

- At Ponca State Park, a \$3,405 grant enabled cabins to be outfitted with bird-watching supplies, allowing guests to observe local birds from their doorstep.
 - Platte River State Park received \$2,598 to create a pollinator habitat, promoting the conservation of species like bees and butterflies while educating visitors about their ecological importance.
 - Fort Kearny State Historical Park used a \$4,338 grant for interpretive signs and brochure rack, enhancing wildlife viewing and identification, especially during sandhill crane migration.
- Each of these projects highlights Nebraska's commitment to wildlife conservation and community engagement. ✓

To show your support for wildlife conservation efforts like those highlighted in this newsletter, consider purchasing a Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund license plate online at dmv.nebraska.gov/services.

For more information about these initiatives, to donate to the Wildlife Conservation Fund, or to apply for your own Watchable Wildlife Grant, please visit the Watchable Wildlife Grants website and the Wildlife Conservation Fund website.

Watchable Wildlife Grants website: OutdoorNebraska.gov/about/community-resources/grants/watchable-wildlife-grants/
Wildlife Conservation Fund website OutdoorNebraska.gov/about/give-back/help-wildlife/wildlife-conservation-fund/

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 \$30, you will receive a "Do Something Wild!" T-Shirt.

Short-sleeved T-Shirt - Adult S, M, L, XL, 2XL

To donate, go online at www.NebraskaWildlifeFund.com

Count on me to help support the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund

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SAVING WILDLIFE and WILD PLACES

2025 Newsletter from the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund

Surveying Nebraska Pollinators A Summer on the Road

By Allyson Frank, Pollinator Technician,
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

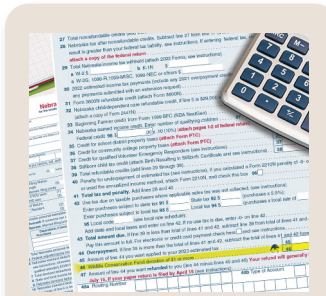
I spent June through September on a buzzing adventure — literally. I traveled across Nebraska, net in hand, surveying bumble bees as part of the Nebraska Bumble Bee Atlas. Each day brought a new landscape and challenges, from manicured state parks to the rugged Sandhills, while searching for our state's important pollinators.

The Nebraska Bumble Bee Atlas, established in 2019 by the Xerces Society and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is a collaborative effort between the Xerces Society and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. The project has received funding from the Wildlife Conservation Fund, as well as the Nebraska Environmental Trust and Competitive State Wildlife Grants.

The Atlas plays a vital role in tracking and conserving the state's bumblebee populations. Through community science participation, the Atlas has documented 15 of Nebraska's 20 historically recorded



Regal fritillaries (*Argynnis idalia*) and an American bumble bee (*Bombus pensylvanicus*) feed on bee balm (*Monarda fistulosa*). Both of these magnificent species face population declines. PHOTO BY ALLYSON FRANK



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 line 46 of 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.com

All donations are fully tax deductible.



bumble bee species. The method to our bee madness? Two types of catch-and-release surveys are used: Point surveys and roadside surveys. The point surveys are the gold standard, requiring a 45-minute search across a hectare of land, ideally filled with diverse flowering plants. Sometimes, though, I traded grasslands for roadsides, conducting shorter, 15-minute bursts of bee-spotting along highways and backroads—still a thrill, especially when a Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) bumble bee, zips by. Both survey types are completed when the floral and habitat assessment along with the photo vouchers are uploaded to BumbleBeeWatch.org.

The work can be tedious, —driving long distances, navigating weather challenges, and sometimes spending hours without spotting a single bee. However, each successful sighting, like a Southern Plains Bumble Bee — a Tier 1 I at-risk SGCN species in Nebraska — makes it all worthwhile. Finding this bee not only adds a crucial data point and also highlights the importance of protecting the diverse habitats our pollinators rely on.

While driving thousands of miles across the state, I not only



Pollinator Technician, Allyson Frank, searches among silky prairie clover (*Dalea villosa*) for bumble bees. PHOTO BY ANN DVORAK, WORLD WILDLIFE FUND

got to know bumble bees but also explored some of the most beautiful landscapes in Nebraska. It's amazing how the abundance of flowers directly influences bumble bee populations; —more flowers means more bees, and a greater variety of flowers means a greater variety of bee species.

I contributed to several other

initiatives funded by the Wildlife Conservation Fund, all aimed at understanding and protecting Nebraska pollinators. One such project is the Monarch and Regal Fritillary Surveys, a Nebraska community science effort to monitor the population trends of these iconic species. My participation in the Nebraska Big Butterfly Count also helped expand our knowledge of the state's butterfly diversity. Additionally, through Monarch Watch's Monarch Tagging Program and Project Monarch Health, I helped to tag monarchs and collect samples for OE (*Ophryocystis elektroscirrha*), a protozoan parasite, to better understand monarch health and migratory patterns. These statewide efforts underscore both the ecological importance of pollinators and the tremendous value of community science.

