



THE LANDSCAPE

"Preserving Our Agricultural, Historical And Natural Resources"

2016 ANNUAL REPORT

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wild thoughts

from Dave Sands, Executive Director



Whenever I get a group of people in a room who know little about Nebraska, they generally don't leave with their misconceptions. For the past two years this opportunity has presented itself when land trust leaders from around the country came to the Lied Conference Center in Nebraska City and I was asked to give the welcoming address. I started with a show of hands for people who have been to Nebraska. I then asked again, with the caveat that seeing the state through a windshield on I-80 doesn't count. The number of hands dropped by about half, giving me an opening to say, "Let me introduce you to our state. With Nebraska you get two-for-one; a Midwestern state and a Western state."

They were then taken on a mind's-eye state tour, starting with the eastern oak/hickory woodlands that find their western limit in the Missouri and lower Platte Valleys. We moved on to the Sandhills and they probably started to question my credibility when told that Nebraska has the largest sand dune formation in the western hemisphere! I quickly explained that the dunes are stabilized by native grass and used by cattle ranchers, who have conserved the largest unfragmented prairie ecosystem in America. The Niobrara Valley was next and I described a biological crossroad that is a National Scenic River, popular with paddlers. Their mind's-eye journey ended with the pines and buttes of the Wildcat Hills and Pine Ridge.

The Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) has worked with private landowners to conserve land and resources forever in all of the places I described. We have also chosen to focus on two landscapes that seem like appropriate bookends for a statewide land trust – the lower Platte Valley and Pine Ridge. In partnership with local landowners, advisory committees, conservation partners and funders, the NLT will conserve agricultural, historical and natural resources that people value in these landscapes, from eastern oak/hickory forest to weather-sculpted buttes amid ponderosa pine. When it comes to landscape protection, the NLT gives you two-for-one as well!

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 Turkey Creek Preserve Easement, North of Omaha

turkey creek preserve

A Conservation Vision is Protected Forever in the Rolling Hills North of Omaha

It was a perfect October day in 2016 when a team from the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) came to Mary Lou Chapek's 595 acres in the rolling hills of Washington County north of Omaha. The warm autumn weather was complimented by warm colors as shades of red, orange and yellow seemed to glow beneath a deep blue sky. Oak/hickory woodlands blanketed the steep slopes flanking the Missouri Valley, while marshes and ponds were strung like jewels along Turkey Creek. At one point, a team member observed, "If I was transported to this land blindfolded, I'd think it was upstate New York." Last December, Mary Lou's Turkey Creek Preserve was protected forever, when she generously donated a conservation easement to the NLT.

The NLT team was visiting the property to prepare a Baseline Documentation Report, which includes photographs, maps, species lists, and narratives that document the land's condition at the time the easement is conveyed. As the group toured the property with Mary Lou, she recounted its history and it became increasingly clear that the NLT would be protecting more than the eastern woodlands, restored prairies, cropland, creek, marshes and ponds that we documented. The conservation easement would also protect Mary Lou's conservation vision and actions.

Her conservation journey began when she was 8 years old and started attending a summer church camp in the rolling hills near Blair. This experience kindled her love of nature and cemented her dream to someday return to this beautiful area. Twenty years ago, her dream was realized when she and her husband purchased 12 acres near Fort Calhoun. As Mary Lou's business grew, so did her vision as she started to purchase adjacent parcels whenever possible. In this fashion, she eventually assembled the 595-acre property she stewards today, achieving "reverse fragmentation" by reassembling many parcels into one protected whole!



 *Mary Lou Chapek, Landowner*

In addition to protecting the land, Mary Lou is providing an opportunity for others to learn from it. Willa Cather wrote in *O Pioneers*, “We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it – for a little while.” To assure that future generations can learn to love and understand this land, students and professors will have access for research and education through the University of Nebraska Omaha. Volunteers will also have a role in its future, as they have in the past.

