1976

Your wildlife lands: the Southeast

Faye Musil
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

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**Title:** Your wildlife lands: the Southeast  
**Author(s):** Musil, Faye.  
**Corp Author(s):** Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.  
**Publication:** Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska Game and Parks Commission,  
**Year:** 1976  
**Description:** 1 v. : ill., map ; 28 cm.  
**Language:** English  

**SUBJECT(S)**

**Descriptor:**  
- Wildlife conservation -- Nebraska.  
- Travel.  
- Wildlife conservation.  

**Geographic:**  
- Nebraska -- Description and travel.  
- Nebraska.  

**Note(s):** Cover title./ Issued to depository libraries on microfiche.  

**Class Descriptors:**  
**GovDoc:** G1000 H029 -1975  
**Responsibility:** [text by Faye Musil].  
**Material Type:** Government publication (gpb); State or province government publication (sgp)
Your Wildlife Lands
The Southeast
SILENCE. Nothing moves but a mourning wind and tall, prairie grasses undulating in its hot blast. Yet the grass is everything, and everything moves.

Prairie was movement. Wind mourned through the grasses, a lonely spirit in lonely hills. Prairie could be a young man standing on a hill crest, surrounded by movement. The prairie touched him.

Heat enveloped blowing clumps of brown-eyed susans and butterfly weed, but couldn't wilt them. The lonely hills were rich with life.

A red buffalo, as the Indians called fire, ran through the grass occasionally, clearing a choke of undergrowth. Yet under the soil, life endured the fire, awaiting the cool rains. And when the rains didn't come, the wait was only longer. Roots remained, many feet under the soil—seeds were viable for years, enduring drought in dry, prairie sod. Dry grasses rattled, tinder for more fires. But the prairie lived.

For centuries, the prairie lived that way, with only fires and Indians to disturb its rhythm. Then came the plow and the cow. Grass gave way to corn. Alfalfa replaced prairie hay. Families struggled on the land, changed it. They made it produce crops and livestock, the basic necessities to feed themselves and the cities. The country expanded.

But there was much in the prairie that was good; a natural balance that maintained itself without the manipulation of man. Today, in Southeast Nebraska, where ruts of the Oregon Trail pass, the buffalo have disappeared, but the prairie remains in small, representative areas—the wildlife lands. Prairie fires no longer sweep out the old grasses and trees. River and stream banks are lined with oaks and hickories that gradually migrate upstream.

In the tree-brush cover, among remnants of osage orange and multiflora rose hedges planted by farmers to hold the soil, are quail. In the oaks and hickories along the river bottoms are squirrels, and maybe some foxes.

Southeast Nebraska is hilly country, swept by winds, covered by fragile, glaciated soil. The hilly, fragile soil has made the farmer careful. Fields are small, there are terraces to farm around, more odd areas. Good conservation practices hold the land.

The state's two major metropolitan areas are located inside the district. Outdoor recreation opportunities are centered now on Salt Valley Lakes, the wildlife and recreation lands along their shorelines, and on a few prairie areas of various types to fill...
Wildlife lands still belong to the native trees and grasses that pioneers found on the prairie

the gaps.

Wildlife lands encompass a wide variety of spots from a waterfowl management area, where thousands of geese stop off during their migration, to acres of prairie where a remnant flock of prairie chickens remains. Southeast Wildlife Lands include a waterfowl production area at Smartweed Marsh, and a few spots along the Blue River where fishermen can get to the water for cat and carp fishing, along with several parcels of railroad right-of-way where wildlife can nest and raise broods. There are acres and acres of grass and trees surrounding the Salt Valley Lakes where dog training and trial facilities are offered. Captive Canada goose and wood duck flocks provide waterfowl for stocking, and a plant nursery supplies stock for wildlife areas throughout the state.

There are about 14,000 acres in wildlife areas in the Southeast with springs, lakes, and a rich intermixture of wild plants and animals that are the reason for wildlife lands to exist. There are no sophisticated developments, no playground equipment, no modern restrooms, no camping pads, and no electrical hookups for camper-trailers. There are outdoor experiences to be savored and shared.

