



Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

In 2021, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is celebrating 100 years of inspiring outdoor adventures at our state park system. It began a century ago in 1921 with the establishment of Chadron State Park, nestled among the distinctive buttes and canyons of the Pine Ridge. Now, Nebraska's 76 parks are top destinations for Nebraskans and visitors from around the world to enjoy breathtaking landscapes, unique wildlife, and abundant recreation opportunities.

The following pages show the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's history in the state, with events that led up to its creation in 1979. As the years passed, the Commission provided increasing opportunities for leisure, recreation and education while providing resource management to leave a legacy for future generations to enjoy. Learn more about how our parks' system unrolled as our agency grew over the years.

Timeline

- 1859 – Territorial legislature passed laws restricting hunting and limiting weapons.
- 1860 – The Council and House of Representatives of the Territory of Nebraska set the first seasons for deer, elk, turkey, quail, grouse and woodcock. As wildlife declined, other species were added and seasons became more restrictive. Yet it would be 40 years before state legislators provided for enforcement of game and fish laws.
- 1873 – The first documented fish stocking in Nebraska occurred by accident when a westbound train derailed on the Elkhorn River near Fremont, dumping a car carrying 300,000 fish.
- 1875 – Game laws were amended to protect the wild bison with a closed season, the same year the once abundant animal was nearly extirpated from the state.
- 1879 – The Nebraska Legislature passed a bill creating the three-man Fish Commission.
- 1881 – The Commission purchased what would become the Gretna Fish Hatchery, and later, part of Schramm Park SRA, and began raising and stocking fish in waters throughout the state. This included German carp, which “will be the most successfully cultivated of any fish adapted to our waters” and touted as the “poor man’s fish of the future” for the food it would provide.

By the time the Game and Fish Commission was formed in 1901, efforts were already being made to eradicate the fish, which muddies our waters, work that continues today. Hatcheries were later established at Valentine, Rock Creek near Parks, Benkleman, Crawford, North Platte, Grove Trout Rearing Station near Royal, and Calamus Reservoir. All but two, Benkleman and Crawford, remain in operation.

1881 – Song birds were protected and another law made it illegal to kill birds with anything other than a shoulder mounted gun.

1896 – It became illegal to hunt another man's land without permission.

1901 – The first fishing regulations in the state were passed. Trout season ran June through October with an 8-inch minimum, and daily bag limits on fish were set at 25. Seasons were added for bass and other species throughout the years. With the exception of paddlefish seasons on the Missouri River, fishing has been open year-round for all species since 1946.

1901 – Deer and pronghorn hunting seasons ran from Aug. 15 to Nov. 15, even though it was estimated there were only 50 deer and 100 pronghorns in the state, and waterfowl hunting season ran from Sept. 1 to April 15.

1901 – In the same act that created the Commission, for the first time in Nebraska history, the legislature placed restrictions on the taking of fish and game and provided funding for four full-time employees. In addition, 88 "special deputy wardens" served without compensation to "report status of fish and game, and violations" in their areas. In later years, the special wardens were paid half of any fines imposed as a result of their work.

1901 – Nebraskans hunting or fishing outside of the county in which they resided were required to buy a \$1 permit. In 1911 "female persons" and boys under the age of 18 when fishing, and boys under the age of 18 when hunting with a parent or guardian, were exempted from a license. In 1921, all persons over age 16 were required to have a license, regardless of where they lived, hunted or fished.

1905 – For the first time, state statutes prohibited the taking of fish in any public water, except the Missouri River, by means other than hook and line.

1905 – Pheasants were stocked by private individuals and were protected, as were all species of native squirrels. The Commission purchased its first breeding stock of pheasants in 1911.

1905 – Wolves, coyotes, foxes, wild cats, skunks and rabbits could be killed at any time of the year. Daily bag limits allowed 10 geese, 50 ducks and 50 "other birds."

1907 – The legislature provided full protection for deer, elk, pronghorn and beaver, closing the season on all.

