



nebraska update

SUMMER 2025

CONNECT WITH NATURE: [NATURE.ORG/NEBRASKA](https://www.nature.org/nebraska)

MEET YOUR PRAIRIE NEIGHBORS

You are invited to the Platte River Prairies Field Day

The Nature Conservancy is hosting the Platte River Prairies Field Day on Saturday, July 12th from 7:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. in Wood River. Participants may come and go as they please. There is no cost for attending.

The day will include a birding hike, a close-up look at small mammals, plant identification, and several other activities with local ecologists. "This is a fun day for all ages, filled with hands-on activities for folks to get to know all the life that's in a prairie," said Chris Helzer, Director of Science and Stewardship. "Visitors

can choose between multiple topics and hike options during each of several sessions through the day."

Snacks will be available as well as jugs of cold water, tea, and lemonade. Participants are asked to bring their own water bottles and lunches.

There is parking available at TNC's headquarters: 13650 South Platte River Drive, Wood River. Go to [nature.org/nebraska](https://www.nature.org/nebraska) for more details.

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The Nature
Conservancy 
Nebraska

FOLLOW THE FELLOWS

The Nature Conservancy started the Claire M. Hubbard Young Leaders in Conservation Fellowship Program in Nebraska in 2013 with a gift from the Claire M. Hubbard Foundation. It's a one-year program for two selected recent college graduates in conservation-related fields, headquartered at the Platte River Prairies. Here they share some of their first impressions:

MEET KOJO BAIDOO



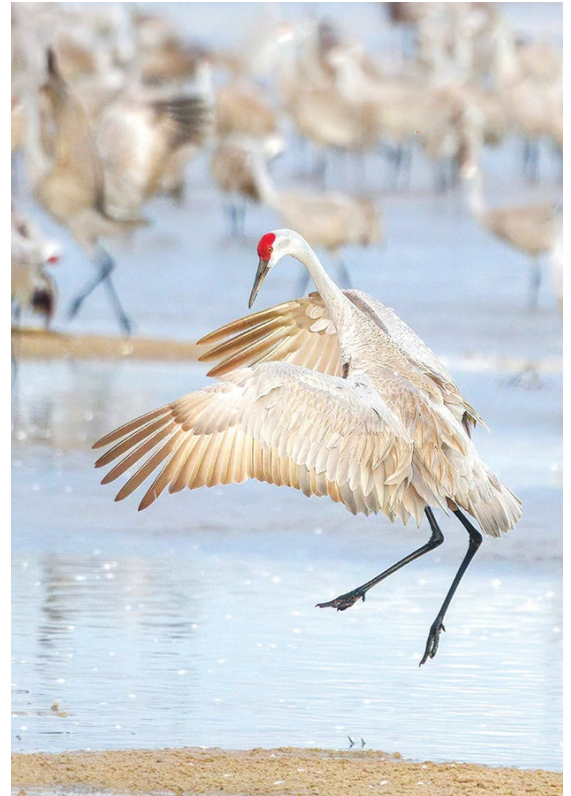
Since I arrived in Nebraska, almost every introductory conversation I've had has included some version of the sentence "I never would have thought I'd end up here, but I'm enjoying every second of it." Even though some part of it has been true from the start, I'll admit this felt a little like lip service at first. It was almost an ode to the fact that I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, which is about as opposite a setting from Wood River, Nebraska as one can imagine in many ways. However, it

didn't take long for me to really believe those words, and they ring truer with every passing moment.

I became interested in birds at the ripe old age of six, and that passion has probably (read: definitely) driven every one of my life-defining choices since I discovered it. Although you'll find a vague "Ecology and Evolutionary Biology" major on my college diploma, I would say that a strong 90 percent of my nature knowledge is bird-related. For a while, birds were all I noticed, which I don't think is necessarily a bad thing, but I chose the Hubbard Fellowship primarily to broaden my horizons by immersing myself in a new environment, learning new skills, and meeting people with new perspectives.

