

**NEBRASKA
STATE REPORT**
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Take ‘em Hunting- Last fall, we announced the Take ‘em Hunting Challenge – asking hunters to take along a new or beginning hunter. Partners included AKRS Equipment, Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation and SCHEELS.

2,367 people took the pledge online to take someone hunting and 2,916 entries were submitted from 2,175 people in the challenge. Most hunters took youth including children and grandchildren. 54 percent of entries took a first-time hunter. Most mentors took people deer hunting (48 percent) followed by turkey (14 percent), upland (13 percent) and waterfowl (10 percent).

We created a series of videos, encouraging hunters to take someone hunting and shared them on social media. Marketing also included paid social and a paid PSA featuring Husker football coach Scott Frost. Direct mail and emails were sent to current and previous hunters. The challenge had a strong social media presence and following. Highlights, photos and stories from submissions were shared weekly our Facebook page. This helped create tremendous excitement from both participants and additional prospective hunting mentors. One story of a mom who took her young kids turkey hunting, reached 92,000 people!

Each week, we announced prizes winners from our partners. The Grand Prize, a John Deer UTV was awarded Wednesday, June 10 to a family from Grand Island, Nebraska. For more information go to OutdoorNebraska.org/TakeEmHunting.

Mountain Lion Season - The Commission held Nebraska’s third harvest season for mountain lions during January – March 2020 in the Pine Ridge Unit (northwest Nebraska). The season allowed for up to 8 mountain lions to be harvested, with a limit of 4 lions and a sublimit of 2 females in each of two sub-units.

The 2020 harvest season was a success with 7 cougars harvested. Our objective is to provide a harvest opportunity that allows the population to remain resilient and healthy, while halting growth or moderately reducing the population size. Our target density is 5-7 mountain lions/100km² of suitable habitat, similar to other states. We also want to reduce depredation events.

Our new 2019 Pine Ridge population estimate is 34 total animals, down from 59 in 2017, and our estimated density is on target at around 5 mountain lions/100km² of suitable habitat. We also had no documented depredation events in the Pine Ridge since 2019.

State Parks Engage People in the Outdoors - Our parks are at the heart of many Nebraskans' lives. They provide the perfect place for people to get in touch with nature, explore the outdoors and find new outdoor pursuits. Over the past decade, the Commission has dramatically expanded its educational offerings at our 76 state parks and recreation areas. Park naturalists plan educational and recreational events to draw new visitors to our parks, while teaching outdoor skills. Popular events include outdoor expos attended by more than 60,000 people; and outdoor discovery programs that introduce more than 5,000 fourth and fifth graders to hands-on activities such as outdoor cooking, kayaking, fishing, and shooting sports. Bioblitzes invite the public to come count unique species. Guided hiking tours and horse rides give people the chance to see parts of the state they would not otherwise have. Fishing clinics and family fishing events introduce thousands to the sport of fishing. Shooting ranges in parks provide great introductions to shooting activities for families, kids, and new shooters in a safe and friendly atmosphere. These events and others bring people together in the outdoors to create family memories.

Reaching Broad Audiences Through Social Media- The Commission has very diverse customers, from hunters, to wildlife viewers and park-goers, and boaters and anglers. Each person's motivation for outdoor participation varies depending on what they love to do outdoors. Social media is an important part of the agency's promotional mix, educating diverse audiences on the state's fish and wildlife, promoting opportunities for fun and recreation and sharing important reminders. Live streaming of big game meetings allows for statewide participation from hunters. Promoting unique special events and training opportunities through social media helps the Commission engage with people in a cost-effective and timely manner. Social media also connects us to our customers, creating engagement and allowing people to share their experiences with us. This brings awareness of the diversity of outdoor opportunities in Nebraska. Instagram is the Commission's fastest growing channel, with over 24,000 followers that are mostly urban-area residents under the age of 25. Facebook is where most of our customers go to for timely information. With 115,000 followers, it is second only to the website and word of mouth. In 2019, the Commission's website had close to 1.8 million unique visitors.

Growing Education and Interpretation- The Commission developed a new education plan in 2019 to help connect constituents to our natural and cultural legacy and outdoor recreation opportunities. Developed through an analysis of our current education initiatives and a broad look towards the future, this plan has six goals: natural resource education, cultural and historical education, outdoor and recreation education, cohesive team development, maintaining and growing strong partnerships, and developing ideas to ensure sustainable funding. A new Fish and Wildlife Education Division was created to assist with implementation of the plan and to educate Nebraskans about our state's natural resources. This division will work to advance and expand ecological education development of Nebraska-specific resources.