1913 – Passage of the federal Migratory Waterfowl Act prohibited spring waterfowl hunting. The federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 provided additional protection.

1917 – Soon after World War I was declared, at the request of the National Food Administration, the Commission established a seining crew to harvest fish to help feed the nation. In the first 18 months, the crew seined 125,000 pounds of carp and buffalo fish, which were sold for one or two cents per pound. The crew was disbanded in 1971.

1919 – The Game and Fish Commission became a division of the newly created state Department of Agriculture, which aimed to make abundant fish and fowl an important source of food, just as corn and cattle.

1919 – All school sections in the state were declared game and bird reserves.

- 1921 – The agency was reorganized as the more independent Bureau of Game and Fish within the Department of Ag.
- 1921 – The legislature created the State Park Board within the Department of Public Works, and set aside one section of school land in the Pine Ridge for Chadron State Park. By 1930, the park had 10 cabins and a swimming pool.
- 1921 – Laws were revised to allow fishing through ice, which to that time was prohibited, for all species except trout and pike.
- 1923 – Arbor Lodge, the mansion and grounds of J. Sterling Morton in Nebraska City, and Victoria Springs, the log home and store of Judge Matthews near Anselmo, were added to the state park system. Arbor Lodge later became a State Historical Park, nine more of which were added: Fort Kearny, Fort Hartsuff, Fort Atkinson, Buffalo Bill Ranch, Champion Mill, Bowring Ranch, Ash Hollow, Rock Creek Station and Ashfall Fossil Beds.
- 1925 – The Bureau began to establish a statewide system of recreation grounds to supplement the state parks. In 1925 and 1926, recreation areas were acquired at Goose Lake, Walgren Lake, Rat and Beaver lakes and Fremont Sandpits “to provide fishing and hunting for the thousands of Nebraska citizens who desire such outdoor recreation.”
- 1926 – First issue of Outdoor Nebraska, precursor to NEBRASKAland Magazine, was published.
- 1927 – The grouse bag limit was reduced to five, ducks to 20 and geese five.
- 1927 – Bag and size limits were established for gamefish and heavy fines imposed for the use of nets or traps to catch fish.
- 1927 – All fees received by the Bureau from sale of permits were directed to funding the fish and wildlife department, making the Bureau self-supporting.
- 1927 – Hunting from an auto was prohibited.
- 1927 – A three-day pheasant season, Nebraska’s first, opened in October in Wheeler and parts of Sherman counties. In 1928, a 10-day season was held in nine central Nebraska counties.
- 1928 – The State Park Board was dissolved and merged with the Bureau of Game and Fish to create the Game, Forestation and Parks Commission. The legislation provided that the governor should appoint five commissioners according to districts to serve as the policy-setting board of the agency. The number of commissioners was later increased to seven and now stands at nine.
- 1929 – In addition to the Chief Warden and a Special Investigator, there were 15 district wardens and additional special deputy wardens serving principally as eyes and ears for the district wardens. District wardens were issued uniforms and furnished with “small automobiles” and camping equipment so they could live in the field when required.
- 1930 – The Commission began its first fisheries research project: an investigation of the aquatic plant and insects in Cherry County lakes. The agency didn’t hire its first fisheries biologist until 1943.
- 1930 – The Commission began its first wildlife research project: a study of the food habits of the ringnecked pheasant in central Nebraska.
- 1930 – The hunting season on prairie grouse was closed and would not reopen until 1950.
- 1930 – The Commission purchased land near Scotts Bluff to create a “big game reserve” today known as the Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area.

