

Nebraska Geographic

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Wild Adventures Yours to Discover in Nebraska's Wildcat Hills

Just the name “Wildcat Hills” inspires imagined visions of a rugged landscape traversed by pioneers, grizzled trappers, and skilled Native American hunters, and home to formidable wild creatures.

Intent on taking my daughter to see Chimney Rock when she was still a child, I was 35 years old the first time I made it to the Wildcat Hills. That pioneer signpost is part of the Wildcat Hills escarpment that stretches for approximately 60 miles through the North Platte River Valley from around Bridgeport and Bayard past Scottsbluff to the Nebraska-Wyoming border. Jail Rock, Courthouse Rock, and Scotts Bluff are other notable geologic features in this rocky range.

The most public access to the Wildcat Hills is in the Scottsbluff and Gering area. Nearly four miles of walking trails snake through 3,000-acre Scotts Bluff National Monument. Speaking of snakes, signs on the trail warn visitors to be wary of rattlesnakes. I jokingly call those signs “false advertising” since I appreciate snakes but haven’t ever seen a rattler there, yet.

The visitor center at what locals simply call “the monument” includes exhibits showing fossils of giant tortoises, oreodonts, and other creatures that once roamed here. Other exhibits depict aspects of Native American life before European settlement, and interpretive panels and artifacts explain the Oregon Trail migration. The highlight here, in my opinion, is the center’s collection of artworks by William Henry Jackson. That frontier artist is regarded as the first person to photograph Yellowstone. The Jackson sketches, paintings, and photographs at Scotts Bluff National Monument comprise the world’s largest collection of his art.

Summit Road leads visitors from the visitor center to the top of Scotts Bluff. The road is the oldest concrete road in Nebraska, and it takes motorists through what the National Park Service says are the state’s only vehicular tunnels (there are three). From the top you can see Chimney Rock 26 miles away to the southeast – and on clear days – Laramie Peak more than 100 miles to the west in Wyoming. Yep, you can see the Rocky Mountains from Nebraska.

Here’s a fun fact for you: when you leave Gering on M Street toward the monument, you are actually traveling on the Oregon Trail. Another incredible

visitor experience awaits visitors south of Gering at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area.

Visitors can explore more than 1,000 acres of Wildcat Hills ruggedness at this unique attraction. The stone picnic shelters here were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. Miles of trails traverse the pine-studded canyons and lead visitors to the newly renovated Wildcat Hills Nature Center.

When you walk in and catch sight of an artificial pine tree spanning two stories in the interior, you know you're in for a treat. Displays teach about the plants and wildlife of the Wildcat Hills from the past to modern times. The center hosts many educational events and field trips. Birdfeeders stationed outside of the large viewing windows attract a wide variety of creatures. During one visit I asked about snakes. The volunteer told me that the day before there had been a rattlesnake beneath the bird feeders looking for an easy meal. But I saw no snakes when I was there. Darn, foiled, again.

On the way back to the Scottsbluff and Gering metro area, which includes Terrytown – founded by Nebraska legislator and businessman Terry Carpenter in the 1940s – make sure to stop at the Legacy of the Plains Museum.

This museum experience within view of Scotts Bluff, Dome Rock, and other towering monoliths, showcases area history with an emphasis on agriculture. I didn't know much about western Nebraska's sugar beet industry when I first visited. The wagonload of realistic fake sugar beets at the museum, and the associated artifacts and displays, shed new light on it for me. Pretty *sweet*, ha-ha.

The attraction previously known as the Farm and Ranch Museum (FARM) continues to grow. The Japanese Hall moved in from Scottsbluff pays homage to the long history of Japanese immigrants who came here to work in agriculture, the railroad, and other industries. There's a real working farm, and a docile herd of longhorn cattle. Last time I left the museum I brought home a cloth bag of locally-grown dry beans from the gift shop.

Hunger creeps up during a day spent exploring Nebraska's western frontier. If you're in the Scottsbluff and Gering area, otherwise known as Nebraska's "Twin Cities," you'll find no shortage of high-quality eateries.

There is no way I can mention them all here, so I will include just a few of my favorites. The Log Cabin Restaurant & Lounge is a Gering landmark. A tall carving of an Indian chief stands watch near the lunch counter, and there's the tanned skin of a huge rattler on the wall. Near the salad bar, one log wall of the

original cabin remains visible. I recommend trying the Monument Burger or the Meat Loaf Dinner.

The history of Ethnic Mexicans in the Scottsbluff and Gering area dates back more than a century. As a result, there are many Mexican restaurants in the area. I have eaten at several of them and have never been disappointed. But I do have to recommend Rosita's. Get the Panchos.

Flyover Brewing Company is decorated with an aviation theme. The wing of a World War II cargo plane hovers over the bar. "Campaign" is a lager dedicated to the sugar beet industry. They have lots of other tasty brews, oh, and a brick-fired oven known for pizzas, grilled shishito peppers, and other goodness.

Scotty's Drive Inn has whipped out burgers and shakes old school style since 1963. And even older, Gering Bakery is a must if you like donuts, long johns, or other classic baked goods. You can't miss it in downtown Gering before daybreak – just look for the warm glow of orange and green neon. The bakery opened in 1950. My go-to is always the Cream Cheese Danish because I fear the Hog on a Log (a slice of bacon on a long john) might kill me.

The Cabbage Burgers at the Mixing Bowl Café are only available on Thursdays. They sell out FAST, so get there early.

We are about to the end of this adventure. But I would be booted from the Cornhusker State if I neglected to mention the Pink Palace Bar & Grill in McGrew. Like watching sandhill cranes, eating a Runza, floating the Niobrara, or attending a Husker game, having a meal at the Pink Palace is one of those things that I think every Nebraskan should do at least once. The story is that back in the 1970s the building needed to be painted. Pink paint was the cheapest – enough said. One of the waitresses there, in between serving wonderful prime rib, told me that the building was actually painted pink because a previous owner lost a bet. That sounds likely to this Nebraskan.

McGrew is a village of less than one 100 residents, but the population can double on weekend nights at the Pink Palace. The community is barely 6 miles from the Wildcat Hills icon Chimney Rock, where this iconic adventure began. Maybe I'll see you there.

Safe travels – and watch for deer.