1977

Your wildlife lands : the Southwest

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Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

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A group of scrub-tailed horses grazes the bunchgrasses on an arid tableland. White-faced Herefords scatter across the mesa. Canyons, filled with a choke of buckbrush, finger into the pastures, breaking the smooth brown-green of dormant grass.

Summer is far advanced and the grasses have sent up their flowering stalks, seeded, and browned. Three mule bucks browse the canyon floor, their antlers sheathed in velvet. The biggest one, a four pointer, must be old, for he's gray—almost white. A scar runs diagonally across his shoulder.

Southwest Nebraska is grazing and croplands; it's tough blue grama grass and yucca. It's short-grass prairie. It is also giant reservoirs; valuable water for irrigation and recreation.

Storage of water for irrigation has created some benefits for wildlife and the sportsman as well. Here are areas where wildlife can find all the requirements for life—water and plants and living space. The large reservoirs of the southwest have provided basins of public land for hunting and fishing, for wildlife observation and for water sports. Recreation in all its forms is focused on the big waters.

Wildlife areas are part of that complex; lands where more primitive outdoor experiences can be found. Vegetation is permitted to grow wild in all its natural diversity, and a variety of wildlife species populates the areas where life needs are met.

Here are fertile loess hills and broad valleys surrounding the mighty Republican and its tributaries, with their series of reservoirs. And to the west are sandhills, the southwestern tip of the great sand-dune formations.

Southwest Nebraska was an area where the farmer Indians of east and central Nebraska hunted buffalo. It was where the nomadic hunting tribes followed the monstrous beasts. Cattle kings followed the Indians, replacing the buffalo with beef cattle. Later, other white men came and built their sod shanties, only to be driven out by drought. But some of them hung on—and others then came to replace those driven out. And finally, they learned the methods of dryland farming and introduced new crops, and they thrived.

There are 21 wildlife areas in southwest Nebraska. They include portions of four major reservoirs, and access points on a number of others. There are two small lakes and several diversions held under lease from irrigation districts for fishing access. There is Clear Creek, a controlled hunting area, and Sacramento in the rainwater basin, where the Commission breeds Canada geese for stocking, administers waterfowl hunting, and provides good habitat for upland game birds along with many non-game species.

There are also three small prairie-cropland parcels where upland hunting is available on public land.

Primitive outdoor experiences of all sorts are available in the southwest.
There are no facilities on the areas, to speak of. There are no modern restrooms, no camping pads, no playground equipment, no firegrates, no electrical hookups for streamlined, jet-age motorhomes and campers. There are rainwater puddles where waterfowl rest as they migrate across thousands of miles of country. There are brush-filled canyons where deer browse. There are upland prairies where rabbits and doves nest, and river valleys and croplands where pheasant and quail, and myriad other birds, nest and roost and loaf.

A guide to the southwest wildlife areas follows. It includes a chart of all areas, a description of the flora and fauna of the region, a look at management philosophy and recreation. It is merely a taste of vast portions of Nebraska. It is up to the individual visitor to the wildlife lands to fill in the details that are most meaningful to him. That is the real value of these lands—not having programmed adventures.

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<th>Land Area (acres)</th>
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*Includes four satellite areas.

There is something very satisfying about wandering off the beaten path. At Lake Wilcox, it is no different. It is a place of quiet and solitude, a place where one can relax and enjoy the simple pleasures of life. There are no facilities on the areas, to speak of. There are no modern restrooms, no camping pads, no playground equipment, no firegrates, no electrical hookups for streamlined, jet-age motorhomes and campers. There are rainwater puddles where waterfowl rest as they migrate across thousands of miles of country. There are brush-filled canyons where deer browse. There are upland prairies where rabbits and doves nest, and river valleys and croplands where pheasant and quail, and myriad other birds, nest and roost and loaf.

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AN INDIAN SUMMER sun flashed off yellowing cottonwood leaves on one of those hot afternoons that is often sandwiched between frosty mornings and cool evenings. The lake was down, and two youngsters were busy caving off a sand ledge along the beach.

Rolled-up blue jeans were drenched anyway; it seemed no child has the restraint to stay in the shallows where he wouldn't get wet. The younger boy, a tousle-haired blond, would stop periodically to pull up his weighted, sagging jeans.

A man and a woman had just moved to the west end of the ledge where they could watch without peering into the sun's glare and its reflection on the waves. The faint sound of a guitar and a woman's voice drifted across from a boat, cruising the center of the reservoir and flashing red from its sides now and then as it turned.

