

SANDHILLS JOURNEY SCENIC BYWAY NEBRASKA HIGHWAY 2 TOUR



This 272-mile stretch of Nebraska Highway 2, from metropolitan Grand Island to the railroad community of Alliance, has been named one of the 10 most scenic routes in the nation.

The View

Dramatic grass covered sand dunes (only place like it in the Western Hemisphere) called the Sandhills, farms (part of the bread basket of America), expansive cattle ranches, the most constant flowing rivers in the world, lakes, marshes and wetlands (from the largest underground High Plains/Ogallala Aquifer), one of the great areas for birding, and the largest hand-planted forest in the nation.

The Adventure

See the world renowned annual Sandhill Crane, whooping crane, and spring waterfowl migration, western heritage museums, American Indian artifacts, canoeing, tanking, boating, and camping, ATV'ing, and enjoy viewing the stars in one of the least light polluted (darkest) areas of the nation.

The following pages will give tour operators ideas of the attractions and opportunities available for individual tours or group tours. Tours of specific areas of interest such as Natural, Cultural, Historical, Art and Artisans, are very popular.

If you want live accompaniment and commentary as you travel the Byway, please contact the SJSB office, 308-546-0636. It is in the Mullen Art Center, in the center of our Byway. During the summer months, Memorial Day to October 1, the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway Visitor Center can answer your questions. That phone number is 308-872-8331 or you may write us via postal mail at 44106 NE Hwy 2, Broken Bow, NE 68822. Additionally, you may email us at info@sandhillsjourney.com. Our websites are www.sandhillsjourney.com or www.sandhillsbywaybirding.com

SANDHILLS JOURNEY SCENIC BYWAY TOUR

An Unforgettable Four Days on the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway

The Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway (SJSB) is a Byway like none other anywhere in Nebraska, in the U.S., or on the planet, for that matter. The late Charles Kuralt (On the Road with Charles Kuralt, CBS Television) called it one of “the ten most beautiful highways in America”. Although it is a mecca of enviable agriculture, arts, culture, golfing, history, nature/scenery, and recreation including navigating rivers and attending rodeos, the focus of this testimony to its uniqueness and importance to the treasured roads of America will primarily speak to its intrinsic, natural appeal.

For the purposes of this document, four separate days of touring are presented although the number of possible customized itineraries is limitless – only limited by your imagination. The optimum days for viewing and participating in some of the events along the Byway, e.g. Sandhills cranes viewing and tanking rivers, are not necessarily at the same time of the year; so you may choose to drive Byway segments at different times. That said, no matter the time of the year, you are in for a treat! Multiple people that call the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway home are available to introduce you to the Byway.

Alternatively, you may want to simply insert our CD entitled “The Sandhills Journey, Nebraska’s Highway 2 Audio Tour” into your car’s CD player when you are ready to begin your tour at Grand Island. The CD provides you with color commentary about what you are seeing as you travel along the Byway from Grand Island to Alliance. It tells you, multiple times throughout your trip along Highway 2, when to pause it and when to turn it on again by arrival at various locations. It also adds some side trips and trivia facts.

Day 1: Experience the cranes and the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway from the Platte River valley to Broken Bow. Here’s your chance to get up close and personal with the natural phenomenon of 600,000 migrating Sandhills cranes as they camp out each spring in the Platte River Valley at the eastern end of the SJSB. Arrive at the Crane Trust Visitor Center located on the south side of Alda, exit 305 on Interstate 80 about mid-afternoon around the 15th of March where your previously reserved evening **sandhills cranes tour** is awaiting you. Your waiting guides will orient you regarding what you’ll see on the Platte River when the cranes, still getting their daily fill of corn in the fields surrounding the Platte River, return to the river in the evening. You’ll travel, with camera in tow and dressed appropriately to protect against the evening chill, to the blind on the edge of the river and watch as the thousands of birds gradually all return from the cornfields to stand on the sandbars in the river, which afford them protection from predators, for the night. The din of their communal conversation, as day merges into dusk, will result in indelible memories of this thousands-of-years old ritual.

When night has replaced dusk, you’ll sneak quietly back to your waiting transportation to allow the cranes to get some z’s before returning to the cornfields the next morning. Your next order of business is to travel the 15 minutes to your favorite restaurant in Grand Island. Virtually all types of cuisine await you as does a very good selection of hotels and motels.

Day 2: You’ll want to see the cranes depart the river for the cornfields. Arrive at Crane Trust well before daylight so that your guide can accompany you to the blind while it is still dark. Quiet is the modus operandi so as not to disturb the cranes. They are still enjoying their vertical sleep on the sandbars in the river before sunrise. You’ll very quietly walk to the blind from the parking lot carrying your camera and your coat, a very necessary item in the predawn chill. As the wide, flat river, immediately in front of the blind and emitting its never-ending sounds of gently flowing water, starts to take visual form in the very early light, you’ll see thousands of cranes catching a few last winks.

