

# Sandhills Task Force

"Where People and Land are One"

2007 Annual Report



## How did it all happen?

In the age of vanishing grasslands, the Sandhills region of Nebraska is a rare and precious resource. Today, the Sandhills region is the largest contiguous grassland in North America, encompassing more than 12.5 million acres. The relationship between the land, water, wildlife, and people is what makes the Sandhills a truly unique place.

The 1991, the USFWS introduced an "ecosystem management program" designed to work with Sandhills ranchers and conserve the natural resources of the region. A 13 member task force was formed to provide the USFWS with information valuable to developing a management "model" practical for the Sandhills. The team consisted of eight ranchers, and five members belonging to organizations involved with Sandhills people and natural resources. The following year, the Task Force developed the Sandhills Management Plan, ([www.sandhillstaskforce.org](http://www.sandhillstaskforce.org)) a landscape level, partnership between landowners, non-profit groups, private entities, and state and federal governments. The approach was tailored to the Sandhills because it not only considered wildlife, but the health and well being of people, land, and water. In September of 1993, the Sandhills Task Force and USFWS signed the Sandhills Management Plan. The 47 - Ranch, owned by Jerry and Florence Garner agreed to host a ceremony celebrating the birth of the Sandhills Task Force. The event drew a diverse group of people from across the Sandhills and elsewhere, including; FWS employees, Task Force members, federal congressional staff, and members of the news media. The unlikely group celebrated with a steak barbeque after a day touring wildlife projects and becoming acquainted with each other.

Over 14 years later, the Sandhills Task Force is a testimony to the power behind partnerships and a love for the land. Today, the Sandhills Task Force continues to look for "win-win" and sustainable solutions to resource issues. The group has been recognized at the state and national level as a successful model for grassroots conservation at a landscape level.



# The Mission: 2007

*"The goal of the Sandhills Task Force (STF) is to enhance the sandhill wetland-grassland ecosystem in a way that sustains profitable private ranching, wildlife and vegetative diversity, and associated water supplies."*

## Board of Directors

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Location</i>
<b>President</b> Byron Eatinger	Rancher	Thedford
<b>Vice President</b> A.B.Cox	Rancher	Mullen
<b>Secretary/</b>		
<b>Treasurer</b> Gene Mack	USFWS	Kearney
Barb Cooksley	Rancher	Anselmo
Mick Knott	Rancher	Hyannis
Richard Lackaff	Rancher	Bassett
Mike Kelly	Rancher	Sutherland
Ben Baily	Rancher	Lakeside
Eric Hansen	Rancher/NRD	North Platte
Melody Benjamin	Nebraska Cattlemen/ Rancher	Lakeside
Rob Ravenscroft	Member at Large	Lincoln
Ted LaGrange	NGPC	Lincoln
Dana Larsen	NRCS	Brewster
Jim Luchsinger	TNC	Valentine
Jim Shoenberg	County Commissioner	Basset
Gene Lehnert	North Central R,C & D	Basset



## Staff

Projects Coordinator  
Jim Van Winkle  
P.O. Box 787  
Wood Lake, NE 69221

## Winter

**New Board Member** - In January, the board approved Nebraska Cattlemen's recommendation of appointing Ben Baily to serve on the STF. Ben is employed by the Rex Ranch and lives south of Lakeside.

**Long-billed Curlew Study** - STF writes a letter in support of a proposed study designed to understand the decline, distribution, and habitat of Long-billed Curlews.

**Presentation to Upper Loup Natural Resource District (NRD)** - Jim Van Winkle and Kyle Graham spoke to the Upper Loup NRD board members. The purpose of the presentation was to update the board and develop new partnership opportunities.

## Summer

**USFWS Roundtable Partnership Training Course** - In June, the STF hosted a training course conducted by the USFWS National Conservation Training Center.

**Board approves appraisal for potential Conservation Easement** - The STF approved the cost of a certified appraisal for a potential conservation easement to be purchased and held by the STF.

**Board approves cooperative agreement with Burlington Northern Sante Fe (BNSF) railroad** - An agreement between BNSF and the STF will provide funding for wetland restoration projects positively impacting the endangered American burying beetle.

## Fall

**National Land Conservation Conference** - Jim Van Winkle attended a two day conference focusing on conservation easements in Denver.

**EPA/Herbst Construction Agreement** - The STF approved an agreement in which Herbst Construction will provide the STF funding for riparian restoration projects on the North Loup River. The funding was part of a settlement between Herbst Construction and the EPA.

