The Nature Conservancy



Nebraska

2026 Annual Report

© Chris Helzer



From the Director

Dear Friends,

How did you come to love nature? Was it time spent hiking, hunting or maybe chasing fireflies as a kid?

When I look at our member rolls, I imagine Nebraska sunsets, grassland birds, lively streams and windswept prairies… a collection of memories that, together, equal our shared story.

For many of us, there's not just one moment we can point to that tipped the scale for us to become someone who is passionate about the protection of lands and waters in Nebraska and beyond. It's not just the things we do; it's simply who we are.

As The Nature Conservancy celebrates its 75th year, it's both fun and humbling to look back at our founders and think about the experiences and motivations that drove them. I'm including a photo of the folks responsible for our first land acquisition at the Mianus River Gorge in Bedford, New York. Some of them pledged their life insurance policies! It demonstrated TNC's ability to work with local communities and private donors to protect a special place and transform conservation.

Since our chapter of The Nature Conservancy was founded in 1988, we've grown from a small team with a big vision into a statewide force for conservation. Today, our work is guided by bold goals for 2030 and focused on three core strategies: conserving Nebraska's lands and protecting the waters that connect us all; advancing regenerative agriculture; and tackling climate change.

This year's impact report is full of stories about what your support makes possible and where we are going together. Every success is built on partnerships, and none of this work is achievable without your support. Your generosity and commitment fuel our progress, allowing us to act quickly, think boldly, and invest in the solutions that matter most. I hope you feel proud of all we have accomplished.

Together, we are building something lasting. It's in our nature!

Yours in conservation,

John Cougher

Nebraska State Director

Top - bottom: © TNC, © Jill Wells

The Nature Conservancy in Nebraska

Nebraska TNC Team

John Cougher, *State Director*

NEBRASKA FIELD OFFICE
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Nick Arneson, *Agriculture Projects Lead*
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Natalie Busby, *HR Generalist, KS, NE & OK**
Brittany Dabestani, *Development Operations & Events Specialist*
Ashleigh Stohlman, *Executive Coordinator & Trustee Liaison*
Shannon Engberg, *Land Protection Specialist*
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Rachel Hampton, *Senior Attorney**
Audrey Kovac, *Digital Marketing Specialist, KS, NE & OK**
Sarah McCall, *Communications Manager, KS, NE & OK**
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Daisy Mora, *Operations Manager*
Nic Salick, *Development Officer*
Amy Short, *Lead Grants Specialist**
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Katie Torpy, *Director of External Affairs & Climate Policy*
Jill Wells, *Senior Writer*

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Sarah Kennings, *Hubbard Conservation Fellow*
Cody Miller, *Preserve Manager*
Leah Zuschlag, *Hubbard Conservation Fellow*

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Chad Bladow, *Prescribed Fire Program Manager*
Simon Choate, *Range Technician*
David Crites, *Program Manager*
Clint Kruml, *Senior Burn Crew Member*
Kate Samuelson, *Community Outreach Specialist*
Gavin Schaefer, *Land Steward*
Carson Schultz, *Stewardship Manager*
Rich Walters, *Director of Conservation Strategies*

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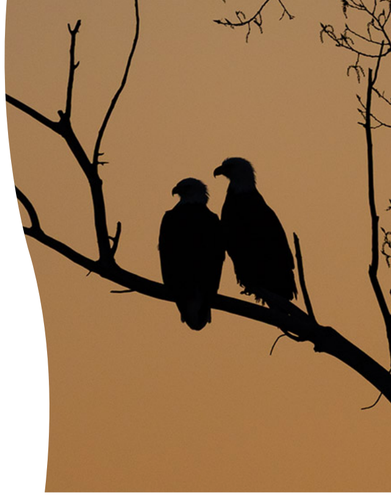
Jacob Fritton, *Director of Agriculture*

**position serves multiple chapters*





Top - bottom: © Chris Helzer

New faces of conservation

We're pleased to welcome our newest trustees, Tracy Stanko, Dr. Lori Harkins, Mick Mulhall and Emily Allen, whose terms officially began on July 1, 2026. We're honored to have folks with a breadth of experience and perspective, and we look forward to their contributions in the years ahead!