As the night fades away and daylight encroaches, you'll see them awakening and becoming restless. One by one and in groups they rise into flight and fly to the nearby cornfields where they'll graze for the day, gaining energy stores. About 45 days of this diet will allow them to fly the great distances to northern Canada, Alaska, and Siberia to spend their summer before reversing their course in the fall.

After the cranes have left the river for the day, drive about 10-15 minutes into Grand Island where many restaurants await you with coffee and your favorite breakfast items. Following your great breakfast and reminiscing on your post-crane tour, travel to **Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer**, one of the top 10 living history museums in the U.S. It is situated at the junction of U.S. 34 and U.S. 281 about five miles north of I-80. Here you'll see what life was like on the prairie in the 1890's as pioneers faced the challenges of nature with its storms and pestilences. You'll experience how they lived their lives and grew their families during this late 19th century era.

From Stuhr Museum, travel to the northwest of Grand Island on Nebraska Highway 2, the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway. All along this phenomenal route you'll find good lodging including hotels, motels and beds and breakfasts, unique eateries as well as conventional eating establishments, and barista cafes with delectable fare.

After traveling about five miles, you'll come to a sign pointing to **Dannebrog** which is approximately 10 miles to the north. Dannebrog is the **Danish Capital of Nebraska** and lies in the Oak Creek and Middle Loup River Valleys. You may want to take this side trip to Dannebrog to enjoy its Danish heritage as reflected in such businesses as The Danish Baker and Dannebrog Delights. As you travel north from Highway 2 on 90th Road, the Dannebrog road, you'll note a string of undulating sand hills. This sandy area is to be distinguished from the very large contiguous Sandhills – the largest area of sand dunes in the western hemisphere – that lie up ahead along Highway 2. This narrow row of low Sandhills courses about 95 miles from about 35 miles southwest of here to approximately 60 miles northeast of this point. The sand hills pastures on your right are part of the Taylor Ranch, a ranch still encompassing thousands of acres that used to cover nearly 10,000 acres. Robert Taylor, founder and owner of the ranch at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, was christened "Sheep King" and a book by that name speaks to this ranch. The "hard land" hills to the north of the Middle Loup, with their heavier soils, are very much different from the Sandhills and sandy river valley soil to the south of the river.

Approximately 17 miles west of Grand Island and five miles northwest of the Dannebrog turnoff, you'll travel through the small town of **Cairo**. The early pioneers named the town after Cairo, Egypt due to the large amount of sand in the area, and its streets' names ring of the Middle East. While in Cairo, take 20 to 30 minutes and visit Cairo Roots Historical Museum which will introduce you to life as a pioneer in the mid and late 1800's. Henry Balcom, a farmer and photographer, brings old-time Central Nebraska to life with his photos of the early settlers with a prairie backdrop – many in front of their "soddies".

Approximately six miles west of Cairo is the **Solon Borglum Historical Marker** speaking to the time when Solon Borglum perfected his painting and sculpting skills on his ranch that included the large sand bluff in view of, and off to the north of, the historical marker. Solon, a great artist in his own right, was the brother of Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of the presidential faces in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Gutzon himself spent some time on this Sandhills ranch.

As you travel on west into the valley below the historical marker you'll cross **Sweet Creek** with the large, beautiful aforementioned sand bluff rising above it off to the north – your right. It is easy to identify with Solon Borglum's appreciation of the beauty of the range land

that he, too, saw many years ago as he experienced frontier life, cowboys, and native Americans and turned those experiences into paintings and sculptures that we cherish today.

About two miles west of the creek, on the south side of the road, you might see the **resident bull elk** that has been hanging out with a group of black beef cows for several years now. He's not totally alone, in that other elk are occasionally seen in the area to compliment the many deer and other wildlife.

Your travel takes you on west approximately seven miles where you skirt the town of **Ravenna**, a major railroad town on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad. Just a mile east of Ravenna, as you drop down off the sand hills into the **South Loup River Valley**, keep an eye out for jack rabbits – not to be confused with cottontails or “bunny” rabbits – which frequent the area. As far as that goes, your vigilance throughout the trip might yield more of them anywhere along your route. Additionally, just on the edge of the valley is a turnoff to **Buffalo County Lake**, three minutes off the road, which provides camping, fishing, and swimming (at your own risk).

Continue west and then northwest along Nebraska Highway 2 and the SJSB. You'll travel through creek and river valleys in “hard land” country, as opposed to Sandhills country. Off to the sides of the stream valleys are hard land hills where cattle and wildlife graze. This entire area is abundant in wildlife of many species including deer, an occasional elk, bobcats, occasional mountain lions, foxes, coyotes, and small wildlife such as rabbits, squirrels, raccoons, porcupines, skunks, ground hogs, mink, and birds of many countless species including Eagles, hawks, owls, herons, and the western meadowlark, the Nebraska state bird. During these 50 miles to Broken Bow, you'll travel through the towns of **Hazard, Litchfield, Mason City, and Ansley** that each have their own unique stories to tell. Just stop and talk to anyone on main street, and they will clue you in with details. Your desire to fish or spend time boating or swimming (at your own risk) may take you off the SJSB to **Sherman Reservoir** about four miles east of Loup City, NE. If that sounds inviting and is calling your name, turn north at Hazard on NE Highway 10. It's about 23 miles to Sherman Lake.

