

**NEBRASKA**  
**MAFWA - STATE REPORT**  
*June 8, 2021*

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**MAINTAINING THE PUBLIC TRUST** - Public outreach and partnerships have helped the Commission create and maintain the trust of Nebraskans. A multi-state survey completed in 2019 called Wildlife Values in the West looked at the values, attitudes and beliefs of residents across the nation and in Nebraska, in relation to fish and wildlife management. Information from this survey can help the Commission understand the public's interest in fish and wildlife and its perspectives on management of natural resources. The study found that 69% of Nebraskans expressed trust in the Commission to do what is right for the state's fish and wildlife.

**NAVIGATING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC** - The agency took actions to limit activities and operations of facilities where social distancing could and would be an issue, with safety of our staff and the public as our number one priority. While there has been a disruption of normal routines, the agency has maintained essential functions and served the public. Activities were phased back in to operation following the Directed Health Measures issued at the state or local levels, and operations are back to more normal (eg. the new normal) across the entire state. Safety of our staff and the public has been and will continue to be our number one priority. Many of our educational programs, R3 and skills-based programs, and naturalist programs were converted to virtual programming. We see that the virtual programming options allow great reach across the state for schools, families, adults, and children and provides new tools that we will continue to use into the future. Hunting and fishing activities have been popular and largely unhindered summer through fall.

**EDUCATION EVENTS GET CREATIVE ONLINE** - Nebraska Game and Parks educators took initiative during the pandemic to develop virtual programming for outdoor enthusiasts of all ages and interests. Programming ranged from wildlife identification to skills development to educator workshops. We created science-based online videos designed to teach students about natural resources, ecological topics and Nebraska's native species. Each video in the series takes students on a journey of discovery and exploration. All videos are tied to Nebraska state education standards, as were our virtual continuing education workshops for educators that covered Project WILD, Trout in the Classroom, and Growing up WILD. By using a virtual format, teachers from across the state - some who had never utilized agency education programs - were able to connect their students with natural resource experiences and high-quality education. As we go back to more "in-person" education events, we clearly see the need to continue to offer virtual programming to reach a larger audience.

**HUNTER EDUCATION GOES ONLINE** - The Commission also in 2020 waived the in-person classroom requirement for new hunters to obtain a hunters' education certificate, by allowing students to complete the class online.

**LANDOWNER OPINIONS ON BIG GAME AND DEPREDATION-** In Nebraska, working with private landowners that provide wildlife habitat and hunter access is important, especially for big game, along with understanding/responding to landowners wildlife issues and challenges.

The agency periodically surveys landowners. In 2020, we worked with the University of Nebraska to send more than 7,500 surveys to landowners about deer (4,500), antelope (1,500), and elk (1,500). Results have been posted on [outdoornebraska.gov/landownerprograms](https://outdoornebraska.gov/landownerprograms). Additionally, Commission staff met with landowners in seven areas that have had depredation issues to get input and opinions on moving forward with elk management in the state.

Landowner information about elk, deer and antelope were used by the agency to get legislation proposed and passed to 1) create nimble special depredation seasons for antelope, deer and elk; 2) increasing antelope and elk permits available to landowners; and 3) create a new program allowing landowners to earn a free either-sex elk permit for successful harvest of multiple (eg. 10) cow/calf elk on their property.

To add capacity for responding to depredation complaints, the Commission created and hired three new positions for a Depredation Program Manager and two Depredation Biologists stationed in western Nebraska. The agency has continued with outreach to landowners via press releases, broadcast announcements, letters and phone calls to remind them of the many resources available to address depredation issues.

**HIDDEN HILLS OUTFITTERS POACHING CASE - 2020** saw the near conclusion of a poaching case involving Hidden Hills Outfitters that uncovered the most egregious abuse of natural resources in Nebraska's history. An intensive, multiyear investigation led to the prosecution of more than 32 people involved in the illegal take of our state's wildlife. Public outcry has expressed support for our efforts and the court that has levied more than \$570,453 in fines and restitution, more than 53 years of hunting and fishing permits being forfeited and 30 months in jail time. This case is not an isolated incident, as we continue to investigate several similar abuses of our natural resources.

**RIFLE DEER SEASON SHIFTS TO ALL TELECHECK FOR FIRST TIME -** Because of the coronavirus pandemic, Game and Parks waived the mandatory in-person deer check for firearm season in fall 2020. Hunters instead were required to check their deer online or via a toll-free telephone number. This was a first for the nine-day firearm season - though muzzleloader, archery, and late-season antlerless deer hunters have used Telecheck for the previous 10 years.

