

Nebraska 2021 State Report May 23, 2022

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For Nebraska Game and Parks, 2021 was a year for celebration and a year of change. Our park system celebrated its 100th birthday with our theme — Your Memories. Your Adventures. Your Parks. — in action at each of our 76 parks. Our parks were full of life and laughter, with campers, hikers, anglers, wildlife watchers, boaters and more sharing in Nebraska's great outdoor spaces. We celebrated visitation numbers at an all-time high.

We also were excited to see record participation in some of our major management programs, such as the Open Fields and Waters public access program, and public information sessions on our big game and fishing management across the state.

Each of these are the result of the complex work we are tasked with. In each region of the state, the needs of the wildlife, plants and people are diverse. Striking a balance requires



collaboration, and in 2021, we met with hunters and anglers, landowners, farmers, ranchers and urban residents, who all value the long-term conservation of our natural resources.

Throughout the year, we maintained our focus on providing and creating opportunities. We partnered with many organizations to introduce people to outdoor recreation for the first time. Stocked millions of fish across the state. Added accessible fishing piers. Launched a pilot program to attract novice duck hunters to the sport. And coordinated hundreds of learning events including archery, kayaking, ice fishing, wildlife identification and more.

It is an honor and privilege to lead this agency because of the quality work we accomplish, thanks to our passionate, professional staff and partners.

By the numbers

We manage wildlife habitat and provides public access for hunting, fishing and trapping on 281 Wildlife Management Areas encompassing 184,340 acres. We also provided public access to 374,000 acres of private lands enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters program, offering walk-in access for hunting, fishing and trapping.

Nebraska's state park system is made up of 78 areas encompassing 105,366 acres. The state park system includes 8 State Parks, 58 State Recreation Areas, 10 State Historical Parks, and 2 State Recreation Trails (324 miles).

Economic impact

Outdoor recreation contributes greatly to our quality of life. In Nebraska, hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and state park visitation supports more than 24,000 jobs and has an economic impact of more than \$2.64 billion annually.

Highlight of Nebraska 2021: Your Nebraska Parks centennial

Nebraska's state park system celebrated its centennial in 2021. The yearlong celebration included more than 100 events hosted at parks statewide, but three signature events celebrated the state's first parks of each kind. The Chadron State Park Centennial Birthday Bash in June celebrated Chadron becoming the first state park in 1921. Events in July at Victoria Springs State Recreation Area and October at Arbor Lodge State Historical Park celebrated the state's first recreation area and first state historical park. We also challenged the public to explore state parks in honor of the centennial through the Your Parks Adventure program.



Getting more people outdoors

Game and Parks encourages people to get outdoors — and knows connecting people to resources is important to growing participation in outdoor recreation. We offer interactive educational events year-round online and in person at our parks and at our education centers across the state. Hundreds of people come to our free community fishing nights, where volunteer instructors introduce them to fishing or advanced fishing techniques. Youth can learn safety and techniques with trained hunting mentors, special programs are offered just for women, and we also draw hundreds of participants to our nature learning series.

The Commission provides skills-based training for those ready to learn more, including hunting and fishing workshops, guided hikes and shooting sports activities. Multimedia efforts, such as videos and podcasts, are helping provide outdoor knowledge and skills.

For those who are more experienced in the outdoors — we have special challenges. The Take 'em Hunting and Take 'em Fishing programs encourage hunters and anglers to introduce a beginner for the chance to win prizes, and to date, has created more than 10,000 hunting and fishing experiences.

A safe return to outdoor events

After a gap year due to the global pandemic, we planned a safe return to some favorite in-

person events. The Missouri River Outdoor Expo at Ponca State Park welcomed several thousand guests trying more than 80 hands-on activities. The discovery program for students included activities designed to engage youth in fish, wildlife, natural history and outdoor skills education. Our exhibit at the Nebraska State Fair included a 6,000-gallon aquarium, an Old West shooting range and a diorama of the Niobrara River Valley and waterfall.

Public input key to future planning

Understanding the needs of our customers, partners, landowners and all Nebraskans is an integral part of our mission. We engaged the public across the state in-person and virtually in 2021 on key issues, such as fish and wildlife management and park improvements. In March, virtual public informational sessions provided local updates on the fishing outlook and special projects. The interactive gatherings provided a chance for questions, dialogue and feedback.