- 1933 – The Commission had established 26 state recreation areas.
- 1934 – Because of the drought, seining crews salvaged an estimated 1 million game fish from drying waters throughout the state and stocked them in other suitable lakes and streams. Additionally, 18,000 pounds of rough fish were sold and the revenue used to fund future operations.
- 1935 – Niobrara State Park at the mouth of the Niobrara River opened to the public after work by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1934 and 1935.
- 1936 – Ponca State Park along the Missouri River in Dixon County was created with the donation of 200 acres from area residents and developed almost entirely with federal funds through the Civilian Conservation Corps.
- 1937 – The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, better known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, was passed by Congress establishing an 11 percent manufacturer's excise tax on sporting rifles, shotguns, ammunition, and archery equipment, and a 10 percent tax on handguns. Revenues from the tax are still distributed to state conservation departments to help support wildlife research and management.
- 1940 – Separate hunting and fishing permits were issued for the first time, with either costing \$1 and a combination permit \$1.50.
- 1944 – A 10-day quail season was allowed in four southeastern Nebraska counties, the first since 1918.
- 1945 – Deer had become so abundant on the Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey that a December "experimental season" was allowed. It was the first since the season for deer was closed by the legislature in 1907.
- 1945 – The Commission began operating Lake McConaughy and other reservoirs in Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District's new irrigation system as state recreation areas.
- 1949 – Nebraska's second deer season since 1906 was held in the Pine Ridge. There has been a deer-hunting season in every year since, and statewide hunting since 1961.
- 1950 – The Dingell-Johnson Act created the Sport Fish Restoration Program by establishing an excise tax on fishing equipment. The tax, collected by the federal government, is reallocated to the states to enhance sport fisheries.
- 1953 – Nebraska held its first open season on pronghorns since 1906 in a portion of Cheyenne County.
- 1954 – Research was initiated on what would be one of the Commission's most ambitious research projects: The Life History and Ecology of the Ring-necked Pheasant in Nebraska. Fieldwork for the project would not be completed until 1965.
- 1957 – The Commission opened what would in 1962 become Fort Robinson State Park to the public on the site of what had been an active military fort from 1874 to 1948.
- 1958 – Pronghorns trapped in Colorado were released in north-central counties in January to re-establish herds once native to the Sandhills. From 1958 through 1962, 1,077 pronghorns were released.
- 1958 – 28 Merriam's wild turkeys obtained from Wyoming and South Dakota were released in the Deadman's Creek drainage in Dawes County and the Cottonwood Creek drainage in Sioux County.
- 1958 – The Commission began requiring a \$1 State Recreation Areas stamp for vehicles entering the parks, its first foray into a user-pay system similar to that required of hunters and anglers. The stamp, which funded park improvements and maintenance, was issued for 3 years.

1959 – The Legislature approved a bill that creates the Division of State Parks within the Commission.

The bill also established the State Park Fund and a special mill levy that would collect 1.3 cents for every \$100 in assessed taxable property value from 1959 through 1968 to fund the development and maintenance of the park system, replacing the SRA sticker and the general fund appropriation and spurring major projects in the parks.

1959 – Assigned boating safety responsibilities by the legislature, the Commission began issuing licenses or motorized boats.

1958 – The Commission took on management responsibilities and began developing facilities for fishing, hunting and recreation at Lewis and Clark Lake, the Missouri River reservoir formed by Gavins Point Dam, which had been completed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1957.

1961 – Game wardens became known as conservation officers.

1962 – The first turkey-hunting season in Nebraska was held in the Pine Ridge. The state's first spring turkey season came in 1964.

1963 – Indian Cave State Park was established in the wooded bluffs along the Missouri River.

1964 – The Commission began developing recreation facilities at Bureau of Reclamation reservoirs, including Merritt, Enders, Box Butte, Medicine Creek, Red Willow, Sherman and Swanson, that were leased to the Commission for recreational development. Lake Minatare had been added in 1960 and, in 1983, Calamus was included. It also began work on facilities at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Salt Valley reservoirs near Lincoln, including Branched Oak Lake.

1964 – The name of the monthly magazine was changed from Outdoor Nebraska to NEBRASKAland. Modern-day pronghorn hunting season was held in the Sandhills.

1966 – A Master Angler Award program was created to acknowledge large fish caught by Nebraska anglers.

1967 – The legislature removed the responsibility for forestation from the Commission, which was renamed the Game and Parks Commission.