Tracy Stanko, Omaha, NE



After a career spent helping organizations tell their stories and inspire action, Tracy Stanko is bringing that passion to The Nature Conservancy on Nebraska's Board of Trustees.

Before retiring in 2016, Tracy served as managing director of the Omaha office of Swanson Russell, Nebraska's largest marketing and communications firm. Throughout her career, she has been recognized nationally for her work in marketing and public relations and has dedicated her time to serving numerous nonprofit organizations throughout the Omaha community.

For more than a decade, Tracy has also volunteered with Citizens' Climate Lobby, advocating for federal climate legislation and representing Nebraska during the organization's national lobby day in Washington, D.C. Inspired by witnessing the environmental challenges facing Lake Erie while growing up, Tracy believes in the power of everyday citizens to be advocates for nature.

Dr. Lori Harkins, Grand Island, NE



A lifelong connection to Nebraska's landscapes has brought Dr. Lori Harkins to a new role with The Nature Conservancy in Nebraska.

Raised on the edge of Nebraska's Sandhills, Lori developed an early appreciation for the outdoors through countless hours exploring the landscape. She and her family also spent many summers, and even some winters, sailing and ice boating on Lake McConaughy, experiences that strengthened her appreciation for protecting Nebraska's natural places.

An ophthalmologist, Lori has cared for patients and their families in Grand Island for nearly four decades. As she gets ready to enter retirement, she's looking forward to dedicating more time to conservation and serving on The Nature Conservancy's Board of Trustees in Nebraska.

Mick Mulhall, Omaha, NE



As CEO of Mulhall's, a family of green industry businesses based in Omaha, Mick continues a legacy that began when his grandfather immigrated from Ireland in 1953 and started a landscaping business. Growing up in the family business, Mick began working on landscape crews as soon as he was old enough to drive and has carried that passion for gardening and the outdoors throughout his career.

A graduate of the University of Notre Dame, Mick has also served on the board of the Center for Immigrant and Refugee Advancement. His passion for the natural world and commitment to serving Nebraska will bring valuable perspective to our board.

Emily Allen, Omaha, NE



As Executive Director of Tech Nebraska, Emily is helping shape the future of Nebraska's technology ecosystem through leadership in communications, policy, partnership development and innovation. Throughout her career, she has built global partnerships, expanded brands into international markets and brought Nebraska's voice to conversations on the world stage.

A Nebraska native, licensed attorney and mom of two, Emily is passionate about building connections and creating opportunities that strengthen communities across the state. Her leadership and perspective will be a valuable asset as we continue our conservation work throughout Nebraska.

Thank you for a successful Platte River Prairies campaign!







Thanks to you, the $9,162,316 campaign for the Platte River Prairies is now complete!

"Our members have come through for this special place," says Sara McClure, Director of Development. "We are so excited for everyone to be able to enjoy our new facilities."

Funds raised will be used to build a new education center and improve accommodations housing for our Claire M. Hubbard Young Leaders in Conservation Fellows, visiting researchers and other conservation professionals.

A workshop with a training classroom and improvements to the trailhead have already been completed.

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Prairie school is in session

The Niobrara Valley Preserve and Platte River Prairies are hosting world-class researchers to learn more about conservation's most pressing questions.