When someone asks me "what have you learned so far?" I almost want to say "well, what *haven't* I learned?" For one, I've learned that a lot more goes into land management than what meets the eye. A pretty prairie doesn't just pop up and stay that way, which seems self-explanatory to those who are familiar with the region, but the forest-dominated landscapes of the East I'm used to feel a lot more static in a way even if they may also be managed. Prairies have several competing natural processes at work that makes and keeps them the way they are, whether those be grazing, fire, precipitation, or others. Ensuring that these processes sustain the prairie doesn't happen on its own, either; it also involves aspects like cultivating years-long relationships with lessees whose cattle graze our property, planning weeks or months for a prescribed burn that could get canceled on the whim of the weather, constantly making sure equipment is up and running (spoiler alert: something's always broken), you name it. It's a full-and-a-half time job, and there's always more to be done.

I can't deny that there are times I've felt out of place here; I'm still getting used to being able to see the horizon at any given moment. But I think the openness of the prairie is something I've very much come to enjoy because it allows me to conceptualize how the ecosystem's moving parts come together. I can always count on seeing something new every time I step outside. I still notice the birds first; as I write this, the prehistoric bugling of sandhill cranes that was omnipresent from February through early April has been replaced with summer sounds such as the insect-like buzz of the grasshopper sparrow and the bubbly warbling of the bobolink. But I've also learned how exciting it is to look down, noting that the warm-season grasses have grown three inches



taller from last week, checking any flower for a crab spider lying in wait, or even counting the number of fly species visiting a pile of cow dung. Learning that there's always more to see isn't a quality that's unique to the prairie, but I will always credit this fellowship with teaching me that lesson no matter where I end up.

In short, I might have never thought I'd end up here, but I'm enjoying every second of it!

RIGHT: Photos © Kojo Baidoo



MEET NOELLE SCHUMANN!



"Kansas kid shoots for the Rockies, lands in Nebraska...and is loving it."

As a kid from Wichita, KS, I often yearned to travel west and explore the splendor of the mountains. It took time and attention to realize that there was splendor right under my nose.

I first grew a love for grasslands while attending Kansas State University. There, I worked in an entomology lab that focused on community ecology in prairie and agricultural systems. I then continued to develop my field skills in an ornithology lab researching grasshopper sparrows on the Konza Prairie and the effects of virtual fencing at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. The variety of experiences and people in these chapters of my life fueled my interest in stewardship of prairie landscapes. I became engrossed in the community involvement required for conservation efforts when serving an AmeriCorps term at Teton Science Schools last fall.

As a Hubbard Fellow, I get to literally frolic in the prairie and combine stewardship and public outreach in an experience that's one-of-a-kind despite my previous work in prairies. This experience is not unlike our different properties at Platte River Prairies (PRP); they may look the same at first glance but give them time and you'll see their unique character unfold.

The fellowship is designed to deliver a smorgasbord of opportunities for the multiple facets of preserve management in a large nonprofit organization, and so far, I'm near stuffed! It started off as a slow burn. Winter had quieted things down on the Platte River before our arrival. Time for us to adjust to the responsibilities of our role and the character of the land was ample. Soon enough, that peace was interrupted by the awkward trumpeting of sandhill cranes overhead. In the blink of an eye, we were off to the races with crane season. This season was full of networking opportunities, community outreach experience, and plain exploration of Nebraska's nature. I found it satisfying to connect to a grand and ancient migration process. In tandem, we turned up the heat with the warm glow of prescribed fire at Niobrara Valley Preserve (NVP). These long days introduced a flow state that I'm eager to return to. Through controlled burns, we've gotten to work on thoughtfully organized teams, understand sandhills culture, and explore the beauty of NVP.



Most of our time now in early summer is spent chipping away at projects at PRP. Here, I have discovered that I enjoy competency in heavy equipment and becoming handy as it gives me the agency I need to pair the delicate theory of prairie management to "boots on the ground" thinking and application.

This fellowship has not been all perfect prairie sunsets and immaculate starry nights; it comes with a fair share of challenges. For one, I've had to reestablish the skill of asking to try something, knowing very well that the outcome may be my own failure. I've also needed to become comfortable sharing and developing ideas with colleagues who are much more experienced than me and learn when I should simply absorb or when I should hop in to offer input. And then there is the casual grappling with the age-old issue of "the more I learn, the more aware I am of the little I know."

