



Preserving Our Agricultural, Historical And Natural Resources.

The Landscape

News from the Nebraska Land Trust

2012 Annual Report

Buttes and Bluffs are Preserved in 2012

Hallowed Cheyenne Land is Protected in Nebraska's Pine Ridge



Rick Williams, a Cheyenne/Lakota stone mason, explains the significance of an unfinished monument to the Cheyenne Breakout, which he helped build.

It was a fine June morning for the Nebraska Land Trust's (NLT) Board of Directors and representatives from Chief Dull Knife College (CDKC) to be gathered together on a hilltop, with a panoramic view of Nebraska's Pine Ridge. The group had come to celebrate permanent preservation of the 1,121 acres that they stood upon, which was owned by the College because of its significance to the Northern Cheyenne people. The College Board and administration who are located in Lame Deer, Montana, wanted to make sure that the land's significance is never lost to future generations, so they completed a conservation easement with the NLT in March of 2012.

Conservation of the land is important for a variety of reasons, including its proximity to Fort Robinson State Park and a state wildlife area, which wrap around the College land on three sides. Thousands of people view this land every year from the park, *(See Cheyenne Land Protected, page 3)*

Anderson/Swanson Easement Caps Schramm Bluffs Grant from NET

Although small in size, Connie Anderson's and Stan Swanson's 36 acres are remarkably representative of the natural resources that are found in the Schramm Bluffs of Sarpy County. There is eastern oak/hickory forest, including a grove of black oaks which are locally rare. The forested land is also about 1/4 mile from Schramm State Park, which has been designated as an Audubon Important Bird Area, the only such area in the lower Platte Valley. Private lands in the area are simply an extension of the same oak/hickory woodland habitat found in the park, where birds pay no attention to fence lines.

Connie and Stan have been actively engaged in improving this habitat by removing invasive cedar trees to create a more natural open understory. In places where cedars have *(See Schramm Bluffs, page 4)*



Scott Luedtke with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, assesses a grove of black oaks on a baseline documentation visit to the Swanson property.



Wild Thoughts

from Dave Sands, Executive Director

"Dave, it's all gone." Those were the words of Gary Fisher last August, when he called to tell me that a wildfire had burned across his ranch in the Pine Ridge, including the area that he and Nancy had protected with a conservation easement in 2011. The heartache in Gary's voice was palpable and unfortunately he was not alone in 2012, as record fires during a record drought scorched the most land in Nebraska's recorded history. The Fishers were not even alone among the Nebraska Land Trust's group of landowners, as the Sunny Brook Ranch on the Niobrara River experienced a similar fate.

But all was not lost and some conservation values preserved by the easements may have even been improved. Ranching is one, as both properties will eventually have more grass and greater carrying capacity. Some wildlife may benefit, such as bighorn sheep in the Pine Ridge which prefer open landscapes. The locations also remain unchanged. The Fisher Ranch is still a wildlife migration bridge between two large parcels of public land and Sunny Brook Ranch still occupies a prominent spot on the Niobrara River. The pine forests are sadly gone, but some trees remain to repopulate the landscape, creating more of the prairie-pine savannah viewed by the first pioneers.

Apart from the fires, there was much to celebrate in 2012. The Chief Dull Knife College Easement in Sioux County is one of the most important ever completed by the NLT. The Swanson Easement in the Schramm Bluffs was the capstone to a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust. Together, these projects illustrate our commitment to working statewide.

But for the Breuklander and Fisher families, there was tragedy in the loss of the landscapes they have come to know and love, in addition to hardships from the temporary loss of grazing, fences and other infrastructure. But when it comes to wildfire, what was there before will come back in time. At least on the Fisher and Sunny Brook ranches, it will be grass and trees instead of cabins, roads and second homes.

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Each voting organization may appoint up to three representatives, but only receives one vote.

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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.

Cheyenne land protected

(continued from page 1)



An unfinished monument stands beneath the Cheyenne Buttes, to commemorate those who died as they fled from Fort Robinson in 1879.

Highway 20 and the popular Fort Robinson Jeep Tours that take visitors to the top of buttes with breathtaking views of the property. Bighorn sheep find it attractive as well, especially the towering Cheyenne Buttes which provide critical lambing habitat that is relatively safe from predators. The land even has a closed-basin wetland, which is a rare habitat in this semi-arid part of the state.