A guide to the Southeast Wildlife Areas follows. You will find a description of recreation possibilities, and the wildlife and plants that you will encounter as you explore Southeast Nebraska.
Guide to Southeast Wildlife Lands

The map and charts give approximate locations of the wildlife lands in southeast Nebraska. Recreation areas and parks are not included in this section. If a more detailed map is needed for the Salt Valley or Iron Horse Trail sites, separate brochures are available from the Game and Parks Commission, Box 30370, Lincoln, Nebr. 68503. Wildlife lands are managed for specific purposes, which are wildlife production and public hunting, fishing, camping, etc. They have a minimum of maintenance, and it is therefore important that visitors make as little impact as possible—no littering, vandalism and similar destructive behavior. Waterfowl production or refuge is becoming more important on some areas, but each of the sites has a primary use. On some, such as Plattsmouth and Twin Lakes, this main use changes with the season. Access is open year-round on most, however, and there is some form of recreation to be enjoyed on them regardless of the season.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Water and Marsh (Acre)</th>
<th>Land Access</th>
<th>Hunting</th>
<th>Fishing</th>
<th>Other Activities</th>
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<td>2 E, 1 S of Alexandria</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Blue Bluffs</td>
<td>1 E, 2 1/2 S of Milford</td>
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<td>2 .5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burchard Lake*</td>
<td>3 E, 1 1/4 N of Burchard</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iron Horse Trail**</td>
<td>33 scattered tracts of abandoned railroad right of way from Dubois to Beatrice</td>
<td>230</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pawnee Prairie</td>
<td>8 S, 1 E of Burchard</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1,115</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Plattsmouth Waterfowl Management Area***</td>
<td>1 N, 1/2 E of Plattsmouth</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,360 3.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salt Valley Lakes****</td>
<td>Around Lincoln</td>
<td>4,350 9,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shady Trail</td>
<td>4 S, 1 E, 1 S, 1 1/4 E, 1 1/4 S of Milford</td>
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<tr>
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<td>60</td>
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</table>

*Camping in designated area

**See chart on opposite page for tract locations

***Special regulations apply; contact area manager for further information.

****Area open for day use only.

*****Special hunting regulations apply; separate brochure available.
### Iron Horse Trail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acreage</th>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1 mi. east, 1 mi. south of Beatrice*</td>
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<tr>
<td>7½</td>
<td>4 mi. east, 1½ mi. south of Beatrice</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>5 mi. east, 1½ mi. south, 4 mi. west</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7 mi. east, 1½ mi. south of Beatrice</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>1 mi. west of Junction Nebr. 4 and U.S. 136, east of Beatrice</td>
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<tr>
<td>1½</td>
<td>½ mi. east of Junction Nebr. 4 and U.S. 136, east of Beatrice</td>
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<tr>
<td>13½</td>
<td>2 mi. west of Virginia</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 mi. west of Virginia</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>west edge of Virginia</td>
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<tr>
<td>13½</td>
<td>1 mi. east of Virginia</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>2 mi. west, ½ mi. south of Lewiston</td>
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<td>½</td>
<td>½ mi. south, 2½ mi. east of Lewiston</td>
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<td>53, 54</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>77</td>
<td>½</td>
<td>2 mi. west, 3 mi. north of Pawnee City</td>
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<td>87, 88</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>98, 99, 100, 101</td>
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<td>1½ mi. north, 2½ mi. west of DuBois</td>
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<td>106</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1 mi. east, ½ mi. north of DuBois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>112</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2¼ mi. south, 2 mi. east of DuBois</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Access via easement from east
Salt Valley

PEOPLE. More than 150,000 persons in Lincoln alone. Recreation in the Salt Valley is geared to large numbers of people and centered on a series of reservoirs in the Salt Creek watershed.

Still, there is room for wildlife in the Salt Valley, and room for primitive outdoor experiences. The undeveloped portions of recreation areas have been turned over to the management of the Resource Services Division of the Game and Parks Commission. Other areas have been managed in total by this division—the wildlife lands.

