

Nebraska State Report May 31, 2024

Tim McCoy, Director
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
PO Box 370
Lincoln, NE 68503

Economic impact - \$4B annually, supporting 24,000 jobs – In Nebraska, hunting, fishing, boating, wildlife viewing and state park visitation support more than 24,000 jobs and have an annual economic impact of \$4 billion. In 2023, there were 241,000 anglers and 189,000 hunters who purchased Nebraska permits; 80,000 registered boats; 126,000 shooting sports participants; and 485,000 vehicle park entry permits purchased.

How Game and Parks is funded – The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is funded mainly by our users, including revenue from the sale of hunting and fishing permits and stamps, state park entry permits, and fees for camping, lodging and activities in the park system. In 2023, 89% of the agency budget was “user pay” and federal reimbursement, and 11% came from State General Funds.

Game and Parks outdoor recreation resources, by the numbers – Wildlife management areas and private lands in our Open Fields and Waters program offer walk-in access on more than 391,000 combined acres for hunting, fishing and trapping. WMAs comprise 184,423 acres on 287 areas. Open Fields and Waters includes 372,600 acres of land/water/wetlands and 40 stream miles. Nebraska’s state park system is made up of 78 areas encompassing 105,344 acres that provide fishing, boating, and hunting access. 57 state recreation areas (65,371 acres) are open for fishing year-around and hunting is allowed away from campgrounds and facilities from the Tuesday after Labor Day until the end of spring turkey season (May 31). Eight state parks (31,836 acres) provide managed hunting and fishing; and 10 state historical parks (2,497) acres provide managed hunting where feasible and are open for fishing. We also have family-friendly firearm and archery ranges at four parks and many self-serve archery ranges on park areas.

Strategic plan focuses on the future – In 2023, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission launched its 2023-2025 strategic plan, Focus on the Future, with three strategic directions:

- Providing sustainable conservation and recreation;
- Developing and investing in our people; and
- Engaging and building relevancy with the people we serve.

In the plan, we prioritized potential growth opportunities for recreation; needs for additional fish and wildlife conservation research; and identified and pursued potential funding sources for our state wildlife action plan. We also evaluated potential initiatives for staff recruitment and retention, and being more relevant to all Nebraskans.

Record number of fish stocked – Nebraska Game and Parks’ five state fish hatcheries supplied more than 68 million fish that were stocked into 299 Nebraska waters in 73 counties in 2023; this was a record. These stockings included 20 species of fish, including hybrids.

Recruiting and retaining a dedicated and talented team – Game and Parks is taking action to address growing issues related to hiring and retention. As a state agency, we are limited in our ability to compete with wages offered by private industry and other governmental entities, which we are addressing by using the limited flexibility allowed under state personnel system rules to recruit and retain professional staff.

Recruiting and retaining outdoors enthusiasts – A new five-year R3 Plan — or Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation Plan — prioritizes Nebraska Game and Parks’ efforts and objectives to engage current customers and recruit new ones. The plan maps our efforts to understand our customers and Nebraska’s outdoor participants, as well as what is important to them; what their challenges or barriers to continued participation may be; and our development of proactive plans and efforts to maintain high levels of participation in all areas of outdoor recreation, including recreating in our parks, fishing, boating, shooting sports and hunting.

Volunteers make opportunities possible – Game and Parks serves the public in many ways, including providing special events and opportunities for the public to learn about recreation. Volunteers are essential to our mission. Hunter education instructors certify up to 8,000 students per year and take beginners on mentored hunts to learn safety in the field. Fishing education instructors help provide hands-on instruction to students, adults and community fishing night participants. Master naturalists help with many activities, teach guests about nature, participate in community science and help keep our areas beautiful. Volunteers help with special cleanup and improvement projects. In our parks volunteers welcome guests and help with special events.

2023 Berggren Pheasant Plan 2.0 habitat accomplishments – Year 2 of the Berggren Pheasant Plan 2.0 ended in 2023 when biologists completed 140 contracts impacting nearly 11,000 acres of habitat for pheasants and other upland game birds. Biologists created plans and contracts with private landowners for an additional 13,000 acres to be implemented for habitat improvements throughout the next year. The Plan provides financial incentives and cost share to landowners to enroll in habitat conservation programs and implement early successional habitat management for pheasant and other upland game birds.

Game and Parks responds to expanding elk range by adding management units – Nebraska Game and Parks reorganized its elk unit boundaries in 2023 with the input of landowners and hunters. Elk have expanded their range across Nebraska over the past 40 years. Within the past five to 10 years, they have expanded beyond their traditional habitat of timbered rough topography into areas that have less traditional support. So, when Game and Parks put harvest pressure on herds in those areas, fewer elk were harvested in the areas than desired. During the fall and winter of 2022-23, Game and Parks hosted public meetings and took public comment on the proposal of redoing elk unit boundaries. As of the close of the 2023 bull season, 53 elk had been harvested in the new units compared to 28 for the full season a year ago.