1967 – Elk began wandering into the Pine Ridge, where the state's first resident herd in modern history became established southeast of Chadron.

1969 – Enrollment in the Acres for Wildlife program began to encourage farmers and ranchers to protect small plots of wildlife habitat.

1970 – The Commission initiated a program to re-establish breeding populations of Canada geese in the Sandhills. By 1983, when the Sandhills portion of the project was completed, 4,100 birds had been released. Dark goose hunting in the region, which had closed in 1969, resumed in 1980. The successful program continued elsewhere in the state until 1997, when the captive flock of Canada geese at the Sacramento-Wilcox Wildlife Management Area was disbanded.

1970 – What would become the Cornhusker Trap Shoot began. The Commission became a sponsor of the event in 1972 and has run it since 1987. Now the largest shoot of its kind in the nation, it draws about 2,500 middle and high school students from Nebraska and surrounding states.

1972 – The Legislature provided for fee-exempt hunting and fishing permits for veterans 65 and older or anyone over 70 years of age.

1973 – Sixteen bison were moved from Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area to start a herd at Fort Robinson State Park.

- 1974 – The Gretna fish hatchery, the state's first, acquired in 1881, was closed. The grounds are now a museum at Schramm Park State Recreation Area.
- 1974 – The Legislature passed a law requiring all hunters born in 1977 or later pass a Hunter Education class before hunting. Bowhunter Education was added in 1993. Volunteer instructors, the backbone of the program, teach students to be safe, respectful and responsible hunters, reducing hunting accidents and fatalities. In 2016, about 600 volunteers donated 8,400 hours to teach 288 classes and certify 4,167 students.
- 1975 – The Legislature enacted the Nongame and Endangered Species Act, declaring that it is in the public interest "to preserve, protect, perpetuate, and enhance" all species in the state. Under this act, species becoming rare within the state receive protection, as well as those included on the national threatened and endangered species lists.
- 1975 – Dove hunting season opened statewide. There had been no season since 1953 when the legislature reclassified the dove as a songbird.
- 1976 – A five-day muzzleloading rifle deer-hunting season was held on DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge, the first black powder-hunting season in the state's history. A statewide muzzleloader season began in 1989.
- 1977 – As recommended by the 1975 Habitat Conference, a cooperative effort between sportsmen's groups, the Commission and other agencies, Nebraska's first Habitat Stamp was issued. The \$7.50 stamp replaced the Upland Game Stamp and provided funding to manage habitat on public and private land and acquire wildlife management areas.
- 1978 – A park-entry permit program, authorized by the legislature in 1976, was initiated to raise funds for improvement and maintenance of state parks.
- 1979 – The Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium opened at the site of the old Gretna fish hatchery in Schramm SRA. The educational facility has hosted countless programs for adults and schoolchildren since.
- 1981 – With the support of the North American Wild Sheep Foundation and the Nebraska chapter of the Safari Club International, the Commission released six bighorn sheep in an enclosure on the buttes at Fort Robinson State Park to establish a resident herd. Some of those sheep and their progeny were released to the wild in 1988 and the enclosure was removed entirely in 1991. Boosted by the relocation of sheep from Colorado, Montana and Canada in 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2012, the state now has about 320 sheep in the Pine Ridge and the Wildcat Hills.
- 1982 – Platte River State Park officially opened in the bluffs above the river for which it was named.
- 1983 – The Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation was created to help develop private/public partnerships that have generated tens of millions of dollars in donations to enhance and improve Nebraska's natural, cultural and recreational resources and help the Commission further its mission.
- 1984 – The Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund was created, allowing citizens to donate all or part of their state income tax refund or make a direct tax-deductible donation to help fund projects to benefit nongame species.
- 1984 – New legislation allowed the Commission and natural resource districts to obtain instream-flow rights in Nebraska rivers and streams to conserve water for fish, wildlife and recreation. The first ever water right granted to protect fisheries came in 1989 on Long Pine Creek. In 1998, rights were granted to protect fish and wildlife habitat in 250 miles of the central and lower Platte River.
- 1984 – A \$5 Trout Stamp was required to harvest trout.

