



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

- 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. In 1923, the park board was attached to the University of Nebraska's Department of Horticulture.
- 1923 - Arbor Lodge, the mansion and grounds of J. Sterling Morton, founder of Arbor Day, in Nebraska City, became the state's first State Historical Park.
- 1923 - Victoria Springs, described as an oasis in the Sand Hills for the mineral springs found there, became the state's first State Recreation Area. The park, near Anselmo, includes the log home and store of Judge Charles Matthews.
- 1925 - Walgren Lake SRA was established in Sheridan County.
- 1925 - The Bureau of Game and Fish began to establish a statewide system of recreation grounds to supplement the state parks "to provide fishing and hunting for the thousands of Nebraska citizens who desire such outdoor recreation." It acquired Goose Lake in Holt County, Walgren Lake in Sheridan County and Rat and Beaver lakes in Cherry County that year, and Fremont Sandpits in Dodge County in 1926.
- 1926 - The first issue of Outdoor Nebraska was published. Its name was changed to NEBRASKAland Magazine in 1964.

- 1929 - Fort Kearny State Historical Park was established. Land was acquired nearby in 1969 to create Fort Kearny SRA.
- 1929 - 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.
- 1930 - The Commission purchased land near Scotts Bluff to create a "big game reserve" today known as the Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area.
- 1933 - By the end of 1933, the Game, Forestation and Parks Commission had established 26 state recreation areas. The Commission developed a 10-year program to improve outdoor recreation in Nebraska and to use its resources more efficiently.
- 1935 - Rock Creek Lake SRA opened in Dundey County a few miles downstream from the Rock Creek Fish Hatchery, which opened in 1926. It was touted as the deepest lake in the state in Outdoor Nebraska, although no depth was given. The lake is now 22 to 25 feet deep in spots.
- 1935 - Niobrara State Park at the mouth of the Niobrara River opened to the public after work by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1934 and 1935. The U.S. Department of the Interior had given the parkland to the Village of Niobrara, which gave it to the Commission in 1930.
- 1935 - A small lake and recreation grounds near Guide Rock in Webster County was completed by The Civil Works Administration laborers and was destroyed by the 1935 Republican River flood before it could open to the public.
- 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 CCC. Additions to the park in the 1950's, 60's, 70's and 2000's grew the park to more than 2,000 acres.
- 1937 - State parks began receiving an appropriation from the state general tax fund.
- 1937 - The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, better known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, was passed by Congress establishing a 10 percent tax on handguns and an 11 percent manufacturer's excise tax on sporting rifles, shotguns, ammunition, and archery equipment. Revenues from the tax are still distributed to state conservation departments to help support wildlife research and management, and amount to about one-fourth of the Commission's wildlife budget. It also has helped build shooting ranges at Platte River State Park, the Wildcat Hills SRA and elsewhere.
- 1940 - Separate hunting and fishing permits were issued for the first time. A hunting or fishing permit cost \$1; a combination permit was \$1.50. Previously, all hunting and fishing permits were combination permits and cost \$1.
- 1945 - The Commission was granted a 99-year lease by Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District to manage recreation grounds on portions of the newly created Lake McConaughy and other reservoirs in the system, including Lake Ogallala, Johnson Lake and Gallagher Canyon.
- 1945 - Box Butte Dam was completed. The Commission later would lease the property from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation as a state recreation area.
- 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. The program has helped fund rehabilitation of lakes at many parks, and more recently, fund the construction of boat ramps, docks and other access projects.
- 1952 - Enders and Medicine Creek reservoirs opened to the public, the first of four large flood-control and irrigation reservoirs built in southwestern Nebraska by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.
- 1954 - Swanson Reservoir opened to the public, third large U.S. Bureau of Reclamation reservoir in the region.