Monitoring wildlife diseases in Nebraska – In 2023, Nebraska Game and Parks conducted wildlife disease response and surveillance for Chronic Wasting Disease in deer, Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease virus/Bluetongue virus in deer, Meningeal brainworm in deer, High Pathogenic Avian Influenza in waterfowl and raptors, a rabies virus in raccoons, and a bacterial pneumonia in bighorn sheep.

Law enforcement makes use of small Unmanned Aircraft Systems – Game and Parks has been developing programs in its law enforcement and wildlife divisions to leverage the technology of small Unmanned Aircraft Systems, commonly known as drones, to aid in various applications. Law enforcement uses the technology in cases of search and rescue, recovery, crime- and incident-scene mapping, modeling, reconstruction, and emergency incident response. It also has used drones in response to depredation complaints and for wildlife surveys and habitat management or property improvement projects on agency or other contracted properties.

Conservation officers create positive experiences – Aside from their many other law enforcement duties, our conservation officers partnered with several entities to bring positive experiences to youth across the state. They did this in events designed to provide one-on-one experiences. One example was a Shop-with-a-Cop event hosted by the Gering Police Department in Scottsbluff. Officers took more than 90 children to Walmart to shop for Christmas gifts for family members, then helped them wrap the gifts. Interactions with the public were positive, as the officers received compliments from parents and store patrons.

Visitors enjoy improvements to state parks – Improvement projects in state parks largely have been funded by Capital Maintenance Funds, which were established by the Nebraska Legislature in 2016 to help preserve Nebraska’s public outdoor recreation facilities and parklands; state and federal funding sources; and Nebraska Game and Parks’ funds generated from user fees of the state park system. A highlight of 2023, visitors again are enjoying the sight of Smith Falls, Nebraska’s tallest waterfall, after the newly constructed 500-foot boardwalk to it reopened in May at Smith Falls State Park. New benches provide places for visitors to rest, and a platform over the stream has been added midway up the walkway to allow for viewing of the falls from a scenic vantage. This was just one major improvement at Nebraska’s state parks in 2023.

Shooting sports complex opens under Game and Parks ownership – The Kearney Outdoor Education Complex is Game and Parks’ newest outdoor education center. The complex, which opened in the summer of 2023, features four trap fields with two overlaying skeet fields and one five-stand range. The complex’s 2,900-square-foot education center has a full kitchen and is rentable to the public. It is compliant with the American with Disabilities Act and offers classroom seating for up to 100 people. The city of Kearney’s adjacent Law Enforcement Firearms Training Range — a 100-yard rifle/pistol range — also was opened to the public thanks to a cooperative agreement with Game and Parks.

Lake Ogallala renovation will enhance fishing – Sportfish anglers will benefit from the fishery renovation at Lake Ogallala, after the aquatic habitat was improved and sportfish were stocked. In late September 2023, the lake water level was lowered and the existing fish population was eliminated. Habitat conditions, which had deteriorated, were improved, and rainbow trout, tiger trout and yellow perch were stocked in the fall. Additional rainbow trout will be stocked in 2024. Lake Ogallala’s cold-water fishery is unique to Nebraska, facilitated by low-level water releases from Lake McConaughy’s Kingsley Dam. Ideal conditions, such as clear water, abundant aquatic vegetation and thriving invertebrate communities, ensure exceptional growth rates for trout.

Wildlife Crimestoppers introduces online submission form – A new online Nebraska Wildlife Crimestoppers submission form makes it easier and more convenient for people to report game

violations. The form is accessible via OutdoorNebraska.gov, which gives users in the field access to it through their mobile phones. The form also is accessible via a QR code printed in the hunting, fishing and boating guides. The agency's Crimestoppers webpage was updated to include information on details that should be provided when reporting a game violation, as well as a list of common wildlife violations in Nebraska.

Some nonresident big game fees increased for 2024 – The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission approved fee increases to several nonresident big game permits for 2024. Money from the fees is deposited into the Game Cash Fund, which supports the law enforcement, wildlife and fisheries divisions and their research, conservation and management efforts. Fees were raised for all nonresident antelope, deer and turkey permits. The increase was anticipated after a statute changed in 2023. The agency had been at the statutory limit on fees before statute change raised the cap on allowable fees.

Mountain lion hunting expands to Niobrara River Valley – For the first time, the Commission in 2023 approved a Nebraska mountain lion hunting season outside the Pine Ridge. It created the Niobrara Unit for 2024, encompassing parts of north-central Nebraska. The objective for the unit is to provide a harvest opportunity for mountain lions that allows the population to remain resilient and healthy, while slowing growth of the population. Mountain lion presence has been documented in the Niobrara River Valley since 2001. There has been a resident reproducing population there since 2013 and information gathered through research suggests a population that is growing and will be resilient to harvest. Harvest continues to be allowed in the Pine Ridge Unit.

Turkey season changes are made in response to declining populations – Game and Parks made several significant changes to the 2023 wild turkey hunting seasons in response to a declining turkey population across the state. The changes made starting with the 2023 hunting seasons were:

- Personal permit limits for all hunters were lowered to two spring permits and one fall permit (from three spring and two fall permits);
- A spring permit quota of 10,000 permits was established for nonresidents;
- The bag limit specifies that a hunter may harvest only one turkey per calendar day;
- The bag limit for fall was reduced from two turkeys to one; and
- The fall season is shortened to Oct. 1-Nov. 30. The season had been Sept. 15-Jan. 31.

