

Nebraska State Report May 31, 2025

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Summary

In 2024, Nebraska Game and Parks achieved major conservation and recreation milestones, reinforcing its commitment to natural resource stewardship. We focused on resource care, public access, team development and engagement:

- We improved boating and angler access; upgraded hatcheries; enrolled 435,000 acres in walk-in access; delivered 2,300 nature programs, completed the Venture Parks projects and expanded/updated campgrounds, cabins and learning features.
- We prioritized workforce recruitment and retention efforts and invested in our team's professional development.
- We strengthened public communication via various platforms and improved customer service and online experiences.
- We celebrated 50 years of Hunter Education and honored more than 5,000 instructors who have helped reduce accidents by more than 80% since 1974.
- We continued to foster good work with volunteers who are vital to our mission and our success as stewards of Nebraska's natural resources.

By the numbers

Nebraska Game and Parks manages outdoor spaces for recreation and conservation:

- 281 wildlife management areas (184,422 acres)
- 435,594 acres enrolled (a record) in Open Fields and Waters, along with 41.8 stream miles and 39 lakes and ponds
- 5 hatcheries, which raised and stocked 55.5 million fish in 270 public waters
- 8 state parks (31,994 acres), 60 state recreation areas (65,427 acres), and 10 historical parks (2,497 acres)
- 2 recreation trails (4,144 acres and 324 miles)

We conducted:

- 23 wildlife research projects
- 26 fisheries research projects
- 337 land-based habitat projects on 103,000 public and private acres
- 8,258 boat inspections for aquatic invasive species.

Participation:

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| • 249,139 licensed anglers | • 86,749 nature program attendees |
| • 188,791 licensed hunters | • 496,202 park entry permits purchased (approx. 7 million visits) |
| • 126,000 shooting sports participants | • 114,721 campsites, cabins or lodge-rooms reserved |
| • 77,080 registered boats | |
| • 5,500 Hunter Education graduates | |

How we are funded

Approximately 89% of the agency revenues were generated through user pay and federal reimbursement in 2024, and approximately 11% came from the State General Fund. User pay includes revenue from the sale of hunting and fishing stamps and permits, state park entry permits, and fees for camping, lodging, and activities in Nebraska's state parks system.

Outdoor Recreation

In 2024, we continued to focus on expanding access to traditional and new recreation to meet Nebraskans' interests. Our investment in their recreational future helps us remain relevant in a changing world, continue to support local economies through visitor spending and employment opportunities, and achieve our mission to care for our state's wildlife and wild places.

Fishing

Fishing engagement expanded in 2024. We, along with volunteers, hosted more than 75 free events in cities and parks across the state. We also hosted fishing workshops or advanced-training opportunities, such as fly-fishing. These events introduced people of all ages to fishing — a low-cost recreational opportunity to engage in the outdoors. More than 249,000 adults bought licenses; untold youth joined who do not need a permit to fish in Nebraska.

Hunting

Despite challenges with deer and turkey populations due to habitat loss and disease, Game and Parks reported success for residents and nonresidents alike. Deer hunt permit quotas were reduced 13% in 2024, but overall harvest statewide was only down 2% from 2023. Turkey harvests were just below 50% success rate for residents and were 62% for nonresidents.

Upland bird hunters also had better opportunities than the past several years after a promising breeding season, timely rains and good production season over the spring and summer. Statewide, pheasant counts were up 19%, northern bobwhite were up in five of six management regions and timely rains meant prairie grouse numbers also looked good throughout their range.

More than 188,791 people purchased a hunting permit. Veterans also were honored with a special waterfowl weekend and free small game permits on Veterans Day. Those new to hunting also had plenty of opportunities to learn and grow with efforts from Nebraska Game and Parks and its partners. Mentored youth hunts and women's hunts were hosted across the state.

Parks

We continue to prioritize improvements providing modern, comfortable experiences, adding amenities, and offering new attractions. Thirty of our parks saw 79 projects completed, including new restrooms, accessible fishing piers, upgraded campgrounds, and the addition of Americans with Disabilities Act features. We also completed a major effort that blended public funds and private donations to enhance the four Platte River Valley parks with 70 new features promote outdoor recreation and education.

Management

Wildlife

Our efforts to manage Nebraska's wildlife were broad, focused on declining game populations, on gathering data and on strategies that could guide our future. We started our waterfowl rezoning process in 2024, seeking hunter input for duck, coot and goose hunting zones. We also updated Nebraska's Chronic Wasting Disease Plan, including new surveillance and testing protocols.

For the first time, hunters were able to report their November firearm deer harvests via Telecheck or at check stations. More than 63% used Telecheck — 54% online and 8% by phone — reducing travel time for hunters and agency costs.