- 1985 – The Commission launched Project Wild in Nebraska. The national program trains educators to teach kindergarten through high school students about wildlife and natural resources. The Commission has since started other educational endeavors aimed at youths and adults, including Trail Tales Magazine, Aquatic Education, Becoming an Outdoors-Woman workshops, Outdoor Skills Camps, Fishing in Nebraska Schools and many more.
- 1985 – Land was acquired for the new Niobrara State Park. The old park site, acquired in 1930, was abandoned because of rising water levels caused by the creation of Lewis and Clark Lake. The new park opened in 1987.
- 1986 – Purchase of land and development of Eugene T. Mahoney State Park in Cass County began. The park, funded in large part by private donations, opened in 1991.
- 1986 – Nebraska's first modern-day elk season was held in the Pine Ridge. Seasons have been held annually since 1995.
- 1991 – The first confirmed reports of a mountain lion since the 19th century came from tracks found near Crawford. Soon after, an adult lion was shot by a hunter near Harrison. Lions continue to find their way into Nebraska from neighboring states and have established resident breeding populations, leading to the state's first lion hunting season in 2014.
- 1991 – Bald eagles successfully nested in Nebraska for the first time in decades, part of a recovery that began in the 1970s following the ban of many chemicals that decimated populations of our nation's symbol, and protection from the Endangered Species Act. Expanding populations here and elsewhere allowed the bird to be removed from the endangered species list in 2007. In 2016, there were a record 159 active eagle nests in the state.
- 1992 – Smith Falls State Park, the site of the state's highest waterfall, was established on the Niobrara River near Valentine.
- 1992 – Commercial harvesting of catfish in the Missouri River was discontinued.
- 1993 – The Belmont fish ladder was completed on the North Platte River near Bridgeport, the first fish passage structure placed on any Nebraska stream.
- 1994 – A gift from the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy of 321 miles of abandoned Chicago & North Western rail line across northern Nebraska lead to creation of the Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail. When completed, it will be the longest rails-to-trails conversion in the country.
- 1994 – The Commission became the first state game, fish and parks agency in the country to launch a website.
- 1997 – Nebraska anglers were required to purchase an Aquatic Habitat Stamp, the first of its kind in the nation, to help rehabilitate and enhance aquatic habitat in lakes and streams. The Aquatic Habitat Program has since spent \$62 million, including funding from 71 partners, to improve aquatic habitat on 96 Nebraska waters.
- 1997 – The Commission launched the CRP-MAP program, which paid landowners to open their land enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program to public hunting. The program started with 19,789 acres and has grown into the Open Fields and Waters program, which this year opened 276,000 acres to hunting and 424 acres of private ponds and 41 miles of private streams and rivers to fishing.
- 1997 – The Commission began stocking endangered pallid sturgeon in the lower Platte River as part of a national recovery plan. The agency's involvement in the fish, listed as endangered in 1990, continues through its intensive brood stock collection program in the Missouri River.