Earlier in the season, the smell of sizzling bacon had drifted on the breeze. Sweatshirt-clad youngsters had waited around campstoves, sniffing the aroma and waiting for eggs and pancakes to be added.

Sometimes a reel along the shoreline would whine and kids would be diverted from their chop-watching or sand-building to join some adult who had been tending their gear for them "just for a minute, please".

Excited shrieks and frenzied grabbing of dipping rods were not uncommon, and a freckle-faced girl might occasionally be found running between campsite and shoreline, telling about the "huge" walleye she had landed.

As fall turns to winter and waterfowl begin moving south, a man and his son might be found building a blind somewhere in a marshy cove. And the day the season opens may find dad, a few seasons already behind him, dragging wearily downstairs to find the boy, already dressed, munching last night's biscuits as he waits on the bot-
tom step. “I’ve been up since 4:30, dad,” he explains.

A cold, crisp day, punctuated by dry leaves crackling underfoot, could find brothers watchfully walking a row of plum and sunflower. “Hey, look at this,” one calls, distracted from his pheasant hunting. “Looks like something’s been bedding here.”

These scenes and many others are repeated year after year on the four big southwest reservoirs. It is on these waters that fishermen troll and jig and try their luck at bait-casting. They dangle every conceivable bait before the fish, from artificials to worms and minnows to doughballs and corn to chicken entrails. It seems at times that the most repulsive is the most productive—or at least the most popular.

All sorts of boats find their way into service as fishing rigs, from cabin cruisers to pontoons to small rowboats, and all manner of fish are there for the taking, including catfish, bluegill, crappie, largemouth and smallmouth bass, walleye and carp.

All around the lake perimeters there are acres and acres of land dedicated to the production of wildlife cover, held in trust by the Game and Parks Commission through leases with the controlling agencies. In all instances, the reservoirs were created with other purposes than recreation in mind. That means that irrigation comes first and the lakes are drawn down each year to water downstream land. Fishing comes second, and while the fishing is good, it is limited in practical terms by the lowest point each of the lakes reaches during a season.

Clumps of trees line the draws, combined with brush where quail whistle-call back and forth each spring. Deer browse the shrubs, drinking from the upper reaches of the lakes.

The big waters offer rest for waterfowl during spring and fall, and concentrations reach into the tens of thousands. Canada geese and mallards are the most common stop-overs.

People do use and enjoy the public lands and waters of the southwest. While the wildlife lands are not intensively developed, they provide ample opportunity for quiet pleasures, for fishing, for hunting, and other recreation. The absence of commercialism is usually appreciated.
Parts of the lake perimeters are set aside as recreation areas, and facilities are available for many outdoor activities. It is there that boat ramps can be found, and picnic tables, water wells, and rest rooms. Some outdoorsmen use those areas as a jumping-off point for hunting and fishing and outdoor study; camping in the recreation area and tramping the wildlife lands during the daytime.

Rugged hills break down to the shore, dunes of sand, frozen with grass. It’s big country with big waters, but it’s thrifty country. Plants and animals struggle with it throughout the seasons, taking only what they need to survive without extravagance.

There’s no spectacular beauty; no mountains or waterfalls on the southwest reservoirs. Yet there is a rich tapestry of life that has muted grandeur—like expensive brocades.

This sandy beach is one thread. There are no blazing flashes of color, but here a bit of foam rides gentle wavelets. Along the beaches, wildlife leave their tracks in the sand, a record of their passing. A painted turtle has dragged his house from shoreline to brush, his trail a smooth path punctuated on either side with the marks of steady claws that pulled him along. Deer leave quotation marks where they come to drink.

The yucca is still green, clumps of its sharp spears topped with dry, brown stalks, the seed pods still hanging on their withered sides. Peering between blades of grass will expose tiny prairie flowers; the poppy mallow and sand cherry in their seasons. Pitcher sage, goat’s beard, daisy fleabane all occupy their respective places in the hills and along the shore.

The Southwest Wildlife Lands are set in big country with big waters. It is a dry land where those waters are a welcome relief and a gathering place for mankind as well as wildlife. They meet the need for water and of man’s need for recreation.

A COOT SITS quietly on her rain-water-basin nest while another leads her ugly, reddish brood through the rushes. Nearby, a pair of mallards dabble for insect larvae and underwater vegetation. The marshes on Sacramento are silent except for the occasional, ringing quack of a duck.

