



# THE NATURE CONSERVANCY IN NEBRASKA

## *Conservation Strategies*



Niobrara River (© Chris Helzer)

**T**he Nature Conservancy works at the landscape and ecosystem level to preserve and restore Nebraska's most valuable plant and animal communities. Combating threats to the most biologically diverse and vulnerable places requires a toolbox of strategic and science-based approaches to conservation. These include:

### **Land Acquisition**

The Conservancy owns 85,000 acres in Nebraska – two-thirds of which is our 56,000-acre Niobrara Valley Preserve northwest of Ainsworth

along 26 miles of the Middle Niobrara River. That land was acquired in 1980, at a time when such acquisitions were affordable. Recreational and residential development has raised prices on property, especially near rivers and lakes, to levels difficult for conservation organizations and farmers to afford. Today, we consider a variety of other ways to preserve habitat while still making selective acquisitions. We pay taxes – well over \$1 million to date – on all the land in Nebraska that we own.

### **Partnerships**

In Nebraska, 98.6 percent of the land is privately owned. For the Conservancy, partnerships with businesses, government agencies and other private organizations are essential to achieving our conservation goals in the state. For example, we have worked with ConAgra Foods on sustainable agriculture, and we work with the National Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Grazing Land Coalition and the Sandhills Task Force to encourage private conservation ownership of land in the Sandhills.

### **Restoration**

Habitat restoration is a particularly important strategy along the Big Bend of the Platte River, which hundreds of thousands of other migrating birds rely on as a resting and feeding ground. In 2001, we joined

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Checked skipper butterfly (© Chris Helzer)

with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to create the Platte Habitat Partnership, which works with private landowners along the Platte River on stewardship and restoration strategies focused on habitat for migratory birds. We work with sand and gravel mining companies, community stakeholders and conservation groups to clear vegetation, maintain the river channel and restore wildlife habitat along the Platte.

### Conservation Easements

This tool enables us to greatly increase the amount of land we are able to protect throughout Nebraska, which currently totals more than 100,000 acres. We have a 9,900-acre easement in the Sandhills, several on the Niobrara River and a new one in the Pine Ridge area. A conservation easement is a voluntary contract between the landowner and the holder of the easement to preserve the land in perpetuity from incompatible development. Because the land remains in private ownership, with the remainder of the rights intact, a property protected by a conservation easement continues to provide jobs, property taxes and other economic benefits to the area.

### Special Initiatives

Fire, Grazing, Freshwater. Ecological threats to Nebraska's native plants and animals include hydrological changes to rivers and wetlands, intense grazing and fire suppression. We work with agencies and landowners to use science-based tools – prescribed burns and alternative grazing practices – to improve prairie habitat.

The goal of the Conservancy's new Missouri River Program – which is managed by staff in Nebraska and also involves Iowa, Missouri, South Dakota and Kansas – is to work with public and private partners to develop and manage the river's water

resources to meet human needs, to protect priority species and to restore natural habitat.



Fire at the Rulo Bluffs Preserve (© Chris Helzer)