But as important as these features are for preservation, none exceed the land's significance to the Northern Cheyenne people. To them, it is hallowed ground where ancestors died so they could live in Montana today. Although the June morning was perfect in most every way, the mood on the hilltop was somber as those gathered remembered a tragic chapter in American history.

The seeds of the Cheyenne Breakout were sown in 1877, when the Northern Cheyenne were removed from their traditional high plains homeland and sent to Oklahoma, which became a land of death and disease for their people. After repeated government denials of requests to return north, which had been promised as an option, more than 350 men, women, and children escaped from "Indian Territory" in 1878 and headed north under the leadership of Chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf.

The Cheyenne eluded the military in Kansas, then split into two groups when they reached the Platte River in Nebraska. Little Wolf's band eventually made it back to Montana after spending a winter in

the Sandhills, but Chief Dull Knife's band was captured in the fall and taken to Fort Robinson. Over the next few months, the army exerted increasing pressure on the Cheyenne to return to Oklahoma, but they remained steadfast in their refusal.

By the first week of January, the impasse had led to confinement of the Cheyenne in a barracks. Eventually, food, water and heat were withheld to break their spirit. Finally, on January 9, 1879, 149 people escaped from the inhumane confinement into a bitterly cold and snow covered night. Sixty-four men, women, and children were killed by the pursuing soldiers over the next few days, including some who died on the College land. But their ultimate sacrifice and the public outrage that followed led to government capitulation on where the Northern Cheyenne should live, which is why they have a reservation in Montana today.

Dr. Richard Littlebear, President of CDKC, explained that the College Board wanted to be certain that the land would always serve as a place of remembrance and healing for all people. With this in mind, the conservation easement allows for the development of a Northern Cheyenne cultural center south of Highway 20 where it will not impact bighorn habitat.

On the hill where the group had gathered, there is a partially completed pipestone monument to those Cheyenne who died during the Breakout. The conservation easement allows for completion, including interpretive signs and parking for visitors who would also enjoy the spectacular views. There is also a reserved right to build a public access Healing Trail, that follows the route of escape into the buttes with interpretive signs in English and Cheyenne. These provisions illustrate the flexibility of conservation easements to provide for land uses that are compatible with conservation, including education and tourism.

Completion of the cultural center, monument and trail will require partnerships with generous donors and organizations, but significant contributions have already been made to make preservation of the land possible. Since the land provides key habitat for bighorn sheep and other wildlife, along with stunning views from Fort Robinson State Park and Highway 20, the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET)

provided almost half of the funds needed to purchase the conservation easement. The NET grant will provide funds to improve grassland health through rotational grazing as well.

The land's ongoing agricultural use and historic value helped attract an indispensable federal partner, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Through their Farm and Ranch Protection Program, the NRCS provided nearly half of the funds needed to purchase the agreement. The Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation and Iowa chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep made up the difference with key donations of their own. While all of these supporters and more were instrumental in helping the NLT to complete this project, only a landowner can open the door to preservation.

To Dr. Littlebear, the motives for preservation were clear from the start. "This land and the adjacent Ft. Robinson are areas of great sadness for the Cheyenne people," he explained. "Too many of our people died there. We Northern Cheyenne revere this land because of these deaths but also because the sacrifices of our ancestors now enable us to live in the north country they and us so dearly love. This conservation easement is an advantageous agreement between the Northern Cheyenne people and the Nebraska Land Trust because of its perpetual nature. The Northern Cheyenne people and all people will be able to appreciate the grandeur of the land and will also know about the determination of the Northern Cheyenne people to live in their beloved north country."



Ponds and wetlands near the White River adorn the southern end of the land in this semi-arid region, with the Cheyenne Buttes in the distance.

Schramm Bluffs

(continued from page 1)

The Anderson/Swanson easement was the final agreement purchased as part of a \$1.1 million Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) grant for Schramm Bluffs preservation. Like other landowners in the area, Connie and Stan felt so strongly about preservation that they generously donated a significant portion of the easement's value through a "bargain sale." It brought the total land preserved by the NET grant to 520 acres. With a goal to expand land preservation around the 330-acre Schramm State Park, the area preserved through this grant now amounts to 57% more land than the park itself. In addition, 248 of these acres are directly adjacent to the park, which helps to protect this public land from encroachment by development.