In-person check stations will resume in 2021. In-person checks allow us to collect more accurate harvest data, as well as age and disease data that can only be collected by physically examining a deer. In-person check stations also provide the most and best opportunities for biologists and hunters to have conversations that may not otherwise happen. Hunters noted their traditional visit to the check station was one thing they missed this year.

**NEBRASKA OUTDOOR RADIO REFRESHES AND EXPANDS -** Stretching statewide Nebraska Outdoor Radio has expanded its mission-oriented messaging to the public from weekly 15- and 60-minute radio programs, to on-demand podcast downloads and topical, local Outdoor Tips of the Week. The program is produced in partnership with Alpha Media, hosted by Communication staff, with relevant content delivered by agency experts from all districts and divisions...Nebraska Outdoor Radio builds on the rich-tradition of the past while mixing in new means of reaching our constituents.

**NEW CONSERVATION LICENSE PLATES** -Nebraskans now have a new way to support wildlife and Nebraska's state parks trails. Beginning January 2021, three new Wildlife Conservation plates – featuring a bighorn sheep, a sandhill crane and an ornate box turtle - became available at the Department of Motor Vehicles. In addition to bringing attention and support for the Commission's wildlife conservation mission, the agency receives \$5 from registrations for each regular plate and \$30 from each specialty plate in the Wildlife Conservation Fund. As of April 1, the Bighorn Sheep plate was the most popular (916 plates), followed by the Ornate Box Turtle (724) and Sandhill Crane (676) plates.

**LEARN TO HUNT SERIES** - Nebraska Game and Parks helps hunters learn the skills they need to be safe and successful in the field. The new Learn to Hunt Series education program focuses on key needs of the novice or beginning hunter in various areas of pursuit, including deer, turkey, waterfowl, small game and predators. Through a series of how-to videos and online workshops, novice hunters find answers to many of their questions, learn new skills and better understand the game animals they are hunting. This series has three main components:

- How-to video series – Short videos teaching basic to advanced knowledge and skills
- Hunter FAQs – Short videos answering many of the more common questions hunters have in the field
- Hunting Happy Hour – Online interactive Learn to Hunt programs for most of our popular game species in Nebraska

**SHE GOES OUTDOORS** - In its first year, She Goes Outdoors reached adult women through podcasts and outdoor education subscription boxes to help them find the equipment and skills they need to enjoy the outdoors. The boxes are in partnership with the Iowa Fish and Game Department and provide women with outdoor equipment linked to online education programs teaching them how to use the equipment and outdoor skills. The podcast is an outreach effort targeting busy moms with a series of fun and educational outdoor recordings. Topics included hunting and fishing, to birding, with interviews of experts from agency and partner groups.

**RIVER OTTER IS A COMEBACK STORY** - The Commission de-listed the North American river otter from the state's Threatened list in 2020. In 1986, otters were listed as Endangered in Nebraska under the Nebraska Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Act. Soon after, biologists began translocating otters from other states and reintroducing them at seven Nebraska locations over six years. By 2000, substantial recovery progress resulted in a down-listing from Endangered to Threatened. With otters now secure in Nebraska, that completed a comeback for a species that historically resided in Nebraska's waters. A River Otter Management Plan has been developed and regulations are proposed for a managed river otter harvest with trapping in 2021.

**OFFICERS SEARCH AND RESCUE** - Search, rescue and recovery operations were conducted day and night, weekends and holidays, on everything from missing persons to searching for evidence in a 20-year-old cold case. Our response to accident investigations involving lost or missing persons consumed more than 762 man hours and more than 8,000 miles during 2020. Highly trained conservation officers used underwater sonar equipment. This tool and associated skills proved to be a valuable resource for other law enforcement agencies in the recovery of evidence for various crimes.

**SOMETHING NEW FOR DUCK HUNTERS: TWO-TIER SYSTEM** - Nebraska duck hunters will have a choice to make before the 2021 season – a six-duck daily limit or a three-duck limit. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife approved the two-tier Harvest Information Program system in October 2020. The two-tier HIP system allows a duck hunter to choose between:

Tier 1 – traditional six-duck daily bag limit with species and sex restrictions, or

Tier 2 – three-duck daily bag limit with no species and sex restrictions

Hunters will select their tier – and bag limit – when they complete their HIP registration at the start of each new hunting season.

