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Cover: A grasshopper sits on purple locoweed, a native wildflower that benefits from cedar removal and prescribed fire in the Loess Canyons. See story on page 46. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

This page: Western wallflower, also known as yellow phlox or prairie rocket, blooms in a Sandhills grassland on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge in Cherry County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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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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In May, paper wasps begin building their nests.
JIM KALISH, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA DEPARTMENT OF ENTOMOLOGY

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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

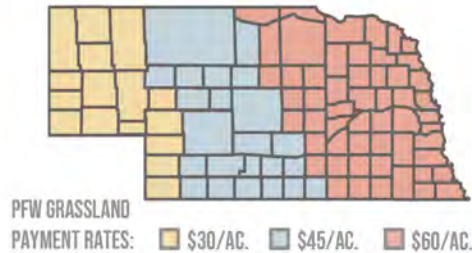
Land must be suitable for one of three program areas and its objectives. Cropland, grassland, community, business, and residential sites are eligible. Cropland must be in the Rainwater Basin area to be eligible for the Precision Ag Conservation project area. Pheasants Forever biologists will evaluate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



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



LITTLE BLUE
A little blue heron hunts
at Holmes Lake in
Lancaster County.

CHRIS MASADA

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

By Ryan Sparks

Casting a frog into a weed-choked farm pond and watching a largemouth bass explode from beneath is arguably the most fun you can have while fishing. Most people think of July and August as the dog days of summer — fish retreat to deep water and heavy weeds make fishing difficult. In this situation, pulling a hollow-bodied frog over the top and catching big bass feels like cheating the system. The aquatic plants that were once your enemy quickly become your friend when you realize they give bass places to hide and ambush your hollow-bodied frog. Getting bass to strike a frog isn't difficult, but getting them to the net is a different story. Here's how to tip the odds in your favor and make your frog fishing more productive.

Stiff Rods and Heavy Line

Landing more bass on frogs starts with the right gear. I love to use light rods and finesse fish as much as anyone, but featherweight gear has no place in frog fishing. Heavy baitcasting rods with plenty of lifting power are preferable. Look for a heavy rod that is 7 feet long or longer. Stout rods help you cast farther, and they also help with hooksets and lifting hooked fish that are wrapped in vegetation.

Pair your frog rod with a beefy, fast-retrieve reel. A fast retrieve lets you take up slack quickly when a fish strikes, and it also saves your wrist during hours of cranking.

Lastly, and probably most importantly, spool your reel with braided line. Fifty-pound line isn't overkill. No, you aren't going to catch a 50-pound bass, but you will be thankful for the extra power when you need to horse a big bass out of the slop.

Upgrade Your Kermit

When I started frog fishing, most of the fake frogs available were low quality and poorly designed. They quickly ripped open and

filled with water, and the hooks they came with were subpar at best.

Now, most hollow-bodied frogs come with sticky sharp hooks, glide effortlessly over weeds, and they last an entire summer or more. A few extra dollars for a good frog is worth it. Some of my personal favorites are the Spro Bronzeye Frog, Reaction Innovations Swamp Donkey and Lunkerhunt Prop Frog. To prevent bass from striking short, I trim an inch or 2 off the rubber legs. I also prefer black frogs because of the contrast they create when a bass is looking up.

Patience and Power

It is easy to get excited and instantly set the hook when a bass smashes your frog, but you

will miss the majority of fish by setting the hook too soon. The key to hooking and landing bass on a frog is to wait a few seconds and then make a powerful hook set. To force yourself to wait, lower the rod and reel up any slack in the line. Then put your back into it and set the hook. You almost can't set the hook too hard. Waiting to set the hook is a hard skill to learn but you will be rewarded with a calloused bass thumb.

Here's one last tip. No matter what you do, sometimes a fish just plain misses the frog. In this situation, have a heavy spinning rod with a wacky-rigged worm ready to go. A bass that hits a frog is in a predatory mood and will often circle back looking for its victim. A slowly sinking worm will often draw a second strike. When I first tried it, I was amazed how well this tactic works.

Gettin' Froggy with It

Come summer, I can't wait to get a frog swimming. The bites are explosive and can yield some hefty bass. Having the right equipment, a quality frog and a good hookset are the three keys to success. Put them together and your hands will smell like bass all summer long.



Spro Bronzeye Frog



The Lunkerhunt Prop Frog

PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

NEBRASKA LAND IS IN DEMAND



KNOX COUNTY - 1560 AC±

Nestled along the tranquil banks of Soldier Creek, this property is a hidden gem offering a harmonious blend of outdoor adventure and income potential. It's a well-kept secret that combines relaxation and productivity on a unique canvas. This property is a gateway to a world of possibilities where outdoor enjoyment and financial gain come together. Whether looking for a private family retreat or considering an investment, this property is incredibly versatile. It can be your personal haven, a recreational escape, or a smart addition to your investment portfolio. Water plays a significant role here, with irrigated farmland acres benefiting from an 8-inch well and serene lakes and ponds fed by natural springs. An intricately designed irrigation system with a proven track record ensures the land's productivity. Thoughtful internal gravel roads provide easy access, even to the most remote fields. Additionally, pasture acres have recently been set aside for wildlife habitat but can be effortlessly converted for grazing. In this natural showcase, you'll find exceptional opportunities for hunting whitetail deer, turkey, and upland birds.



GAGE COUNTY - 156.97 AC±

Located just 3 miles from Pickrell, Nebraska, and a convenient 25-mile drive from Lincoln, this property offers an ideal retreat from the bustle of city life while remaining easily accessible. Situated approximately 1 mile from Highway 77, accessibility is unmatched, making it an excellent investment opportunity or an optimal retreat for the whole family! The landscape offers numerous enjoyable opportunities; the property features a large lake and several small ponds, offering serene settings for fishing and relaxation. The smaller pond contains bass, bluegill, and crappie, providing endless opportunities to fish the day away. The sizable lake adds to the property's charm with around 6 acres of surface water, a full pool, and inviting activities like boating, kayaking, and waterfowl hunting. Moreover, a large timbered draw boasts a high amount of deer sign with numerous pinch points, funnels, and future food plot locations.

CONTACT JASON OR LUKE FOR A NO OBLIGATION FREE ANALYSIS.



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The new campsites and shower house at Box Butte Reservoir State Recreation Area will cater to the lake’s anglers and many other visitors. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

BIG UPGRADES AT BOX BUTTE CAMPGROUND

By Justin Haag

One of the Panhandle’s most popular fishing spots now has more amenities for anglers and others who want to make a multi-day trip of it.

Workers late last year completed the addition of 20 new electrical campsites and the installation of a shower house and sewage dump station at Box Butte State Recreation Area and its 1,600-acre reservoir.

The dump station and shower house are new features for the area, and the campsites represent an increase by more than half of what was previously available.

The new amenities are at the west side of the current campground, north and parallel to the existing paved road and sites 7-18. Half are available for reservation with the others being first-come,

first-served. The improvements were designed to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Nebraska’s Capital Maintenance Fund, which was established by the Legislature in 2016 to help preserve public outdoor recreation facilities and parklands, was a large contributor to the \$840,000 project. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation also was a major financial sponsor.

The expansion follows many other improvements at the recreation area in recent years, including a new boat ramp and dock, concrete outhouses and an upgraded fish-cleaning station.

In addition to fishing, Box Butte Reservoir SRA and Wildlife Management Area provide boating, hunting, picnicking and birdwatching opportunities. It is located 9 miles north of Hemingford.



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RYAN SPARKS

MEDITERRANEAN WILD TURKEY SANDWICHES

By Ryan Sparks

These sandwiches are delicious, easy to make and quick to assemble. They transform tougher pieces of a wild turkey like the legs, thighs and wings into tender, shredded meat with tons of flavor. When the weather warms, this recipe is on a regular rotation in our home. The sun-dried tomatoes, basil, lemon zest and capers, combined with the wild turkey meat, make them a perfect summertime sandwich.

Servings: 4

Prep Time: 10 minutes

Cooking Time: 4-6 hours

Ingredients:

- 12 oz. cooked wild turkey meat from legs, thighs or wings (directions below)
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- ¼ cup julienned sun-dried tomatoes
- ¼ cup roughly chopped basil
- 3 tbsp. roughly chopped parsley
- Zest of 1 lemon
- 2 tbsp. capers
- 1 tsp. kosher salt
- ½ tsp. black pepper
- Bread of choice (focaccia, ciabatta, baguette, croissant)
- Olive oil
- 1 garlic clove

- Salad greens of choice (baby spinach, arugula, romaine, etc.)

Cooking the Turkey

Place the turkey pieces in a slow cooker set to low. Depending on the size of the turkey(s), 2 thighs, 2 legs or 6 wings should yield enough cooked meat for the sandwiches.

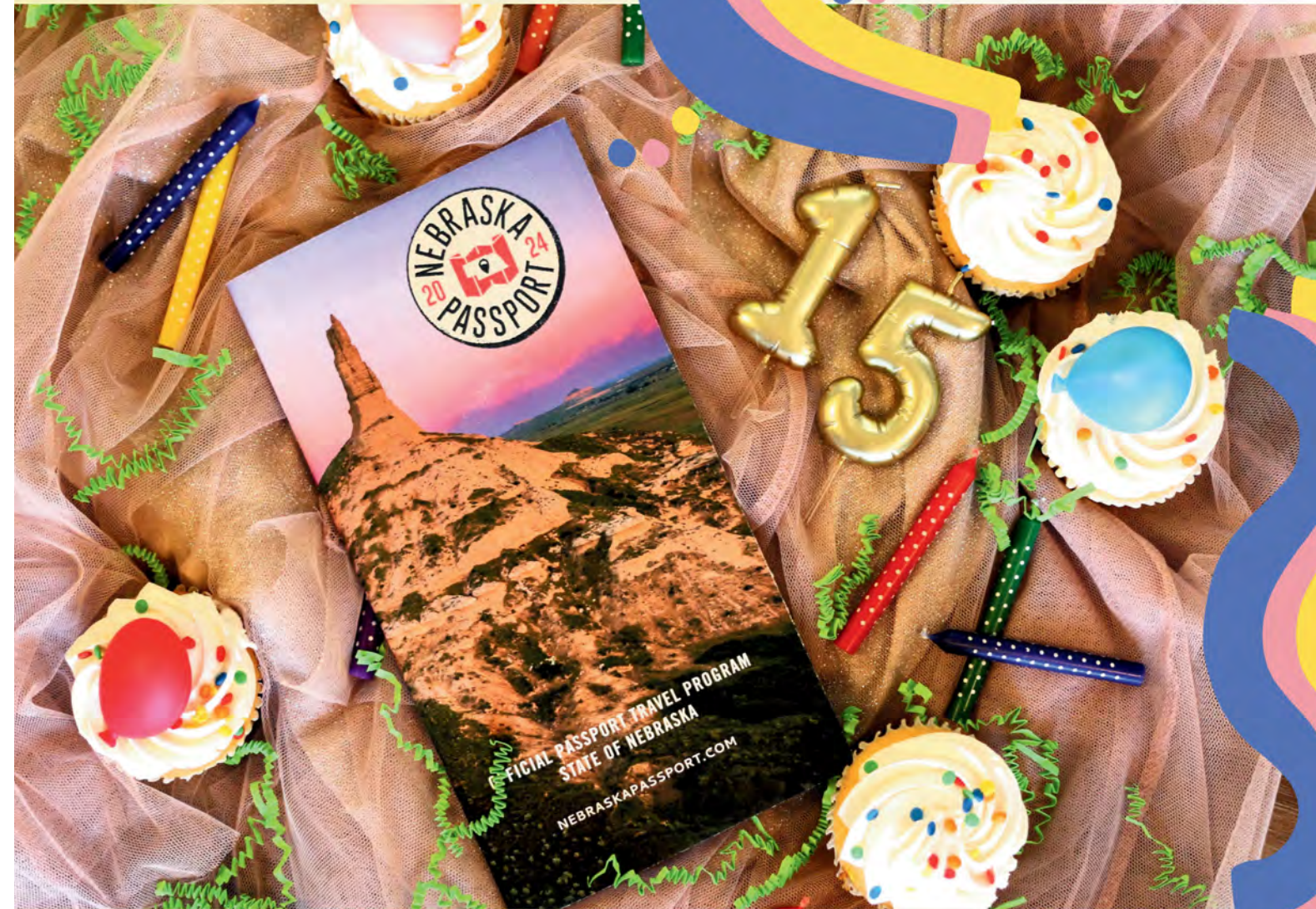
Fill the slow cooker with enough water to barely cover the meat. Braise the turkey pieces on low heat until the meat is easily separated from the bones, 4-6 hours. Optionally, but highly recommended, throw in roughly chopped onions, roughly chopped carrots, dried thyme, dried parsley and a bay leaf to simultaneously make homemade broth for later.

When the turkey is tender, remove it from the slow cooker and allow it to cool slightly. Using your hands, remove the meat from the bones and tendons. Roughly chop the cooked meat, keeping an eye out for any shot.

Assemble the Sandwiches

When the turkey is finished, combine the meat, mayo, sun-dried tomatoes, basil, parsley, lemon zest, capers, salt and pepper in a large bowl. Taste for seasoning.

Toast the bread, brush it with olive oil, and rub the garlic clove across the bread's toasted side. Place a generous pile of turkey mixture on the bread, top with greens and serve.



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Falling Through the Times

More than 230 waterfalls adorn the Niobrara Valley, but one state park attraction still stands above them all

Story and photos by Justin Haag

It's reassuring to return to places that don't change much over time. While such can be said of other Nebraska rivers and streams, there's something exceptional, and especially enduring, about this spot tucked away in a canyon 250 yards from the Niobrara River. A place where one can rely on the water flowing from more than 60 feet overhead and splashing into the shallow pool below. Where children can stand below the towering waterfall on a hot day, feeling the force of cold water rush over their bodies just as generations have before them, their shrills barely audible over the roar of the natural spectacle itself.

