

Nebraska Geographic

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April 3, 2024

Recreation Overflows in Nebraska's 'Great Lakes' Region

For a place once regarded as part of the Great American Desert, Nebraska sure has a lot of water.

While most of our state comes up dry in terms of natural lakes, wetlands and shallow ponds and lakes topped off by the Ogallala Aquifer are numerous in parts of the Sandhills. And then there are the tens of thousands of miles of flowing streams that flow across Nebraska. Those persistent streams are the reason that Central Nebraska lays claim to our state's Great Lakes region.

Sherman Reservoir was the first built of the trio of lakes I am designating as Nebraska's Great Lakes. This 2,845-acre recreational haven is northeast of Loup City. The manmade lake is the highlight of Sherman Reservoir State Recreation Area and surrounded by 4,721 acres of rolling Sherman County hills. Some of that land acreage is in the form of Wildlife Management Areas open to activities such as hiking and hunting.

The friendly folks at Trade Winds Marina & Resort told me that 68 miles of shoreline bound the lake formed when Oak Creek was dammed up in the 1960s.

Fisherman's Bridge spans the inlet above the northwest corner of the lake. When word gets out that the white bass are running, the inlet can be almost elbow to elbow with hopeful anglers. At other times, the Fisherman's Bridge area is a birding hotspot with species such as belted kingfishers, least flycatchers, eastern and western kingbirds, and yellow warblers being reported.

The arrival of spring attracts flocks of anglers to the dam where walleye gather to spawn. Special regulations protect the resource. The lake is also known for northern pike, channel catfish, and flathead catfish, but it is best known as a regional hotspot for catching limits of crappie. If you're ever fishing Sherman on a chilly morning and the fish aren't biting, I suggest heading to Loup City to warm up with a hot drink at Ash Hollow Coffee Co.

About an hour's drive to the north and west, Calamus Reservoir, with its dam completed in 1986, could be considered the middle sibling of Nebraska's Great Lakes family. But at more than 5,000 acres, this lake near Burwell is the largest of our great threesome of manmade reservoirs.

Speaking of large, four-foot-long muskellunge – a cousin to the equally toothy northern pike – are the top predator in this massive lake. Largemouth bass, white bass, and wipers – a hybrid between white bass and striped bass – also prowl these waters. Over the last decade or so, the lake's population of large channel catfish have lured anglers from far and wide. Almost as popular are the white sand beaches that form at Calamus Reservoir when lake levels drop during irrigation season.

When the wind and whitecaps whip up, boaters smartly get off the lake. But there is still plenty to do. Not far from where the Calamus River meets the northwest corner of the lake, Calamus Outfitters launches thousands of adventurers each spring and summer in livestock tanks on the Calamus River. The hardworking Switzer family and their kin also provide guided overland ranch tours and have lodging and event facilities.

Below the dam, Calamus State Fish Hatchery – Nebraska's largest fish hatchery – raises millions of rainbow trout, walleye, yellow perch, and northern pike each year to stock recreational waters statewide.

I would be remiss to not mention some of the smaller water bodies of Nebraska's Great Lakes region. Lake Ericson, near the village of Ericson, is a scenic escape on the Cedar River in Wheeler County. I spent many hours and days here during my childhood swimming, wading, catching turtles and frogs, and fishing for anything that would bite a nightcrawler. The lakeside community of residences here today has evolved since the first rustic cabins went up after the lake was completed in 1916. If the tranquil lake isn't enough to beckon you, there is always the historic Hungry Horse Saloon downtown, and the Wagon Wheel Saloon & Steakhouse on the east edge of Ericson.

In southern Wheeler County, Pibel Lake is another favorite childhood haunt. In terms of amenities it is much improved since my younger days thanks to ownership transferring from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to the Lower Loup NRD in 2012. It is a popular spot for families looking to entertain children with bobbers dancing above eager bluegills. There are largemouth bass and channel catfish here, too, and the lake is known for its ice fishing. Pibel Bible Camp is tucked above the northwest corner of the lake where it was founded in 1939. Pibel Pleasant Hill Cemetery is on a hillside northeast of this 24-acre Sandhill oasis.

The manmade jewel of Nebraska's Great Lakes region is Davis Creek Reservoir. The 1,145-acre lake south of North Loup was built in the 1980s as part of the North Loup Irrigation Project. The walleye fishing has really taken off over the last few years. White bass, largemouth bass, channel catfish, and even some yellow

perch are among the species that anglers are seen reeling in. One dedicated angler I know targets carp here with his flyrod and hooks some giants.

Davis Creek Recreation Area is on the west side of the lake and is maintained by the Lower Loup NRD. Amenities include two RV campgrounds, tent camping and handicap specific campsites, two boat ramps, a playground, shower house, a fish cleaning station, and wi-fi. The dark sky over Davis Creek Reservoir is one of my favorite reasons to visit. If you leave the recreation area toward the south beginning on Ashton Road, you can weave your way to Sherman Reservoir in barely 20 minutes. The world-famous Happy Jack Peak & Chalk Mine is even closer.

Day or night, and winter, spring, summer, or fall, there's no bad time to visit Nebraska's Great Lakes region. For more information on these and other great Nebraska lakes, visit www.OutdoorNebraska.gov.

Safe travels – and watch for deer.