- 1998 – Two permits were issued for Nebraska's first bighorn sheep hunting season. By 2016, 21 permits had been issued by lottery or auction in all but five years since, raising \$1.2 million for the sheep program.
- 2002 – The Commission launched its Focus on Pheasants Program, a cooperative effort with Pheasants Forever and others aimed at improving habitat for the upland game bird and other wildlife on public and private land.
- 2005 – The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project, Nebraska's version of the Statewide Wildlife Action Plan required by the U.S. Congress, was initiated. The project targeted habitat management for at-risk species through partnerships and became a major part of conservation in the state.
- 2005 – The first Missouri River Outdoor Expo was held at Ponca State Park, offering hands-on activities featuring outdoor education, sports and recreation, with one day for fifth graders and two for anyone. The free event is now the largest in the Midwest, drawing more than 50,000 people annually. It spawned similar Commission expos at Fort Kearny and the Wildcat Hills state recreation areas, and at Platte River State Park for schoolchildren.
- 2010 – The Commission launched its Angler Access Program, an offshoot of the Aquatic Habitat Program, to improve access and fishing success for bank anglers. By 2016, \$6 million had been spent on projects at 52 waters.
- 2011 – The Roger G. Sykes Outdoor Heritage Complex, the Commission's first shooting range, opened at Platte River State Park, offering archery, air rifle, firearm and shotgun ranges. A similar range opened in 2016 at the Wildcat Hills SRA.
- 2014 – The Nebraska Outdoor Education Center, an indoor archery and firearm range, opened in Lincoln.
- 2014 – The Commission also opened its Outdoor Encounter exhibit at the Nebraska State Fair, continuing a presence at the state fair that dates to at least 1900.
- 2015 – Danish Alps State Recreation Area, part of a new reservoir near Hubbard in Dakota County, was opened in May 2015. The park comprises a 219-acre lake surrounded by 520 acres of parkland. The area offers camping, day use facilities and hiking, biking and equestrian trails.

The Nebraska Legislature approved the Venture Parks project, an estimated \$35 million project to expand or enhance activities and amenities at four state parks and recreation areas along the Platte River: Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, Platte River State Park, Schramm Park State Recreation Area and Louisville State Recreation Area. The governing body authorized \$7.3 million of Commission cash funds to be used for the project. Together with the Foundation, the Commission approached private donors with the goal of raising nearly \$28 million of the \$35 million needed for the project.

- 2016 – The Commission adopted the Cool Water Stream Management plan to guide stewardship of streams and ensure they will support productive and sustainable populations of cool water aquatic life, have healthy riparian zones and clean water, and contribute to watershed stability.

The Commission launched its Berggren Plan, a five-year cooperative effort with other organizations aimed at growing Nebraska's pheasant population and increasing land open to hunting in areas with abundant pheasants, with habitat and hunter access, particularly for youth, as cornerstones. The plan is named for the late Nebraska Game and Parks Commissioner Lynn Berggren.

Ground broke on the Venture Parks complex, a multi-year project to enhance opportunities at four state parks and recreation areas: Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, Platte River State Park, Schramm Park State Recreation Area and Louisville State Recreation Area.

2017 – Crawdad Creek, an interactive water feature at Platte River State Park, opened to become the first completed Venture Park addition. The creek is host to aquatic invertebrates, insects, reptiles and fish that visitors see and interact with. The creek also serves as the source for water recharge of the nearby Jenny Newman Lake.

2018 – As part of the Venture Parks concept, five new features opened at three state park areas: Treetop Adventure and the tallest climbing wall in the region at Mahoney State Park; a spray park and glamping cabins at Platte River State Park; and a floating playground at Louisville State Recreation Area.

An aquatic rehabilitation project began at Conestoga State Recreation area to improve aquatic habitat, water quality and angler access. A priority of the project was to re-establish some of the depth and lake bottom diversity and capture future sediment in the upper ends of the reservoir.

2019 – The Schramm Education Center – a fully renovated and greatly expanded iteration of the former Ak-sar-ben Aquarium – opened in May of 2019 as part of the Venture Parks concept. The education center features interactive exhibits, a touch; new tanks featuring fish, reptiles and amphibians native to Nebraska; an educational nature center area; a maker space and more.

2020 – The Treetop Journey course and Monkey Drop freefall activity were added to the already popular Treetop Adventure at the Eugene T. Mahoney State Park.

2021 – Game and Parks continues to manage 76 areas and two state trails in its state park system, encompassing more than 70,000 acres across the entire state. Nebraska state parks and recreation areas account for about 20 of the top 25 tourist destinations in the state.

In addition, the Commission manages 287 wildlife management areas and five fish hatcheries, providing hunting ground and improving fish populations for the public to enjoy for years to come.

Game and Parks continues to grow these sites as demand for unique experiences and enhanced opportunities to meet the expectations of Nebraskans now and into the future.