



THE NATURE CONSERVANCY IN NEBRASKA

Where We Work: Western Landscapes



Cherry Ranch (© Chris Helzer)

Sandhills

The Nebraska Sandhills is an ecosystem that is unique to North America and the most extensive intact wetland-grassland system in the United States. It encompasses 19,600 square miles of grass-covered sand dunes and 1.3 million acres of wetlands in the western Nebraska panhandle and southern parts of South Dakota.

This large, dry grass-stabilized dune region supports a system of high-quality streams, rivers and wetlands. It provides vital habitat for migratory birds in the Great Plains Flyway, as well as fish species such as the

finescale dace, northern redbelly dace and blacknose shiner. Many prairie and western grasses and forbs thrive in the Sandhills and are essential to prevent erosion. These include sand bluestem, little bluestem, needlegrass and sandreed grass. The flowering yucca plant is common, as are jackrabbits, the Plains pocket gopher, prairie voles, a variety of bats, badgers, muskrat, river otters, coyote, swift fox, bobcat, elk, deer, pronghorn and bison.

Ecological threats to the region include the draining of wetlands, grazing and invasive trees and shrubs.

The Nature Conservancy is working with other organizations – the National Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Grazing Land Coalition and the local rancher-driven Sandhills Task Force and encouraging private conservation ownership of land throughout the Sandhills. The first conservation easement on a Sandhills stream was acquired by the Conservancy along a five-mile stretch of Birdwood Creek on Kelly Ranch.

Pine Ridge

The dramatically beautiful Pine Ridge landscape south of Chadron in northwestern Nebraska is dominated by Ponderosa pine forest, hills, savanna and open hay meadows. The Conservancy has obtained a conservation easement on 640 acres in Dawes County which connects nearly 30,000 acres of state and federal

More on back...

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Primrose (© Chris Helzer)

lands are popular hiking, hunting and camping areas. The region includes the Pine Ridge National Recreation Area, the Nebraska National Forest and the Ponderosa Wildlife Management Area. The Conservancy's Carter Tract protects a critical wildlife corridor between two large areas of the Pine Ridge that is used by bighorn sheep and other animals. The Conservancy's science-based management of the area includes proper grazing and timber removal, with plans to do prescribed burns to reintroduce fire to the area.

Conservancy's goal is for Cherry Ranch to serve as a conservation model. We plan to use natural processes such as grazing and fire to remove invasive species such as Canada thistle and create a mosaic of natural vegetation areas, including wet meadows, while keeping the area economically viable for agriculture.

Shortgrass Prairie

In the far northeast corner of Nebraska, the upper section of the Niobrara River flows naturally as it always has, unaltered by dams or pollution. However, water levels and habitats for native plants and animals are under increasing pressure as center-pivot irrigation systems proliferate in the western part of the state. The Conservancy is working with ranchers, landowners and other partners to wisely manage the river's resources while keeping most land in the area in private for-profit ownership. The Conservancy owns the 7,260-acre Cherry Ranch Preserve in Sioux County. The preserve land is used primarily for cattle grazing. The



Ranchers at Cherry Ranch (© Chris Helzer)