As you near Broken Bow, you'll notice the rather large, smoothly round topped hills on either side of **Mud Creek**. Upon these grass covered hills thousands of bison once grazed as they did over the entire area of the plains. Homesteaders and cattlemen tended to disagree with what the land should be used for, and some ugly incidents took place in the 1800's such as the **Olive Gang/homesteaders fracas near Callaway**, a little canyon town southwest of Broken Bow about 22 miles. Men died by gun and lynching in the dispute, and you can learn more about it by visiting the **Seven Valleys Museum in Callaway**.

On the east edge of Broken Bow is a big red barn which houses the **Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway Visitor Center**. This is a must stop, and you'll want to spend some time here learning more about the SJSB. This visitor center is staffed by hosts that know the Broken Bow area and the miles of hills and valleys all along the Byway. In addition to great conversations, and exhibits and artifacts of all kinds inside, outside you will find a large area of plants and grasses where you can learn to identify the grasses you will be seeing as you continue along the SJSB and into the largest area of stabilized sand dunes in the western hemisphere. Seven educational panels provide an in depth look into what you will see as you continue on the SJSB. A third of a mile trek up-hill for the hearty will give you a 360 vista and explain the power of the wind turbines seen to the north.

The **city square** in Broken Bow is only five minutes away. Several very interesting destinations are located on the square, including **Wild Rose Gallery and Ortello Dale**. They exemplify the talent of the people of the area as their exhibits trumpet the natural beauty of central and western Nebraska. The **Custer County Museum** is a must stop if you are into natural history/pioneer history. The photographs by **Solomon Butcher** and others, and exhibits housed in the museum, are priceless and will give you great insight into the lives of the pioneers that basked in sunny, perfect days but also endured nature's treacherous elements such as thunderstorms, hail, and tornadoes, as well as raging blizzards.

You can find what your appetite craves in Broken Bow as they have a great assortment of eating establishments. Two of the more well-known restaurants are **Bonfire Grill** in the **historic Arrow Hotel** on the southwest corner of the square, and microbrewery **Kinkaid Brewing Company** about a mile north from the square. Speaking of Kinkaiders, in the early 20th century, settlers finally made it clear enough to the U.S. government that 160 acres of land, the amount a person could acquire via the Homestead Act, was not sufficient to hope to scratch out a living in the Sandhills where sand was, and is, more prevalent than dirt. Moses Kinkaid of Nebraska was their spokesperson, and President Theodore Roosevelt signed into law in 1904 the Kinkaid Act that allowed each settler to obtain 640 acres of land, instead of just 160 acres, in 37 counties in northwest Nebraska; hence, the Kinkaid Brewing Company name.

Just six miles southeast of Broken Bow is **Straight Arrow Bison Ranch**. Here you'll find a herd of about 100 bison grazing the prairie very much like they did in the 1800's and before. Your ride out among the bison in an SUV is a really cool experience that you will be glad you signed up for. And you can purchase some bison meat to take with you!

While in the Broken Bow area, you can tour a wind turbine on one of the two wind farms located just east of Broken Bow – which you saw a little earlier if you took that hike up the hill at the barn. Contact the SJSB Visitor Center, 308-872-8331, or the SJSB office, 308-546-0636, and they'll make the necessary reservations for you. We celebrate plentiful, natural wind in Nebraska, and these two wind farms stand tall for harvesting one of nature's natural resources.

You are now running out of daylight and probably need some supper – that's the evening meal in the Midwest where "dinner" might refer to the noon meal! Regardless of what you want to call it, as you found out at lunch/dinner, many good eating places exist in Broken Bow, and you'll need to hit one of them before lodging for the night at one of the multiple hotels and motels or maybe one of the Bed and Breakfasts.

Day 3: Leaving Broken Bow, you first come to **Merna** about 10 miles up the road and lying in the highly productive Dale Valley, which is surrounded by grass covered, hard land hills. Travel about another 10 miles and you come to **Anselmo**, the gateway to the Sandhills.

In Anselmo, one of nature's sweetest gifts is the honey produced by all-important honeybees. **Chandler's Sandhill Honey** sits on your left as you enter Anselmo, and is a stop worth making. You'll not want to leave there without purchasing one of the many delectable honey items from Nebraska hives! Their products can be found in area stores if the plant is closed; and by all means, don't miss **St. Anselm's Catholic Church - The Cathedral of the Sandhills**.

Now's another opportunity to enjoy a quiet, enthralling piece of geography just off the

Byway. If you travel six miles east of Anselmo on the hard surface county road, you'll arrive at **Victoria Springs State Recreation Area**. Victoria Springs is the third oldest area in Nebraska's state park system, so its many attributes have been recognized by multiple generations. It is part of the original homestead of Custer County Judge Charles R. Matthews. One of the two buildings on the property was his home and the other was the first post office in the county. The recreation area's name is derived from the mineral springs found on the park's 60 acres. In the heyday of spas, Victoria's waters were much acclaimed and were bottled and sold throughout the U.S. Victoria Creek flows through the park which is home to modern cabins, electric pads, tent campsites, a five acre pond, a picnic shelter and a hiking trail. Inscribe this park on your mind in indelible ink as a place to return to someday, or take an extra day on this tour to hang out there overnight and enjoy its peaceful ambience. When it's time for you to leave, simply drive back west to Anselmo and, once again, travel the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway.