Even though Smith Falls State Park between Valentine and Sparks is Nebraska's youngest, the property's main attraction has surely been recognized as a scenic jewel since its discovery by humans, whenever that may have been. An early 1900s newspaper account said Native Americans had referred to it as the "Place of the Roaring Water," reporting an initiative to have it named Roaring

Falls.

The waterfall was instead known to the settlers of the times as Arikaree Falls. The name is a reference to the Arikara, the semi-nomadic tribe of Native Americans that has a rich history along the upper Missouri Valley and migrated to northern Nebraska for about a decade in 1823.

Regardless of its name through time, the roar has always been the same.

'Fred's Falls'?

In 1896, when Frederic Smith obtained the first homestead patent for land on which the waterfall resides, the attraction gradually became known locally as the "Smith fall," a description that eventually became a proper noun. Early newspaper stories also refer to it as Honey Smith, or Hunney Smith, Falls.

Later, under the ownership of another "Fred," Smith Falls gradually picked up steam as the tourist attraction we know today.

In 1941, Sandhills farmer-rancher

Fred Krzyzanowski bought the property for \$7 per acre as a place to graze cattle, reportedly not knowing there was a waterfall on it. He owned the property a month before visiting the falls.

With vehicle access to the falls locked behind private lands on the south side of the Niobrara, Krzyzanowski allowed the increasing number of people floating the river to park their vessels for a visit. He later catered to the falls' popularity by adding a campground and picnic tables. Visitors shared space with his cattle herd.

In 1983, Krzyzanowski began charging 50 cents for those arriving by raft or inner tubes and \$1 for canoeists, with proceeds used for trash clean-up and the installation of outhouses.

Visitors also could pay 50 cents for a ride across the river on the "cable car." It's not a cable car resembling those carrying passengers around San Francisco. Instead, it's something of a gondola lift — a steel cage hanging on a cable spanning the river with

Park visitor Lauren Hudson of Broomfield, Colorado, stands below Smith Falls.



Old photo of the cable car that once crossed the Niobrara River. NGPC PHOTO LIBRARY

pulleys fashioned from car wheels. The car, powered by hand pedals, was initially constructed by Cherry County for Krzyzanowski's daughter,

Margaret, to get from their home on the south side of the river to meet the school bus on the north side. Even though Margaret tragically died from illness 18 months after the car's installation, the lift remained as a landmark for people floating the river.

The cable car's origins were among the stories visitors to the falls remember Krzyzanowski telling them as he visited the campground. The contraption has been closed to use, but still exists in place for posterity.

Krzyzanowski died at age 89 in August 1988. In 1990, the Krzyzanowski family contracted a private lease agreement for management of the camping facilities, known as "12 Mile Camp." Not long after, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission entered the picture.

Becoming a State Park

In January 1992, after considerable discussion, the Game and Parks Commission OK'd a 30-year lease



Along the Niobrara National Scenic River, Smith Falls State Park's campground, Verdigre Bridge and walkway to the falls.

agreement with the Krzyzanowski family for 244 acres on both sides of the river. The agency agreed to pay \$10,000 per year and planned more than \$500,000 of improvements for when the property officially became a state park that May.

One of the first priorities was the path to the big waterfall. With increased traffic, officials realized the need to improve safety and reduce erosion caused by the wet feet trekking up and down the single-track dirt trail to the attraction.

With volunteer assistance of more than 100 members of the Casper Yost Chapter of the Telephone Pioneers

of America, a wooden walkway, supported by 180 4x4 posts, was installed in 1993. Safely suspending visitors about 4 feet above the old dirt trail, it was christened the Fred Krzyzanowski Memorial Walkway.

Bridging Gaps

Another goal of Game and Parks when assuming management of the park was to make the falls accessible to more people.

The same month Game and Parks commissioners approved the lease agreement for Smith Falls in 1992, Knox County commissioners decided

a 165-foot high-truss steel bridge at the north side of Verdigre had become insufficient after seven decades of use and would have to come down for a replacement. What was deemed by many in the Verdigre area to be a sad event for the stately landmark now seems more like destiny than coincidence.

The bridge was retrieved from the county's scrap heap and transported to the fledgling state park to be reassembled and gain new life as a footbridge. The 30-ton structure, originally constructed in 1922, was assembled by contractors and put in place Oct. 1, 1996, with three

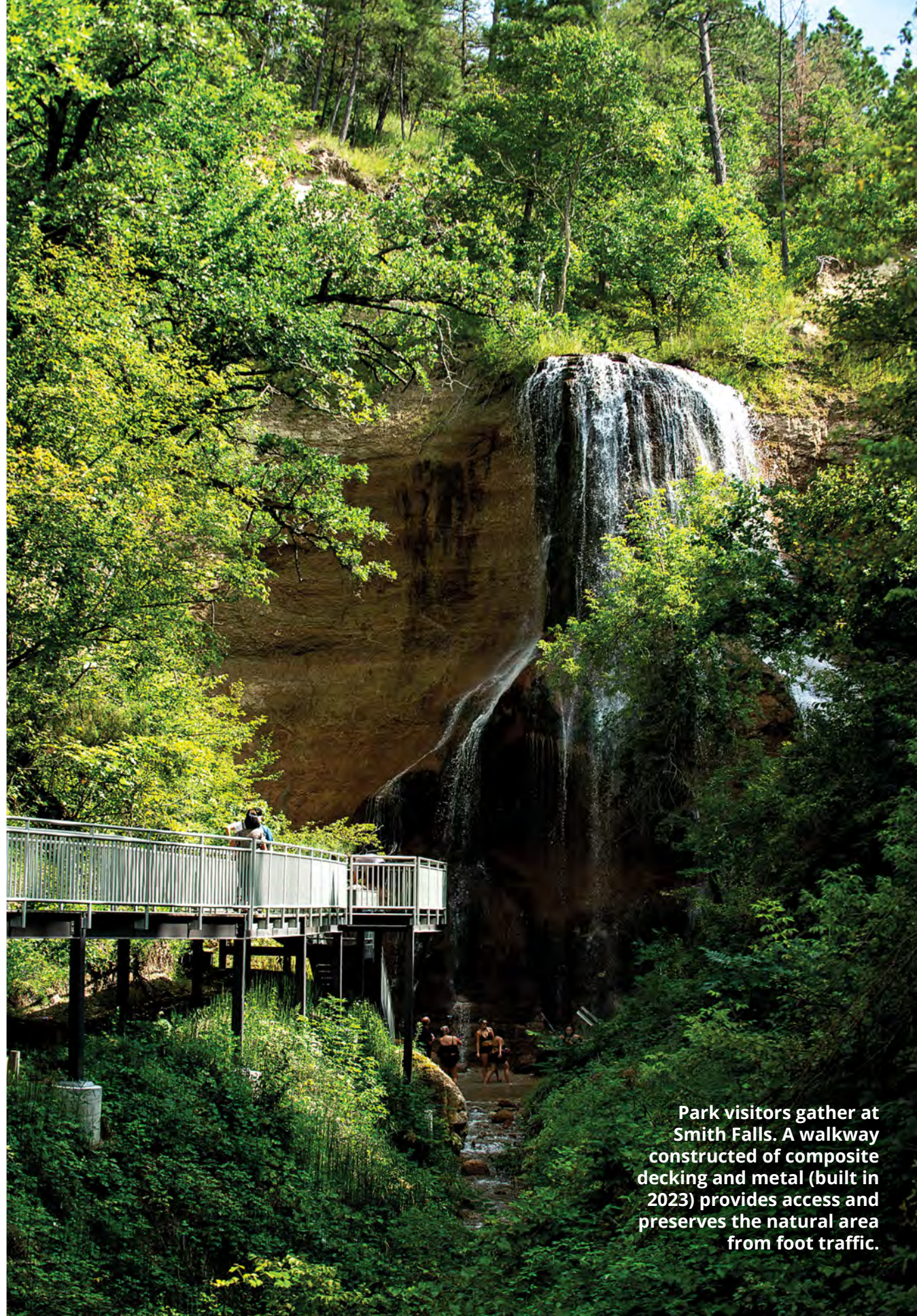
giant cranes and a bulldozer. Most of the project's \$340,000 cost was paid for with federal grant money, most notably the Transportation Enhancement Program.

The bridge was amply sturdy enough to get park visitors across the river by foot, planners noted, and would even complement the area's aesthetics. During reassembly, it was narrowed by 5 feet, making it even stronger than its 5-ton capacity when it spanned Verdigre Creek.

For the first time, the public could visit Smith Falls without floating, wading or riding the rusty cable car across the river. The Verdigre Bridge



Postcard of Smith Falls circa 1960 with just a dirt trail and no walkway built yet.



Park visitors gather at Smith Falls. A walkway constructed of composite decking and metal (built in 2023) provides access and preserves the natural area from foot traffic.



Among the park's natural attributes are its Smith aspen trees (*Populus x smithii*), an endemic hybrid of bigtooth aspen (*Populus grandidentata*) and quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*).

has since served countless visitors, throughout all seasons, who otherwise might not have been able to see the attraction.

A New Chapter

Through the years, the park renovated the visitors center and added 70 primitive campsites, a shower house, two picnic shelters, four restrooms and housing for the park superintendent.

With the end of the 30-year lease agreement looming in the 2010s, many wondered if the park's future was in peril. They were relieved when the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the Krzyzanowskis — Fred Jr. and wife Joann still farm and ranch on land neighboring the park — renewed the lease agreement for 25 more years in 2018.

Since then, Game and Parks has been investing in substantial improvements.

The wooden walkway to the falls had served the park well but was showing wear from three decades of

use and exposure to the elements.

In May 2023, after eight months of construction, the Game and Parks Commission opened an improved walkway with composite decking. The project of more than \$800,000 was largely funded with a source not available when the first walkway was built. The Capital Maintenance Fund was established by the Nebraska Legislature in 2016 to help preserve Nebraska's public outdoor recreation facilities and parklands.

The new 500-foot walkway features both a wheelchair ramp with a gradual grade and a more direct route via steps. With its steel posts and frame, concrete footings and aluminum railing, the new walkway is expected to last much longer than the one it replaced. A deck of similar materials was constructed at the park's visitors center, with new steps leading to the campground. Also included in the walkway project were wheelchair-accessible approaches to the footbridge.

Game and Parks is in the process of developing a management plan for the park, and officials expect many exciting

developments in coming years.

A Natural Marvel

A goal for Game and Parks since the beginning has been to balance accessibility with preserving the area's natural attributes. There's a lot to consider in what has been designated the Middle Niobrara Biologically Unique Landscape by the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project. Six natural ecological cultures meet in this area, resulting in a fascinating mix of plant and wildlife species.

As warming temperatures caused glaciers of the area to retreat about 10,000 years ago, some botanical species survived in the steep, shaded canyon of the Niobrara that don't survive on the warmer lands above. The park is home to the Smith aspen trees, an endemic hybrid of bigtooth (*Populus grandidentata*) and quaking (*Populus tremuloides*) aspen. Attractive paper birches also adorn the park. People aren't sure for how long, though, because they aren't reproducing.



Canoers enter the north side of the park at Nichols Landing. There is also a landing on the south side that provides access to the big waterfall and nature trail.

Because of the sensitive biological attributes, the park limits hiking to designated trails and walkways. The best way for visitors to take in the park's natural scene is the Jim MacAllister Nature Trail, named for one of the Game and Parks officials who was instrumental in the park's early development. It takes hikers 1½ miles from the bottom of the canyon to the top. It's an elevation change of about 200 feet, but most hikers consider it easy.

Along the way, the trail encounters a number of the other nine waterfalls in the park and 230-plus waterfalls documented in the Niobrara Valley. Most other falls in the park are not marked and are much smaller than Smith. They include Turkey Feather, Birch, Pine and Little Smith falls.

A Popular, Quiet Place

A summer day at Smith Falls State Park evolves from a tranquil night and sunrise to the chatter from a steady stream of floaters landing riverside to take that walk up the canyon for a scenic view or cold shower from nature.

Those floating the river can access the park at two landings. The Smith Falls Landing is on the south side of the river and the Nichols Landing at the north side, just east of the campground.

In the late 1980s, officials estimated

15,000-20,000 canoers per year on the river. The National Park Service estimates the latest five-year average to be about 75,000 floaters per year, surely driven by increased publicity and the popularity of float tubes and kayaks. In 2020, when much of the world was shut down because of the pandemic, the figure topped 100,000.

Despite all of that busyness, Smith Falls and the Niobrara River maintain a reputation of serenity.

Smith Falls was among the stops that a team for Quiet Parks International made while doing acoustic tests on a four-day kayak trip down the river. The organization bestowed the river with its "Quiet Trail" designation in 2023 — the second in the world and first in North America to receive such an honor.

That doesn't mean Smith Falls is necessarily quiet. Those doing the sound study for the designation didn't document a figure, but said the water dropping at Smith Falls is probably about 70 decibels, comparable to that of a vacuum cleaner.

A Niobrara Valley Treasure

Early news accounts tell of the beauty of at least four other named falls in the area surrounding Valentine that since have been concealed behind the fences of private landowners. The one that is now the main attraction of

this state park was and remains to be the most well-known.

The immeasurable value of Smith Falls was often mentioned in the 1970s and 1980s as contentious debates raged over a proposed dam project and federal legislation to designate the Niobrara a national scenic river. Although the proposed dam site was downstream near Norden and said by proponents not to affect Smith Falls, the beauty spot surely was present in the minds of the public during the discussions. The dam proposal failed, but the National Scenic River designation passed in 1991. The designation has afforded certain protections from development to 76 miles of the river that includes the park.

Roaring On

The water of Smith Creek emerges from a spring of the Ogallala Aquifer about 800 yards south of the waterfall. Because of the stream's short length, it's much less susceptible to the



Smith Falls is convex, formed from erosion during countless winters of freezing and thawing at their sides.



