

MAFWA 2009 State of the State

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Section 6

NGPC currently has three active traditional Section 6 grants: one to study the life history characteristics and habitat requirements of the American burying beetle; another to develop captive rearing techniques for the highly endangered Salt Creek tiger beetle, which is endemic to two counties in NE; and a third to study the effect of bird diverters to help prevent sandhill and whooping cranes from colliding with power lines. We also received a Section 6 Habitat Conservation Planning grant to develop an HCP for the Salt Creek tiger beetle, this will be the first HCP in NE. Finally, we received a Section 6 Recovery Land Acquisition Grant to purchase habitat along the Platte River for whooping crane, interior least tern, and piping plover.

The NPABC partnership continues to expand as the Steering Committee that directs the organization is now comprised of 23 members representing conservation, tourism, agriculture, landowner, and small business interests.

Current major projects for Nebraska's Partnership for All Bird Conservation(NPABC) include:

- Development of a web-based Nebraska bird curriculum that teachers can use in the classroom and fulfill state education standards
- Development of a Nebraska Bird Conservation Plan that will outline population objectives and an implementation strategy for all priority species
- Coordination of a statewide-effort to develop new cost-share opportunities for landowners of expiring CRP that want to retain CRP as grassland
- Administration of a capacity building grant program that assists local conservation efforts in identification and implementation of strategic conservation approaches

National Fish Habitat Action Plan

Nebraska is actively attempting to form a Reservoir Fisheries Habitat Partnership (RFHP) for the National Fish Habitat Action Plan (NFHAP). The candidate partnership's Steering Committee met May 5-8 at Big Cedar Lodge on Table Rock Lake, Missouri to develop reservoir classification and assessment methodologies, a strategic plan, and an application for partnership to the NFHAP Board (to be submitted on August 14). It will be recommended that the RFHP be governed by an Executive Committee, to include one representative each from the NEAFWA, SEAFWA, MAFWA, and WAFWA and that Northeastern, Southeastern, Midwest, and Western Regional Reservoir Working Groups be formed to prioritize projects for submission to the Executive Committee for NFHAP funding.

State Wildlife Grants

Since the inception of State Wildlife Grants, NGPC has had an external granting program in which approximately half of Nebraska's annual SWG allotment is distributed to outside organizations who are working to implement the Nebraska Natural Legacy Plan (our SWAP). This past year, due to staff turnover and internal needs, we did not have an external granting program. But that program will resume again this year. The primary areas of emphasis for SWG spending this past year were in the following: private lands work to improve land management in Biologically Unique Landscapes identified in the Legacy Plan: staffing to conduct on the ground plan implementation; field research and inventory to identify at-risk species and natural community locations within the BULs.

Outdoor Camps

Nebraska will expand the offering for outdoor camps with the additions of a Becoming an Outdoors-Family program in the eastern Nebraska region to compliment the annual BOW event held in central Nebraska. The two camps will allow us to educate 150 women annually. The Commission has also expanded its Beyond BOW efforts offerings several advanced outdoor skills programs for BOW graduates which include hunting, shooting, fishing, boating and other outdoor skills activities in an effort to bring participants from awareness to adoption stages.

The Commission is expanding its recruitment programs to families with the addition of two new Becoming an Outdoors-Family programs to be held in August and September of 2009. The format will reach over 100 participants providing education in fishing, hunting, shooting sports, boating, camping, and many more outdoor skills. The Commission is scheduled to expand these offerings to five in 2010 in an effort to reach more families.

Hunter/Angler Recruitment, Development and Retention Plan

The Commission is preparing for the July 1 implementation of a \$1,000,000 plan to recruit, develop and retain more hunters and anglers in Nebraska. Developed over several years, the Plan calls for expanded efforts in Education, Marketing, Hunter/Angler Access, Program Evaluation, and Research to reach Goals that will ultimately bring families into these time honored activities. The Action Plans underwent a strategic ranking process and are now being fleshed out for implementation. Plan Objectives include increased participation by youth, adults, lapsed hunters/anglers, further development of current hunters/anglers and maintaining support for hunting and fishing in Nebraska.