## Education

- \$5,000 contribution to Grazing Land Coalition. The contribution will help expand an existing mentoring program focused on multi-species grazing and beginning ranchers.
- \$500 contribution for the Nebraska Society of Range Management Summer Range Camp held in the Sandhills.
- Two \$500 scholarships for Grazing Livestock System major at University of Nebraska.
- Partial tuition cost (\$375) for Sandhills ranches interested in applying the "Total Grazing Manager (TGM)" to their operations. TGM is a software program designed to simulate forage production and animal demand.

## Outreach

**West Central Weed Management Tour** - A STF funded project located on Otter Creek that included removal of eastern red cedars as part of a riparian area restoration was a "demonstration" project for the weed management tour.

**Gudmunson Ranch Tour Day** - In August, the STF sponsored a field day held at the Gudmunson Ranch owned the University of Nebraska. Jim Van Winkle staffed a informational booth and answered questions regarding habitat enhancement projects.

## Research

**Long-billed Curlew Study** - The STF agreed to assist researchers find landowners willing to participate in a three year study. The study will be conducted by a graduate student and assistance provided by the University of Nebraska and Iowa State University.

## Awards

**Leopold Conservation Award** - In 2006, the Sand County Foundation, ([www.sandcounty.net](http://www.sandcounty.net)) initiated the Leopold Conservation Award program in Nebraska. A panel of judges, including the Project Coordinator for the STF, evaluated the nominations, then submitted a list of finalists to the Sand County Foundation. In 2007, the Christian family of southeast Nebraska will receive a \$10,000 cash award for outstanding stewardship.

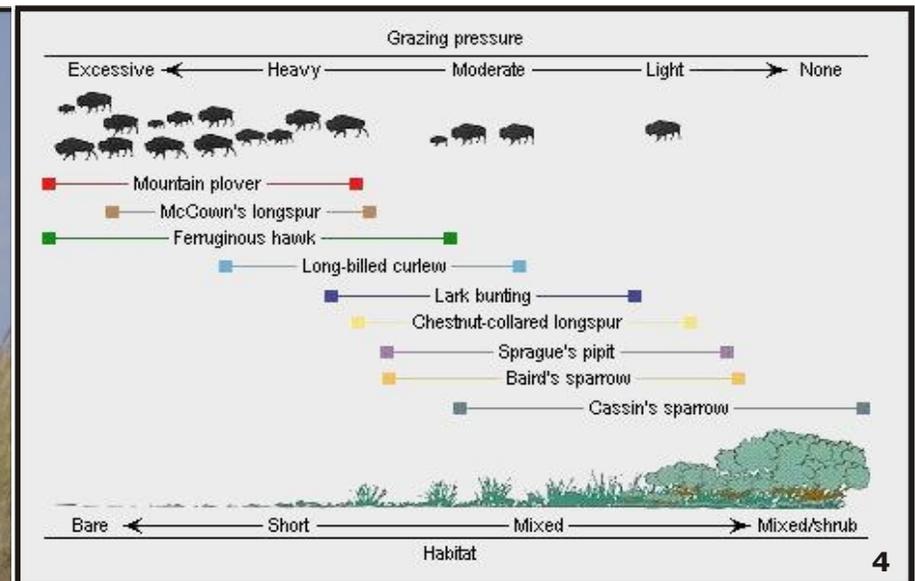
# Accomplishments: 2007

In 2007, most of the Sandhills region enjoyed a well deserved reprieve after a five year drought. The spring and summer rains were sporadic but fairly consistent in terms of total rainfall. In an extreme case, the eastern Sandhills received record rainfalls approaching 43 inches in Wheeler County. Good rains, coupled with a solid cattle market brought about a universally optimistic attitude. The STF also enjoyed full year of new partnerships, opportunities, successes, and challenges. Among the new partnerships, the Task Force provided an avenue for Burlington Northern Sante Fe railroad to mitigate wetland acres associated with the endangered American burying beetle. Another partnership arose when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) required a construction company to mitigate damage caused by depositing fill in the river channel. A cooperative agreement between the EPA and the STF resulted and will provide funding earmarked to restore riparian areas near Burwell.

As the landscape of the Sandhills continues to change, the STF must remain flexible and seek out new niches where energy and money is most wisely spent. The non-profit status and landowner knowledge among the board members allows the STF to identify, act quickly and address resource concerns. Pressing issues such as an aging ranching population could result in a massive loss of generations of land knowledge, if not addressed by leaders within the ranching community. Increased absentee land ownership, drought management, and invasive species, are all concerns that could threaten the Sandhills.

