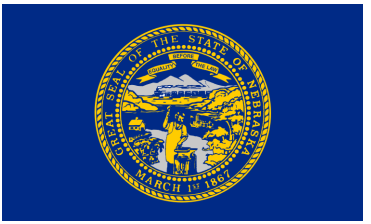
Nebraska's State Symbols[3]

State Seal and State Motto

The Nebraska Constitution provides for a state seal that is to be kept by the secretary of state and used by him or her officially as directed by law. Legislation creating the original state seal was passed in 1867.

The seal's design is as follows: On the right, a steamboat is ascending the Missouri River. The Rocky Mountains are on the left. In the background, a train of cars is heading toward the Rocky Mountains. The mechanic arts are represented by a smith with hammer and anvil. Agriculture is represented by a settler's cabin and sheaves of wheat. In the top of the circle is the state motto: "Equality Before the Law." The circle is surrounded with the words, "Great Seal of the State of Nebraska, March 1st, 1867."

State Flag



Nebraska's state flag was designated by legislative action in 1925. It consists of a reproduction of the state seal, charged on the center in gold and silver on a field of national blue.

State law says no part of the state flag is to be used as a business advertisement or trademark, and insulting the flag is forbidden. State law also requires the flag to be displayed under or to the left of the U.S. flag on or near the State Capitol, the governor's mansion, all courthouses, city or village halls, schoolhouses and other public administrative buildings.

The original flag is displayed in the Office of the Secretary of State in the Capitol. A historical scrapbook about the flag, compiled by Mrs. B.C. Miller of Crete, is on microfilm at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

[3] Except where noted, sources for state symbol information are: Nebraska State Historical Society; Nebraska Game and Parks Commission; Conservation and Survey Division, University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Nebraska Secretary of State's Office; Nebraska Governor's Office.

State Name

Nebraska has had two official state names: the "Tree Planters' State" and the "Cornhusker State."

Nebraska was designated the "Tree Planters' State" by legislative action in 1895. Nebraska's claim to tree-planting fame includes the founding of Arbor Day in 1872 by J. Sterling Morton of Nebraska City, the Timber Culture Act of U.S. Sen. Phineas W. Hitchcock in 1873 and the millions of trees planted by early settlers as windbreaks, woodlots and orchards.

The 1945 Legislature changed the official state name to the "Cornhusker State," thus repealing the 1895 act. The name is derived from the nickname for the University of Nebraska athletic teams, the Cornhuskers. The term "cornhusker" comes from the method of harvesting or "husking" corn by hand, which was common before the invention of husking machinery.

State Flower

The goldenrod (*Solidago serotina*) was declared the state flower by legislative action in 1895. Numerous species of goldenrod grow throughout the state. The goldenrod is an erect, coarse-looking perennial herb that is usually about two or three feet tall. The small flower heads, which are almost always yellow but sometimes have cream-colored or white rays, are grouped into either elongated or flattish clusters. The flowers appear from July through October.

State Bird

The western meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*) was designated the state bird by legislative action in 1929. The western meadowlark is abundant throughout the state and is noted for its joyous song. The birds are eight to 11 inches long and are brown and streaked above, with bright yellow underparts interrupted by a bold crescent of black across the upper breast and white outer tail feathers. The birds nest on the ground in grassy fields or meadows and feed largely on insects.

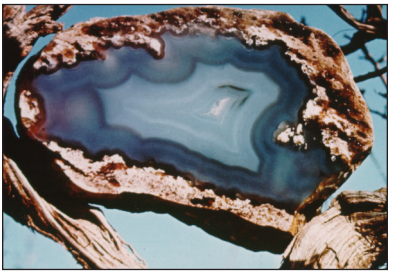
State Tree

The American elm (*Ulmus Americana L.*) was named Nebraska's first state tree in 1937, but the 1972 Legislature named the cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) as the state tree. The cottonwood often is associated with pioneer Nebraska. Several famous early landmarks were cottonwood trees, and their shoots often were collected by settlers who planted them on their claims. Today, the cottonwood grows throughout the state.

State Fossil

The mammoth was named Nebraska's state fossil by legislative action in 1967. Various species of the mammoth crossed the Bering Strait land bridge and spread throughout most of North America. Mammoths were elephants, but some were larger than the modern elephant. Early prehistoric people hunted the mammoth and found the animal's ivory tusks useful in making tools and realistic etchings. Mammoth remains have been found in most Nebraska counties. One mammoth found in Lincoln County, *Archidiskodon imperator maibeni*, was one of the world's largest elephant fossils. It is displayed in the University of Nebraska State Museum in Lincoln.