We also expanded mountain lion hunting opportunities, adding a Wildcat Hills unit to the existing Pine Ridge and Niobrara units to address growing populations. Harvest limits were set to maintain balanced, healthy mountain lion populations. A total of 1,520 permits were available to Nebraska residents by drawing.

At the same time, our staff continued to improve habitat, engage hunters through public input sessions and harvest surveys, and collaborate with landowners on depredation issues. Over the course of the year, staff logged 8,700 hours helping 228 landowners with wildlife damage issues.

Fisheries

Nebraska Game and Parks' fish stocking program, supported by five hatcheries, continued to fulfill its role of supplying millions of fish for anglers and improving aquatic ecosystems statewide; 55 million fish (22 species) were stocked in nearly 270 water bodies in 2024. About 1,800 anglers earned a Master Angler Award and four won a state record.

The agency also completed several major habitat restoration projects at Louisville State Recreation Area, Standing Bear Lake, Harlan County Reservoir, Gracie Creek Pond, Two Rivers Trout Lake and Hershey/East Hershey I-80 Lakes. These projects restored or improved fish habitats, improved or increased angling access, and ensured healthy ecosystems for the future.

We also took proactive measures to successfully prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species. The team inspected 8,258 watercrafts across 39 water bodies, and nearly 250 water samples were collected at 66 water bodies for zebra mussel larvae. No new infestations were identified. Zebra mussels have been isolated to just three water bodies in the state. Aquatic vegetation surveys identified one new curly-leaf pondweed and four Eurasian watermilfoil infestations.

Access

With 97% of Nebraska's land privately owned, Game and Parks continued to expand outdoor opportunities through public-private partnerships and access improvements. A record 435,594 private acres were enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters program, which supports walk-in hunting, trapping and fishing access. A new partnership — the Nebraska Community Access Partnership in Keith County, Nebraska — added 43,893 acres, nearly 30,000 of them new to the OFW program. A customer study showed 74% of Nebraskan hunters were satisfied with public access in the state.

Nebraska has 475 public lakes, with 357 lake and 131 stream and river access points. Access improvement projects were completed at six areas, Grove Lake, Hayes Center and Defair wildlife management areas, Danish Alps and Enders state recreation areas, and Standing Bear Lake. Eight additional access projects are in the construction phase. These efforts enhance recreational use for anglers, kayakers and boaters.

Conservation

Wildlife research highlights

In 2024, 23 wildlife research projects helped close knowledge gaps and inform land management. Projects spanned species from elk and turkeys to mountain lions. Thirty elk were fitted with GPS collars, bringing the total to 161 tracked elk. Trail cameras helped estimate population density across management units, guiding harvest decisions.

Nebraska's collaborative research into declining turkey populations continued for the second of five years. The study continued collecting turkey reproduction and movement data focused on southwest Nebraska and the Pine Ridge.

We also continued monitoring our mountain lion populations using GPS collars, cameras, and genetic surveys. This data was used to inform harvest limits and document expansion into the Niobrara Valley and Wildcat Hills, which had seasons for the first time in 2024 and 2025.

And finally, a multi-year project to develop a tool to help target pheasant habitat management efforts began. Data has been collected and will be used to create a modeling framework for forecasting pheasant population densities based on the availability of suitable habitat. The tool will help land managers and landowners.

Fisheries research highlights

From sport fish to endangered fish, Nebraska Game and Parks conducted 26 research projects in 2024, focusing on improving the quality of fish, fisheries, habitat, and angler experiences. Among them was a survey of trout stream fisheries within the North Platte River watershed; this survey assessed changes and response to stocking strategies compared to a 2023 survey. The 2023 survey recorded 1,956 fish of 13 species in the tributaries.

We also studied fish population and movement dynamics at Lake Ogallala, a recently renovated water body in western Nebraska. The study explored nuisance fish distribution in Lake Ogallala, linking fish movement to water temperature and oxygen levels prior to October 2023. Prior to the renovation, more than 1.15 million pounds of fish were estimated to be in Lake Ogallala and 83% were nuisance species, such as carp.

Reservoir research on "Georgia Cubes" showed sportfish used both added and existing habitat in reservoirs but generally use it more in areas with no natural habitat. The information will help inform future habitat enhancement strategies.

Threatened and endangered species

Over the past two years, Nebraska Game and Parks funded American burying beetle surveys of the western Sandhills for the federal and state listed species. The western portion had not been surveyed for more than 10 years. This is helping develop a more accurate range map, so we can better target conservation work.