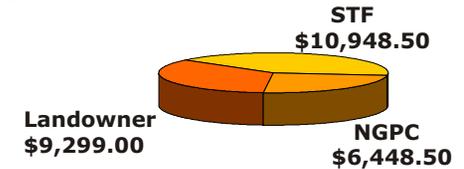
## Habitat by the numbers.

Wetland acres restored - **1,104**      Stream miles restored - **7**  
Riparian acres restored - **1,839**      Wet meadow acres enhanced - **3,942**  
Upland acres enhanced - **38,187**



# New Sandhills Ranch Projects: 2007

**Bartak Project** - In the late winter of 2007, the Bartak family purchased a unique piece of land located on the Calamus River, in Loup County. The property includes a rare mix of Sandhills uplands, river frontage, backwater sloughs, and a permanent body of water. The Bartaks expressed interest in wildlife conservation and maintaining the native Sandhills prairie. The agreement includes cross fencing, a pipeline system, cedar removal, and drilling a new well. The combination of these improvements will allow the Bartaks to implement a planned grazing system, calling for short periods of use followed by long periods of rest.

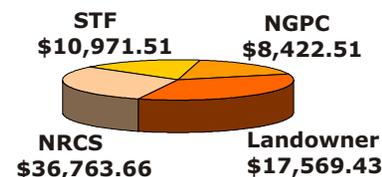


*"Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land"*

Aldo Leopold,  
A Sand County Almanac, 1949



**Ferguson Project** - In 2004, the STF began working with the Ferguson family on a ranch owned in Blaine County. In 2007, another opportunity for a whole ranch project arose in Loup County on another property owned by the same family. After meeting with the family, it was apparent that the Ferguson's goals and vision were compatible with the mission of the STF and our partners. One universal issue along the North Loup River in Loup County is eastern red cedar trees. For several decades, cedar trees have migrated, unhindered, up the North Loup River drainage. The 1,100 acre ranch will be split into small grazing units where the manager can use timing, duration, and stock density, to boost range condition and discourage tree growth. A 100-acre meadow adjacent to the North Loup River, (historically hayed on an annual basis) will be incorporated into the grazing plan, promoting plant and structural diversity.

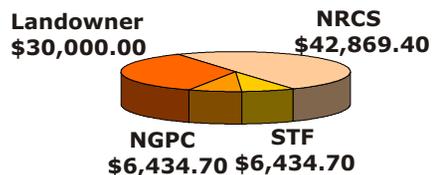


# New Sandhills Ranch Projects: 2007

**Gracie Creek Ranch** - For 33 years, Mr. Price, the owner and operator of Gracie Creek, has sought out opportunities to improve his operation. His willingness to try new ideas and ability to manage risk has resulted in a sustainable operating plan that fits the Sandhills resource. Years of building vigor in range condition has allowed Mr. Price to rest 20% of the ranch each year. In 2007, the STF installed two water control structures, designed to seasonally hydrate wetlands, meadows, and stop downcutting. The ranch includes several expansive, flat, meadows, that provide superb migratory waterfowl habitat each spring.



**Keller Ranch** - In 2006, the STF placed a conservation easement on the property recently purchased by the Keller family. In 2007, Mr. Keller approached the STF with a management plan that included a solid rotation in the upland units in addition to a short graze on the meadow units. Previously, small groups of cattle grazed each unit through out the growing season, limiting the cover available to wildlife in the winter. The plan calls for additional tanks, wells, fences, pipeline, and eastern red cedar removal for the life of the agreement.

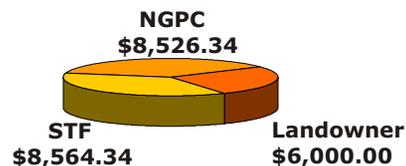


**Begining Rancher Update :**

# New Sandhills Ranch Projects: 2007

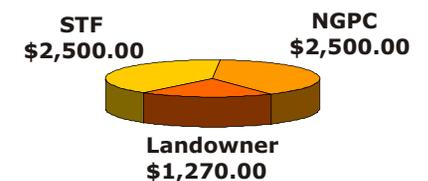


**Marlatt Ranch** - In 1953, the Marlatt family in conjunction with the Water Resources Department, constructed a low level dam on Plum Creek in Cherry County. The intent of the dam and water control structure was to seasonally hydrate a meadow to increase hay yields. In 2006, the dam failed and the Marlatt family brought the situation to the attention of the STF. In addition to increasing the quantity of hay, the dam provided hundreds of acres of "shallow water habitat" for migrating and nesting waterfowl. Working closely with the Marlatt's, the STF and NGPC designed and installed two water control structures with the intent of providing shallow water habitat. The design permits the landowner to drop the water elevation down to a "minimum pool" elevation. Upstream of the dam location, an active downcut on Plum Creek caused the stream to become incised and drain the adjacent sub-irrigated meadow. Using a water control structure, the STF designed a plan to halt the downcutting and stabilize the groundwater table.



