

OUTDOORS DIGEST

Of The Outdoors | Gary Howey

Mickelson Trail – Mount Rushmore National Memorial Connector Trail Project Moves Forward

PIERRE – The highly-anticipated project to create a connector trail from the George S. Mickelson Trail to Mount Rushmore National Memorial is taking a big step forward.

The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) and project partners have commissioned an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) for the project, which will solicit public involvement and assess any potential impacts the proposed route may have on the environment.

"The EIS is really the first official step towards this project becoming a reality," said Al Nedved, assistant director for GFP. "It will hopefully clear the way to construct the connector trail in the near future, a vision over eight years in the making and shared by many."

Funding partners for the study are the South Dakota Parks and Wildlife Foundation and the Mount Rushmore Society. The U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service contribute to the project as land management partners.

The Mickelson Trail runs 114 miles through the heart of the Black Hills. It has earned recognition as a must-visit attraction from national travel websites and publications. The trail takes visitors from Edgemont to Deadwood, featuring seven trailheads in area towns, several bridges and rock tunnels, views of Crazy Horse Memorial and a connector trail into Custer State Park. Last year trail users purchased nearly 20,000 annual and daily passes to bike and walk the Mickelson Trail.

A connector trail to Mount Rushmore National Memorial, the state's biggest tourist attraction, is expected to be hugely popular. The proposed 15-mile connector trail would start south of Hill City and take visitors to the parking lot vicinity of the memorial.

The majority of the funding for the EIS is provided for as one of the Heritage Projects proposed by Gov. Daugaard and approved by the 2013 Legislature.

The other two Heritage projects – the creation and enhancement of Good Earth State Park and the construction of a new visitor center at Custer State Park – are well underway. Good Earth became a state park in 2013 with trails established and native prairies restored over the past two years. Work on a new entrance road and a visitor center began this fall. The state-of-the-art visitor center at Custer is currently under construction and is expected to open next spring.

"It's great to see the progress these projects have made since the Governor first proposed them," said Nedved. "They offer so much in terms of education, recreation and quality of life. The Mickelson Trail – Mount Rushmore connector trail will be a special opportunity for the people of South Dakota and our visitors."

HDR Engineering is consultant on the EIS and will coordinate with the U.S. Forest Service, which is the lead federal agency. The project will include working with the land management partners and offering opportunities for public input. The final issuance of the EIS is expected in 2017.

Fungus That Causes Bat Disease Detected In Neb.

LINCOLN, Neb. – The fungus known to cause white-nose syndrome (WNS) in hibernating bats, a disease that has decimated bat populations in the United States and Canada, was recently discovered for the first time in Nebraska.

The fungus *Pseudogymnoascus destructans* – or *P. destructans* – was detected in samples sent to researchers at the University of California, Santa Cruz for testing. The samples were collected in 2015 from bats hibernating in a mine in Cass County in eastern Nebraska. Northern long-eared bats, tri-colored bats and big brown bats tested positive for the fungus.

WNS has killed more than six million bats in North America since it was first discovered in New York in 2007. In some states, winter bat numbers have declined by more than 90 percent. Since it was first detected, WNS has been confirmed in 26 states and five Canadian provinces. The fungus has been detected in four additional states, including Nebraska.

"While the presence of the fungus is disappointing, it is not surprising," said Mike Fritz, Natural Heritage zoologist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. "With the fungus being present in states around us and the migratory nature of bats, it was probably only a matter of time before it was documented in Nebraska."

Recent studies have shown that the value of insect control by bats to agriculture is worth several billion dollars annually. This value includes reduced crop loss to insect pests, reduced spread of crop diseases and reduced need for pesticide application.

WNS does not infect humans and is only known to affect cave-hibernating bats. The fungus thrives in cold, humid environments and invades the skin of bats, disrupting their hibernating behavior and depleting their fat stores.

Researchers from the Commission, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Nebraska-Omaha and University of Nebraska-Kearney began monitoring mines for the fungus in 2014. Researchers are asking for landowners' help in locating and accessing mines for tracking the spread of the fungus. Those with knowledge of such sites are asked to contact Fritz at 402-471-5419.

Adams Homestead To Host Christmas Event

NORTH SIOUX CITY – Adams Homestead and Nature Preserve near McCook Lake invites visitors to get in the holiday spirit and step back in time by attending the annual Christmas at the Homestead on Saturday, Nov. 14, from noon to 4 p.m. CST.

The free family event allows participants to tour the Stavenger Church, Shay/Adams House and Lamont Country School which will be decorated for the Christmas season. Adams Homestead volunteers and area businesses will display their talents in each of the homestead buildings.

For more information, call Adams Homestead and Nature Preserve at 605.232.0873.

Vets, Pheasants & S.D.: A Winning Combination

BY GARY HOWEY
Hartington, Neb.