Sacramento-Wilcox Game Management Area is a series of tracts in the south-central Nebraska rainwater basin area. It is surrounded by cropland—corn, milo, and wheat—where waterfowl and pheasants can feed. It is an area of refuge from the hazards of farming operations where nesting and brooding cover is not disturbed.

It is a controlled hunting area, a center of Canada goose production for the Game and Parks Commission’s stocking program, and an open area for hunting upland game.

Pit blinds edge the marshes at Sacramento. And in fall, thousands of Canada geese rest on the ponds there. Area managers manipulate water levels and
Visitation and usage of wildlife areas works out well, with people such as swimmers at Red Willow (below) and campers at Sutherland (bottom photo) preferring summer conditions. Wildlife is perhaps more interested in spring nesting and the fall and winter habitat crop patterns to provide hunting as well as a stopping-off point for the migrating waterfowl.

Sacramento meets the needs of pheasants and quail, too. Water levels fluctuate dramatically from year to year on the rainwater basins. In high-water years, waterfowl crowd into the marshes. In dry years, upland game uses the resulting weed patches. A windbreak of cottonwoods and elm, along with its edge of shrubs, attracts quail to the area. Croplands and prairie draw pheasants.

There is much to be learned there, much to be observed about game and hunting. Sitting on his heels with a hot thermos of coffee, his dog alert beside him, a hunter might muse about his sport.

"I guess I'm a snob about hunting. It takes a long time to become a good hunter, a lot of trial and error and knowing your game and how to shoot. You can't just buy a gun and a permit and presto, be a hunter. . . . At Sacramento I find a variety of game species, and I can study their habits; what they eat, where they loaf, what
sort of nesting cover they need. I've learned to respect and appreciate my quarry.

Every spring, a group of egg-stealing men rob the captive Canadas' nests, substituting dummy eggs for those taken. They incubate the eggs and rear goslings to be released, mainly in the Sand Hills, where the Commission is attempting to restore the giant Canadas to their former range.

Artificial nesting tubs are scattered throughout the area, left over from an attempt to attract free-flying geese that have been released on the area. Nesting boxes, too, can be found on Sacramento where wood ducks are being encouraged to settle. A captive flock of the colorful birds provides ducklings for stocking elsewhere.

A killdeer flops along the shoreline, playing its very serious "broken wing" game whereby it distracts attention from its nest.

In summer, Sacramento is splashes of yellow coreopsis scattered around the water's edge, and fields of damp smartweed—expanses of pink that border the sky-reflecting water.

But it's in fall, when water and sky turn to steel, that flocks of geese speckle the sky. A quiet, empty marsh suddenly becomes a bedlam of wings and honking geese, rising in wave after wave of living bodies.

Amid the resting waterfowl are scattered dozens of domed muskrat houses, sitting on the surface of the water like regular hulks of debris, piles of dead twigs and cattails.

Sacramento is also prairie, and a prairie dog town on one of the satellite areas seems almost an echo of the past when buffalo roamed the grasslands instead of beef cattle. In fact, it is theorized that the lagoon area was an immense buffalo wallow. A prairie dog town, with its complexity of animal dependencies, harbors such "critters" as rattlesnakes sometimes, and burrowing owls. Sightings of black-footed ferrets have been reported.

Sacramento, like any wildlife area, is a place where a full variety of plants and animals is encouraged to grow. At Sac, that variety is the special intermixture of rainwater basin, prairie-cropland species.

Isn't that just beautiful," a big, rough-looking man remarked almost religiously. "Just beautiful.

He was stroking the feathers of a large Canada goose he had just bagged at Clear Creek.

"I drew a blind site this year," he said, "and it was no easy trick to get that blind in there, either," he continued. "That channel is tricky. Some days during the season, the guys from the Commission told us, it was too dangerous to even cross.

"I came out every time I could, though," he said. "There weren't many geese during most of the season this year, weather was just too good. But I'd watch a few of them flying over every now and then. Too high to shoot. Just black against the sky and honking. You kind of want to be up there with them.

"I'll have this one mounted so I can just look at him."

Despite the controversy that the controlled hunting area caused when it was created in 1972, it provides an almost unique hunting experience for Nebraskans. Although most goose
hunters don’t often discuss their feelings about geese and goose hunting. Clear Creek offers a chance for some hunting that obviously means a lot to a great number of people.

