

Preservation of Dunse Ranch is a family affair

Southeast of North Platte, there is a biologically unique, scenic area that few Nebraskans have heard of, much less seen. Known as the Loess Canyons, it is a picturesque land of steep hills and deep ravines, where ranching has preserved a mid-grass prairie ecosystem, including a herd of wild elk and one of the last strongholds for the endangered American burying beetle.

In 2007, protected habitat for these species was expanded by a donated conservation easement from sisters Monica Dunse and Wanda Clark. Their 644-acre ranch adjoins the 1,920-acre Wapiti Wildlife Management Area, owned by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to preserve elk and beetle habitat.

With assistance from the NGPC in 2008, the NLT completed a conservation easement on an additional 343 acres adjacent to the sisters' property, owned by their father, John Dunse. The resulting 987 acres of protected ranch land and wildlife habitat will help to buffer Wapiti WMA from development, while expanding a protected area of critical habitat by more than 50%!



The Loess Canyons derive their name from deep ravines carved into the steep loess hills, like this canyon on the Dunse Ranch.

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The Landscape

Shanahans protect sacred Pawnee ground



Attendees at the dedication included, left to right: Pat Shanahan, Mark Brohman (NET), Francis Morris, Pat Leading Fox, James Rice, Dave Sands (NLT), Merton Moore, Randy Epperson (NRCS), and Judi M. gaiashkibos (Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs). (Photo by Anne Hubbard)

Overlooking the lower Platte River in Saunders County, there is a high bluff cloaked in oak/hickory forest, with breathtaking views that are rare in eastern Nebraska. To the Pawnee, this bluff is a sacred place and on a perfect late September morning in 2008, it was easy to see why. The warm temperature and light breeze spoke of summer, but the deep blue sky, low humidity, and red sumac pointed to fall. The fine weather was well-suited for this idyllic place, where 40 people had gathered to celebrate its permanent preservation.

In his 1921 book, *Prairie Smoke: A Collection of Lore of the Prairies*, ethnologist Melvin R. Gilmore wrote, "Each of the nations and tribes of Indians had certain places within its own domain which they regarded as sacred...Within the ancient domain of the Pawnee nation...there is a cycle of five such sacred places. The chief one of these five mystic places is called Pahuk." Also known as Pahaku, it was said to be a place of rebirth, where animal spirits dwelled in a cave beneath the bluff and divulged their secrets to seekers of healing powers.

(See *Pahaku*, page 4)

Walz Easement preserves land next to Schramm State Park

As a people drive down into the Platte Valley on Highway 31 toward Schramm State Park in Sarpy County, they behold a pastoral landscape of farmland and woodlands lining the Platte River. Thanks to John and William Walz, whose family has owned the land for more than 100 years, this scenic vista, wildlife habitat, and natural Platte River frontage will be preserved forever through a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust.

This 90-acre property has been protected thanks to funding and technical assistance made available in a partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, the Papio-Missouri Natural Resources District, the Nebraska Land Trust, the Nebraska Department of Roads and Hawkins Construction Company. The Nebraska Environmental (See *Walz Easement*, page 3)



Natural shoreline, such as this protected by the Walz Easement, is becoming increasingly rare below the I-80 Bridge as river banks have been stabilized to accommodate development.



Wild Thoughts

From Dave Sands, Executive Director

The cold October night was warmed by a campfire, as my son started to play some chords on his guitar. The barely discernable remnants of dusk added a pale glow to the western sky, reflected by a twisting ribbon of Niobrara River flowing between the black silhouettes of hills and trees. Unseen but heard, geese honked and splashed in the water while the timeless call of sandhill cranes emanated from the darkened expanse overhead. Suddenly, the yellow fireball of a shooting star appeared from nowhere and just as suddenly, it was gone.

Meanwhile, back in the larger world, the one where news is inescapable, it seemed that financial investments were a bit like that shooting star. However, I found solace in knowing that the investors I am closest to did receive excellent dividends and a bonus in 2008! These “investors” were people who have contributed to the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT), the “dividends” were the permanent protection of some very special places, and the bonus was a \$1.1 million grant to do even more.

