

Northeast District Meeting
3/7/2024
Ponca State Park

President Russ Hamer called the meeting to order.

Elections

- Hamer asked for a volunteer or nominations for president; none were received from the floor.
- Hamer said that Lucas Negus had expressed willingness to be president for the next year.
- Jason Thiele agreed to continue as secretary.

Prescribed Fire Training

- The new prescribed fire Standard Operating Procedures manual has not received final approval yet.
- A large, organized training event is unlikely to occur this spring, but there should be opportunities to get live fire experience. Parks and Wildlife (Management and Partners sections) have many burns planned for this spring. With a lot of seasonal positions unfilled, additional help will be needed for some burns. Stay tuned for updates.
- Oak Valley WMA's burn units are set up well to do some smaller-scale training exercises if people are interested in getting experience with certain techniques (e.g., fire break preparation, ignition, suppression, etc.). Let Russ know if you have any specific training needs.
- A summer burn is planned after August 15 at Wood Duck WMA. This could be another good training opportunity.
- The Nebraska Forest Service will host the Eastern Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy again at Ponca SP this fall.

Wildfires

- NGPC personnel assisted with the response to the recent large wildfire near North Platte. No staff from the Northeast District were called in, however.
- Fine and heavy fuels are very dry across much of the district. Use extra caution while burning this spring, and anticipate that relative humidity will be lower than predicted, with more intense fire behavior and greater risk of escape.

Next Meeting / District Birding Day – May 16 at Willow Creek SRA

- Plan to attend district birding day. A couple of large vans and a trailer will be available to transport groups to different sites. Experienced birders will be matched with inexperienced birders. There may be a blind set up by a Greater Prairie-Chicken lek in the area.
- Additional activities, such as fishing or archery, may be available later in the day.
- The district meeting will follow. Administrative staff from Lincoln will be invited to provide updates.

Individual updates were provided by all present. For ease of readability, reports are grouped by division.

Parks

Tyler Wulf, Regional Park Superintendent

- Efforts are underway to backfill several vacant positions. All permanent park superintendent positions in the Northeast are filled, except for Nate Remter's former position at Niobrara SP.
- Parks Division is working with the Department of Administrative Services to update the minimum qualifications for superintendent positions. Some suitable applicants have been kicked out of the system.
- Parks Division will be having their division meeting at Fort Robinson SP March 18-21.
- STAR WARS update
 - The Weigand Marina project is at 90% design and has been submitted to the Army Corps of Engineers for review. A major hurdle has been approving the proposed spoil pile location at Bloomfield Recreation Area.
 - The Niobrara SP lodge project has stalled somewhat due to uncertainty about funding. The current plan is to continue up to 30% design and wait to see what happens in the legislature.
 - The Niobrara River access project is particularly important to the community, and efforts are still underway to determine the best course of action.
- NGPC recently signed a contract with City Data to get access to location data collected from cell phone users, which will allow better tracking of visitor use of parks and other public areas. The data collected does not identify individuals but can give information about where visitors are coming from, how long they are staying, and what facilities they are using. City Data charges a flat annual fee. If others would want to collect user data for other NGPC properties, contact Tyle Wulf or Kate Birch (see below).
- Parks will soon be advertising for a Conservation Technician. This position was a 6-month position but will now be an 11-month position.
- Two drop tanks for use on wildfire response and prescribed fires will be kept at Ponca SP and Niobrara SP, but they could be used for burns elsewhere. These have a capacity of approximately 2000 gallons.
- Inspections of park shops and superintendents' residents are being conducted.
- Niobrara SP and Ponca SP will alternate as sites for youth mentor hunts. A mentored turkey hunt is planned at Niobrara SP in April.
- The Olson family recently donated a 158-acre tract to the NGPC Foundation. The property includes timber, crop fields, and hay fields. It will be managed by Ponca SP and used for education and hunting opportunities for youth and disabled people.

Katie Leware, Lynn Mellick, and Brady Petersen, Ponca SP

- The new assistant superintendent JR Kantor begins work on Monday, March 11. JR comes from Platte River SP and Schramm Park SRA.

- Ponca SP is looking to fill an 11-month Outdoor Educator position.
- Ponca SP hosted about 80 educators for the Nebraska Environmental Education conference at the end of February.
- The park will also be hosting a commissioners' meeting and division meetings this year.
- Marsh Madness is happening during the Saturdays of March with sunrise and sunset outings in blinds to see waterfowl along the river. An area at the North Addition has been flooded for the event and is attracting waterfowl. The cabins are full for the upcoming weekend.
- Various fishing events will be happening this spring.
- Ponca SP and Danish Alps SRA will be holding a training for kayaking instructors in early June.
- Range safety office training is also being planned.
- A new trailer for hosting community fishing events is now housed at Ponca SP along with the shooting sports trailer.
- Prescribed burns are planned, and fire breaks are being prepared.

