



Preserving Our Agricultural, Historical And Natural Resources.

The Landscape

News from the Nebraska Land Trust

2014 Annual Report



The Chief Dull Knife College Conservation Easement, adjacent to Fort Robinson State Park in the Pine Ridge.

Pines and Buttes Conservation Project

***The NLT Pursues Community Conservation
in Nebraska's Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills***

In his book *The Nature of Nebraska*, Dr. Paul Johnsgard wrote that Nebraska's Panhandle "should have become a part of Wyoming, but somehow by chance and luck became attached to Nebraska."

For Nebraskans who love the western beauty of sculpted sandstone, the smell of ponderosa pine after a rain, or the thrill of seeing bighorn sheep on top of a sheer butte, it is luck indeed. The Panhandle's Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills are Nebraska's own beautiful pieces of the mountain west.

They are landscapes that would still be recognized by the pioneers and Native Americans who preceded them. For the most part, generations of ranching families have preserved the unfragmented integrity of both ecosystems, but historic land use doesn't always predict the future. Cattle have a tough time competing with people when it comes to land in pretty places. This too is a part of the mountain west. ***(See Pines and Buttes, page 4)***

Families partner to protect Birdwood Creek

***Two donated easements will help to
protect a pristine Sandhills stream***

In the southern portion of Nebraska's Sandhills, riparian stream corridors are especially rare. Birdwood Creek is one of only two major Sandhills streams in this region that flow south into the North Platte River (the other is Blue Creek). Because of its rarity and pristine qualities, Birdwood Creek is a magnet for migratory waterfowl and other wildlife.

Streams in Nebraska can also be a magnet for people, and Birdwood Creek's relatively close proximity to Interstate 80 means that in some places, it is less than a half-hour drive north on paved roads. Recognizing this potential threat to their land, Todd and Laura McWha, and Terry and Karen Waite chose to permanently protect 1,413 acres of Sandhills prairie with more than two miles of riparian corridor ***(See Birdwood Creek, page 7)***



A sandhill crane along the banks of Birdwood Creek.
(Photo by Laura McWha)



Wild Thoughts

from Dave Sands, Executive Director

Last summer, I went hiking with my family on Hurricane Ridge in Olympic National Park. As the name implies, the area is not known for balmy weather, since it is located at an elevation of 5,200 feet above the Olympic Rain Forest, in the Pacific Northwest. But we were fortunate to enjoy an 80-degree day with the snow-covered Olympic Mountains highlighted against a cobalt blue sky.

As I approached an obvious local coming down the trail, I cheerily greeted him with, "Beautiful day!" He seemed a bit surprised by my proclamation and gave a two-word response, "It's sweltering."

Therein lies a lesson. While the day was tops in my book, I had failed consider his local perspective of living in a cool, damp, and cloudy climate. My perspective on the weather was totally irrelevant to him. From his point of reference, it was a hot day.

When the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) proposes to focus on land conservation in a particular region, this lesson is extremely pertinent. Local perspectives in a distant landscape may differ from our own, and they matter a lot!

When public and/or private funds are used for the purchase of conservation easements, the NLT seeks projects that get the most conservation bang for the buck. But when it comes to defining the conservation values that should be protected, we do not impose our perspective on what those values should be. Instead, we ask community residents for their perspectives on resources that need to be conserved.

The reason is simple. We want our work to be relevant in the local communities where it occurs. To help us achieve this, we form local advisory committees like the one recently established in the Pine Ridge (page 1). It is an opportunity to invest in and recognize the bond and familiarity that local people have with their landscapes. Without this investment, the quality of our work would suffer, and be just as relevant to local communities as my comment to that guy on the trail.

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Bob Robart relishes time to hunt, fish, and work on his 80-acre tallgrass prairie southeast of Fairbury.

Robart family and wind power protect Sandstone Prairie

Steele Flats Wind Project provides funding

Bob Robart grew up in Norfolk, Nebraska in the 1960's with a multitude of hunting and fishing opportunities. "I retained that focus through a move to Lincoln for college and a decision to remain there to raise a family with my wife Cheryl," he explains. That focus led to the purchase of land near Unadilla in the 1980's, where the Robarts developed a commitment to conservation and enhancement of wildlife habitat.

Primarily because of population encroachment, this land was sold in 2010 but the desire to make a difference was still strong and the following year Bob and Cheryl had an opportunity to buy a tallgrass prairie in Jefferson County. It is in a unique part of Nebraska called the "Sandstone Prairies" region, where a shallow underlying shelf of sandstone makes it problematic to plow, so much of the area has been utilized for grazing and maintained as prairie.

