellow flowers. Grazing animals will eat the plant before the burs become too prickly.

Search for “*Tribulus terrestris*” on the Internet, and you will find many people hawking its health benefits. Both the root and its fruit are marketed as a supplement to boost testosterone and increase the male libido, among other health benefits.

Does it work? It’s debated.

While the thought of an army of bodybuilders roaming the landscape and munching up all of the goatheads should certainly get people excited, controlled studies have not proven it to increase testosterone and ingesting it has not been proven to be safe.

A tribulation, indeed. 🍷



Puncturevine’s flowers, attractive to pollinators, serve as little redemption for its horrible burs.

THREE FLIES FOR BLUEGILLS

By Larry Kurrus, Jarrod Spilger and Jeff Kurrus

Bluegills can be caught with a myriad of flies. Here are three favorites.

Hoppers

Catching giant bluegills on a hopper is a hoot and relatively easy during the spawn. Look in shallow coves for water movement and circular beds, but don't get too close —



Trophy bluegill caught with a hopper.
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

anything less than a few feet from the outer edge will scare fish away. Once located, lay a brown hopper just outside their bedding area, gently twitching it to give it a swimming motion. If you don't get a strike, carefully recast your bug closer to the bed, catching the fish on the outside of the area first before moving your casts to the interior beds. The surface explosions are breathtaking, and so are the massive gillies that you pull to the boat. —L.K.



Wulffs

Originally designed for eastern salmonid fishing, the Wulff family of dry flies works equally well on Nebraska panfish. There are several variants, but my favorites are the white and royal. The White Wulff is my go-to fly in May when bluegills are slurping the surface beneath cottonwood trees. This all-white fly resembles a blob of cottonwood seed. A close second is the Royal Wulff. This dry fly version of the Royal Coachman has bushy white hair wings that mimic cotton, plus a red body implying wounded bait. It's also easier to find in local fly shops than the White Wulff. —J.S.



A chartreuse and green woolly bugger.
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Woolly Buggers

Up until recently, I had always fished popping bugs for May bluegill, sight-fishing beds as I found them. Then I was introduced to the woolly bugger, a sinking fly that allowed me to fish beneath the surface when fish weren't feisty enough to hit on top. These can be tied, or bought, in a number of colors. Strip line at a comfortable pace, pausing periodically to allow the bugger to sink. Then simply watch your line. At the slightest movement, set the hook. More often than not, there will be a fish on the other end of the line. —J.K.



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Zebra mussel found in a moss ball.
Photo: USGS, Public Domain

ZEBRA MUSSELS IN MOSS BALLS

By Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist
Nebraska Department of Agriculture

Recently, Marimo moss balls, infested with zebra mussels, were found being sold across the United States. These moss balls are actually a type of green algae, formed into a ball approximately 2-5 inches in diameter. They are used to filter water and absorb pollutants in aquariums and are often sold in pet and aquarium supply stores. The moss balls were originally imported from the Ukraine before being distributed across the U.S.

The first report of zebra mussels in moss balls came from an employee at a pet store in Washington, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is coordinating efforts across the country to respond to the find. This undertaking has involved federal and state agencies, including the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. To date, infested moss balls have been found in at least 30 states, including Nebraska.

Nebraska Game and Parks staff inspected two Petco locations in Lincoln and found zebra mussels present in several moss balls. All Petco and PetSmart locations in Nebraska were cooperative when asked by Game and Parks to remove the product from their shelves.

The zebra mussel is one of the most destructive invasive

species in North America. It is a D-shaped clam, with alternating light and dark bands, about finger-nail size. Zebra mussels filter large quantities of plankton from water, decreasing the food supply for native species. Their dense colonies clog water intakes for power and water plants, block water control structures, and damage fishing and boating equipment.

Nebraska Game and Parks has provided the following guidance for anyone who has purchased moss balls:

To prevent the spread of zebra mussels from aquariums, moss balls should be removed, placed in a plastic bag, frozen solid and then disposed of in the trash. All aquarium owners should dispose of tank water away from water sources, such as a stream, and instead dump water in grass or gravel. Don't dump aquarium water down the drain as this can spread zebra mussels to water bodies.

For questions and to report aquatic invasive sightings, contact Game and Parks at npgc.ais@nebraska.gov or 402-471-7602.



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BALLISTICS AND BRIBERY

By Chris Helzer

“Ballistics and Bribery” sounds like a great title for a novel or action movie. It’s also a pretty apt description of the two-pronged seed dispersal strategy of violets. Seventeen different species of violet (*Viola* sp) are listed in *The Flora of Nebraska*, including both annuals and perennials and flowers of blue, purple, white and yellow. Almost everyone has seen violets growing in their yard or in a nearby prairie or woodland, but few people are aware of the fascinating ways they move their seeds around.

When a violet seed pod opens, it splits into three sections, each of which holds rows of seeds. The seeds don’t stay there for long. As the pods dry and shrink, they squeeze those seeds more and more tightly until they are explosively ejected into the air. If they don’t hit leaves or other obstacles, the tiny seeds can travel several feet away from their parent. I highly recommend a quick internet search on this topic so you can watch videos of this happening.

Dispersing seeds three to four feet away is an impressive feat for an unassuming little plant like a violet. Over time, populations can expand pretty quickly that way. However, most violet species have evolved a second strategy to help their seeds embark upon even longer journeys.

Violet seeds have what looks like a small, fleshy appendage (called an elaiosome) outside the hard seed coat that is rich in lipids and proteins. As it happens, ants really like to feed lipids and proteins to their babies. As a result, when an ant comes across a violet seed, it often decides to carry the seed back to its colony.