Clear Creek Waterfowl Management Area is divided into three areas: a refuge, a controlled hunting area, and a public hunting area.

On the refuge, geese find almost any kind of Nebraska river-bottom terrain. There are riparian woodlands, wet meadows, river channel and sandbars, along with croplands and hay fields. Bald eagles share the area with them, using dead trees for roosting. Squirrels steal corn that Commission personnel store there for use in baiting waterfowl during winter banding efforts.

Wheat offers geese green expanses, and alfalfa and corn take over when the wheat’s gone.

“Bunny’s Point”, just inside the southeast corner of the controlled hunting area, is accessible on foot. It offers an overview of the refuge, and binoculars will pick out hundreds of geese. It is estimated that as many as 7,000 Canada geese winter there.

On the controlled hunting area, the Commission takes pains to accommodate both geese and goose hunters.

A controlled burn in the spring of 1975 cleared some areas for loafing. In addition, personnel seeded wheat and alfalfa for green feed.

Originally, the area was a wet meadow. High water earlier in the reservoir’s history drowned the vegetation, however, and when the water receded, cottonwood and willow seedlings began to take over.

The burn was aimed at setting back the growth of those trees and bringing about the return of grasses. The burn is not expected to affect other wildlife using Clear Creek. It covered only 40 acres, a minute area.

Some 25 blind sites at the controlled hunting area are allocated by yearly drawing. Site holders must then build their own blinds. On days when they are not present, however, the blinds are allocated to other hunters on the basis of a daily drawing.

A dangerous channel makes entry to some of the blind sites almost impossible in some years. In 1975, however, the Commission began installing a cable across that channel and providing a boat to make the crossing safer. Even with this aid, ice and winter weather still create hazards that haven’t been entirely overcome.

On the Lake McConaughy public hunting area, there is much less competition for blind sites. Permits from the Commission are necessary there, too, and the blinds must be kept a reasonable distance from public use facilities such as boat docks and picnic areas.

The common denominator at Clear Creek is geese. From the public hunting area on the east to the refuge at the west, geese pass over the area, moving from nearby feeding areas where they pick up waste grain to loafing areas near the water.

The Clear Creek area also provides some of the best catfishing opportunity in the state during the spring. The upstream migration of catfish from massive Lake McConaughy to the North Platte River offers uncommon opportunity to catfish enthusiasts.

Myriad recreational activity goes on through the year, and water is a most important ingredient. While some reservoirs fluctuate greatly depending on irrigation demands, such as Enders, others are affected less, including Red Willow (above) and Swanson Lake (opposite). Fishing varies less than water.
YOU CAN MEET almost anybody on the ice. Ice fishermen come in all sizes and shapes. An old man sits quietly on a camp stool, a stubble of white on his chin. Blue eyes glint as he exchanges good-natured greetings with other regulars on the ice.

Each expects to ace the others out with that granddaddy northern that waits in the depths—but mostly they’re all satisfied to take home a nice mess of crappie.

Conversations are a mixture of studies read on fish populations and philosophy on the therapy offered tired minds by fishing, along with a bit of one-up-manship.

"...Why, the wind was so bad in them days, you couldn’t leave your horse tied to the hitchin’ rail while you went into the saloon for a beer. When you came out, he’d be strangled to death cuz the wind’ud blow the ground right out from under him and he’d be hanging from the rail."

Youngsters skate on their boots as they wait for a nibble, and, with all their boisterousness, they probably miss the bites they do get.

In summertime, the same camp stools may be resting on the lake shore, along with the same fishermen, the same philosophy. Fish studies may be new, and new inventions are sure to be coming from fertile minds still vying to tell the real show-stopper.

The kids are likely to be chasing frogs in the shallows or wading in a tiny cove out of the fishermen’s way.

Local residents still call the area Camp Hayes or the Duke Alexis area. According to Nebraska history, William F. Cody, Buffalo Bill, and Grand Duke Alexis of Russia camped on or near the spot in 1872 during the celebrated buffalo hunt.

Although efforts at management of wildlife areas is about divided between people and animals, the benefits are primarily reaped by humans. Hunting, fishing and nature watching are all enhanced with each improvement for wildlife, but that may be incidental to goals.

photo by Jon Farrar

photo by Faye Musil
Hayes Center Lake is important to the small community 12 miles distant. Important enough, in fact, that the community club donated their labor to rebuilding the old earthen dam there in 1975. Members of the club secured materials at cost, and engineering plans were contributed by the Soil Conservation Service. The Commission funded the project at approximately $800.