In early 2014, Bob and Cheryl said "It became evident that our lifelong commitment to conservation could be enhanced by placing a conservation easement on this beautiful piece of original tallgrass prairie."

Conservation of the prairie was also made possible by funding from the Steele Flats Wind Project, cooperation from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, and the Nebraska Land Trust. As a result, an all-too-rare piece of our vanishing prairie heritage is forever protected.

Oak woodlands, farmland preserved north of Blair

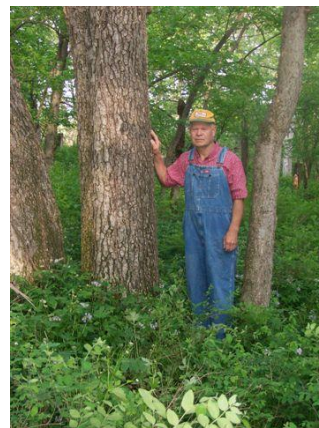
J.A. Woollam Foundation

helps to make protection possible

For more than 45 years, Ken Hansen has farmed 67 acres in the undulating hills and valleys overlooking the Missouri River Valley, just three miles north of the growing city of Blair in Washington County.

On the Nebraska Land Trust's first visit, Ken pointed to the acreages that have sprouted around him and explained that he did not want that fate to befall his farm. He and his wife Diane cherished their farmland and Ken was particularly fond of his woodland, which has a reproducing population of bitternut hickories growing in the shade of mature bur oak and walnut trees. In spring, the forest floor is carpeted with Virginia waterleaf, Dutchman's breeches, violets and native sedges.

To protect these resources, Ken and Diane were willing to donate a conservation easement to the NLT, but the associated transaction and endowment costs presented a barrier. The J.A. Woollam Foundation of Lincoln stepped in to provide these needs, which allowed for the permanent protection of their pristine woodland and surrounding farm. Ken summed it up by pointing out that, "the Nebraska Land Trust and conservation easements are for those farmers and ranchers who understand that long-term preservation is worth much more than short-term gain."



Ken and Diane Hansen preserved their farm and a remnant oak/hickory woodland near Blair.

(Photo courtesy Ken Hansen)

Pines and Buttes Preservation

(continued from page 1)

Land use and ownership are beginning to change in Nebraska's Pines and Buttes landscapes, from ranching to recreation, often with out-of-state owners, which can lead to consequences on the land.

For example, if recreation replaces ranching it can be detrimental to grasslands (which evolved with grazing animals), and a local economy sustained by ranching. Moreover, when land is no longer connected to its owners through a collective family history, it can be viewed as a simple real estate investment. This makes eventual fragmentation through subdivision and development into ranchettes much more likely.

History also suggests that changing land use and ownership are often accompanied by local concern for the future. This is certainly true in the Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills, which are just hours away from more than four million people along the I-25 urban corridor from Pueblo to Cheyenne.

Conservation easements, used in an appropriate manner, can help to retain certain values that people hold dear through the conservation of unique and important lands. But when it comes to defining what is "unique and important," the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) does not offer the definition.

Instead, local residents are asked, "What makes your region special? What would you hate to lose? What are your priorities?" The NLT calls this "Community Conservation" and has pursued this approach from the Niobrara National Scenic River to the Lower Platte River below Ashland.

In 2014, with support through a grant from the Land Trust Alliance, the NLT formed the Pine Ridge Advisory Committee, to create community-based

ranking criteria that will guide the selection of land conservation projects and provide ongoing feedback to the NLT on its work in the region.

Committee members reflect community values and include: ranchers from three counties; experts in local biology, rangeland ecology, history, and geology; agency representatives from the Nebraska Game and

Parks Commission, Nebraska Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory; community leaders from the cities of Crawford, Chadron, and Rushville; and the Upper Niobrara White Natural Resources District, which hosts the meetings.

A similar advisory committee will be formed in the Wildcat Hills, where the NLT will partner with Platte River Basin Environments (PRBE), a respected land trust based in Scottsbluff.

Interest in private land protection cannot be created without real threats. It typically increases when landowners don't like changes that are happening around them, like changing land use and ownership in the Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills. For the most part, interested landowners tend to be ranchers who can't afford to donate a significant portion of their land's value through a conservation easement.

If funding were unlimited, the NLT could work to purchase conservation agreements from many landowners in both landscapes. But funding is limited and competitive, so the challenge is to obtain funding for the purchase of agreements and prioritization of projects so that funds are well spent. By investing in the local bond and knowledge that residents have with the Pines and Buttes landscapes of Nebraska, the NLT can prioritize its work in a way that is relevant to the people who matter most – those who live there.