The number of waterfowl hunters has declined significantly in the past 10 years. The goal is to see if the two-tier system can encourage new waterfowl hunters. The two-tier system will be in place in Nebraska and South Dakota during the duck seasons from 2021 through 2025, and will include evaluation regarding recruitment and other potential impacts.

#### **RECORD 1.2 MILLION ACRES ACCESSIBLE TO PUBLIC FOR HUNTING AND FISHING**

- Nebraska currently supports more than 1.2 million acres of public-accessible lands, which includes state, federal and conservation partner lands, as well as private lands enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters program. Nebraska is more than 97% privately-owned and increasing access to private lands continues to be one of the agency's primary objectives. Open Fields and Waters provides financial incentives to private landowners willing to allow public, walk-in access for hunting, trapping and/or fishing. The program has grown substantially over the past several years, with a net gain of nearly 140,000 acres since 2016. We enrolled more than 373,000 acres statewide for the 2020-21 hunting season – an all-time high.

**NEBRASKA UPLAND SLAM MAKING IMPACT** -The Nebraska Upland Slam, initiated in 2018 by Game and Parks and Pheasants/Quail Forever, is now in its third season challenging hunters to harvest a sharp-tailed grouse, greater prairie-chicken, ring-necked pheasant and northern bobwhite quail. During the 2020-2021 upland bird seasons, 314 hunters from 17 states participated with 144 completing the slam. The 144 finishers by state include NE-124, AL-1, CO-9, IA-1, KS-1, MI-1, MO-1, NY-1, OH-1, OK-1, SD-1, WI-1, WY-1. Nearly 60% of harvests were on public land. The Upland Slam was developed to improve upland hunter recruitment/retention/reactivation and increase awareness of Nebraska's mixed-bag opportunities, and is generating new excitement and exposure for our great upland hunting.

**DUCK SLAM RENEWING EXCITEMENT IN WATERFOWL HUNTING** - People from across the state and the country are participating in the second year of the Nebraska Duck Slam, for a chance at completing the slam and winning prizes. The Slam challenges hunters to harvest four ducks during the season: a teal (blue-winged or green-winged) of either sex and drakes of: an American wigeon, a mallard, and a northern pintail. The Slam, in partnership with Ducks Unlimited, has renewed a sense of excitement in the waterfowl world. In the 2020-2021 seasons, 316 hunters participated from 13 states - and 127 hunters completed the duck slam from 6 states (NE-117, CO-1, IA-3, IL-2, MN-2, SD-1, WI-1). Many hunters who harvested a species for the first time mentioned how this program got them to target other waterfowl species. Nearly half of the hunting/harvest of waterfowl is taking place on public lands. The number of first-time hunters, youth and re-activated hunters has made this program successful in Nebraska.

**SPECIAL YOUTH HUNTS PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES** - For the 10th consecutive year, pheasants were released on select wildlife management areas prior to the youth pheasant season in October, enhancing harvest opportunities for youth and other novice hunters. Over 9,000 rooster pheasants were purchased and stocked on 19 publicly-accessible areas (at a targeted density of 0.5 birds per acre). Special Youth Hunts were held at the 19 areas, in which one adult accompanying a youth hunter was allowed to hunt pheasants and bag one rooster. We surveyed 330 hunting parties during the weekend, consisting of 444 adult mentors and 500 youth hunters. Hunters harvested 820 released and 31 wild roosters during the Special Youth Hunts and success averaged 0.90 roosters per hunter, similar to recent years. More than 97% of participating youth indicated they would participate again and more than 96% intended to hunt the regular season.

**PETERSON WMA ADDITION MAKES FAMILY'S WISHES COME TRUE** - A consortium of partners, including the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, National Wild Turkey Federation, Wild Sheep Foundation, and Bass Pro shops worked with Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to make the wishes of a Sioux County landowner come true. The McDowell family wanted its 1,520-acre ranch, which sits adjacent to the Peterson Wildlife Management Area, to belong to Game and Parks so it can be enjoyed by the public and used for hunting and recreation for generations to come. The property is in the Pine Ridge and includes pine savannahs, timber, grasslands, a cool water seep, and rock outcroppings. It is home to turkeys, mule deer, elk and bighorn sheep. It is part of high-priority landscape (Pine Ridge), provides unique recreational opportunities (back-country hunting), and holds critical lambing habitat for the Fort Robinson bighorn sheep herd.