These dividends also reflected some significant firsts for the NLT. We completed three conservation easements in 2008, the most ever in a single year. All of these easements were acquired through “bargain purchases,” where a portion of the easement’s value was donated while the remainder was paid for – another first.

The NLT also received the largest grant in its seven year history; approval of \$1.1 million from the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) for the purchase of easements that protect the Schramm Bluffs in Sarpy County. When added to the donated value of the three easements and other funds used for purchase in 2008, the total exceeds \$1.6 million for the permanent protection of land. When compared to our annual operating budget for last year, this is about a 14 to 1 return on investment.

Of course the real returns are cultural, ecological, and agricultural treasures preserved on the Shanahan farm and critical habitat for the endangered American burying beetle on the Dunse Ranch. Pristine river shoreline, scenic views, and woodlands adjacent to Schramm State Park are dividends from the Walz Easement, where the promise of additional land preservation is now possible thanks to the NET grant.

Best of all, these dividends don’t discriminate. They benefit many people whether they invest in the NLT or not, they keep producing in good times and bad, and their value only grows with time. It is like a stone thrown into a pond. The stone represents the collective weight of support for the NLT. From there, the benefits of land conservation ripple outward, from the landowner who permanently conserves their land, to larger ripples that benefit wildlife, agriculture, historic sites, native ecosystems, scenic views, water quality, and recreation; dividends that touch us all.

Unlike that shooting star, these are things of permanence; benefits that can be enjoyed by us, our children, and generations beyond – my idea of a great investment! In that regard, 2008 was a very good year.

The mission of the Nebraska Land Trust is to foster the protection of agricultural, historical and natural resources on land in Nebraska, through education, partnering, and permanent conservation.”

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For information, please call the Nebraska Land Trust at (402) 438-5263; email dsands@nelandtrust.org; or mail to 233 S. 13th St., Suite 1712, Lincoln, NE 68508.

Partnerships key NLT success

By its very nature, the Nebraska Land Trust is a partnership, with a Board of Directors consisting of other organizations and agencies with an interest and expertise in land stewardship. This means that knowledgeable professionals from the public and private sector offer exceptional expertise in wildlife, botany, mapping, history, agriculture, and more. In addition, these partners provide in-kind services that help to contain the NLT’s operating budget and create an efficient organization.

Two NLT board members, the Lower Platte South and Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources Districts, also provided financial support in 2008 through Cooperative Agreements to pursue land protection in the lower Platte Valley. Under these agreements, the NLT will broaden the scope of its work in the lower Platte Valley to include the entire “Bluffs Region” below Ashland. This will include education, identification of “Conservation Focus Areas,” prioritization of prospective properties, and permanent preservation.

As a true “public/private partnership,” the NLT also relies on donations and grants from individuals, foundations, and businesses. This includes the donation of conservation easements from landowners and the significant value that they represent. The NLT is deeply grateful to all of these partners, who make it possible to preserve land and resources in Nebraska.

Congress extends enhanced tax deductions for donated easements

In the 2008 Farm Bill, Congress extended the enhanced tax deduction for conservation easements that are fully or partly donated. Under this rule, the IRS will allow a deduction up to 50% of the donor’s annual “adjusted gross income” (AGI) in the year that the donation is made. Any unused portion of the deduction can be carried forward and used over the next 15 years, up to 50% of the donor’s adjusted gross annual income in those years. An additional incentive has been provided for “qualifying farmers and ranchers,” who can use the deduction up to 100% of their AGI over 16 years. The enhanced deduction will expire at the end of 2009, unless they are made permanent or extended by Congress.

Donor leaves a double legacy of protection, by gifting land to the NLT

As a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization, the NLT owes its success to the generosity of others. Annual and endowment gifts provide essential funding that allows us to fulfill our mission.

In 2008, the NLT received its first gift of land. If this land is ever sold, it will have a conservation easement placed on it to permanently preserve its resources, while generating funds for the NLT endowment. In turn, this will increase the NLT’s capacity to continue its work in all parts of the state, on many other properties, enhancing his legacy of protection. If you would like to learn more about a gift of land for the NLT Endowment, please contact Dave Sands at 402/438-5263.

Thank you!

