

Nebraska State Report May 31, 2023

Tim McCoy, Director
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
PO Box 370
Lincoln, NE 68503

Commission updates R3 Plan to engage outdoor recreationists- The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission approved a five-year plan to recruit, retain and reactivate outdoor enthusiasts in 2022. This 2023-2027 Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation Plan provides goals, objectives and strategies to help Game and Parks engage participants in outdoor opportunities and maintain widespread support for conservation and recreation. The plan built on prior efforts in hunting and fishing, but expanded to include boating, parks and shooting sports for the first time — positioning Nebraska as one of the first states to do so.

Special elk depredation season a success - Eight elk were harvested during Nebraska's first special elk depredation season in July 2022. Five bulls and three cows were taken during the season on private land in parts of Lincoln, Perkins, Keith, Deuel and Garden counties. Game and Parks considered the season a success as it achieved its intended goals. This one-month season was designed to allow for as many potential hunters as possible in the geographic area - roughly 873 square miles. The season attracted 178 hunters (152 residents and 26 nonresidents) who purchased 208 permits, usable once they gained landowner access to private property. Game and Parks has worked with landowners in this area for several years to lower elk herds to reduce damage to the cropland, including trampling, wallowing and consumption of crops. Historically, five or six elk are harvested in the this geographic area by hunters during fall/winter elk seasons.

Nebraska Aquatic Habitat Program turns 25 - Two great feats were celebrated by NGPC at Conestoga State Recreation Area— the 25th anniversary of the Aquatic Habitat Program and the largest project ever completed in the program. Since its inception in 1997, the Nebraska Aquatic Habitat Program has generated more than \$90 million for improvements to 137 water bodies. The program works to enhance aquatic ecosystems by implementing restoration techniques in-lake and in the watersheds that feed them. In addition to improving aquatic habitat and water quality, the program also improves boat and bank angler access. Funding is provided by anglers through the Aquatic Habitat Stamp, which is included in the price of a fishing license. Nebraska was the first state in the nation to require such a stamp, making projects that bring new life to aging waters possible. This and 9 other projects across the state were completed in 2022 using Aquatic Habitat Program, Sportfish Restoration and Nebraska Environmental Trust funds.

Game and Parks fights wildfires - Drought conditions across the state made Nebraska susceptible to wildfires in 2022 and 2023. Over the course of the last year, NGPC staff assisted with the containment and extinguishing of wildfires as they popped up both in the west and the east. Our field staff worked with volunteer fire departments, local landowners, emergency management and federal firefighters on various fires to protect life, property and habitat. 2022 was the second worst wildfire season on record in Nebraska, and the Commission is grateful to all volunteers, agencies, landowners and everyone who worked together to combat wildfires.

Low-water creates opportunity to improve boat launch access - Nebraska Game and Parks maintains 185 boat launch facilities in our park and wildlife management areas. Because of the drought and lowering water levels, staff worked to extend boat ramps where possible in 2022. In some cases, the low water level revealed damage to ramps that was repaired. Funding for new projects and repairs is made possible through the Aquatic Habitat Program, Capital Maintenance Funds and Sportfish Restoration Motorboat Access Funds.

Wetlands planning and pumping benefits wildlife - With drought across much the state in late summer and fall, NGPC pumped water into 25 wetland areas across the state for the benefit of wildlife, wildlife watchers and hunters. The ability to deliver water into these wetlands takes planning, funding and collaboration, including to secure land, restore and manage wetlands, and provide pumping infrastructure. Over the past 15 years, wetland restoration projects have been completed on more than 22 wildlife management areas, and we have added pumps, wells or water pipelines to 21 wildlife and park areas. Additional projects are being planned. Evidence of success from these efforts was seen in October when a pair of endangered whooping cranes spent 26 days at the Kissinger Wildlife Management Area in Clay County. This was a record-long fall stopover in Nebraska involving adult whooping cranes. The length of their stay suggests the habitat at Kissinger WMA was favorable. The area has undergone extensive restoration and habitat management for migratory birds, wildlife, hunters and wildlife viewers.

River otter seasons successful - The recovery of river otters is a prime example of conservation success in Nebraska. Once extirpated from the state, caused by over-harvest and habitat loss, NGPC reintroduced river otters from 1986 to 1991. River otters now can be found nearly statewide with populations in most major river systems. Game and Parks' goal is to manage and maintain healthy, thriving populations for the long term. A total of 78 river otters were harvested by trapping during Nebraska's first regulated season. In the 22/23 season, 53 otters were harvested with a season harvest limit of 125. For 2023, plans are to remove the season harvest limit while maintaining the 1 harvest per person per season and eliminating the requirement for trappers to check-in daily that the season remains open on our website or the 1-800#. Mandatory checking and CITES tagging will remain required.