We are slipping out of the guidance stage of the Hubbard Fellowship and into the self-sufficient stage, which allows us to develop our own schedule and re-ponder the question "what do I want to get out of this?" within our newfound context. I'm excited for this developing answer and more so for the feats that I never could have guessed.

RESILIENT AND CONNECTED

TNC WORKS WITH PARTNERS ON UPPER ELKHORN PROJECT



As proud Nebraskans, we love to repeat that of all the temperate grasslands in all the countries in all the world, the Nebraska Sandhills are the most intact (Twidwell and Scholtz). In the past two years, TNC has expanded the scope of its work to help keep it that way.

The Elkhorn River Headwaters on the eastern edge of the Sandhills includes large areas of Brown, Holt, and Rock counties. This area is known for its extensive wet meadows and shallow marshes, as well as its value to local ranchers and communities.

Its meadows support the state's largest populations of the federally and state threatened western prairie fringed orchid. The area is also habitat for several other federal and state listed species including the small white lady's slipper orchid, American burying beetle, and whooping crane. It's home to many grassland dependent birds that require large, intact grasslands, and waterfowl and other water birds make extensive use of its wetlands.

The challenge: this area of the Sandhills has a higher rate of cropland conversion, wet meadow drainage and woody encroachment than any other.

The solution: by protecting and enhancing existing grasslands through long-term management plans, easements, prescribed fire, and whole ranch planning, we can help prevent fragmentation. These programs assist landowners to stay on the land - keeping grass in grass – and focusing on the economic, environmental, and social aspects of land protection and enhancement.

With grants from Union Pacific and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, TNC provides support for the work of Bethany Johnston, Livestock Systems Extension Educator at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. She is a rancher from the eastern Sandhills herself, where her family raises registered Angus cattle.

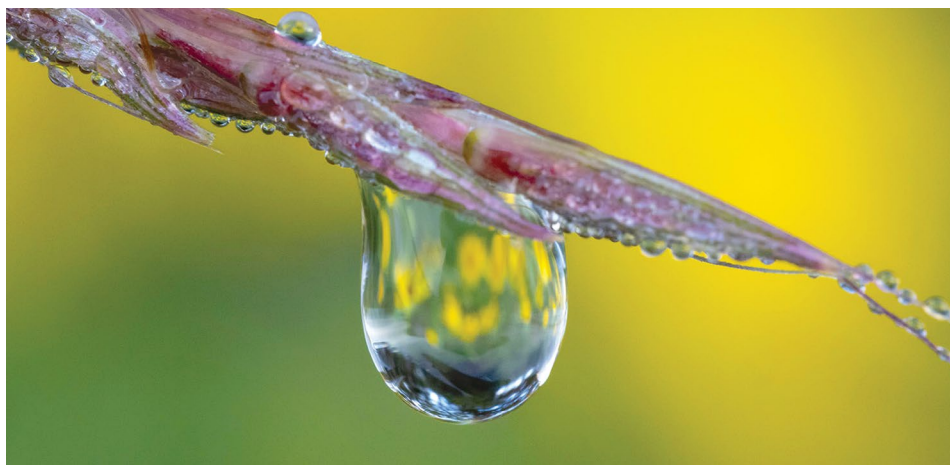
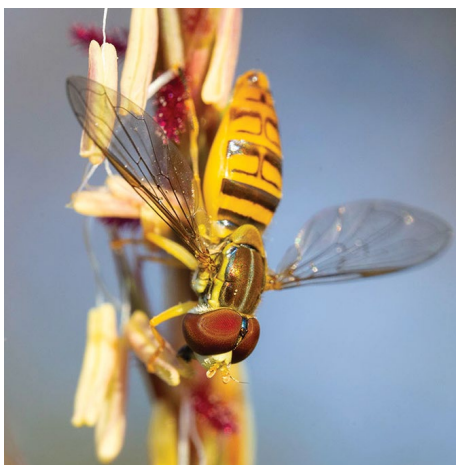
Bethany provides technical assistance to accelerate on-the-ground delivery and implementation of National Resources Conservation Service and Farm Bill conservation practices. Partners from Pheasants Forever, Sandhills Task Force, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission are essential to her work.