The new 500-foot walkway features wheelchair ramps, benches and a scenic vantage at its midpoint.

water fluctuations of longer creeks and rivers. Smith Creek's consistent 50-degree water, with an average flow of 2.59 cubic feet per second, satisfies visitors year-round. Inch-for-inch, it surely gets more people wet than any other natural tributary in the state.

While the fall may seem consistent within our lifetimes, it's constantly changing, as with all stream systems, and is in the stage of a geological cycle.

The geology of the Niobrara Valley gives its waterfalls a notable characteristic. Smith Falls and others in the valley are convex, meaning the water flows over the top of a face that protrudes outward from the center.

In winter, the sides of Smith Falls and others often become adorned with attractive icicles while the spring water continues to flow through the center. As groundwater in the sandstone at the sides freezes and thaws, it loosens the material and makes it subject to erosion.

Darryl Pederson, a professor emeritus at the University of Nebraska who has extensively researched waterfalls, said someday Smith Falls

will look much different. Eventually, the water will veer to one side of the rock protrusion instead of flowing over the top of it. Then, the protrusion itself will no longer be protected by the spring water and will be subject to freezing, thawing and breaking up.

As it stands, though, Smith Falls is a point of pride for Nebraska, and many say it holds its own on a larger scene.

"Niagara appeals to you by its grandeur, but the Arikaree by its dainty beauty far surpasses any other falls on the continent," a newspaper reporter wrote in 1908.

Thanks to the many improvements to the state park, more people are enjoying the "Place of the Roaring



First known as Arikaree Falls, Smith Falls State Park is located 12 miles east-northeast of Valentine and 3 miles southwest of Sparks, on the south side of the Niobrara River.

Water" than ever before. And, with each passing day, the water continues to fall for whomever wants to see, feel and hear its timeless charms. **N**

How High is It?

For as long as people have written about Smith Falls, they've been assigning a number to its height. It's been reported as high as 100 feet tall but is usually listed between 60 to 75 feet.

The first "official" measurement — 68 feet — is believed to have been made by Dr. George Condra of the state conservation and soil survey in the 1910s.

For uncertain reasons, the official height has changed since then. The National Park Service reports that it was last measured to be 63 feet. Park service employees plan to join Game and Parks and other partners in measuring the falls again this year using a process that involves a rangefinder, clinometer and knowledge of trigonometry.

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

May is a wonderful month to be outdoors. This month, explore options like walleye fishing, birding, turkey hunting — and even mothing. 🦋



Participate in the Nebraska Birding Bowl

May 1-31 | Statewide

Join the fun and participate in this free, statewide birding competition in honor of Nebraska Bird Month. It is perfect for anyone who enjoys observing birds in Nebraska, no matter your age or skill level. Enter in one of several categories and enjoy the chance to see birds and even win prizes. The data you submit will contribute to research and bird conservation. To learn more and sign up, visit birdtrail.outdoornebraska.gov/birdingbowl.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Walleye fishing at Sutherland Reservoir

May and June | Sutherland Reservoir State Recreation Area

Sutherland Reservoir provides consistently good walleye fishing, and this year, it's even better — listed as a top walleye destination in the 2024 Fishing Forecast. This reservoir will be particularly favorable for 15- to 20-inch walleyes that make great eating. Through June 30, participate in the Midwest Walleye Challenge to help provide data to fisheries biologists who will use the information to learn more about the status of walleye fisheries. Search “Midwest Walleye Challenge” at outdoornebraska.gov to learn more.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

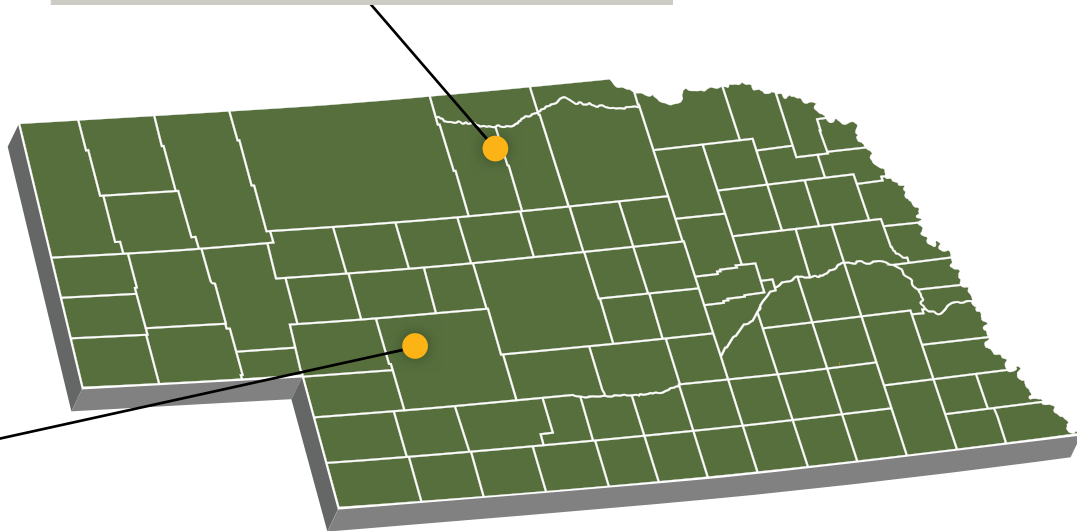


Visit Long Pine SRA

All year | Long Pine State Recreation Area

May is a particularly good month to visit this small jewel of a park; it's an ideal birding spot during songbird migration in May. Long Pine is also a popular tubing destination and boasts some of Nebraska's best trout fishing. Other attractions include an archery range, a 1-mile scenic hiking trail and plentiful picnicking spots. Basic campsites are available, so break out the s'mores, bring your camera and enjoy a peaceful vacation here.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Youth shotgun turkey season

April 6 – May 31 | Statewide

Spring turkey hunts are a great way to connect with your kids, spark their interest in hunting and pass along your passion for the outdoors. To have a positive experience, play on the weather and the interest of the young hunter. Let him or her help make some of the decisions, like when and where to hunt, and how to set up and call. Bring snacks and take lots of pictures. A ground blind can add an extra bit of comfort needed to stay a little longer.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



What to Do in May



Look for cecropia moths

May to early July | In hardwood forests statewide

The stunning cecropia moth is the largest native moth in North America, with a wingspan of around 5 to 7 inches. This is the time of year when these impressive specimens emerge from their protective cocoon. Cecropia moths live only about two weeks, focused only on finding a mate, breeding and laying eggs. To view them, visit a hardwood forest at night. Take a white sheet, drape it over a clothesline, and shine a light onto the sheet. Bring a moth identification book and see what you discover!

GETTY IMAGES

Fens Forever

By Mariah Lundgren

There is a type of wetland found in the Nebraska Sandhills that holds mystery and wonder — fens. Unique and rare plant species make their home in this boggy and bouncy land. Formed over thousands of years, fens are an important part of our natural history and are critical in cleaning our air and water. But first, what makes a fen a wetland?

What Are Wetlands?

Wetlands are defined by the presence of water, water-loving plants and soils that have been developed in wet conditions. Wetlands in the Sandhills are found where the Ogallala Aquifer meets the surface in the valleys and between the hills, along the shorelines of the many rivers and streams, and on the edges of lakes. Impressively, the Sandhills are 20,000 square miles, have more than 1 million acres of wetlands and are one of the last truly wild landscapes left in the Great Plains.

The Sandhills are the most intact temperate grassland left in the world and have remained relatively undeveloped since the westward movement of European-American settlers. The sandy, porous soils make row crop agriculture challenging, unlike much of the Great Plains, which has been turned to the plow. However, with renewable energy development, such as wind, encroachment of woody vegetation and the wealth of groundwater that lies beneath, threats loom on the horizon.



Wetlands are formed in depressions in sandhill areas where groundwater intercepts the surface of the land. The most notable complex is the Sandhills.

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND

Fens

In spring 2021, Platte Basin Timelapse producers Ethan Freese, Dakota Altman and I spent three days with Nebraska state botanist Gerry Steinauer and Nebraska wetland program manager Ted LaGrange. The itinerary of this trip was to explore three fens on public and private lands deep in the heart of the Sandhills. So naturally, this trip coined the name Fen Fest.

A fen is a type of wetland that is perpetually fed by cold

groundwater. Its soils are saturated, and they form in low oxygen conditions, otherwise known as anaerobic conditions, over a long period of time. The cold and wet conditions drastically slows down plant decomposition, and the partly digested plant matter found in fens turns into a type of soil we call “peat” and “muck.”

Fens are found in various climates, including warmer and arid regions, such as the Sandhills of Nebraska. If you see a fen from the side of the road, you would hardly know it.

However, when you set foot on one, it will feel like standing on a waterbed in places. This is due to the bouncy nature of the peat and muck soils and their proximity to groundwater. Fen ecology is fascinating and supports a diversity of plant and animal life. Scientists and researchers are still learning about how these unique ecosystems function.

Legend has it that cows, cars and tractors have been swallowed by fens. During a later excursion, that legend became fact.

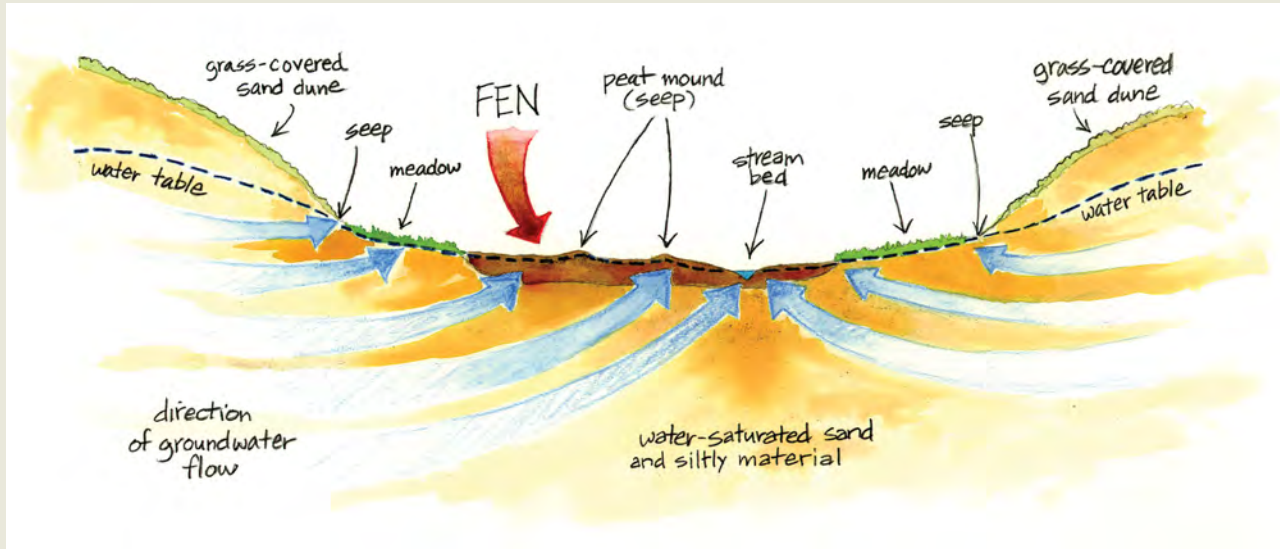


Two boiling sand springs bubble to the surface of a fen wetland connected by a steady stream of sand and cold water. Through the cold upwellings of water, fens can support ancient plant communities that once thrived during the ice age.

DAKOTA ALTMAN

Anatomy of a Sandhills Fen

By Jon Farrar



Some groundwater under dunes moves laterally, surfacing as seeps low on hillsides at the edges of valleys and in the valley floor. Where the cool groundwater has flowed to the surface for hundreds or thousands of years, the decomposition of plant material is slowed and deposits of peat have formed, some 22 feet thick. In some parts of fens, where groundwater wells to the surface, the rate of decomposition is even slower and mounds of peat rise as much as 8 feet above the surface of the fen. ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND



Marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*) blooming in a fen as an April thunderstorm passes overhead. Marsh marigold is typically found in regions with cooler and wetter climates than Nebraska. The cold and saturated soils found in fens have allowed marsh marigold and a handful of other plants to persist as relics from glacial periods. ETHAN FREESE

Fen Fest

The three fens we visited during Fen Fest were located on the banks of Steverson Lake at Cottonwood-Steverson Wildlife Management Area on private land owned by the Ravenscroft family and on the Turner Enterprise's Spikebox Ranch. As guides, Gerry's and Ted's combined knowledge made for a fun and informative experience.

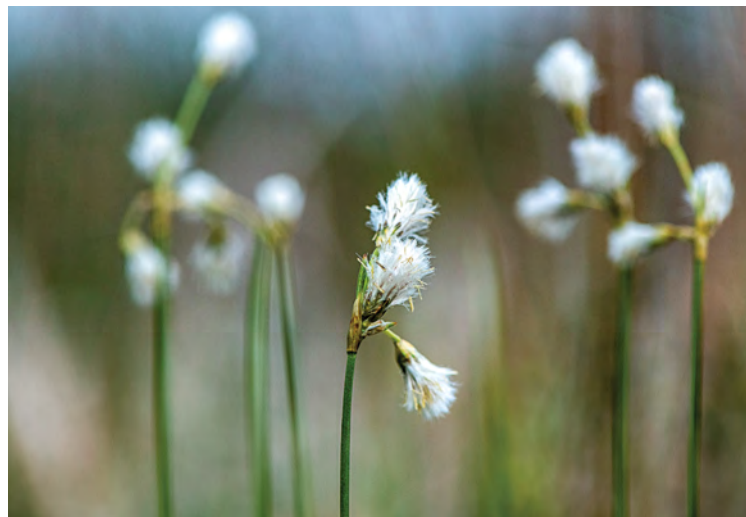
My favorite fen was on John Ravenscroft's ranch. His ranch is deep into the rolling Sandhills, where dark skies are prominent and wetlands and grasslands flourish. We joined John, his wife and son on a tour out to the fen, and we watched them walk out onto the springy mat of peat and bounce around, giddy as ever. Gerry then pointed out a plant species, marsh marigold, which typically prefers cooler and wetter climates. The microclimate found within the fen makes an ideal habitat for this species and many others, such as bog bean, cottongrass and Nebraska sedge. We ended the excursion back at the Ravenscrofts' home, where they delighted us with mint chocolate chip ice cream, homemade brownies and warm conversation.