**TAKE 'EM HUNTING – RECRUITING NEW HUNTERS-** Game and Parks held the second Take 'em Hunting Challenge – asking hunters to pledge and then take along a new or beginning hunter in the field Sept 1, 2020 – May 31, 2021. Participants share a photo of their adventure for a chance to win prizes. Take 'em hunting concluded May 31 with more than 1,390 entries – successfully creating new hunters in Nebraska. Promotional and prize partners included AKRS Equipment, Pheasants/Quail Forever, Ducks Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation and SCHEELS. In total, 2,916 entries were submitted from 2,175 people in the challenge. Game and Parks created a series of videos, encouraging hunters to take someone hunting and shared them on social media. Prizes were awarded weekly. The winner of the grand prize, a John Deer UTV, was just drawn the first week of June.

**SEEING THE GRASSLAND THROUGH THE TREES** - In recent years, Game and Parks has been shifting more focus to protection of our abundant and beautiful grasslands. They are disappearing through conversion to agriculture and are being invaded by eastern redcedar and other trees. In 2020, staff affected more than 53,000 acres of native grasslands across the state through tree removal (40,000 acres) and prescribed fire (13,000 acres) by providing incentive payments to landowners; this improved habitat for greater prairie-chickens, sharp-tailed grouse, mule deer and many other grassland species. Game and Parks and its many partners are working with researchers and University of Nebraska-Lincoln students to study the invasion of cedars and are collectively working toward a statewide cedar management plan. This plan will increase our efficiency and effectiveness in cedar management efforts.

**ENGAGING NEW ANGLERS** - Nebraskans spent a lot of time fishing in 2020 – and many of them were new anglers. With more than 35,000 new and reactivated anglers in 2020, Game and Parks developed a plan to provide information to help people on their journey for a successful fishing trip — helping to ensure retention. More than 15 fishing-related articles were distributed to news outlets, through blogs, radio, social media and through email engaging new and current anglers. Each article directs readers to our How to Fish page and Going Fishing Guide on our website. Topics included 1) Importance of tying good knots; 2) Simple setup to get started fishing; 3) How to plan a successful trip; 4) Handling fish; 5) Rods, reels and line; 6) Hooks, bobbers and weights; 7) Bait; and 8) Where to fish. Later articles covered late-summer white bass and wiper fishing and fall stocked trout fishing. Looking forward to 2021, we are producing fishing trip planners to provide ideas of new places to go, lists of different species people can catch, and a challenge for beginners to catch and identify a variety of common sportfish.

**STREAMS PLAY HIGHER ROLE IN HABITAT RESTORATION** - Long Pine Creek is one of our most pristine cold-water streams, and its habitat and public access were improved at Pine Glen Wildlife Management Area. Eastern red cedar trees were removed along the valley floor and boulder structures placed in the stream, enhancing the critical aquatic and riparian habitats.

The restoration of Dry Spotted Tail Creek was completed, adding more than three quarters of a mile of new trout stream habitat and creating several acres of new wetlands along the North Platte River valley. This project was the result of a partnership with Platte River Basin Environments, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever to restore this rare floodplain habitat and cold water stream.

**TAKE 'EM FISHING IS BIG SUCCESS IN SECOND YEAR** - Game and Parks marked the success of its second year of Take 'em Fishing, a program in which we challenged anglers to share their passions and introduce someone to fishing. When mentors take someone fishing and share a photo they can win great prizes. Many great memories were created and thousands of people were introduced to fishing. In 2020, we had more than 6,000 entries surpassing 2019's numbers by more than 1,500 entries. Entries came from around 3,614 individuals, most of whom were new to the program. The grand prize boat donated by the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation and Bass Pro Shops/ Cabela's was awarded to the Liebhart family from Columbus. The program continues in 2021 as we help create our next generation of anglers.

**FRESHWATER MUSSEL PROJECT** - Since 2014, when our efforts began to augment and/or restore native freshwater mussels back into streams where they historically were found, we have released 26,542 plain pocketbook and 16,137 fatmucket mussels. They have been marked and released into 17 streams across the state over the past five years. More than 7,500 have a Passive Integrated Transponder tag glued to the outside of the shell. The tag identifies the individual mussels and allows the biologists to determine growth, mortality and movement from the original release location.