Turkey populations in Nebraska have fallen considerably since their peak around 2008-10. Over the past 15 years, turkey populations have decreased by 52% across the state. The likely causes are habitat conversion and degradation. Predators and disease also could have played a role. It's likely the high numbers of the late 2000s were above carrying capacity, and the recent decline is a regression back to carrying capacity of the current habitat.

State Park vehicle entry permit increases for 2024 – To help meet customer needs and their expectations for high-quality park experiences, Nebraska Game and Parks raised state park permit fees, effective January 2024. With this increase to \$35, Nebraska is tied for the 29th lowest cost out of the 38 states with resident vehicle park entry permits and 21st lowest cost out of the 39 states that have nonresident vehicle park entry permits, at \$70. States that do not have a park permit, support their park systems with dedicated funds from sales taxes and other sources or rely 100% on legislative appropriated General Funds dollars.

Working with landowners on depredation issues, gauging satisfaction – Game and Parks continued to work with landowners in 2023 to reduce wildlife damage issues to agricultural property while respecting their needs and that of science-backed wildlife management. Timely technical assistance for damage associated with game species was given to more than 500 people across Nebraska. Ten big game meetings, multimedia outreach through the agency’s website, radio shows, emails and news releases helped keep the public informed about tools and resources available to prevent depredation. Because hunting is the preferred management tool in big game depredation situations, the agency continued aggressive big game permitting to control populations in areas of greatest damage concern. According to a survey, overall, landowners who contacted Game and Parks believe the agency has a great response time, does a good job providing technical advice, believe the depredation options used helped reduce damage, and would work with us on future depredation issues.

Updating the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project – The state’s wildlife action plan, or Nebraska Natural Legacy Project, is being updated with input from conservation partners, private landowners and the public. The Legacy Project identifies Nebraska’s at-risk species, their habitats and threats causing their decline; it also identifies actions to address threats and monitor wildlife populations. To ensure conservation actions remain current, revisions of the plan are required by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service every 10 years. The third edition of Nebraska’s plan is due to the Fish and Wildlife Service in October 2025.

Joint project looks at pronghorn antelope movements – In February 2022, Game and Parks, in cooperation with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Natural Resources and University of Nebraska at Kearney, launched a research project focused on western Nebraska pronghorn. Between 2021 and 2022, 110 pronghorns were collared in the Panhandle. GPS locations were collected every 2½ hours, totaling 2.6 million locations for the duration of the project. While researchers will continue to look at data, project findings so far include:

- Pronghorn survival estimates were around 65%.
- Hunter harvest and hemorrhagic disease were the highest causes of pronghorn mortality.
- Pronghorn used agricultural areas in winter, spring and fall, preferring crops like winter wheat, alfalfa and millet.
- Pronghorn avoided roads during the fall and winter.

Research on the Missouri River focuses on walleye and sauger movement – Walleye and sauger are among the most popular sport fish species to anglers fishing Lewis and Clark Lake and the upper Missouri River bordering Nebraska and South Dakota. Their populations, however, are dynamic, experiencing ups and downs based on several factors. To better understand these factors, a collaborative research project aims to determine walleye and sauger movement insights into angler harvest and fish exploitation also are expected. Results from this project, which began in 2021, will be used to guide future fisheries management in the system and continue Game and Parks’ focus on science-based natural resource management.

Collaborative study looking at turkey populations in Nebraska – Game and Parks is funding a five-year study to understand wild turkey populations in Nebraska. The study, which began in 2023, is a collaboration with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, and the University of Georgia. The project will provide insight into

the dynamics of Nebraska's turkey populations, which have declined about 45% in the past 15 years. This study hopes to establish a baseline for wild turkey numbers, their annual reproduction and survival rates, their resource selection, and their movements. Researchers are focusing primarily in southwest Nebraska and the Pine Ridge, where wild turkeys are being captured, banded and outfitted with GPS units over the first three years. Turkeys are monitored throughout the year, with an emphasis on nesting and roost locations during peak seasons.

Missouri River program monitors endangered pallid sturgeon – As part of the federal Missouri River Recovery Program, Nebraska Game and Parks monitors the movement and spawning activity of the federally endangered pallid sturgeon in the lower Missouri River. Reproductively ready pallid sturgeon, mostly females, are captured between Gavins Point Dam and the confluence with the Mississippi River and surgically implanted with acoustic telemetry tags. These fish are tracked daily, their spawning behavior documented, and then recaptured to determine their spawning success. In 2023, the agency and partners tracked 11 reproductive female pallid sturgeon. The fish migrated upstream more than 200 river miles and moved up to 18 miles per day. Nine fish successfully spawned in the Missouri River in the study area, with a spawning aggregation located near Ponca State Park. One fish spawned in the Platte River, and one fish didn't spawn. The research continues in 2024.