

Saving Wildlife and WILD PLACES 2016

A Newsletter from the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund



Northern River Otter

You can make the difference

Remember our wildlife and the wild places that we want future generations to enjoy. Make sure to “check” for wildlife on your state tax return. Look for the peregrine falcon symbol and donate all or a portion of your tax refund to the Wildlife Conservation Fund. You can also donate throughout the year by calling (402) 471-0641 or online at NebraskaWildlifeFund.org

All donations are fully tax deductible



PHOTO BY BOB GRIER

Nebraska's Natural Legacy includes hawks and herons, bats and butterflies, turtles and tree frogs, milkweeds and milk snakes, and almost everything in between. Nebraska is a beautiful, interesting and unique place in part because of our wildlife. About 98% of the thousands of birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians, insects and plants are considered “nongame” species in Nebraska because they are not hunted, trapped or fished. By law, revenue from hunting and fishing licenses cannot be spent on “nongame” species, so the Wildlife Conservation Fund was created. The Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund connects people to nature through education. It is the state's primary source of funding for the research and habitat restoration necessary to ensure that spectacular nongame species, such as the whooping crane, river otter, and blowout penstemon thrive in Nebraska. By supporting the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund with a tax-deductible donation, you are taking an active part in conserving our state's diverse wildlife and our natural legacy for future generations.



Painted Turtle

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

The Royal Butterflies Monarchs and Regal Fritillaries



By Kristal Stoner, Wildlife Diversity Program Manager, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Everyone knows the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus* L.). Children fall in love with them while witnessing the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly in their classrooms. Adults in urban and rural areas readily recognize this butterfly, resting and feeding in the flowers in their backyard. The butterfly is found across most of the eastern United States, and although this insect weighs less than a gram, it makes-distance migrations to Mexico every year to escape the

freezing winter temperatures. The migrations of monarch butterflies in North America to overwintering sites in Mexico and California can be a journey of 3,000 miles and are among one of the world's most spectacular migrations.

Although the butterfly is very well known and loved, not everyone is aware of the challenges monarchs are now facing. Habitat loss threatens the migratory populations of North American monarchs throughout their annual cycle of breeding, migrating and overwintering. Based on counts in Mexico, the monarch has declined approximately

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Butterflies...

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90 percent in the last 20 years, so the monarch butterfly was recently petitioned for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The monarch is not the only declining butterfly. The regal fritillary (*Speyeria idalia*) is a large, orange and black butterfly that is similar in size to the monarch butterfly. The regal fritillary is found throughout Nebraska, but is mostly associated with tallgrass prairies, meadows and pastures. The larvae feed on violets while the adults feed on a variety of flowers such as milkweeds, thistles, clover, and purple coneflower. On April 19, 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received a petition to list the regal fritillary under the Endangered Species Act. It is also listed as a Tier 1 Species of Greatest Conservation Need by the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project.

Passionate people are taking action now to reverse these declines. Canada, Mexico and the United States have joined forces to help the monarchs by reducing threats and improving habitat across its entire range. Locally, biologists, landowners,



PHOTO BY MIKE FORSBERG

A female regal fritillary sits on a tall thistle at Burchard Lake Wildlife Management Area in Pawnee County.

The monarch butterfly weighs less than a gram, yet needs to travel thousands of miles each year. To restore the monarch, everyone needs to help, and everyone can do something.



NGPC LIBRARY

A monarch butterfly nectars on milkweed.

teachers, children, nurseries and gardeners are already working to help. They are improving habitat by reducing the use of chemicals, while also planting milkweed (the food for caterpillars) and other nectar producing flowers (adults use a variety of flowers). In Nebraska, there are several choices of native species of milkweed. You can help monarchs in your own yard by planting native milkweed such as common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) or butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), and other native, pollinator friendly plants.

There is also the urgent need to track monarchs across their range over time to better understand and adjust conservation measures to be most effective. Thanks to the Wildlife Conservation Fund, a citizen science project was launched in 2015 to monitor monarchs and the regal fritillary.