The Nebraska Land Trust wishes to express our sincere appreciation to the following individuals, businesses, and organizations that contributed to our success in 2008:

Individuals

Tom and Jane Allman
John and Catherine Angle
Warren and Sue Arganbright
Lorrie Benson
Laurine Blankenau
Ann and Peter Bleed
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Ione Werthman
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Foundations

Abel Foundation
Cooper Foundation
Claire M. Hubbard Foundation
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Julie Morsman Schroeder Foundation
J.A. Woollam Foundation

Organizations and Businesses

A to Z Printing
Briggs, Inc.
Hawkins Construction Company
McGill, Gotsdiner, Workman, & Lepp
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Olsson Associates
Papio-Missouri River NRD
Young Presidents Organization

Easement Donors

John Dunse
Pat and Nancy Shanahan
John Walz
William Walz

Environmental Trust awards \$1.1 million for Schramm Bluffs protection

The Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) announced in April that the Nebraska Land Trust would receive \$1,100,000 for the “Schramm Bluffs Preservation Project,” to permanently protect sensitive environmental resources on private land in southwestern Sarpy County. Land would be protected through the purchase of voluntary land preservation agreements known as conservation easements from willing landowners.

The Schramm Bluffs Preservation Project presents a rare conservation opportunity where a number of private landowners have expressed interest in permanently protecting their land from subdivision and development. The NET recognized that many doors were open to this voluntary approach, several properties were contiguous to each other, and that there are significant resources to protect.

At the heart of the bluffs, Schramm State Park has been designated as an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society, due to a diverse assortment of migrating songbirds that visit the wooded hills and ravines each spring. In addition, the bluffs border the Platte Valley which has been recognized as an area with exceptional biodiversity, including three threatened or endangered species and locally rare eastern oak-hickory woodland near the western edge of its range, along with restored and remnant tallgrass prairies.

Like most healthy eco-systems, habitat, wildlife, and watersheds are not confined to park boundaries so the future of this area is largely in private hands. For some families, there has been a tradition of good stewardship for more than 150 years. The NLT will use the \$1,100,000 grant to establish conservation easements on private land that will protect this unique landscape in the midst of the state’s most populous region and assure that this legacy lasts far into the future.

Besides the Nebraska Environmental Trust, other funding partners in this project have included the Abel Foundation, Cooper Foundation, Claire M. Hubbard Foundation, J.A. Woollam Foundation, and the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District. Expertise and assistance has also been provided by the Fontenelle Nature Association, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Nebraska State Historical Society, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Walz Easement (from page 1)

Trust, Cooper Foundation, Claire M. Hubbard Foundation, and J.A. Woollam Foundation also provided funding while the landowners donated a significant portion of the easement’s value.

Initially, this land preservation effort resulted from environmental mitigation for construction of the new six-lane Interstate 80 Bridge across the river. This led to an offer by Hawkins Construction Company to provide funding for a conservation easement that protected natural riverbanks along the Platte. By some estimates, more than 50% of the riverbanks have been stabilized downstream from the I-80 Bridge. Since natural riverbanks are essential to river processes and hydrology, preservation of remaining natural banks is important. The Walz Easement will protect nearly one-half mile of riverbank adjacent to Schramm State Park and the last half-mile of an unnamed tributary that flows out of the Schramm Bluffs into the river.

In addition, scenic views of the property will be preserved from many locations in the Platte Valley, including views from Highway 31, Fishery Road, Schramm State Park, the Eastern Nebraska 4-H Center, Eugene T. Mahoney and Platte River State Parks, Quarry Oaks Golf Course, and the Lied Bridge.

Natural resources also include habitat for numerous songbirds that frequent the area each spring, leading to Schramm State Park’s designation as an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society; the only IBA on the lower Platte River. The easement will preserve 25 to 30 acres of woodlands adjacent to the park, creating a larger contiguous block of permanently protected habitat in the area, including large cottonwood trees that are used by bald eagles.

Bill and John Walz expressed appreciation for the NLT’s work in preserving natural areas that “remind us of how valuable and irreplaceable nature’s beauty is to all.” They also credited the Schramm Association for a Viable Environment for their efforts to preserve the Schramm area.