This summer's work reinforced the importance of continued conservation efforts for Nebraska's native species. As I've seen firsthand while crisscrossing the state, net in hand, chasing after these important (and, again, adorable) pollinators, the data we collect doesn't just inform us about where bumble bees and butterflies are thriving, —it tells us where they're struggling, giving us a road map for action. ✓



A southern plains bumble bee (*Bombus fraternus*) nectars on blue sage (*Salvia azurea*). PHOTO BY ALLYSON FRANK

New City of Lincoln Park Includes Rare Saline Wetlands

By Ted LaGrange, Wetlands Program Manager, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Saline wetlands are one of the rarest natural community types in Nebraska and are designated as a Biologically Unique Landscape (BUL) by the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project. The wetlands are of historical significance as their presence spawned a short-lived salt mining industry in the 1860's that led to the establishment of the City of Lincoln. They only occur within the floodplains of Salt Creek and its tributaries in Lancaster and Saunders counties and receive their salinity from salty groundwater that is under pressure and rises to the surface in these areas.

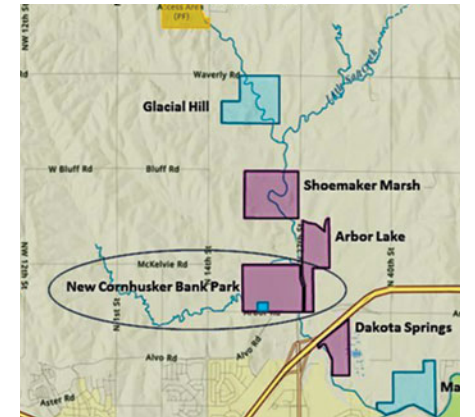


Saline wetlands provide habitat for a variety of wildlife species, including 37 at-risk species. The Salt Creek tiger beetle is found only in the saline

wetlands near Lincoln and is listed as a state and federally endangered species. Saltwort is a state-listed endangered plant species present in saline wetlands. These wetlands also store floodwater, provide green space, and are used for recreation.

A new saline wetland area was acquired in 2024 by the City of Lincoln on the north edge of town and is named Cornhusker Bank Park in honor of one of the major donors. Solidago Conservancy purchased the entire 154-acre property in 2024 from a willing seller and then subdivided the property into three tracts that were sold to the City of Lincoln and the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District (NRD). The City of Lincoln bought a 54-acre tract that will become a traditional city park. The NRD bought an 11-acre tract that may one day be developed into a new office location/headquarters.

The remaining 85-acre tract was bought by the City of Lincoln and will be dedicated to saline wetland conservation. This tract includes 24 acres of saline wetlands with the potential to restore more. It also includes a portion of Little Salt Creek and a tributary stream that



New Cornhusker Bank Park location in Lincoln, Nebraska. Blue = NRD property. Purple = City of Lincoln property. GIS MAP BY TED LAGRANGE

contains excellent habitat for several threatened, endangered, and at-risk species.

Funding for the purchase of the saline wetland conservation tract came from the following sources: a Section 6 Recovery Land Acquisition grant award from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to acquire habitat for the endangered Salt Creek tiger beetle; Wildlife Conservation Funds from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission; the Saline Wetlands Conservation Partnership; City of Lincoln; Lower Platte South Natural Resources District (NRD); Pheasants Forever; and a private donor. This project could not have been completed without the generous support of the people and partners who worked to make this a reality.

This site will offer an opportunity for people to learn more about saline wetlands, conservation, and explore trails that will be developed.

This new park offers a wonderful opportunity to combine public use in a traditional park with conservation messaging and education and will be a wonderful asset for future generations to enjoy. ✓



The salt creek tiger beetle (above) has a new home in Lincoln. PHOTOS BY SHAUN DUNN

Radio Tracking Massasaugas

By Colleen Rothe-Groleau, Nebraska Natural Heritage Program Biologist, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Western massasauga rattlesnakes are a species of pygmy rattlesnake that grows, on average, to 18 to 32 inches in length. In Nebraska, these rattlesnakes are known to occur in a few counties in the southeastern part of the state. They are cryptic in coloration and generally difficult to find due to some fantastic camouflage.

