

Nebraska Geographic

with ALAN J. BARTELS

100ThingsSandhills@gmail.com



Feb. 7, 2024

Cornhusker State Travel Countdown, part 2

In the previous *Nebraska Geographic* we counted down Nebraska travel wonders including 1 million sandhill cranes, the 20,000-square-mile Sandhills, and Greeley's "old crabs." In this installment we continue exploring Nebraska by the numbers.

- **455.32:** This is how many miles of Interstate 80 spans Nebraska. The late television host Charles Kuralt once said that our country's interstate highway system "Makes it possible to go from coast to coast without seeing anyone or meeting anybody." I-80 feels foreign to me, but sometimes it just makes sense, especially when traveling for work. And since it does cross our entire state, good ol' I-80 can be a convenient starting point for Nebraska travel adventures.
- **93:** Every Nebraska fourth grader knows that Nebraska has 93 counties. Brewster, the county seat for Blaine County, has an official population of 8. The courthouse has the ledger that outlaw Doc Middleton signed when he tried to go legit and open a saloon. When it comes to Nebraska courthouses, some travelers consider it a challenge to visit each one.
- **73:** This is the number of state parks (SP), state historical parks (SHP), and state recreation areas (SRA) currently managed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. I say "currently" because the agency recently sold one of my favorite places, Long Lake State Recreation Area. It's no longer available to the public.
Anyway, for a measly \$35 travelers can slap a Nebraska Park Entry Permit on their vehicle's windshield and visit areas like Fort Hartsuff State Historical Park. Public outcry saved the park from budget cuts in 2009. These state areas run the gamut from tiny Victoria Springs SRA near Anselmo to 22,500-acre Fort Robinson SHP near Crawford.
- **39.17:** Believe it or not, Nebraska has nearly 40 state highway miles that have never been paved. To me, the 18.85 miles of unpaved Nebraska Highway 18 in Frontier County is the most scenic. It passes through hilly country east of Stockville and ends at US Highway 283 south of Elwood. Otoe County claims 10.28 unpaved highway miles, with another 10.04 in Pawnee County.

- **23:** Nebraska's 23 Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) are known for protecting natural resources, but their responsibilities also include development and management of recreational and park facilities. NRDs manage more than 80 public areas ranging from small attractions like the Upper Loup NRD Arboretum in Thedford, to the Lower Loup NRD's Davis Creek Recreation Area near North Loup. The NRD Recreation Exploration program relaunches in March 2024 with prizes for NRD recreation area visitors. www.nrdnet.org/recreation.
- **9:** Nebraska is crisscrossed by nine scenic byways. Two of them were awarded National Scenic Byway status in 2021: the 450-mile-long Lincoln Highway Scenic and Historic Byway (450 miles), and the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway that stretches 272 miles from Grand Island to Alliance.
- **9:** There are nine National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) in Nebraska. The Sandhills Prairie Refuge Association is a group of volunteers working at Valentine NWR and Fort Niobrara NWR improving wildlife habitat and enhancing visitors' experiences. Join at www.sandhillspira.org.
- **4:** Nebraska is home to a quartet of zoos, including Omaha Zoo, routinely rated among the world's best. The Lincoln Children's Zoo is home to more than 40 endangered species. Riverside Discovery Center was founded in 1950 in the shadow of Scottsbluff National Monument. The Horn T Zoo is a seasonal roadside affair near Monroe known for its fall pumpkin patch and carnival.
- **2:** Our state has two time zones. Until 1967, the Central and Mountain time zones met in the center of Main Street in Valentine. The Central time zone now extends west of Valentine, but Nebraska still doesn't have any mountains. I suggest exploring both sides of town, including Plains Trading Company Booksellers on the west, and Bolo Beer Co. to the east.
- **1:** There are many one-and-onlys in Nebraska. Monowi in Boyd County comes to mind. Elsie Eiler is the only resident of what is the smallest incorporated community in the United States. She's perhaps best known for her Monowi Tavern. Elsie is also the sole taxpayer keeping Monowi's three streetlights lit, and rumor has it that she signs off on her own liquor license. Cheers!

Safe travels – and watch for deer.