Your wildlife lands : the Sand Hills

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Your Wildlife Lands
The Sand Hills
Mule deer flourish on the plain’s lushness

M O V I N G S A N D. Wind blows sand on sand with a soft tinkle. From the center of a blowout, only distance is visible. Dunes follow dunes, dressed in flowing grasses, to the far horizon, and blue-sky clouds march back to zenith. Sand stings.

Mounds and ridges of sand, held in place by a delicate cover of tough grasses, reach high above the intervening troughs. Here and there, the grass loses its tenuous hold and sand begins moving again. The hills are covered with grass clumps and yucca.

Water oozes in low meadows, forming little lakes and puddles, or maybe just wet meadows. Here marsh grass is lush, reed canary and bulrush. Flowers and birds change character. Shorebirds and waterfowl are common. Penstemon and puccoons grow in roadside ditches along with purple vetch and leadplant.

In the quiet of a lavender-purple dusk a great blue heron wings slowly across the hills, a black silhouette with neck folded back. It seems he has never touched ground and never will, always remaining suspended between sandy grass and sky.

The Sand Hills have been called the Great American Desert. They have been defamed and avoided like a plague. But their ill reputation kept man away. They were little tampered with for many years after white men began “domesticating” other parts of Nebraska.
The Sand Hills were cursed when cattle disappeared there, never to return. Then an enterprising cattleman rode into the hills to round up the scrawny remnants of his lost cattle and found them sleek and fat among the grass-frozen sand dunes and wet meadows. The Sand Hills became cattle country.

But yet the plow little disturbed the hills, for to break grass cover was inviting disaster. Exposed sand would blow, and no domestic crops could survive the hot, dry winds of summer to hold the sand.

Today among the choppies, the Game and Parks Commission maintains a number of wildlife lands where grazing is forbidden or closely managed. Grass is permitted to grow lush and tall to provide cover for wildlife "crops" that nest and loaf among its plenty.

There are streams for canoeing and fishing, and wildlife areas provide access to them. There is a major reservoir for boating, fishing, swimming and various other water-related activities, surrounded by recreation and wildlife lands. There is a small reservoir surrounded by oak and cottonwood and clumps of wild rose. It is marshes and lakes ideal for waterfowl production and hunting. There is a section of Pine Creek, flowing clear and cold through tree-covered canyons. There is Pressey, located on the Loup River, broken by canyons and smoothed by river valley; and Schlagel Creek, a combination of Sand Hills and creek bottom, with trees and shrubs and grass intermixed.

Wildlife lands, here as elsewhere in Nebraska, receive a minimum of "tending". They are allowed to go their own way as much as possible, all 11,591 acres of them.

There are no facilities to speak of, but tomorrow promises wild plants and animals that are unique. Visitors will lay their fires on the ground, maybe in fire rings they have dug themselves; not in firegrates. Campers will pitch their own tents, not plug in their self-contained, jet-age units. Recreation will mean meeting the out-of-doors, not bringing the suburbs to the country.
IN THE PROTECTION of towering sandhills, thousands of lakes and wet meadows percolate from the sandy soil, clear and still, reflecting puffy clouds and azure sky.

Where water meets land...that's where the coyote and the rabbit come to drink. It's where the greatest variety of plants congregate in quest of life-giving water. All sorts of wild animals and plants gather at water's edge.

In early summer, blue-winged teal, mallards and shovellers lead their broods among the stalks of cattail and bulrush, barely disturbing the surface of quiet water. Shorebirds wade the shallows in search of insect larvae and snails.

A shunk waddles slowly through the grass, divebombed by a pair of black-and-white shorebirds. He must be very near their nest, for their distress is evident. They nearly dive right into his face, then pull up and circle for another strafing run. Willets—protecting their eggs, or their young.
Canada geese have reclaimed their native sandhills.

There's quite an assortment along the shoreline. Phalaropes, dowitchers, killdeer and maybe a sandpiper or two, wade the water's edge.

An American avocet strides stilts-like through the scattering of sedge that claims the inch-deep shallows.

In the lush meadows that creep down from the choppies to meet the water's edge, a handful of Canada geese raise up from their grazing, alert for danger. From a hand-hewn fencepost, a western meadowlark announces its territorial claims to neighboring males.

Heron and bitterns cast patient silhouettes on water. Motionless, they wait for minnows, tadpoles or small frogs. Occasionally a human angler will stand as patiently, in the shallows of Goose Lake perhaps, waiting for a northern pike or a perch to nibble on his minnow.

Ballard's Marsh, Big Alkali Lake, Goose Lake, Rat and Beaver lakes and South Twin Lake are all state wildlife lands. Some of them are hidden away in the midst of private land. Access involves driving sandy trails through cattle guards and sometimes lazy beeves. But the end product is the marsh with its fishing and waterfowl hunting, and its trapping for mink, muskrat and beaver.

