



Preserving Our Agricultural, Historical And Natural Resources

The Landscape

News from the Nebraska Land Trust

2013 Annual Report



The Kennedy farm stretches from the Platte River to forest and pasture on the bluffs, traversed by scenic Highway 31 and the MoPac Trail.

Kennedy Farm protects scenic views, habitat, river and bluffs in Sarpy County

It was the kind of afternoon that makes one feel lucky to be outside, as the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) baseline team went about their work on the 262-acre Kennedy farm in southern Sarpy County. Francis and Margaret Kennedy preserved their land through a conservation easement with the NLT in 2013 and prior to completion of all easements, a baseline report is needed to document conditions on the land when the easement is conveyed. The NLT takes a team approach, by calling on our board members to provide needed expertise in many pertinent areas.

The team was scouting an unusual oak woodland on the banks of the Platte River when a shout went out for everyone to “get over here!” Gary Garabrandt (Fontenelle Forest) and Scott Luedtke (Nebraska Game and Parks Commission) had found a natural grove of Chinquapin oaks; an eastern tree on the far northwestern edge of its range in America, and the first ever documented in Sarpy County.

(See Kennedy Farm, page 3)

Nebraska Land Trust earns national recognition

After an extensive evaluation following years of preparation, the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) was awarded national accreditation in 2013 by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. The NLT is one of 254 land trusts from across the country that have been awarded accreditation to date, which is about 15% of the land trusts nationwide. The NLT is also the first accredited land trust based in Nebraska.

(See Accreditation, page 4)

Boerkircher Ranch preserved in Loess Canyons

Sometimes, an unlikely event can lead to an outstanding conservation opportunity. For Brent and Mary Boerkircher, who own a 1,038-acre ranch in the Loess Canyons southeast of North Platte, it was a mistake made on the title when they transferred a

(See Boerkircher Ranch, page 4)



The Loess Canyons are a large area of unfragmented mid-grass prairie southeast of North Platte, providing habitat for wild elk and other grassland species.



Wild Thoughts

from Dave Sands, Executive Director

Recently, I celebrated one of those “milestone” birthdays that end in a zero. More than one friend advised that it’s “just a number on the calendar,” but milestones do make you think about how far you’ve come and those who have helped you to get there.

Organizations have milestones too and the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) reached several in 2013. Foremost is the achievement of national accreditation, a milestone that has only been reached by about 15% of the 1,700 land trusts nationwide. It isn’t meant to be easy, as dozens of standards and practices must be met, from nonprofit management to land protection.

At its heart, the program is intended to help land trusts meet the promise of preserving land in perpetuity. It also demands a continued quest for excellence, which is a journey that never ends. As a statewide organization devoted to the permanent preservation of private land, Nebraskans deserve no less.

While the NLT did not have a milestone birthday in 2013, other notable milestones did involve numbers. We surpassed 10,000 acres of permanently preserved private land; we completed our 25th conservation easement; we added two new counties to our project list for a total of 11; and we completed the most agreements ever in a single year with five.

Of course no assessment of progress is complete without recognition that we didn’t reach these milestones alone. It all starts with the landowners who seek to leave a legacy of permanently preserved land. Then there are all of the generous individuals who support the NLT, which enables us to work with interested landowners across the state and turn conservation opportunities into achievements.

Finally, there are the organizations and people listed to the right, who serve on the NLT Board of Directors. They represent a wide range of interests with at least one thing in common; support for private property rights, including the right of a landowner to permanently preserve agricultural, historical, and natural resources on their land.

Board of Directors

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***Advisory, non-voting members**

Each organization receives one vote.

Staff

Dave Sands, Executive Director

Jacob Alishouse, Stewardship Associate

Lee Kottmeyer, Intern

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Kennedy Farm

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The observation tower at Platte River State Park rises above a hilltop across the river, where visitors can get a birds-eye view of the Kennedy Farm.

While it is the NLT's job to document the finer points of properties we preserve, it does not take a botanist to appreciate the beauty of the Kennedy Farm. Scenic Highway 31 crosses the property as does a new segment of the MoPac Hike/Bike Trail. The farm is across the valley from Platte River State Park and anyone who has ever climbed their observation tower has gazed down upon the Kennedy Farm.

The farm is also one of a few area properties that stretch from the river into the bluffs maintaining an important corridor for wildlife. The unhardened river bank helps to preserve the natural hydrology of the river, which benefits the endangered pallid sturgeon, interior least tern, and threatened piping plover.