Outdoor Youth Skills Camps

In partnership with the Nebraska 4-H Camps the NGPC has been providing the state's youth an opportunity to go beyond Hunter Education and actually experience all the shooting sports (shotgun, rifle, muzzleloading and archery) as well as other outdoor skills (fishing, wildlife, hiking, camping, canoeing, trapping, etc.). These week long camps have become one of the most popular summer offerings for the 4-H camps. In 2008, 200 youth were able to discover their outdoor callings by taking part. In 2009, the fun will be increased as a Shooting Skills Camp - focusing even more closely on the shooting disciplines and hunting - will be offered as a third 4-H Camp.

Nebraska's National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP)

Since beginning in 2004, NASP has continued to grow in Nebraska. During the 2008/2009 school year the curriculum was taught to an estimated 20,000 student in nearly 150 schools across the state. With school-day EXPO's and increased marketing of the program more schools are being exposed to NASP and becoming interested in implementing the curriculum which provides positive impacts beyond the teaching of the life skill of archery to 4th-12th graders. In addition, more schools are looking to initiate after-school archery clubs in association with local enthusiasts and archery pro-shops. In March 2009, over 320 youth archers took part in the Nebraska – Archery in the Schools State Tournament – making it the state's largest indoor youth event. Archers from four schools went on to represent the state in the National – NASP Tournament in Louisville, KY this past May.

Mentored Youth Hunting

The opportunity for Nebraska's youth to take part in a mentored hunting experience has never been better. Partnering with volunteers and wildlife organizations the NGPC is able to offer hunts ranging from shot-gunning for dove to bow hunting for white-tailed deer. These unique opportunities can be one-day to full season mentoring programs and everything in between. In 2008, thanks to Nebraska Pheasants Forever, Nebraska National Wild Turkey Federation, Duck Callers Association of Nebraska, Ducks Unlimited volunteers and Bowhunter and Hunter Education Instructors more than 1,000 Hunter Education Graduates were able to experience the thrill of the hunt in a structured mentor hunt. With more exciting developments taking place for 2009 in mentored youth waterfowl, wild turkey and muzzleloader deer hunting opportunities this area will see even more dramatic increases in success.

Boater Education Program

In 2008 there were 83,280 motorboats registered in Nebraska. This ranked Nebraska 38th in the nation for registered boats. Motorboat registrations continue to increase each year by about 900. There were 28 accidents reported in 2008 (34 in 2007) involving 37 boats (46 boats in 2007), causing 14 persons with personal injuries requiring medical assistance (47 in 2007), and 2 fatalities (7 in 2007). At least one personal watercraft was involved in 7 of the 28 accidents representing 25%. Of the 36 boat operators involved in the 28 accidents only 4 indicated they completed the Nebraska Boating Safety course and 32 advised they have received no formal boating safety education. No persons involved in any of the fatality accidents were found to have completed any formal boating safety education. In both fatalities, the cause of death was drowning, and they probably would have survived if they were wearing their life jackets. Our conclusions are: lifejackets save lives, boating safety course graduates appear to be safer boaters, boating and alcohol is a bad mix, and boat registrations appear to be a consistent trend of boating accidents in the State. On the boater safety education side, we certified 1,202 students compared to 1,360 in 2007.

Human Dimensions Nebraska Update

Duck Hunting Survey: In an effort to understand a potential crowding situation in a particular duck hunting location, a boat ramp survey was designed to measure daily satisfaction rates. The survey results showed a significant correlation of satisfaction with harvest rate and ducks seen, but not with crowding. This would indicate that even if measures were taken to “reduce crowding”, unless harvest potential is increased, satisfaction rates would not likely increase.

Marketing Evaluation Survey: As a follow-up to our fall turkey hunting marketing campaign, an internet survey was conducted to evaluate the campaign messages and methods. We found that direct mail pieces and newspaper ads were the best way to reach our target audience, but that television and newspaper were the most motivating. The survey indicated that 87% of the respondents remembered seeing the campaign messages and 72% took some action as a result of the campaign. The most common reasons cited for not purchasing a fall turkey hunting permit was access to quality hunting lands, not enough time, and family obligations.