Decades of adjustment have made the sandhill lakes into intricate, well-balanced wildlife communities in which each plant and animal has established its own relationships with
each other living thing, and with the soil and water and land contours that surround it. Some of the relationships are simple who-ate-what interdependencies. Ducks eat insects and aquatic plants. Mink eat ducks.

But the web becomes considerably more intricate in view of the total dependence of some varieties of crayfish on the muddy shallows, not for food, but for homes. Crayfish build mud chimneys with tops that clear the surface. Looking down the chimney reveals the animal inside.

Muskrats, too, use the raw materials of the marsh to build homes; their dome-shaped houses are most often fashioned of cattails. Marsh without plants would be a marsh without rails, even if other food were available, for the rails use vegetation for cover.

Northern pike use marsh vegetation in a different way. They deposit their spawn among the plants, and the young fish hide there to put on their first growth.

Marshes change from day to day, from hour to hour. Small lakes rise and fall. Ducks come and go. Yet it seems that the changes are predictable, not surprising. Tomorrow most of the ducks sitting on this little lake may be gone, heading north. But that's good; it means they'll probably be back sometime in the fall on their way south. Perhaps someone will roast one or two of them.

The Game and Parks Commission's marsh-lake wildlife areas are held in trust, like all wildlife lands. They are places where tomorrow is much like today, and next year will be much the same as this. They are places where change is inevitable, but structured; understandable.

SCHLAGEL CREEK has just about everything. There is the little creek and many acres of surrounding sandhills. There are cottonwoods and willows and pockets of shrubs, sumac and buck brush.

The stream bottom itself is almost more wet meadow than creek. Water barely trickles among the rushes and cattails. The little draw is lined with brush and a few trees. Here is an oasis for deer, with browse and water within a few feet.
A combination of shade from towering cottonwoods and cold spring-water provide cool mud banks for bullfrogs. Leopard frogs, too, use the damp draw. In sharp contrast, the creek gives way to towering sandhills where skinks rest in the shade of Spanish bayonet, the only shade to be had.

Sharp-tailed grouse feed on rose hips among the hills and perform their courting rituals in spring. The young supply their dietary needs with fat grasshoppers and other insects.

A hike along the marshy stream might reveal myriad wildflowers from Solomon’s seal to marsh bellflower. Farther up the slopes are shell-leaf penstemon, spiderwort and hoary puccoon. Yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds add color to the lowlands, and cowbirds, grackles and kingfishers nest or feed in nearby fields or stream banks.

Wind rustles willows and cottonwoods and dry bunch grass that have gone to seed and now lie yellow and dormant, waiting for cool, spring rains to green them again. A lone hiker stalks the creek’s edge, looking for signs of deer; for a trail. He eyes the hills knowingly, mentally picking a spot. His imagination breaks his man-outline just under the hill-crest. In his mind’s eye he watches himself lying quiet, rifle ready. A big buck browses warily along the creek toward him. He tenses; braces...yes, that’s the spot. In the fall he will be ready. Schlage Creek is his spot.
HERMAN RESERVOIR is the child of two outdoor recreation philosophies, and is divided between recreation area and wildlife land.

Portions of the lakeshore have received intensive development, including boat ramps, picnic tables, rest rooms, drinking water and so on. Still, there is room for wildlife at Sherman, too. The undeveloped “leftovers” from recreation areas have been turned over to the management of the Resource Services Division. These are the wildlife lands.

Waterskiers and boaters use ramps on the recreation area and the lake’s center, but the avid fisherman is likely to prefer the lake’s upper reaches where water is too narrow and shallow for power boats to maneuver, and dead trees and weeds are permitted to stand along the shore. That’s where the fish are.

Around the lake, on the hills and in the shrub-filled draws, are pheasant and quail hunting. Deer browse the buck brush and willows. Concentrations of ducks rest on the lake each fall and spring.

Access to much of the lake is limited. Trails are few and walking is the best way to approach the water. But walking kicks up game birds, and only the man on foot can really see even a tiny portion of the “happenings” among the grass and shrubs. There’s a bud of poppy mallow opening; here’s a rabbit’s nest, empty now; over there a mourning dove is about to hatch in a grass-hidden nest.

The leftovers at Sherman provide a closer look at the wild world; more primitive, satisfying outdoor experiences.

SOME WILDLIFE lands are small; just a stretch of sand beach and river frontage, or maybe just the river and a few trees. They’re a place to get to the water and catch fish, or a place to put a canoe in the stream.

Spencer Dam and Borman Bridge on the Niobrara, and Milburn and Arcadia diversion dams on the Middle Loup River, are such places. All claim good catfishing, with sauger, carp, bullhead and a few bass in addition on the Niobrara.