If your home is in an area or community where car traffic never goes away, you've noticed, since leaving Grand Island, that driving Highway 2 is a picnic compared to where you come from. That realization is about to increase exponentially as you leave Anselmo, leaving the hard land behind, and headed northwest into the approximately **20,000 square miles, or 12.75 million acres, of Sandhills** – a place like no other in the world! These sprawling, grass-covered sand hills can make one feel really small – in a good way! Charles Kuralt said it so well, "...writers inevitably use the metaphor of a 'sea' to describe the 'hundreds of thousands of acres of grass and the hundreds of thousands of acres of sky'...". You're entering, to reiterate, the largest area of stabilized sand dunes in the western hemisphere.

As you drive the 20 miles to **Dunning**, you'll pass cattle ranches, most of the homes of which are not visible from the highway. Ranches in the Sandhills typically cover thousands of acres, and it is not uncommon to drive one to three or four miles off the main road to the ranch headquarters. Nature's bounty – grass – is the rancher's "crop", and the ranchers harvest it with prodigious cows or, on a few ranches, native American bison. They have learned to care for this very fragile "soil" – really sand containing a bit of humus created by decomposition of the native grasses – at all times, e.g. not to overgraze it. Incessant wind, sometimes soft and caressing, but at times, gale-force and cutting, can lift exposed sand, in overgrazed areas, driving it downwind and creating blowouts in its wake. **Blowouts** are denuded areas of sand from which the prairie grasses have been ripped out by the wind. In some cases, on the down-wind margins of some of the blow outs, additional grass may be buried by the air-borne, blowing sand. The combination of the small areas of blowouts and the never-ending sea of grass and hills against the never-ending sky creates unforgettable, mesmerizing, and very picturesque scenes.

Another natural feature, and the most important, is the great body of water that underlies the Sandhills and much of the rest of Nebraska as well as parts of seven other plains states. The **Ogallala Aquifer**, also known as the High Plains Aquifer, is a vast underground lake stretching from the Texas panhandle and northeastern New Mexico into southwestern South Dakota. The aquifer, where its surface level is above the floor level of the Sandhills' valleys, creates countless lakes across much of those 20,000 square miles. This whole Sandhills area is a wildlife bonanza including waterfowl of many descriptions as well as deer, antelope, predators, and many other smaller species.

Not only are lakes abundant, wet meadows exist where the water table is just below the surface and the prairie grasses are naturally irrigated. These wet meadows cover large areas, where the flora is very rarely lacking for moisture, and wildlife flourish.

Not only do wildlife flourish but the meadows make for great hay crops for the ranchers. By haying the meadows, the grass is kept very palatable and nutritious, e.g. tender and higher in protein content, for wildlife and for cattle.

While driving through the Sandhills, you'll note countless **windmills**. These windmills, powered by an abundance of wind "native" to the area, pump water out of the aquifer that is then deposited in stock tanks. Here cattle supplement their water intake from the natural lakes. You'll need to boot up, on the internet, "Sandhills Savior", by Baxter Black, undisputed king of cowboy poetry, to really know the appreciation Sandhills ranchers have for the wind, the water, and the windmill. If you can't get it, contact those of us with SJSB at the visitors center in Broken Bow, and we'll get it to you ASAP. The poem will cause your appreciation of the Sandhills to intensify!

About three miles east of **Dunning** is a paved county road that strikes off south toward **Arnold** 32 miles away. Each year, ultra-fast sports cars, e.g. Corvettes, Lamborghinis, Porsches, Mustangs, etc. participate in the **Sandhills Open Road Challenge** rally style 55 mile road race which covers much of the road from Dunning to Arnold. If you want to personally enjoy the Sandhills up tempo, strap on your helmet, and pay the hefty entry fee for the 20th annual rally this August, 2020!

As you approach Dunning and come down off the hill into town, you'll cross the **Dismal River** on the southeast corner of this sleepy little ranch town. Then, just a quarter mile on north, you'll cross the **Middle Loup River**. These two rivers converge just northeast of Dunning a mile and a half to continue as the Middle Loup. They and other rivers including the Callamus, the Cedar, the Elkhorn, the South Loup, and the North Loup originate from the Ogallala Aquifer in the form of springs arising from the ground in the Sandhills and flow downhill in a southeasterly direction, eventually ending up in the Platte River and then the Missouri River. **Nebraska**, in addition to its myriad of other natural gifts, **possesses more miles of river than any other state** – greater than 79,000 miles. The High Plains aquifer is a gift that just keeps on giving.