NET and NRCS provide funding for Pines and Buttes Conservation

With passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can provide 50% to 75% of the funds needed to purchase conservation easements on working farms and ranches.

In 2014, the NLT responded to this opportunity by submitting a "Pines and Buttes Preservation Project" grant request to the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET). This \$900,000 grant (approved in 2015) will provide matching funds for NRCS programs and other donations to protect land in the Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills.

The NET receives 44.5 percent of the proceeds from the Nebraska Lottery and has provided more than \$228 million for conservation projects in all 93 of Nebraska's counties.

Onboard the NLT

The Nebraska Land Trust's Board of Directors largely consists of diverse agencies and organizations with a common interest in land stewardship. This article is the first in a series to highlight the conservation activities of NLT Board members. It was originally published in the Lincoln Journal-Star on November 2, 2014.

Preserving natural areas



By Glenn Johnson, General Manager, Lower Platte South Natural Resources District and Vice-Chair, Nebraska Land Trust

Walter Bagley, retired UNL Professor of Forestry, and his wife Virginia spent many years planting trees and shrubs to create an arboretum on their farm just east of Lincoln. They also wanted to preserve it as Lincoln grows so at Walt's urging, Senator Jerome Warner cosponsored a bill in the Legislature that established the authority for Conservation and Preservation Easements in Nebraska. Upon it becoming law, the Bagleys donated a perpetual conservation easement on the 145 acre tract to the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District in 1982, making it the first conservation easement in Nebraska, and starting a District program that continues today.

Each of the 17 conservation easements held by the District is unique. All were granted by the landowners voluntarily, for a variety of reasons, including generations of family ownership, native prairie protection, concern over future urban development, an inherent stewardship ethic, income tax advantages, and subdivision requirements for open space. The lands and resources preserved by these easements includes Missouri River wooded bluff lands, saline wetlands, native tallgrass prairies, mixed woodlands, cropland, floodplains, and habitat for endangered plant and insect species. Some protected properties also have significant historical values like pioneer wagon train ruts and Native American cultural sites.

Another fifteen conservation easements are jointly held by the District and the City of Lincoln. Most of these are primarily for preservation of the 100 year floodplain along stream corridors in the future

development areas at the edges of the City, to proactively prohibit building in floodplains while also preserving green space in new developments, floodplain storage along Salt Creek, and wetlands. Who doesn't want a home or business property that backs up onto natural area?

Conservation easements work to provide permanent preservation of desired resource values through a set of land use restrictions that are customized for each easement. These can include prohibition of buildings, filling of wetlands or floodplains, removal of trees or desired vegetation, and introduction of nonnative or invasive plants and animals. Landowners can continue to control access to the property, use the land for cropland, haying, cattle grazing, or other uses that are compatible with resource protection. The conservation easements are perpetual and continue in effect when the property changes ownership ensuring permanent preservation of the special qualities.

In addition to protecting the arboretum carefully cultivated by the Bagleys, the Prairie Pines property is also available for education and research, including a training site for Community Gardens.

Conservation easements have become an important tool in helping landowners protect valued resources and to make sure that future generations are able to experience and appreciate these special places.

Remembering T.R. Hughes

Nebraska's conservation community lost a great friend and leader with the passing of Ted "T.R." Hughes on March 17, 2015. T.R. was also a great friend of the Northern Cheyenne people and gave them land next to Fort Robinson State Park, to honor their ancestors lost in the Cheyenne Breakout of 1879. This 1,121-acre property, now owned by Chief Dull Knife College, is permanently protected through a conservation easement with the NLT.

T.R. had a passion for bison as well. He was an honorary member of the Intertribal Bison Cooperative and helped to start the Great Plains Bison Association. He and his wife Kay carefully managed the genetics of their herd, which recently found a new home on land owned by the Platte River Whooping Crane Trust. To put it simply, T.R. Hughes was a good man who accomplished great things.



A new well with a solar powered pump is one of many improvements made on the CDKC land since 2012.

Conservation easements: A beginning, not an end

By Jacob Alishouse, Stewardship Coordinator

When the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) completes a conservation easement, we view it as the beginning of a partnership as opposed to the end of a process. This includes working with willing landowners to enhance the conservation values that are protected through the easement. The 1,121-acre Chief Dull Knife College (CDKC) property provides an excellent example.

