

Nebraska's Niobrara & Sandhills Safari With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



May 28 – June 4, 2019
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Hidden almost in plain sight, Nebraska has a giant secret--the spectacular Sandhills. A region with 128 million acres of sand dunes mostly covered in prairie, sustained by rainfall and groundwater, then sliced by beautiful rivers.

The region has a plethora of hidden treasures that will be the quests of your tour. We will seek out the region's amazing plants, wildlife, wetlands, rivers and unique features. You will get to meet the conservationists and ranch families who care for the rich native prairie community that supports them and stabilizes about 20,000 square miles of sand dunes.

We will look into the wetland eyes of the Ogallala Aquifer that peek out from below the dunes, and explore its waters in the stunning streams and waterfalls that hide in the valleys. A float trip on the calm, steady flowing Niobrara (Nei-oh-brarera) Wild and Scenic River is akin to uncovering a crown jewel, and "tanking" down the Calamus is discovering a whole new river experience.

Buried in volcanic ash there are herds of intact fossil remains—mostly mammals, that National Geographic called, "the Pompeii of pre-historic animals." At Ashfall Fossil Beds the chant is; "it's rhinos, not dinos." It's also horses, camels and a lot more. Fortunately, we do not have to dig because the fossils are now in plain view at this working National Natural Landmark paleontological site.

Itinerary

Tues., May 28 Arrival in Lincoln, Nebraska | Welcome Dinner

We begin our tour in Lincoln, Nebraska's, friendly state capital that is conveniently situated to our Nebraska Sandhills destination. Our expert guides, Ed and Sil Pembleton, meet you at the airport today and we have arranged a welcome dinner at a favorite restaurant in the historic Hay Market District.

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Canoe the Niobrara Wild and Scenic River (including a visit to Smith Falls), and canoe, tube, or tank the Calamus River near our lodging
- ✓ Witness herds of Bison and Elk, Black-tailed Prairie Dog towns, and other species on the native prairies at Fort Niobrara and Valentine National Wildlife Refuges
- ✓ Discover the amazing Ashfall Fossil Beds that contain intact, complete specimens of horses, camels, rhinos, and other fossils
- ✓ Venture deeper into the sandhills on a ranch habitat jeep safari tour
- ✓ Observe many of the birds that migrate for the summer to Nebraska's Great Plains to breed: Swainson's Hawk, Upland Sandpiper, Burrowing Owl, Western Kingbird, Blue Grosbeak, Dickcissel, Orchard Oriole, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and more
- ✓ Learn about the prairie ecosystem and conservation efforts to maintain and enhance this landscape
- ✓ Enjoy the hospitality and share the knowledge of our hosting ranch family who cares for the ecosystem and community that supports their ranch and tourism businesses

Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Nebraska Nature Tour
with Ed & Sil Pembleton
\$2490, from Lincoln
Airport is Lincoln (LNK)



If you should arrive early, by 2:00 PM, join us for the opportunity to visit [Morrill Hall](#), home of the University of Nebraska State Museum. Morrill Hall houses marvelous fossil exhibits and a collection of more than a million Cenozoic mammal fossils.

Did you know? University of Nebraska, Professor Emeritus, Mike Voorhies, says that if you live in Nebraska there's a 90% chance that there's a fossil elephant under your house.

Accommodations in Lincoln (D)

Wed., May 29 Travel to Calamus Outfitters | Fort Hartsuff | Ranch Jeep Tour

We depart Lincoln to one of Nebraska's biggest and best kept secrets: the Sandhills. It's a region of prairie-shrouded sand dunes covering more than 20,000 square miles (that's 128 million acres, more or less). Some dunes rise 800 feet and the area is filled with abundant wetlands, wildlife, and rivers. In most places, prairie grasses hold the sands in place, but severe weather and/or poor range management can let the sand start to move, creating stark and unique habitats. It is amazing so few people have discovered the beauty of this region.

En route we explore Fort Hartsuff State Historical Park, a unique cavalry outpost that, because of its concrete construction, survived long enough to be restored to conditions similar to its 1870s position along the trail to the Black Hills. Chimney Swifts, which nest in the concrete construction, are often chattering overhead.

After lunch in Burwell, we proceed to our lodgings at the Switzer Ranch, home of Calamus Outfitters, where we stay for the remainder of the trip.

After time to settle in and freshen up, we enjoy a Jeep tour of the Switzer Ranch for our first in-depth exploration of the Sandhills ecosystem and gain insights into how they sustainably manage prairies for wildlife and livestock. While we listen intently to their family story and how their management practices benefit the local ecology, we may also hear the melodic calls of Western Meadowlark. If we are lucky, we may even see Greater Prairie-Chicken or Sharp-tailed Grouse — their presence is a good indicator of the healthy prairie ecosystem they maintain here. We end the day with a ranch dinner.