Dunning is the largest town in Blaine County with a population of 104 in 2017. Blaine County's county seat is **Brewster**, 17 miles to the northeast of Dunning and had, in 2010, 17 hardy souls which made it the smallest, by population, seat of county government in the U.S. It is also the only county seat in the U.S. without a post office – that honor is in Dunning. Multiple county seat towns across the Sandhills are very small in population. This low population density is part of what keeps the Sandhills so enchanting, inviting, and unique.

Moving on northwest 11 miles to **Halsey**, and paralleling the Middle Loup River on your left, you'll see the sign to **Purdum**. You'll recall being invited to participate in the Sandhills Open Road Challenge, a rally-type race which runs from Arnold to Dunning. Well, the **Loup 2 Loup** is a similar race running from Halsey, on the Middle Loup River, to Purdum, on the North Loup River, and back to Halsey. This occurs annually on the Thursday prior to the Saturday that the **Sandhills Open Road Challenge** occurs. This year they occur on the 6th and 8th of August, respectively, and, just as in the SORC, the L2L is a wild ride through the Sandhills – only this time on a single lane oil road. Single lane oil roads, which are scattered across the Sandhills, are a must see/drive in this sea of rolling grass-covered sand dunes. Should you decide to take the 14 mile drive from Halsey north to Purdum, and should you meet someone who is traveling the other direction, you'll need to stay right with two tires off the pavement to provide room for the other guy. Just make sure you keep two tires on the pavement – you don't want to get stuck in dry, loose beach-like sand!

Sandwiched in between the SORC and L2L, on Friday, August 7th, is the **Callaway Shootout** which is the epitome of all drag races. Should you elect to do this gig, you'll be back in hard land country at Callaway, a land of canyons and rugged hills.

Speaking of Callaway, if you listened to, on the audio CD, the commentary about the Olive Gang, who had a ranch near the South Loup River east of Callaway, you know that Print Olive and his gang were a tough bunch. But stealing horses wasn't part of their modus operandi. Not so for **Doc Middleton** who spent a lot of his outlaw time in the Nebraska Sandhills collecting a would-be remuda. Historical documents suggest the king of horse thieves stole up to 2000 head of horses during a two-year period. Obviously, he was not considered a good neighbor. Doc eventually died of an abdominal knife wound while cooling his heels in jail for selling liquor illegally from his Wyoming saloon.

One mile west of Halsey is the entrance to the **Nebraska National Forest, Bessey Ranger District**. This beautiful landscape of rolling hills of Ponderosa Pines, Spruce trees, Eastern Red Cedar, other tree families, and native grassland is a merging of the natural rangeland with mankind's insertion of trees. It is **the largest man planted forest in the western hemisphere**. This 90,000-acre forest is a naturalist's dream come true. It provides a myriad of adventures in the outdoors including camping with RV hookups; swimming, tubing, kayaking or canoeing in the Middle Loup River (at your own risk); fishing in the river or at the pond inside the entrance; four wheeling, cycling, and horseback riding (at your own risk) with, in all cases, your own mounts across miles of trails; and grouse and prairie chickens viewing from blinds as the males perform their dance in leks in the spring. Besides many species of birds, other wildlife present include deer, coyotes, antelope, bobcats, mountain lions and other, smaller species. The hiking trail to the lookout tower is a great venue to the best opportunity to see a panorama of the vast forest. Be sure to take the walking bridge across the river to read and learn about our prairie river system.

The **Bessey Nursery**, consisting of 76 acres, 46 of which are irrigated, resides on the forest and is the oldest federal tree nursery in the U.S. It provides, to multiple conservation districts in the upper plains states, up to 4.5 million bare root seedlings per year, as well as providing container plants and seeds. Up to 100 species, depending on the year, are available. It lies very near the entrance to the forest just on the south side of the Middle Loup River.

As you leave the forest and get back onto Highway 2, turn left toward **Thedford**, the **'Crossroads of the Sandhills'**, about 17 miles away. Here you will have an opportunity to catch up to your appetite at a few ranch town eating establishments that prepare food reminiscent of your Mom's home cooking. While in Thedford, don't miss the **Little Girls Lost Historical Marker** and Bronze Statue in memory of the two, young Haumann sisters who encountered, tragically, the unforgiving nature of the Sandhills when they became lost in an area where lakes were not present and early May heat punished them relentlessly. You'll find this monument in the center of town a block south of the byway. Additionally, if you enjoy the transition of the natural to the canvas, you'll want to visit the **Thedford Art Gallery** located right on Highway 2, also in the middle of town.

During the warm months of the year, consider renting some kayaks, tubes, or one or more cattle watering tanks from **Sandhill River Trips** while in the Thedford area. Your trip and your water craft are reserved by calling Ewoldt's Grocery, 308-645-2235. Outfitters with Sandhill River Trips will strategically place you on the Dismal or Middle Loup River and pick you up where you want to get out of the water. If you haven't tried the cattle tank, replete with lawn chairs, you may want to take this memory-creating mode of conveyance!