Mountain lion research update - While NGPC has known mountain lions can travel hundreds of miles and to any portion of Nebraska for decades, our research program didn't know just how far they move across the landscape. That changed in 2022 with the dispersal of one male mountain lion on the search for a mate or a home range of his own. In July, a video showed a GPS-collared mountain lion at the western edge of Lincoln; that lion had been trapped and collared in the Niobrara River Valley near Valentine in 2021. This lion kept moving, first to Iowa and then to Illinois, providing data regarding its movement and use of habitat the entire way. It made it as far as Springfield, where Illinois wildlife officials immobilized it and moved it to a big cat sanctuary in Indiana. This was one of the furthest documented dispersals for a GPS-collared mountain lion. Staff continue to collar mountain lions to continue learning about their dispersal and movements.

Ornate Box Turtle named state reptile -Until 2022, Nebraska did not have a state reptile. In October during Nebraska Reptile Month, then-Gov. Pete Ricketts proclaimed the Ornate Box Turtle as the State Reptile. The box turtle is the state's only land turtle and is found in short, mixed and tallgrass prairies; the turtle is most commonly found in the Sandhills.

Conservation officers protect and serve- Nebraska Game and Parks conservation officers play an important part in protecting our state's fish and wildlife for the future. In addition to enforcing parks, wildlife and boating rules, conservation officers travel to every inch of the state to keep us safe, as well. Our officers provide critical emergency response, such as to fires, floods, crisis situations or missing persons cases, and investigate major crimes. They also frequently support other enforcement agencies, particularly in rural areas where assistance can be limited.

In 2022, our team of conservation officers had nearly 250,000 contacts with Nebraskans and visitors to the state. This included more than 44,000 angler checks; nearly 70,650 parks responses; 20,600 boater checks; 23,000 hunter checks; and more than 150 search and rescue missions. Officers also assisted with nearly 2,000 outdoors programs. We also hired seven new conservation officers to help fill the ever-increasing demand for enforcement personnel. Because whether it's a state park, a wildlife management area or one of Nebraska's many water bodies, we know it's important to be there, working for the safety of Nebraskans and our wildlife.

Stahlecker honored for life-saving effort -Nebraska Game and Parks Conservation Officer Trevor Stahlecker was honored in 2022 for his role in a life-saving effort at Pawnee State Recreation Area the year prior. The award, an Agency Partner Certificate of Merit from the Lancaster County Sheriff's Office, was given to Stahlecker and a Lancaster County Sheriff Terry Wagner for their quick response to a crisis situation at the lake. But for their quick actions, the person in crisis may not have survived. Stahlecker, a conservation officer since 2017, covers Lancaster and Saline counties.

New all-terrain wheelchair program

The Nebraska American Legion donated \$16,055 to Nebraska Game and Parks in the fall for the purchase of an all-terrain wheelchair for state park visitors. Game and Parks currently has two of the tracked wheelchairs at Ponca State Park. The chairs provide people the freedom of mobility to fish, view nature and enjoy the outdoors in all types of terrain. Game and Parks has a goal for eight track chairs available for use at state parks across the state. They will be used at park events, mentored hunts, shooting ranges and education programs.

Economic impact - \$4.2B annually supporting 24,000 jobs - In Nebraska, hunting, fishing, boating, wildlife viewing and state park visitation support more than 24,000 jobs and have an economic impact of \$4.2 billion annually. With their participation in outdoor recreation pursuits, Nebraskans and nonresidents contributed tremendously to the economy. In 2022, there were 266,000 anglers and 185,000 hunters that purchased Nebraska permits; 80,000 registered boats; 126,000 shooting sports participants; and 508,000 vehicle park entry permits purchased by visitors.

Growing our reach and relevancy - In an effort to better serve many people across the state, NGPC convened an advisory board to learn how we can improve and grow our relevancy efforts in meaningful ways. What we learned included:

- Outdoor recreation for these expanded audiences includes activities such as picnicking, hiking, and being outside with family.
- Translating our website, print materials and signs in other languages; using inclusive images; and designing programs relevant to underserved audiences would be more inviting.
- Growing awareness of what opportunities/ resources we already offer is important and will require continuing to expand our communications efforts.