Here's what's underway at the Niobrara Valley Preserve (NVP):

- Dr. Sabrina Russo from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL) has been leading a long-term, global study through a collaboration with the Smithsonian Institute, examining how forests are responding to climate change around the globe. Every five years, they map and measure each tree in an area west of headquarters at the preserve. "They put that together with study sites around the world, including Indian Cave State Park, which is the other one in Nebraska. It's been fun because it's led to good conversations with our stewardship staff about the effects of fire, for example, and the direction the forest is moving," says Chris Helzer, Director of Science and Stewardship. "We did some cedar clearing, as well as fire, so Dr. Russo's been able to study how the forest is responding to those things."
- Within Dr. Russo's lab, Ph.D. candidate Lillie Hoffart has been looking at sumac at NVP in multiple different ways, trying to help us determine what the impacts of sumac are on the prairie community. She's also been working on how fast it has been spreading and how fast it might spread in the future. "This will help us to think about management going forward," says Helzer.
- Alma Talcott, also part of Dr. Russo's lab, is looking at the effect of fire on the regeneration of oak trees and on the larger community of oak woodlands. "It's an applied, useful specific study to help guide our work," says Helzer.
- The University of Kentucky's Graduate Research Assistant Taylor Kennedy is looking at dung beetles. A lot of internal parasite control in cattle is hard on dung beetles. "This is something we know is a problem," says Helzer. "The long-term hope is to figure out what kinds of pesticides we can use so that the cows can be healthy but also not hurt the dung beetles." Kennedy is first inventorying dung beetles at the preserve, setting up a grid and doing pitfall traps. She has found a broad diversity of species. Based on what she learns, TNC can move forward with the next step, hopefully bringing in a bigger team of researchers from across the country.



© Chris Helzer

- Dr. Elsie Shogren of Wake Forest is studying buntings -Indigo and Lazuli. (Lazuli is a western species, Indigo is eastern, and they come together at NVP.) This is one site included in a bigger study. NVP is on the eastern edge of the research band. "We want to know how our management is impacting these species," says Helzer.
- Dr. Jessica Corman from UNL studies water quality and water ecology in streams across the state, and has been working at NVP for many years collecting long-term data on our streams in the spring branch canyons.
- Dr. Jacob Cooper of University of Nebraska at Kearney is looking at cuckoos across large scales, and this preserve is a good fit for his study.
- For the past two years, Gerry Steinauer with the Game and Parks Commission and other mushroom experts have conducted surveys at NVP. They have found a couple new species to in the process". "They may find a lot more. We are going to try to keep them coming up every year as long as we can," said Helzer. Steinauer is working with Bellevue University for DNA analysis to figure out which species are new.
- Dr. Katharine Hogan, Director of Conservation at NE's Lauritzen Gardens and former Hubbard Fellow, is conducting research on woolly milkweed at NVP. "It is a species of milkweed that is pretty rare in the state because it doesn't often make seed and we don't really know why," says Helzer. "We have a couple of big populations, one in one of our prairie dog towns. She is trying to figure out why that's doing well." Hogan has also been doing some work on orchids at the preserve, as well as the Platte River Prairies to figure out what species are there using DNA testing.
- Bob Steinauer is contracted by Nebraska Game and Parks to do plant surveys at NVP and nearby areas in 2026, looking for rare plants.

And at Platte River Prairies (PRP):

- Chris Helzer is collaborating with Dr. Nic McMillan from UNL. Nic is helping quantify the results of different techniques the stewardship team uses to create habitat heterogeneity through focal grazing. Often, the team burns or hays a portion of a prairie to entice cattle to focus most of their grazing in that patch. Focal patches are created in new places each year. In addition, they're looking at ways to tweak the kind of rotational grazing approaches used by ranchers so they create more heterogeneity. "Nic is helping us get some robust data on our results so we can share what we're learning with a broad audience, "said Helzer.