State Gemstone



Blue chalcedony, commonly called the blue agate, was named Nebraska's state gemstone by legislative action in 1967. A pale stone, blue chalcedony sometimes has a dark internal form with bands of blue and white and often has a colorless streak. Blue agates often are used to make jewelry. The blue agate can be found in northwestern Nebraska, where it formed in wind-blown silt and claystone deposited in the Chadron Formation of Oligocene Age.

State Rock

The prairie agate was declared the Nebraska state rock by legislative action in 1967. Agate is a semiprecious stone, and Nebraska has an abundance of it, especially in the Oglala National Grassland. Agate is a variegated quartz noted for its layered varieties. In most specimens, the bands are coarse and differ in color and translucency, as well as in compactness and porosity. The prairie agate, distinguished from most other agates because it seldom has these bands, is still colorful, has a rounded irregular shape and is popular for jewelry.

Prairie agate is not native to Nebraska. It formed in sedimentary rocks in Wyoming and South Dakota and subsequently eroded from these deposits and was carried into Nebraska by streams.

State Grass

Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) was designated the official state grass by legislative action in 1969. Little bluestem, a vigorous native prairie grass, grows throughout the Great Plains and beyond. In central and western Nebraska, it grows in bunches and is sometimes called "bunch grass." In some areas, it also is known as "beard grass." The grass is an important native hay and forage grass.

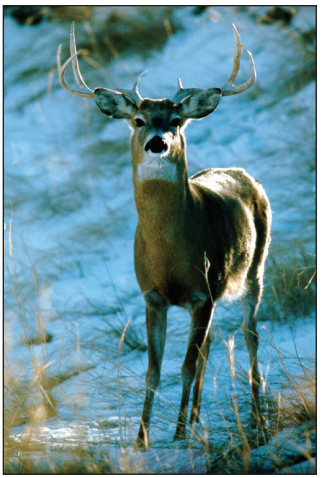
State Insect

The honeybee (*Apis mellifica*) was named the official Nebraska state insect by legislative action in 1975. Honey production is a $3.1 million industry in Nebraska. In 2006, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, there were about 47,000 colonies of honeybees in the state producing more than 3 million pounds of honey.

State Soil

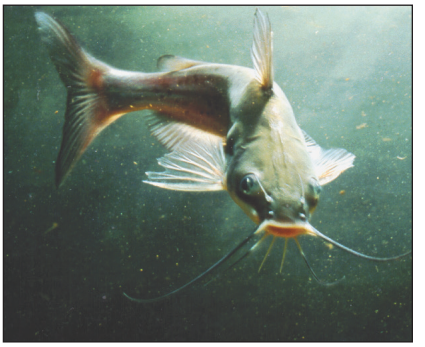
The 1979 Legislature designated the official state soil to be soils of the Holdrege series, classified as *Typic Argiustolls*, which are slightly to moderately alkaline and fine-silty in texture. The mean average temperature of Holdrege series soil ranges from 50 to 56 degrees Fahrenheit. The mean average precipitation ranges from 18 to 24 inches per year. Holdrege soils are ideal for growing crops such as sorghum, wheat and corn. This soil is most commonly found in south-central Nebraska and north-central Kansas.

State Mammal



The 1981 Legislature designated the white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) as the state mammal. The white-tailed deer is a herbivorous hoofed mammal found in farmlands, brushy areas and woods. If alarmed, this deer raises its tail, exhibiting a conspicuous flash of white that can communicate danger to other deer or help a fawn to follow its mother in flight. The feeding habits of white-tailed deer are flexible: they graze on green plants; eat acorns, nuts and corn in the fall; and browse on woody vegetation in the winter. White-tailed deer hunting is a popular recreational activity in Nebraska.

State Fish



On Sept. 13, 1997, Gov. Ben Nelson declared the channel catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*) to be the official state fish. The channel catfish is a popular sport fish that often is used for food. It has distinctive barbels or "whiskers" that are covered with taste buds. Its diet consists of aquatic insects, crayfish, fish, frogs and plant material. Channel catfish spawn during summer in cavities created by tree roots or rocks and often defend their nests.

State American Folk Dance

On Sept. 19, 1997, Gov. Ben Nelson declared the square dance to be the official state American folk dance. Square dancing developed as the nation progressed toward the west. It became a popular diversion from the hardships settlers faced. Square dancing is called, cued or prompted to dancers. Related forms include round dancing, clogging, contra dancing and line dancing.[4]

State Ballad

On Oct. 9, 1997, Gov. Ben Nelson declared "A Place Like Nebraska" to be the official state ballad. Sol Kutler composed the words and music.