Its fall, the time of the years when trees, shrubs and grasses change from their summer colors to their beautiful fall colorations.

The orange, yellows and reds are not the only colors appearing in the fields in October, as you will see rows of hunters orange color as thousands of hunters, hit the field for the South Dakota pheasant season.

It was the second week of the season as wildlife artist Mark Anderson, Sioux Falls, South Dakota and I made our way north up Highway 281 heading for Aberdeen, up into Brown County, the home of excellent habitat and good bird numbers.

Good friend Casey Weismantel, Aberdeen C.V.B. had invited us to take part in a veteran's hunt held out of the Half Cocked Lodge on Mina Lake west of Aberdeen.

The event sponsored Wounded Warrior Guide Service, Aberdeen C.V.B., HuntFish SD.com and the Half Cocked Lodge brought veterans from WW 2 Viet Nam and Iraq-Afghanistan together to pheasant hunt.

It was close to noon, as we loaded up and making our way out to the fields to begin our hunt; with our group opening our season in one of the many unpicked cornfields in the area.

As the veterans debarked the bus, team leader Dave Usselman went over the game plan as to how best to hunt the field.

Our wingmen, those on the outside, would be set up, twenty-five yards out in front of the walkers working along the edge of both sides of the corn with walkers moving through in the corn, with other veteran's blocking at the end of the field.

Fifty yards into the corn, the dog off to my right begin to get birdy, his nose close to the ground with its tail going in tight circles as he closed in on a bird. With a loud cackle, the first bird erupted from the outer edge of the corn directly in front of trailing dog.

Several shots later, the bird came crashing down, with another dog was hot on its trail, retrieving the first bird of the hunt.

In the wide rows in front of us, other birds were on the run, some



OUTDOORSMEN PRODUCTIONS PHOTO

Viet Nam Vet Edwin Ohmann, of Moundsview, Minnesota, takes aim at a rooster that was flushed by walkers during the Wounded Warriors Guide Service Hunt near Aberdeen, S.D.

tried to slide out in front of the walkers, only to be pushed back into the corn by the wingmen. As we approached the end of the first field, shots rang out as our blockers did their best to get in front of the hard flying roosters.

Approaching the end of the field, the walkers slowed, stopping from time to time, allowing the dogs to root out those birds, hiding in the cover.

On both sides of the corn and at the end, the dogs were putting birds into the air with shotgun blasts erupting along the entire line, with a few birds escaping, flying off into other fields.

The north group was hunting similar fields as the first group, unpicked corn with grass fields along either side.

Our second group of hunters, were set up in similar way, the only difference was this group would have a drone filming overhead, with the operator with the blockers, guiding the drone via his I Phone, giving the operator a bird's eye view of the action.

In the middle of the field, as the walkers approached, several birds, both roosters and hens blew out of the cover, as the rooster pumped hard, gaining altitude, flying high over the outside wingman. The hunter shouldered his twelve gauge,

swung past the bird, and fired, putting the bird down.

As the hunters and their dogs make their way through the grass or corn by, the birds are pushed towards the end of the field where they hope to make their escape out the end of the field.

The dogs working those birds out in front, will methodically work the last part of the field with the walkers holding, keeping the birds from cutting back into the corn.

One of the hunters a double amputee was in a tracked wheel chair on the right side, he approached the end of the field, prepared for what he knew would soon happen.

This is when it happens, with birds erupting from the cover, when you will hear the cries of the hunters yelling "rooster", with birds coming up between the walkers and blockers, at times it is pure pandemonium with birds going in every direction as the hunters do their best to draw a bead on the brightly colored fast flying birds.

It was the end of a successful hunt where those who were once served as brothers in arms, now had the opportunity to spend quality time in the outdoors, enjoying time with each other in the field in South Dakota sharing a South Dakota tradition, pheasant hunting.

Hunts like these are an oppor-

tunity to honor those, which have served; with opportunities, they may have never been able to take part in if it were not for sponsors and groups such as the Wounded Warrior Guide Service.

Wounded Warriors' Guide Service is a guide service founded in 2009 by veterans for veterans, providing cost free hunting opportunities for vets wounded while serving our country. More information on the Wounded Warrior Guide Service can be found at www.woundedwarriorguide.com

Gary Howey, Hartington, Nebraska, is a former tournament angler, fishing and hunting guide. He is the Producer/Host of the award winning *Outdoorsmen Adventures* television series, seen locally in Channels 2 and 98 at Saturday at 6:30 pm and Sunday at 7:00 am. It airs on Saturdays at 6:30 am and on the MIDCO Sports Network Thursday at 5:30 pm and Sunday at 10:00 am. The show can be seen in nine states in the upper Midwest He and Simon Fuller Co-Host the *Outdoor Adventures* radio program on *Classic Hits 106.3, ESPN Sports Radio 1570 in Southeastern South Dakota and Northeast Nebraska. In Northwest Iowa, it airs on KCHE 92.1 FM. If you are looking for more outdoor information, check out www.outdoorsmenadventures.com.*

Kansas K-9 Program Getting Most Out Of Lab Work

BY MICHAEL PEARCE
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BURLINGTON, Kan. _ State dignitaries ringed the room as she walked in to be honored before retirement. During a distinguished career, she had saved senior citizens, rescued lost children and brought criminals to justice. She also never missed a day at work, complained or contradicted an order.