Next to the river there are woodlands that host nesting bald eagles, and a pond that attracts migratory waterfowl including trumpeter swans. The bluffs are a mosaic of grasslands and woodlands that provide habitat for songbirds and other wildlife.

In fact, it was the land's importance for wildlife and agriculture that allowed the NLT to partner with the Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who all provided funds for the bargain purchase of the conservation easement. It was a bargain purchase because the family generously donated a substantial portion of the easement's value to make preservation possible.

NPPD became a partner through the relicensing of the Cooper nuclear power station near Brownsville. In looking at potential impacts to endangered species, it was determined that something should be done to benefit the pallid sturgeon.

"Each of my family members has a favorite memory of a special spot. It may not be the same spot but it is at the same place. The family farm. We all love the land, views, wildlife and sounds we can hear during a quiet moment. It is our connection to our family heritage. It links us to our parents, grandparents and great grandparents. It is also our link to the future.

We have a responsibility to future generations to preserve the land for their enjoyment, so they too can have favorite memories of that special spot and moment. We also feel a responsibility to those that may be passing through the area on a family drive or a hike on the MoPac Trail that runs along Highway 31. The beauty and the sounds will give them a break from the hustle and bustle and a chance to bond in nature.

We believe Nebraska Land Trust shares our vision and goals not only for our land but for the Schramm Park area. With a new set of eyes, we discovered even more about our land from them and how we could preserve it, while also preserving compatible new uses for the future."

Colleen Kennedy Smart

The Platte River provides critical habitat for the species that is affected by bank stabilization which often results from development on the shore. Given the farm's location in the state's fastest growing county, with scenic views and a lake that could have easily been developed for housing, the threats to the river and land were very real.

Rich bottomland on the farm represents an endangered resource of a different sort – farmland in an increasingly urban county. This qualified the farm for NRCS funds aimed at preservation of prime farmland near cities.

Francis likes to refer to the land by its historic name, Peaceful Valley Ranch.

Thanks to Francis, Margaret, and their family, it will remain a peaceful haven for wildlife and people who enjoy the lower Platte Valley.

Accreditation

(continued from page 1)

National accreditation has been a cornerstone of the NLT's commitment to the permanent preservation of private land through voluntary agreements known as conservation easements. When working with private landowners, there is nothing more important than trust, and accreditation enhances trust and confidence in the quality of a land trust's work.

Each accredited land trust must submit extensive documentation and undergo a rigorous review. "Through accreditation, land trusts conduct important planning and make their operations more efficient and strategic," said Tammara Van Ryn, Executive Director of the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. "Accredited organizations have approved systems for ensuring that their conservation work is permanent."

"Land trusts are gaining higher profiles with their work on behalf of citizens and the seal of accreditation from the Land Trust Accreditation Commission is a way to prove to their communities that land trusts are worthy of the significant public and private investment in land conservation," noted Land Trust Alliance President Rand Wentworth.

In the words of NLT executive director Dave Sands, "Accreditation is about the pursuit of excellence, both in what we preserve and how we preserve it. We are a much better land trust for having tackled this challenge and achieved it."



The NLT is now able to display the above seal of accreditation, affirming that it meets national standards for excellence, upholds the public trust, and ensures that conservation efforts are permanent.

Boerkircher Ranch

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small portion of their land to a next door neighbor. The neighbor was John Dunse, who completed a conservation easement with the NLT on his ranch in 2008. As conservationists who care deeply about their land, Brent and Mary became interested and donated a conservation easement to protect their ranch in 2013.

To understand the significance of the Boerkircher's donation, one must realize that the adjacent 987-acre Dunse Ranch adjoins the state's 1,920-acre Wapiti Wildlife Management Area. Named for wild elk that still roam this unfragmented prairie region, the Wapiti WMA was also set aside to benefit the endangered American burying beetle. Completion of the Dunse

"To us the ranch is our sanctuary, an investment in future generations, and an opportunity to enjoy what we currently are stewards of. It is a growing, ongoing project, and the conservation easement gives us peace of mind to know that our investment in stewardship will be preserved and monitored for generations to come. We are so blessed to have the land and never take it for granted. Our family, kids and grandchildren have memories that only could be made possible by such a magical place!"

Mary Boerkircher

Easement enlarged this block of protected habitat by half and with the contiguous Boerkircher Ranch Conservation Easement, the protected block of habitat has now more than doubled.