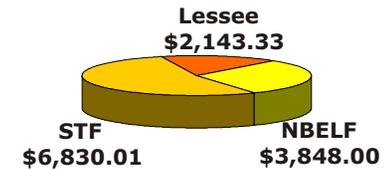
**Reed Project** - Nearly two years ago, Mr. And Mrs. Reed purchased a ranch in the Sandhills and have since made several capital improvements to facilitate a better grazing plan. The families goals include developing a sustainable management plan that will lead to improved range conditions and additional wildlife habitat. Shortly after their arrival, the Reeds invited the STF out to the ranch to discuss the management options they were considering. The ranch includes both a portion of the Dismal River and several thousand acres of native Sandhills prairie.

As a result of the STF discussions with the landowner, the Reeds signed an agreement including over one mile of fencing along the Dismal River. Historically, the sole source of livestock water was the river, thereby causing erosion and poor water quality. The new fence will create an additional unit along the river that will be grazed for a short time each year.



# New Sandhills Ranch Projects: 2007

**School Land Project** - Several years ago the STF recognized the opportunity to have a positive impact on lands own by the Nebraska Board of Educational Lands and Funds (NBELF), and leased by Sandhill ranchers. Many of these parcels have significant wildlife value and tenants with proven management abilities. One such example is a "school section" on the North Loup River near Brewster. The north half of the section includes a mile of river frontage, 40 acres of wet meadows, and a large marsh adjacent to the river. This particular stretch of the river is known as a valuable location for both resident and migratory waterfowl. Warm water springs adjacent to the river keeps water open to waterfowl throughout the fall and winter. The tenant expressed interest in developing a planned grazing system for the 300 acres of uplands and the large marsh adjacent to the North Loup River. Currently, a large percentage of the marsh is ungrazed vegetation and not available to waterfowl. The new grazing plan outlines controlled grazing on a portion of the marsh area each fall. The grazing and hoof impact of the cattle will open up much of the marsh vegetation, allowing waterfowl access to the shallow water.



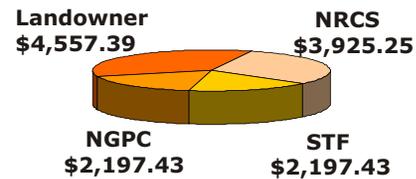
**A message from the Projects Coordinator:** "As the Projects Coordinator for the STF, I believe 2007 may well be judged by history as a year of unprecedented change in the Sandhills region. Change is always accompanied by opportunity as well. Our board of directors represents some of the finest leaders in the ranching and conservation professions. They are all "stay the course," leaders with deep convictions and a sincere commitment to their neighbors and this fantastic grassland resource. Our board does not "tip at windmills," in the livestock industry nor the conservation world. Instead, for the past fifteen years the Task Force principal, "good land stewardship sustains prosperous ranching operations while supporting native plant and animal communities," has continued to drive our efforts. Each morning, when I put on my STF hat and attempt to represent these goals, I am honored. Working with landowners across our region and helping them meet their conservation goals is very enjoyable work. Each ranch has different needs, goals and abilities. We try to be the bridge for landowners to make the right connections, that will strengthen their resource base. A look forward into 2008 would indicate the STF may be involved in a record number of Wildlife Extension Agreements, including stream restorations, cross fencing, livestock watering, and eastern red cedar tree removal. There is a good chance that 2008 will include conservation easement agreements as well. The new year promises to be an exciting year for Sandhills stewardship efforts."

