University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Hunter and Angler Research

Learning how we can make your public-access lands and waters work for you

Hunter Survey

2014-2015 Annual Report

Learning more about hunters helps us manage wildlife habitat and improve public hunting opportunities in Nebraska

Hunting opportunities are out there for everyone

Participation in hunting sports is a long-standing tradition in Nebraska, with value for communities, local economies, wildlife conservation, and outdoor recreation. Knowing why people hunt when and where they do, and how management may influence those decisions is central to understanding how we can maintain hunting participation. Unfortunately, despite the importance of hunting to Nebraska, we know surprisingly little about what drives hunter participation and how it influences wildlife populations and wildlife management. In Nebraska, we have a unique opportunity to examine how hunters use public-access lands, and what we learn will hopefully provide managers and policy makers with information that will help improve hunting opportunities and ensure the future of the Nebraska hunting tradition.

What we do

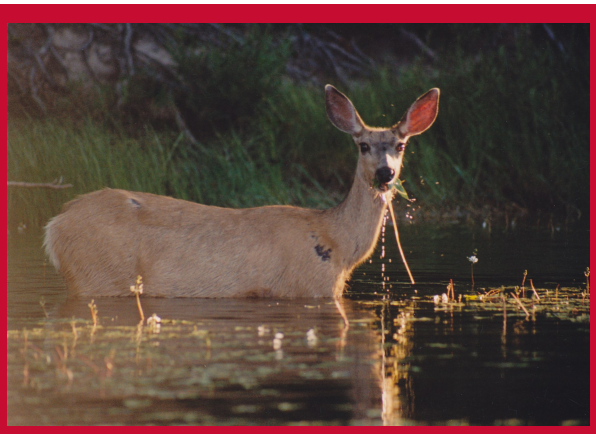
We monitor hunting activity on public-access lands in Nebraska by counting cars and hunters, allowing us to gauge where people choose to hunt and what opportunities hunters take advantage of around the state.

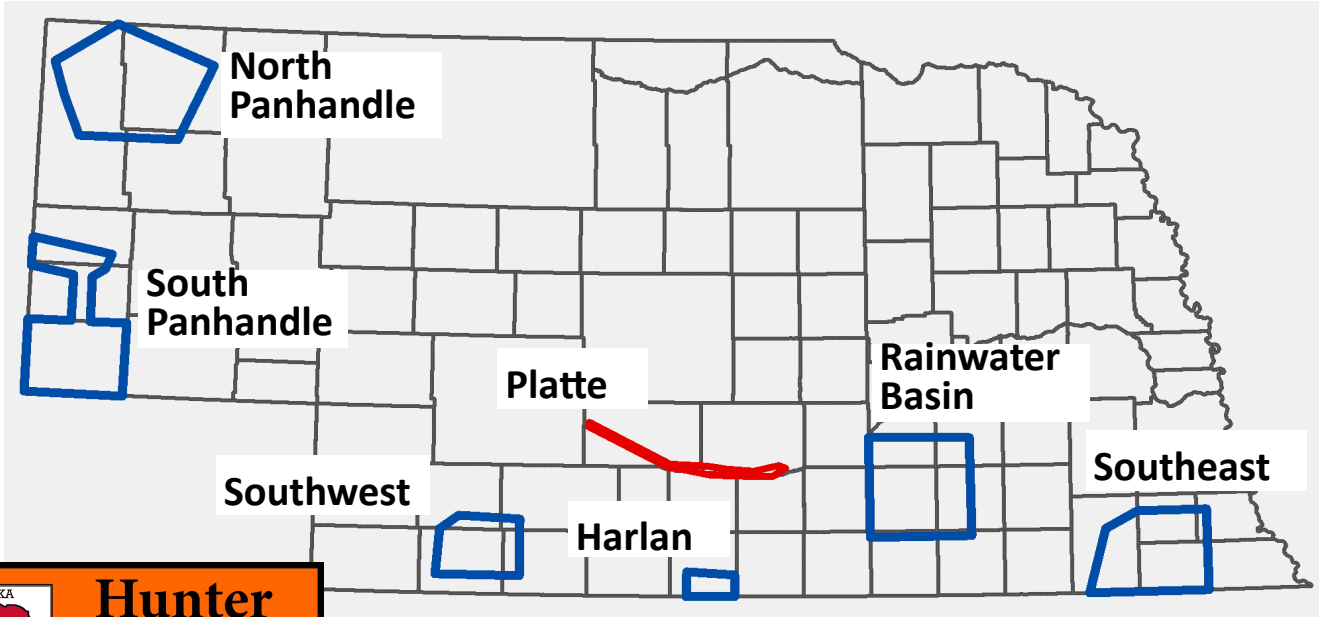
When we meet hunters on our survey routes, we conduct in-person interviews. Some of the questions we ask include:

- What species are you hunting?
- Why did you chose to hunt here?
- Where else have you hunted?

Who we meet

Most public-access lands we monitor are purchased or leased using funds from hunters and anglers. Not surprisingly, 87% of the people we meet were either hunting or fishing. However, public-access lands are also used by people for other reasons, including exercising, camping, or wildlife viewing.