Top - bottom: © Chris Helzer

- What happens when you manage prairies in the same way over and over? Repetitive management tends to decrease the diversity of plants because it always favors the same plants year after year… and you bottleneck the species. McMillan and Helzer are looking at this as well. "I want to do this both as a research project and a demonstration site. We've got some plots that we planted years ago for a different research project being hayed. Some are hayed every June; some are hayed every August. We think this will create two very different plant communities over a long period of time. We have other plots on which we're switching management back and forth which should favor a greater diversity of species. It might take five years or more to see a difference," said Helzer.
- In another collaboration with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, PRP staff are testing virtual fence collars on cattle, an emerging technology that seems poised to drastically change how cattle grazing is managed. Cody Miller, preserve manager, is spearheading this project, working with Dr. Yijie Xiong and Dr. Mitch Stephenson at UNL. Virtual fence can be used to control where cattle do and don't graze by sending signals to cattle when they are approaching the edge of where they are allowed to go. Boundaries can be set, and changed, by managers on digital maps from their phones or other screens. "There is huge potential for this technology to improve how grazing can improve habitat (and save ranchers time and money)," says Helzer. "We want to learn as much as we can in these early days so we can help ranchers adopt and use the technology as the cost comes down."
- University of Nebraska at Omaha's Dr. Erin Rowland-Schaefer's tallgrass prairie ecology work centers on small mammals like mice and voles. She is interested in understanding how different management practices like prescribed fire, reintroduction of grazing herbivores, and weed control through mowing or spraying impacts these small mammals, both directly and indirectly. At PRP, she is currently investigating how those small mammals interact with the varied habitats created through focal grazing approaches.
- Dr. Tim Dickson and Helzer are studying milkweed and grazing. (Cattle love grazing milkweed, and monarchs need milkweed.) What kind of grazing is best for monarchs and milkweed? "We have already published a couple papers documenting how cattle eat milkweed, and how that can affect populations of milkweed and monarchs," said Helzer, "but our long-term hope is to find ways to get bigger populations of both in grazed prairies."
- Nebraska Master Naturalist Mike Schrad has been looking at small mammals at PRP over the last 12 years. Schrad has been studying the plains pocket mouse population found at the Platte, comprised of the common western subspecies and at-risk eastern subspecies. TNC has gained many valuable insights thanks to Mike's work—including the fact that this curious critter is adaptable and resilient in the face of changing environmental conditions. Whether their habitat is heavily grazed, dense and lush, or somewhere in-between, the plains pocket mouse survives and thrives on the prairie, giving our stewardship team more confidence as they design and test land management approaches.
- Rohit Balay, PRP Land and Restoration Steward, is trying something new with overseeding on the Platte. Adding prairie species of plants that have disappeared over time back into the prairie is something TNC has been doing for a long time. Typically, fire and grazing are used to create good conditions for new establishment of seeded plants. Balay is trying to find ways to improve that success even more by harrowing the soil or using a non-lethal, grass-specific herbicide treatment to temporarily suppress competition for new seedlings.





3 Questions for Brandon Cobb

Formerly the Indigenous partnerships program manager and former Hubbard Fellow for The Nature Conservancy in Nebraska, Brandon Cobb is moving into a new role. As assistant director for TNC's Indigenous Peoples Burning Network, he'll work with Native Nations to revitalize traditional fire cultures. As he transitions to his new role, we asked him to reflect on what he's learned.

Thinking about your time with the Nebraska chapter, what stands out for you?
Internal and external change efforts created a stair-step effect. We would make one major achievement with a partner, and then more staff would say, "How cool is that? How do I get involved?" Then we'd use that momentum to support the partner. Slowly but surely, we stair-stepped it up.

Why is prescribed fire important?
TNC tends to view it through a Western science lens. Fire reduces hazardous fuels, increases biodiversity, creates habitat and supports ecosystem health. It's a win for nearly everything we care about as an organization.

When viewed through an Indigenous lens, the outcome is similar but the perspective is different. For people who have lived in these places for thousands of years, the rationale comes from relationships. It's about the medicines, the plants, the buffalo, the animals and all the things we have relationships with.

Why do you love working with prescribed fire?
We carry big saws and packs, it's hot outside, and the boots are heavy and leave blisters on your feet. But I enjoy the fact that it challenges me physically, mentally and emotionally.

Another joy is being able to share my knowledge with ranchers, prescribed burn associations, Tribes and TNC staff. I've done all this work to build my qualifications and knowledge, and now I get to help develop another generation of fire practitioners.