**Jim Van Winkle**

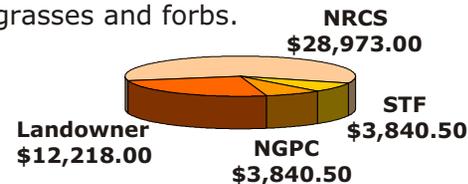


# New And Ongoing Sandhills Ranch Projects: 2007

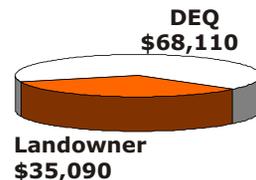
**VJ Quarter Circle Family Ranch** - In a partnership effort, the NGPC, NRCS, and STF have teamed up to develop a management plan designed to discourage invasive eastern red cedars and promote native grasses and forbs. Historically, the sole source of livestock water was provided by the Dismal River. With this system the cattle often crossed the river and found additional grazing opportunities on the neighboring landowners pastures. The new plan provides an additional water source and creates a new unit which includes the river and associated riparian area. Grazing within the riparian unit will be limited to two weeks on a biannual basis to discourage eastern red cedar or russian olive tree infestation.



**Bonnifield Project** - Starting in 2005, the STF entered into an agreement with the Bonnifield family. The remaining portion of the improvements (fencing, tanks, pipeline) were installed this past summer. The ranch manager has already noticed positive changes in range condition and is considering additional management to an attempt to maximize the potential of the native grasses and forbs.



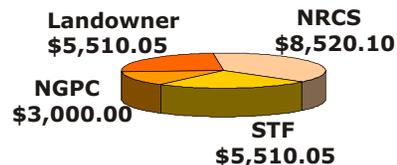
**Kelly Project** - In 2006, the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), STF, and the landowner teamed together to restore a portion of Birdwood Creek, in Sutherland County. The restoration included forcing a portion of the stream flow into a historic meander. As a result, backwater habitat, and several shallow water wetlands, now exist. The bulk of the Birdwood Stream Restoration project was completed according to plan in the summer of 2006. The project was finalized this past summer after the contractor completed a small amount dirtwork and reseeded.



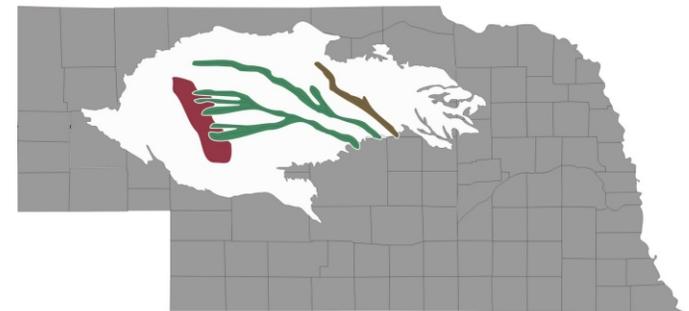
# New Sandhills Ranch Projects: 2007



**Severson Project** - As the North Loup River winds through Blaine and Loup Counties it is easy to see why waterfowl are drawn to this area. Adjacent backwaters and side channels fed by warm water springs stay open throughout the fall and well into winter. One such area is owned by Mr. Severson near Almeria. Such a resource is currently threatened by invasion of eastern red cedar trees and season long grazing resulting in the loss of native grasses and forbs. In partnership effort, the NRCS, STF, and NGPC, developed a plan that includes cutting, piling, and burning the eastern red cedar trees. The foundation of the plan is a solid grazing plan, limiting the amount of time the cattle graze each unit. A historic center pivot field will be seeded to native warm season grasses and forbs. Once the grasses become established the field will again be incorporated in the grazing plan.



Eastern redcedar removal focus areas



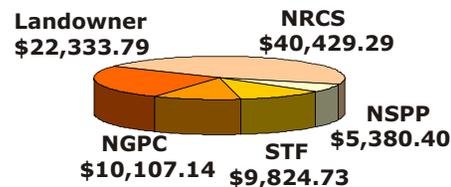
Biologically unique landscapes in Sandhills (Nebraska Natural Legacy Project)  
 Dismal River Headwaters  
 North & Middle Loup River  
 Calamus River

# Ongoing Sandhills Ranch Projects: 2007



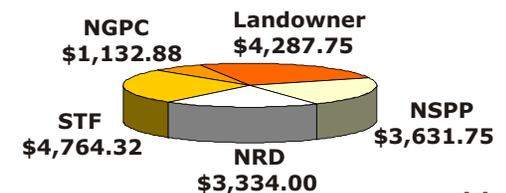
**Rundle Project** - After several years of drought and decreased plant vigor the Rundle family developed an agreement with the STF. The agreement included the infrastructure necessary to adopt a rotational grazing plan. As soon as the fall of 2006 it was apparent that the grazing plan was working as native grasses flourished. Native plant species and communities thought to be missing, have appeared in short order. The tenant is excited about the quick progress and expects the range to only grow stronger. Another parcel owned by the family borders Pawnee Creek before in flows into the Platte River. Cedar trees had overrun the riparian area and range condition suffered as a result. In the spring of 2006, cedar trees were cut, stacked, piled and will be burned this winter. Future plans include, building a new fence around the riparian unit to facilitate early season grazing. In effect, the "flash" grazing will discourage cool season, non-native grasses, thereby promoting native warm season grasses and forbs.