"Bethany's experience and skill set is the perfect mix that is needed to work with partners and landowners on grassland improvements and protection," said Rich Walters, Director of Conservation for the Nebraska program.



Photo courtesy Bethany Johnston

Bethany serves in the Upper Elkhorn watershed of the eastern Sandhills, helping landowners with rangeland practices, prescribed burning, and conservation cost-share.



A SQUARE METER OF PRAIRIE... AND A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

Chris Helzer's square meter plot is located in a narrow strip of restored grassland at Lincoln Creek Prairie in Aurora, Nebraska. Restored in the early 1980's, this great little grassland contains a diversity of prairie plants, making it the perfect spot for Helzer's square meter photography project. He set out to show people how much happens in prairies by highlighting one tiny portion of one small prairie. Here's a summary from Chris on the completion of this fascinating work:



In 2018, I came up with a new way to show people why prairies are endlessly fascinating to me. I marked out a square meter plot at a prairie just across town from my house in Aurora, Nebraska. Over a 12-month period, I visited the plot repeatedly and tried to photograph as much beauty and diversity as I could within that tiny space. That simple idea turned into a joyful obsession for me and became a book, a museum exhibit, and the subject of dozens of presentations that connected with a broad audience.

After a six-year break, I impulsively decided to revisit the project in the spring of 2024. I found my old plot and started the whole process again. It was even better the second time. I photographed

well over 300 different species, but even better, I had a blast watching countless stories play out in front of my eyes and camera. I found something new during each of my 131 visits between May 5, 2024, and May 4, 2025.

The project has been a terrific way to highlight how incredibly complex and interesting prairies are. It's also been particularly gratifying to help inspire people to find their own ways to look more closely at nature and natural areas near their home.

To learn more about this project and Chris' other work, and to see lots more photos, check out www.prairieecologist.com/.



OUR MISSION:

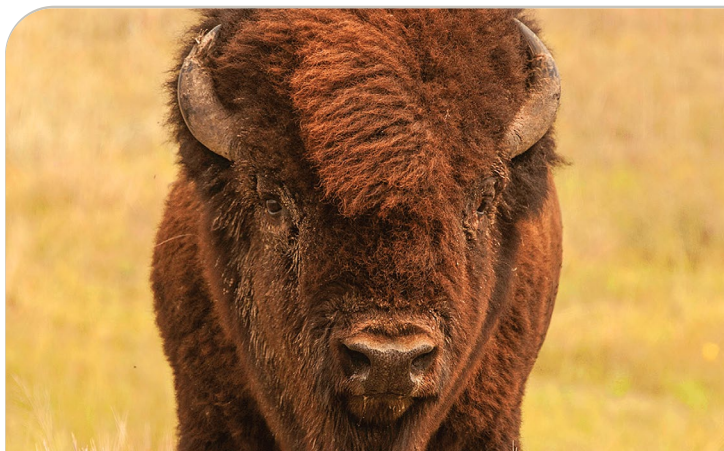
TO CONSERVE THE LANDS
AND WATERS ON WHICH
ALL LIFE DEPENDS.



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Bison © Chris Helzer/TNC



Sandhills Summer Saturday

You are invited to the
Niobrara Valley Preserve Field Day

Saturday, August 2nd | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Bring your own lunch, snacks, sunscreen, insect repellent, binoculars, refillable water bottle, etc. All ages are welcome! Enjoy a bison tour, hiking, and other family-friendly activities.

Please RSVP by July 20th to Kate Samuelson at katelyn.glause@tnc.org or by calling 402.722.4440

Cherry Ranch © Chris Helzer/TNC



Plan today to pass on your values.

What does tomorrow hold for the Nebraska we love?
Will future generations know the joy of hiking
a pristine prairie, navigating clear waters, or
watching the wildlife we know and cherish?

Learn how you can make a lasting impact
for nature with a gift through your will, trust,
retirement plan, or life insurance policy.

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