Through 2023 and 2024, in a project partially funded by the Wildlife Conservation Fund, the Nebraska Natural Heritage Program staff, contractors, and volunteers tracked the movements of 13 western massasauga rattlesnakes in southeastern Nebraska to document the seasonal usage of habitat surrounding and including highway right-of-ways. One of

the primary goals was to provide recommendations to help reduce the occurrence of negative interactions between humans and these protected rattlesnakes.

We used duct tape to attach a specialized radio transmitter to the body of each western massasauga near the tail. These transmitters collected a GPS point every three hours while attached to the snake. Additionally, they transmitted a beacon signal to small radio



The lost transmitter after retrieval.
PHOTO BY COLLEEN ROTHE-GROLEAU

receivers every three days during the active season, April to November, so surveyors could track their whereabouts and assess the overall health of the snakes.

By design, the transmitters did not always remain attached to the snakes, especially after rain. Of the 13 snakes tracked, we retrieved 11 transmitters throughout the duration of the project. Often, these retrievals were easy. The transmitter was laying on or in the grass. Occasionally, retrieval was much more complicated. One transmitter was in a crayfish burrow about 3 feet underground and



Heritage Program Data Manager, Chelsea Forehead, holds a western massasauga immobile in a plastic tube after fitting a transmitter to the snake using duck tape.

PHOTO BY COLLEEN ROTHE-GROLEAU

required digging a hole in a partially flooded right-of-way ditch to get it out. Two transmitters, along with the snakes they were attached to, disappeared entirely. Both likely were eaten by predators.

After collecting nearly 1,500 GPS points, we found that western massasaugas tend to stay within a mile of their hibernacula – those areas where they spend the winter underground in a crayfish burrow, rodent tunnel, or fissures reaching deep into the bedrock. They regularly use highway right-of-ways as travel corridors and come back to those same hibernacula year after year. Conserving those hibernacula and the travel corridors that western massasaugas use is an important aspect of conserving this beautiful species. ✓



Heritage Program Biologist, Colleen Rothe-Groleau reaches for a bucket to scoop water out of a flooded hole while retrieving a transmitter.

PHOTO BY DAN FOGELL

Plains Topminnow

Little Fish Up Against Big Odds

By Cassidy Wessel, Habitat Partners Wildlife Biologist, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Almost anyone who spends time chasing small fish in Nebraska can tell this story. First the knock on the door, then the introduction with the handshake. Then comes the request to sample a stream, and usually one of two things will happen. If that person spent time on the creek as a kid, they'll say, "Yeah, there's a few fish in there but nothing big." Just as often though, the eyebrows raise, sometimes even furrow as they contemplate my seemingly absurd request. "Fish? Out there? Well, good luck. Be sure to shut the gates."

I get it. I grew up here, too, and for many people wildlife is something you'd go on vacation to see, and fish are something that we stock in ponds and reservoirs, or maybe live in big rivers. We grew up loving Nebraska, but didn't grow up believing there might be anything special just down the road from home.

If I'd have known to look though, I'd probably have found the plains topminnow. This nifty little fish is a Tier 1 at-risk species in the Nebraska Natural Legacy Plan, which justifies additional research, monitoring, and habitat restoration efforts to prevent the need for official state or federal listing.

Supported by the Wildlife Conservation Fund, Legacy efforts have brought Nebraska Game and Parks Commission staff together with Dr. David Schumann and graduate student Avery Lettenberger of the University of Wisconsin – LaCrosse to take everything we think we know about plains topminnow and turn it into one of the Legacy Project's first At-risk Species Management Plans. As Avery and David helped field biologists, researchers, and water policy experts work through the planning, we also got to see challenges and opportunities on both public areas and working ranches. Avery and David are creating tools to prioritize restoration and assist in management prescriptions. We hope the Plains



Male plains topminnow in breeding colors. PHOTO BY CASSIDY WESSEL



Sampling for plains topminnow in Nebraska stream.

PHOTO BY AVERY LETTENBERGER

Topminnow Management Plan provides a roadmap for helping other at-risk species and provides a template for how to share collective knowledge.

Attention to the plight of grassland species has heightened over the last decade, but the global loss of freshwater biodiversity exceeds that of terrestrial systems. Freshwater systems nested within grasslands then, have the deck stacked against them. Despite the challenge, if we succeed in reversing the decline of plains topminnow we'll save much in the process. We'll benefit the birds, amphibians, and insects using the same shallow pools and floodplain wetlands. We'll benefit orchids that need the groundwater-fed wet meadows, not to mention the forage and hay production on those meadows. We'll even save ourselves a few mosquito bites if we keep plains topminnow around to eat the larvae.

For a certain number of raised or furrowed eyebrows, curiosity eventually gets the better of them and they'll swing by. Some get to hold a plains topminnow, or any other number of colorful pinky-sized fish which call a quality prairie stream home. More than once we've heard, "Well, I'll be darned. I've lived here my whole life and never seen one of these."