Top - bottom: © Chris Helzer, © Brandon Cobb



Aerial view of a prescribed burn at Niobrara Valley Preserve

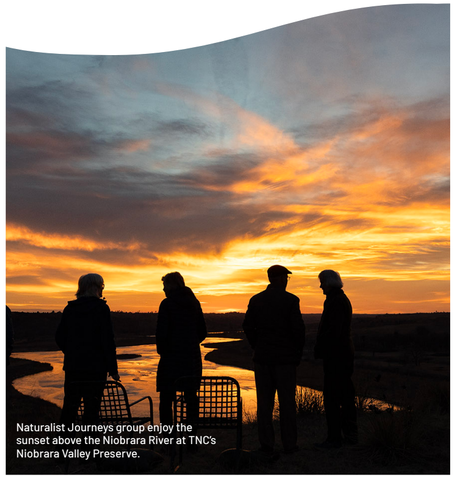
© Brandon Cobb



Bald eagle pair at TNC's Niobrara Valley Preserve.



Sunset on the Niobrara River.



Naturalist Journeys group enjoy the sunset above the Niobrara River at TNC's Niobrara Valley Preserve.



Hairy golden aster (Heterotheca villosa) and lead plant (Amorpha canescens) in Sandhills prairie at TNC's Niobrara Valley Preserve.



Hoary vervain and fog at TNC's Platte River Prairies.

Bison bull at TNC's Niobrara Valley Preserve.



Snapshots 2025-2026

Photos by Director of Science and Stewardship Chris Helzer



Northern lights (Aurora borealis) over a wetland at TNC's Platte River Prairies.

Noble scoliid wasp *(Scolia nobilitata)* at TNC's Niobrara Valley Preserve.





Plains leopard frog at TNC's Platte River Prairies.



Prickly poppy (Argemone) at TNC's Niobrara Valley Preserve.



Frosty feather on the frozen surface of a wetland at TNC's Platte River Prairies, Derr Sandpit Wetland Restoration.









Strengthening Buffalo Stewardship

Tribal buffalo herd managers gather for a learning exchange at Niobrara Valley Preserve

In May 2026, buffalo herd managers from various Tribal Nations gathered at The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve to learn, collaborate and celebrate the completion of a yearlong apprenticeship program led by the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC), a federally chartered organization that restores buffalo to Tribal lands for cultural and spiritual enhancement and preservation.

The apprentice program, funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, is an ITBC initiative that provides in-depth knowledge and hands-on experience in buffalo management for Tribal herd managers.

Since 2020, TNC has worked with ITBC, Tanka Fund and other Indigenous partners to transfer buffalo from TNC herds to Native Nations and communities. To date, nearly 3,000 buffalo from herds at 11 TNC preserves have made the long journey—over time and distance—back to their ancestral grazing lands and original stewards.

"Transfers will always remain central to the work that we do," says Dani Triebwasser, Buffalo Restoration Program specialist. "But through partnership, we're learning how TNC can support what our partners are asking of us, which includes offering spaces to gather, like Niobrara Valley Preserve and our other preserves, and facilitating opportunities for knowledge sharing between TNC and Tribal herd managers and buffalo programs."

This joint learning opportunity gave the participants hands-on experience with several aspects of buffalo stewardship. They discussed low-stress buffalo handling, practiced body condition scoring (something that's common in cattle ranching but a newer practice for buffalo), explored infrastructure (fencing, water and corrals), and talked about using prescribed fire to keep grasslands healthy.

Why Niobrara Valley Preserve?
Located in the Nebraska Sandhills, Niobrara Valley Preserve is an ideal location for shared learning experiences because it functions as both a working ranch and a world-class natural laboratory. The preserve manages two separate bison herds in two large pastures, creating unique opportunities for side-by-side comparison of management approaches.

David Crites, program director at Niobrara Valley Preserve, says the separation of the herds allows staff to use "one as a test and one as a control," providing a real-world setting for evaluating grazing, herd health and management strategies. This aligns with the preserve's broader role as a place where researchers, ranchers, students and conservation professionals come together to advance grassland management.