Education programs reach new audiences -With creative programming, Nebraska Game and Parks was able to reach new audiences in person and virtually, expanding ecological education and engaging people in outdoor interests across the state. These efforts included coordinated “Nature Nerd” Trivia Nights, which brought people together at five locations across the state for a fun challenge. From Lincoln to Scottsbluff, teams enjoyed evenings of camaraderie over their shared interest in nature. In Omaha, we partnered with a nearly a dozen organizations to host Benson Park Community Nature Night — a night dedicated to exploring nature, enjoying outdoor recreation and celebrating community. We also worked closely with Girls, Inc., to provide nature-based exploration and education focused on the growth of girls into future leaders.

Stocking fish & mussels enhance aquatic resources - One of Nebraska’s strengths is its diversity of sportfishing. We serve anglers by producing a variety of species of fish; in 2022 we stocked more than 65 million fish into 275 waters in 71 counties. These stockings consisted of 20 species of fish, including hybrids. The spring and fall stocking of trout in water bodies across the state continues to be popular with anglers of all ages. Trout also are supplied for the waters hosting community fishing events. In 2022, more than 260,000 trout were stocked at dozens of water bodies. Staff also continue to make strides propagating freshwater mussels, which have been in decline naturally over time in the state’s streams and rivers. Since 2014, Game and Parks has propagated and stocked threatened mussels in select areas to reestablish populations.

Programming boosts fishing participation - Enhanced by the partnerships of volunteers and organizations, outreach and events help get people hooked on fishing:

- More than 200 Certified Youth Fishing Instructors and volunteers gave more than 6,000 hours to fishing education and outreach efforts in 2022. These volunteers make possible the 170 statewide fishing events that reached more than 10,000 anglers.
- Thirty-seven Community Fishing Events attracted 1,200 guests.
- Eight “Discover” programs taught advanced fly fishing, bow fishing and ice fishing techniques to an additional 236 participants thanks to the contribution of Youth Fishing Instructors, Cornhusker Fly Fishers, Bowfishers of Nebraska and the Nebraska Game and Fish Association.
- Project Healing Waters and Cornhusker Fly Fishers, with Game and Parks staff, cosponsored fly rod building and fly-tying classes.
- Other partners, including the Nebraska Walleye Association, Cops and Bobbers, and Live Well Go Fish, also held programs to introduce more people to fishing in Nebraska.
- Take ‘em Fishing, a program that encourages anglers to take a beginner fishing, with chances to win prizes, continued in 2022 with 950 entries.
- Communication and marketing to keep outdoor activities top-of-mind is crucial for engaging Nebraskans in the outdoors. To boost awareness of fishing and other activities in state park areas, promotional spots highlighting these options appeared statewide in a variety of media channels. Social media, video and digital ads were paired with radio and television messages. New outreach included responsive ads and digital ads in weather apps when conditions favor outdoor pursuits.

Free earned landowner elk permit program - 2022 was the first year of the Free-earned Landowner Elk Permit Program. It allows a person who owns or leases at least 80 acres of farm or ranchland for agricultural purposes to get a free either-sex elk permit following 10 verified general permit antlerless elk harvests on their property. The goal is to increase hunting access opportunities and antlerless elk harvest, while benefitting landowners who regularly have elk on their property.

Collaboration boosts wetlands education and outreach - NGPC collaborated with Platte Basin Timelapse over the past two years to create a series of integrated outreach and educational materials aimed at increasing awareness of the importance of Nebraska wetlands and the need for their conservation. The materials, including an updated Guide to Nebraska's Wetlands, a new publication for children, videos, and photo galleries, offer the opportunity to learn about Nebraska's diverse wetlands. This project was led by commission staff and funded by a grant from the US EPA; partners included Platte Basin Timelapse at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, and Ducks Unlimited.

NGPC recognized for excellence in communications - Game and Parks earned 11 awards of excellence at the 2022 Association for Conservation Information annual conference. The agency received four 1st, four 2nd and three 3rd place awards in the national peer-critique contest. The first-place awards were for: an informational campaign about camping reservations at lakes McConaughy and Ogallala; the marketing campaign for the Nebraska state parks centennial celebration in 2021; for Trail Tales Magazine, a publication for 4th-graders across Nebraska; and for a Nebraskaland Magazine duck hunting photo.

NFWF grant for restoring Sandhills grassland and wetland habitats -NGPC and its partners received a \$4 million grant through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (Americas the Beautiful grant) to restore grassland and wetland habitat for at-risk species. A four-year project starting in 2023 will take place in the Sandhills and adjacent areas, where wetlands and streams face alteration and channelization and eastern red cedar is encroaching on native grasslands. A voluntary, incentive-based approach will be used to improve habitat, while sustaining resilient ranching communities. The goals are to build capacity, restore wetlands and streams, and remove trees using mechanical tree removal and prescribed fire. These will benefit a host of at-risk species and other wildlife in the Nebraska Sandhills and adjacent grasslands. Partners include PF/QF, Forever/Quail Forever, Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition, Northern Prairies Land Trust, Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, Sandhills Task Force, Santee Sioux Nation and TNC.

