



The Landscape

News from the Nebraska Land Trust

2010 Annual Report



Sunny Brook Ranch near Valentine, NE

10th Anniversary of The Nebraska Land Trust to be celebrated in 2011

2011 brings the 10th Anniversary of the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) and plans are underway to celebrate the work and successes over those first 10 years. The NLT is also enthusiastically planning and preparing for the next 10 plus with many activities and projects lying ahead.

Join us in celebrating our 10th Anniversary through supporting the Nebraska Land Trust as well as its mission and goals. July 3, 2011 is the official anniversary date.

1,124-acre Ranch preserved on Niobrara National Scenic River

As a young man, Steve Breuklander was hunting elk in Wyoming when he came upon the most beautiful place he had ever seen. From the deep shade of the forest, his guide led him into a large sunlit meadow with a mountain stream, lush grass, and abundant wildflowers, framed by stately pines and the majestic Tetons under a deep blue sky. As he gazed upon this perfect scene, Steve pointed to a flat spot and remarked, "That's where I want to build my cabin." The guide had a quick reply based on experience, "You and about 40,000 others who have seen this place and said the same thing."

As Steve tells it, this response helped him to appreciate the need for permanent preservation of irreplaceable places. He realized that if some places aren't preserved for all to enjoy, they can easily be lost. Ultimately, this wisdom led him and his father Roy to permanently preserve their special place, a 1,124-acre cattle ranch on the Niobrara National Scenic River.

Thanks to a conservation easement purchased with funding from the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Farm and Ranch Protection Program (FRPP), the ranch is now protected from subdivision and development forever. For the multitudes who love the Niobrara Valley, this is very good news as the scenic ranch is highly visible to thousands who float the river every year, especially those who end at Rocky Ford which is just downstream. Thousands more appreciate the vistas from land, as River Road crosses the ranch for nearly 2.5 miles, which is slated to be paved.

(see Breuklander Easement, page 4)



Wild Thoughts

From Dave Sands, Executive Director

I arrived at Sunny Brook Camp on one of those rare March afternoons that seemed more like May. As I walked up to the guest cabin overlooking the Niobrara River, I was greeted by Roy Breuklander, who started his canoe outfitting business on this ground more than 35 years ago. Roy and his family wanted to know more about private land preservation agreements known as conservation easements but when we sat down to talk, it wasn't about easements. Instead, it was my good fortune to mostly listen, as Roy recounted his 80 or so years on the river.

He spoke of growing up in a log cabin nearby, and about his purchase of Sunny Brook Ranch in the mid-1970s. There was the story of a skeptical banker in those early days, who thought that a small loan for a few canoes was a bad idea. Roy is now the last of the original outfitters who built an economic engine that attracts about 40,000 floaters each year.

There were stories from the days when Roy, his neighbors, and other conservationists were fighting the proposed Norden Dam, which would have put most of the ranch under water. When the dam was defeated in 1985, Roy was among the landowners who sought permanent protection of the Niobrara through designation as a National Scenic River. With his wife Florence, he traveled to Washington DC and testified before Congress on behalf of protection. When scenic designation was finally achieved in 1991 after a six-year battle, the *Omaha World-Herald* referred to Roy and like-minded neighbors as "Heroes of the Niobrara."

Still concerned about the river he loves, we talked about current problems, like over-use of alcohol on the river. Still making a difference, Roy and his son Steve operate the only alcohol-free campground on the river, so that people can have the option of camping in peace without a party next door.

We also talked about the future and the threat of subdivision. As Roy stated in an interview with the *Omaha World-Herald*, "Since I've owned the place, I had many chances to sell five or 10 acres, but what would it look like? Up on the ridge there are several perfect places for a cabin, but I wouldn't want to see a dozen cabins up there."

Thanks to a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust in 2010, he'll never see any cabins up on the ridge, and neither will the thousands of people who traverse his ranch each year, by river or soon-to-be-paved road. In my mind, Roy and his family are Heroes of the Niobrara once again, for their permanent preservation of a landscape that is cherished by so many.

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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Dave Sands, Executive Director

Jana Sittler Hafer, Director of Outreach and Administration

For information, please call the Nebraska Land Trust at (402) 438-5263; email admin@nelandtrust.org; or mail to 9200 Andermatt Dr., Suite 7, Lincoln, NE 68526.

Thoughts from the Chair

By Warren Arganbright

About a week ago, Dave asked if I could write a first “Chairman’s Message” for the Annual Report. Since then, I have spent most of my time on more non-NLT things than I can even count, and the NLT took a back seat to my efforts to, as is typical in my profession, “clean up the messes others created” (my words, no emphasis added, though deserved). And for each mess addressed, the vicarious lessons I learn add to the body of knowledge I have developed through years of study, practice and life on how to deal with the next mess that walks in the door. And that is the point of my message—learning. We all learn through a variety of methods, be it instruction, be it experience, be it observation. When I think about it, the nature of my profession is one of the principal reasons I agreed to serve on the NLT.