I get it because I'm from here, too. And there's something about those moments when you learn that a place you've always loved has been hiding something remarkable right down the road. ✓

Researching Nebraska's Western Bats with Acoustics

By Derek Krueger, Wildlife Biologist, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

The arrival of white nose syndrome in Nebraska has sparked an urgent need to survey the state's bat populations. The fungal disease has killed bats across North America, and its presence is causing serious declines of our bat populations. If conservation efforts are to succeed, our habitat managers need data on Nebraska's bat populations and the disease's spread. This information is well documented in eastern Nebraska but is lacking in the west. To help fill this gap in knowledge, a survey technique known as acoustic monitoring is being used.

Acoustic monitors record the echolocation calls of passing bats. Collected calls then are analyzed to determine what species made them. It's a cost-effective way of surveying bat populations in a specific area, which are notoriously difficult to study.

Monitoring bat populations with acoustics is a year-round process funded in part by the Wildlife Conservation Fund. Of all the seasons, the summer is most ideal for conducting acoustic surveys measuring bat populations. This is when most of Nebraska's residential and migratory species are present within the state. It's also when bats are most active, as they give birth, raise their pups, and hunt for insects every night.

To conduct acoustic surveys during the summer, Nebraska Game and Parks has implemented the North American Bat Monitoring Program. This program, (started by the United States Geological Survey), is a collaborative program dedicated to collecting population data to help understand and hopefully reverse the decline of bats. It provides collaborators with standardized acoustic survey methods to monitor bats on a large scale. Following program guidelines, biologists conduct acoustic surveys over the entire state. Calls from these surveys can detect the presence or absence of different species in the study area. We also can use the calls to estimate the relative number of bats in a specific region and how the population has changed in later surveys since the arrival of white nose syndrome.

Acoustic research is even being conducted during the winter. During the cold months, most migratory bat species leave the state while resident species hibernate in winter roosts. Although hibernating bats are relatively inactive, they occasionally leave shelter for water. Acoustic monitors can pick up these bats and help locate their roosts. If the roost is accessible and contains enough bats, researchers can sample these locations for the presence of white nose syndrome. In eastern Nebraska, several of these roosts are known but none have been found out west. Efforts are underway to find these locations. Without the availability of these roosts to sample, it's unknown if white nose syndrome has infected western bat populations. If even one hibernaculum is located, it will help fill a major gap in Nebraska's ongoing white nose syndrome research. ✓



A fringed myotis.- This Tier 1 bat species is found exclusively in Nebraska's western panhandle Panhandle. PHOTO BY BRETT ANDERSEN



A Titley AnaBat Express stationary acoustic monitor deployed at Fort Robinson State Park. PHOTO BY DEREK KRUEGER

From Squirrels to State Parks

Celebrating Nebraska's Watchable Wildlife Initiatives

By Meghan Manary, Watchable Wildlife Biologist, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

The 2023-2024 Watchable Wildlife Grants have funded several impactful conservation projects across Nebraska.

The Flying Squirrel Project of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's School of Natural Resources, supported by \$5,963, centers on the intriguing discovery of southern flying squirrels of Nebraska. This project focuses on studying these squirrels and their habitats while strengthening community bonds by educating and involving locals to engage with wildlife and the outdoors.

In addition, \$5,307 was awarded to UNL's College of Architecture to support the Prairie Dog Blind Trail, providing strategically placed observation sites for Cedar Point Biological Station's students and visitors to learn about these keystone species and their ecological roles.

Birding was a major focus for many projects funded by the Watchable Wildlife Grants this past year.



Installing a flying squirrel box in a community member's yard. PHOTO BY ISABELLA VILLANUEVA



Roadside Pollinator Plot, Platte River State Park.

PHOTO BY TRAVIS WEBB

- The Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center received a \$2,400 grant to develop Accessible Bird Outing Backpacks equipped with essential resources such as monoculars, noise-canceling headphones, binocular mounts, binocular harnesses, winged eyecups, walking/hiking poles, and large print birding and nature field guides. They also offer trail chairs and an off-trail wheelchair.

- Audubon of Kansas also received \$4,776 to enhance Grouse Viewing at Hutton Niobrara Ranch, offering wildlife enthusiasts optimal opportunities to observe the courtship displays of these birds in their natural habitat.

- Additionally, the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation, with a \$599.99 grant, added a Spotting Scope for Trails of Chimney Rock, allowing visitors to easily scan the landscape for wildlife while experiencing the site's historical significance.

Several state parks have benefitted from these grants as well.