Mentoring Videos Encourage People to Share Their Passion- Hunting is an important part of our Nebraska heritage, and the sale of hunting and fishing permits fund conservation efforts in our state. For these two reasons, it is critical that we attract new hunters and re-engage those who may have let hunting fall by the wayside. Game and Parks worked with several partner groups in 2019 to produce a sixpart video series underscoring the reasons mentors take new hunters

into the field each year. The reasons shared included anything from creating family memories, spending time with friends, and spending time in the field with the dog. The videos were released on Facebook channels between August 2019 and November 2019, in tandem with the agency's Take 'Em Hunting campaign. Partner organizations shared the six videos throughout the year on their own social media channels. In total, the six part series received over 40,000 views.

Addressing Wildlife Damage - Nebraska's landowners are important partners in conservation. Creating and providing wildlife habitat, providing access for public hunting to control populations and continual communication provide for successful wildlife management.

The Commission has been proactive in response to crop damage by deer, pronghorn and elk. The agency's Damage Control Permit protocol was rewritten in 2019. The new protocol removed obstacles preventing the use of damage control permits as a tool for addressing crop damage done by big game. Although damage control permits have been issued for deer for many years, 2019 saw a more aggressive use of these permits for pronghorn and elk. Other steps taken to address depredation were:

- Landowner meetings in areas with high prevalence of damage complaints.
- Encouraging landowners to contact Commission personnel to report damage caused by big game.
- Commission staff contacting landowners who have had damage in the past.
- The Commission issued a series of outreach messages throughout the year, through news releases and broadcast announcements, reminding landowners of the many resources available to address depredation issues.
- The new Antlerless Hunter Database was created in the summer. Hunters willing to harvest only antlerless deer can sign up online and offer their contact information. Landowners can access this database to find hunters in their area willing to harvest antlerless deer.
- A Contact a Biologist online tool was created to allow landowners to contact the Commission and get immediate help addressing depredation issues.

The Commission's renewed and increased response to depredation is an effort to connect landowners experiencing damage losses by big game to solutions that work.

Expanding Public Access on Private Lands- Nebraska supports nearly one million acres of publicly-accessible lands, much in part to the Open Fields and Waters (OFW) Program. Nebraska is over 97% privately-owned and increasing access to private lands continues to be one of the agency's primary objectives. OFW provides financial incentives to private landowners willing to allow walk-in hunting, trapping and/or fishing. The program has grown during each of the last four years, and last years enrollment totals nearly 347,000 acres – a record for the program. Since 2016-17, over 113,000 acres have been added to OFW, a 48% increase. In recent years, new OFW enrollments have been targeted within the Berggren Plan priority areas in an effort to increase public hunting opportunities for pheasants and other upland gamebirds, and public access opportunities have increased by 93% within these priority areas. Over the past two years, we also targeted additional hunting opportunities for prairie grouse, deer and turkey, and 1 northern bobwhite. A 2020 Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) award for \$3M from USDA-NRCS will help continue our efforts to grow the program.

Bighorn Sheep Research Continues-

South Dakota State University researchers in 2019 gathered another year of information in the effort to keep Nebraska bighorn sheep populations healthy. Preliminary information from the 2019 lamb crop indicated higher success rates than in years past. In particular, Pine Ridge herds had nearly doubled lamb survival rates from 2018 as five out of 15 lambs were well. The researchers and Commission staff experimentally removed ewes chronically ill with the deadly strain of pneumonia, which had been identified as influencing poor lamb survival over the last decade. The Wildcat Hills herd saw another banner year for lamb survival, with 14 of the initial 22 captured in the spring still alive. The study will continue for another year with hopes of gauging the effectiveness of removing chronically sick adults on lamb survival. Researchers also hope to understand what is influencing the continued high lamb survival in the Wildcat Hills, where since 2018, 38 of the 73 lambs observed survived.