We are asking for help with two levels of surveys. Level one is site observation and documenting conditions. Level two requires walking transects and recording butterflies as well as daily conditions. Next spring there will be training available for survey methods and opportunities to conduct surveys for these two butterflies. Visit OutdoorNebraska.org to learn more next spring. ✓

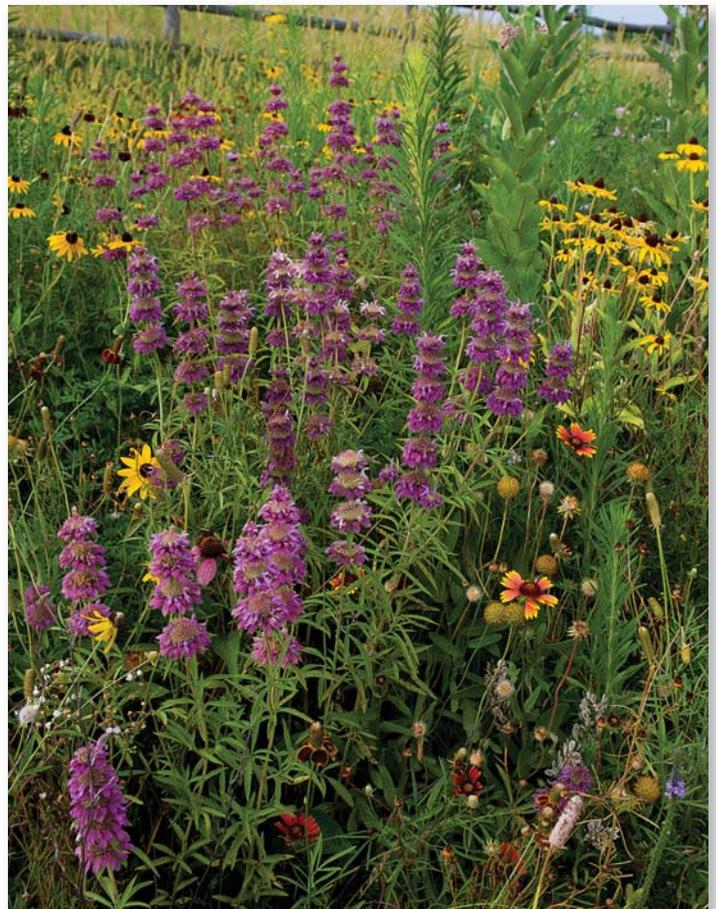


PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

A variety of pollinator species perfect for the larvae and adults.

Movement of Trumpeter Swans in the Sandhills



**Mark Vrtiska, Ph.D., Waterfowl Program Manager,
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission**

As we busted through the thick cattail and bulrush, we were instantly surprised as the family group of trumpeter swans was right in front of us. The surprise appeared mutual, as the swans hesitated for a moment – I’m sure wondering just where the heck the big airboat had come from – and then swiftly scattered in different directions. We swung the airboat around in pursuit, and went after one of the adults. He managed to juke us once, but on the second pass, I managed to swing the dip net over his head and we had him captured.

The capture of this trumpeter swan was part of a project examining swan movements from breeding or post-breeding wetlands to fall staging and winter grounds, and any possible movements between wintering areas. Additionally, little is known about swan fidelity to wintering and breeding sites. Information obtained from the study will assist managers in conserving habitat in Nebraska’s Sandhills for trumpeter swans, a Tier 1 species in the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project.

The project began in July 2014, when three adult female swans were captured and fitted with neck collars that also had

an attached Global Positioning System (GPS), solar powered-satellite transmitter. The project in July and August 2015 with the capture of an additional 12 swans (9 females and 3 males) to be fitted with the special neck collars. The GPS attachment allows for accurate locations of swans as they move about on the marshes where they were captured, but also as they move to and while on wintering areas and back.