Some of the Salt Valley Lakes have been intensively developed with many recreation facilities, including boat ramps, picnic tables, rest rooms, drinking water and so on. Others have only modest developments. People crowd into the recreation areas on weekends, evidencing their desire for outdoor experiences.

There are over 10,000 acres of wildlife lands bordering Salt Valley water. In an area of the state with large numbers of hunters and increasing acres of private land that is closed to hunting, that is not enough, but it is a welcome chunk of public land for hunting. Fishing waters are few outside the Salt Valley. Opportunities for hiking, camping, viewing and photographing wildlife, would be slim in the Lincoln area if the Salt Valley wildlife lands did not exist.

Salt Valley means all these opportunities on lands that are carefully planned to include both recreation facilities and wildlife areas.

A recreation area is made for people. The grass is mowed, unsightly dead limbs and trees are periodically removed. Debris is cleared away, and facilities are provided for people comfort, including fire grates.

But next door, across a highway maybe, are wildlife lands. Grass may not be “high as an elephant’s eye”, but pheasants and quail can live and hide in it. Dead limbs and trees are permitted to fall at their leisure, meanwhile providing food for worms and insects, which woodpeckers eat in their turn.

For the camper who prefers a bit of isolation, the wildlife lands offer plenty of open space where he can set up his tent and campstove. But that’s all incidental. People must conform to the wildlife areas because they are a product of nature, not man.

Wildlife lands are left undeveloped, making them naturals for hunting.

Photo by Lou Ell

Photo by Jon Farrar
are managed for wildlife.

Waterskiers and sailboaters like Branched Oak Lake proper, but the avid fisherman is likely to prefer the little coves and quiet areas where power boating is limited to five miles per hour and dead trees and weeds are permitted to stand. That's where the fish are. That's where the shade is, too. Trees overhanging the bank shade the water, the fisherman and the fish under the surface.

Lots of things are happening on the south arm of Branched Oak Lake. Captive flocks of Canada geese and wood ducks are producing goslings and ducklings for free-flying flocks of both on the Salt Valley. Already, the ducks and geese stocked at Twin Lakes are nesting.

Adjacent to the duck and goose pens are nurseries for trees to be planted on wildlife lands throughout the state. These are the trees that are not available from nurseries; trees that are especially propagated to grow in Nebraska. Valuable nut, hardwood and fruit trees grow strong in the nursery before they are replanted on other areas where they are expected to "grow wild" with a minimum of tending. Herbaceous plant materials are also propagated in the nursery. This is where the Game and Parks Commission gets rare plant materials for replacing native wildflowers and shrubs on areas that have been farmed or otherwise disturbed. Rows of butterfly milkweed and creeping juniper will provide seed and cuttings for more flowers and shrubs.

In addition to other "facilities" on Salt Valley reservoirs, there are two dog training areas—one on Wagon Train and another at Yankee Hill, where hunters can exercise and train their dogs. On Branched Oak, the Commission also maintains a nationally recognized dog trial area. These areas receive minimal management, with mowing occasionally to prevent choking overgrowth that would hamper the dogs' work.

The Salt Valley also offers refuge for waterfowl. Twin Lakes is closed to all hunting the year round, and some of the south arm of Branched Oak is closed as posted throughout the year. Stagecoach and Conestoga are closed to waterfowl hunting. Artificial nesting has been provided on wooden rafts and posts on the lakes for geese, and in boxes for wood ducks. Hopefully, the cry of the wild goose will someday be commonplace even as close to the metropolitan area as the lakes. It is hoped that the wood duck's soft whisper will be heard around the edges of the reservoir.

Salt Valley backwaters offer fishermen retreat from the weekend crowds.
Iron Horse Trail

IRON HORSE TRAIL is not a single strip of land, but rather a series of 33 parcels scattered from DuBois to Beatrice. They are parts of an old railroad right-of-way. Along the trail are a variety of soil and vegetation types from woods to grasslands.

Access to the trail is often dirt, and when it rains, visitors have to be a little careful about vehicle travel.

But, perhaps that’s part of the attraction of Iron Horse Trail. The winding, tree-lined road to tract 112 is part of being in the country, just as the tiny town of DuBois is anything but urban with its iris-decorated yards.