- 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 - 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 three years.
- 1958 - Lewis and Clark Lake, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reservoir on the Missouri River, opened. The Corps granted the Commission rights to manage the fish, wildlife and recreation resources on the Nebraska side of the reservoir. The area became a State Recreation Area in 1971.
- 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. It spurred major projects in the parks. The Commission was assigned tourism responsibilities for the state.
- 1959 - Assigned boating safety responsibilities by the Legislature, the Commission began issuing licenses for motorized boats.
- 1960s - Throughout the 1960s, a chain of lakes in central Nebraska, created by construction of Interstate 80, were developed as hunting, fishing and recreation areas, including Mormon Island, Union Pacific, War Axe and Windmill SRAs.
- 1960 - Two Rivers State Recreation Area opened, featuring camping, swimming, fishing and 28 duck blinds for rent.
- 1960 - The Commission began managing Lake Minatare, a Bureau of Reclamation reservoir that was completed in 1915.
- 1961 - Game wardens became known as conservation officers.
- 1962 - Red Willow Reservoir, the fourth and final large U.S. Bureau of Reclamation reservoir in the region, opened.
- 1964 - Bluestem and Wagon Train lakes opened to public use. These were the first of eight flood control reservoirs built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that would be managed by the Commission as State Recreation Areas. Known as the Salt Valley Lakes, others would include: Branched Oak, Conestoga, Olive Creek, Pawnee, Stagecoach, and Twin Lakes. Two other Salt Valley Lakes, Hedgefield and Yankee Hill, are managed by the Commission as Wildlife Management Areas. Another in the project, Holmes Lake, is managed by the city of Lincoln.
- 1964 - Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area opened.
- 1964 - The name of the monthly magazine was changed from Outdoor Nebraska to NEBRASKA land.
- 1965 - Buffalo Bill Ranch was dedicated as a State Historical Park. The dedication followed extensive restoration work on the home and barn of famed showman scout William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, which was acquired in 1961. The Commission acquired 233 acres nearby on the North Platte River in 1997 to create Buffalo Bill SRA and provide a campground, which opened in 1999.
- 1966 - The first facilities at Ash Hollow State Historical Park, a small campground, opened. Land acquisition began in 1962 and was completed in 1968 for this park, an important stop on the Oregon Trail that also featured a cave with evidence of human inhabitants in the valley dating back 7,000 to 10,000 years. An interpretive shelter over the mouth of the cave and displays at Windlass Hill were completed in 1973, and in 1978, a visitor center housing display of pioneer history, American Indian history, and geologic and paleontological history opened.
- 1966 - Acquisition of the 10,300-acre James Ranch expanded Fort Robinson State Park.
- 1967 - The legislature removed the responsibility for forestation from the Commission, which was renamed the Game and Parks Commission.