**Parker Project** - Ms. Parker entered into an agreement with the NGPC, STF, NRCS, NRD, and the Northern Shortgrass Prairie Partnership (NSPP) in the fall of 2006. The bulk of the improvements were installed in the summer of 2007. In the spring of 2008, Ms Parker will initiate a grazing plan including a moderate stocking rate, short duration grazing, and growing season deferment of several units. The Parker Ranch is located in a unique ecosystem found in the north-west corner of the Sandhills.



**Vincent Project** - The STF became acquainted with the Vincent family on a site visit facilitated by the NSPP. It was apparent at this time that the Vincent's moderate stocking rate and proven interest in maintaining quality wildlife habitat aligned well with the STF mission.

The ranch is split into two separate parcels, both of which are located on the Niobrara River in Sheridan County. This portion of the Sandhills supports black-tailed prairie dogs, ferruginous hawks, Long-billed Curlews, and burrowing owls. The improvements needed to facilitate a rotational grazing program were completed in the winter of 2006-2007.



## Revenues, Resources & Expenditures

January 1, 2007 - December 31, 2007

An audit of the organization's 2007 financial activity was completed in May by Hellman, Main, Coslor and Pathol., P.C. of Kearney. The report stated "*In our opinion, the financial statements referred to above present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of the Sandhills Task Force as of December 31, 2006 and 2005 and the changes in its net assets and its cash flows for the year then ended in conformity with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America.*"

### Income

Carryover from 2006 (Cds)	\$ 674,900.00	
Cooperative Agreements and grant funding	\$ 127,752.87	
NETF Conservation Easement Funding	<u>\$ 250,000.00</u>	
		<b>\$ 1,052,652.87</b>
Public Grants		
Private Stewardship Grants Program	\$ 44,520.00	
Private Grants		
Burlington Northern Sante Fe Railroad	\$ 32,000.00	
USFWS Partners For Fish and Wildlife	\$ 20,000.00	
NGPC Habitat Stamp Funds	\$ 20,000.00	
Interest from Cds	<u>\$ 32,163.74</u>	
<b>Total New Income</b>		<b>\$ 148,683.74</b>

### Expenses

Projects, Operations, & Programs - \$113,788.76

### Expenses by Program Areas

Habitat Enhancement Projects - \$35,958.09  
 Education and Outreach - \$2,770.00  
 Research - \$7,325.00  
 Operations - \$67,735.67



**Photography Credits:** Cover: Gracie Creek Ranch. Kyle Graham/FWS; Pg 1: Smithsonian Historical Photo Collection. Nebraska Sandhills; Pg 2: Sandhills Task Force board members. Kyle Graham/FWS; Pg 4: Long horned steer. Kyle Graham/FWS; Grazing Diagram. Knopf. Pg 5: Horseshoe Lake. Bartak Property. Jim Van Winkle/STF; Pg 6: Gracie Creek Ranch. Jim Van Winkle/STF; Pg 7: (left) Plum Creek before restoration. Kyle Graham/FWS. (right) Plum Creek after restoration. Jim Van Winkle/STF;

Pg. 9: North Loup River. Severson Property. Kyle Graham/FWS; Eastern red cedar tree removal. Kyle Graham/FWS; Pg 10: Bob Price speaking with Kenny Dinan FWS. Kyle Graham/FWS; Pg 11: (top) Prill Project before restoration. Kyle Graham. Kyle Graham/FWS: Prill Project after restoration. Kyle Graham/FWS; Pg 13: Top row. (Left to right). STF partners. Kyle Graham/FWS. Marlatt construction site. Jim Van Winkle/STF. Prill construction site. Kyle Graham/FWS. Bottom row. (Left to right) 2007 NCTC Partnership Training

held in the Sandhills. Kyle Graham/FWS. Valentine High School field trip award winners. Kyle Graham/FWS. Marlatt construction site. Jim Van Winkle/STF. Blanding's turtle research talk. Kyle Graham /FWS.

**Written and designed by Kyle Graham**