The NLT, in my opinion, deals with the opposite of what I deal with every day. Our function is not to fix “others messes”, but rather to protect land from suffering the messes made by others, and to learn, vicariously, from those messes other people have created. The efforts we make are guided in part by the vicarious experiences we have seeing, dealing with, or resolving “messes” other people have experienced. We have the opportunity to learn, from other’s mistakes. In other words, we learn vicariously. It’s a common learning method and though, in my opinion, while vicarious learning doesn’t have nearly the same impact as a personal experience, still, vicarious learning opportunities are better than none at all...and sometimes it’s the only opportunity we have.

We don’t all own pristine riverfront or historically significant land. We don’t all build strip malls or housing subdivisions in culturally significant areas. But we do see them; we do hear about them, we do experience them. In short, we all have acquired a certain amount of knowledge about these resources which we have learned vicariously.

My opinion is that I have taught my children respect for the land. But my instruction is the origin of only part of the knowledge my children have. I believe that my kids have learned by my instruction, by my example, and vicariously, through other people’s experiences, how to respect the land. My goal through

the Nebraska Land Trust is in part to be able to give others the opportunity to vicariously learn how to appropriately deal with land, rather than learning the hard way, rather than after the RV park is built on the Pawnee sacred site, after the exclusive housing development is built overlooking the Platte, after the next cabin is built on the rim of the canyon overlooking the Niobrara.

I believe one of our principal obligations as a steward and citizen of the State of Nebraska is to educate, in the hope that others learn before another “mess” is created. Go forth and educate-by word, by work, by practice and by example.

NLT Welcomes Jana Sittler Hafer to Staff

As the trust nears its 10th Anniversary in 2011 a renewed focus has started for outreach, development programs, and activities. The trust has been busy growing over the last 10 years and as we end 2010 and begin 2011 all evidence points to another growth cycle.

Along with growth, we have experienced an increasing need for outreach and education, about the mission and work of the NLT and the benefits it provides to private landowners, governmental entities and environmental quality.

To meet this need, Jana Sittler Hafer has been hired as the NLT's Director of Outreach and Administration, increasing the capacity of the organization to reach out to interested parties, partners, supporters, and any entities either requiring or requesting additional information about our crucial work and efforts. This will help to generate additional support and understanding for the NLT and our mission.

The NLT staff is available to provide group presentations, educational activities, and other information as needed or requested. Please feel free to contact us at anytime to have us join you and provide a more in depth view of our mission and goals as well as an overview of past and current projects.

(Breuklander Easement, from page 1)

especially those who end at Rocky Ford which is just downstream. Thousands more appreciate the vistas from land, as River Road crosses the ranch for nearly 2.5 miles, which is slated to be paved.

Like many conservation easements, this agreement preserves unique wildlife habitat and the Sunny Brook Ranch has four of the six ecosystems found in the Niobrara Valley, including ponderosa pine forest, eastern deciduous forest, tallgrass prairie, and mixed-grass prairie. There are a number of historic sites on the land as well, including an old log cabin that may someday be restored or rebuilt.

Limited public access is also allowed as the family runs Sunny Brook Campground, the only alcohol-free campground in the Valley. If one wants to hike up a canyon on the ranch, just stay a night and ask. With this in mind, the agreement is tailored to preserve recreational opportunities for guests such as horseback riding, ecotourism, hay rides, camping, hiking, and hunting. A provision was even included to allow for a 5-acre public river access site if needed in the future.

This agreement will also help to preserve a unique endangered species in this stretch of the river – ranchers. While it may be hard to believe, the Sunny Brook Ranch is one of the last working cattle ranches on the river between Valentine and Rocky Ford. Ranches are endangered in the Niobrara Valley because cattle can't compete with people for land in pretty places. The price of land becomes too high for agriculture and recreational buyers replace ranchers.

For the Breuklanders, a conservation easement offered an alternative. It allowed Roy to sell the development rights and retire after 84 years, while allowing Steve to buy the ranch from his dad at a grassland price that fits the economics of ranching. The agreement itself is an agricultural easement, with provisions designed to accommodate their cattle operation. This means that typical ranch infrastructure such as fencing, water pipelines, trail roads, and small sheds are not restricted, and larger structures can still be built at the ranch headquarters.

Had the ranch been sold out of the family, all of these resources could have easily been lost to subdivision and development. Thanks to the

conservation easement with the NLT, essential funding from the NET and NRCS, and the Breuklanders realization that irreplaceable places deserve permanent preservation, the land will stay in the family and agriculture for another generation, while its scenic beauty, clear streams, and wildlife habitat are protected in perpetuity for us all.

First Step taken to Preserve Schramm Bluffs Farm

According to an educator at the Aksarben Aquarium at Schramm State Park, when school children look out the window as they wind down into the Platte Valley on Highway 31, "It is like entering another world." Instead of houses and subdivisions, they see a mosaic of rolling farmland and forest. For approximately one mile they are looking at one farm in particular -- the nearly 700-acre Patterson Farm.

Like many family farms, ownership has been divided over the years even though the land is farmed entirely by Ron and Carol Patterson. However, this has not deterred them from a goal to eventually preserve the entire farm, starting with two parcels that they own themselves. In 2010, the first 56-acre parcel was preserved through a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT).

