

Nebraska State Report June 2026

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OUR RESOURCES: The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission provides areas for recreational use and the conservation of wildlife, including:

- 8 state parks, comprising 31,994 acres
- 60 state recreation areas, comprising 65,427 acres
- 10 state historical parks, comprising 2,497 acres
- 2 state recreation trails, comprising 4,144 acres and 324 miles
- 5 fish hatcheries
- 281 wildlife management areas, encompassing 184,435 acres
- 471,646 acres (a new record) enrolled in Open Fields and Waters, including 41.8 stream miles and 39 ponds and lakes that provide walk-in access on private lands for hunting, fishing and trapping.

OUR IMPACT:

- 57 million fish stocked in 300 public water bodies
- 262,080 shooting sports participants
- 257,000 law enforcement contacts
- 249,513 licensed anglers
- 187,809 licensed hunters
- 3,477 Nature Education programs w/ 110,234 attendees
- 222 habitat projects on 89,000 acres (public and private lands)
- 77,316 registered boats
- 6,937 boats inspected for aquatic invasive species
- 6,000 Hunter Education graduates
- 2,680 surface acres improved with aquatic habitat projects
- 2,251 projects Environmental Reviews
- 229 landowners assisted with wildlife depredation issues
- 27 public input meetings

ANNUAL ECONOMIC IMPACT- more than \$4.1 billion and 25,000 jobs supported by outdoor recreation - including hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing and state park visitation.

OUR FUNDING - 96% of funding for Nebraska Game and Parks is user pay and grants (primarily federal reimbursements) with 4% from the State General Fund. User pay includes revenue from the sale of hunting and fishing stamps and permits, state park entry permits, and fees for camping, lodging, and activities in Nebraska's state parks system.

Game and Parks and partners have launched **the largest greater prairie-chicken study** ever conducted, a multistate effort examining how the Conservation Reserve Program influences populations in Nebraska and Kansas. The project evaluates habitat use, movement patterns, and the effects of grassland management across landscapes with varying grassland availability and fragmentation. In the first year of the study, crews captured 93 hens on 3 sites each in Nebraska and outfitted them with GPS transmitters. Through the summer, technicians tracked the hens to document nest success and brood survival, monitoring 96 nests and 29 broods. Crews also completed 4,511 vegetation surveys at nesting, brooding, non-breeding, and randomly selected sites to assess habitat conditions. The study continues in 2026 with additional sites, trapping and transmitters through the Nebraska and Kansas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units.

Game and Parks conservation officers, in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, led the **multiyear investigation into illegal hunting and guiding** by Dustin Noble (Noble Outdoors) in North Platte. On Sept. 4, 2025, Noble was sentenced in federal court for conspiracy to violate the Lacey Act. The investigation documented 114 unlawful hunts from 2015-2021 that target trophy mule deer and other wildlife using illegal methods. Noble was sentenced to 22 months in prison, followed by three years of supervised release, ordered to pay \$179,680 in restitution, and required to forfeit wildlife mounts, crossbows and firearms. The court also imposed a 25-year ban on hunting, fishing, trapping or guiding, and a 10-year ban on taxidermy.

Game and Parks biologists and their partners **completed gathering critical wild turkey field data** that will shape future management of this important game species. Researchers tagged and tracked more than 500 turkeys in southwest Nebraska and the Pine Ridge over the past three years, documenting the fate of nests and offspring. Data analysis has begun and will reveal how genetics, habitat use, reproduction, movement, predators and hunting pressure influence turkey populations. This five-year project is a collaboration among the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, and the University of Georgia.

This year marked progress the pallid sturgeon, one of the Missouri River's rarest fish. For the first time, Game and Parks' fisheries biologists found groups of males and females returning to the same areas to reproduce near Ponca State Park and the James River, east of Yankton, S.D. In the past three years, they also have tagged 164 adult sturgeon, documented 23 cases of female pallid sturgeon successfully laying eggs, and confirmed natural reproduction in the river after capturing two young sturgeon this year. Understanding population structures and survival rates provides evidence recovery efforts are working, and the ability to determine preferred spawning locations helps locate crucial habitats vital for conservation planning and habitat protection. These achievements are the latest chapter in more than 20 years of dedicated monitoring under the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-funded Missouri River Recovery Program.