Even with the generous donation of the conservation easement, the NLT's transaction costs must be paid and a Stewardship Endowment is also needed. The Nebraska Big Game Society agreed to partner on the project by paying the transaction costs, while the stewardship endowment came from a fund to benefit the American burying beetle through the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture.

Above all, the Boerkirchers feel blessed to own the land. Through the conservation easement, they have extended a blessing to future generations by preserving its beauty, habitat, and productivity.

Loss of grasslands spurs interest in protection

Nebraska is number one, but not in a good way. Instead, United States Department of Agriculture data show that Nebraska had more grassland converted to cropland (54,876 acres) between 2011 and 2012 than any other state in America. That represents a loss of nearly 85 square miles of grassland habitat.

In 2013, two landowners donated conservation easements to the Nebraska Land Trust to make sure that their grasslands will continue to provide habitat for wildlife and forage for livestock.

Claudeen and Francis Penry of Atkinson protected their 160 acres of native prairie “out of respect for Claudeen’s parents,” Francis said. “They loved the land and broke up only what was necessary to produce grain to feed their livestock. Our quarter of land is one of the few places where the jack rabbit survived so we call the land Jack Rabbit Flats. We contacted the NLT and discovered that they offered what we desired; protection of the land after we depart this life.”

John and Julia Schutz and John’s sister Mary Helen Shortridge also wanted to honor generations of their family’s stewardship in Merrick County. “Over time, with all that is changing in this world, we have come to realize the importance of preserving a parcel of native woods and grassland that has been in our family for five generations,” John explained. At the planning commission hearing to approve their easement a commissioner agreed. “You know, we are losing too much grass and trees around here,” she said.



The Penry Prairie near Atkinson provides an oasis of grass and trees for wildlife, in a sea of cropland.

Prescribed Fire: Medicine for our grasslands

By Jacob Alishouse

In the last half-century the Great Plains grasslands have seen the reintroduction of a time-tested management tool, prescribed fire. Although fire was once widely present in the Plains through lightning and intentional ignition by Indians, it has been suppressed since European settlement.

Since the 1960s, fire research has sparked land managers to rethink using fire in an effective and safe manner. It must be clarified that there is a difference between wildfires and prescribed fires. A wildfire is unplanned, while prescribed fire follows a land management plan so the burn occurs at a particular time and space, while accounting for environmental conditions to ensure predictable fire behavior. An example of how data are analyzed for a particular burn to meet a land management plan is that desirable plants would be dormant and soil moisture sufficient to sustain plant growth post-fire.

It is important to note that prescribed fire is not a “cure-all” that will reverse the entirety of past management failures. Although, when used in conjunction with other management practices it does produce considerable benefits. In grasslands, prescribed fire may increase the availability, yield, nutritive quality, and palatability of grass. While at the same time it may reduce hazardous fuels, suppress unwanted plants, and improve wildlife habitat.

One specific use for prescribed fire is to suppress the growth of eastern red cedars that are invading many Nebraskan landscapes. The spread of eastern red cedar has reduced forage production as it shades-out herbaceous cover under its canopy. This has only become more of an issue as management is overlooked and red cedars increase their numbers. The great benefit of prescribed fire is that it is an inexpensive method to reduce red cedar growth in comparison to alternative methods, such as mechanical removal or herbicide.

Fire is also beneficial to our wildlife species through increasing habitat diversity, nutritive quality, availability and yield of forage. Despite the common misconception that wildlife are killed in fires, most

actually escape by moving away from the fire. Birds will fly away, ground animals will run, and burrowing animals will go underground. Many upland birds, such as game birds, are nesting in May, so an early April burn will avoid most nest destruction.

Safety is the primary concern when planning and conducting prescribed fire. The burn plan must be detailed, an experienced person must supervise the execution, and the fire crew must be competent and reliable. Nebraska law requires all prescribed burn plans to be submitted to the local fire chief. If there are no issues with the burn plan, an open burning permit will be administered for the prescribed fire.



File photo, National Park Service

There are places where prescribed fire should not be used, like sandy soils subject to wind erosion, steep slopes greater than 30 percent at risk of erosion, or when the environmental conditions are not within the burn plan's guidelines. Factors considered include relative humidity, air temperature, and wind speed with a consistent direction.

Fire has emerged as a leading land management practice. When properly applied it can benefit cattle, wildlife, and aid in the removal of invasive species while costing the landowner less than comparable practices. Keeping prescribed fire as a tool for land management is both environmentally and fiscally beneficial for the landowner.