The purchase of this conservation easement was made possible by the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET), through a \$1.1 million grant for the Schramm Bluffs Preservation Project. In addition, funding was obtained from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through their Farm and Ranch Protection Program (FRPP). Ron and Carol also made the purchase possible by generously donating a significant portion of the easement's appraised value, which is known as a "bargain sale."

The preservation of farmland in Nebraska's fastest growing county could be considered a conservation goal in itself. But like many properties in the Schramm Bluffs area, the Patterson Farm has outstanding natural resources as well. In addition to scenic views from public places like Highway 31, the property has locally rare oak/hickory woodlands, unusual geology, and a spring fed stream that flows into the Platte River on the Walz property, which is also protected by a conservation easement with the NLT. The woodlands and water make the area especially attractive to song

(Schramm Bluffs, from previous page)

birds, which is why Schramm State Park has been designated as an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society.

While 56 acres of a 700-acre farm may seem like a small first step in preserving these resources, the first step on a long journey is often the hardest to take.

2010 Highlights and a 2011 Sneak Peek

The latter part of 2010 proved to be the start of what appears to be a very busy year for the Nebraska Land Trust. Just in the first three to four months of 2011 the interest level for protection of land as well as the idea of preservation and legacy development seems to be a prevalent thought amongst many conservation minded landowners. The inquiries have proved to be plentiful and at the same time beneficial due to the types of potential projects that are available to us.

As time passes, urban sprawl continues as well as the viability for some families to maintain their land, the development of a legacy for future generations that started many years back, and conserving the precious resources for which that land was intended has helped to drive this interest.

We appreciate the growing interest by landowners in Nebraska to go this route and engage our services. In 2010 we completed three easement projects with landowners across the state. As we move into 2011 we are potentially on track to do even more.

As with any growth there are challenges, but as we grow not only in projects but staff we are positioning the organization to meet any challenge we encounter. We would like to thank our generous supporters as well as our many partners for their contributions, expertise, and assistance as it really does take a team to accomplish the permanent preservation of land.

Persistence Leads to Preservation of Nine Penny Ranch

When Kris Fisher called the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) in the summer of 2006, he had an unusual

request. His mother owned a 949-acre ranch in the Loess Canyons, which is a rugged unfragmented landscape of mixed-grass prairie southeast of North Platte. To biologists, it is a Biologically Unique Landscape due to its habitat for grassland birds, a wild herd of elk, and the endangered American burying beetle. To the family, it was also a place to raise cattle and horses and given its location just 20 minutes from North Platte, they wanted to make sure it stayed that way.

With this in mind, Kris was planning to submit a grant request directly to the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) for funds to purchase a conservation easement on their ranch. Before submitting his request, he wanted to know if the NLT be willing to hold the easement if the grant was approved.

The request was unusual, because the NET is not known for approving grants to landowners. In fact, this may be the only such grant ever approved by the NET for a conservation easement. Typically, landowners rely on nonprofit partners like the NLT to submit such grants but as a wildlife biologist for the Klamath Tribe, Kris was well qualified to make the case for his family's land and the NLT was happy to become a partner if he succeeded.

Succeed he did, when the NET approved the grant request in the spring of 2007, which spoke volumes about the biological importance of the property's habitat. However, when the value of the conservation easement was appraised, it was realized that the NET grant would only provide about 50% of the funds that were needed. At first, it was decided to protect half of the ranch with the NET funds and then go back for a second grant to finish the job. In this case, it is fortunate that things did not go as planned.

As is often the case with real estate transactions, title work can be a challenge. That would be an understatement on this project since it took more than two years to get title issues resolved but there was a silver lining to the delay. During this time, the NLT began to effectively use the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Farm and Ranch Protection Program (FRPP), which will fund up to 50% of a conservation easement that preserves a working farm or ranch. Since about 50% of the funding was already in hand from the NET, application to this program seemed natural and when the funds were

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approved, it became possible to preserve the entire ranch under one conservation easement. Finally in May of 2010, nearly four years after the process started, persistence paid off and the entire 949-acre Nine Penny Ranch was permanently preserved through a conservation easement held by the NLT. Completion of this project has added significance for the NLT in that it marks the second conservation easement in this area. About five miles away, the NLT holds an easement on the 987-acre Dunse Ranch, which is adjacent to the 1,920-acre Wapiti Wildlife Management Area. Between the two easements, the NLT has now doubled the amount of protected land in the Loess Canyons, which some might describe as the prettiest part of Nebraska that most people have never seen.



**Nebraska Land Trust
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Support the Nebraska Land Trust

Your previous and generous support of the Nebraska Land Trust, its efforts and its mission are greatly appreciated and we thank you. In order to continue to expand not only who and where we touch but to build upon our wonderful portfolio it takes resources, human and financial. As you make your philanthropic plans for 2011, please consider supporting the Nebraska Land Trust and its vital work.

As donation envelope has been included for your convenience or you may feel free contact us at anytime regarding needed support. As always your donation will be tax deductible.

Thank you again for your support and decision to help carry on our mission.

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