More important than the acres preserved are the resources on them, including oak/hickory and floodplain forest, scenic views, spring fed streams, natural Platte River shoreline, numerous cultural and historical sites, and productive soils on working farms in an urbanizing county.

The \$1.1 million NET grant also helped to attract additional partners to the project. For easement purchases alone, the NET grant was matched by \$958,010 from the Natural Resources Conservation Service Farm and Ranch Protection Program. Landowners donated \$615,475 through "bargain sales" at less than appraised value. When other donations are added, the total match for the \$1.1 million NET grant was \$1,731,048.



Land near Schramm Park preserved with NET grant.

An endangered insect finds refuge in Nebraska

***By Stephanie Butler,
Wildlife Biologist, part-time NLT Stewardship Associate***

The Nebraska Land Trust has preserved nearly 2,000 acres in the Loess Canyons southeast of North Platte, which is an important refuge for the endangered American burying beetle. Once found in 35 states and three Canadian provinces, the American burying beetle is now found in just seven states; Arkansas, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota and Texas (Bedick, et al., 2004). There are several hypotheses for the decline of the American burying beetle, including pesticide use, increased artificial lighting, habitat fragmentation, a decrease in food base and an increase in competition by vertebrate scavengers (Sikes and Raithel, 2002). Likely their decline is due to a combination of factors.

Nebraska is home to two of the largest strongholds left for this species; one in the Sandhills area (Holt, Rock, Garfield and Wheeler counties) and one in the Loess Canyons of Lincoln county (Jurzenski, et al., 2011). The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) has designated these areas as priority conservation areas and the NLT continues to work on preservation of the Loess Canyons landscape.

The American burying beetle is the largest carrion beetle in North America with a length of 0.8-1.4 inches (Ratcliffe, 1996) and is distinguished from other carrion beetles by its bright reddish-orange pronotum which is located behind its head. Carrion beetles feed on dead and decaying flesh, so they are a part of nature's clean-up crew. Carrion beetles compete with flies for decaying carcasses and are very adept at finding them. They can find a rat within an hour of its death from as far away as two miles!

To determine if the carcass is of suitable size, the male and female pair will crawl under the carcass and do a test "push-up" to see if it can be moved. Once the couple is happy with the carcass and the location, they will act as small bulldozers to move the



An adult American burying beetle.

soil from under the carcass sinking the carcass into the ground. During this process, the couple will remove any fur or feathers from the carcass and secrete oral secretions over the carcass that will retard decay. The couple will then lay their eggs, which will hatch within a few days and make their way to the carcass to feed.

The American burying beetle displays a very rare characteristic among insects in that both the male and female will stay and care for the young. Once the young are old enough to feed themselves, the adults will emerge while the young stay underground to complete pupation. It is thought that the beetles bury the carcass to prevent a take-over by flies or vertebrate scavengers while providing a safe environment for their offspring to develop. By doing this, carrion beetles have been documented to reduce fly populations which in turn decreases the potential transmission of disease among livestock.

These carrion beetles live for one year with their most active periods during June and August. Adults will emerge in May and will search for an appropriate carcass to rear young and in July most of these carrion beetles are underground tending to their young. By August, both the adults and the young are above ground preparing for winter. The young will spend the winter underground while the adults will also bury, but generally die during the winter.

The NGPC and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have programs to provide technical and financial help to private landowners who want to improve and

provide habitat for species deemed “at-risk” within the state of Nebraska. A few of the programs offered include cost-share for tree removal, prescribed burning, fence and water development for rotational grazing and native prairie inter-seeding. For more information regarding cost-share programs that benefit the American burying beetle, contact T.J. Walker of the NGPC at (308) 535-8025, and/or Emily Munter of the USFWS at (308) 535-8025.

Estimated Current Range of
American Burying Beetle (*Nicrophorus americanus*)



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Nebraska Natural Heritage Program,
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
September 2011

Cooper, Kiewit, and Woollam Foundations support outreach

When the Nebraska Land Trust was formed in 2001, Nebraska ranked 43rd in terms of privately protected land. There was added significance to this low ranking when one considers that Nebraska is a geographically large state where 97% of the land is privately owned. While some of this ranking could be attributed to a perception of fewer development threats than other states, it was also due to a serious lack of knowledge among landowners and public officials about conservation easements.