Bouncing through rushes and cattails, a swamp sparrow finds purchase on a wetland rush. Fens are important places for wildlife; many use them as homes. These small brown-capped songbirds are aptly named for their affinity to wetter environments like seeps, bogs, marshes and fens. Sometimes you might find them ambling through shallow spring waters, submerging their heads below the water's surface to glean aquatic insects. DAKOTA ALTMAN



Bog bean and cotton-grass growing in a fen on private land in the Nebraska Sandhills. Because most of Nebraska's fens are found on private land, working with ranchers is an integral part of fen conservation. ETHAN FREESE



Little wisps of white, Q-tip-like flowers stick out during an overcast day on a fen. Cottongrass is so called because of its seed head having a similar appearance to the cotton plant. They grow in large clumps in the peat and muck fen soils.

DAKOTA ALTMAN

Fen Fest: Part 2

This past fall, the same team, minus Gerry, plus others from Nebraska Game and Parks and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, visited a fen in the far eastern Nebraska Sandhills, where we installed a PBT timelapse camera to watch the fen wetland change over time. Naturally, we called this outing Fen Fest: Part 2, which I am hopeful will become a new tradition with our group.

It was a windless evening — the air was crisp, and the temperature was pleasant. Our mission was simple: to explore the fen and swap memory cards on the timelapse camera. However, when we arrived at the spring, we discovered something not quite right. A cow bone was found in front of the camera right next to the spring.

“Hmmm,” Dakota said. “This was not here last time we checked the camera.”

That led us to think either A) the cow bone was brought here by another animal, or B) the cow was swallowed by the fen. We quickly moved on from the cow bone and began exploring the bottomless springs, charming plant life and each other’s company.

A few weeks later, Dakota downloaded the images from the timelapse camera, and lo and behold, the timelapse

LEFT – TOP TO BOTTOM: Connected to the storied prehistoric past and an ever-evolving future, Jennings’ Fen is a unique wetland ecosystem found along the easternmost edge of the Sandhills and connects to a shallow meandering prairie river called Beaver Creek. Fens are where ancient groundwater pushes up to the surface, supplying cold water that supports a plant community that has persisted since the ice age. Plants such as bog bean, marsh marigold, marsh fern and the rare Loesel’s twayblade orchid can be found in fens. This timelapse camera looks into two circular springs where sand and cool water boil to the surface, surrounded by a working landscape of cattle and ranching. MICHAEL FORSBERG



Deep in the heart of the Nebraska Sandhills, this aerial photograph shows a fen wetland and the Platte Basin Timelapse crew on the ground exploring. Fen wetlands can be unassuming from the air. MARIAH LUNDGREN

recorded a calf getting stuck in the spring that fed the fen, dying and decomposing. So, it turns out that the legend of cows being swallowed by fens holds true, and now this cow will be part of the fen forever. However, there is no need for humans to fear fens, as we are not aware of any people getting stuck in them.

Beyond the ecosystem benefits these fen wetlands provide, they are also connectors. Fens bring people together. They are places to enjoy the wonder and surprising beauty of an unassuming, overlooked landscape. They take us back to our playful, childlike state and make us forget the troubles in the world. I hope more people will learn about them and understand that we need places like fens to stick around forever. N

Wetlands of Nebraska project

For more information about fens and all types of Nebraska wetlands, visit nebraskawetlands.com. See timelapse footage at plattebasintimelapse.com.



Dakota Altman and Ethan Freese pose next to a Platte Basin Timelapse camera that is taking pictures of an eastern Nebraska Sandhills fen wetland and watching how it changes over time. MARIAH LUNDGREN

A History Mystery

What was this 100-pound steamboat anchor doing in a central Nebraska field?

By David L. Bristow, *History Nebraska*

Gloria Liljestrand-Barber found this 4-foot-high, 100-pound anchor in 1985. It was mostly buried in a hayfield on her parents' farm near Brady. A similar anchor had been discovered 3 miles away in 1894.

We don't know what became of the 1894 anchor, but a few years ago Liljestrand-Barber donated this one to History Nebraska.

How did a heavy anchor come to rest in a central Nebraska hayfield? Here's a clue: The Platte River is nearby.

Legend has it that the steamboat *El Paso* traveled up the Platte River in 1852, but the story never seemed plausible to most historians. Even shallow-draft steamboats of that era



Four feet long and weighing more than 100 pounds, this anchor was discovered near Brady, Nebraska. HISTORY NEBRASKA



A Union Army pontoon bridge near Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1863. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS

usually drew at least 4 feet of water, but the Platte's braided channels were frustrating even in fur trade-era canoes or bullboats.

But how else do you explain these heavy anchors? Turns out the Platte River has another anchor story from the mid-1800s, and it's not what you might expect.

The story of the *El Paso*'s purported Platte River voyage begins with a man named Edward Everett Hale, an author, historian and Unitarian minister who in 1854 wrote *Kansas (sic) and Nebraska*, a hastily-compiled promotional book for prospective settlers. In it, Hale claimed that the steamboat *El Paso* had ascended the Platte River more than 500 miles in the spring of 1853, following the North Platte River to a place somewhere above Fort Laramie in present-day Wyoming. Hale did not say where he heard the story.

In 1921, Nebraska historian Grant Lee Shumway

elaborated on the story in his *History of Western Nebraska*. Shumway claimed that the voyage took place in 1852 and that the *El Paso* reached Fort Mitchell near Scottsbluff and continued upstream to the site of present-day Guernsey Dam in Wyoming. But Shumway did not cite any sources, nor could he remember any when Nebraska State Historical Society superintendent Addison Sheldon later asked him about it.

But the story continued to spread, repeated as fact in other articles and books. Historian William E. Lass finally debunked it in a 2008 article for *Nebraska History Magazine*.

Lass showed that the *El Paso* was a real Missouri River steamboat, a 260-ton sidewheeler that measured 174 feet long and 26 feet wide. (Try to picture that next time you cross the Platte!) But he also showed that the boat's whereabouts were well documented in 1852 and 1853 — and the *El Paso* was never on the Platte. As for Fort Mitchell, its purported



The steamboat *El Paso*'s career on the Missouri River lasted barely five years, from its first voyage in March 1850 until it struck a snag and sank on April 10, 1855.



Nebraska and Kansas, 1854 map by J.H. Colton & Co.

destination, that army post wasn’t even built for another 12 years. There was simply no financial incentive for such an expensive and hazardous journey when there was money to be made on the busy Missouri River.

A Platte journey made no better sense in terms of logistics. The El Paso’s wood-fired boilers would have consumed about 1.25 cords per hour. Steamboats normally refueled several

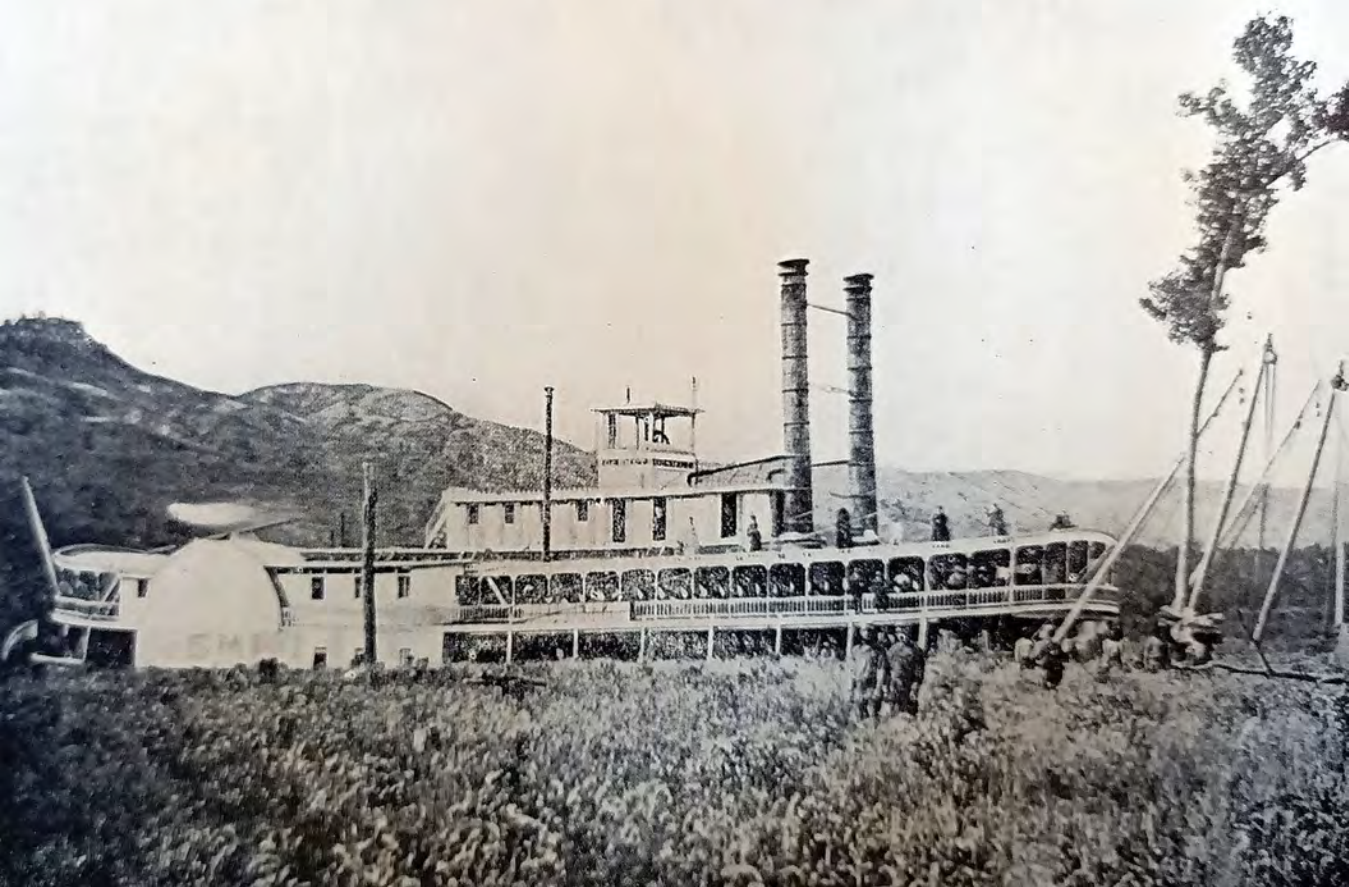
times per day, but there were no commercial woodyards along the Platte. And stockpiling wood on deck would only settle the boat deeper into the shallow water.

Lass also drew attention to the absence of eyewitness accounts. Thousands of emigrants were traveling along the Platte River Road in those years, but steamboat sightings — surely a noteworthy event in such a location — appear neither in the hundreds of surviving trail diaries, nor in the official records of Forts Kearny and Laramie.

But what about other steamboats in other years? Lass explains that “the Platte was a braided river with many channels intersected by islands” and that it has a tendency “to widen rather than deepen during its most vigorous flows.” If there’s any place on the Platte where a steamboat might have a chance, it would be on the lower (eastern) part of the river. In 1855, the Mary Cole, a 93-ton sidewheel ferry (about half the size of the El Paso) tried to ascend the Platte but grounded before reaching the mouth of the Elkhorn. Other documented attempts by small steamboats on the lower Platte similarly failed.

So how did two heavy, mid-19th-century steamboat anchors end up near Brady?

On Nov. 17, 1866, the Kearney Herald reported that “General O’Brien is building a pontoon bridge across the Platte opposite



A sidewheel steamboat presumably similar to the El Paso. Steamboats like this ascended the upper Missouri River, but the Platte had less water. “A STEAMBOAT ON THE BANK,” PHOTO FROM HIRAM CHITTENDEN’S 1903 BOOK, *EARLY STEAMBOAT NAVIGATION ON THE MISSOURI RIVER*.



An 1864 drawing of Fort Cottonwood, later known as Fort McPherson, which stood near present-day North Platte.

HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG951-0-1-A

Cottonwood, 100 miles west of Kearney, where the overland stage line will connect with the railroad until next spring, or until the railroad reaches Alkali or Julesburg.”

At the time, the Union Pacific Railroad was rapidly laying tracks westward toward an eventual junction with the eastbound Central Pacific tracks — the nation’s first transcontinental railroad. The railroad followed the Platte Valley, the same route long used by westbound emigrants of the Oregon, California and Mormon trails.

In 1863, the 7th Iowa Cavalry, commanded by Gen. George O’Brien, built a fort popularly known as Fort Cottonwood and later officially named Fort McPherson. It stood not far from the Platte River about 10 miles southeast of present-day North Platte.

No bridges spanned the Platte River in those days. It was possible, though risky, to ford the shallow channels in some places, but the river was a major barrier to north-south travel.

That’s where O’Brien’s pontoon bridge came in. The Army used many pontoon bridges during the Civil War — and to keep them from being swept away, they used steamboat anchors to hold them in place.

The Nebraska anchors, in other words, tell a story not of steamboat travel on the Platte, but of the transcontinental railroad and of stagecoaches, freight wagons and other traffic along the Great Platte River Road. And because nearby

Fort McPherson was involved in military campaigns during the Indian Wars, the anchors also speak to the conquest of the Plains and the dispossession of Native tribes.