The new dam is expected to improve the walleye fishery there by giving the fish a good spawning bed. The large rocks and slabs used to reinforce the dam face are a necessary component to walleye reproduction.

Hayes Center Lake is a community project in a very real sense of the word, and it is a family gathering place where picnicking facilities are available. A camping site on the area also hosts a few hunters each year. The sportsmen set up a base camp at Hayes Center to hunt surrounding private lands.

Too small to be a great hunting center, the area still supports a few quail and pheasants. Both white-tailed and mule deer are sighted there, along with fox squirrel and cottontail rabbit.

For an area so small, Hayes Center Lake offers a rich variety of outdoor experiences.

As FALL QUICKLY turns to winter, Nebraska’s well-known winds whip across the state, carrying a cargo of tumbleweeds. A deep, roadside ditch gathers these and holds them until it is brimming with the prickly pompons, each distinguishable from the others by its slightly different shade of buff and brown, or perhaps even a reddish cast.

And across the ditch is Limestone Bluffs, one of several smaller wildlife areas in southwest Nebraska. Combining the three which are in fact scattered throughout the region would bring thick shelterbelt, creek bottom and short-grass prairie together with an old rock quarry.

These small patches are permitted to grow up wild to native grasses and shrubs. Though not large enough to support extensive recreation opportunity, they do provide “henhouses” for wildlife production. Here are places for pheasant and quail to find cover, to nest and bring off broods undisturbed by surrounding farming operations.

In addition, they are a small trust for the future. It’s hard telling in 1976 what just 5 years will bring in terms of recreation needs. Any one of these small areas might support some sporting possibility that has been overlooked previously.

Careful observation of any one of these patches of public land could turn up a microcosm of wildlife habitat. The casual observer is likely to discover occasional deer, a rabbit or two, some interesting species of songbirds. A walk through the grass might be interrupted by the startling movement of

Turkey vultures (below) may have bad reputation, but they are important links in nature’s food chain. They are able to assimilate even long-dead animals, thereby serving as environmental cleaners and recyclers. And, their efforts also help nature present us with more attractive scenery.
a blue racer disturbed from his resting place just underfoot.

On those areas that include creek bottom or marsh, the visitor is likely to hear the scattered “plops” of a dozen frogs heading for cover underwater. Coon tracks might be discovered along the water’s edge. Deer may come to drink and browse on scrubby growth.

Predators, too, may sometimes be found wandering through or soaring over the tracts in search of food. Perhaps coyotes visit occasionally to hunt mice or rabbits, perhaps they bed atop one or another of the hills. A hawk may be seen hovering over a place where prey has been spotted. Or an owl may roost there, waiting for darkness to return so that he can get on with his hunting.

Though small, these spots are alive with things to be seen and experienced, from the progression of leaves turning in the fall to wild plum blooming in spring.

SOME OF THE finest fishing in the state is found in the irrigation and power canal system in southwest Nebraska. To provide fishermen with access to the canals, the Game and Parks Commission leases a number of small areas throughout the system.

Some fishermen haunt the canals exclusively, taking channel and flat-head catfish, walleye and a few smallmouth bass and trout.

In fall, when the power companies drain the canals, there are crayfish by the thousands to be taken from shallow pools remaining as the system dries. As crawdads can damage canal walls with their burrowing, it is to the benefit of the system, too, that they be removed.

In addition to the canals, and the major reservoirs, there are small, Commission-leased areas on many of the lakes, including Jeffrey Canyon, Johnson and Sutherland. Again, these small areas provide access for fishermen as well as waterfowl hunters.

Two spill areas in Boxelder and Cottonwood canyons near North Platte have turned partially to marsh as flash-flood erosion carries silt down the escarpments and onto the canyon floors. Rushes and sedge and cattails make hiding places for waterfowl hunters, and the small lakes draw waterfowl.

Later in the winter, the lakes are sheltered from blustery winds, and freeze smooth for ice skating opportunities. Some 6 to 10 feet of water offer at least marginal ice fishing.

Although they are not large, the diversions and canal access points are gathering points for local sportsmen. They provide entrance to many acres of water where fishing and waterfowl hunting is readily available.

Text by Faye Musil

"Your Wildlife Lands: The Southwest" was funded by the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, project W-17-D, and by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Box 30370, Lincoln, Nebraska 68503. Additional copies can be obtained free at any district Game Commission office or by writing the above address.