The third-highest number of piping plover nests and a record high number of interior least tern nests were recorded in 2025 at Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership sites along the Platte and other eastern Nebraska rivers. Game and Parks and partners documented 73 piping plover nests and 375 least tern nests at 23 sand and gravel mines and lakeshore developments. For more than 25 years, Game and Parks and the conservation partnership have worked side-by-side with the mining business and housing industry to protect threatened and endangered birds while keeping vital economic activity moving.

Nebraska’s updated State Wildlife Action Plan — the Nebraska Natural Legacy Plan — was approved in 2025. The plan outlines conservation priorities for the state’s most vulnerable plant and animal species and reflects input from landowners, conservationists, the public, land managers and others committed to natural resources. A major change in this edition was the new designation of a Biologically Unique Ecoregion for the Sandhills – recognizing the region’s ecological value. Also, conservation priority designations were developed for aquatic habitats, with 63 watersheds selected as priorities for research and conservation. The priority areas offer the greatest opportunities for conservation, management and research to benefit our at-risk species while keeping common species common. The Tier I and Tier II species lists also were revised, with 53 species removed, 17 added, and 29 assigned a new designation as Species of Greatest Information Need for monitoring and research over the next decade. Guidance for education and recreation areas were expanded, recognizing their growing importance for public engagement in conservation.

Nebraska Game and Parks, along with University of Nebraska partners, made significant progress toward **understanding how anglers use Nebraska’s waters.** Anglers’ harvest numbers can be used to improve management of fisheries. Surveys at Conestoga, Sherman and Harlan County reservoirs generated 1,777 angler interviews and 531 angler counts, documenting more than 266,000 angler-hours across 61,400 fishing trips. This information helps provide a clearer picture of participation levels, angling pressure, and catch and harvest across key fisheries, helping biologists evaluate how recreational use influences fish populations and management needs. The project also expanded to support a fall-winter creel survey at the Lake Ogallala complex as part of an ongoing evaluation of the 2023 renovation. Interviews and angler counts began in September 2024 and continued in 2025, offering year-round insight into use patterns at this high-demand fishery.

In 2025, **Nebraska Game and Parks partnered with the Nebraska Broadband Office** to efficiently review more than 135 federally funded fiber optic projects across the state. By streamlining consultation under the Nongame Endangered Species Conservation Act, the broadband office will achieve a 1- to 2-month turnaround for most projects — helping bring high-speed internet to rural Nebraskans quickly. Game and Parks staff adapted the online Conservation Environmental Review Tool to automate activity selection and speed reviews, while also providing guidance to project applicants. Early coordination with the broadband office will allow most projects to move through consultation with minimal impacts to protected species. This collaboration advances Nebraska’s priority of expanding broadband access while safeguarding wildlife. Inspired by success, the agency continues refining the consultation process and offered several online training sessions to improve submissions and the application’s use.

Nebraska made **significant strides in pollinator conservation** in 2025. Through a four-state Competitive State Wildlife Grant, funding was awarded to continue the Nebraska Bumble Bee Atlas through 2028, allowing the agency to collect data on the status of the state’s 20 bumble bee species and summarize the information into a strategic plan for bumble bee conservation in the Midwest. The grant also will support the planting of 400 acres of pollinator habitat at state parks. Meanwhile, Nebraska’s Big Butterfly Count — a community science project tracking butterfly diversity — nearly tripled in participation from its 2024 pilot year. Twenty-seven volunteers contributed over 560 hours prepping, surveying and submitting data. They conducted 243

surveys across the state, documenting more than 9,000 butterflies from 65 species, including 13 listed as threatened or endangered in Nebraska. Together, these efforts provide critical data to guide conservation strategies for the state’s pollinators.

Fisheries researchers are expanding habitat improvement techniques tailored to Nebraska’s diverse stream sizes to support sport-fish and at-risk species. Recent work on Big Bordeaux Creek Wildlife Management Area, Gordon Creek, Sowbelly Creek and Dry Spotted Tail Creek is providing real-world test cases to measure the success of renovations. Biologists report measurable gains for trout and other cool-water species where customized improvements — such as instream wood and constructed pools — have been installed. Early results show these upgrades also benefit at-risk species, which are staying in these enhanced reaches rather than dispersing in search of better water. In 2025, researchers also launched a pilot study on the movement of the northern pearl dace, a small at-risk species in Sandhills streams. Findings will guide priority restoration areas, predator management, and stream-connectivity improvements, with methods expanding to additional species and waters.

