

Nebraska Geographic

with ALAN J. BARTELS

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Passion for Picnicking

I don't know what it is, but for me, there's something special about packing a cooler with a sandwich or two, a bag of chips or some creamy potato salad, and a couple of cold drinks. Whether it is a big community park with plenty of shade, a state park, a wildlife management area, or some other tranquil destination, a relaxing picnic is a great way to spend an afternoon – especially if it might include the possibility of a nap. Here are a few of my favorite Nebraska picnic spots.

Located near Scotia, the Happy Jack Peak and Chalk Mine is one of the most interesting places in Nebraska in terms of both geology and scenery. The peak overlooks the North Loup River Valley. The mine is one of only two subterranean diatomic mines in the United State – and the only one that is open to the public. The wooded valley near the mine entrance includes a handful of picnic tables shaded by oaks and other trees. Flyovers by bald eagles are common.

Pibel Lake has been important to me since I was a kid. While spending summers in Bartlett, my friends and I would head to this lake in southern Wheeler County to relax, fish, get muddy, and enjoy a one of my friend's mother's picnic ham sandwiches. Back then the place belonged to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Today, Pibel Lake Recreation Area is owned and operated by the Lower Loup Natural Resources District. Tons of improvements have occurred in recent years, more are on the way, and believe me when I say that the Lower Loup NRD keeps this place looking great.

Gremlin Cove, south of Republican City at Harlan Reservoir, is my newest favorite Nebraska picnic spot. I was in the area for a meeting in early July and had some time toward the end of the day to relax at the lake. The fish didn't cooperate, at least not for me. But my colleagues and I had a good time snacking and catching up as boats motored by on an unusually comfortable summer evening. Right across the bay, North Shore Marina has a nice menu in case you forgot the food and drink.

North of Merna or about straight east of Anselmo, Victoria Springs State Recreation Area is a recreational haven in the heart of Custer County. When you're done with your picnic lunch you can fish, rent a paddle boat, or check out the historic schoolhouse. The two newer cabins are available for lodging. The park's

two log cabins are much older. One was the first post office in Custer County. The other cabin was the home of postmaster and judge Charles Matthews.

It has been a while, but sometimes I like to grab some fast food in Broken Bow and then eat it at the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey. I know that probably doesn't sound like a classic picnic, but it is enjoyable to park on the side of one of the access roads and hike into the pines. I almost never see anybody, and more than once I have fallen asleep after lunch and been awakened by the peaceful, persistent Sandhills breeze winding through the trees.

When I really want to get away from it all, or if I just happen to be in far west Nebraska, I make a beeline for Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area. This rocky, rugged area features a cool nature center, miles of trails, and even a shooting sports complex. I usually take a quick walk through the nature center before grabbing my picnic basket (I actually collect them) and hiking to one of the park's stone picnic shelters. These unique buildings were built during the Great Depression by the men who lived here while working with the Civilian Conservation Corps. Their careful workmanship has stood the test of time, and these stone shelters are really something to see. Check it out and take some grub with you.

I'd love to hear about your favorite Nebraska picnicking spots. Drop me a line at 100ThingsSandhills@gmail.com.

Safe travels – and watch for deer.