Special meetings also were held to seek input on big game management across the state, a new plan for the management of elk populations, and our planning efforts to improve pheasant habitat. To better understand our users and their needs, we also launched surveys of our park users and for education preferences for underserved communities.

We also gained public feedback through our Board of Commissioners, which generally hosts public information meetings and public business meetings six times a year.

Working toward diversity, equity and inclusion

Just as diversity is critical to our native ecosystems, Nebraska Game and Parks knows diversity is critical to our mission and success. We are committed to fostering a diverse workforce and creating an environment that is welcoming and inclusive for our staff and constituents. In late 2020, Game and Parks established a diversity, equity and inclusion workgroup. The group has developed initiatives to guide our efforts, an external advisory group of community organizations, and diversity, equity and inclusion development for staff.

Public safety comes first

In addition to enforcing parks, wildlife and boating rules, Game and Parks conservation officers act as state peace officers, wearing many “hats” to address a variety of violations. These can include drugs, thefts, trespassing and assaults. Our officers also provide critical emergency response, such as to floods, fires or missing persons, and investigate major crimes. Officers’ duties are quite diverse; however, public safety always remains their top priority.

Women’s outreach program celebrates 30 years

The Becoming an Outdoors-Woman program turned 30 in 2021, graduating more than 30,000 women since its inception in 1991. The program empowers women just beginning their outdoor journey by offering opportunities to explore outdoors activities in a no-pressure environment. Attendees learn about outdoor cooking, kayaking, wildlife, shooting, hunting and more during three-day workshops at Ponca and Fort Robinson state parks.

Park improvements focus on guest experience

In 2021, more than \$8 million was spent on dozens of improvement projects at more than 40 parks across the state. Among the improvements, Chadron saw the installation of a 3,000-square-foot indoor archery and pellet gun range, fishery improvements and camping upgrades. Fort Robinson received cabin updates in addition to \$2.8 million in pond renovations and

fishing access improvements, and Lake McConaughy's campgrounds saw electrical and other upgrades to create more opportunities for full-service camping.

New tools for big game management

Bills passed during the 2021 Nebraska Legislative session provided three new big game management tools. The first expanded special depredation seasons and season extensions to include elk and antelope, helping Game and Parks address depredation issues.

The second allows for a higher percentage of elk and antelope permits to go to landowners, without reducing the permits available to general hunters. This allows landowners to be part of the solution to a problem they disproportionately face.

The third created a new incentive for landowners who allow hunters to harvest antlerless elk on their property. After landowners have recorded 10 antlerless harvests on their property by general elk permit hunters, the landowner is eligible for a free elk tag limited to their property.

New plan for managing elk

After receiving input from landowners, hunters and the public, the Commission approved a plan for managing elk at acceptable population levels. The plan objectives are to:

- Establish population and demographic objectives in each of the eight management units
- Minimize depredation issues
- Continue to provide disease surveillance and monitoring
- Annually report on the status of elk populations using harvest data and survey information.
- Continue to work with the Department of Agriculture and Captive Cervid Industry.
- Continue to engage stakeholders with elk management in the state.

Commission enacts special landowner deer season

We adopted a Special Landowner Deer Season in January, created by the passage of Legislative Bill 126 in the Legislature. The season allowed a qualifying landowner up to four permits to designate themselves or immediate family to hunt on his or her property on the Saturday, Sunday and Monday before the opening of the November firearm deer season. The Nov. 6-8 season saw the harvest of 898 deer, including 178 mule deer bucks and 597 whitetail bucks.

River otter recovery

The recovery of the river otter is a prime example of conservation success in Nebraska.



River otters were once extirpated from Nebraska, but from 1986 to 1991, 159 otters were reintroduced into the state's waters. River otters now can be found nearly statewide, and they were delisted from the state threatened list in 2020. In June, the Commission approved Nebraska's first river otter harvest season. The season began on November 1st, 2021 and closed on January 10th, 2022 with 78 total otters harvested. The season provided those with a fur harvest permit an opportunity to trap one otter for the season. Game and Parks' goal is to manage and maintain healthy, thriving populations for the long term.