The **Aquatic Invasive Species Program** had a productive 2025 season. Nearly 7,000 watercraft inspections were conducted at more than 40 water bodies, and two zebra mussel-fouled watercraft were intercepted, preventing contamination. Staff analyzed 159 water samples for zebra mussels with no new detections — a strong sign Nebraska’s prevention strategies continue to work. The year also marked a milestone in invasive aquatic plant management, with successful herbicide treatments at 12 water bodies targeting Eurasian watermilfoil and curly-leaf pondweed. Early results suggest strong treatment success, with additional efforts planned for 2026. Nebraska also celebrated its first Aquatic Invasive Species Week in 2025, bringing new educational opportunities to communities across the state

Substantial **improvements were made to Nebraska’s fish hatcheries in 2025**, enhancing water conservation, fish rearing, and the state’s ability to meet fish stocking goals. At Valentine State Fish Hatchery, construction began on a new hatchery building to modernize the state’s oldest production facility, in operation since 1912. The hatchery produces a range of warmwater fish — including largemouth bass, bluegill, channel catfish and yellow perch, as well as species such as tiger muskie and northern pike. Rock Creek State Fish Hatchery improved a pond with deepening and an upgraded wall construction to manage spring water, keeping the pond water cooler and oxygen levels high to help fish thrive. At the North Platte State Fish Hatchery, new pond liners reduced water use and improved pond management, supporting production of coolwater and warmwater species, such as walleye, saugeye, blue catfish and channel catfish. Together, these upgrades strengthen Nebraska’s fisheries and support recreational opportunities.

In 2025, Nebraska Game and Parks staff spent 10,100 hours providing solutions to 229 **landowners with wildlife damage or nuisance issues**. The agency completed its five-year landowner depredation surveys for deer, elk, pronghorn and, for the first time, mountain lions. About 8,500 surveys were sent to assess landowners’ views on population size, damage severity, acceptance of damage, and incentives for allowing hunter access. Landowners reported declines in population concerns and damage severity for deer, elk and pronghorn. Whitetail and mule deer responses dropped 14% for those who felt there were “too many” deer and rose 15% for “too few,” while responses on elk damage shifted toward lighter impacts, with severe and moderate

cases down 7%. Familiarity with depredation response options rose 14%, and the mountain lion survey established a baseline for future landowner surveys.

Nebraska's fisheries flourish thanks to **the Aquatic Habitat Program**, funded by anglers through the Aquatic Habitat Stamp. In 2025, projects restored fish habitat, expanded fishing access, and strengthened aquatic ecosystems — ensuring healthy waters and great fishing for generations to come at Willow Creek State, Lake Maloney and Medicine Creek State Recreation Area's along with 11 Interstate 80 sandpit lakes. Projects included aquatic habitat, fishing access, and fish habitat improvements. Funding for projects included Aquatic Habitat Funds, the Sportfish Restoration Program, U.S Bureau of Reclamation, the Nebraska Environmental Trust, and design by the Nebraska Public Power District (Lake Maloney).

Nebraska's grasslands are among the state's most valuable features — sustaining wildlife, supporting rural livelihoods, protecting soil and water, and anchoring one of North America's largest intact grassland ecosystems. In its first year, the Nebraska Grassland Alliance grew into a community, engaging more than 100 individuals from over 50 organizations. The Alliance hosted its first meetings and unveiled NebraskasGrasslands.org, the state's first shared platform for grassland resources and collaboration. On the ground, Game and Parks and partners completed 222 habitat projects improving nearly 89,000 acres of prairies, wetlands and other natural areas. This included 110 grassland-focused projects covering nearly 77,000 acres. These efforts - supported by ranchers, tribal partners, conservation groups and private landowners - enhanced native vegetation, soil health, and wildlife habitat. A notable highlight came from Box Butte County, where a Morrison's Bumble Bee was documented — the third confirmed Nebraska sighting since the Bumble Bee Atlas launched in 2019. The property was restored to native grassland in 2022 through the Conservation Reserve Program and is enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters Program, demonstrating how habitat partnerships can support wildlife and access.

