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Nebraska’s 8 Great Natural Wonders

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FOR MANY PEOPLE, Nebraska is part of a large, indefinite segment of the central United States dismissively known as “flyover country,” which is best observed through a jet’s window from at least 30,000 feet and while sipping a cool drink. I like to think of such persons as “flyover people,” who have probably never known, at close range, the wonders of our state’s natural landscapes. In the traditions of those romantic souls who would like to visit the seven natural wonders of the world, I humbly offer my own suggestions for visiting Nebraska’s inherent wonders. They are not ranked in any special order of importance but are roughly organized in a southeastern to northwestern direction, in a sequence that a westward-bound tourist might encounter them.
ALTHOUGH THE MISSOURI RIVER is now largely channelized and tamed in Nebraska, its shoreline forests are still memorable, and their woodland trails are perfect places to enjoy relative solitude. Indian Cave State Park is notable for its trails, its panoramic views of the river valley and its fall color, to say nothing of the Native American petroglyphs that make one ponder what both human and animal life must have been like here a millennium ago.

Farther upstream, Fontenelle Forest Preserve in Omaha provides natural attractions such as 40 species of deciduous trees, and Ponca State Park's similar forests border the nearly pristine Missouri National Recreational River along the South Dakota border. All three locations have large stands of mature forests, sometimes with long-lived oaks that were present before Nebraska became a state, or perhaps even when Lewis and Clark ascended the river in 1804. Many eastern birds, like whip-poor-wills, ruby-throated hummingbirds and scarlet tanagers, may be found here. All of these birds are close to the western edges of their ranges as are many plants, including nearly all of the oaks. At the edges of the forests and at the tops of steep hills, relict patches of tallgrass prairies give the visitor a sense of how most of eastern Nebraska must have appeared prior to settlement.
ASHFALL FOSSIL BEDS
STATE HISTORICAL PARK

FOR A SENSE OF “DEEP TIME,” all Nebraskans should visit Ashfall Fossil Beds in Antelope County to glimpse the large animal life found here 10 million years ago. Their skeletons are now frozen in space and time, after being entombed in volcanic ash during a period when rhinos, camels, horses and other grazing mammals reminiscent of the African plains roamed the countryside.

For an even longer look back in time – say about 20 million years – there’s Agate Fossil Beds National Monument in Sioux City. Nonetheless, if it’s the opportunity to see, first hand, dozens of rhinos lying right where they died, preserved in a Pompeii-like manner, there’s nothing quite like Ashfall. In addition to an interpretive center which is open seasonally, the hills surrounding Ashfall are mixed-grass prairies, rich in wildflowers all summer long.
THE CENTRAL PLATTE VALLEY, from about North Platte to Grand Island, cuts across central Nebraska like a gracefully curved bow, with Kearney at its lowest midpoint. To this stretch of river, and especially the section between Kearney and Grand Island, half a million cranes and about 10 million ducks and geese funnel in each March from wintering areas as far away as Arizona, northern Mexico and the Gulf Coast. It is a wildlife spectacle easily matching the great wildlife migrations of the African plains, and is almost certainly the greatest concentration of bird life to be found anywhere except, perhaps, for the great nesting bird colonies of the high Arctic or Antarctic.

At times, a million geese may settle on a single wetland in the Platte Valley or the nearby Rainwater Basin, and roosting flocks of up to 20,000 sandhill cranes spend the night on secluded sandy bars and islands of the Platte. It is perhaps the finest wildlife spectacle in all of North America, and yet it remains largely unknown to most Nebraskans.
THE NEBRASKA SANDHILLS

WHERE IS THE LARGEST AREA OF STABILIZED SAND DUNES in the Western Hemisphere? In Nebraska, of course. Sprawled over the center of our state is an ocean of sand that is nearly 1,000 feet deep, saturated with water from the Ogallala aquifer and crowned by the largest stand of remaining native prairie anywhere south of Canada. Some of the dunes are up to about 300 feet high, and many are several miles in length.

Their crests are mostly oriented in a southwest-to-northeast direction, their wave-like shapes reflecting the prevailing wind patterns of a far distant past. Yet, extended droughts within the past few thousand years have set the dunes into motion, until extended wet periods have again allowed the sand-adapted grasses to recapture them.

At the dunes’ bases, beautiful meadows or wetlands often are present, representing the upper boundary of the Ogallala aquifer. These wetlands support some of North America’s most spectacular shorebirds, such as long-billed curlews, upland sandpipers, white-faced ibises, American avocets and black-necked stilts. In late afternoon light, the dunes are increasingly blanketed by curving shadows and, at night, they offer spectacular views of a star-filled sky, often accompanied by free concerts from lonesome coyotes.

Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge is my most frequent destination in the Sandhills, but my favorite roads include those through Sheridan County from Lakeside north to Rushville, in Blaine and Cherry Counties from Seneca to Brownlee and in Grant and Arthur Counties from Whitman south to Highway 92. All of these are near-wilderness drives amid glorious dune scenery and have some wonderfully rich wetlands near the road. When you are exploring in the Sandhills, just be sure to have lots of gas, plenty of drinking water and a car with high clearance! A bit of good luck is also handy.
The Niobrara River and its Transitional Forest

The Niobrara River is one of the few Great Plains rivers to display a continuous transition between the coniferous forests of the American West and the hardwood forests of the East, mostly within the confines of a single county, Cherry County. From eastern Cherry County downstream for about 80 miles, the Niobrara Scenic River offers nature-lovers opportunities for paddling or floating over a clear, hard-bottom stream that is rich in both geological and human history and has occasional rapids, waterfalls and lots of wildlife.

The Nature Conservancy’s Niobrara Valley Preserve and the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge lie within the Scenic River region, and both have large herds of bison and other wildlife that can often be seen. There are also hiking trails at both sites. Prairie dog towns provide a good place to watch for coyotes, hawks and eagles, and even cougars have rarely been reported along the river.
Chimney, Courthouse and Jail Rocks

These three great monoliths rise unexpectedly above the shortgrass prairies of western Nebraska and represent the first of the famous landmarks encountered by pioneers heading west on the Oregon and Mormon trails. Chimney Rock somewhat resembles an eroding Egyptian obelisk, while Courthouse and Jail Rocks remind me of ruined Gothic cathedrals.

Courthouse Rock can be fairly easily climbed, and its summit offers a splendid view west along the North Platte Valley toward Chimney Rock and Scotts Bluff. Jail Rock is steeper, more hazardous to climb, and its south face has, at times, provided a home for nesting golden eagles. Golden eagles have also nested along the north side of Chimney Rock which is conveniently close to a reliable food supply of prairie dogs not far to the south. Near the prairie dog town, there is also an old pioneer cemetery, reminiscent of one of the hardships and dangers faced by brave pioneers on their way west.
SCOTTS BLUFF NATIONAL MONUMENT AND THE WILDCAT HILLS

SCOTTS BLUFF IS THE MOST VISUALLY IMPRESSIVE of Nebraska’s natural monuments and is another of the famous historic landmarks of the pioneers. One can hike or drive to its top and, from there, look down over a varied landscape of badlands, high plains and the wooded uplands to the south known as the Wildcat Hills.

Scotts Bluff and the Wildcat Hills are great places to hike and look for western birds such as golden eagles, prairie falcons and ferruginous hawks. Mule deer, prairie rattlesnakes, wild turkeys and ornate box turtles are all likely to be encountered along these trails, and the keen observer might also spot bighorn sheep or elk on distant slopes. A federal Visitor Center at Scotts Bluff and a Nebraska Game and Parks nature center in the Wildcat Hills offer opportunities to learn about the history, biology, geology and paleontology of this beautiful and relatively little-visited region.
The Pine Ridge

It's unfortunate that the most scenically attractive parts of Nebraska are situated diametrically across the state from most of the state's population. Many Nebraskans have never visited the Pine Ridge region even if they have vacationed in South Dakota's Black Hills. The Pine Ridge is a kind of tag-end ecological appendage of the Black Hills with many of the plants and wildlife species found in the Hills. It is true that the Pine Ridge escarpment is different geologically from the Black Hills, but a drive through Monroe Canyon or Sowbelly Canyon might make one wonder if he has somehow wandered into South Dakota's Black Hills by mistake.

Part of the attraction of the Pine Ridge derives from its rich Native American heritage. The Oglala Lakotas knew this land intimately, and many of them died at the hands of the American cavalry in a futile effort to protect it. As one of the many military outposts that were active during the Indian Wars, Fort Robinson is, perhaps, far more famous, or infamous, as the place where the legendary Lakota warrior Crazy Horse was murdered while in captivity.

My own favorite drive in the Pine Ridge, through Shoemaker Canyon, pleasures me with the sights and sounds of the beautiful western forest birds - Townsend's solitaires singing in the same deep forest as eastern birds, such as rose-breasted grosbeaks. A few years ago, a forest fire devastated much of Sowbelly Canyon to a degree that I have since avoided returning. Yet, I know that the forest eventually will recover and that a new generation of trees will bring with it a new assortment of wildlife. So, too, I hope that new generations of Nebraskans will discover these wonderful areas of our state and learn to love them as I have.