The birds captured in 2014 remained near their breeding wetlands through the summer and early fall, until mid-November, when a severe cold front had pushed through the region, and they then moved to their respective wintering rivers and creeks. Each swan chose a different river or creek in which to winter, which included the North Platte River, Birdwood Creek, and the South Loup River. The females moved an average of 70 miles to reach wintering areas. The females returned to their respective breeding wetlands in early February and resided on or near their breeding wetlands throughout February, March and April. ✓

A mated pair of trumpeter swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) stand over their nest filled with cygnets near Whitman in Grant County.

Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch

By Nicole Fleck-Tooze, Lincoln Parks and Recreation, Special Projects Administrator



The Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch is a tallgrass prairie passage and trail. It will build on Lincoln's nationally recognized trail and greenway system and link two of Lincoln and Lancaster County's premier environmental resource and education centers. It will follow the Haines Branch of Salt Creek from the Pioneers Park

Nature Center to the Conestoga State Recreation Area (SRA) and then pass through the Village of Denton and on to the Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center.

Less than 1 percent of tallgrass prairie once found in the United States remains today, but Lincoln and Lancaster County have an opportunity to restore wildlife habitat and offer a unique tallgrass prairie experience. The Prairie Corridor is being implemented by a public/private partnership with most funds coming from grants and private donations. To view a list of partners, visit: prairiecorridor.org.

This project will conserve and develop habitat through a voluntary, incentive-based approach. Tallgrass prairies, woodlands, wetlands and the stream corridor will be enhanced



The Prairie Corridor Technical Team assesses the virgin prairie on the Prairie Corridor conservation property at SW 84th and Kolbrook Road.

to provide valuable habitat for pollinators, grassland birds, and other native animals and plants. Habitat will be evaluated by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's School of Natural Resources to increase pollinator species and the diversity of plants and animals.

This project also includes a 20-mile round-trip trail ride that will take people from Pioneers Park south through the Village of Denton to Spring Creek Prairie. An additional link to the west will connect to Conestoga SRA.

The Prairie Corridor will benefit children and adults by building on the programs at the Pioneers Park Nature Center and Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, and offering interpretive signage and interactive activities along the trail route.

The Prairie Corridor began in 2013 with an award from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and funding from matching partners, including the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund. Although this is a long-term project, early accomplishments include the:

- conservation of 492 acres
- development of habitat management plans and the completion of a phased prairie re-establishment on 38 acres of land
- completion of the first of nine trail segments at the north end of the corridor in Pioneers Park, and engineering for the second segment to make a connection to the west edge of Pioneers Park in 2016

For more information about the Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch project, contact Nicole Fleck-Tooze or Sara Hartzell at the Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department at ntooze@lincoln.ne.gov or 402-441-8263 or shartzell@lincoln.ne.gov or 402-441-8261, or [visit prairiecorridor.org](http://prairiecorridor.org). ✓



Mike Bullerman from the Prairie Plains Resources Institute discusses the native prairie seed to be planted on the Prairie Corridor conservation property near Denton.

Peregrine Falcon Project Success Continues



By Joel Jorgenson, Nongame Bird Program Manager, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Many Nebraskans, as well as people throughout the world, log on to the Internet each spring to watch streaming video of the peregrine falcons nesting on the 18th Floor of the Nebraska Capitol. The same pair has nested and reared their young at the Capitol for more than a decade, and their biological investments are now paying off.

The pair has fledged 22 young falcons since 2005. Over the past few years, several of their offspring have turned up in other cities and started to raise families of their own. Every bird's identity is known, because the young falcons are banded and named each spring.

Boreas, banded in 2007, and Nemaha, banded in 2009, have nested at the Westar Energy building in Topeka, Kansas, since 2011. Mintaka, banded in 2010, has been the resident male at the Woodmen building in Omaha since 2012. Clark, banded in 2012, is half of the pair at Nebraska's



PHOTO BY MELISSA PANELLA

Orozco the peregrine falcon, named to honor fallen police officer Kerrie Orozco.

newest nest site at the Omaha Public Power District's North Omaha Power Station. In 2015, the falcon pair at the Capitol produced one offspring, which was named "Orozco," in honor of slain Omaha Police Officer Kerrie Orozco.

