

Nebraska Natural Legacy Conference – Coming to a City near You

By Melissa J. Panella, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

A community conserves what it understands and appreciates. For the last 8 years, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has hosted an annual conference to bring together natural resource professionals, graduate students in environmental studies, landowners, volunteers, and others who take a keen interest in Nebraska's wildlife. The conference has become a wonderful opportunity for individuals to hear about research, monitoring and issues relating to wildlife; learn of environmental education opportunities; and connect and collaborate on future efforts to advance fish, wildlife, and habitat conservation in the state. Registration costs for the conference are kept at a minimum thanks to financial support from the Nebraska Environmental Trust.

The conference is held every fall with the most recent one taking place at the Ainsworth Community Center on September 19–20, 2018. Nebraska's at-risk species are the focus of the program, but the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project recognizes the importance of improving habitats at-large and keeping native common species common. The conference location is moved around the state from year-to-year in order to reach new communities and feature various Biologically Unique Landscapes and local conservation projects.

In Ainsworth, Dr. Craig Allen, the Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit Leader, delivered an enlightening keynote presentation: "Are Nebraska's Biologically Unique Landscapes sustainable? New insights and new directives." More than 30 presenters spoke on wide-ranging topics from tracking Trumpeter Swans to finding glacial relict fish species.

Kristal Stoner, former Wildlife Diversity Program Manager at the Commission, presented a Natural Legacy Conservation Award to William Whitney of Prairie Plains Resource Institute, Inc. for his wonderful partnership to the Natural Legacy Project in restoring and preserving native habitats and offering environmental education programs. Paula Hoppe, a Nebraska Master Naturalist volunteer, was also awarded for her many contributions to Natural Legacy Project initiatives that have a lasting impact by encouraging communication, education, and broader appreciation for the diversity of at-risk species within Nebraska. Commission Wildlife Division Administrator Alicia Hardin thanked Ms. Stoner for her dedicated service to the agency and achievements for the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project over the years. Lindsay Ohlman, Graduate Research Assistant at the School of Natural Resources University of Nebraska – Lincoln, received the best student presentation award for presenting "Survival and growth of Plain Pocketbook *Lampsilis cardium* freshwater mussels in response to frequent sampling."

Just after the closing remarks for the conference, participants grabbed a sack lunch and had a chance to explore during one of two learning lab field tours. Groups went to the Niobrara Valley Preserve run by The Nature Conservancy or to the Frank Ranch. The Niobrara Valley Preserve offered an opportunity to see riparian habitat restoration, oak savanna enhancement, and how patch-burn grazing is being used to successfully manage grasslands. American Bison are an important component of their operation. A second group traveled to the Frank Ranch to see innovations in incorporating prescribed fire into their rangeland management. The Franks are combining fire and grazing in a particular way that manages invasive cool-season grasses and promotes diversity, while also taking advantage of increases in forage quality.

There are plans underway to hold the next annual conference in western Nebraska. If you would like to be notified about future Nebraska Natural Legacy Conferences, please contact Melissa.Panella@Nebraska.gov.



Mercy Dinwiddie (left) and Melissa Panella (right) observe firsthand how The Nature Conservancy uses strategic grazing by American Bison to maintain the grassland at Niobrara Valley Preserve. Photo by Justin Haag, NEBRASKALand.



American Bison at the The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve. Photo by Justin Haag, NEBRASKAland.