The preserve also exposes participants to a range of operational realities. Herd managers can learn in both a state-of-the-art handling facility with modern hydraulic systems and an older, more traditional corral system, allowing participants to see different types of infrastructure. By demonstrating buffalo management techniques in both advanced and basic corrals, the preserve can meet people where they are in their buffalo management journey while showcasing practical, adaptable solutions.

For Crites, hosting the final week of ITBC's apprenticeship program at Niobrara Valley Preserve was one of the highlights of his career. "I left the week on cloud nine, both for all the things I learned and for the way it felt to bring people and communities together," he says.



All images: © Jaida Grey Eagle

Nebraska by the Numbers

July 1, 2025 through
June 30, 2026

Budget:

$6,810,996

Property Taxes Paid:

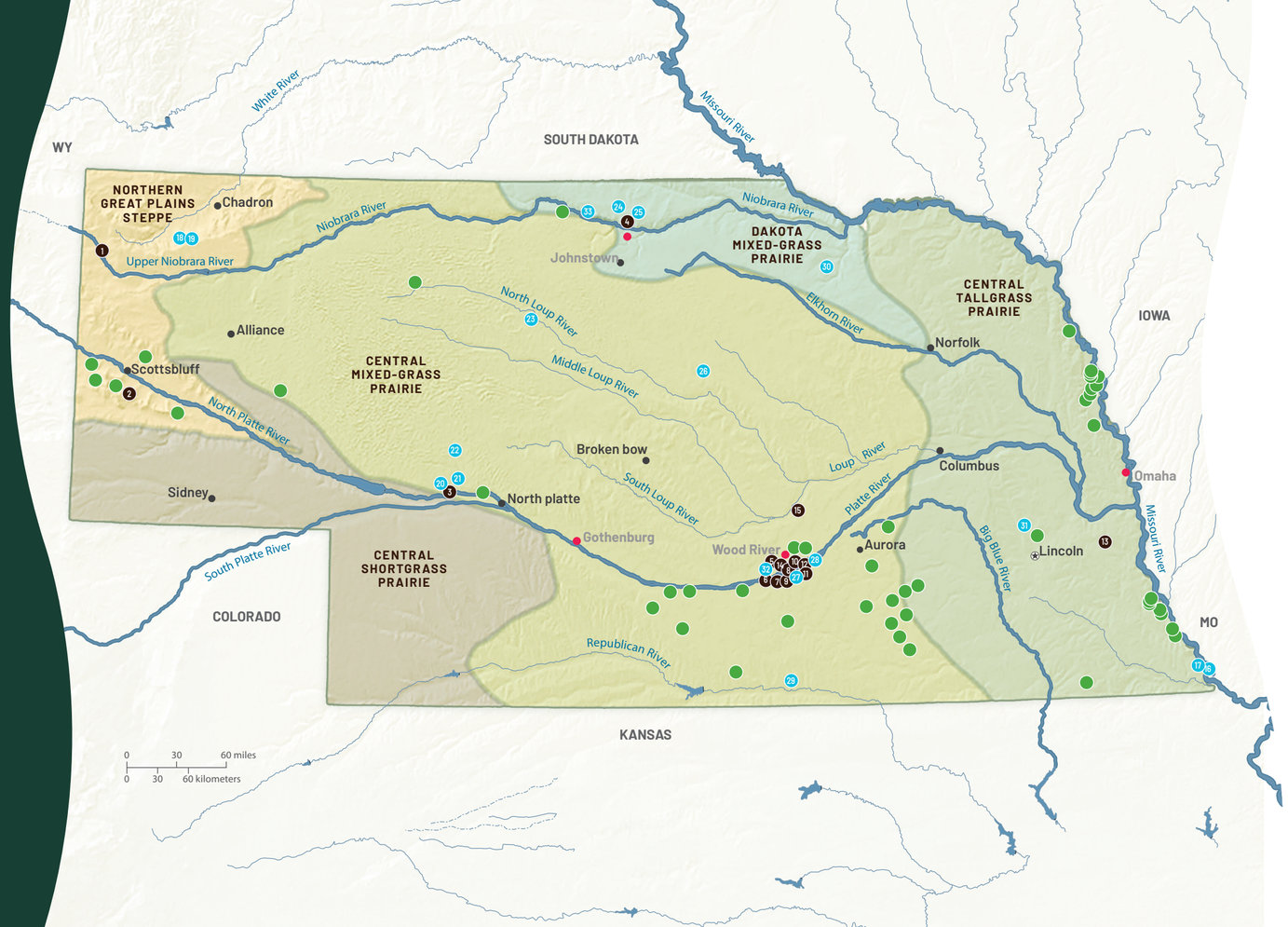
$333,469

Staff:

34

Member Households:

5,181



Where we work in Nebraska

- Properties owned by the Conservancy
- Properties with easements/restrictions
- Properties the Conservancy has helped preserve
- Conservancy Office/Staff

Ecoregions labeled in brown

Rivers where we work

Big Blue Niobrara
Elkhorn Platte
Missouri
Niobrara
Platte

Properties owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy (number of acres)

1. Cherry Ranch (7,112)
2. Murphy Ranch (1,680)
3. Kelly Tract (1,446)
4. Niobrara Valley Preserve (49,728)
5. Uridil (860)
6. Bombeck/Richardson (209)
7. Jacobs/Miller (352)
8. Derr (363)
9. Dahms (889)
10. Caveny (306)
11. Studnicka (174)
12. Frey (144)
13. Busch (159)
14. Lehmann (241)
15. Grand Island Ranch (4,868)

Properties with easements/restrictions

16. Schulenberg/ Rulo Bluffs (285)
17. Bachman/Rulo Bluffs (160)
18. Mahlman (71)
19. Kreitman (640)
20. Vineyard (268)
21. Kelly (493) and Kelly 2 (322)
22. Birdwood Creek/ Buckboard Ranch (9,920)
23. Horse Creek Fen (3,240)
24. Egelho (3,503)
25. Turkey Creek (3,079)
26. Switzer (1,742)
27. Rainforth (153)
28. Mormon Island (1,902)
29. Willa Cather Memorial Prairie (613)