The implementation of a more effective rotational grazing system was at the heart of improving the grassland for wildlife and grazing. The goal was to increase the number of pastures to better distribute cattle grazing. This included replacing six-foot tall bison fencing throughout the property that was an obstacle to movements of large animals.

New wildlife friendly fence was built to a normal height, substituting smooth wire for the bottom barbed wire which allows wildlife, especially bighorn sheep and antelope, to move more freely as they travel between neighboring lands, such as Fort Robinson State Park and Peterson Wildlife Management Area. In total, over 10,000 linear feet of fencing were repaired, removed and/or installed.

Pasture improvements also tackled better watering facilities for cattle and wildlife, including nine new

recycled rubber tire water tanks with wildlife escape ramps. A new well was drilled to supply water to the tanks and outfitted with a solar pump. Nearly 8,100 linear feet of buried water pipeline were installed to distribute water from the new well to the new tanks. The additional water tanks allow cattle to graze more areas of the pasture, reduce overgrazing near water tanks, and improve the overall health of the land.

Former cropland on the property that has not been farmed for many years had become dominated by invasive and undesirable weeds. Restoration of this 69-acre field to grassland was accomplished through seeding with a mixture of grasses to reestablish the field as productive grassland for cattle and wildlife.

Tim Hruby leases grazing rights on the land from the College and worked on the improvements, which benefit his cow-calf operation. Better cross fencing has led to better pasture utilization. With ample moisture the last two years, Tim says the cattle “have been nowhere near to using up the pasture by winter.”

Historical values are being enhanced on the property as well. With assistance from the NLT, private donations and grant funds have been raised so the Northern Cheyenne can complete construction of a monument to commemorate the Cheyenne Breakout of 1879. The Breakout claimed many Cheyenne lives as they escaped inhumane imprisonment at Fort Robinson in an effort to return to their homeland in Montana. Once finished, the pipestone, granite, and stainless steel monument will honor the Cheyenne involved in the Breakout, while providing interpretive signage so all people can better understand the tragedy that unfolded on this land.

The grassland improvements were funded from a grant the NLT had received from the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET). Generous donors and foundations stepped up to fund the monument. As a result, the agricultural, historical, and natural resources listed in the NLT’s mission statement have all been improved on the CDKC land. Moreover, the conservation easement ensures the land will not see development today, which protects the land’s improvements from being gone tomorrow.

Birdwood Creek

(Continued from page 1)

along Birdwood Creek, through adjacent conservation easements donated to the Nebraska Land Trust.

Todd McWha and Terry Waite are partners in law at the firm Waite, McWha & Heng in North Platte, so a partnership in conservation seemed natural, especially since they owned adjacent parcels along Birdwood Creek. Still, each traveled a different path to private preservation. Below are their stories in their own words.

Todd and Laura McWha



By Todd McWha

"You really don't own the land but simply are a caretaker of it during your life." That phrase begins to help explain why we placed a conservation easement on the property we own along the Birdwood Creek.

We wanted to protect one of the more unique ecological areas of Nebraska and to preserve a way of life for ranchers to ensure the property can be used for cattle grazing by generations to come. A conservation easement is one way we can "pay it forward" and leave the land better for the next generation. Each and every generation of my family has been involved in agriculture in Lincoln County through farming and ranching since 1880, when my great grandfather immigrated and settled in Lincoln County. Today, we are still actively involved in agriculture through our ownership of a cow/calf and row crop operation.

Laura's family began farming and ranching four generations ago in Kansas with her father ultimately obtaining a doctorate degree in agronomy, range and forage. She remembers as a young child collecting flowers on the prairies while her father did range studies. Those same passions that were instilled in her as a child are shown through her commitment to the land and her hobby of photography of landscapes, grasses and wildflowers.

Some of the wildflowers on our Birdwood property include Spiderwort, Black Eyed Susan's, Prairifame Flowers with animals including antelope, mule deer, trumpeter swans, various ducks and Sandhill Cranes. On a different stretch of the Birdwood Creek, very near our property, whooping cranes have been spotted resting on their migrations north.

People ask us "why we wanted to get involved with the Nebraska Land Trust." We were looking for a solid, respected Nebraska organization which held the same philosophy on conservation as ours. The Nebraska Land Trust fits all our requirements and more. Not only are the Nebraska Land Trust and its people knowledgeable in conservation easements and protection of the land but they also partner with key organizations who can provide technical information to assist with managing the land.

We are a busy couple between my law practice and Laura working as a registered nurse at the local hospital and at the same time operating our agriculture interests. While sometimes we question how busy we are, it all becomes worth it when we walk on our Birdwood property knowing it will be preserved in its current state for not only the plants and animals to grow and thrive but also for future ranching families to use.