Salt Creek Tiger Beetle Releases- The Commission continued its recovery efforts for the endangered Salt Creek tiger beetle in 2019 by releasing 315 lab-reared larvae and adult beetles onto critical habitat at Little Salt Creek WMA. It was the first time the agency released Salt Creek tiger beetles onto Commission property. Also in 2019, the Commission partnered with a Kansas zoo to help raise the tiger beetles in the lab. In March, staff at the Topeka Zoo and Conservation Center began raising larvae transferred from Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium. Having another zoo partner will help us increase our lab-reared beetles and help speed our recovery efforts. Other partners raising beetles include the Lincoln Children's Zoo and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Rehabilitating Waters for Future Recreation - The Aquatic Habitat Program works to improve conditions for aquatic life through better management or rehabilitation of existing resources, and collaborates with partners to do so. Funding is provided by the purchase of the Aquatic Habitat Stamp, included in the price of a fishing license. Major projects in 2019 were:

- The Conestoga Reservoir rehabilitation was completed, producing a fantastic recreational area for Nebraskans. Investments in the angler and boating access will provide facilities for anglers, birders and hikers and bikers. Work began in 2011, and three years of construction were needed to modify the outlet structure, excavate over one-half million cubic yards of sediment, stabilize shorelines, install sediment retention cells and build wetlands to protect water quality. The Aquatic Habitat Program, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy, Environmental Protection Agency and Sport Fish Restoration provided the funding for the \$8 million project.
- A major coolwater stream restoration project on Dry Spotted Tail Creek is nearly complete. Efforts to restore natural stream function, riparian and wetland habitat has involved the replacement of the straightened and incised channel with a new, constructed reach of meandering stream to support healthy aquatic and wetland communities. Public access improvements will be included when the project is completed in 2020 with help from Platte River Basin Environments, Trout Unlimited and Ducks Unlimited.
- Fort Robinson State Park's Grabel, Cherry Creek and Ice House ponds are being rehabilitated. They are being excavated to remove sediments, water-control structures are being modernized, shorelines are being shaped for better access and underwater habitat structures are being installed to improve fishing. Maintaining fishing opportunities throughout construction is a goal of this project.

Enhancing Coolwater Streams - Coolwater streams account for less than 28 percent of all stream miles in Nebraska, but they are still a tremendous resource. Good land stewardship has preserved the relatively pristine condition of some stream reaches, which provide habitat for a variety of aquatic organisms, including native and at-risk species, and angling opportunities for trout. In 2019, staff and partners completed projects to create or enhance an estimated 1.6 miles of coolwater streams. Staff conducted pre- and post-construction surveys to assess the fish community's response to stream enhancements and sampled several at-risk species.

In addition, instream flow appropriations were renewed at Long Pine Creek for another 15 years. These flows sustain naturally reproducing rainbow and brown trout populations.

Fighting Aquatic Invasive Species - Aquatic invasive species (AIS) continue to threaten Nebraska's waterways. The Commission partners with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to educate people about AIS and how to combat them. The agency also is exploring new cleaning stations, and renovating lakes to reduce threats. A new, waterless boating-cleaning station was installed at Lewis and Clark Reservoir in 2019. It was used 391 times in its first two months as zebra mussels continue to be an issue for Lewis and Clark and the Missouri River. Glenn Cunningham Lake was found positive for zebra mussels in 2018, was drained to facilitate freezing the mussels during the 2018/2019 winter, and will be refilled and restocked in 2020.

Restoring Freshwater Mussels - Efforts began in 2014 to restore native freshwater mussels back into their historical range in Nebraska streams. Since 2016, 14,000 plain pocketbook mussels and 5,700 fat muckets have been released. Mussels were not released in 2019 into streams where high water existed; instead, those mussels are being held in hatcheries. Mussel production in 2019 includes 42,000 plain pocketbook and 23,000 fat muckets. All released mussels have been marked or tagged to identify them.

Law Enforcement and Public Safety - Conservation officers frequently answer the call for assistance from a variety of other agencies whenever a tragedy occurs. These calls for service triggering a response from our enforcement personnel in 2019 ranged from searching for homicide and cold-case victims to retrieving stranded motorists during the Thanksgiving blizzard. Our personnel are well equipped for many of these search operations, utilizing drones, 4-wheelers, side-scan sonar and a fleet of vessels.

Three large, long-term cooperative investigations into the illegal and fraudulent take of fish and wildlife are in the prosecution phase. Investigations have involved state and federal officials, and 21 defendants have pled to fines of more than \$117,000, along with multiple years of probation and permit revocation. In addition to the illegal take of wildlife, many of the cases centered on the illegal commercialization of natural resources. With a number of plea agreements still in process, the case is expected to culminate in 2020.

Helping protect our natural resources and landowner rights is important to the Wildlife Protectors Association (WPA) and the Commission. The two collaborate in implementing the successful Nebraska Wildlife Crime Stoppers Program. The WPA solicits private funds to offer as possible reward monies for information in solving wildlife crimes, which has resulted in more than 1,000 arrests.