Brian ? and John ?, Ponca SP

- Staff have been busy with routine maintenance and various shop and indoor projects.
- A large pump for the pool is getting refurbished.

Kate Birch, Admin Specialist for Northeast Region Parks

- Kate is coordinating the City Data contract and will be coordinating the analysis of the visitor data. See Tyler Wulf's report above.

Jon Voelker and Leslie Donner, Lewis & Clark SRA

- Leslie recently started as the Assistant Supervisor at Lewis & Clark SRA. The temporary supervisor position is currently vacant.
- The new sewage lagoon project is nearly complete, and it is holding water.
- A new emergency road is being installed near the 54-C Bridge.
- There has not been much fishing activity on the lake yet this spring, but last fall anglers were very successful.

Hudson Schweers, Danish Alps SRA

- A new kayak launch will hopefully be completed before Memorial Day weekend.
- Staff burned approximately 80 acres at Danish Alps last week.
- A hookup to the rural water system has been completed which should address the problems with rusty water in the campground.

Jordan Swenson, Summit Lake SRA

- The lake is finally beginning to fill up. The ice fishing season was short but good. Lots of boats have been out the last few weeks.
- Fire breaks are being prepared.

- Emerald ash borer is very likely present at Summit Lake. A big increase in woodpecker activity has been noted as the birds are presumably seeking out larvae.
- Dead Timber SRA has received a grant to move ten of the campsites to higher ground.

Fisheries

Becca Munter, Norfolk

- Jeff Shuckman and Phil Cvala are attending the Great Plains Fishery Workers Association meeting in Canada.
- Becca has been sorting through her “inheritance” of files from the Bassett office.
- Fisheries staff have been busy with reports.
- Water levels have been monitored closely at Goose Lake. The pump has not been run since the new one was installed. The carp barriers are being checked regularly. Early sampling efforts at Goose Lake indicate a good perch population, but further sampling will be needed for pike as initial results were disappointing.
- Fisheries staff from Nebraska and South Dakota will be meeting next week to discuss paddlefish harvest, aquatic invasive species, fish sampling needs, and other concerns on border waters.
- Spring trout stockings begin soon. Adult rainbow trout are stocked for put-and-take fishing opportunities.
- Thomas, last year’s AIS technician, will be returning this year. He will be working primarily at Calamus, Davis Creek, and Lewis & Clark.
- Lake levels are low at Maskenthine, Willow Creek, and Summit Lake. Boaters should use caution; some ramps may not be useable.
- Improvements are planned to the north and south boat ramps at Grove Lake. A fishing pier will also be installed. The work is scheduled to begin this spring.
- A kayak launch is being planned at Kramper Lake / Danish Alps SRA.
- Fisheries will be hosting public meetings on Zoom starting March 15. The Northeast District meeting will be on March 21 at 7 p.m.

Wildlife

Grant Wiemer, Oak Valley WMA

- A lot of work has been done on invasive shrub control in grasslands and woodlands with a combination of mechanical removal and basal bark herbicide applications. Target species include autumn olive, buckthorn, and bush honeysuckle.
- A couple of small burn units were completed earlier this week.
- The past fall provided a lot of good opportunities for spraying exotic cool-season grasses. About 140 acres were treated.

Matthew Pfeiffer, Oak Valley WMA

- Matthew has been spending a lot of time on fire break preparation.

Russ Hamer, Oak Valley WMA

- Russ attended the Big Game Management Council meeting. Expect significant changes again in deer tags. A lower quota on River Antlerless permits is being recommended; these permits could sell out next season. Several units in the Northeast District were recommended for a reduction in tags issued.
- Colorado State University is going to be collaring mule deer in the Wildcat Hills for a chronic wasting disease study.
- Be alert for outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza, especially in flocks of migrating waterfowl. Todd Nordeen recently e-mailed staff with response protocols.

Kelly Corman, Bassett

- Kelly recently participated in an ArcGIS Pro training in Lincoln that was put on by Esri and the NGPC GIS team. He recommends other staff to attend if the training is offered again.
- Changes to the landowner elk zone are being considered.
- This winter was the first mountain lion season for the Niobrara unit. A female lion was harvested. Staff had collared a female mountain lion in the area, but the collar stopped transmitting. Several kittens have been observed in the area, either caught in trapped or found dead.
- The new depredation biologist starts work next week.
- Prescribed burns are planned at several WMAs. A cooperative burn with a private landowner adjacent to the Cowboy Trail is also planned.
- Jim Conn is also planning a large public/private cooperative burn around Calamus.

