



Introduction and General Description

More than 250 landowners in Nebraska have joined with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through its Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to restore fish and wildlife habitat on their lands. Through the Partners Program, the Service provides technical and financial assistance to help farmers and ranchers realize their goal of making their land a better place for fish and wildlife while sustaining profitable farming and ranching.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program was first implemented in Nebraska in 1991 and has been growing ever since. Since the early 1990's, approximately 250 projects have been accomplished, resulting in a substantial amount of habitat restored for Federal trust species (i.e., migratory birds and fish and threatened and endangered species).



White-fronted geese on a Rainwater Basin wetland in south central Nebraska.

NEBRASKA

Nebraska is located in the heart of the central Great Plains, and its wildlife resources are highly diverse and very dynamic. The Partners Program works with farmers and ranchers to restore wetlands, stream and river corridors, prairies, grasslands, and other important fish and wildlife habitat.

Habitats of Special Concern

In Nebraska, the Partners Program focuses in ecosystems or watersheds where our efforts will accomplish the greatest benefit. Three major geographic areas located in Nebraska are recognized as being of international importance to wildlife.

Nebraska's Major Geographic Focus Areas

- T Rainwater Basin
- T Central Platte River
- T Sandhills

The **Rainwater Basin** area of south-central Nebraska has been recognized as an internationally important spring staging area for waterfowl. Millions of ducks and geese stop annually in the basin to feed and roost during their spring migration.

Approximately 90 percent of the mid-continent, white-fronted goose population, 50 percent of the mid-continent population of mallards, and 30 percent of the continent's pintail population stop in the Rainwater Basin each spring. The Rainwater Basin also

serves as important migration habitat for State and federally listed species, shorebirds, wading birds, and neotropical migratory birds.

The **Central Platte River** extends approximately 90 miles from Lexington to Chapman, Nebraska. The Platte River is considered to be one of the most endangered waterways in the United States. The central Platte River provides critical migration habitat for the endangered whooping crane, spring staging (resting) habitat for 80 percent of the world's sandhill crane population, breeding habitat for the threatened piping plover and endangered least tern, and migration and wintering habitat for millions of waterfowl. Over 300 bird species have been observed along the Platte River, and over 140 species are known to nest along the river.

The **Sandhills** of Nebraska is a 19,600-square-mile sand dune formation covered by native grasses in north-central Nebraska. The hydrology associated with sand dunes has created a vast groundwater reservoir and 1.3 million acres of wetlands.

The Sandhills represents the largest contiguous tract of grassland remaining in the United States and provides valuable breeding habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, and wading birds.

The abundance of wetlands and grasslands makes the area important to wildlife and ranching. Ranching is the primary economic use, with over 90 percent of the land in private ownership.



Partners Program wetland restoration project in Nebraska's Sandhills.

In addition to the three major geographic focus areas, the Partners Program also recognizes the importance of other fish and wildlife resources located throughout Nebraska.

Other important habitat areas of concern include the Missouri, North Platte, Niobrara, Loup, and Republican Rivers, eastern saline wetlands, Todd Valley wetlands, and the southwest high plains playas. These areas contain important habitats for migrating, wintering, and breeding fish and wildlife.

Threats

Nebraska's wetland resources have been greatly reduced since settlement. Historically, Nebraska contained an estimated 2,910,000 acres of wetlands that covered about 6 percent of the State. By 1989, approximately

1,005,000 wetland acres or 35 percent had been lost, and many of the remaining wetlands have been degraded.

Wetland losses primarily occurred as a result of agricultural and urban development and was accomplished primarily by draining, filling, tiling, ditching, digging concentration pits, land leveling, stream degradation, and increasing sedimentation.

We estimate that about 90 percent of the historic Rainwater Basins, 45 percent of central Platte River wet meadows, and 36 percent of the original Sandhills wetlands



Shallow water wetland with drainage ditch.

have been lost.

Conservation Strategies

The objectives of the Partners Program in Nebraska are to: (a) restore Federal trust species on private lands through cooperative efforts with other governmental agencies and partners; (b) conserve biological diversity through the careful selection, design, and implementation of restoration projects; and (c) provide technical assistance to USDA and landowners involved in the implementation of key

conservation programs.

Partners

The key to the success of the Partners Program in Nebraska has been the partnerships that have been developed with private landowners and other groups, agencies, and organizations. Major partners include the hundreds of landowners located throughout Nebraska who have participated in the Partners Program, as well as the partners listed below.

Natural Resources Conservation Service
Farm Service Agency
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
Bureau of Indian Affairs
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
Nebraska Board of Educational Lands and Funds
Omaha Tribe of Nebraska and Iowa
Santee Sioux Tribe of Nebraska
Little Blue Natural Resources District
Lower Elkhorn NRD
Lower Loup NRD
Lower Niobrara NRD
Lower Platte South NRD
Middle Niobrara NRD
Nemaha NRD
Papio-Missouri River NRD
Tri-basin NRD
Upper Big Blue NRD
Upper Elkhorn NRD
Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund
Ducks Unlimited
Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust
National Audubon Society
The Nature Conservancy
Rainwater Basin Joint Venture
Sandhills Task Force
Nebraska Cattlemen
Pheasants Forever
National Arbor Day Foundation

Accomplishments

Between 1992 and 2000, the Partners Program entered into approximately 250 Wildlife Extension Agreements with private landowners throughout Nebraska. These projects have resulted in the protection, restoration, and/or enhancement of approximately:

- < 13,000 acres of wetland habitat
- < 29,000 acres of upland habitat
- < 95 miles of stream/riparian (streamside) habitat
- < 10 miles of sloughs, backwaters, and side channels

These projects have benefitted federally listed species (e.g., whooping cranes, least terns, and piping plovers), migratory waterbirds (e.g., waterfowl, shorebirds, and wading birds), grassland nesting birds, and numerous other fish and wildlife species.

In addition, the Partners Program has developed over 30 successful partnerships with Federal and State agencies, local governments, and private organizations and continues to provide technical assistance to these partners in the implementation of key conservation programs.

Future Needs

Hundreds of requests are being made for technical and financial assistance for habitat restoration on private lands throughout Nebraska. Private landowners are waiting in line for help from the Partners Program.

In Nebraska restoration opportunities abound. The following lists the restoration potential in the State:

- < Protect, restore, and enhance 12,500 acres of degraded or destroyed wetlands plus 12,500 acres of associated upland habitat throughout the Rainwater Basin area of south-central Nebraska.
- < Protect and restore approximately

20,000 acres of drained wetlands throughout Nebraska's Sandhills and enhance the Sandhills wetland-grassland ecosystem.

- < Protect, restore, and enhance approximately 10,000 acres of riverine (areas along and within large river systems) and wet meadow habitat along the central Platte River for federally listed species and migratory waterbirds and grassland nesting birds.
- < Restore and conserve 10,000 acres of floodplain habitat along the Missouri River for migratory waterbirds and other native fish and wildlife species.



Partners Program Jumbo Valley Fen restoration project.



Partners Program wetland restoration project along the North Platte River.

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- < Restore and enhance over 5,000 acres of wetland and grassland habitat along the North Platte River Valley.
 - < Protect, restore, and enhance over 500 miles of stream/riparian (streamside) habitat throughout Nebraska.
 - < Work with private landowners throughout Nebraska and other partners to improve habitat on their property.

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Riparian habitat along a Nebraska stream.