A Place Like Nebraska
When I dream of my home
And the good folks I've known
I'm glad I've grown up
In Nebraska

'Cause the good life is there
With sun and fresh air
And neighbors who care
In Nebraska

Wherever you go, they all want to know
And someday someone will ask ya
So turn on your smile
Tell them life is worthwhile
When you're bred and corn-fed in Nebraska

With cool winding streams
And good football teams
And jobs that are there for the asking

[4] Source: Nebraska State Square and Round Dance Association.

With daughters and sons
Some real famous ones
All proud to be called a Nebraskan

'Cause wherever you go, they all want to know
And someday someone will ask ya
So turn on your smile
Tell them life is worthwhile
When you come from a place like Nebraska

A soft falling snow
A warm fire's glow
And a lifetime of memories to last ya

Of a cool summer's breeze
And bright autumn leaves
Each season a joy in Nebraska

So wherever you go, you just let them know
'Cause someday someone will ask ya
So turn on your smile
Tell them life is worthwhile
When you come from a place called Nebraska

State Historic Baseball Capital

On Oct. 9, 1997, Gov. Ben Nelson declared St. Paul to be the official historic baseball capital of Nebraska.

State Baseball Capital

On Oct. 9, 1997, Gov. Ben Nelson declared Wakefield to be the official baseball capital of Nebraska.

State Village of Lights

On Dec. 11, 1997, Gov. Ben Nelson declared Cody to be Nebraska's official Village of Lights.

State River

On Feb. 26, 1998, Gov. Ben Nelson declared the Platte River to be the official state river. The Platte, formed by the junction of the North Platte and South Platte rivers near the city of North Platte, flows east through central Nebraska into the Missouri River. The stream is 310 miles (500 kilometers) long.

The Platte is too shallow for navigation, but it is an important source of water for farm irrigation, municipal and industrial uses, recreation and hydroelectric power production. The river also provides habitat for sandhill cranes, other migratory birds, fish and other wildlife.

Platte River in Early Spring

The Platte River valley has been an important east-west human transportation corridor throughout history. The Oregon, Mormon and California trails, the Pony Express route, the Union Pacific transcontinental railroad, the first transcontinental paved highway (U.S. Highway 30) and Interstate 80 all have followed the Platte.

State Soft Drink

On May 21, 1998, Gov. Ben Nelson declared Kool-Aid to be the official state soft drink. The fruit-flavored drink was developed in Hastings in 1927 by Edwin E. Perkins, founder and president of the Perkins Products Co.[5]

State Beverage

On Sept. 10, 1998, Gov. Ben Nelson declared milk to be the official state beverage. The dairy industry is an important part of Nebraska's agricultural economy.

[5] Source: Adams County Historical Society.

State Poet Laureate[6]

The 1921 Legislature named John G. Neihardt (1881-1973) as Poet Laureate of Nebraska. Neihardt's first book of poetry was published in 1908. In 1912, he began writing "The Epic Cycle of the West," consisting of five long narrative poems, and this became his chief literary work. These poems are Neihardt's substantial and unique contribution to the history of Nebraska and the West.

State Poet[7]

Twyla Hansen was named Nebraska's second state poet by proclamation of Gov. Dave Heineman on Nov. 14, 2013. Hansen is the first woman to hold the post, which had been vacant since the death of William Kloefkorn in 2011. Raised on a farm near Lyons in northeast Nebraska, Hansen received an undergraduate degree in horticulture and a master's degree in agroecology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Hansen has published extensively and received numerous awards and honors for her poetry, including the High Plains Book Award and the WILLA Literary Award. She also has twice received the Nebraska Book Award. Hansen, who lives in Lincoln, was appointed to the position for a five-year term.

U.S. Poet Laureate

The Library of Congress named Garland resident Ted Kooser the U.S. Poet Laureate for 2004-06. Kooser is the author of 12 poetry collections, including "Delights and Shadows," which won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize, "Weather Central" and "Flying at Night." He also has published three books of prose, including "Local Wonders; Seasons in the Bohemian Alps." Kooser has won many honors and awards, including four honorary doctorate degrees and two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. Ground-breaking for the Ted Kooser Elementary School in Lincoln was held in April 2008. Kooser is Presidential Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

State Song

The 1967 Legislature declared "Beautiful Nebraska," composed by Jim Fras, to be the state's official song.

[6] The title "poet laureate" remains with Neihardt. For more information and a photograph of Neihardt, see his Nebraska Hall of Fame listing on Page 72.
[7] Source: Twyla Hansen.