The Niobrara runs through the Sand Hills, clear and swift; exciting canoeing water. Rustic Borman Bridge on an area of the same name, marks an easy landmark for taking out to avoid obstacles just a short stretch downstream. The area was taken over from the federal Bureau of Land Management for administration by the Game and Parks Commission. It’s a bit of riverbottom land that is being held in trust for a time when public lands and river access may become shorter in
supply than they are even now.

Spencer Dam is a popular starting point for canoeists, and a deep hole below the old dam attracts fishermen. The spot has an added attraction in its sand beach and the small, grassy, tree-shaded area where a camper spends the night occasionally.

Milburn and Arcadia diversions seem to have been created especially for the ring-of-baloney and loaf-of-bread catfisherman. Here is a place where a man can park his car, set out his bank lines, then nibble sandwiches and snooze until something happens. When the baloney and bread run out, it’s time to go home, limit or nothing. Deep holes below each of the old structures have yielded many a catfish to the patient fisherman who has nothing better to do (for a few hours at least) than watch the Big Dipper and unscramble his thoughts. And, for him, the tinkle of an old turkey bell might at any minute signal some excitement—perhaps a Master Angler, or maybe even a state record, catfish.

The juncture of water and land. It’s a place of excitement where something might happen any second. A canoe might upset, a big fish might bite, a sunbather might be drenched in a sudden shower. Limitless outdoor experiences can be had through simple access to the rendezvous of water and land. This is the essence of the wildlife lands, to bring together man and the remaining parcels of Nebraska wilderness.
A BLACK LAB plunges through tall prairie grasses, the sun striking blue on its coat. A man and his son walk behind the dog, the father giving occasional instructions to his boy. It's the boy's first hunt.

Suddenly the dog acts birdy. His master moves up behind him as his father had taught him before the season began, and finally the cock flushes upward, brilliant feathers flashing and the cackling adding to the excitement. The boy fires, only rumpling a few tail feathers. Sumac flames on the youngster's disappointment as he groans that he forgot to lead the bird.

The father grins. "I've done that a few times, too, son." "No kidding?" the youth asks hopefully.

"There will be plenty more pheasants," his father promises.

Spirits cannot be crushed for long, and in a few moments the sunlit, fall-smelling day and the dog working take their effect on the boy.

Walking the quail draws and nearby food plots on Pressey have provided learning experiences for more than one boy.

Pressey is on the South Loup River and encompasses acres and acres of surrounding canyons and grasslands. It is about 1,000 acres of grassland with canyons and ravines that conceal pockets of pheasants and quail. Rabbits range through the grassland and along the 600 acres of riverbottom.
An occasional grouse also uses Pressey.

Peering down from canyon rims, visitors can almost always find a deer nestled in a pocket along a far wall. Sometimes a buck can be caught off guard, browsing in a ravine.

The Loup River flows constantly and slowly through the area. Fishermen work the holes there for catfish, bullhead and carp. Here, too, is an access point for floating the river.

The wildlife area was willed to the Game Commission upon the death of its former owner, A. E. Pressey, with the proviso that it be developed and used for public recreation or propagation of wildlife and fish. Pressey’s death left some 1,600 acres in trust for the people of Nebraska. Along with the acres of wildlife habitat, Pressey left the remains of his homestead, an extensive flower garden and an orchard on the riverbank. All are gradually becoming part of the natural wildlife community.

A red-tailed hawk sails over the area, his view encompassing vast chunks of land contour—flat grassland broken by canyons, riverside thickets of trees with an understory of shrubs, weed-choked draws. Yet his vision is narrow, seeking among the bunches of prairie grass for some small rodent.

The hawk’s circling glide is part of the changeless, everchanging world of the wildlife lands that are scattered throughout the Sand Hills as tomorrow’s legacy.
BREEZELESS silence grips the small lake. It mirrors bowers of wild rose against the vibrant green of bur oak. The surface is broken only occasionally by the movement of a turtle or a bullfrog. Tiny toadstools nestle under the trees.

Then the quiet is broken by the plop of a popper dropping on the water’s surface, and again by the strike of a largemouth bass rising to investigate. A man might take his granddaughter and grandson to Hull Lake to fish. The quiet would most likely be shattered then by delighted squeals and chatter.

Children might poke around in the shallows with a stick, disturbing crayfish and waterbugs. Shiny schools of minnows might flash along the shoreline, swimming in synch as though guided by one central nervous system. Or tadpoles might catch youthful attention as youngsters wait for their bobbers to dip under the surface.

Squirrels could answer the children’s chatter, or their investigations
might turn up a nest of young rabbits—wild cottontails carefully hidden away by their mother. Or perhaps they would occupy themselves with answering the strange whistles of bob-white quail.