Project provides choices for duck hunters

The Commission in March approved a new five-year pilot project to offer two bag limit options to duck hunters. The options were designed to make getting into hunting easier for novice duck hunters and were based on a survey that indicated duck identification skills were a factor preventing potential hunters from joining the sport. Launched during the 2021-22 season, the bag limit options, or tiers, offered hunters the choice of the current traditional six-duck limit with species and sex restrictions or a three-duck limit with no species or sex restrictions. A total of 3,223 people signed up for the new program, out of about 29,300 duck hunters. A survey was sent to participants to find their motivations and satisfaction with the season, results are being analyzed. Nebraska was joined by South Dakota for the experimental program.

Open Fields and Water has record participation and enrollment

In 2021, more than 850 private landowners were enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters program, providing walk-in access on 374,000 acres during hunting seasons — both all-time highs for the program. OFW also provided fishing opportunities on more than 500 acres of ponds and lakes and more than 45 stream miles. A three-year grant awarded in 2020 from the USDA provides funding for the expansion of this popular program.

Game and Parks partners for study on antelope movement, survival

The University of Nebraska and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission are partnering for the first antelope research in the state in more than 30 years with the goal of understanding antelope movements, habitat use and survival rates. In February, researchers from both entities, with assistance from a helicopter capture crew, captured and GPS-collared 80 adult antelope in western Nebraska. GPS data showed the antelope around the Sandhills are very mobile, with several covering 70 miles or more. This project will collect another year of data.

Nearly 48 million fish stocked to create great fishing opportunities

After years that included the 2019 flood and the COVID-19 pandemic, Game and Parks began ramping up fish production in 2021, getting back to “normal.” Approximately 47.7 million fish were stocked into 299 waters in 74 counties. Spring and fall trout stockings continued to be popular with anglers of all ages. More than 273,000 trout were stocked during the year. In support of the Parks Centennial celebration, we also stocked a variety of harvestable-sized fish in state parks and other areas — hot spots for fishing during a big park attendance year.

Combating aquatic invasive species

Halting the spread of highly destructive aquatic invasive species was a key focus in 2021. In March, Game and Parks discovered Marimoor “moss” balls used in aquarium tanks often contained zebra mussels, so we urged stores to remove the product and advised the public on how to properly rid their tanks of the invasive species. We increased our watercraft inspections, as well, setting a new record. In addition, we annually sample dozens of lakes for signs of aquatic invasive species, and we urge Nebraskans to “Clean, Drain, Dry” to help in our efforts.

Aquatic Habitat Program Success

Game and Parks' Aquatic Habitat Program was recognized in 2021 with the American Fisheries Society Conservation Achievement Award. The award recognizes significant actions, programs or initiatives of individuals or organizations that contribute substantially to fishery conservation or fishery science. The Aquatic Habitat Program, celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2022, was recognized for its unique and "first of its kind" vision.

License plates boost conservation dollars

In January 2021, Game and Parks created three new specialty license plates available at the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles. Dollars from the sale of these plates, support conservation of Nebraska's at-risk, threatened and endangered species. The plate designs, featuring a bighorn sheep, sandhill crane and ornate box turtle, were a hit, generating nearly \$70,000 for the Wildlife Conservation Fund. More than 1,950 mountain lion conservation plates were also sold, generating more than \$9,500 in funding for wildlife education programs.



Cool-water stream projects underway in Pine Ridge

Cool-water stream projects are underway on Big Bordeaux Creek and Sowbelly Creek in the Pine Ridge in northwest Nebraska. Efforts at Big Bordeaux Creek aim to improve floodplain connectivity, repair bank erosion, and enhance habitat structures for aquatic species. At Sowbelly Creek, the project aims to enhance stream habitat structures for trout and native fish while creating angler access areas. These projects are supported through the Aquatic Habitat Program and Nebraska Environmental Trust grants.

Conserving at-risk species and their habitat

The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project enjoyed a successful year focused on improving habitat and monitoring for at-risk species. Game and Parks worked with partners and landowners to find win-win solutions for at-risk species and landowners. This year, joint efforts included prescribed fire to control invasive plants, rare butterfly surveys, and freshwater mussel propagation (right). An annual conference facilitates education and outreach about these efforts, including about wetland ecology, avian research, insects and other topics.