Children and Nature Multi-state grant: Nebraska's Lincoln Safari was selected as a demonstration program for the WAWFA multi-state grant. The two objectives we would like to accomplish with this grant is a comparison of the general Lincoln population with the Lincoln Safari participants to see if the participants are an accurate sample of the general population. The second objective is to create a program that will draw a subset of the Lincoln Safari participants into stewardship action (especially under-represented populations).

Outreach Programs

In addition to our original two spring and fall Outdoor Expos covering nearly every aspect of the great outdoor recreation opportunities in our state, two new Expos were added this spring. Both were ‘school only’ events held on weekdays and promoted as ‘outdoor classrooms’. One was held April 22-23 at one of our full service Park locations in the East and hosted over 1,550 students from grades 4-6 who enjoyed a choice of 35 activities. The other was held May 6-7, in the West, and hosted 802 students at a local YMCA camp who enjoyed a choice of 25 activities. One of our regular Expos, now in its third year, had two school days hosting 1,770 students from 98 schools who enjoyed a choice of 44 activities and one public day, with an estimated 8-10,000 attendees, from May 14-16.

Our 40th Annual Cornhusker Trapshoot was another resounding success this year. Held April 29-May 1, 1,750 students competed. A good mix of ages and genders participated.

Since the effectiveness of traditional media channels continues to decline, especially with those under 30 years of age, and an increasing number of local publications downsizing the media itself and/or its staff, we also increased our web communication efforts.

In February, we launched a Facebook page (www.facebook.com and search for “Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to see our group page.) and a Twitter page (<https://twitter.com/NEGameandParks>) followed in April. Our Facebook ‘friends’ now number 170+ and Twitter has crested the 415 mark. While we don’t know if these have been successful in RDR, selling more permits, etc., we do know we are reaching a vital target market through their preferred method.

Through the skills of our new Public Information Manager and upgraded Adobe software, we finally succeeded in developing a major publication as ‘web first, print second’. In essence, we develop it for use on the web and then reconfigure for the printing press, rather than vice versa, which produced a large, inflexible PDF to view, print or download. This new method is much more user friendly and should increase acceptance of web distribution of our Big Game Guide (<http://www.ngpc.state.ne.us/hunting/pdfs/biggame.pdf>), which was entirely revised to improve the overall product. This is part of our continued efforts to reduce printing and postage costs and will be used on other publications going forward. Beneficial features include:

- Along the left hand side are bookmarks to aid users in navigating.
- There are hot links within the document to aid navigation (IE: table of contents)
- The ads link out to the advertisers web sites
- The maps are rotated to be landscape
- This document is fully searchable using Adobe’s find feature

The Public Information team has also been pursuing Outdoor Media visits to Nebraska. Since December, the following have visited our state: Sticks and Stones TV, Cabela's Ultimate Adventures TV, Turkey and Turkey Hunting Magazine, American Hunter Magazine, Outdoor Life Magazine, Sports Afield Magazine, Field and Stream Magazine, Flambeau Outdoors and Hook'd Up TV. The team has also participated in numerous sport shows and retailer events to promote hunting, fishing, camping, et al.

We have developed a revised logo and tag line to improve the effectiveness of our marketing communications. The new logo has a modern look, is designed to communicate the outdoors and now has a tagline – See You Out There – that says it all. We have great opportunities, we’re out participating, and we assume you’ll join us. This is being rolled out in a controlled and cost-effective manner.

Related to this, we are developing a Branding Book that will guide our use of colors, fonts, layout, etc. to develop our brand. We have selected our three official fonts for use on the website, advertising and most printed materials. We are also re-branding our fleet vehicles, in a controlled manner too, to reflect the new logo, typefaces and adding a colorful visual, similar to a ‘vehicle wrap’. So far, we have used a graphic of a Big Horn Sheep, Walleye and Pintails. These are cost-effective means to promote what we do with these ‘rolling billboards’.