Welcome Jacob Alishouse

In 2013, Jacob Alishouse was hired as the Nebraska Land Trust's Stewardship Associate, our first full-time position devoted to easement monitoring, baseline documentation, and working with landowners to enhance conservation values after easements are completed.

Northern Cheyenne launch fundraising effort to complete monument

On the cold, winter morning of January 9, 1879, after four days without food, water, or heat, Chief Dull Knife and 149 Cheyenne People escaped from their inhumane imprisonment at Fort Robinson and began a long dangerous journey back to their home in the north. In their fight to survive, 39 Cheyenne men and 22 women and children lost their lives.

In 2001, tribal members, elders and supporters began the planning and construction of a new historical monument west of Fort Robinson State Park to establish a place of remembrance, respect, honor and healing to acknowledge the sacrifices made by their Cheyenne ancestors.

Although the planning and construction efforts began in 2001 the Monument was half finished when existing funds ran out. It is the desire of many Cheyenne to finally finish the Monument for all people to visit and remember what happened at Fort Robinson. It is hoped that it will provide a chance for all people to heal from the senseless tragedy.



The Nebraska Land Trust holds a conservation easement on this land and works to assist landowners who wish to enhance their conservation values. The monument would greatly enhance the land's historical value by helping people to understand what occurred.

In 2014 the Northern Cheyenne Breakout Legacy Fund was established as an affiliated fund of the Nebraska Community Foundation to receive donations for the monument. For information on the fund, please go to www.nebcommfound.org. For additional information on the Northern Cheyenne Breakout Monument project please contact: Major Robinson at (406) 438-1420 redstonemt@gmail.com or Dave Sands at (402) 438-5263 dsands@nelandtrust.org.

Would you make an investment that provides a 10 to 1 return for conservation?

The Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) is a very efficient organization that accomplishes big things on a relatively modest annual operating budget. This approach is greatly facilitated by our Board of Directors, who provide many in-kind services needed by land trusts, from map making to biology.

Even so, the NLT must raise significant support every year to allow everything else to happen, including the raising of funds for direct land protection through the purchase of conservation easements.

Since 2008, the total NLT operating budget for all six years was \$953,457. During this same period of time, NLT staff raised \$9,851,054 to purchase land protection agreements. **For every dollar of support from our annual donors since 2008, we have raised \$10 to purchase land protection agreements. Please consider a tax-deductible gift to the Nebraska Land Trust today. Not only does it represent a sound investment decision, the true dividend is paid forward to future generations through permanently preserved land!**

Family of Friends

The Nebraska Land Trust thanks the following individuals and organizations that have contributed to our success during 2013.

Conservation Easement Donors

Brent and Mary Boerkircher
Francis and Margaret Kennedy
Carol and Ron Patterson
Claudeen and Francis Penry
John and Julia Schutz

Stewards

John and Jane Ellsworth
John and Carmen Gottschalk
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Foundations

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Adah and Leon Millard Foundation
Claire M. Hubbard Foundation
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Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation
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Organizations and Businesses

Audubon Society of Omaha
Land Trust Alliance
Lower Platte South Natural Resources District
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Nebraska Big Game Society
Nebraska Environmental Trust
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
Nebraska Public Power District
Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District
United States Fish and Wildlife Service



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Additional land preserved on Patterson Farm

Sometimes, preservation of agricultural properties must be done in increments, as ownership of various parcels becomes fragmented over the decades among family members. In these situations, separate conservation easements must be completed for each parcel. This was the case on the Patterson Farm in Sarpy County, when Ron and Carol Patterson started working with the Nebraska Land Trust toward a goal to someday preserve the entire farm.



View of the Platte Valley from Patterson Farm

The NLT made the commitment to pursue this long-term strategy because of the farm's unique attributes that include spring fed streams, oak/hickory woodlands, high visibility with frontage on Highway 31, prime farmland in an urban county, and significant cultural and historical sites.

In 2013, the NLT completed a third conservation easement on the farm, bringing an additional 174 acres under permanent protection. When combined with two previous agreements, 410 acres of the farm are now preserved near Schramm State Park making it the largest protected property in the Schramm Bluffs (larger than Schramm State Park). With funding already in place to complete the fourth and final conservation easement, the NLT will be working to bring the

entire farm under protection in 2014. All of the agreements have been made possible through funding from the Nebraska Environmental Trust, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and generous donations of easement value from Ron and Carol Patterson.