Maybe a kayak race would stimulate your competitive juices. The **Hills 2 Forest Kayak and Canoe River Challenge** takes place each September. This 33 miles long race draws competitors from a large radius and follows the Middle Loup from about seven miles west of Thedford to the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey. If trying to win it all isn't your gig and you're into serenity, just cast off onto the river to lay back and float a shorter distance while enjoying the sounds of the water and the sights of wild life while enjoying the hills with maybe a few puffy clouds overhead. Contact Sandhill River Trips or Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway for more information.

If you are into spending some time fishing the rich waters of some of the natural, above-ground lakes of the Sandhills, while in Thedford you will want to backtrack a mile east on Highway 2 to northbound U.S. 83. From that junction, travel north approximately 35 miles to the **Valentine National Wildlife Refuge**, a Sandhills area of multiple lakes that are a veritable mecca of fish including bass, perch, bluegill, crappie, and northern pike. Big Alkali, a lake not on the refuge but adjacent to it, also contains walleye. Depending on the time of year and the aquifer water table level, you may get to experience the adventure of driving through a bit of shallow water for a short distance over the highway. The calm, gentle water, literally, comes up to lap at the edges of the road and occasionally crosses it.

Should you care to venture on north of the refuge to Valentine (approximately 20 miles), you'll encounter the Niobrara Scenic River on the north edge of the Sandhills where it separates sand from hard land. This river inherits much of its flow in the Sandhills after originating in eastern Wyoming, and canoeing, kayaking, tanking, and tubing are available, originating in Valentine. It's scenic, eastward progression takes it approximately 200 river miles to its mouth where it empties into the Missouri River.

Assuming you are finding yourself at the end of your day in the Thedford area, you'll find good lodging in the form of a couple of hospitable motels. The bar/café and restaurant that were your choices for lunch will be ready to serve you once again in the evening. Striking up a good conversation with locals at a neighboring table will give you a real feel for this unique land in which you find yourself. The dialog may cover a smorgasbord of topics including the current year's level of precipitation, so critical for range species growing on the upland sandy soil and not in the sub irrigated valleys, to how calving went for the ranchers, to your new-found friends wanting to know all about you and where you come from.

If it is a clear-skies night with little to no moon light, one final thing you need to do before you call it a day, in this land still graced by thousands of years of tranquility, is to drive north or south of Thedford a few miles. Stop your car at the entrance to a ranch road, preferably on a hill, out of sight of any ranch lights. Look up into an amazing display of stars and file this unforgettable mental picture in your mind forever. Find the Big and Little Dippers revolving around the North Star, and be mesmerized by the magnificent Milky Way. If you call, during business hours, the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway Visitors Center in Broken Bow, 308-872-8331, or the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway office in Mullen, 308-546-0636, they will contact a friendly rancher that will provide you a fantastic, strategically located viewing place. As you settle into bed this night, the visions of thousands of stars etched in your mind will lull you into blissful unconsciousness.

Day 4: Following that great night's sleep, it's time to shove off into the western part of the Sandhills. You'll continue to parallel the Middle Loup River for a few miles as you travel west. The road will then cross over the river via a high bridge that will allow you to see the river disappear from your view off to the northwest in the direction of its origin from a Sandhills spring. Total mileage from Thedford to Mullen is 27 miles, and, as you approach the turnoff

to Seneca coming up on your right about half way there, you'll be able to see the north wall of the deep gorge through which the Middle Loup River, now off to your right, is flowing. Seneca is only about a mile north of Highway 2, and you might want to take the short little hiatus to experience the rapid decent of the spur highway into the very narrow river valley. In spite of the steep decent to the little town and the river, you are still almost 3,000 feet above sea level in the floor of the valley. As in all of the plains states, driving in a westerly direction across Nebraska finds you climbing in elevation at approximately eight feet per mile. The fall of the Middle Loup River as it courses easterly exemplifies this fact.

Although its inhabitants are not all wild animals native to this area, **Stable Productions Exotic Animal Ranch** just a mile northeast of town on the north bank of the Middle Loup is, indeed, a range land zoo. It is home to bison, elk, reindeer, zebras, water buffalo, and an aviary of a multitude of birds. RSVPs are needed for viewing. www.stableproranch.com After climbing back up out of the valley, hang a right and travel to the west on Highway 2. Set your watch back, as you are now **entering the Mountain Time zone**. The deep cut of the Middle Loup River canyon off to your right angles away from the road off to the northwest approximately 40 miles, and the hills become a little gentler as you approach **Mullen**.

The vehicle license plate prefix in **Hooker County** including Mullen, the county seat and only town, is number 93. Nebraska's counties were numbered 1 through 93 in 1922 based on a descending order of registered vehicles. Hooker County, at that time, had the least number of registered vehicles in the state. As you can imagine, most of the counties in the Sandhills have high license plate numbers correlating with these wide open spaces.

Mullen, despite its remoteness and low population, features the **Mullen Arts Center** which displays paintings and other art by local artists. Additionally, if you can linger a little while in town, you might be able to participate in one of its workshops which will help you perfect your ability to paint one of the magnificent natural vistas you are encountering.