In the fall, when oak leaves burn red and the air smells of musty smoke-dust, a hunter might try the grassy slopes above Hull Lake for grouse. Hull Lake is grouse territory, and the alert birds range along the fringes of the public land. Squirrel hunters, too, and rabbit hunters find game on the wildlife area.

Come winter, snow drifts to the surface of the frozen lake, protected in the shadow of the hills from blustering wind. Then cottontails and raccoons, and maybe an opossum or two, leave tracks in the smooth surface of the snow, along with those of varied songbirds and quail. The story of lakeside life is there to read; tales of struggle and just day-to-day living.

Then, with the new flush of spring, a jay's raucous scream pierces the pleasant stillness of the lake. The cycle of bullfrogs and fish, rabbits and squirrels, booming grouse and warbling songbirds, begins again.

Hull Lake is a small place, just a ravine that's been dammed to hold some fishing water. Its stature is amazing, however, as a place for varied wild creatures to make their dens and nests. It's a good place to visit the wild plants and animals that surround men's activities.
STANDING ON THE Pine Glen canyon rim, a solitary man scans the stream below. He hikes to the creek, bucket in hand, towel over his shoulder, a flyrod in the other hand. Stripping to bluejeans, he immerses himself in a deep hole and permits the current to wash away the day’s grime and exhaustion, then fills his jug, buckles on a belt, and wanders aimlessly upstream, flyrod in hand.

A log crosses the stream, with a deep hole below and an overhanging bank above it. Quietly, aimless movement takes purpose as the man steals to the bank’s edge. A homemade fly arches gracefully to the surface, twitches, and begins to drift. Silver sides flash in the waning sunlight as a trout sucks in the bait. A few moments’ play and he gasps exhausted in the grass.

Drawing a knife from his belt, the man cleans his trout, soon adds another to his small cotton sack, gathers
Autumn sun signals marsh birds to roost. His gear, and climbs thoughtfully to camp, moccasins sinking deep into pine needles.

Back on the rim, he startles a white-tail doe and fawn that plunge down the ravine to the south. He sees them in slow-motion, knowing that their leaps span many feet. In an instant they will disappear; in a moment their crashing rush will be silent....

Pine Glen wildlife area near Basset is many things. It’s canyons and Sand Hills grasslands; it’s a cold, running stream and hillside meadows; it’s dawn-frosted dew on spiderwort and little bluestem; it’s turkey vultures and songbirds; whitetails and mulies; bullfrogs and skinks and bullsnakes. Pine Glen is large—an entire 960 acre tract that encompasses several land features. In an area where spaces seem wide open, there is little public land. Pine Glen offers a large parcel for all sorts of outdoor activity.

Sitting under a pine tree on the canyon rim is like hanging in space. A turkey vulture circles within a few yards—hundreds of feet above the creek, yet eyeball-to-eyeball with a hiker.

A sunrise in June begins to wash the morning chill from damp air. Crystal dewdrops compress drops of sunlight and sparkle like liquid jewels. Each stem of grass bears a frosty coating of moisture. Somewhere on an eastward-facing slope, where wind has bent the grass, a snake lays coiled, absorbing sunlight into his cool hide. Everything is still.

Later, as the sun arcs upward, the frosty grass seems to melt, its sparkling grandeur of morning pales to a lustrous sheen, then to dry, afternoon green. And, when setting, the sun throws glittering ripples from the stream’s surface to the canyon wall. The creek blazes.

Fall brings flame to creek bed and canyon walls. Red vine and oak mingle with yellow and gold of ash, elm and cottonwood, and the flaming colors lick at an interspersion of ponderosa pine and redcedar.

Sumac and buck brush provide a rich understory for the trees. A confusion of wildflowers from daisy fleabane to ball cactus line the creek banks and canyon walls.

Buck brush, plum and low junipers crowd the steep valley slopes, and it’s from these thickets that bobwhite quail make their clear, morning call in spring. Deer browse the shrubs, leaving sign throughout the area along well-used paths where hoofprints are plentiful.

Silent summer nights are broken by the howls of coyotes and the impossible croak of bullfrogs, sounding like nothing animal at all. Vast hordes of songbirds conduct their various business in the scruffy thickets—twittering, warbling, and cheeping—catching grasshoppers and feeding their youngsters.

Pine Glen is new to the Commission, only recently purchased as the result of an offer from the former landowner. Croplands still break the canyon rims; milo and corn for deer and quail to feed on.

Pine Glen is many things to many people. To some, it’s a natural cathedral where a jeep track is blasphemy. To others it is a zoological or botanical laboratory where plant and animal habits and interrelationships can be studied. To a hunter it’s the challenge to meet a deer on a steep canyon wall. For a fisherman, it’s trout. For a camper or hiker, it’s the original of an oil that he paints himself into. It’s solitude to gaze into a campfire and discover oneself.