

Nebraska Geographic

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Jan. 24, 2024

Cornhusker State Travel Countdown, part 1

For any skeptical readers out there, including Nebraskans content to rarely venture far from their hometown, here's a countdown of Nebraska-only reasons why our state attracts travelers from near and far.

- **1,000,000 +:** The spring gathering of sandhill cranes along the North Platte and Platte rivers in Nebraska is the largest congregation of any crane species on earth. When Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary was founded in 1974, approximately 300,000 sandhill cranes migrated through Nebraska each spring. When I was volunteering there from the early 2000s to the early 2020s, the flock had grown to 600,000+. It has continued growing. Other than Rowe Sanctuary, which is near Gibbon, riverside tours can also be reserved at the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center near Wood River. For a truly off-the-beaten-path Nebraska adventure, view the cranes from the Lewellen area.
- **81,000+:** This is the number of stream miles assigned to Nebraska on the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy's website. Nebraskans throw around the proud claim that Nebraska has more river miles than any other state, but a little research proved that isn't true. That website goes on to say that only 18,000 miles of Nebraska streams flow year-round, which according to Dan Haas of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, doesn't even put Nebraska in the top 10. Still, our state is blessed with magnificent rivers and streams from border to border. Tanking is a common summertime pastime in Nebraska, and the Niobrara River is considered among the best canoe and kayak rivers in the nation.
- **20,000:** Figures describing the Nebraska Sandhills vary from 19,000 to 25,000 square miles depending on the source. NASA even once put the size of this region of grass covered sand dunes at 33,333 square miles. Regardless of the exact number, (20,000 square miles is the most commonly cited) the Sandhills covers approximately one quarter of Nebraska. This is a land of immense beauty where cattle outnumber people, and it's a stronghold for prairie chickens, sharp-tailed grouse, rare turtles, swans, the blowout penstemon, and so many other plants and animals. Nebraskans can be proud that the Sandhills is the largest intact temperate grassland on our planet.

- **562:** Travelers turning off of US Highway 281 into Greeley are greeted with a welcome sign like no other. “Greeley. 562 friendly people and a few old crabs.” The community didn’t have the Greeley Irish Festival when I was growing up there, but old crabs? I get back to Greeley fairly often, and the people don’t seem all that crabby, at least not any crabbier than when I lived there.

- **531:** That’s how many incorporated communities we have in Nebraska. I visited most of them over the course of a couple decades spent writing and taking photos, including while on staff with *Nebraska Life* magazine. My buddy Seth Varner visited all 531 in just two and a half months in 2020. The adventure he shared with his co-author Austin Schneider became the book, “Visit 531 Nebraska.”

Each community has its own events, attractions, and culture. All we have to do is get on the road and discover them for ourselves.

We will continue the Cornhusker State travel countdown in the next installment of *Nebraska Geographic*.

Safe travels – and watch for deer.