A cinder path down the center of the tract is evidence of man’s passage, but it is almost entirely overgrown with plum thickets now.

Tract 106 probably offers the most variety along the trail. Weathered railroad ties lie in a jumble, waiting to be reclaimed by decay. Here, a casual stroll to the Nemaha River will reveal flashes of color from a dozen different songbirds. Bobolinks’ clear, bubbling call will sound like water for just an instant, encouraging the visitor who still has a long walk ahead. Cardinals and bluebirds, and downy woodpeckers, share the area with brown thrashers and sparrows.

Rabbits and bobwhite quail aren’t overanxious about visitors, and several of them are likely to cross the trail during a walk to the river. A squirrel may even be spotted eating a walnut in a nearby tree. Occasional heavy rustles bring deer to mind.

Snails and clams by the millions must inhabit the Nemaha River, for their shells are strewn throughout the tract. High water frequently floods portions of the area, leaving behind debris of aquatic life. Raccoons leave footprints in the riverside clay.

All along the strip, wildlife uses Iron Horse Trail. Hunters striding through the tracts may push animals to adjacent farmlands, but when the trail is quiet again, they return. Pheasants and quail use the tracts for sunning and dusting areas. Trees and shrubs edge on adjacent croplands where wildlife can feed.

On tracts 29 and 31 near Beatrice, a little creek provides a pocket for hardwood trees like oak and walnut. Squirrels are likely to be found anywhere on the area.

As the parcels get farther from water, cover changes. Iron Horse is a good study in varying habitat, and its transition from river and stream bottom to prairie. Wooded areas give way to shrubs like sumac with its fall flame, plum and chokecherry with their frosted fruits. Even dogwood, bittersweet and Virginia creeper tangle with wild grape in a rich plant community where fall paints with vivid color, from white to orange to purple.

Then the shrubs give way to grasses and forbs. Roundhead lespedeza and goldenrod mix with bluestem, switchgrass, and foxtail, but the wildflowers are only tiny spots in the blanket of tall grasses; bluestem, switchgrass, and Indian grass. It is a place for pheasants and rabbits to build their nests.

Iron Horse is leftovers, abandoned by the railroad; its original use is ended. But the wildlife that uses it doesn’t mind—wild animals and plants have their own uses for it, living together for the hunter and hiker to enjoy.
Plattsmouth

Geese. SQUAWKING, honking geese. By the tens of thousands they stop at Plattsmouth Waterfowl Management Area each fall. But the sound is not a distant, wild gabble—it's a clamor which reaches its crescendo with an average peak population estimated at 100,000.

Plattsmouth is a waterfowl refuge, with controlled perimeter shooting. Some 2,000 hunters used blind facilities there in 1973, and about 1,400 geese were harvested.

The area is intensively managed for geese. Game and Parks Commission personnel manipulate crops to suit the tastes of geese. No royalty has sat down to a more carefully planned and prepared cuisine. Wheat is interspersed with corn in a pattern that varies from year to year. Since snows and blues are reluctant to feed in a closed field, corn is harvested in strips—opening 16 rows and leaving 8.

Besides the comforts of food plots, the geese enjoy a 25-acre lake on the area for loafing and resting.

Hunters of several types enjoy Plattsmouth. Human hunters, especially beginners, have an opportunity to participate in goose hunting without the search for a site. Although blinds are already in place, hunters must take along a thorough knowledge of their weapons and of their game.

Eagles and coyotes hunt Plattsmouth too. Diseased or crippled geese provide most of their meals.
Plattemouth Waterfowl Area provides food and rest for migrating snow geese

Hunters are not the only people encouraged to visit the area. Many visitors bring only cameras or binoculars. On Wednesday and Sunday afternoons, local personnel conduct scheduled tours. Afternoon hunting has not been permitted there recently, allowing geese to feed undisturbed.

Though goose concentrations are the major attraction, Plattemouth has other uses as well. During the day-use season, April 15 to September 15, fishermen use the area for access to the Platte and Missouri rivers where they take many good catfish. The lake and several smaller ponds offer carp and bullheads, some crappie and bass.