Unimpressed by the speeches and applause, Lucy, a Labrador retriever, let out a long sigh and gave Jeff Goeckler a bored look that said, "I'd much rather be fetching a tennis ball."

Lucy was a member of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism K-9 program, one of 11 dogs that have lived and worked with game wardens since the program started in 2003. Most of the program's best dogs came from animal shelters or from homes where they were problematic.

Lucy and Goeckler joined the team in 2008 and she quickly made an impact, helping Goeckler with wildlife cases and other law enforcement agencies needing her services.

Goeckler knew it was a tough challenge when he got her from his truck that first year. It was late at night, and deer poachers he'd been pursuing crashed their car and took off into the blackness.

"It was a real nasty, overgrown pasture, and hard for me to even keep up with her," Goeckler said. "It ended up being a two-mile track. She was on the trail the whole time, even when they



MICHAEL PEARCE/WICHITA EAGLE/TNS
Lucy was part of the K-9 program, helping game warden Jeff Goeckler for about seven years. She played a major role in helping solve many poaching cases, and tracked down lost elderly and children.

tried backtracking and when they separated. She stayed on the main trail until we caught the first guy. We went back to where they'd split and she got right on tracking down the other guy. It was a real 'wow' event."

He has memories of Lucy finding illegal doves tossed out a vehicle window as they raced away across the countryside. One bitterly cold night Lucy tracked, and quickly found, an elderly woman with dementia who wandered from a care facility in only a thin nightgown.

There was the time panicky parents near Milford Reservoir called for help when their 4-year-old son was missing. The family lived

atop a tall, steep bluff that dropped nearly straight down into deep water. Lucy tracked and found the child a quarter-mile away, safe, but trying to make it to the water. She was a pro at finding the empty shell casings from a poacher's gun.

"She did that a lot, and she did it with speed," he said. "You just told her what to do, then stood back and watched the show. We called her the chocolate rocket."

Jason Sawyers, Wildlife and Parks K-9 coordinator, said the program looks for high-energy Labs, or Lab mixes.

"They're hunting dogs, naturally," he said. "We're just teaching them what we need for them to find. It's all already in them, we're just changing the end result. They never quit on you."

He said several of the dogs have from Wichita-area shelters. One came from a Wichita family that couldn't control a rambunctious female Lab. Cooper is now one of the department's top dogs.

Goeckler's Lucy wandered the streets of Topeka for at least three weeks before she could be captured and taken to an animal shelter. All handlers, and their assigned dogs, have been thoroughly trained.

Sawyers said K-9 handlers, and their dogs, undergo about 400 hours of intensive training in Indiana, the state that pioneered such programs. Handler and the dog are trained in tracking, detection and searching. Some dogs have

particular specialties. "We have some trained on a particular kind of fish," Sawyers said. "We had one in Wichita trained to sniff out trout because there were over-limit problems there. Another at Milford was trained to sniff out wipers. They could tell the difference between those and the smells of other fish. It's pretty impressive."

The program was initially started with donations. Though they now have a budget, Hills Pet Nutrition provides free dog food. Veterinarians often provide services for free or reduced prices.

The dogs, which live with their handlers and are usually left with the same family upon retirement. Since Goeckler's recent promotion means far less time from the office, Lucy has been retired to his home as a full-time member of the family. She had health issues that also would have made working afield difficult, and maybe dangerous.

All of the K-9s are important bridges to the public.

"When we take these dogs to a sport show, they are the stars of the show," Sawyers said. "We have one dog, Cooper, that in four years, has done about 200 programs. That's one of the neat things about using Labs, is you don't have to worry about somebody getting bitten. Some kid might get licked to death if we're not careful, but that would be the only way someone would get hurt by our dogs."

Many S.D. Furbearer Seasons Underway

PIERRE – As of Nov. 7, many of the furbearer seasons across the state began. The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department (GFP) wants to remind individuals to leave trapping equipment or furbearers in traps undisturbed. Tampering with either one is a violation.

Traps (including snares) are designed to humanely hold furbearers. When individuals voluntarily shoot a furbearer in a trap thinking they are assisting the trapper; they oftentimes destroy valuable pelts which can lead to conflicts.

In 2014, 3,577 sportsmen and women pursued the renewable natural resource of wild fur as a recreational outdoor activity. Trapping

is an important component of wildlife management and serves as a critical role in managing South Dakota's furbearer populations.

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