- 1967 - Land was purchased in Jefferson County for what would be the core of Rock Creek Station State Historical Park, an important station on the Oregon Trail and a Pony Express station. A visitor center, donated by the Burlington Northern Foundation, opened in 1984 on a hill overlooking ruts left in the prairie by wagons traveling the trail. Reconstruction of historic building, based on archeological surveys and an 1860 photo, began that same year.
- 1968 - Fort Hartsuff State Historical Park opened to the public following restoration of a few of the buildings that remained from the military fort that served the area from 1874-1881. More work would follow on the property, which was acquired in 1960. The park was formally dedicated in 1973.
- 1969 - Acquired Champion Mill, a flour mill on Frenchman Creek in Chase County, to create a state historical park. The mill pond, a popular swimming and fishing hole and park, had been acquired in 1930. The mill and pond were given to Chase County in 2013.
- 1970 - Indian Cave State Park opened to day use and primitive camping. Initial acquisition of land for the park, located in the forested bluffs above the Missouri River, began in 1963 and was completed in 1973. In 2000, 347 acres of bottomland was added to the park.
- 1973-Sixteen bison were moved from the Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area to start a herd at Fort Robinson State Park.
- 1973 - The Gretna fish hatchery, the state's first when it was acquired in 1881, was closed and became part of Schramm Park State Recreation Area. The hatchery is now a museum.
- 1978 -A park-entry permit program, authorized by the legislature in 1976, was initiated to raise funds for improvement and maintenance of state parks. Additionally, the Nebraska Outdoor Recreation and Development Act, funded by a one-cent tax on cigarettes, began to fund new park construction.
- 1979 - The Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium opened in Schramm Park.
- 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 were released to the wild in 1988 and the enclosure was removed entirely in 1991. The sheep program was boosted by the relocation of sheep from Colorado, Montana and Canada in 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2012. In 2020, the state had about 290 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.
- 1986 - Calamus Reservoir, a Bureau of Reclamation irrigation reservoir completed on the Calamus River near Burwell in 1984, opened.
- 1986 - Ten cabooses, donated by the Union Pacific Railroad and converted into cabins, opened to the public at Two Rivers SRA.
- 1987 - The new Niobrara State Park opened. The old park site, acquired in 1930, was abandoned because of rising water levels in the Missouri River following the construction of Lewis and Clark Lake. The new park features a group lodge, 20 cabins, swimming pool, campground, trails and more.
- 1987 - Arthur Bowring Ranch State Historical Park, a working Sandhills cattle ranch near Merriman, opened. Former U.S. Senator Eve Bowring left the 7,202 acre Bar 99 ranch to the Commission in memory of her husband when she died in 1885, wanting it to be preserved as a living history museum and example of 19th century ranching.
- 1989 - Lightning sparked a wildfire July 8, known as the Fort Robinson Fire after it burned nearly 50,000 acres of the Pine Ridge in and around the state park; the largest fire in recorded history at the time. None of the parks historic buildings were damaged, but 14 private structures were. Rains that fall and the following spring washed tons of ash into the White River, Soldiers Creek and Lake Carter P. Johnson, killing nearly all of the trout. A 100-year flood in May 1991 caused more damage to those waters and inundated the Commission's Crawford Fish Hatchery, causing damage that forced the closure of the facility that was completed in 1931 and operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service until 1984.

- 1990 - The Commission signed an agreement with the Mirage Flats Irrigation District that would keep more water in Box Butte Reservoir, a move that would help maintain quality fishing and recreational access at the recreation area.
- 1990 - A new RV campground opened at Chadron State Park on land leased from the U.S. Forest Service in 1987 and later purchased. The park previously had offered limited space for tent camping along Chadron Creek.
- 1991 - Eugene T. Mahoney State Park opened along the Platte River between Lincoln and Omaha. Land acquisition and development, funded in large part by donations, had begun in 1986. The year-round park includes the 40-room Peter Kiewit Lodge, restaurant, 57 cabins, campgrounds, meeting space, theater, aquatic center, indoor playground, ice skating rink, trails and more.
- 1991 - Ashfall Fossil Beds State Historical Park opened. Land was acquired in 1987 for the 360-acre park, a partnership between the Commission and the University of Nebraska State Museum. It features a collection of fossils left nearly 12 million years ago when volcanic ash engulfed this ancient watering hole, entombing rhinos, cranes, turtles and other animals, which paleontologists continue to unearth beneath the barn built over a portion of the bed. The original rhino barn was replaced in 2009 with the Hubbard Rhino Barn, which is eight times larger. The Dickinson Fossil Heritage Center opened in 2012.
- 1992 -Smith Falls State Park, the site of the state's highest waterfall, was established on the Niobrara River near Valentine.
- 1994 - The Commission becomes the first state game, fish and parks agency in the country to launch a website.
- 1994 - A gift from the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy of 321 miles of abandoned Chicago & North Western rail line across northern Nebraska led to creation of the Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail. When completed, it will be the longest rails-to-trails conversion in the country. Resurfacing the 192 miles between Valentine and Norfolk was completed in 2009, although several segments of the trail damaged by flooding are now closed. Another 15-mile stretch between Rushville and Gordon was improved with the help of volunteers.
- 1995 - The Wildcat Hills Nature Center opened at the state recreation area south of Gering. A cooperative effort between the Commission and local civic leaders and groups, the center serves as an educational facility, museum and interpretive center. An expansion completed in 2017 nearly doubled the size of the center.
- 1997 - A new marina was dedicated at Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area. The marina was part of major improvements that began in 1994 and included a store and upgraded roads and RV campgrounds.
- 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 aging lakes and streams. Through 2020, the Aquatic Habitat Program has spent \$74.4 million, including funding from 91 partners, to improve aquatic habitat on 112 Nebraska waters.
- 1999 - The Commission began selling hunting, fishing and big game permits online. All permits, with the exception of Park Entry Permits, became electronic in 2010.
- 2000 - Five cabins, the first of 10, open on the shore of Lewis and Clark Lake in the Burbach area. Four more opened in 2002 and another in 2005.
- 2000 - Commission staff and volunteers drove a herd of 140 purebred Texas longhorn cattle 170 miles along Highway 20 from Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge near Valentine to Fort Robinson State Park. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had maintained the herd at the refuge since 1936, but transferred those animals and 79 more to the Commission after it was determined they didn't fit the mission of the wildlife refuge.
- 2001 - The Lake McConaughy Visitor and Water Interpretive Center opened. The facility includes park offices, conference room, the Ethel S. Abbot Theater featuring a film on the history of Kingsley Dam,