Mary Lou has always sought to better understand the land through research so volunteers monitor butterflies, frogs, birds, bats and other wildlife. A recent bat survey found seven of the nine species that occur in eastern Nebraska, including the Northern long-eared Myotis which is listed as a federally threatened species. Monarch Butterflies are also monitored and 140 were counted in 2015, a sharp increase from 113 the year before and 13 counted in 2012. More Monarchs were counted on the Turkey Creek Preserve in 2015 than on five other area sites combined. Abundant species of milkweed on the property are likely a factor.

*“We come and go, but land is always here.
— And the people who love it and understand it are —
the people who own it - for a little while.” - Willa Cather*

Birds are another measure of ecological health and 79 bluebird boxes on the land fledged an estimated 253 young in 2015. Other birds that have been sighted include bald eagles, trumpeter swans, American kestrels, a large variety of migratory waterfowl, egrets, barred owls, great horned owls, indigo buntings, green herons and many more.

The land’s healthy wildlife diversity undoubtedly reflects the results of a 25-year Master Plan designed by Fontenelle Forest, that was initiated in 2001 to enhance and restore native ecosystems on the property. To date, 60 acres of tallgrass prairie has been restored on steep, highly erodible hills that had previously been farmed. Dozens of native trees have been planted, invasive plants have been controlled and a two-acre pond was created for wildlife.

Given the realization of her conservation vision, it is easy to understand Mary Lou’s passion to seek permanent protection of the land and nature that she loves. As she explained to the Washington County Board when seeking approval for the easement, “I have devoted over 20 years of my life and much of my hard earned resources to preserving this beautiful place for generations yet to come. By donating a conservation easement to the NLT, I can be sure that this property will be saved from development both now and in the future.”

 *Turkey Creek Preserve Easement, North of Omaha*



northern cheyenne monument

NLT Partners with Northern Cheyenne to Honor their Ancestors

When you plan a summer event outdoors in Nebraska's Pine Ridge, you prepare for the worst and hope for the best. So a large tent was erected to shelter attendees from blazing sun or heavy rain when the Monument to the Cheyenne Breakout of 1879 was dedicated on July 15, 2016. Located on 1,121 acres adjacent to Fort Robinson State Park, the land is owned by Chief Dull Knife College (CDKC) in Montana, who protected it forever through a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) in 2012.

Fortunately, Mother Nature was kind on the dedication's morning. Cloudy skies and a cool breeze had some reaching for their coats, including the NLT's executive director, Dave Sands, who had served on the Monument Committee and helped to raise \$150,000 for its completion. While it may be unusual for one nonprofit organization to raise funds for another, the NLT often helps landowners to enhance conservation values that are protected through conservation easements, in keeping with the NLT's mission to conserve agricultural, historical and natural resources. On the CDKC land, the Monument was seen as an enhancement of the property's significant historical value.

The dedication began with prayer and reflection at the Cheyenne Barracks in Fort Robinson State Park, where Northern Cheyenne had been imprisoned in the fall of 1878 to force their return to "Indian Territory" in Oklahoma; a place that had brought misery, sickness and death to their people. A solemn two-mile walk to the Monument followed, roughly paralleling the route taken by Cheyenne men, women and children who escaped their inhumane captivity on January 9, 1879. On a beautiful mid-summer morning, it was hard to imagine the bravery, pain, sacrifice and suffering of those who fled the Fort though deep snow in bitterly cold temperatures at night, while being pursued by mounted troops intent on capturing or killing them.

Nearly 200 Northern Cheyenne had traveled to the Monument Dedication from Montana and for many, it was the first time they had seen it. Gleaming stainless steel graced the corners and provided a beautiful accent to the red pipestone and black granite that covered the Monument's base. On each of the four sides was a plaque telling the story of the Cheyenne Breakout through survivors who were there. A stainless steel Morning Star, symbol of the Northern Cheyenne, stood atop the monument while American and Northern Cheyenne flags snapped in the breeze.