Combating depredation with landowners - Nebraska Game and Parks continues to work with landowners to reduce wildlife damage issues to crops and property. Timely technical assistance for damage associated with game species was provided to more than 500 people across Nebraska. Nine big game meetings, six landowner elk meetings, and multimedia outreach through the agency's website, radio shows, emails and news releases keep the public informed about tools and resources available to prevent depredation. While hunting is our preferred management tool, we use all of the resources at our disposal to help landowners with wildlife damage.

Stocking fish & mussels enhance aquatic resources - One of Nebraska's strengths is its diversity of sportfishing. We serve anglers by producing a variety of species of fish; in 2022 we stocked more than 65 million fish into 275 waters in 71 counties. These stockings consisted of 20 species of fish, including hybrids. The spring and fall stocking of trout in water bodies across the state is ever-popular with anglers of all ages. Trout also are supplied for the waters hosting community fishing events. In 2022, more than 260,000 trout were stocked at dozens of water bodies.

Fisheries staff also continue to make strides propagating freshwater mussels, which have been in decline naturally over time in the state's streams and rivers. Since 2014, Game and Parks has propagated and stocked threatened mussels in select areas to reestablish populations.

Protecting our waters from invasive species – NGPC is proactively battling any introduction or spread of aquatic invasive species into Nebraska waters. The Missouri River has an existing zebra mussel population along its entire length downstream of Gavins Point Dam. Lewis and Clark Lake, Lake Yankton and the Offutt Base Lake are the only other confirmed Nebraska waters with established zebra mussels. As part of our prevention plan, in 2022, the agency inspected a record 6,627 watercraft, more than 4,000 more than the previous year. We sampled more than 40 water bodies monthly in 2022 for zebra mussel larvae, and we surveyed 39 water bodies across the state for invasive aquatic plants, resulting in seven new detections of Eurasian Watermilfoil and one new detection of Brittle Naiad. A new outreach campaign, “Protect our Waters,” is helping build awareness of aquatic invasive species. The goal is to inform boaters of their role in preventing AIS through thoroughly cleaning, draining and drying their watercraft before leaving a water body.

Hunting regulation changes affect nonresident hunters - Changes to NGPC regulations and orders in 2022 were designed to give residents preference over nonresidents per Nebraska statutes. Nebraska hunters can now purchase deer and antelope permits in non-draw management units before nonresidents. To maintain resident access to hunting permits, Game and Parks established a sales cap on nonresident either-sex or buck-only deer permits for all permits except landowner and youth. Nonresident antelope archery also was added to the list of draw permits, meaning it no longer is unlimited in quantity.

In preparation for 2023, some changes were made affecting turkey hunting with a quota of 10,000 nonresident spring season permits, reduction of personal permit limits to 2 permits for spring turkey (from 3) and to 1 permit for one turkey (from 2 permits each allowing harvest of 2 turkeys), and a shortened fall season.

Game and Parks outdoor recreation resources – by the numbers - Wildlife management areas and private lands in our Open Fields and Waters program offer walk-in access on over 391,000 combined acres for hunting, fishing and trapping. Wildlife Management Areas - 184,423 acres (287 areas) and Open Fields and Waters – 372,600 acres of land/water/wetlands and 40 stream miles.

Nebraska’s state park system is made up of 78 areas encompassing 105,344 acres that also provide fishing, boating, and hunting access. On 57 state recreation areas (65,371 acres) are open for fishing year-round and hunting is allowed, away from campgrounds and facilities, from the Tuesday after Labor Day until the end of spring turkey season (May 31). Eight state parks (31,836 acres) provide limited/managed hunting and fishing; and 10 state historical parks (2,497) acres provide limited/managed hunting where feasible and are open for fishing. We also have family-friendly firearm and archery ranges at 4 parks and many self-serve archery ranges on park areas.

Agency resources - The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is funded mainly by our users, including revenue from the sale of hunting and fishing permits and stamps, state park entry permits, and fees for camping, lodging and activities in the park system. In 2022, 89% of the agency budget was “user pay” and federal reimbursement, and 11% came from State General Funds.

We also received a new fund in 2022: the **Water Recreation Enhancement Fund** with \$100 million in general fund revenues. The water recreation projects currently authorized will be administered at Lewis and Clark and Lake McConaughy state recreation areas for developing marinas, and development of a lodge, river access and other facilities at Niobrara State Park.