Accommodations at Calamus Outfitters (B,L,D)

Thurs., May 30

Niobrara: Float the River & Explore Ft. Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge

After a ranch breakfast, we head northwest to explore the Niobrara River Valley, where a rich ecosystem contains six different plant communities. This biodiversity results from varying topography coupled with the convergence of flora and fauna from north and south, as well as east and west.



We spend about half of our day floating the Niobrara Wild and Scenic River. It's a stream so different and beautiful that first-time visitors cannot believe it's in Nebraska. As one of the better-known features in this landscape, the river attracts large crowds during summer weekends. However, on a weekday this time of year we are likely to enjoy the Niobrara's, beauty, gentle flows, and quiet whispers in our own solitude.

After paddling down river, we relish a picnic lunch and a short hike up to Smith Falls (Nebraska's tallest) before heading to our afternoon adventures on the 19,000-acre Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge. The native prairie habitat here attracts many colorful summer breeders, including Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Dickcissel, Lark Sparrow, and Horned Lark. Northern Harrier and Swainson's Hawk often patrol the grasslands, while Black-headed Grosbeak and Orchard Oriole sing from the more wooded areas.

Our wildlife viewing experiences here are always unique, because the refuge is large enough to have almost 5,000 acres of designated wilderness; border nine miles of the Niobrara River; provide native prairie habitat for Greater Prairie Chickens, other prairie birds, bison and elk herds; contain a Black-tailed Prairie Dog town; and have enough different topography to support biodiverse communities.

We return to Calamus Outfitters for dinner at the end of a rewarding day.

Accommodations at Calamus Outfitters (B,L,D)

Fri., May 31 Ashfall: Nebraska's "Fossil Pompeii" of Pre-Historic Animals

A hearty Calamus breakfast sends us off to explore Ashfall Fossil Beds, a National Natural Landmark. *National Geographic* referred to this prime example of Nebraska's rich fossil resources as the "fossil Pompeii of pre-historic animals." Almost 50 years ago, and just 10 miles from where he grew up, "paleo sleuth" Dr. Mike Voorhies discovered a rhino skull at this site. He and his colleagues have been digging through the volcanic ash deposited from the Yellowstone caldera and investigating the fossil treasures ever since. Because the animals died rapidly and were left largely undisturbed, it has been possible to learn a great deal about the ancient ecosystem that perished 12-million years ago. If he is on site today, we learn how skilled Dr. Voorhies is at doing science, as well as explaining what they have found and the future of the ongoing research.



We return to Calamus Outfitters, or perhaps the nearby café in Burwell for dinner.
Accommodations at Calamus Outfitters (B,L,D)

Sat. June 1 Explore the Ranch & Communities of Calamus, Burwell & Taylor

After the last couple of full days of activities, today has minimal travel as we explore local ecosystems and communities. After our hearty ranch breakfast, we stretch our legs with a hike and local birding. If you are prone to get up really early, birding can be available before breakfast. Mid-morning we head down the Calamus Reservoir shoreline looking for nesting Bald Eagle, Wood Duck, American White Pelican, Great Blue Heron, and Belted Kingfisher. Wooded areas by the reservoir include nesting habitat for Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-headed Woodpecker, and Orchard Oriole.

After lunch in Burwell we return to the ranch with an opportunity to canoe, tube and/or “tank” down the Calamus River. That’s correct, “tank” down the river — it means floating downstream in a large, round, plastic stock-watering tank. It’s an easy and almost “untippable,” way to float down the Calamus.

We conclude our lazy summer day with dinner in nearby Taylor at the Bootleg Brewers, a café and microbrewery operated by the Sandhills Brewing Company.

Accommodations at Calamus Outfitters (B,L,D)

Sun., June 2 Audubon’s Hutton Sanctuary

Having greeted our day with the requisite ranch respite, we depart due north for a drive up to Audubon’s Hutton Sanctuary, a 5,000 acre ranch situated on the south bank of the Niobrara River.

The Hutton family willed the ranch to Audubon of Kansas, stipulating that it be managed as a sanctuary for wildlife. With a philosophy that wildlife, conservation, and ranch management are interconnected, the ranch employs a variety of techniques to enhance the wildlife values on this land. With use of prescribed fire, improved livestock watering systems, and range management the sanctuary serves as a showcase of the results that can be achieved. In addition to seeing some of the changes and wildlife improvements, we see the “dog”



town where prairie dogs were reintroduced in 2012, as well as explore the prairies, marshes, and the original homestead along the shoreline of the Niobrara. A rich variety of songbirds nest in the restored prairie, so we hope to see some of the following species here: Western and Eastern Kingbirds, Grasshopper and Lark Sparrows, Bobolink and Dickcissel.