Once the ceremony began, many spoke of the Monument's importance to the Northern Cheyenne people, as a place to remember the sacrifices made by their ancestors and as a place to heal from the tragedy. The Breakout was often referred to in remarks as the Cheyenne Exodus, which is an apt analogy as their ancestors made the ultimate sacrifice to escape unjust and cruel imprisonment, so their descendants could live in their Montana homeland today. It was also pointed out that the Monument has great significance for all Americans, to remind us of a dark chapter in our history when all people were not equal under the law; a chapter that should never be repeated again.

When the easement was completed in 2012, the Monument was half done and in need of attention, since funds and donated labor had run out years before. In his remarks at the dedication, Sands recalled the night he first met the Monument Committee.

 Northern Cheyenne Monument, Chief Dull Knife College



*"It felt a bit like jumping off a cliff
without knowing if there was
a deep pool of water or rocks at the bottom...
there was indeed a deep pool of
generosity in Nebraska"*



 Leading a procession from Fort Robinson State Park, the Northern Cheyenne flag is held aloft as participants walk uphill toward the Monument Dedication.
Photo Credit: Greg Rust

By the end of that meeting, he had pledged the NLT's support in helping to raise funds for completion, but in his words, "it felt a bit like jumping off a cliff without knowing if there was a deep pool of water or rocks at the bottom." Thanks to the Ethel S. Abbott, Sterns, Lozier and Scott Foundations, Julie Schroeder, Anne Hubbard, Jane Johnson, Mike and Gail Yanney, Charles Wright and others, there was indeed a deep pool of generosity in Nebraska.

The Nebraska Environmental Trust and Natural Resources Conservation Service were recognized as well, since they provided funds needed to purchase the conservation easement.

But it was the decade-long perseverance of the Northern Cheyenne Monument Committee itself that ultimately brought the Monument to completion. Headed by Edna Seminole and coordinated by her son, Vincent Whitecrane, the Committee articulated the need for the Monument and its importance to the Northern Cheyenne people. They developed a budget for completion and provided oversight for construction, keeping the project on track and under budget. In the process, a dream became reality, culminating on a beautiful Pine Ridge morning last July.

The Monument to the Cheyenne Breakout is located on a hill about one mile west of Fort Robinson State Park on Highway 20 in Nebraska's Pine Ridge. If the gate to the monument is closed and/or cattle are present, it should be viewed from the road. But when the gate is open to the red rock road that winds up to the Monument, people can sit on the stone benches in quiet reflection, pondering the heart-rending stories of survivors written in bronze, and the healing beauty of a Pine Ridge view that touches the soul.



NLT, Monument Committee honored with 2017 Chief Standing Bear Award

At its awards breakfast in May 2017, the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs (NCIA) honored the Northern Cheyenne Breakout Monument Committee and the Nebraska Land Trust with their Chief Standing Bear Organizational Award. The NCIA jointly recognized both the NLT and the Committee "for their achievement in constructing and dedicating a monument honoring the story of the Cheyenne Breakout and memorializing the stories of the people who participated. The establishment of this monument tells a necessary piece of Nebraska History and richly deserves to be honored."



lower platte preservation

In eastern Nebraska, there are few areas that match the beauty, history and wildlife of the Lower Platte Valley below Fremont. The Valley is a braided ribbon of river, sandbars, wetlands, woodlands, bluffs, prairie and prime farmland draped across Nebraska's most populous region. It sustains wildlife in a Biologically Unique Landscape and families in agriculture. It also sustains 1,000,000 people with drinking water and opportunities to enjoy nature near the state's two largest cities.

The Valley and its resources are also uniquely threatened in a region that could have 2,000,000 people by the year 2050. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has protected some Valley gems in state parks and other areas, but its future is largely in private hands. The Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) has been working with willing landowners since 2002 to conserve the Valley's considerable agricultural, historical and natural resources, through voluntary agreements known as conservation easements. To date 3,384 acres with woodlands, wetlands, grasslands, natural riverfront, streams, farmland and historic sites have been permanently protected through 14 agreements in three counties.

The Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) has been a key partner since 2008, providing \$2,222,913 in three grants to purchase eight of these easements, which attracted \$3,089,875 in matching funds from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), landowners and others. Over the years, Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) and the Nebraska State Historical Society provided in-kind services and/or financial support for transaction costs. On two occasions, stakeholder groups were asked for input on conservation priorities. It is a proven partnership for success.

In 2016, the NLT initiated the Lower Platte Valley Preservation Partnership (LPVPP), applied to the NET for a new grant to purchase conservation easements in the lower Platte Valley and \$350,000 was approved for 2017. The NLT will now seek a minimum 1:1 match from federal and other sources. With funding approved, the NLT will seek input from a stakeholder advisory committee that will be asked to identify and prioritize conservation values that are important to them, which is a prerequisite to the identification and completion of quality projects. If past experience is any guide, projects could potentially buffer state parks and public attractions from development, expand existing blocks of protected land, help to maintain water quality, protect wildlife habitat, preserve scenic views and conserve prime soils for agriculture.

Community Conservation Engages Local People in Land Protection

Permanent Conservation

In a largely private landscape like the Lower Platte Valley, a voluntary, flexible, incentive-based approach has the best chance of achieving conservation success. Conservation easements offer this approach and can achieve permanent protection of resources and the public benefits they provide, while landowners retain the right to live, farm, hunt, and fish on the land. Easements are cost-effective to purchase and landowners continue to pay for management and taxes. Given the value of land in the Valley, financial incentives are needed to offer a feasible alternative to development and conservation easements can provide this incentive by compensating landowners for the appraised value of the easement, while still allowing for uses like agriculture, hunting and tourism.

The LPVPP is focused on the Valley downstream from Fremont because it has the highest development threat and the most strategic conservation opportunities, where new easements can be used to expand upon already protected public lands or any of the 14 conservation easements the NLT holds in the Valley.

Community Conservation

Typically, there are more opportunities to purchase easements than funding, so it is important that funds are spent wisely on projects with the highest conservation value. In determining conservation values, the NLT believes it is wise to seek local input, so our work is relevant and sustainable in the communities where it occurs. To achieve this, the NLT will form a Lower Platte Valley Advisory Committee (LPVAC) made up of landowners and other stakeholders, to develop transparent, sound, locally crafted ranking criteria. The NLT calls this approach Community Conservation and the LPVAC will be similar to the Pine Ridge Advisory Committee (PRAC) which has been ongoing since 2014. Likewise, the LPVAC will provide ongoing advice on our work in the Valley.

Community Conservation also includes a robust effort to provide education and outreach through field days, coffee shop meetings, print, social media, conferences and other mediums. Taken as a whole, this process is more time consuming, deliberate and costly, but it recognizes the importance of being locally relevant and in step with community values such as preservation of working farms, wildlife habitat and historic sites in a rapidly urbanizing region.

conservation easements ensure basic property rights and rangeland protection

by Barb Cooksley

*Immediate past president of Nebraska Cattlemen,
Rancher, and former Soil Conservation Service employee*

Nebraska Cattlemen (NC) is pleased to partner with the Nebraska Land Trust, an entity that shares our mutual goal of protecting agricultural, historical and natural resources on land in our beautiful state. NC members often remark that farmers and ranchers are the original conservationists, and ranchland protection is an important priority for our association.

Nebraska has a rich agricultural heritage, and private conservation and sustainability of Nebraska's working lands are values shared by all our members. Since 2006, NC has partnered with Sand County Foundation to present the annual Nebraska Leopold Conservation Award. This honor distinguishes Nebraskans who are committed to the enhancement of the land, water and wildlife in their care.

While the world celebrates Earth Day one day a year, every day is Earth Day for agriculture. Ranchers spend all winter planning and preparing for the year. We derive our income and livelihood from the land, so it is in our best interest to take care of our precious resources. The Nebraska Leopold Conservation Award helps inspire the next generation of landowners to do right by the land, and NC is pleased to help instill the value of conservation in our youngest producers.