On the west edge of Mullen is **Sandhills Motel and Glidden Canoe Rental**. Here's your opportunity, if you missed it in Thedford, to cruise down either the Middle Loup or the Dismal River. **Canoes, kayaks, and tanks** are the order of the day. Maybe you're destined to spend the first weekend in March in Mullen to participate in the **Polar Bear Tank Race**, the three-mile multi-person tank race on the Middle Loup that the Gliddens have hosted for years. We're talkin' serious business here. The entry fee covers everything for two days except your traveling to Mullen to participate. The SJSB is forever indebted to the Gliddens as the proceeds after expenses are all donated to the Byway! Maybe you just want to join in the festivities without getting on the river. The soup cook off the Friday night before the Saturday race is a hoot as is the awards ceremony Saturday evening following the river extravaganza, and participants and non-participants alike are welcome.

As you've driven across the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway, you may have seen chicken-sized birds, gray-brown colored with light colored horizontal cross striations or white flecks in their plumage. These, the **prairie chicken** and its closely related cousin the **sharp tailed grouse**, are staples of this great grass prairie. If you find yourself doing this drive during the spring, your trip will only be complete with a guided visit to a prairie chicken or grouse "lek". A lek is a relatively small, almost sacred, area of prairie on which, each morning during March and much of April, the males gather to strut their stuff and demonstrate to not-always-present-females that they, indeed, are of alpha status. Since the birds inflate their bright orange covered neck pouches and expel the trapped air suddenly, while sometimes jumping several feet into the air, this grassy gathering area is called a "booming" ground and the birds are sometimes called "boomers". Guided visits to leks are provided by only a very

few outfitters, Glidden Canoe Rental of Mullen being one of them. So, before you leave the Mullen area, you may want to reserve your seat in a blind with Mitch Glidden.

Finally, you need to be aware of, in case you're a golfer, several pro-quality golf courses are in the Sandhills – **SandHills Golf Club** and **Dismal River Club** - both a few miles south of Mullen. The Sandhills great natural dune area has excellent topography and soil conditions – maybe sand conditions is more accurate – to closely mimic original Scottish links.

Pushing on west from Mullen, you'll travel the 25 miles to **Whitman**. Whitman was named after Whitman, MA by a railroad official. There isn't much to see in the little unincorporated town, but here, just as in Halsey, a single lane oil road strikes off north into the hills. If you follow that road approximately three miles north and then turn right and travel about five miles into the **Gudmundsen Sandhills Laboratory**, you'll find a testimony to the sustainable cattle industry, in the form of a University of Nebraska research ranch, assuring that mankind knows how to care for these fragile, easily erodible hills. This ranch, and others like it, is constantly assessing grazing techniques and optimum utilization of this great natural resource called the Nebraska Sandhills. The Sandhills are in phenomenal, sustainable shape today in large part because of research such as what is done at Gudmundsen and then put into practice by ranchers all over the Sandhills.

Approximately one mile west of Whitman, you'll definitely want to take in the view of **Doc Lake** nestled in this sub-irrigated wet valley up against some of the tallest, steepest hills in this vast, largest area of sand dunes in the western hemisphere. If you happen to catch this scene along with an azure blue sky, you have, indeed, hit a home run.

Continuing on west from Whitman, approximately 11 miles, and following the floor of the valley with its grass meadows, you come to the **Avocet Wildlife Management Area**, a gathering place for pelicans, at least during warmer months, sometimes in large numbers. Be sure to look, on your right, for these magnificent white birds which, when they're fishing, display their pendulous, large pouch. These birds frequent the lakes throughout the Sandhills. In the spring, a family of swans also calls Avocet home.

Just to the northwest about a mile from the lake lays the town of Hyannis. Named for another Massachusetts town, Hyannis is another textbook cow town nestled in the Sandhills. But unlike other cow towns, this cow town, in Grant County, in May, 1931, was declared to be "The Richest Town in America" by a reporter for the Omaha World Herald. So, what gives? At that time, less than 100 people lived in the town – due to the low population – filed income tax returns, and those people, on average were purportedly worth approximately \$150,000 each due to the fact that many had large ranch holdings. Even today, the large ranches in the area, with miles and miles of range under their care and ownership, cause Grant County and other counties in the Sandhills to rank highly as it relates to per capita net worth.

Pushing on west of Hyannis, you'll arrive at **Ashby** after eight miles. Ashby is another one of the little welcoming ranch towns strung out along the Byway. It, too, was named after the Massachusetts Ashby. You'll need to stop here and visit with Linda, Nebraska's pot lady, at **Calinda's Pot Shop and Art Gallery**. She definitely is the pot lady in that she turns a lot of pots on a potter's wheel! The long-time pottery and painting instructor is also an accomplished painter, and you'll not want to leave Ashby without one or more of her productions, e.g. a beautiful painting of Sandhills flora and fauna. If you can stay a little while, she'll convert you into a potter and painter as well!