30. Katie Kelly Ranch (320)
31. Little Salt Fork Marsh (173)
32. Brooks (64)
33. Wilderness (Sparks) (868)

In Memoriam



John Wallace Webster (May 31, 1948 – March 14, 2026) served on The Nature Conservancy in Nebraska's board of Trustees for nine years (including three as Chair.) John was an avid sportsman who loved dogs, hunting, fishing, and shooting. His passion for conservation was reflected in his many contributions to the life and work of the Nebraska chapter. "John was a wise, wonderful advisor to TNC and opened many doors for us," said Sara McClure, Director of Development. "We will miss his counsel, his stories, and his enthusiasm for learning."



William Paul Norris (July 20, 1938 - May 24, 2026) was an integral figure in the establishment and development of The Nature Conservancy in Nebraska. Introduced to TNC by his friend Charlie Wright, Bill went on to volunteer to talk to dozens of groups across the state to introduce them to the work and mission of The Nature Conservancy. When he retired, Bill worked for TNC to scout some conservation land in the Sandhills. "He was the right person at the right time for landowner visits," said Vince Shay, TNC's founding state director in Nebraska. Bill and his late wife Jan especially liked helping with events at the Niobrara Valley Preserve. "Bill was a wonderful friend and ally. He did so much for our program," said John Cougher, State Director.



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(*deceased)

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Photo: Silky prairie clover (Dalea villosa) © Chris Helzer

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nature.org/Nebraska

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You're Invited!

Omaha Open House

Thursday, December 3rd
4-7 p.m.
1007 Leavenworth Street
Please use metered on-street parking

Members are invited to enjoy hors d'oeuvres and drinks as we celebrate all the conservation you've made possible in 2026.
Come meet our staff and like-minded friends!
RSVP to Jill at jwells@tnc.org or (402) 915-6628.



Great horned owl © Gerald H. Emmerich Jr.