Law Enforcement Issues

Budget constraints implemented over the past several years have helped stabilize our Game Fund. However, several priority agency programs (RDR, Marketing, Access) will receive additional funding beginning with the new fiscal year on July 1st which will require continued frugality in other programs. Therefore, we continue to reduce expenses in several ways:

- We lost three Conservation Officer vacant positions in the new biennium budget. The funding from three other vacancies will very likely be required to augment operating funds to insure that we can effectively field remaining officers.
- Conservation Officers have assumed a very active role in the new Open Fields and Waters Program which is aimed at enrolling more hunting and angling lands/waters for public access in support of our hunter/angler Recruitment/Development/Retention (RDR) program.
- COs are also primaries in delivering the RDR action items to the publics statewide. Some traditional duties will no longer be prioritized to insure that the officers have sufficient time to address their RDR responsibilities.
- We have to date issued eight bicycles to officers primarily for use on state park and recreation areas and at public events. They have also been used to good effect in fishing enforcement in the metropolitan areas in some cases teaming bike officers with officers in boats who spot anglers to be checked by the bike officers.
- We have purchased three on/off road motorcycles and are in the process of training the operators and equipping the motorcycles. They will be used in concert with ATVs and the bicycles for patrol of park and recreation areas and at public events such as outdoor expos. They will afford the officers more range for patrol of larger areas. We anticipate substantial fuel savings from their use as well as enhanced public relations, as has also been the case with the use of bicycles.

Major Trends in Law Enforcement

Our involvement in the agency hunter/angler RDR efforts is ever-expanding. Conservation Officers will be a major presence in all of the action items ranging from after school outdoor clubs to family camping workshops. As examples, eighteen COs were assigned to assist at the third annual Kearney Outdoor Expo in May; nine officers assisted at the first Western Nebraska Expo in Scottsbluff; and eight officers assisted with the first Platte River Park East Expo in April. Nebraska Conservation Officers presented or assisted with 2,055 programs to many different constituent groups in 2008.

As previously mentioned, we have issued a number of bicycles to officers – they have been well-received by the public, save fuel, and allow the officers to contact groups that have been traditionally difficult to reach.

As also mentioned, we have purchased three motorcycles for cost savings, enhanced mobility and public relations.

The possible transition to smart phones with tethering to laptops is another transition that would allow much better field voice and data communications than we currently have without duplicating data interfaces.

New Innovations in Law Enforcement

The new State radio communications system project is now finally being implemented with Phase 1 in the far western part of the state scheduled to be activated in September. It is a P25 compliant VHF trunked Motorola system. Some low-load data will also be routed over the radio system with higher volume data being sent over commercial wireless data systems. The new State radio system will provide much more reliable and functional communications for all state public safety agencies and will interface with the other regional communications systems to provide enhanced interoperability statewide.

Our probable transition to smart phones with data tethering to laptops will provide our required high volume data connectivity in support of our participation in the new radio communications system.

The issuing of bicycles and now motorcycles are some new innovations that have, in the case of the bicycles, produced some positive results in savings and public relations. We expect that the motorcycles will also prove to be similarly beneficial.

Wildlife Division Research Projects

Wildlife Research, Analysis, and Inventory Section staff led or were primary partners in a number of research efforts during the past year. We and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) recently finished field work on a project examining greater prairie-chicken productivity in a CRP-dominated landscape in southeast Nebraska, and began a similar study in the Nebraska Sandhills examining grazing effects on prairie chicken habitat use. In the western Sandhills, we are partnering with Iowa State University and UNL in studying long-billed curlew distribution, abundance, and productivity, as well as ascertaining the wintering origin of our breeding curlews with the use of satellite transmitters. Satellite transmitters are also being employed on a small sample of bighorn sheep rams in the Pine Ridge to identify key habitats on private lands.

Other major projects include examining responses of exotic cool-season grasses to patch-burn grazing systems in native tallgrass rangelands, evaluating the survival of pheasant chicks raised in Surrogator™ rearing units, measuring duck hunters' perceptions of crowding and satisfaction at Lewis and Clark Reservoir, and monitoring the movements and habitat preferences of river otters in the central Platte River.