The peregrine falcon project and streaming video are supported by funds from the Wildlife Conservation Fund. ✓

Rare Plants and Fire in the Pine Ridge

By Rick Schneider, Heritage Program Manager, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Many people believe the intense wildfires of 2012 devastated large areas of the Pine Ridge forest. To determine how rare plant species fared, Steve Rolfsmeier, a botanist at Chadron State College, surveyed known populations of a variety of rare plants tracked by the Nebraska Natural Heritage Program.

These populations had been inventoried in the 1990s, before the fires. Overall, most species tolerated the fires. Some species increased in abundance and others

were negatively impacted, especially in areas where the fires were very intense. The species negatively impacted by fire included dwarf juniper, yellow



SPREADING DOGBANE



FIREWEED

stonecrop, false melic (a grass) and several species of pussytoes. Species that increased following fire included spreading dogbane and, not surprisingly, fireweed.

One interesting find was pearly everlasting, which was found in a burned ravine. The plant is known to increase in response to fire in other parts of its range. This was the first record of this plant in Nebraska in more than 75 years.

The plant species that appeared to be most heavily impacted by the 2012 fires fall into two categories: species of pine-wooded uplands, and fire-intolerant species of deciduous-wooded bottoms. Upland pine-dominated slopes that had a

dense litter layer were the most transformed habitats following the fires. Many of these sites have lost much of their native vegetation. Sites with a dense litter layer may have had a low diversity and abundance of groundcover species before the fires. The most intensely burned areas were often invaded by exotic species such as cheatgrass, Canada thistle, mullein, and prickly lettuce.

What has allowed many of the rare plants to persist is the fact that the fires were not uniformly intense but contained many areas with moderate to low fire intensity and even some unburned areas. Most of the Pine Ridge species can tolerate moderate to low intensity fire. This study will continue in the summer of 2016 with sampling in areas burned by the 2006 fires and in unburned areas. ✓



White-nose Syndrome Research in Nebraska



By Mike Fritz, Natural Heritage Specialist, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

From 2013 through 2015, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has received funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to identify and conduct surveys of hibernacula and monitor for the presence of White-nose syndrome (WNS) in Nebraska. WNS is a disease that has decimated bat populations in the eastern United States and Canada. It has killed nearly six million bats in North America since it was first discovered in New York in 2007. In some states, winter bat numbers have declined by more than 90 percent. WNS has been confirmed in 26 states and five Canadian provinces, and the fungus that causes WNS has been detected in four additional states.

WNS is caused by the non-native fungus, *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*, which affects bats while they overwinter in hibernacula. The fungus thrives in cold, humid environments and invades the skin of bats, disrupting their hibernating behavior and depleting their fat stores. WNS is only known to affect cave-hibernating bats and does not infect humans. Although there is no treatment for bats in the wild, researchers are studying a native soil bacteria that shows potential for controlling the fungus.

While Nebraska does not have the large bat populations and number of hibernacula of many eastern states, it does have a relatively high diversity of bat species and several known hibernacula. In 2014 and 2015, bats were captured during surveys of hibernacula and swabbed on the nose and wing. The samples were then sent to labs for genetic testing for the presence of the WNS fungus. Before 2015, the fungus had not been documented in Nebraska

but it was known to occur in Iowa, Missouri and Minnesota. The rapid westward progression of WNS and its proximity to Nebraska indicated that it was likely that the disease would move into the state in the near future. The fungus was documented for the first time in Nebraska in 2015. The fungus was detected in samples collected from three species of bats from a mine in Cass County. Although the fungus has been found in Nebraska, the symptoms of WNS, white fungal growth on the nose and lesions on the wings, have not yet been observed on any bats in the state. The confirmed presence of the fungus in Nebraska means that the fungus is continuing to expand its range west and north in North America.

Recent studies have shown that the value of insect control by bats to agriculture is worth several billion dollars annually. The annual value to corn alone is several billion dollars worldwide. This value includes increased crop production through the control of insects, reduced spread of crop diseases and reduced need for pesticide application. The loss of large numbers of bats has a direct cost impact to farmers.