The Nebraska Land Trust shares our belief that conservation easements can play a pivotal role in helping maintain our natural resources. The model of private lands conservation has preserved thousands of habitat acres across the state for multiple generations. The protection of personal property rights is of utmost importance to cattlemen conducting their business, and NC supports the right for landowners to choose whether a conservation easement is appropriate for their situation. For some, voluntary land preservation agreements are a perfect way to leave a permanent legacy behind. NC thanks our partners at NLT for recognizing the most basic of property rights – the right to determine the future of one's land.

An annual donation provides an 8 to 1 return for conservation!

The Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) accomplishes big things on a relatively modest annual operating budget, but we still must raise significant funds every year to protect land, including funds for the purchase of conservation easements and operating revenues that allow us to pursue and complete projects.

Since 2008, the NLT has raised \$13 million to purchase land protection agreements. For every dollar of operating support from our annual donors, we have raised nearly \$8 to fund the purchase of conservation easements that protect land forever in the lower Platte Valley, Pine Ridge, Wildcat Hills, and Niobrara Valley. 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 conserved land!



 *Prairie coneflower on McWha Easement*
Photo Credit: Laura McWha

Friends and Supporters

The Nebraska Land Trust thanks the following individuals and organizations who contributed \$100 or more to our success during 2016.

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Mary Lou Chapek (Turkey Creek Preserve)

In Memory Of

Mrs. Wallace Jorgenson

We protect land forever. You can support land protection forever!

Just as the Nebraska Land Trust protects agricultural, historical, and natural resources for generations to come, you can support the NLT for generations through a Planned Gift that will help to build our endowment. Please consider inclusion of the NLT in your planned giving and bequests, because forever is a long time and the NLT is dedicated to keeping our promise of perpetuity. For more information, contact Dave Sands at dsands@nelandtrust.org or call 402/438-5263.

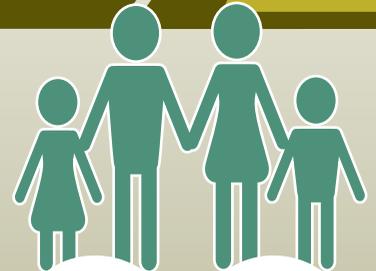
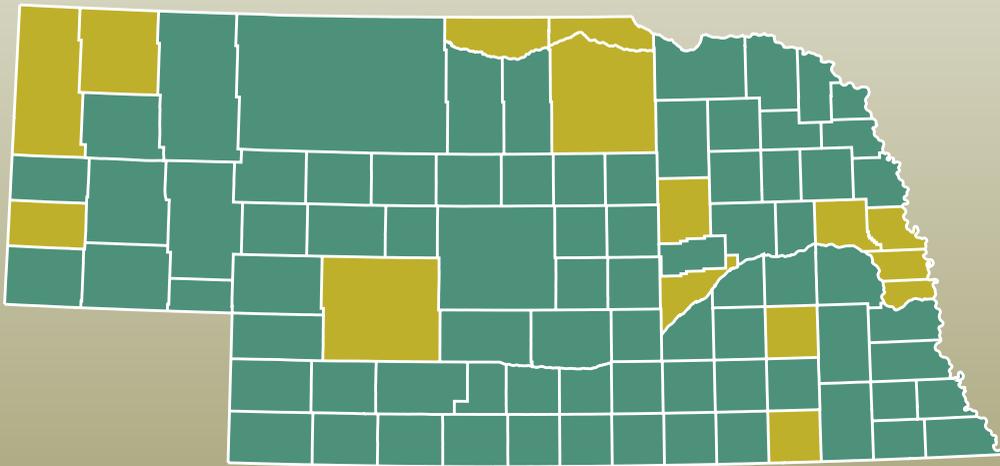


YOUR MONEY AT WORK



15
COUNTIES

15,000
ACRES



30
FAMILIES

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ON THE COVER
Turkey Creek Preserve Easement, North of Omaha.