That’s not the story you expect when you see a boat anchor, but that’s one of the things that makes history so interesting. Artifacts often tell multiple stories, and sometimes those stories are far from obvious at first glance. [N](#)



A Union Army pontoon boat used to support a temporary bridge in Virginia during the Civil War.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Courting Bluegills

A first-hand account of this rare spectacle

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

If you've spent much time fishing, chances are you've seen a male bluegill guarding its spawning bed, a bowl-shaped depression that it fans out in the lakebed using its tail. Or numerous bluegills in a nesting colony, each guarding its own bed.

If, instead of casting to those beds hoping to catch dinner, you put down your rod and reel and watched for a time, you may have seen another male bluegill approach a bed, only to be run off by the male. Or females making their rounds, trying to decide which male they deemed worthy of the right to fertilize their eggs.

In 2021, I had the opportunity to witness, up close, the next step in the spawning process, and something I would be willing to bet few have seen: the interaction between male and female prior to spawning.

I was snorkeling in an Elkhorn River backwater at Red Wing Wildlife Management Area near Neligh, gathering underwater photos for a story on the area and the aftereffects of the 2019 flood that changed the river's course (see "A River Used to Run Through It," November 2023). In one section of the backwater, not far from the river, I found a handful of bluegills, most gathered in or around tangles of beaver-chewed sticks and rushes in a pool that was no deeper than 3 or 4 feet.

In one tangle, I watched for 6 minutes as a 7- or 8-inch long male and a female two-thirds its size, circled the nest, rubbing against each other, with the female occasionally tipping on her side. At the time, I had no idea what I was watching. And I'm a nose breather and, as such, not a very good diver, so I stood to clear my mask and my nose and moved on in search of more photos.

I'm also blind without my glasses, and don't swim with a corrected mask, so it wasn't until I pulled the photos up on my computer that I could see the eggs beneath that fish, and two others I'd photographed. These fish were on spawning



A female bluegill turns on her side and rubs against a larger male in an egg-filled nest among a tangle of sticks, photographed in a backwater of a former Elkhorn River channel at Red Wing Wildlife Management Area in Antelope County.

beds that looked nothing like others I'd seen.

So what were the fish doing? A little Googling found the answer, described by Vernon Lee Avila in *A Field Study of Nesting Behavior of Male Bluegill Sunfish*, published in *The American Midland Naturalist* by the University of Notre Dame in 1978.

"Spawning was accomplished in a manner typical of all centrarchids. Once the female is settled in the nest the male swims close beside her. They face in the same direction and circle together in the nest, with the male on the outside

and the female inside. During the spawning act the male's anterior ventral surface darkens. As they circle in the nest the male remains upright, but the female tilts her dorsum away from the male and, leaning to one side, rubs the ventral surface near her genital pore in a quick 'vibrating' movement against the side of the male near his anal fin. As they circle together, the female tilts into this spawning posture every 60-100 sec. As contact is made, eggs and presumably milt are deposited (Miller, 1963). Spawning sessions varied in length from 15-90 min."

Yep. That's exactly what I saw.

I'd always assumed females simply came to the nest and deposited their eggs, and the male fertilized them. I had no idea there was some lovey-dovey stuff going on down there.

Game and Parks fisheries biologist Daryl Bauer summed up that aspect of my observation in simple terms. "You've got to coax her into laying the eggs," he said.

"Like anybody else, I get zoned in on fishing for them and catching them. But sometimes it's just really interesting to stop for a second and watch them. It's similar to



A pair of largemouth bass stalk a school of bluegills in the backwater.



Exactly as described in a research paper, the male bluegill circles the nest on the outside of the female.

going to the prairie grouse leks and watching all of that mating behavior.”

Bauer said males will make a clicking sound, and if you watch closely enough, you might see them flare their gills and pop their head to do so. Some won’t have anything to do with your lure because they are too preoccupied with guarding their nest. And you might see the “sneakers” in action. These small male fish take on the dull coloration of a female. When a female does approach a nest, he follows. Thinking he has two females on his nest, the parental male won’t chase the other male away, allowing the sneaker a chance to deposit its sperm when the female releases her eggs. This behavior, Bauer said, extends the inferior genetics and can lead to stunted populations, a good reason to release the big males.

“If you only knew some of the things that are going on below the surface,” Bauer said.

As for the solitary nests built in tangles sticks and rushes? Studies have found that while colony nesting is the norm — one found as many as 272 nests in a single colony — about 5 percent of bluegills are solitary nesters. And research in Wisconsin found that while bluegills will nest in muck, sand

or gravel, they preferred gravel mixed with sticks.

One nest I saw was entirely on sticks. The nest in which I observed the spawning behavior was on sand, full of sticks and one chunk of log, and surrounded by vertical and overhead rushes and sticks. Another nearby was in cover that was identical.

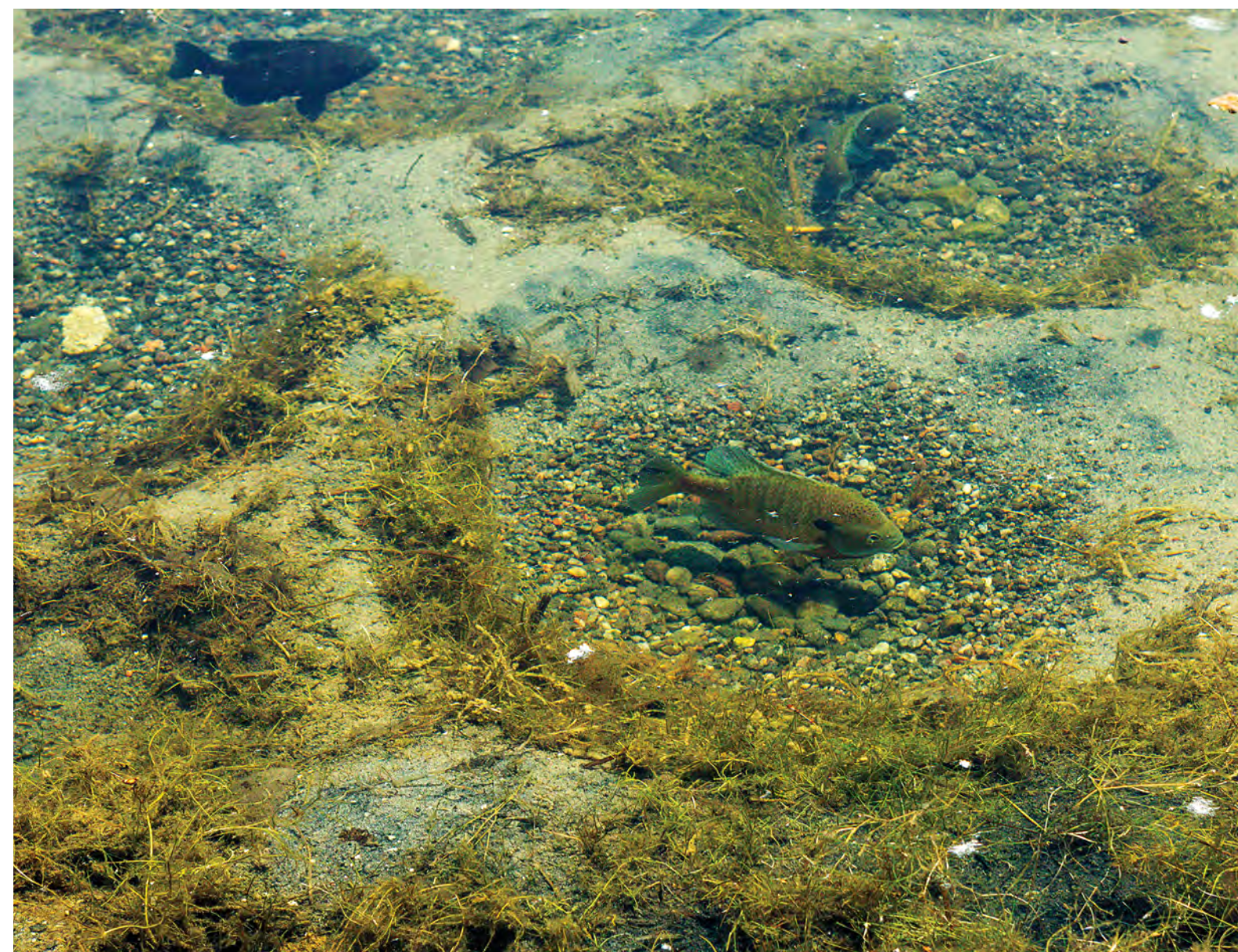
The first question Tony Barada, another fisheries biologist, asked when I showed him the photos and questioned the location of the nest was if there were predators nearby. Indeed, there were. On my previous visit to Red Wing two weeks earlier, I found a school of small bluegills in shallows of the same backwater. Lurking nearby in deeper water were three largemouth bass that would periodically dart into the school, hoping for lunch.

“Maybe that was a mechanism of getting out of the way, or being sheltered from the bass,” Barada said of the nests. “But it is such an odd observation you saw in general. In a setting like that, where it’s not a big backwater area, that could’ve been the only way to potentially have success in that deal.

“It’s amazing, in our natural world, how many anomalies there are. There’s stuff that organisms do that are very unorthodox. They’re all individuals.”

Had I been smart enough to know what I was watching, I would’ve lingered longer. Had I done so, I may have been able to watch the female actually deposit her eggs.

One thing I know for sure, however, is the next time I find a bluegill nesting colony, I’m going to put down my fishing rod and watch. And come back later with the underwater gear. 



The bluegill beds observed in the Elkhorn backwater at Red Wing WMA looked nothing like the ones most anglers are accustomed to seeing, such as this one in a farm pond near Brady, where males have fanned the sand out of the bottom and guard the gravel beds. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

Finding a Balance

Program helps corn grower manage deer population

By Justin Haag

It's no secret to those living in the Cornhusker State: Nebraska is serious about its agriculture. Also evident: Nebraskans are proud of their populations of deer and other big game species. Unfortunately, those animals can sometimes be at odds with landowners' agricultural goals.

Aaron Schott of Silver Creek is among the many agriculture producers who work with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to strike a healthy balance between wildlife populations and their operations' objectives.

The Schott family's property along the Platte River is certainly well suited for white-tailed deer. The nation's most popular big game animal loves the riparian habitat with water flowing through towering hardwoods, and, of course, nibbling at nearby croplands. Problem is, whitetails are notably prolific. A large population of herbivorous whitetails can mean significant damage to the corn the Schotts raise to feed cattle as silage, not to mention a hazard for people driving on nearby roads.

The Schotts have long invited family and other hunters to their property during the state's established deer seasons, but found that the roughly 15 deer harvested during fall and winter were not enough to keep the population in check.

Whitetails are especially attracted to the green landscape of the Schotts' property in late spring and summer, when waters bubbling from irrigation pipes conveniently provide for a drink under a smorgasbord of standing corn.

For the past decade, Schott has invited Game and Parks to observe the deer populations and crop damage on his property in late May and early June. That has resulted in the issuance of a damage control permit.

The damage control permit, one of the depredation options Game and Parks employs to help landowners, is issued when deer harvested during the state's established hunting seasons aren't enough to provide sufficient relief from damage.

Dusty Schelbitzki, depredation program manager for Game and Parks, said timing is a big consideration for the issuance of the permits.

"Damage control permits are issued during the growing season to help mitigate damage from the crop field and remove wildlife that are specifically causing damage at that time," Schelbitzki said. "Overall population control should be done during the regular hunting season with hunters focusing on antlerless harvest."

Schott recruits the help of a friend in Columbus to develop a list of shooters who are looking to put meat in the freezer. After the names are vetted by Game and Parks, those listed begin visiting Schott's property. The permits have allowed the harvest of up to 15 deer through the summer growing season.

Schott acknowledges that organizing so many hunters can be a challenge, and said he is fortunate to have help with that part of the job. He said, however, there seems to be no shortage of people looking to put venison on the table. Landowners looking for hunters can contact the nearest Game and Parks district office or visit outdoornebraska.gov/antlerlesshunterdatabase.

Schelbitzki said many factors affect depredation, and it usually takes a multi-faceted approach instead of one "silver bullet."

"It is important to know about the property's harvest during hunting seasons, types of crop being damaged, amount of local habitat, de facto refuges,



White-tailed deer feed in a Sarpy County cornfield. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

what wildlife species may be causing damage, location of damage and timing of damage," he said. "The more options a landowner is open to, the more effective we can be at helping them reach their goal of tolerable damage."

One way landowners can limit depredation is to implement an "earn-a-buck" program on their property, Schelbitzki said. That is, require hunters to harvest a doe or two before taking a buck.

Providing access during all hunting seasons is another way, and landowners can even earn money by doing so through the Open Fields and Waters program. Communicating with neighbors to achieve a common goal also is beneficial.

"After being contacted by a landowner, we try to always meet up on site to look at the damage to make the best possible recommendations," Schelbitzki said. "This is important because every situation is different and some depredation options may not be as effective as others."

Game and Parks also sometimes employs hazing devices, such as propane cannons and pyrotechnics, and exclusion tactics such as fencing and stack yards.

Damage control permits usually allow the harvest of only does, which make the most impact on population. If a permit does allow bucks, the antlers must be turned into Game and Parks. No money changes hands during the process and meat from harvested animals must be utilized.

"These aren't trophy hunters by any means," Schott said. "They're in it for the meat."

He said deer management during the summer is viewed as a chore, not recreation.

"If you (get put on the list, but later) can't or don't participate, there usually isn't a second round," Schott said. "When given a chance to help control the deer population, we need results."

The approach is working. Instead of observing herds of 50 on and near the family property as before the permits were issued, Schott sees them numbering about half that. He no longer sees the extensive crop damage of the past, where deer had made it appear as if a herd of cattle had been turned loose in the corn.

"We've seen that (damage) dramatically cut back," he said.

Less damage to the crops, and less chance of his vehicle colliding with a deer during his nightly drive into Silver Creek.

"I don't want one on my bumper. I'd rather have it on my plate," Schott said.