Several picnic areas are located on the west perimeter, near the trees. A nature trail winds through the timber.

But, still, Plattemouth would not be Plattemouth without its geese. Every year the quiet little area comes alive with the incredible, unexplainable migration of thousands of geese. And every year they leave it again, silent and stripped, to await their next coming.
ing their bodies in mirror-smooth water.

But then come evening breezes. Somewhere on the far side a duck quacks; four squawks, then silence. Nearby a muskrat ripples quietly through the bullrushes, barely waving their stems. A red-winged blackbird warbles from a scrubby willow switch. A silent mink glides behind a slow, half-grown duckling; then sudden splashing as he takes his quarry. A single frog begins the evening chorus along the edges of torpid water.

Then comes November, and hunters. An old man and a boy sit hunkered down in the tall bullrushes. Dawn is but a few minutes off. They can hear the ducks, the summer’s hatch, the fall migration. “Now, don’t shoot,” the old man cautions, “until you can tell what they are. Mallards are big. You should know their profile; we spent enough mornings out here last spring.”

The sky shows a bare hint of gray. As Aldo Leopold said: “In the marsh, long, windy waves surge across the grassy slough, beat against the far willows. A tree tries to argue, bare limbs waving, but there is no detaining the wind”.

The ducks are coming through the rising morning bluster, teal rushing by on erratic wings; pintails almost out of sight before they’re seen; then mallards, and more mallards. It’s the boy’s first duck hunt.

Fisherman Access

YOU GET THE LINE and I’ll get a pole....” There’s a line in an old song like that, and some of the best examples of the fishing hole are tiny wildlife areas purchased by the Game and Parks Commission to provide fishermen access to the Blue River.

Blue Bluffs and Shady Trail are two such areas. Both of them are on old power dam sites, with remnants of the structures still in place. Both man and fish benefit from these remains of a
They’re quiet, pleasant little places with good cat and carp fishing water and lots of shade. A few birds might serenade you as you tote your tacklebox and fishing pole downstream to the edge of the area, where you’ve spotted a place that’s unoccupied. You might exchange pleasantries, or maybe a few fish stories, with anglers who are already there. “Catchin’

Or you might take the family along and picnic adjacent to the river before you start fishing. Take the kids along and let them poke around in the shade.

Dusk settles on an old fisherman, his pipe puffing occasionally. He learned patience with a fishing pole in his hand. It seems to belong there.

It seems to belong there.

### Prairie Areas

BENEATH THE WAVING sea of grasses are thousands of lives...I see the evidence everywhere, though I seldom see a living animal. Here a coyote or a fawn laid on this hillside overlooking the draw. See how the grass has been mashed down by his body? Here is a mourning dove nest, a little circle among a blanket of rustling heads. Look how the grass parts here. It’s a tunnel for some kind of mouse or shrew, maybe a prairie vole. It’s his highway, or maybe the entrance to his kitchen.”

The prairie seems monotonous; grasses all seem the same on prairie wildlife areas like Pawnee Prairie, Burchard Lake and Alexandria. Trees only inhabit the draws, shrubs are few, and grass is everywhere.

Yet, the silent calm of the grasslands hides a centuries-old conflict that is renewed yearly. Warring species of plants never establish victors, nor are any ever entirely conquered. Year after year, they struggle bitterly for the essentials of life. They claw toward sun and stretch toward water, fighting all the while for nourishment from the soil. They crowd each other. Like rush hour traffic they push and shove, but all are silent. And their crowding leaves them dwarfed and underdeveloped compared to what

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*Food plots at Alexandria provide for game birds and nongame wildlife*
they could be in another environment. Yet they are tough and healthy.

The natural balance of prairie plants makes it a closed community; safe from invasion by other species, safe from drought, safe from fire.

The community is an interdependent one with tall plants shading smaller ones, and mat-forming grasses shielding the soil and slowing evaporation of precious water. Slender leaves of dominant grasses filter sunlight to short grasses and forbs.