Teaming With Wildlife Program

Nebraska's Teaming with Wildlife Coalition is part of a larger nationwide effort to secure wildlife conservation funding for our at-risk species. Nebraska has the fourth largest coalition with 285 members, but nationwide there are more than 6000 coalition members. Conservation is expensive, and ineffective if action is delayed until a species is listed as threatened or endangered. This coalition advocates for a proactive approach by supporting The Teaming with Wildlife Act, which would provide a reliable and increased amount of funding for preventing wildlife from becoming endangered. The bill would dedicate a portion of existing federal revenue from on-shore and off-shore oil and mineral development activities to the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program.

Real Estate Issues

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is responsible for paying In-Lieu-of-Tax on all parcels of land that were purchased after 1977 with Habitat Funds. The 2008 total was \$514,547.36.

We are currently working with the Nebraska Forest Service on a project that will be funded by a Nebraska Environmental Trust Grant as well as a Federal Legacy Grant. It is the intent to purchase a tract of land in the Pine Ridge. The renovation is complete on Crescent and Blue Lakes in the Garden County and we are working with the Board of Educational Lands and Funds to acquire access, so the lakes can be open to the public for fishing. We are also working with the Saline Wetland Partnership and The Nature Conservancy on a project to protect more acres of critical habitat for the Salt Creek Tiger Beetle.

Environmental Regulation

Project reviews continue in 2009, and by the end of the year that number should be between 275 and 325 (these are misc projects pursuant to NEPA, CWA, FWCA, ESA). Participation in the Platte River

Recovery Program and the Missouri River Recovery Program continued (reviewed multiple Corps of Engineers proposals for emergent sandbar habitat projects and shallow water habitat projects).

Nebraska Wildlife Disease Monitoring Report

Avian Influenza

Avian influenza surveillance started on 8/3/2008 and ran through 12/20/2008.

Species that tested H5 matrix positive were mallard, Northern pintail, American green-winged teal, Northern shoveler and Canada goose. All were low path. The following table lists species sampled.

Species	
American Green-winged Teal	198
American Wigeon	55
Blue-winged Teal	225
Canada Goose	0
Divers	11
Gadwall	27
Light Goose	10
Mallard	209
Northern Pintail	18
Northern Shoveler	29
Wood Duck	14
Weekly Totals	796

Chronic Wasting Disease

Biologists working deer check stations were instructed on the removal of retropharyngeal lymph nodes. A total of 4,998 samples was collected, 4,978 were reported with useable information during the November firearm season in 2008. Samples were screened with the ELISA test and confirmed using IHC. A total of 22 new positives was confirmed. Counties with positive deer included: Banner 1, Box Butte 1, Cherry 2,

Cheyenne 1, Dawes 4, Keith 2, Kimball 1, Red Willow 2, Scotts Bluff 3, Sioux 5. On 10/14/2008 a female white-tailed deer, showing clinical signs, was collected in Dawes County and tested positive. A total of 126 deer was tested through culling or targeted surveillance. The results from this surveillance show no new geographical expansion or increase in prevalence of the disease.

Location of firearm positives



Rabies

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Service's rabies testing program for 2008 reported 40 positive cases that included 22 skunks, 2 horses, 1 fox, 4 cows, 10 bats and 1 cat.

West Nile Virus

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Service's West Nile Virus testing program for 2008 reported 45 clinical positive human individuals with no deaths. They tested 67 dead birds with 17 confirmed positives and 1592 mosquito pools with 81 being positive.

Meningeal Worm

A total of 28 deer (predominately mule deer) were collected in 2008 exhibiting circling behavior, head tossing or were unafraid of humans and submitted to the UNL Veterinary Diagnostic Center for testing. Diagnosis for this behavior was apparently related to the extrapulmonary lungworm parasite *Parelaphostrongylus tenuis*, or meningeal worm.