To learn more about the Game and Parks' programs to assist landowners experiencing problems with wildlife species, visit outdoornebraska.gov/depredation or contact a Game and Parks district office in Alliance, North Platte, Lincoln or Norfolk. [N](#)



A large deer population can mean significant damage to agriculture.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Melting the Green Glacier

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

It happened slowly. Eastern red cedar trees were once found only in steep, moist corners of the landscape, rocky hilltops or islands in rivers where they were protected from the fires set by Native Americans to attract game or sparked by lightning that periodically swept across the Great Plains. When settlers arrived and fire was removed from the equation, this opportunistic invader began to creep out of its refuges and into the surrounding grasslands. Each year, cedars consumed more valuable grazing land and wildlife habitat. The front line advanced so slowly it has been dubbed the green glacier.

Now, after more than a century without these periodic fires, the prairies are one of the most imperiled and least conserved ecosystems in North America. Across the Great Plains, from Texas to the Dakotas, woody plants including cedars are expanding at a rate of 10 percent per year. Where the problem is at its worst, grasslands are now dense woodlands. Nebraska has lost 500,000 acres, or 781 square miles, of grassland since 2000 alone. That's nearly the size of Lancaster County.

Efforts to control cedars are many and growing, but the problem is so bad, cedars are still winning the battle. In the Loess Canyons region of southwestern Nebraska, however, landowners are making serious headway. The key to their success has been working with their neighbors to reintroduce fire. With large, intense prescribed burns, they are killing trees from the ridgetop prairies, down the steep slopes and into the canyon bottoms. It is one of few places in the world where the rate of woody encroachment has been stopped. Soon, it may even be reversed.

With fire, they are melting the glacier.



Landowners conducting a prescribed burn in the Loess Canyons south of Maxwell sit back and watch after lighting the head fire on the upwind side of a 3,200-acre burn in 2020.

The Problem

The Loess Canyons region encompasses a 330,000-acre triangle of land south of the Platte River between North Platte, Cozad and Curtis. The region's present topography is related to its origin. At the end of the last glacial period, wind slowly blanked the area in loess, tiny particles of silt, clay and sand. Among the thickest such deposits in North America, the loess is highly erodible. It has evolved into a maze of steep-walled canyons that stretch like veins from the main creek draws, some leading north to the Platte River Valley and most south to the Republican River Valley. Cloaked in mixed-grass prairie, the canyons contain grasses

and forbs, wildflowers that vary from the dry ridgetops to the moist bottoms. It is one of 35 Biologically Unique Landscapes identified in the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Natural Legacy Project, its roadmap for recovering threatened and endangered plants and animals.

Many long-time residents tell the same story, about how, when they were children, or when their parents were, it was hard to find a cedar to cut for a Christmas tree. And why would you? In the Tree Planters State, home of Arbor Day, every tree is said to be good. There were fewer cottonwoods, box elder, ash and hackberry than there are today, and planting trees, including cedars, was encouraged for their value as shade and protection from wind for people, livestock and wildlife.

But eastern red cedar, a hardy, drought tolerant species native to Nebraska and much of the Great Plains, grows fast and produces up to 1.5 million seeds per tree. Some seedlings will grow near that tree, but germination is improved when the seeds are eaten and partially digested by birds. Wherever those birds land and deposit their droppings, cedars will grow.

Research by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln found 95 percent of cedar seedlings sprout within 200 yards of a mature, female tree. That means during its seed-producing years, a single tree can compromise 26 acres of grassland. And each female tree that sprouts and matures puts the next 200 yards of grassland at risk. Today, in the northern end of the Loess Canyons, cedars cover 90 percent of some



Eastern red cedar is a prolific seed producer, one factor contributing to their spread.



Mule deer will utilize cedar trees for escape and thermal cover but prefer wide-open grasslands. They have benefitted from cedar control in the Loess Canyons.



Wild turkeys will abandon roosts in hardwood trees when cedars overtake the understory. They find more insects to eat in grasslands than cedar-choked pastures.

properties.

“Trees are like compound interest,” said Russ Sundstrom, who has been ranching in the canyons south of Brady since 1993. “The worse it gets, the faster it goes.”

The problem is not unique. In the western United States, woody plants have increased on 108 million acres of grassland, an area more than twice the size of Nebraska, since 1999. In the Great Plains, the loss of grassland to woody encroachment is nearly equal to losses to land conversion for agriculture. The problem is progressing from south to north and east to west. Nebraska is on the edge of that advance.

The list of problems caused by encroachment is a long one. Compared to the many species of sun-loving grasses and forbs that typically would grow in prairie, few, if any, plants grow in the dense shade below cedars. More cedars means less grass for cattle. In some areas where cedars have displaced grass, landowners have been slow to adjust stocking rates and overgraze their pastures, further stressing the native vegetation and allowing non-native plants like cheatgrasses and smooth brome to invade.

It also reduces available habitat for grassland wildlife. Grassland bird populations, including the greater prairie-chicken, bobwhite quail, grasshopper sparrows and Bell’s vireo, declined, as did the overall number of species. Mule deer and wild turkeys were displaced by the trees. Even insects, like the endangered American burying beetle, were affected.

Cedars deplete soil moisture, groundwater recharge and stream flow. With no grass to slow runoff, erosion on cedar-choked hills can be severe, reducing downstream water quality. Fewer acres of grass on School Trust Land reduces what can be charged for grazing leases on that land, which means less funding for schools. And the severity of wildfires increases where cedars are present, putting lives and property at risk. A wildfire south of Gothenburg in 2002 burned 40,000 acres.

The Epiphany

By the time landowners in the Loess Canyons realized how big the problem was, it was almost too late. The region had become one of the most cedar-infested in the state. But they attacked it anyway. Initial efforts focused on cutting, piling and burning trees. But they made little headway, and efforts were costly. Where landowners did cut, the soil disturbance led to ideal conditions for seeds to germinate, and a new flush of cedars sprouted, creating a stand often thicker than the one that had been removed. All the while, cedars were sprouting in the seemingly tree-free pasture behind them.

Prescribed fire was already being used in areas of eastern Nebraska and elsewhere to control cedars in grasslands. Doug Whisenhunt of the Natural Resources Conservation Service wondered if fire could also control mature trees in the

canyons, and in 2000 convinced Mark Alberts to try a burn on his pasture on the edge of the Central Loess Hills northwest of Gothenburg. As was the case in the steeper Loess Canyons to the south, cedars were spreading from the steep slopes into open pastures.

The idea did not go over well with his neighbors. “The greatest ad campaign in this country, the most successful, has been Smoky Bear,” Alberts said. Prescribed burning “was something kind of new, and we had a lot of people mad at us. Mark was a four-letter word.”

But with the help of NRCS staff and some neighbors, they gathered a hodgepodge of equipment and burned 300 acres. “We kind of made up our burn plan as we went,” Alberts said. “If we burned today the way we did then, we’d probably go to jail.”

With just 30 percent mortality on cedars, the results of their fires were poor by today’s standards. But even that, Alberts said, was enough to turn some of the naysayers into some of today’s greatest advocates for prescribed fire in the region. And lessons were learned: Where Alberts had cut trees with a chainsaw in one location and left them lay next to standing trees, the dried, dead formed a perfect ladder fuel, taking the fire from the ground to the crown and through the stand, killing more trees. This cut-and-stuff method of controlling cedars had already been used elsewhere, but word

of its effectiveness had not spread.

In 2002, Whisenhunt helped Alberts and a dozen or so other landowners form the Loess Canyons Rangeland Alliance, the state’s first prescribed burn association. With Alberts as the burn boss, they burned 1,300 acres. With grants from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and others, they purchased equipment to make burning safer and more efficient, including 200-gallon water tank sprayers that could slide into the back of a pickup, and then burned more acres in 2005.

Scott Stout, a Burwell native, began working on his wife’s family’s ranch north of Curtis when they married in 1999. He said he was “shell shocked” by the number of cedars in the region. When he wasn’t working cattle or farming, he was doing something to control cedars, which covered 20 to 50 percent of their pastures. He helped neighbors with one of those burns in 2005, and while he wasn’t overly impressed with the results, he could see fire was a better option than cutting and joined the burn alliance.

He continued to cut scattered trees to prepare for his own burn, but wasn’t happy with the time it took to move and pile those trees. Instead, he pushed them up against the dense stands on slopes too steep to cut. When he finally burned in 2008, he saw the same success Alberts had, but on a larger scale. Where previous burns had resulted in 40 to 50 percent



Mike Gruber and Russ Sundstrom, a contractor and rancher in the Loess Canyons, watch Sundstrom’s crew cut and pile cedar trees on Gruber’s ranch south of Brady to prepare for a prescribed burn. Gruber had cleared trees on the land in the 1980s. “It seems like it’s slow, but then when you think back it’s like, ‘Wow. How did there get to be so many trees so fast, and a worthless cedar tree too,’” Gruber said.



Lush grasses and annual sunflowers fill a pasture on Scott Stout’s family’s ranch in the Loess Canyons north of Curtis in the fall following a spring prescribed burn.

mortality, Stout saw 70 to 75 percent.

“So by happy accident, we just started shoving cut trees up against live trees just to get rid of them and not thinking that it was going to apply that intense heat source there,” Stout said, noting that this cut-and-stuff approach to clearing prior to a burn is now the standard today.

Each year, as neighbors looked across the fence and saw the results of a burn, including not only fewer trees, but a lush stand of grass, more joined the association. In 2008, there was enough interest that Alberts helped form a second burn association he still leads, the Central Platte Rangeland Alliance, in the southeastern portion of the Loess Canyons and in the Central Loess Hills to the north between Brady and Lexington. Stout took over leadership of the LCRA, became the burn boss, and continues in that role today.

The combined membership of both associations includes more than 120 individuals. In the Loess Canyons, members collectively own 264,000 acres, or 80 percent of the region. More join each year. That buy-in, and the fact that the groups and burns are led by landowners, has been their success. Working together on burns has rekindled something from days gone by, where neighbors regularly helped neighbors with their chores, knowing the favor would be returned. “I think it kind of got away from that here for a while,” Stout said. “But this group, it seems like it kind of developed a whole new sense of community. It’s really brought back the

selflessness of people.”

That cooperation also allows them to burn several properties at once, often burning from one county road to the next in an area with very few roads, rather than one property, which might require cutting fire breaks through steep terrain. Now they build fire breaks in places where the terrain makes them easy to both create and defend.

Getting there was a process, as members weren’t sure how many acres they could safely burn in a day. “They started with a section,” said Andy Moore, coordinating wildlife biologists with Pheasants Forever, who has helped landowners in the Loess Canyons plan cedar-control projects since 2011. “And then there was a point where some of the members said: ‘We can’t do burns bigger than 2,000 acres because we can’t get around them in a day.’ They’ve proved that wrong. They’ve done burns bigger than that in a half day.”

To date, the largest burn conducted by the groups covered 4,500 acres, a daylong effort that covered property owned by 10 individuals. In 2020, LCRA members burned 22,000 acres, including several burns topping 3,000 acres. CPRA members burned another 7,500 acres, and a private contractor 6,500. In all, the groups have burned more than 150,000 acres, most of those since 2008.

The burns are meticulously planned, many by Stout, first as the burn boss and now as a technical service provider with the NRCS. And they are well attended, with more than

100 people showing up for some. They arrive in rusty ranch pickups or pulling trailers loaded with ATVs, each assigned a specific job and handling it without question. “Trying to get farmers and ranchers to cooperate, you might think it’s easier to pile BBs,” Alberts said. “We’ve never had an issue.”

The safety record of the burn crews is excellent. Rarely have fires spread outside the unit. More wildfires have been sparked while landowners burned piles of cut cedars during the winter, a process now combined with the prescribed burns.

“They’ve mastered the use of high-intensity fire,” said Dillon Fogarty, an assistant professor and woody invasion ecologist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who studied the region as a graduate student and documented their success. “By doing that, they can manage the patches of trees, mature trees, the seedlings and the seeds during that single application of prescribed fire.”

After killing less than half of the cedars in those initial burns, “now some of the landowners aren’t pleased if they don’t kill 90 percent or more of the cedar trees inside a unit,” Moore said.

The groups are now looking at bigger burns, up to 10,000 acres, and at burning at times other than late-winter and early-spring, when most burns are currently conducted. They know they need to expand if they are going to keep restoring grasslands and maintain the ones they already have. To stay ahead of the problem, landowners need to burn every 5 to 7 years to control new cedar growth. Many have already burned their land twice, and others need to soon, before new trees get too big to control with fire alone. The second burn is easier, with little if any mechanical clearing required. And with so many acres having been treated, it is safer, with fewer cedars to send burning embers outside the burn units.



Skeletons of cedar trees stand in an area south of Maxwell treated with prescribed fire in 2020, a stark contrast to the cedar-choked draws stretching north to the Platte River Valley. While landowners in the region have made significant headway in controlling the woody growth, there is still much work to do.



Hudson Stout lights the perimeter of a prescribed burn with a drip torch as others follow in a truck, dousing flames not heading into the burn unit. A job for young legs, Stout covered about 4 miles on the 3,400-acre burn, while another volunteer did the same on the other half.

“We understand that it’s not a one-year, one-time fix-all,” Stout said. “We understand it’s a management process, and we have to go back and maintain it.”

Cost vs Benefit

Planning and preparing for these burns typically takes three years before the first drip torch is lit. Each landowner must get any necessary tree-cutting done, clearing fire breaks, large trees on the perimeter and scattered mature trees that might not burn. They also need to defer grazing on the property in the year leading up to the burn to ensure there is enough grass to fuel the fire, carry it through the unit and kill young cedars, and burn hot enough to consume the seeds still waiting to sprout. When their turn to burn rolls around, weather must cooperate. Drought can postpone burns for a year — and has more than once.

The cost of mechanical control can be daunting, averaging \$250 per acre in the region. Where firebreaks must be cut by hand in dense stands on slopes too steep for heavy equipment, it might soar to \$2,500. “That seems astronomical, and it is,” said Sundstrom. “But if you do that and can treat hundreds and hundreds of acres [with fire], and you don’t have that cost over a lot of acres, then it’s economical.”