Erect Dayflower (Photo by Laura McWha)

Terry and Karen Waite



By Terry Waite

Too late, perhaps, we realize how quickly it all passes. As I complete this overly-long letter and put away the list of names and addresses for another year, I note the number of red lines drawn through names seems to have spread further throughout the page.

We plan to see Terry and Karen in Arizona in late January and they will accompany us as we return to Nebraska on our annual pilgrimage.

The above passage came from my dad's last holiday newsletter. He was famous throughout the family for sending one out each New Year. Unfortunately, Dad never got to make that final pilgrimage to Nebraska. Karen, the baby and I did show up in late January as planned, but that turned out to be the weekend he was first diagnosed with an untreatable cancer, or as he called it, "This damnable disease".

A lot of my motivation for the Conservation Easement came from my Dad's legacy to me of a love and appreciation of wilderness generally and western Nebraska specifically. His grandfather (my great-grandfather) emigrated here from Scotland, found a bride near Sutherland, Nebraska whose parents had homesteaded near there, and eventually farmed and ranched in northeast Colorado. Despite growing up in Colorado though, each year Dad and I made an "annual pilgrimage" back to west central Nebraska for week long hunting trips. Those started in my early years of grade school and were the highlight of my childhood. When I relocated from northwestern Nebraska to Lincoln County dad mentioned that, "Well, you have come full circle."

I always had an interest in Land Use Planning inspired in part by working for an Engineering and Planning firm in my undergrad years and later as a young County Attorney helping to set up the first comprehensive Land Use Plan both in Sheridan County where I was County Attorney, and in Dawes County where I was Special Counsel to their Planning Commission.

Choosing to partner with the Nebraska Land Trust was an easy choice. We wanted to work with folks who had both a proven track record and an appreciation for the beauty of the terrain in Nebraska, particularly the Sandhills and its clean water.

My Dad's pride in his Scottish heritage and love of the land calls to mind Dougie MacLean's song entitled Solid Ground:

*We stand on Solid Ground;
It's the land - it is our wisdom;
It's the land - it shines us through;
It's the land - it feeds our children;
It's the land -you cannot own the land;
The land owns you...*



Birdwood Creek meanders through the McWha and Waite properties for more than two miles

(Photo by Laura McWha)

Want less paper, more news?

The Nebraska Land Trust now offers a bi-monthly *E-Landscape* to provide more current updates on our work and other timely information. If you'd like the *E-Landscape* delivered to your email inbox, contact Jacob Alishouse at jalishouse@nelandtrust.org.

An annual donation to the NLT provides a 10 to 1 return for land conservation!

The Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) accomplishes big things on a relatively modest annual operating budget, but we still must raise significant support 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 \$10,953,906 to purchase land protection agreements. **This means that for every dollar of support from our annual donors since 2008, we have obtained nearly \$10 to fund the purchase of conservation easements that protect land from Sarpy to Sioux Counties. 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!**

Friends and Supporters

The Nebraska Land Trust thanks the following individuals and organizations who contributed to our success during 2014.

Conservation Easement Donors

Kenneth and Diane Hansen
Todd and Laura McWha
Terry and Karen Waite

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Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
NextEra Energy Resources (Steele Flats Wind Project)
Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District
Perry Reid Properties



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A Prairie Year

In 2014, the Nebraska Land Trust and landowners protected two outstanding native prairies – a tallgrass prairie in the Sandstone Prairies region of southeastern Nebraska, and a Sandhills prairie that includes a riparian corridor along Birdwood Creek, one of the Sandhills most pristine streams.



Robart Prairie Conservation Easement

The Robart Prairie Easement in Jefferson County southeast of Fairbury preserves 80 acres of never-plowed tallgrass prairie in the Sandstone Prairies region, where shallow soils and rocky outcrops make farming difficult, but not impossible, especially when the price of corn is high. Thanks to landowners Bob and Cheryl Robart, and funding from the Steele Flats Wind Project, this tallgrass prairie will never feel the bite of a plow.



McWha/Waite Conservation Easements

A pronghorn antelope casts a wary eye toward the photographer on Sandhills prairie north of Sutherland, which is a magnet for birds and wildlife due to the presence of Birdwood Creek. Thanks to donated easements from Todd and Laura McWha and Terry and Karen Waite, 1,413 contiguous acres of Sandhills prairie with more than two miles of Birdwood Creek are permanently conserved. *(Photo by Laura McWha)*