We, along with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, expanded the Motus Wildlife Tracking System network in both states to improve our understanding of at-risk birds and bats along the Missouri River corridor. The imperiled wood thrush, northern long-eared bats, little brown bats and tricolored bats are tracked to identify critical stopover areas and understand migratory behaviors and connectivity. The northern long-eared bat was listed federally endangered in 2023. All four are Tier I species of greatest conservation need in Nebraska.

We also tracked monarch and regal fritillary butterflies; 2024 was our fifth year monitoring these species, and teams conducted more than 1,200 surveys in 250 separate locations in eastern Nebraska. Monarch detections declined 51.7% and regal fritillaries 51.9% from 2020-2023.

Game and Parks conducts environmental reviews on projects that are state funded or permitted. More than 2,100 projects were reviewed through our Conservation and Environmental Review Tool to avoid impacts on at-risk species, and 101 conservation planning reports were created to guide proactive efforts. Nebraska is one of 11 states in the U.S. that reviews state actions for impacts to T&E species.

Finally, the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project or state wildlife action plan, is in the process of being updated. In 2024, public input sessions and expert teams helped shape the plan's third edition, which will be finalized in 2025. The plan will serve as a guide for landowners, partner organizations, public land managers, and other stakeholders interested in implementing conservation efforts that benefit wildlife, habitat, and the residents of Nebraska.

Habitat work

Nebraska Game and Parks has several conservation initiatives, focusing on conserving natural habitats and diverse wildlife. Our efforts include expanding habitat restoration projects that aim to rejuvenate native prairies and wetlands. Across the programs implemented on private lands and conservation partner lands, 337 projects were completed in 2024 that impacted nearly 103,000 acres. These add to the total acres affected by conservation partners and the USDA.

We also worked with partners, ranchers, and local conservationists through our Prairie Grasslands Coalition to preserve Nebraska's native, intact grasslands. Native grasslands are essential for Nebraska's wildlife and livestock producers. In 2024, Game and Parks and partners completed 62 projects on more than 53,000 acres. These efforts support birds, including prairie chickens, and promote sustainable ranching.

An additional 183 habitat projects were completed on over 15,000 acres in six pheasant opportunity areas through our Berggren Pheasant Plan. This plan prioritizes pheasants and other game birds by supporting habitat work on private lands with financial incentives farmers enrolled in and managing Conservation Reserve Program acres; other projects include cover crop plantings and other habitat management incentives.

Community science

In 2024, more than 1,900 volunteers helped with community science projects and events, collecting and reviewing data for the agency. More than 220 people participated in three state park bioblitzes to document wildlife. Other events included the Nebraska Pollinator Quest, in which 124 observers contributed 568 pollinator observations. And the Lincoln-Lancaster County City Nature Challenge drew 125 people who made 2,773 wildlife and plant observations in a four-day period.

People also participated in more complex community science projects, including the Bumble Bee Atlas and Nebraska Wildlife Watch. In 2024, more than 675 people helped categorize and tag Nebraska Wildlife Watch images for researchers. When done well, community science benefits the organization conducting research and the community scientists.

Service

Education

In 2024, Game and Parks celebrated 50 years of Hunter Education, with more than 200,000 students trained since the program began. Thanks to 5,000 dedicated volunteer instructors, safety and ethics remain top priorities. In 2024 alone, 5,500 students earned more than 9,000 Hunter Education certificates. Commission data shows that since the program began, hunter incident rates have fallen by more than 80%.

We also offered more than 2,300 educational programs, reaching nearly 87,000 people. An additional 16,000 joined outdoor skills, hunting, and shooting sports activities. Highlights included:

- Nature-based learning programs like Master Naturalist Mondays and Moth Night.
- Outdoor skills events like the Missouri River Outdoor Expo and Becoming an Outdoors Woman.
- 75 free community fishing events.
- Park programming year-round, including the popular First Day Hikes and the new Your Parks Adventure: Trail Trek — where more than 850 participants logged 5,100 visits to trails across the state.

Public safety

Our Nebraska Game and Parks conservation officers kept people and our natural resources safe. In 2024, conservation officers documented nearly 250,000 interactions with the public — checking anglers, hunters, boaters, and park visitors — and responded to more than 755 search and rescue calls. Officers also helped with more than 2,100 outdoor education programs and often supported other law enforcement agencies, especially in rural areas. Thirteen new officers were hired in 2024. The division also reorganized to improve statewide coverage and efficiency and added a full-time investigations unit.

Game and Parks staff also assisted in battling more than 75 wildfires in 2024, working alongside local emergency responders on both public and private lands. Their quick action helped protect people, property, and natural areas. Temporary restrictions were also used to prevent wildfires, and staff shared important safety information throughout the year.