aquariums, and interactive exhibits depicting the story of water in Nebraska, and the history, hydrology and geology of the North Platte River Valley and Lake McConaughy.

- 2001 - Two new cabins opened at Niobrara State Park.
- 2001 - A forest thinning project began at Chadron State Park to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk. The work provided a place firefighters could set backfires which would help halt raging West Ash Fire in 2012 . The West Ash Fire burned 58,836 acres, the largest in recorded history in the Pine Ridge.
- 2002 - The Lied Platte River Bridge, abandoned by the Rock Island Railroad, opened as a trail across the river near South Bend. Managed jointly by the Commission, the Papio-Missouri Natural Resources District (NRD) and the Lower Platte South NRD, the bridge will serve as an important link in a trail connecting Lincoln and Omaha.
- 2002 - The Nebraska Legislature cut funding to the Parks Division, forcing the Commission to make cuts and reduce services at some parks across the state.
- 2003 - The \$7.9 million Missouri National Recreational River Resource and Education Center, a cooperative effort with the National Park Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Better Ponca Foundation, opens at Ponca State Park.
- 2003 - The Family Aquatic Center opened at Mahoney State Park, adding a wave pool, drop slide, aquatic playground and sun turf to the existing pool and water slides.
- 2003 - The First Tribal Council, a signature event in the national celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Lewis And Clark expedition, was held at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park.
- 2003 - The reconstructed Buffalo Soldiers Barracks was completed at Fort Robinson. The barracks was home to African American Soldiers in the Ninth Cavalry.
- 2004 - The Commission begins taking reservations for park cabins and campsites online.
- 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 for the public at Fort Kearny and Wildcat Hills state recreation areas and for school children Platte River State Park.
- 2008 - The first two mini lodges opened at Ponca State Park. These four-bedroom units feature a large "lodge" style great room, a wood-burning fireplace, wireless Internet, cable television, two bathrooms, and many other comforts of home. The park now offers 15 mini lodges, 10 two-bedroom cottages and two green cabins making it a year-round destination. The park also maintains four of the rustic cabins built in the 1960s for summer use.
- 2008 - The Great Park Pursuit began, inviting visitors to explore parks around the state and enter a contest to win prizes.
- 2010 - The Commission launches its Angler Access Program, an offshoot of the Aquatic Habitat Program, to improve access and fishing success for bank anglers. Through 2020, \$13.1 million has been spent on projects at 90 Nebraska waters.
- 2011 - 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.
- 2015 - The Commission, in conjunction with the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation, launched the Venture Parks initiative, which will expand programs and amenities at Mahoney and Platte River state parks and Schramm and Louisville state recreation areas to form a recreation destination. Through the Foundation, donations would cover \$28 million of the \$35 million project. Construction began in 2016.
- 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.

- 2016 - The Wildcat Hills Shooting Sports Complex opened, offering archery, air rifle, firearm and shotgun ranges.
- 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.
- 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.