Because of this, it was clear from the inception of the NLT that ongoing efforts to improve outreach and education would be needed. The introduction of state legislation that would have severely hampered the use of conservation easements in 2011 served as a stark reminder that there is still much to be done.

Thanks to significant support from the Cooper Foundation, Peter Kiewit Foundation, and J.A. Woollam Foundation, the NLT was able to expand education and outreach in 2012, starting with a revamped web site. An organization's web site may be its most important component of outreach so it needs to be inviting, interesting, informative, compelling, interactive, and easy to navigate. While the old NLT web site had good information, it was not presented in an engaging manner.

The new web site, which can be seen at www.nelandtrust.org, has more photographs, information, and an attractive design, thanks to support that allowed the NLT to hire the professional web design firm, Play Creative. Because the web site is still relatively new, comments and suggestions would be appreciated. As part of the new design, a new logo was created that illustrates the three legs of the NLT mission, to preserve agricultural, historical, and natural resources.

In addition, the NLT provides presentations whenever asked and in 2012 this included an opportunity to address the Nebraska Association of County Officials (NACO), the Lancaster County Board, and the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District. The NLT has also partnered with the Sand County Foundation, the Nebraska Cattlemen, and others to host a private lands conference. Titled "**Innovations on the Land Private Conservation for the Public Good**," the conference will be held in Lincoln on July 25-26. Please contact the NLT office for more details.



Preserving Our Agricultural, Historical And Natural Resources.

The new NLT logo represents the three legs of the organization's mission in land preservation.

Thank you!

The Nebraska Land Trust greatly appreciates the following individuals, businesses, and organizations who generously contributed \$100 or more in 2012:

Individuals

Warren and Sue Arganbright
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Connie Anderson and Stanley Swanson

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Stewards of the Nebraska Land Trust

Each year, there are individuals who provide exceptional commitments of time, advice, and financial resources. The Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) recognizes these generous individuals as Stewards of the Nebraska Land Trust. The NLT wishes to thank the following Stewards in 2012:

2012 Stewards of the Nebraska Land Trust

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The NLT needs your support!

As you make your philanthropic plans for 2013, please consider supporting the Nebraska Land Trust and its vital work in preserving significant agricultural, historical, and natural resources. **All of your donation will stay in Nebraska and be used to further permanent preservation of private lands that benefit us all.** An envelope for your tax-deductible donation has been included for your convenience.

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The Landscape

2012 Annual Report

Worthy Conservation

**The following editorial appeared in the July 16, 2012 *Omaha World-Herald*
It is reprinted with permission.**

Forever protected: That's the new status of nearly three square miles of the Pine Ridge near Fort Robinson State Park, thanks to landowners and the Nebraska Land Trust.

Ranches in the beautiful area are under pressure to subdivide land for residential development. The trust purchased voluntary conservation easements on ranchland owned by Gary and Nancy Fisher in Dawes County, and Sioux County land owned by Chief Dull Knife College, to protect it from future residential or recreational development.

The 1,700 acres include the historic Cheyenne Buttes just west of Fort Robinson, part of the route taken by about 150 Northern Cheyenne Indians when they fled Fort Robinson in 1879 after being starved and allowed to freeze in subzero weather while in U.S. care. Some 64 Native Americans and 11 soldiers died in the 12-day running battle.

The Fisher land will serve as a wildlife migration route between Ponderosa Wildlife Management area and the Nebraska National Forest near Crawford. Elk and bighorn sheep are among the animals that use the corridor. The price for easements on both pieces of land was about \$820,000, most of it from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and a U.S. Department of Agriculture conservation program that protects working ranches.

Landowners who volunteer for the conservation program continue to own the property. They are allowed to live on the land and can farm, ranch, hunt and use it for similar activities. What they can't do is develop the land's natural or historic resources in a way that is incompatible with conservation goals.

A huge thank-you is due Gary and Nancy Fisher and the Chief Dull Knife College, based in Montana, for their stewardship. Their public-spirited action means a wild and magnificent portion of the Cornhusker State will be protected in perpetuity.