



Wild Thoughts

from Dave Sands, Executive Director

It was early in 2004, soon after I had become executive director of the Nebraska Land Trust and as a land trust neophyte, I sought out a wise man for advice.

In a long career with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Mark Ackelson provided leadership that built it into a premier state land trust. Mark also found time to help build the Land Trust Alliance into a highly respected professional organization that fosters land trust excellence throughout the nation. In my eyes, Mark was perched atop the land trust mountain.

Fortunately, the mountain was right next door and over lunch in Council Bluffs I asked Mark the ultimate question, "What is the one thing I should never forget about land conservation?" As with all great truths, his answer was simple. "It's a people business," he said. Land conservation is really about people.

When you think about it, only a small fraction of people have the opportunity to protect a special place forever, and only a tiny fraction of those actually do, which makes them exceedingly rare. These are the people that we have the honor of working with.

People like Ron and Carol Patterson, who completed four conservation easements in seven years to protect a large, unfragmented and diverse farm in the Schramm Bluffs of western Sarpy County. At the opposite end of the state, Jim and Chris Voeller protected their beautiful piece of Sowbelly Canyon in the Pine Ridge, while Dee Burchfield permanently conserved her family ranch in the Wildcat Hills.

In northeast Nebraska, the Marshall family conserved grasslands and the original Ponca Agency site on the Niobrara River, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In between, Todd and Laura McWha protected pristine native prairie and habitat for the endangered American burying beetle in the Loess Canyons south of Brady.

All of these places are special and rare, as are the people who preserved them. When it comes to private land conservation, it truly is a "people business."

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Lazy Three J Ranch conserved for bighorns, ranching and beauty in scenic Wildcat Hills



Towering buttes on the Lazy Three J Ranch provide safe haven for bighorn sheep.

In 1887, John McNett crept up a slot canyon in the Wildcat Hills west of Chimney Rock. He had homesteaded the land and wanted to leave his mark by etching his name and year into the sandstone, in the upper reaches of what is now known as McNett Canyon. Over the years, many more names and dates would be added, creating a historic visitor registry carved in stone.

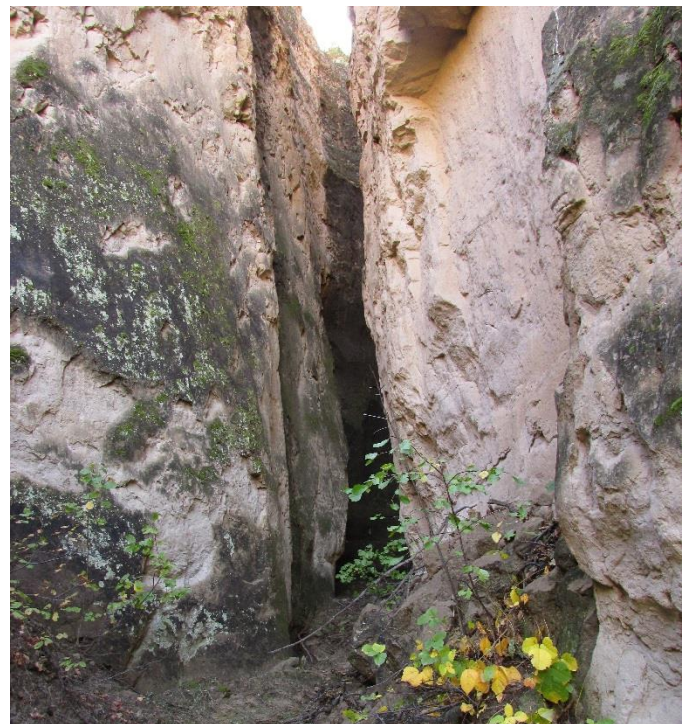
In time, ownership of the land passed into the Burchfield family; it became the Lazy Three J Ranch and its current owner, Dee Burchfield, decided to leave an indelible mark of her own. In October, she permanently conserved her family's 983-acre ranch through a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) that was completed in October.