The conservation easement is an important first step in a larger effort to preserve the Schramm Bluffs from development. When the Nebraska Environmental Trust approved a \$1.1 million grant to purchase easements in the area, they recognized that there was a unique opportunity for conservation, with many landowners interested in permanent preservation of their land. Thanks to their support and many others, the NLT will be working with other conservation-minded landowners in the future.

Pahaku (from page 1)

On this morning, standing at Pahaku, Pat Leading Fox, head chief of the Nashara Council of the Pawnee Nation, reaffirmed its religious significance to the Pawnee. He and three other Pawnee leaders from Oklahoma had returned to their ancestral homeland, to visit the sacred bluff and join with others in thanking Pat and Nancy Shanahan for preserving their part of it.

Roughly half of the site designated on the National Register of Historic Places is located on their 257-acre farm. Through a voluntary land preservation agreement known as a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust, their farm will now be protected from development in perpetuity.

The other half of Pahaku was protected in 1981, when Dr. Lou and Geri Gilbert used Nebraska’s new Conservation and Preservation Easements Act to permanently preserve their land. The law was based on recognition that private land preservation is a property right. If a landowner can develop their property in a way that alters the land and its resources forever, they can also choose the flip side of that property right; to restrict development in a way that preserves the land and its resources forever.

In the process, agriculture, scenic landscapes, wildlife habitat, river corridors, water quality, and historic sites can also be preserved, which benefits us all. While it is common for a single property to have multiple conservation values, the Shanahan’s farm had extraordinary resources in all of these categories.

In the 1880s, noted conservationist George Bird Grinnell collected the story of Pahuk, as did Mari Sandoz who mentioned it in “The Buffalo Hunters.” The story was about a boy, who was brought back from the dead by animal spirits dwelling beneath the bluff, so he could teach healing to his people.

While this cultural significance is reason enough for protection, Pahaku Bluff has extraordinary ecology as well; it harbors mature eastern oak/hickory woodland which is very rare above the Platte’s confluence with the Elkhorn River. This unique woodland was first noted by government surveyors in the 1850s and thoroughly documented by scientists in the 1980s who discovered several eastern woodland species that had never before been found in Saunders County.

The farms agricultural value is also outstanding. Over the eons, rich soils from the valley were picked up by the wind and deposited on top of the bluff, creating some of the best cropland in the state. This soil has been tilled by the Shanahan family for more than 100 years and the conservation easement will assure that they can

farm it in the future. In a developing area like the lower Platte, the preservation of agriculture and natural resources often go hand in hand.

Because of these extraordinary resources, the Shanahan easement represented a new milestone for the NLT, as the first purchase of a conservation easement to proactively preserve an extraordinary place. This required funding and the Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) was a key partner through their Farm and Ranch Protection Program, which can provide up to 50% of an easement’s value to preserve agricultural properties under threat of development.

The Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) was an essential partner as well with a \$77,280 grant for the purchase, while the Shanahan family donated a significant portion of the easement’s appraised value. The Cooper and Claire M. Hubbard Foundations provided needed funding for associated expenses.

As the large group at the Shanahan dedication illustrated, there were others who appreciated this partnership for preservation. Over the eons, Pahaku must have changed many lives as a place of healing power. That power still exists, as many would attest who have walked in the forest among the stately oaks and stood on the sheer bluff 150 feet above the Platte River, awed by expansive vistas. Noted Nebraska author Roger Welsch is one of these people and he spoke for many that morning when he said, “I have camped across from this great hill often and I have worried about it for 50 years. Friday night, I’ll sleep better knowing it is a step closer, a big step, to being protected for all.”

“I have camped across from this great hill often and I have worried about it for 50 years. Friday night, I’ll sleep better knowing it is a step closer, a big step, to being protected for all.” – Roger Welsch

At the dedication, a number of speakers pointed out that Pahaku is many things: sacred ground, an ecological treasure, a productive farm. But most of all, it is a rare place that links all of us to the past and the future, like a thread running through history, woven into many lives. Thanks to Pat and Nancy Shanahan and the NLT’s partners in this effort, it will continue to weave its magic through generations to come.