Dinner finds us in the Basset Lodge and Range Café, which has retained its mid-century décor and quirky charm since it was constructed as the cattleman's home away from home in the 1950s.

Accommodations at Calamus Outfitters (B,L,D)

Mon., June 3 TNC's Niobrara Valley Preserve & Valentine NWR

Today's excursion of discovery takes us north along the North Loup River to The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve on the Niobrara River. With 56,000 acres (one of TNC's largest preserves in the US) it is operated as a working ranch that practices prairie management with two herds of bison, cattle grazing, and prescribed fire. It is a spectacular property that protects 25 miles of the Niobrara River where the staff conducts research on the rich flora and fauna found in what is referred to as the "biological crossroads of the Great Plains." They are particularly interested in the effects of bison and different methods and regimes of grazing and controlled fire. During our trail hike we should locate some of the grazing bison and discover many species of wildflowers.

From the TNC preserve we travel to the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, where we search for resident and nesting birds on and around these wetlands, which largely originate from the Ogallala Aquifer. Unlike other areas to the south, the Ogallala Aquifer is rich with water here and breaks through the surface of the sand to provide yet another unique habitat. It provides nesting opportunities for a large variety of waterfowl, including a reintroduced population of Trumpeter Swan. Eared and Western Grebes fish in deeper areas, while Yellow-headed Blackbird and Marsh Wren sing their tunes from the reeds.

We finish the day with dinner at a local restaurant before returning to Calamus.

Accommodations at Calamus Outfitters (B,L,D)

Tues., June 4 Return to Lincoln | Departures

After our final ranch breakfast, we bid farewell to our ranch hosts and head back to Lincoln. Please arrange for flights out after 2:00 PM, or we can drop you at an airport hotel for flights out the following day.

As you say farewell and fly home, remember that the Nebraska Sandhills are also in “plane” view if you’re flying from Minneapolis to Denver or a similar route. Watch and you may notice a part of the Great Plains lacking the pattern of Jeffersonian roads that crosshatch most of what is known as “flyover country.” Now you know some of the secrets that are hidden there and that it’s something very special.



Your Guides: Ed & Sil Pembleton

As Aldo Leopold said, “There are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot.” Ed and Seliesa Pembleton count themselves among those who cannot. The couple delights in introducing children and adults to the wonders of the natural world. For over 30 years as educators, naturalists, and conservationists the Pembletons have lead field trips to explore landscapes, celebrate wild things, and marvel at the annual gathering of more than 500,000 Sandhill Cranes along the Platte River in Nebraska. As a 14-year employee of the National Audubon Society, Ed was instrumental in directing national and worldwide attention to the river

and the cranes. As director of the Leopold Education Project, he promoted Aldo Leopold’s philosophy of land ethics. An accomplished photographer, Ed’s pictures appear in books and national magazines. Seliesa has written wildlife books for children, worked at the Smithsonian Institution and for 10 years was director of environmental studies at Hard Bargain Farm, an outdoor education facility on the Potomac River. She has been invited to Japan several times to teach environmental education “American style.” The couple enjoys birding, hiking, gardening, and canoeing. They enjoy sharing their expertise on rivers and prairies on Naturalist Journeys’ adventures.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Please note, starting in January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Travel Information

Please plan to arrive in Lincoln no later than 2:00 PM on May 28. Please plan on departures after 2:00 PM on June 4.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is **\$2,490 DBL / \$2,990 SGL**, from Lincoln, Nebraska. Cost includes: all accommodations; all meals as stated in the itinerary; group airport transfers; ground transportation; professional guide services; park, preserve, and other activity fees; and miscellaneous program expenses.

Tour price does not include: roundtrip airfare to and from Lincoln, Nebraska, or items of a personal nature such as laundry, portorage, telephone charges, or alcoholic beverages.

Photo Credits

Burrowing Owl, Greg Smith (GS); Yellow-headed Blackbird, Ed Pembleton (EP); Badgers, EP; Red-headed Woodpecker, EP; Western Meadowlark, EP; Elk, EP; Sharp-tailed Grouse, EP; Wilson’s Snipe, EP; TNC Preserve in Bloom EP; Upland Sandpiper, EP; Greater Prairie Chicken, GS; Swainson’s Hawk, GS; Blue Grosbeak, Mahlon Hale; Horned Lark, GS; Niobrara River, EP; Black-headed Grosbeak, Sandy Sorkin; Rhino Fossil, EP; Calamus Sandhill Safari, EP; Sandhills in Bloom, EP; Tanking, courtesy Calamus Outfitters; Prairie Dog, EP; Trumpeter Swans, GS; Bobolink, Steve Wolfe.

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