With its towering buttes and ponderosa pine forest rising from native grasslands, the property is prime bighorn sheep habitat and adjacent to the Nebraska

Game and Parks Commission's Williams Gap Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Because of its bighorn habitat, 25% of the funding for purchase of the conservation easement was provided by the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET). In 2011, the NLT received a grant from the NET to permanently preserve bighorn habitat in the Wildcat Hills and Pine Ridge, where an additional 2,971 acres have been preserved through three other conservation easements.

Additional funding to preserve the ranch was provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Grasslands of Special Significance (GSS) Program. Since the ranch has native prairie that qualified for this program, NRCS was able to provide 75% of the funds needed to purchase the easement.

In addition to its own conservation value, when added to the William's Gap WMA next door, it creates a 1,989-acre block of protected land in view of Chimney Rock. As a result, there will be no subdivisions, golf courses, or eye jarring intrusions on this historic landscape. Indeed, Dee Burchfield has done much more than carve her name in sandstone. She has left a mark that will last forever.



The slot canyon where homesteader John McNett and many others have carved their names since 1887.

Wind power funds conservation of native grasslands

Grassland and history preserved on Niobrara



A carpet of grass on the property stretches toward the Niobrara River, lined by woodlands and wetlands.

In college, Gary and Laura Marshall fell in love with 261 acres on the Niobrara River in Boyd County. So much so that they bought the land at a time when many peers hadn't bought their first car and 40 years later, they worked with the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) to protect it forever in 2015.

Standing on a bluff overlooking the land with expansive views up and down the valley, it is easy to understand the love affair. Little did they know at the time that the Ponca Tribe once called it home as well, when the original Ponca Agency occupied the site from 1859 to 1865. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the land offers a wealth of information about the Ponca Tribe's transition to reservation life.

The integrity of the historic site and grasslands have been protected by the Marshalls use of the land for grazing, which will continue. Grassland protection in northeast Nebraska is important for wildlife and ranching, as the past decade has seen significant conversion of grasslands to cropland.

Grassland was also fundamental to protection, as the Prairie Breeze I Wind Energy Project in nearby Boone and Antelope Counties sought to fund an easement that protected grassland and woodland habitat for wildlife. It was what the family wanted as well.

Laura explained, "It is important to us to preserve and protect the historical significance as well as the native rangeland, while our sons and their families are able to continue using this property in the same manner as we have in the past."

Loess Canyons prairie adds to legacy

When Todd and Laura McWha preserved their 304-acre Loess Canyons prairie south of Brady last December, it was the second prairie they had conserved forever, as they had previously protected Sandhills prairie on Birdwood Creek. Thanks to funding provided by the Broken Bow II Wind Project, they've added the Loess Canyons to their conservation legacy. It also added to the Nebraska Land Trust's (NLT) legacy in the Loess Canyons, where 3,278 acres have now been permanently conserved.

When the NLT first started working on this project, Todd sent a digital file that was just shy of 180 pictures, revealing much about their land. There were sweeping views of treeless prairie capturing the dissected landscape that characterizes this rugged region. Other photos documented an impressive array of wildflowers and wildlife, indicating prairie health.

The pictures revealed much about Todd and Laura too. Some of Laura's photos showed the joy of land ownership, such as Todd enjoying a view or Laura picking wild grapes that would soon become jelly.

Hard work was also pictured, from cutting invasive cedar trees to fixing fence and tending cattle. Agriculture roots run deep in their families and Todd explained, "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."



Photo by Laura McWha

Patterson Farm, continued from page 1

easement makes Patterson Farm the second largest protected property (after Fontenelle Forest) in our state's smallest and fastest growing county.