Deferring grazing is another expense, as landowners must rent pastures elsewhere or providing hay to feed their stock. There are cost-share programs available from numerous sources (see sidebar) that Moore says typically cover 75 percent of these expenses.

Doing nothing to control cedars is not a good option, said Sundstrom, who sees both sides of the equation as a landowner and tree cutting contractor. Property taxes aren’t adjusted according to the amount of tree cover, even though the land can feed fewer cows. And the cost of control can



Purple locoweed, a sensitive species typically found only in healthy prairies, is one of many native wildflowers that benefit from cedar removal and prescribed fire in the Loess Canyons. It blooms in the spring, a time when there are few other plants flowering, making it critical for early pollinating insects.

quickly exceed the rental value, and it gets higher every year. If you aren't willing or able to do it, Sundstrom said, "As high as property is right now? Man, sell it and go do something else."

Some landowners still want to cut trees and not burn. "The thing that people don't realize is there are so many other benefits to the prescribed burns," Sundstrom said. "It's instant fertilization. The grass is better and the cows like it better."

When cedars are removed and sunlight reaches plants struggling to grow in the shade and the seeds of native grasses and forbs that have laid dormant, in some cases for decades, the response is instant. Annual forbs like annual sunflowers and ragweed are the first to explode, followed by the prairie grasses. "It amazes me how resilient that native grass is, and how it comes back," Stout said.

Non-native, invasive, cool-season grasses like downy and Japanese brome grasses are also set back by spring prescribed burns. And with native grasses, such as side-oats grama and little bluestem, now growing where cedars once stood, ranchers can increase their stocking rates and their bottom line. Rather than needing 14 to 17 acres for each cow and calf he puts to pasture, Stout needs 8 or 10 acres. For those trying to make a living off the land, "it really does sell itself," Stout said.

Sundstrom put a pencil to it a different way, and figured

he increased the number of grazing days on his ranch by 40 percent, and his profit, after expenses, by more than 200 percent. "That's the important number there," Sundstrom said. "I always felt like whatever I did for tree control, with increased grazing, paid for itself in 3 to 5 years."

A Model for Others

Around the world, woody plants are invading grasslands. Few places have been as successful at controlling the invasion as they have in the Loess Canyons.

Since 2014, 180,000 acres of the region have been a working laboratory for researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. With full support of landowners, students have studied the response of grassland plants, birds, the American burying beetle and other topics in response to fire.

The work in the canyons served as the framework for the Working Lands for Wildlife program recently released by the NRCS to guide grassland wildlife conservation in the Great Plains. Now people from around the world are looking to these landowners, researchers and partners to learn how they did it.

"Very few groups, and none in Nebraska, have gotten to the level where they're using fire to manage all of the stages [of cedar growth] at once," Fogarty said. "I don't want to take away from what good work is being done in other places, but the Loess Canyons is just the example to look up to right now."

Stout said landowners shrug off the attention. "It's kind of funny, it's just another day for them," he said. "They don't realize what they're doing. ... They're just trying to keep their operations afloat."

In the process, by banding together, they are winning the battle, melting the green glacier and restoring a unique — and necessary — landscape. 🌱



Where the dense canopy of eastern red cedar blocks sunlight, little, if any, vegetation grows.

Bad News for the Beef State

Cows don't eat cedar trees.

In Nebraska, the beef state, where 1.8 million cows and calves graze in pastures across the state, the cost of eastern red cedar encroachment into rangeland is significant and growing.

In 2019, Nebraska lost 419,000 tons of range production to woody encroachment. Kansas lost 1.5 million tons of forage that year, and Oklahoma 4.5 million tons. "We're following the trajectory of those states, said Dillon Fogarty, a range ecologist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The lost grass could feed 88,000 cows and calves, and replacing it would require 700,000 round bales of hay. The cash rental rates of the pasture lost would amount to \$18 million. "Our rangelands are worth a whole lot in this state," Fogarty said. "Woody encroachment is taking an increasingly bigger piece of the pie every year."

If you have even one seed-producing cedar tree where you don't want more, you have a problem. The species is spreading in every corner of the state, and even in the Sandhills, often where planting cedar windbreaks introduced a seed source where there was none. In all, 8 million acres of intact grassland are at risk of future encroachment.

Though control efforts are underway, Fogarty said the rate of encroachment continues to increase, a troubling fact to range managers. Part of the problem is that control has often focused on removing mature trees, while seed from those trees sprouted in adjacent, intact grasslands, which grew, produced more seed and affected even more acres.

The University and others are now preaching one message: Protect and grow the core. The core is the intact grassland, far enough from the seed source that it hasn't been infested. From there, work backward towards the forest, or even the windbreak, removing seedlings and seed trees. The most effective and least costly tool to use for these efforts is prescribed fire. Once those acres have been protected, go after the scattered trees in the grassland and, finally, the mature stands.

There are numerous sources of cost sharing assistance for cedar control efforts. Pheasants Forever has nine coordinating wildlife biologists around the state who help landowners connect with those resources. Andy Moore fills that role in the Loess Canyons, working out of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission district office in North Platte. He said the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Great Plains Grassland Initiative is one source that has grown significantly in both manpower and funding in recent years, helping offset the cost of mechanical removal, prescribed burn planning, deferred grazing and more. The Nebraska Forest Service provides assistance in developing fire breaks around burn units and structures within the units. Game and Parks' Natural Legacy Program can fill in the gaps.

Other sources of funding and technical assistance in the state include The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Districts, the Nebraska Environmental Trust and conservation groups, including the Sandhills Task Force, The Nature Conservancy, the National Audubon Society, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Quail Forever, National Wild Turkey Federation and the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies. Seventeen formal prescribed burn associations in the state work together to tackle the problem.

Scott Stout, a rancher and member of the Loess Canyons Rangeland Alliance, said the best time to start controlling cedars is when you have a few. Wait, and the problem will grow like it did in his region, one of the most infested in the state prior to widespread control efforts. "If you don't start now, it's going to get out of hand."



Cows graze on grasses growing beneath the skeletons of cedars and other trees killed in a recent prescribed burn on the Russ Sundstrom ranch south of Maxwell.

BUMBLE BEE ATLAS

By Nicole Loudon

When I thought about important native species to the Sandhills, bumble bees didn’t immediately come to mind. Until last August.

Given the opportunity, I tagged along with Denise Pecha and her husband, Ted Kyster, as they surveyed bumble bees at my ranch near Ellsworth, Nebraska. Ted and Denise are part of a volunteer group called Nebraska Bumble Bee Atlas supported by the Xerces Society and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, a community science project aimed at gathering the data needed to track and conserve bumble bees.

The survey duo worked quickly in the pasture — trapping bees, taking photos, cataloging, then releasing the bees once finished. While they worked, they answered my questions about bumble bees, and why bees and the surveys are so important.

On the prairie, bumble bees are critical pollinators of grasses and wildflowers. Unlike honey bees — which aren’t native to the U.S. — bumble bees can pollinate plants through a method of “buzz pollination” or sonication. Bumble bees grab hold of the anther of the flower and vibrate, dislodging pollen from flowers more efficiently. Certain plants — such as tomatoes and potatoes — benefit from buzz pollination.

Bumble bees nest in the ground or on the surface, with most colony members dying in the fall. Only the newly emerged and fertilized queens live to hibernate through the



Volunteers capture live bees, gather data then release them.



A southern plains bumble bee — an endangered species — was found during the survey. PHOTOS BY NICOLE LOUDON

winter each year. Then, in the spring, the queen lays eggs for a new colony — beginning with workers. Later in the summer, the queen produces new queens and the male drones that will mate, reproduce, and begin the next colony.

Nebraska hosts 20 species of bumble bees, several of which are endangered. The duo found a two-spotted bumble bee on my ranch — a species not typically found in western Nebraska.

“That’s part of what we are doing,” Denise explained of the changing ranges of the bees. “If it gets too hot, they will move to higher elevations and further north.” Similar to birds, many factors — such as disruption of habitat, pesticide use, and climate change — may be contributing to their decline.

According to Katie Lemke, endangered species conservation biologist with Xerces Society, “Six of the 20 species have not been detected during the Atlas (2019-2023), [and] many of them have not been seen in the state since the last monitoring effort in 1999-2001.”

Information gathered from the volunteer surveys is used to assess the status of Nebraska’s bumble bees and design conservation recommendations to support them. The data may also be used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when deciding if declining numbers on a particular species of bumble bee — like the southern plains bumble bee — warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Atlas is an ongoing community science project and anyone can get involved. It is important for private landowners to welcome survey volunteers like Ted and Denise, both for native pollinators like bumble bees and ourselves.

For more information, visit nebraskabumblebeeatlas.org.

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STAY SAFE WHEN HAVING FUN

By Julie Geiser

Many summer fun activities in Nebraska involve being in or around water. Remember these tips to make sure everyone comes home safe at the end of the day.

For Swimmers

- Only swim in designated swimming areas, especially in large reservoirs where there are boaters and personal watercraft users.
- Don't dive into water less than 12 feet deep. Enter the water feet-first to check for depth and to avoid head or neck injuries or drownings. Never dive into rivers.
- Be cautious of drop-offs that can happen fast and catch you or children off guard.
- Wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket. Small children should always wear a life jacket while swimming. It only takes seconds for a child to drown.
- Avoid areas with strong moving currents — which can happen in rivers or even some lakes — and possible underwater debris.
- Never swim in cold-water temperatures. Water should

be at least 67 degrees Fahrenheit before swimming occurs. Water temperatures below that can affect breathing and may induce hypothermia.



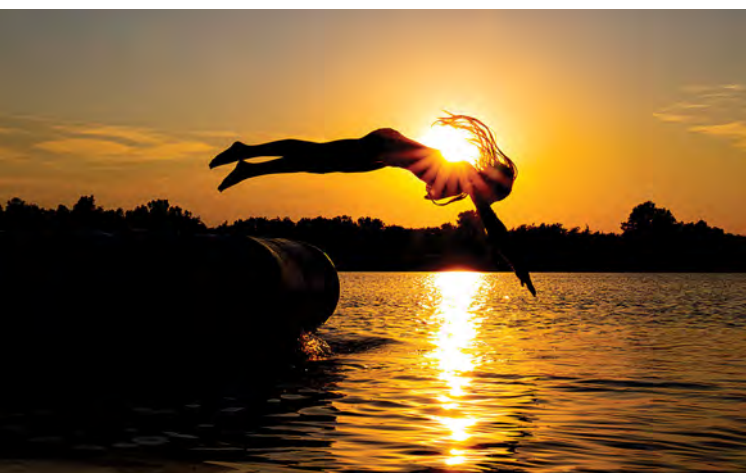
Children age 12 or under must wear a life jacket. JULIE GEISER

For Boaters, Personal Watercraft Users and Paddlers

- Always wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket.
- When recreating on a river, leave a float plan with a friend or family member, including where you are going and when you expect to return.
- Be sure your boat is in good running order and legally equipped. Carry a life jacket for each person on board your boat and a type IV throwable device. No child age 12 or under is allowed aboard any vessel when not wearing a life jacket that properly fits them.
- When pulling a person on skis, a tube or similar device, you must have a person age 12 or older as an observer unless your vessel is equipped with a wide-angle rearview mirror. A hunter orange flag of at least 12 square inches must be displayed when a skier/tuber is down in the water. The skier/tuber must wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket.
- Pay attention to the weather as you recreate. Severe weather can cause large waves and produce lightning. Exit the water before storms arise.

Anyone born after Dec. 31, 1985, is required to successfully complete a Boating Safety Course and possess a course certificate while operating a boat or personal watercraft. You must be at least 14 years of age to operate a motorboat or personal watercraft in Nebraska.

Read the 2024 Boating Guide and know the rules and regulations regarding state waterway markers, right of way and navigation rules and unlawful practices — including boating under the influence.



Don't dive in water less than 12 feet deep. JEFF KURRUS

Life Jacket Loaner Stations

Several state recreation areas across Nebraska are housing life jacket loaner stations. These stations are available for anyone of any size to borrow a life jacket for the day.

The stations are available at the Lake McConaughy Visitor Center, and Enders, Lake Maloney, Johnson Lake, Sherman Reservoir and Minatare state recreation areas.

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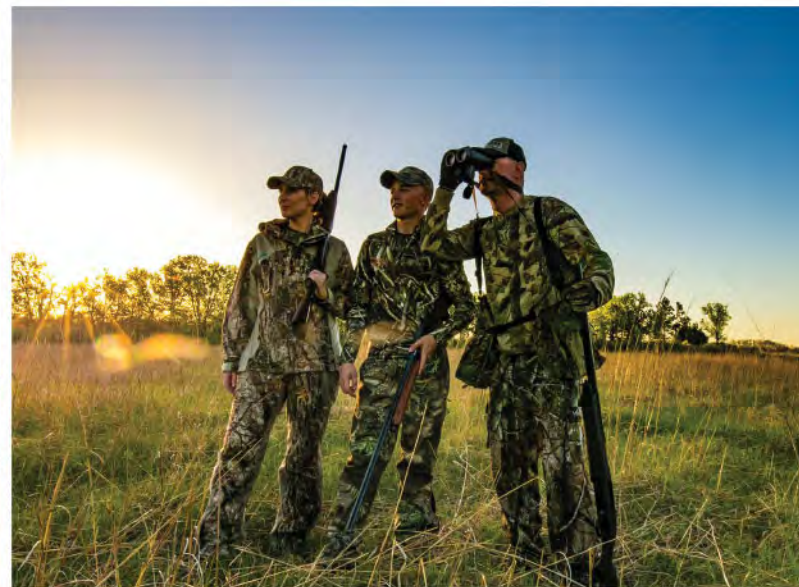
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ANIMAL GROUP NAMES

By Monica Macoubrie, Wildlife Education Specialist

From “schools of catfish” to a “rhumba of rattlesnakes,” the animal kingdom boasts a diversity of collective nouns to describe groups of animals. These imaginative descriptors not only enrich our understanding of Nebraska’s wildlife but also serve as linguistic snapshots that convey the essence of their social lives.



