



December, 2016

A few weeks ago on election night, I was nowhere near a newscast or voting booth (I voted early). Instead, I was in the Pine Ridge on a 2,400-acre ranch east of Chadron. At the family's invitation, I had been there to view elk on three previous occasions, but not one had indulged my desire to see them. This time, I had reason for high hopes. ***An hour before sunset I had climbed into a new viewing blind with the ranching couple who love these elk and are hoping to permanently preserve their habitat through a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT).***

We couldn't have asked for a more beautiful November evening, with warm temps and a light breeze that put us upwind from a canyon where the elk find shelter during the day. As the last rays of afternoon sun fell upon the prairie, my hopes were realized as elk began to emerge from the canyon shadows. At first, it was a single line with maybe a dozen. Then another line and another and another until we counted nearly 150.

Darkness deepened with the sunset as high clouds became wisps of peach and orange. The elk congregated right in front of our blind as bulls bugled amid a chorus of mews and chirps from cows and calves. We could even hear the clicking of antlers as the bulls jostled. I had seen elk many times in mountains and national parks, but I had never had an experience quite like this!



Of course this wildlife spectacle had nothing to do with public land – it was the result of private land stewardship. Todd Nordeen, Big Game Disease and Research Manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, had also been on the land recently. He confirmed to me in an email that ***the ranch is “a unique place holding elk and other wildlife throughout the year. Due to [family] management, this property has become an iconic place for wildlife and an area worthy of easement protection.”***

But landowners and the NLT can't do it alone. To permanently protect this iconic Pine Ridge ranch and others like it, we need annual support from people like you!

Elk are doing well in northwest Nebraska because it has the remote unfragmented habitat that elk and other western wildlife need to thrive. We largely have ranchers to thank for this but continued conservation is not a given. These days, when ranches are sold they are seldom being purchased for ranching. Instead, they increasingly are being bought by out-of-state buyers for recreational use; the first step on a slippery slope to “ranchette” subdivisions that fragment land forever. Fortunately, there are other families like the one above, who want to protect their unfragmented working ranches forever.



*Pine Ridge sunset from the elk viewing blind.
The lack of lights speaks to the property's
remoteness, which is important for elk.*

Thankfully, the NLT's Pine Ridge Advisory Committee has helped us to develop ranking criteria for the prioritization of projects as we have now assessed 11 prospective properties over two years, totaling more than 13,500 acres! This interest in permanent conservation of private land is a direct result of asking local people what matters to them. We call this unique approach ***Community Conservation***. As a result, we will be pursuing multiple projects in 2017, including several new ones if federal grants are approved to match a \$900,000 Nebraska Environmental Trust grant we've already received to purchase conservation easements in the Pine Ridge.

When it comes to raising state and federal dollars needed for the purchase of conservation easements, the NLT has a significant track record of success. ***Since 2008, the NLT has raised \$12,654,394 from state, federal and private sources for the purchase of conservation easements that protect land forever. When compared to the total of our operating expenses over this same period, it represents an 8 to 1 return on investment for those who have donated annual support! In other words, we have turned every dollar of annual support into \$8 for the purchase of conservation easements that permanently protect land in the Pine Ridge and elsewhere!***

Elsewhere includes the Lower Platte Valley, where we hope to launch a new initiative in 2017 – the ***Lower Platte Valley Preservation Partnership***. Through this project we will expand outreach and pursue Community Conservation through a Lower Platte Valley Advisory Committee, to help the NLT identify, prioritize and complete quality projects. If opportunities and funding allow, we can buffer state parks from development, expand existing blocks of protected land, help to maintain drinking water quality, protect key wildlife habitat, preserve scenic natural amenities and conserve prime farmland in an urban region projected to have 2,000,000 people by the year 2050.

Given our increasing workload in the Pine Ridge, our new initiative in the Lower Platte Valley, and ongoing maintenance of 35 conservation easements covering 15,000 acres in 15 counties from Sarpy to Sioux, your support has never been more timely or needed. Please consider a generous donation to the Nebraska Land Trust today and help us to protect more land!

Sincerely,

Dave Sands
Executive Director