Researchers working with the Commission and the Service include Dr. Patricia Freeman and Dr. Cliff Lemen

of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Dr. Jeremy White of the University of Nebraska-Omaha, and Dr. Keith Geluso of the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Researchers are asking for help in locating and accessing mines for tracking the spread of the fungus. Those with information of such sites are asked to contact the Commission at 402-471-5419. ✓



To determine if bats are affected by white-nose syndrome, scientists look for the visible white fungal growth on the bat's muzzle and/or wing tissue, but this is not a reliable indicator. Bats must be swabbed and samples diagnosed in a lab to determine the presence of white-nose syndrome.

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Remember to Just Click

Since 1984, the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund has been saving wildlife and wild places through habitat restoration, research and education. The Wildlife Conservation Fund is entirely funded through tax-deductible donations. Here are just a couple ways to support the Wildlife Conservation Fund.

- 1) Support with just a click, simply visit www.NebraskaWildlifeFund.org to make a donation.
- 2) Remember the Wildlife Conservation Fund when you are doing your taxes. Taxpayers should look for the new peregrine falcon symbol on your tax form to make a contribution.



Viewing from a Distance



By Adam Jones, Watchable Wildlife Biologist, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

When people go out into the “wild” – whether in their backyard, a state park or a drive in the country – what do they actually see? Are they looking actively for wildlife or just enjoying the walk or drive?

Believe it or not, it is real easy to see animals in their natural habitat going about their daily routine. All that needs to happen is to look for things that do not belong or seem out of the ordinary. When walking through the forest, park or even looking in the backyard, one may notice out of the corner of his or her eye something that does not seem right. This is the moment to turn and focus attention in that direction. There is an excellent chance to see something otherwise unnoticed. Always be aware of what the surroundings have to offer.

When people consider entering the secretive world of wildlife in its natural habitat, it is more than often a question of “How do I get the most out of spotting and viewing wildlife wherever I go?” Shy wildlife can be hard to find. However, each year we offer Watchable Wildlife small grants to many entities, which are designed to enhance peoples’ viewing experiences and to get folks involved with and connected to wildlife around them. The grant program is also meant to lead to further appreciation of wildlife the state of Nebraska has to offer and to promote ecotourism opportunities in rural areas, which helps booster the local and state economy.

With the help of the watchable wildlife grant program, several wildlife viewing blinds have been built throughout the state to facilitate and enhance people’s experiences in viewing numerous Nebraska wildlife species. The structures used were made in several different ways from converted material to newly built structures and ADA-accessible blinds.

Red Willow County in southwest Nebraska hosts an annual Chicken Dance Festival using such blinds. Since 2013, they have been host to visitors from New York, Idaho, South Carolina and Germany, among other locations. The ADA accessible blinds have made it possible for all people to enjoy the sights that the festival has to offer. Several more pictures and information can be found on the festival’s Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/PrairieChickenDanceTours/>.



ADA accessible trailer converted into a viewing blind to help everyone enjoy spectacles such as the “Chicken Dance”



Visitors at the Red Willow Prairie Chicken Dance Festival enjoying the Dance of the Birds.

Through the use of blinds, such as these in Red Willow, the public is able to view Greater Prairie-Chickens “dancing” in leks (or groups of males) not usually seen at such close proximity. The public also is able to appreciate the animals in their natural habitat without disturbing the animals’ normal activities. Having educational opportunities such as these has brought sightseers from around the country and world into some of the smaller communities in Nebraska. ✓



Greater Prairie Chickens “dancing” in a lek working to attract females.

NEBRASKA

— GAME  PARKS —

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Do Something Wild!

Donate to the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund

Help protect our natural legacy by making a tax-deductible donation to the fund. The Fund supports the conservation of Nebraska's diverse wildlife (including endangered and threatened species). For a donation of \$25, you will receive a "Do Something Wild!" T-Shirt.

Short-sleeved T-Shirt - Adult S, M, L, XL, XXL

To donate, call 402-471-0641 or go online at

www.NebraskaWildlifeFund.org



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