More important than the acres are the resources on those acres, which are emblematic of the NLT's mission to preserve agricultural, historical, and natural values. These values include terraced croplands with prime soils that produce excellent yields without irrigation; Native American sites that tell us about the people who lived in these bluffs before the pioneers; spring-fed streams that flow over rocky beds under a gallery of mature oak/hickory woodlands; and scenic views along a mile of Highway 31 as it winds down into the Platte Valley.

The effort to preserve the farm started in 2008, with a "handshake agreement" between Ron and Carol Patterson and the NLT. They agreed to donate a portion of their easements value and try to protect all four parcels that comprised the farm, even though two were owned by other family members at the time. The NLT agreed to raise additional funds from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Nebraska Environmental Trust. It was a long road, but the Pattersons and NLT ultimately reached a shared destination; a protected oasis of rolling farmland and forest in our state's most populous region.

When explaining their motives for protection to the *Omaha World-Herald* last fall, Ron said "Imagine what you could do with this 700 acres. You're talking lots of money and a huge development. But we couldn't stand it." Carol added that the couple couldn't be happier about preserving the farm forever. "It'll be here after we die, nice and green and welcoming to Omaha and Lincoln," she said.



Oak/hickory forest reflecting fall colors in a farm pond

Sowbelly Ranch, continued from page 1



Fire has returned much of the ranch to grassland, but scenic views from public roads still abound

1,304-acre Sowbelly Ranch north of Harrison in the heart of the canyon. Last December, its owners Jim and Chris Voeller, permanently conserved the land through a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT).

Jim and Chris were especially keen on conserving the unfragmented habitat their ranch provides for elk and bighorn sheep. In 2012, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission gained permission to use their ranch as a reintroduction site for bighorns. Usually, release sites are on public land owned by the agency. The Voellers provided a rare opportunity to release bighorns in ideal habitat on private land. The land is also home to other creatures great and small, as the Pine Ridge is a biologically unique landscape where eastern and western species mingle at the edge of their range.

It always takes willing landowners to permanently conserve private land, but in this case one could add the term "generous." With limited funds to purchase the easement, the Voellers offered to donate more than half of the easement's value to the NLT through a bargain sale at less than appraised value. The Nebraska Environmental Trust, which receives 44.5% of state lottery proceeds, provided most of the balance through a grant for conservation of bighorn habitat.

Other funding partners included the Nebraska Big Game Society, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Wild Sheep Foundation, and the Iowa chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep. The diversity of partners speaks to the land's value for wildlife. The Sowbelly Ranch is truly a place where beauty is more than skin deep.

Restoration: *A step beyond conservation*

By Jacob Alishouse, Stewardship Director



An open canopy and understory is necessary for oak tree regeneration. The forest stand improvement shown above provides both, building a future for the oak woodland.

In 2013, after completing a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust, Francis Kennedy expressed a strong desire to restore his oak woodlands which had been invaded by eastern red cedar (ERC). The farm in the lower Platte Valley is in an area known for its oak-hickory woodlands, but the “oak” in “oak-hickory” is under considerable pressure in this landscape to keep its name in the title.

The 262-acre Kennedy Farm is highly visible from across the river at Platte River State Park, along Highway 31 near Schramm Park State Recreation Area or the MOPAC Trail which crosses the property. This made a demonstration project to restore the woodland that much more important.

ERC have become invasive across the eastern two thirds of Nebraska and according to the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS), between 2005 and 2010 there were approximately 300 square miles of new growth. This creates the potential for more frequent and hotter wildfires, less diverse woodlands, loss of prairie habitat and grazing.

The Kennedy forest stand improvement project was made possible by funding and technical support from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Nebraska Forest Service, Papio-Missouri River Natural Resource District, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission (NGPC), and the Nebraska Land Trust who coordinated the effort.

An annual donation provides a 10 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 \$12 million to purchase land protection agreements. **For every dollar of operating support from our annual donors, we have raised nearly \$10 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!

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The Nebraska Land Trust thanks the following individuals and organizations who contributed \$100 or more to our success during 2015.

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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.