Bovine Tuberculosis

The Nebraska Department of Agriculture tested elk in a Knox County captive facility for bovine TB in February and March, and received final confirmation in early April that several had tested positive for the disease. The herd is now quarantined so that no animals may leave the facility. The USDA is in negotiation with the owner of the facility to purchase and depopulate the quarantined animals, both elk and fallow deer. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission collected 42 white-tailed deer near the facility in May and submitted the samples to the UNL Veterinary Diagnostics Center for testing. None of the deer samples tested positive for TB. Nebraska is currently experiencing a confirmed, but yet to be determined how extensive, TB outbreak among several cattle herds in Rock County. Nebraska's TB free status for cattle may be adversely affected by this outbreak.

Hair-loss Syndrome

On April 7, 2009 a male mule deer fawn in Box Butte County was reported to be lethargic with drooping ears. It was found dead the next day. Examination showed an emaciated body condition with a louse infestation. Collected lice were submitted to Dr. JW Mertins at the National Veterinary Services

Laboratory for identification. Lice were identified as chewing fallow deer lice (*Bovicola tibialis*). These are one of the 2 species of lice reported in Washington responsible for mule deer population declines.

Apprentice Hunting License

Nebraska recently completed our first year of offering an apprentice hunting license. This permit allows those who have not completed hunter or bow hunter education a chance to try hunting while accompanied by a licensed adult age 19 or older who is at all times in unaided visual and verbal communication with them.

The first fall seasons saw about 1900 people use the Apprentice Hunter Education Exemption Certificate starting on July 18th until December 31, 2008 to give hunting a try before making the commitment to spend the time to complete the courses. Only problems we experienced were getting those wishing to use the exemption certificate navigated through our web page to the only place to obtain this exemption certificate on the permits page.

The biggest group to use it were those age 12, which was a surprise. We had anticipated that the older person 18 through age 29 who had not completed the course but wanted to try hunting would be the best customer. Instead it was the age group age 12 that had to for the first time in their lives to either have completed the course or they could not hunt so instead they obtained the exemption certificate.

New Public Hunting and Fishing Access Program

Beginning in 2009, landowners will have an opportunity to enroll their lands, lakes, ponds, rivers and streams in the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's new Open Fields and Waters Program with the goal of providing public access for hunting and fishing. The Open Fields and Waters Program will allow enrollment of land types not currently allowed in the Conservation Reserve Program-Management Access Program (CRP-MAP) which is the original NGPC wildlife habitat improvement/public access program stated in 1999.

The statewide, two-year pilot program allows landowners to enroll qualifying lands and waters for one or two years. Hunters and anglers will be allowed access to enrolled lands and waters beginning in September 2009.

For the lands portion, the new program is focused on sites that must have a core of mature woodland or quality wetland hunting habitat, which will complement the grassland/upland game focus of the existing CRP-MAP.

The program divides the state into two zones. The program's primary target area, which includes lands near large population centers and along the Platte River, will offer higher rates for public access and will receive more staff emphasis for enrollment. Lands enrolled elsewhere will be offered a reduced rate. The OFW program as seeks to take advantage of Nebraska's expanding white-tailed deer herd and the increasing numbers of wild turkeys, both of which are considered to be gateway species for novice hunters.

Landowners may be paid as much as \$12 per acre for enrolling high quality woodlands or wetlands in the program's target area and allowing hunter access to their land during all hunting seasons. Payments for hunting access range from \$1 - \$12 per acre. The payment to landowners who enroll lakes or ponds in the program for fishing access will be \$250 for bodies of water up to one acre and an additional \$40 per acre for larger waters. Access to streams and rivers bordered by private land will be paid at the rate \$750 per mile for cold water trout streams and rivers, and \$500 per mile for warm water. Other rates will be paid depending on the quality and type of habitat enrolled in the program and the types of hunting permitted on the land.

The Open Fields and Waters Program was developed under the auspices of the Commission's 20 year outdoor recreation Recruitment, Development and Retention (RDR) plan. To date, the Commission has enrolled over 16,000 acres of land, 130 acres of ponds, 12 miles of streams involving 70 some landowners for an annual expenditure of over \$130,000.