A raft of ducks. ERIC FOWLER



A bale of turtles. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY



A parliament of owls. JULIE GEISER



A murder of crows. ERIC FOWLER



A murmuration of starlings. JUSTIN HAAG



A kettle of hawks. GETTY IMAGES



A hover of trout fingerlings. JEFF KURRUS



A skulk of foxes. BOB GRIER



A bed of snakes. GETTY IMAGES



A herd of bison. CHRIS HELZER



A coterie of prairie dogs. JUSTIN HAAG



A romp of river otters. BOB GRIER



A scurry of squirrels. ERIC FOWLER



An army of bullfrogs. JUSTIN HAAG



A kaleidoscope of butterflies. JULIE GEISER

KNOW YOUR MORELS

By Tim Reigert

April and May are prime morel mushroom hunting times in Nebraska. And there is nothing as delicious as morel mushrooms soaked in salty water and then fried in butter and garlic.

But did you know that there are “false” morels? Many don’t. Several species of false morels are toxic, but they are easily distinguished from edible morels of the *Morchella* genus.

False morels have wrinkled to nearly smooth heads without distinct pits and ridges, hence the common name, brain mushroom. False morels are usually more round and grow closer to the ground than true morels.

The fruiting head of many false morels is thin and brittle, not thick and fleshy as with true morels. Eating false morels can cause illness, but those found in North America are seldom lethal.

False morels can be found throughout the growing season. Carefully study the illustrations below. To avoid illness, do not consume any mushroom that you can’t positively identify.



True Morels

The base of the fruiting head of a true morel is attached to the stalk and the stalk is hollow.



False Morels

The fruiting heads of false morels are attached to the top of the stalk and hang down around the stalk like a skirt. Often, but not always, the stalk is filled with cottony or pithy material. ILLUSTRATIONS BY TIM REIGERT



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AQUATIC HABITAT 2024

By Eric Fowler

Three years after Glenn Cunningham Lake in Omaha was drained to kill invasive zebra mussels, the reservoir is expected to provide excellent fishing this year.

Drawing down the 390-acre reservoir in 2019 also allowed the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to replace vegetation barriers and gravel on spawning beds and repair a breakwater and fishing deck installed during a major Aquatic Habitat Program project completed in 2008, as well as construct a new boat ramp and renovate the fishery to remove common carp.

Good numbers of crappies to 12 inches, bluegills to 8 inches, and a few largemouth bass topping 15 inches, with hordes of smaller fish, make the lake a great place to take kids. Anglers will also have a chance of catching a 15-inch-plus saugeye, channel catfish topping 24 inches and even a muskellunge.

Several other recent projects to improve fisheries and access are coming into their own and producing keeper-sized fish.

Stagecoach Lake

This 190-acre reservoir near Hickman was drawn down in 2017 to allow for a renovation of the fish population, which was dominated by carp and gizzard shad, and construction of a new boat ramp, kayak launch and a breakwater to protect both from north winds. The fishery has taken off since it was restocked in 2018, and has good numbers of bluegills, crappies, channel catfish, largemouth bass and walleye.

Gracie Creek Pond

Work to remove 28,000 yards of sand that had washed into the Gracie Creek trout pond by flooding in March 2019 and



An Aquatic Habitat project at Cunningham Lake in Omaha included maintenance on a breakwater and resurfacing gravel spawning beds. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

reduced the volume of the pond by 60 percent was completed in 2022. This popular put-and-take fishery, located on a spring-fed, Sandhills stream adjacent to Calamus Reservoir, is stocked with more than 5,000 trout throughout the year. A sediment trap built as part of the project will allow normal deposits to be easily removed every year or two.

Smallmouth and Perch

Big Elk Lake Recreation Area, built in 2021 in Papillion, and Lake No. 5 at Two Rivers State Recreation Area near Venice, renovated in 2021 to remove carp, were both stocked with smallmouth bass and yellow perch to create unique fisheries in eastern Nebraska. Lake No. 5 at Two Rivers, also known as the Trout Lake, is the popular put-and-take fishery stocked with more than 20,000 fish each spring.

Rock Creek Lake

Renovated in 2020 to remove gizzard shad, this lake now has healthy populations of largemouth bass, channel catfish, redear sunfish, yellow perch and crappies, and is stocked regularly with trout.

Cub Creek 12a

This 27-acre Lower Big Blue NRD lake was renovated in 2020 and now has decent bluegills, largemouth bass and channel catfish. The project also removed sediment and built rock jetties that improve angler access.

Lake Ogallala

Renovated last October to remove common carp, white sucker, gizzard shad and alewife, the lake has been stocked with 65,000 8- to 10-inch rainbow and tiger trout that will grow fast this spring and summer. It will be a few years before the 46,000 3-inch yellow perch will be big enough to eat.

Fort Robinson Ponds

The seven ponds renovated at Fort Robinson in recent years are all stocked with one or more species of trout, including rainbow, brook, cutthroat and tiger trout. A few ponds with warmer water were also stocked with other species of gamefish. Cherry Creek Pond is producing a few keeper-sized bluegills; Middle Grable Pond: bluegills and yellow perch; North Grable: largemouth bass, bluegill, yellow perch and channel catfish; Middle Ice House Pond: bluegill, catfish and largemouth bass; and Lower Ice House Pond: bluegill, perch, black crappie, largemouth bass and catfish. Cherry Creek and Middle Grable also have smallmouth bass that need time to grow.



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Deer hunting near Wilber, 1992

This is a photo of my friends John Janecek in the center, Gary Richtarik on the right and me. John harvested this buck near his farm in Gage County northeast of Wilber in 1992. We grew up together and hunted and fished for many years in Gage and Saline counties. I still hunt the same areas and keep in touch with John. Gary unfortunately passed in 2020 and is sorely missed.

– Rich Pomajzl, Beatrice



Catfishing on the North Loup River

Pictured from left: Leonard Kaslon, my dad; Keith Kaslon, me; Brian Kaslon, my third cousin; Bob Kaslon, my uncle. This was the morning after an overnight camping and set-line trip to the North Loup River around 1987.

– Keith Kaslon, Columbus

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.



Duck hunting at School House Lake in Cherry County, 1981

Hunters Douglas Blaine Harris (me), Larry Shaw, Joe Francis and Marv Adamson. Being originally from the Sandhills, I organized an annual trip to Cherry County to open duck season. The Lincoln group included Joe Francis, Larry Shaw and the Harris family. The Adamson Ranch was the childhood home of my wife, Marge Adamson Harris.

Children in the pickup: Kevin Ravenscroft, Ryan Adamson, Natalie Harris and Jake McDowell.

– Douglas Blaine Harris, Lincoln



Fishing on a small irrigation canal, 1960

My father, Wilbur Simmons, caught this carp in August 1960 on a small irrigation canal that flowed between Overton and Elm Creek between what is now the interstate and the Platte River. Today, you can still see the canal.

That day I was fishing a small sandpit nearby for carp with two poles and later went to check with my dad. Unfortunately, when I returned to the sandpit, both my poles were missing. My dad came over to the pit and used a big treblehook to my line and pulled both poles as a 5-pound carp had tangled both lines. I got a stern lecture about leaving my poles unattended. Most of what I know about fishing I learned from my father. He always took me fishing when he went. He passed around 20 years ago, but I think of him often.

– Kim A. Simmons, Bellevue

Fishing bullheads near Rackett, 1957

This picture is of my grandmother, Helen Fickes, of Oshkosh in June 1957. She's holding a stringer of bullheads after a day of fishing with my grandfather, David Fickes, and Vern and Beth Keenan, also from Oshkosh. I believe they were fishing north of Rackett. Vern and Beth took me on my first bullhead fishing trip in the early 1980s to the same area, often catching two at a time, using earthworms dug in Grandma's backyard.

– Matt Arndt, Cheyenne, Wyoming





A mink pauses along a trail at Heron Haven in Omaha. RENAE BLUM

FEARLESS

By Renae Blum

It wasn't scared of me.

The squirrel-sized creature, its dark brown fur wet from a recent swim, paused to stare up at me from the gravel path just yards away. It was the most fearless wild animal I had ever encountered, and I wasn't even sure what it was.

I raised my camera and fired off a couple of shots, and then the moment passed. Still unconcerned, the animal went zipping through the grass, scampering along shoreline branches and gliding easily along the surface of the wetland pond nearby. It was a joy to watch it, its small body all energy.

Our encounter happened last May along the trails at Heron Haven, a small spring-fed wetland and wildlife sanctuary in Omaha, just off the intersection of 120th and Old Maple streets. In my opinion, it's one of Omaha's best-kept secrets, with a variety of wildlife, photography blinds and well-maintained trails and gardens. I'd spent hours photographing pollinators in the butterfly garden, as well as frogs, turtles and ducks in the wetland ponds. But none of those experiences measured up to the one with this furry mystery creature.

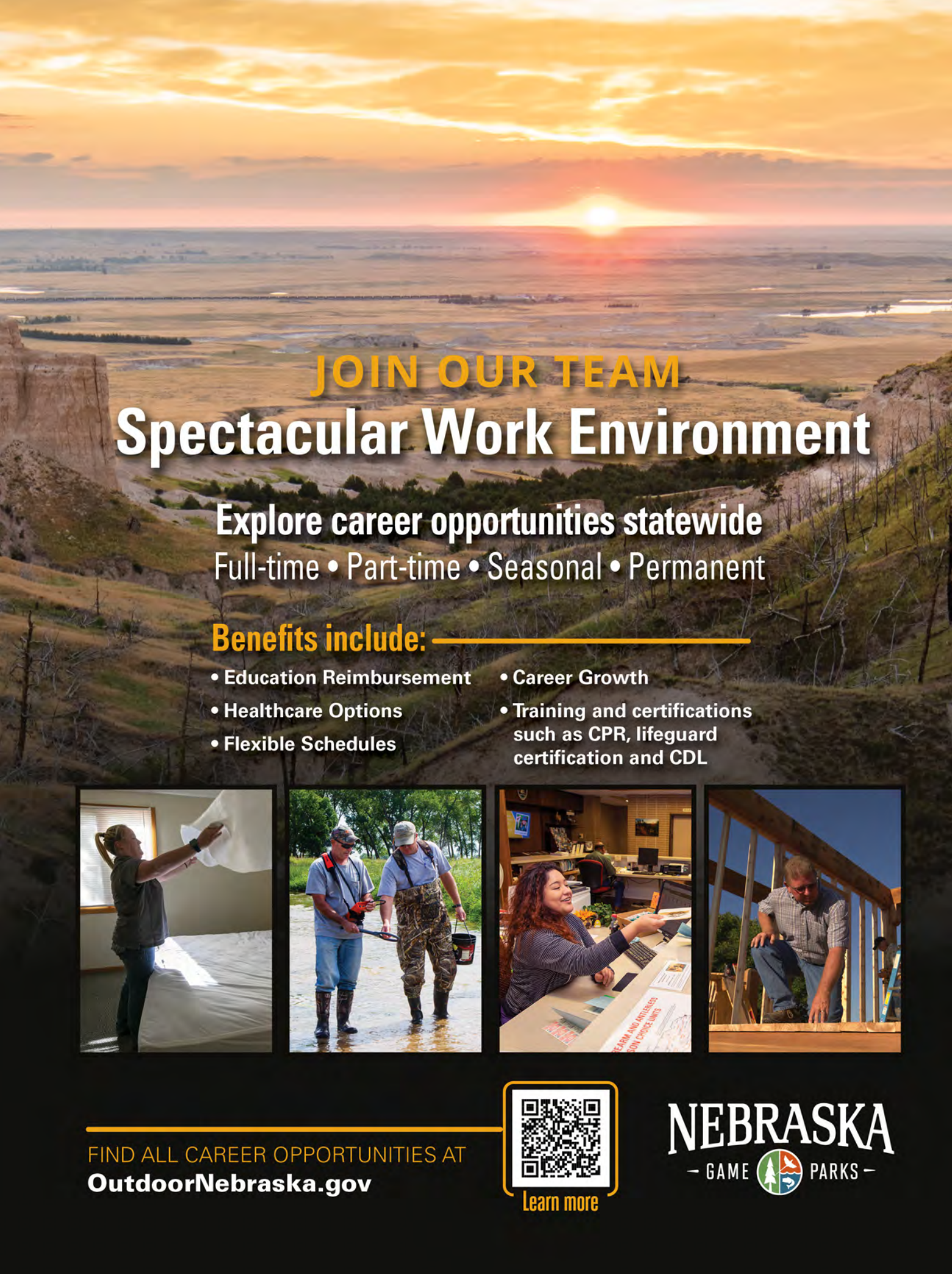
The next week, I reached out to Sam Wilson, the furbearer

and carnivore program manager at Nebraska Game and Parks, to figure out what the heck this thing was. He confirmed my uneducated guess: It was a mink, a semi-aquatic carnivore belonging to the mustelid family.

And the reason why it was so unafraid of me? Probably because it was born inside city limits and has likely seen people every day since the time it was young, Wilson said. Mink are confident animals in general, he added, but ones in rural areas, where people are scarcer and may hunt or trap them, would be more fearful of humans.

I also happened to be in the right place. Because mink are small, people don't see them often unless you're in the right habitat, Wilson said — and Heron Haven is the perfect example of that. Mink dwell near water, especially spots with wild areas nearby where they can hunt for frogs and crayfish. Many urban areas in Nebraska with lakes or wetlands offer the opportunity to see mink.

Now that I know what I'm looking for, I'm keeping my eyes peeled for more of this mink's fearless brethren. Who knows what awaits me at Heron Haven this year?



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