Kyle Schumacher, Partners Section, Grove Lake WMA

- The Verdigris-Bazile Rangeland Cooperative met last week. Members are working on building and acquiring more suppression equipment. They have just a few burns planned for this spring, but the workload will increase dramatically in the next couple of years with burns being planned through NRCS programs.
- Many projects are being completed and planned in the eastern Sandhills. Bid days for projects have been frequent. Eastern redcedar removal is in high demand, and a fire culture is growing. The Great Plains Grassland Initiative and the America the Beautiful Challenge grant received by NGPC and partnering organizations have provided increased funding capacity.
- Kyle and others have been working out ways to do follow-up assessments of completed projects, evaluating how long treatment effects last and how wildlife respond to treatments. Emphasis will be placed on how to maintain re-encroachment following initial mechanical tree removal.

- NGPC and partners are having conversations with NRCS about modifying the 528 Prescribed Grazing standards to include practices with more wildlife-friendly outcomes.
- NRCS Local Working Group meetings are scheduled around the district.
- Kyle is coordinating the Nebraska Society for Range Management conference, which will be held in Norfolk in late October.

Jason Thiele, Partners Section, Norfolk

- Interest in prescribed burning continues to grow on private lands. Biologists have been busy wrapping up burn plans and checking on prep work.
- Open Fields and Waters payments have been wrapped up for the 2023-2024 contract year. Staff will soon be writing contracts for 2024-2025. Everyone should look for opportunities to promote the program to private landowners. If you know anyone who might be interested, please contact Jason or one of the other private lands biologists.
- The Habitat Partners Section had a large meeting with other agencies and organizations in Kearney in February. Many staff also attended the Pheasants Forever State Habitat Meeting.

Hanna Barnes, NPLT, Ponca SP

- Fire breaks are being prepared at Ponca State Park and the North Addition.
- Hanna is coordinating with NGPC Zoologist Shaun Dunn to put out trail cameras for Eastern Spotted Skunks and acoustic bat monitors in the park.
- Hanna has been meeting with private landowners to discuss invasive/noxious plant identification and control.

Jen Corman, NPLT, Bassett

- About five cost-shared prescribed burns are planned for this spring. They range in size from 200 to 1200 acres.
- Multiple cedar removal projects are underway.
- Grouse surveys will begin in April.
- The Omaha High School Science Academy will be visiting in the summer, and Jen is helping arrange some activities for them.
- Jen will be on maternity leave in June and July.
- Extra help will be needed for American Burying Beetle surveys in August. Contact Jen to volunteer.

Scott Wessel, Partners Section, Norfolk

- Several partner positions are open in the district.
 - Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists are vacant in Ainsworth, Hartington, and Tekamah. [Update since meeting: Positions have been posted]
 - The Coordinating Wildlife Biologist position in the Verdigris-Bazile BUL is moving toward a partnership with NGPC, NPLT, and NRCS; the position will be focused on the Great Plains Grassland Initiative

- Scott and other district managers are meeting with UNL researchers in April.
- Scott will be attending a grassland conference with other agencies and NGOs in Broken Bow in May.
- NGPC Northeast district biologists and RAI biologists will be meeting with researchers from UNL and Oklahoma State this summer at Calamus to discuss the “next steps” in grassland conservation.
- Adam Kester is the new Access Program Manager. Over the next year or so, NGPC will be exploring the addition of a restricted/reservation-based access program to provide more opportunities, particularly near urban areas.
- Conversations are under way with four NRDs to possibly promote incentives for CRP and access in the Bazile Groundwater Management Area
- The UNL pheasant study is in its fourth year. Acoustic monitors are currently being re-deployed to record crow counts this spring.
- NGPC is exploring options for putting GPS collars on prairie grouse to study habitat use by peripheral populations.
- The new grouse-viewing blind will be available at Niobrara State Park this spring. The blind was built by Niobrara High School students. Many people have already reserved the blind, and many are reserving cabins as well.
- Scott attended PF’s National Pheasant Fest in Sioux Falls. The NGPC Chapstick was extremely popular with attendees.
- A large area of the Sandhills could soon be “cedar free.” The Valentine National Wildlife Refuge is working on removing all trees from the refuge. Adjacent landowners are also interested in tree removal, and efforts are continuing on the McKelvie National Forest to clear cedars. In total, this could be a complex of around ¾ million acres.
- A large Wetland Reserve Easement project was recently approved in Garfield County. 10 formerly irrigated quarters will be converted back to native prairie and wetlands.