Resident fees adjusted for the first time since 2017. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission increased several resident permit, hunting and fishing application fees, as well as nonresident aquatic invasive species stamp fees beginning in 2026. This marks the first resident fee increase since 2017. The Commission has minimized fee changes whenever possible through efficiencies and cost reductions. The adjustments are expected to generate approximately \$2.1 million annually, which will be reinvested directly in statewide fish and wildlife management, habitat improvement and restoration, and maintenance of public access areas, fish hatcheries and infrastructure. Rising operational costs contributed to the need for fee updates.

Helping Nebraskans of all ages gain outdoor skills through hands-on programs and memorable experiences. Outdoor Discovery Programs introduced 3,979 elementary students to kayaking, fishing, archery, wildlife identification and nature hikes at Fort Kearny, Platte River, Ponca and Wildcat Hills state parks. Special programs like the Nebraska Archery in the Schools Program brought students of all backgrounds together in both the in-school program and to compete in local, regional and state tournaments; this year 332 schools participated and 14,831 students received instruction. Nebraska Game and Parks also cohosted 20 competitive and recreational shooting events, where 4,364 students tested their marksmanship skills. Learn to Hunt workshops and mentored hunts provided 481 beginners with hands-on instruction in firearms, safety and field techniques, while partnerships like Pheasants Forever's Next Steps

programs offered first upland hunt experiences. The Nebraska Ladies Hunting Cohort, now in its second year, and the Becoming and Outdoors-Woman program continued to foster a supportive environment for about 480 women to share hunting experiences, learn strategies, and gain insights from experienced facilitators and guest speakers. Across all programs, participants gained skills, practiced safety and created memories that last a lifetime.

In 2025, Nebraska Game and Parks' educators conducted programs designed to bring fresh opportunities for learning, skill-building and outdoor fun. Overall, they hosted 3,477 educational programs attended by nearly 110,234 people. Highlights of 2025 offerings include: a new Saline Wetland event that brought participants up close with Nebraska's saline wetland ecosystems, offering hands-on exploration and learning opportunities about the plants, animals and conservation efforts; Nature Journaling workshops at Rowe Sanctuary, Spring Creek Prairie and Prairie Pines focused on adults and encouraged participants to observe and reflect on nature through art and writing, fostering deeper engagement with Nebraska's landscapes and wildlife; and Growing Up WILD & Project WILD trainings continue to get this innovative curricula into classrooms and other educational spaces with preservice teacher training using local wildlife content and scenarios - equipping them to bring nature-based learning to their students in meaningful and hands-on ways.

For more than 50 years, Nebraska Game and Parks has empowered hunters with the knowledge and skills to hunt safely and ethically. In 2025, over 6,000 students earned certification through in-person and online Hunter Education courses, learning firearm and archery safety, hunter ethics, and wildlife conservation. In-person Hunter Education courses offered hands-on field training, while mentored hunts paired trained mentors and certified instructors with novices to build confidence and competence. Graduates also had the opportunity to join Next Steps programs, including upland hunts led by partners like Pheasants Forever. By providing education, mentorship and guided experiences, Nebraska Game and Parks ensures new and experienced hunters can enjoy Nebraska's outdoors responsibly and safely.

Volunteers play a crucial role in helping Nebraska Game and Parks serve the public through events and programs that promote outdoor recreation. Their contributions help extend the agency's reach while conserving resources. Hunter education instructors certify students and mentor beginners in safe hunting practices. Certified fishing instructors provide hands-on lessons for students and provide free guidance at community events. Master naturalists lead nature education, participate in community science projects, and enhance our public areas. Volunteers also support cleanup efforts, welcome guests, and assist with outdoor skills education programs.

Game and Parks launches employee recognition program In 2025, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission launched a new Employee Recognition Program to honor staff who go above and beyond in conserving Nebraska's natural resources and enhancing outdoor recreation. We know our employees make a lasting impact every day, and this program ensures their efforts are celebrated. Awards recognize a range of achievements, including years of service, innovation, outstanding contributions to the agency's mission, and living Game and Parks' values. The program also connects to the statewide Governor's Employee Recognition Program, giving top performers a chance to be celebrated at the state level. By highlighting our employees, we not only celebrate our people but strengthen our mission.