So it's back out on the road for another 19 miles passing by **Bingham** and then stopping at Ellsworth. **Ellsworth** is home of Morgan's Cowpoke Haven and is better known as, simply, **Morgan's Store**. The store, on the **National Register of Historic Places**, was originally built in 1898 on the then-existing Spade Ranch as its supply store. It was, at that time, a depository for inbound supplies to be used on the 500,000 acre ranch. These essential goods were hauled 23 miles northeast to the Spade headquarters every three days by a 10-horse hitch. Wade Morgan and his general store currently offer a wide variety of merchandise including a few snacks, western clothing, tack, and a large stock of guns. You really must experience this stop.

After spending some time in Morgan's Store, walk the very short distance to the Nebraska Historical Marker that provides information about the Spade Ranch. Also located in the little town, see the well-preserved one room school house on skids - the first "mobile home" in the hills.

You might be familiar with **Mari Sandoz**, whose books about the plains continue their legacy of educating generation after generation of people about the natural lure of this broad strip of Middle America running from Texas to Canada, ring through history and the Nebraska Sandhills where she grew to adulthood. **Old Jules**, Cheyenne Autumn, and the Buffalo Hunters are just a few of the books that endeared many of us to this author and to the plains about which she wrote. Her cantankerous, many times mean-spirited father, Old Jules himself, had homesteaded in northeast Nebraska but left it for the Sandhills. Mari wrote, in her biography of her father, "And out of the East came a lone man in an open wagon, driving hard." Jules drove the three weeks to the "Orchard Place", as Mari called it, from his homestead. **Mari's grave site**, almost sacred, lying in the hills that roll off endlessly in every direction, is **about 23 miles north of Ellsworth** and near the entrance to the Sandoz Fruit Farm which is just beyond. You may desire to drive to the grave in respect for Mari's ability to "paint" the many pictures of the hills that she described so vividly through her writings.

After you shove off westward again, you'll come to **Lakeside** in about six miles. You may want to turn south here to go to **Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge**, a veritable flora and fauna bonanza. Caution: depending on the underground lake level, this road and other roads ahead of you may be underwater and not passable. Crescent Lake NWR is sometimes called a "Sea of Grass Within a Sea of Grass" due to the lush wetlands surrounded by a sea of Sandhills, and the many plant species that make for a naturalist's dream come true. The refuge's great, totally valid, claim to fame is the wide variety and countless species of water fowl and other wildlife. Many lakes exist in the vast refuge and surrounding area as well and help provide unequaled habitat for all creatures great and small. The refuge is open sunrise to sunset, and, for detailed information, visit the web site at <https://fws.gov/crescentlake>, or contact the headquarters at 308-762-4893 or crescentlake@fws.gov.

Starting westward once more out of Lakeside, you'll travel through terrain where the hills flatten out and roll more gently than in the Hyannis and Ashby areas where the hills are quite large and steep. You'll arrive eight miles distant at **Antioch**, on the **National Register of Historic Places** and now only a near-ghost town, and discover old **potash kiln remnants**. These old kilns, long ago invaded by prairie grasses bent on reclaiming their rightful habitat, sprang to life originally at the beginning of WW1 when the U.S. supply of German potash dried up. If only Antioch could tell its own story, I'm sure we'd all be mesmerized. We do know that Antioch was once a city of over 2,000 people and was called the potash capital of the U.S. Its proximity to several alkali lakes allowed five potash reduction factories to flourish but only until the war was over. At that time, the U.S. procured its potash, once again, from Germany and France, and the short-lived boom town dried up.

Heading west once again, you'll travel the final 15 miles of the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway into **Alliance**. Approximately five miles east of Alliance you'll break out onto flat "hard ground" once again leaving the Sandhills behind you. Alliance lies on this high plains, flat plateau that was a perfect place for this Nebraska panhandle city to be birthed. Although the name "Alliance" did not come about as a result of any treaty signed here, nor was it derived from the Lakota Sioux language (the Sioux were a prominent tribe of native American Indians in this area prior to, and during, white settlement), the word means "Sand River Bend". Alliance celebrates the SJSB with a couple of must-see stops, the **Carnegie Art Center** and the **Knight Museum and Sandhills Center**. The Carnegie Art Center is a premier art gallery and displays many paintings reflecting the Sandhills and their allurements in detail. The Alliance Knight Museum and Sandhills Center provides its visitors with a wide variety of natural and cultural exhibits including large murals of both the Ogallala Aquifer and Sandhills plant life. In downtown Alliance, you'll find several stores that display paintings that speak to the natural wonder of the land you just traversed.

As the day nears its end, you might want to wet your pallet and curb your appetite at **Newberry's**, a restaurant with a lot of history and character. Newberry's occupies the old saddlery plant where countless, high quality saddles, built for horses that spent countless hours under them, were built and sold. Many made their way into the Sandhills and are still mounted on horses that cover the sand dunes and river valleys.

Alliance is home to a number of other good eating establishments as well. When your head longs for a pillow, you'll find good lodging accommodations in this Nebraska Panhandle city.

You've now experienced the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway over three or more days, depending on how many of those great side trips you decided to indulge in. By now, you recognize that what you saw was only one way to see it. The options for hours-long excursions or weeks-long journeys are legion. This land keeps giving and giving to those who venture into its vastness. We trust that you agree, and we look forward to encountering you again along the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway!

Thank you for coming!