Prairie plants are conservative. They require little water and small amounts of nutrients. Their stems and leaves catch rainwater. They permit little runoff and prevent evaporation with their dense, protective ground cover. Flowers take turns blooming, reducing competition. Underground, the prairie is a rich mosaic of intermixed root systems. Tough rhizomes provide food storage for harsh times. Fibers reach for water seven feet and more into the soil.

As prairie plants have their storage rooms beneath the soil, so the prairie provides rooms for wildlife. The entire grassland is a dining room for numerous kinds of birds, with grass and forb seeds as table fare. Rodents dine on stems and leaves.

Water is shelter to beaver, and little ponds are scattered throughout Pawnee Prairie—glistening pools of water where beavers have dammed the tiny creek, or man has built his earthen structures. A cacophony of loafting frogs is suddenly silent as a hawk’s shadow glides across their logs and shoreline.

Water is clear and clean here. Pounding rains cannot reach the bare soil through its thick umbrella of plants. Little silt is permitted to wash away. A series of springs water Alexandria, where the resultant tiny stream runs along a sandy bottom and raccoons leave tracks in the granules.

Water at Burchard Lake is stored behind a small dam, built with federal matching money under the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson programs. Local sportsmen contributed a portion of the funds needed to purchase the area. Nestled between
prairie hills, the water attracts waterfowl in fall, and fishermen through most of the year. Managers say that Burchard Lake is unique because there are very few vandalism or litter incidents there. They speculate that local involvement has created a greater local interest in the upkeep of the area.

Late in April, when the cattail shoots are but a couple of inches high, a new sound adds dimension to contemplation of the prairie areas. Quiet mornings bring prairie chickens' boom wafting across the gentle grasslands on an almost imperceptible breeze.

On a hill adjacent to Burchard Lake is the only state-maintained prairie chicken observation site in the state. The two blinds are near a booming ground, and most dawns in late April and early May will find chickens there performing their mating rituals. Prairie chickens are among the most unique forms of wildlife of the prairie crop-land country, and their springtime booming is one of the spectacular wildlife "shows".

"The morning after I hear that first boom, I try to slip up to the blinds before daylight. I don't have much company that time of day, especially during the week. It's a little like watching the Roman gladiators—without the bloodshed. Each of those cocks seems as serious about defending his 10 to 20 yards of hill as a gladiator would have been about defending his life".

During the booming dance, the male's bright orange air sacs puff out the sides of his neck, and the long feathers stand up like horns. He charges forward, screeches to a halt, then stamps his feet rapidly, sometimes pivoting in a dance. Suddenly, his fanned tail snaps with a sharp click and the air sacs deflate with a cooing "boom" that can be heard for a mile.

Loggerhead shrikes use the prairie areas, too, and later on, when the grasshoppers hatch out, the shrikes find more meals than they can eat. Their answer to the storage problem is a locust thorn or a barbed-wire fence where they pin their excess booty for future reference.

Individuals and groups have helped the Game and Parks Commission to look out for the future of wildlife through prairie wildlife areas. When parts of Pawnee Prairie were offered for sale, the Commission hadn't the ready cash to purchase the land. Nature Conservancy then came into the picture, buying the land and holding it until funds were available from an agency that could manage it in the best interests of wildlife. Finally, the Game Commission was able to budget the necessary monies. Such investments hold valuable land, and the wildlife on it, in trust for the public. Native prairie areas like Pawnee Prairie are rare, priceless pieces of yesterday and today that will become even more valuable tomorrow.

Part of Alexandria was also a legacy to Nebraskans that came from a landowner who had planted trees and wildlife habitat on his farm. He encouraged wildlife to visit his home before he sold it to the Commission for further wildlife management.

Prairie is a rare, unique community, and the prairie areas are an attempt to preserve the kind of land and wildlife that once spread across entire states. Miles and miles of rolling sod were an amphitheater for the clear song of the lark and the tragic-comic drama of never-ending life and death; the competitive struggle among plants and animals for survival.
Pleasure on a wildland may come from the obvious or the obscurity of a dew-laden spider web.
Your Wildlife Lands: The Southeast was funded by the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, project W-17-D and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.