

## NEBRASKA'S STATE SYMBOLS<sup>3</sup>

### 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 depicts a steamboat ascending the Missouri River on the right. 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."

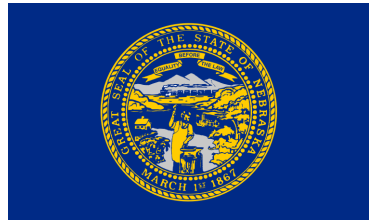


### State Flag

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.



<sup>3</sup>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 1873 Timber Culture Act authored by U.S. Sen. Phineas W. Hitchcock 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 flatish 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.



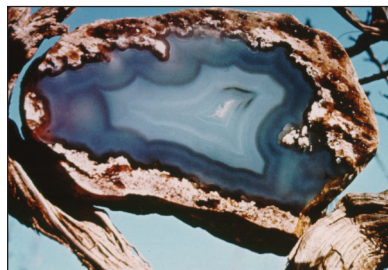
## State Fossil

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 \$3.9 million industry in Nebraska. In 2021, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, there were about 39,000 colonies of honeybees in the state producing an average of 47 pounds of honey per colony.





## 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.<sup>4</sup>



## 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

---

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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.



**Platte River in Early Spring**

## **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.<sup>5</sup>

## **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.

## **State Migratory Bird**

On March 16, 2022, Gov. Pete Ricketts declared the Sandhill crane to be the official state migratory bird. Each spring, as many as 1 million sandhill cranes migrate through the Platte River Valley in central Nebraska. The birds begin arriving in mid-February and numbers peak in mid- to late-March as the cranes make their way from wintering areas in the southern U.S. and Mexico to their breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska and Siberia. It is the largest gathering of Sandhill cranes in the world and draws tens of thousands of spectators annually to the area between Kearney and Grand Island.



<sup>5</sup> Source: Adams County Historical Society.



## State Reptile

On Oct. 28, 2022, Gov. Pete Ricketts declared the Ornate Box turtle (*Terrapene ornata*) to be the official state reptile. The Ornate Box turtle is the only terrestrial turtle species native to Nebraska and can be found in short, mixed and tallgrass prairies. Ornate Box turtles are named for their hinged lower shell, which allows them to pull their head, legs and tail almost completely into their shell to escape from predators. Ornate Box turtles rarely are more than six inches long and can live up to 30 years. Reptiles such as the Ornate Box turtle are critical to the health of Nebraska's ecosystems for their role in insect and rodent control and as a food source for many native predators.



## State Poet Laureate<sup>6</sup>

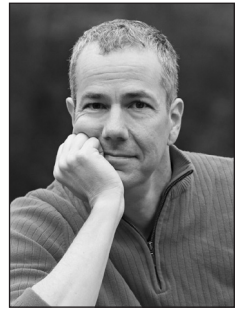
The 1921 Legislature named John G. Neihardt (1881-1973) as Poet Laureate of Nebraska. Neihardt's first book of poetry was published in 1908. In 1912, he began writing "The Epic Cycle of the West," consisting of five long narrative poems, and this became his chief literary work. These poems are Neihardt's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

## State Poet

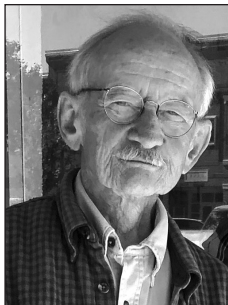
Matt Mason was named Nebraska's third state poet by proclamation of Gov. Pete Ricketts on Jan. 30, 2019. Mason, the author of four books, is the former executive director of the Nebraska Writers Collective and is the winner of a Pushcart Prize and two Nebraska Book Awards. His work also can be found in numerous magazines and anthologies. Mason is based in Omaha with his wife, poet Sarah McKinstry-Brown, and daughters Sophia and Lucia.

William Kloefkorn of Lincoln was named Nebraska's first state poet by proclamation of Gov. Charles Thone on Sept. 11, 1982. A retired English professor at Nebraska Wesleyan University, Kloefkorn served as state poet until his death in 2011.

Twyla Hansen, Nebraska's second state poet, served from 2013 to 2018. Hansen has published extensively and received numerous awards and honors for her poetry, including two Nebraska Book Awards.



<sup>6</sup> The title "poet laureate" remains with Neihardt. For more information and a photograph of Neihardt, see his Nebraska Hall of Fame listing on Page 68.



## 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 15 poetry collections, including “Delights and Shadows,” which won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize, “Kindest Regards” and “Red Stilts.” He also has published five children’s books and five 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. Ted Kooser Elementary School in Lincoln opened in 2009.

Kooser is Presidential Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

## SPECIAL DAYS IN NEBRASKA<sup>7</sup>

**George W. Norris Day:** Jan. 5, to honor the longtime Nebraska politician.

**State Day:** March 1, the day Nebraska joined the Union in 1867.

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Day:** April 13, to honor the U.S. president.

**Workers Memorial Day:** April 28, in remembrance of the courage and integrity of U.S. workers.

**State Fire Day:** Friday before Fire Recognition Day in May, to call public attention to the great damage that fire causes to life and property.

**Fire Recognition Day:** Second Saturday in May. Exercises appropriate for the subject and day may be conducted by any fire department.

**Pioneers’ Memorial Day:** Second Sunday in June, in recognition of those who served and sacrificed as pioneers in the settlement of Nebraska.

**Nebraska Czech Day:** First Sunday in August. The date coincides with the annual Czech Festival at Wilber, which has been designated the Czech capital of Nebraska and the United States.

**John G. Neihardt Day:** First Sunday in August, to honor the writer and Nebraska poet laureate.

**Howard’s Day:** Sept. 2, the birthday of John Howard, author of prison reform throughout the world. Observed in the state’s correctional institutions.

**American Indian Day:** Fourth Monday in September, to honor the first residents of Nebraska and recognize their contributions to the state.

**Pulaski’s Memorial Day:** Oct. 11, to commemorate the death of Revolutionary War hero Casimir Pulaski. The brigadier general died of wounds suffered in the siege of Savannah, Ga., on Oct. 11, 1779.

**White Cane Safety Day:** Oct. 15, to recognize the importance of the white cane as a symbol of independence for blind people and to remind citizens of the need to keep streets, sidewalks and other public places safe and functional for people with disabilities.

<sup>7</sup> Source: Nebraska Revised Statutes.