Once the ant gets the seed to the nest, the nutritious elaiosome is fed to ant larvae, and the rest of the seed (still intact within its hard seed coat) is deposited in the colony’s “compost” pile. That compost pile is full of rotting vegetation and animal matter. In other words, it’s a damp and rich environment for violet seeds to germinate and grow.

In short, violets launch baited seeds into their neighborhoods as a way to trick ants into transporting them to ideal germination spots. It sounds like a dastardly scheme except that everyone benefits. The ants get healthy treats for their kids, the seeds end up in a dark fertilized place, and we get to admire the whole process.



Blue violets (*Viola sororia*) in the Nature Conservancy’s Platte River Prairies. CHRIS HELZER



The seed pod splits open into three sections, each containing rows of seeds. CHRIS HELZER



The individual seeds show the small, fleshy appendages which ants feed to their larvae. CHRIS HELZER

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TICK TAG GO

By Renae Blum



American dog tick (*Dermacentor variabilis*) in Chadron, Dawes County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

When you’re participating in community science — gathering data on the natural world for scientists to use — often you’re observing something fun, like monarchs or bumble bees. Usually not parasites.

“Ticks are kind of a hard sell,” acknowledged Louise Lynch-O’Brien, an assistant professor of insect biology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She and colleague Jody Green lead the community science project Tick Tag Go, with the goal of establishing baseline data of tick distributions in the state.

While ticks seem like an unlikely subject, the data such a project can gather is important. Tick populations are shifting and new species are being identified in Nebraska, so having records of tick sightings is critical in understanding what species are found where. In the scientific community, there’s little time or resources for monitoring ticks, so the public can be a big help, Lynch-O’Brien said.

Unlike your average community science project, Tick Tag Go involves passive surveillance. “That just means, if they’re out and about — hiking, walking their dog, hunting, doing their normal activities — and they come across ticks, then we’re asking them to share those interactions and that data,”

Lynch-O’Brien said.

To do so, you simply log on to the iNaturalist app or website, and share a photo of the tick and information about the encounter on the Tick Tag Go page. Depending on the photo, the tick species can then be identified, and the entry is added to a statewide map showing all tick sightings for the project.

Beyond learning more about Nebraska’s ticks, the founders of Tick Tag Go have another goal: public awareness. They want people to still go out and enjoy the outdoors, but also be aware of the presence of ticks, know about the diseases they spread, and know how to remove ticks properly. Ticks should be removed with tweezers, Lynch-O’Brien said, and tick checks are also important.

By logging tick encounters on iNaturalist, participants will also have data they can keep for their personal health records.

“People who join the project won’t just be helping us, they’ll be helping other Nebraskans and then potentially themselves, too,” Lynch-O’Brien said.

To participate, join iNaturalist and submit photos, preferably on the Tick Tag Go page. To learn more about Tick Tag Go, visit ticktaggo.unl.edu.



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Chadron State Park 1954. My mother would walk with us three children to the park so we could swim in the wonderful in-ground outdoor pool. I am looking at the camera, and my 6-year-old brother, Joe, is next to me. My 10-year-old sister would have been swimming in the larger pool. Wonderful memories.

– Inez Buck, Chadron



Platte River State Park 1983. Our three families began spending a couple of weekends each year at Platte River State Park the year it opened. The parents met in December to choose the weekends, and when the reservation window opened in early January our moms dialed and redialed until someone managed to get through and reserve cabins for all three families. I have continued this tradition with my family and some friends. Back row: Michael Behrens, David Lundquist, Kristina Lundquist Leeper, Andy Farrell. Front row: Jenny Behrens, Sarah Farrell Hansen, Diana Lundquist.

– Kristina Leeper, Omaha



Platte River State Park 1997. At the falls.
– Denise Maack, Lincoln

Smith Falls 1988. My husband (Pat Shea), my sister (Sharron Walter), and I (Betty Walter-Shea) checked out a number of the Nebraska falls, including Smith Falls in the fall of 1988. (My sister was visiting from Arkansas.) A “cage and pulley system” was available for tourists to cross the Niobrara River to pick up the trail to the falls. In this picture, Pat is on the other side of the river helping Sharron (in the cage) cross the river.

– Elizabeth Walter-Shea, Lincoln



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



MY FAVORITE PHOTOSHOOT

By Jeff Kurrus

When it comes to photography, midday light is often bad. Really bad. So when I met living history reenactor Megan Katz for a recent photoshoot, I wasn't expecting much. I knew she would be good in front of the camera, because I had seen her before. What I didn't know was if I would be any good.

We met at Rock Creek Station State Historical Park to capture one photo we would use in our recently-debuted special issue, *100 Years of Nebraska State Parks*. Jeff Barger, the superintendent, was on hand to take us anywhere we wanted to go on the property.

As I began photographing Megan, who was adorned in homemade period attire, I kept looking at the noon sky, unable to place her in a spot that flattered her.

"I can open up one of the buildings if you'd like," Jeff said.

"Please!" shot from my mouth even before I had time to

think. But sometimes thinking is overrated.

When he opened the door to one of the wooden buildings, the light I had just been fighting with outside gave me a soft glow within.

And for the next hour, I kept pressing the camera's button.

Megan was amazing as a photo subject, from her perfect look and posture to her willingness to have me go way overboard on the number of images I made.

What she didn't know was that I could have spent the rest of the day photographing her.

When I had finally wore out my welcome, we went back out in the stark sunlight.

I immediately filed that photo tip for future reference, knowing I'll encounter a similar situation again. Hopefully when I do, I will have a photo subject just as good.

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