NEBRASKA HUNTER & ANGLER RESEARCH

Hunter Survey

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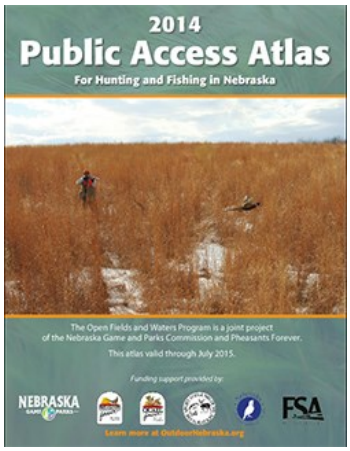
NEBRASKA GAME & PARKS

University of Nebraska Lincoln

Where we work

We conduct interviews and count hunters on public-access lands around the state, including wildlife management areas, waterfowl production areas, and private lands enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters program. In 2014 we had six focal regions (blue) and in 2015 we are adding a new area along the Platte River (red).

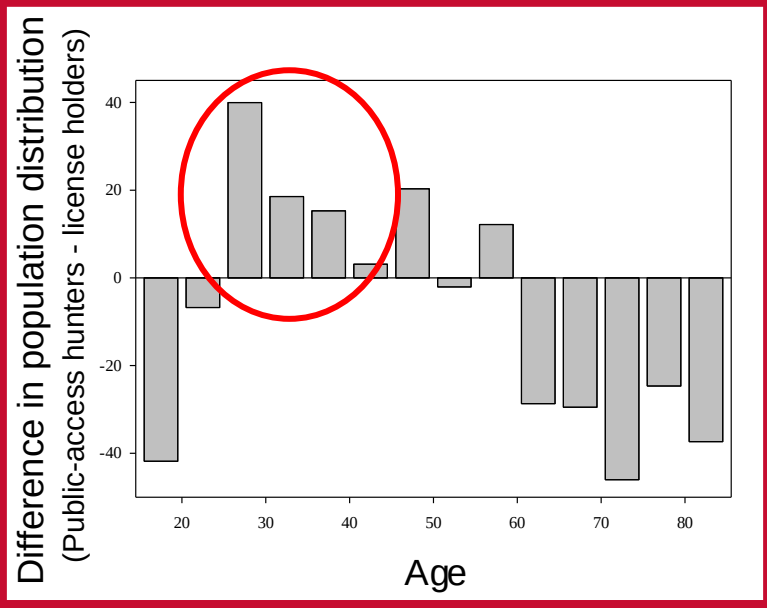
What is public-access?



Any land or water open to public hunting or fishing is considered "public-access" for sportsmen and women. In Nebraska, public-access lands include properties owned by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, properties owned by other natural resource agencies, and private properties enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters Program. The locations of available lands are listed in the Public Access Atlas, produced each year by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and available for free around the state. The atlas works: almost 30% of the hunters we interviewed used the paper atlas to find a place to hunt, and another 10% used the online or mobile version.

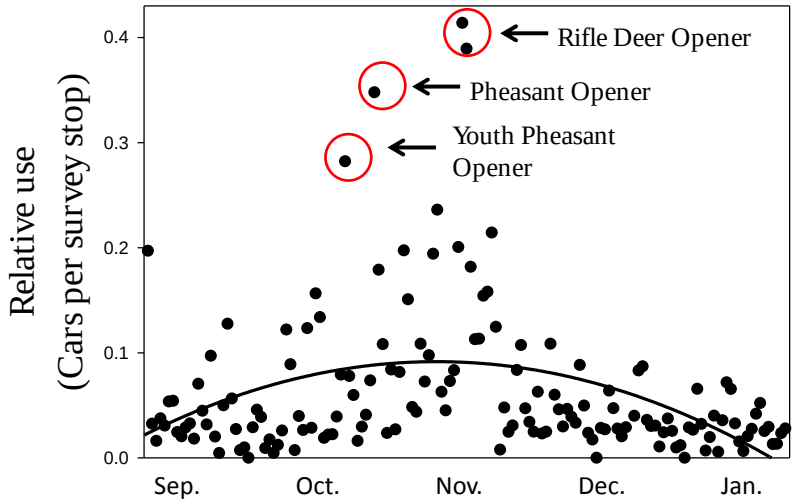
Public-access may be important for younger hunters

Each year information from hunting license sales is used to learn about Nebraska's hunters and make management decisions. But are hunters who use public-access lands different from the hunting community in general? Hunters we interviewed had a median age of 42, which is about six years older than the average Nebraskan, but six years younger than the median age of Nebraska hunting license holders. The graph to the right shows the difference between all license-holders and hunters who use public-access lands to hunt— bars above the zero-line represent groups which use public-access lands more than expected based on license sales, while bars below the line represent groups that use public-access lands less than expected. Public-access lands appear particularly important for hunters in their late 20s and throughout their 30s, but the use of the same public-access lands appears less important to older hunters.



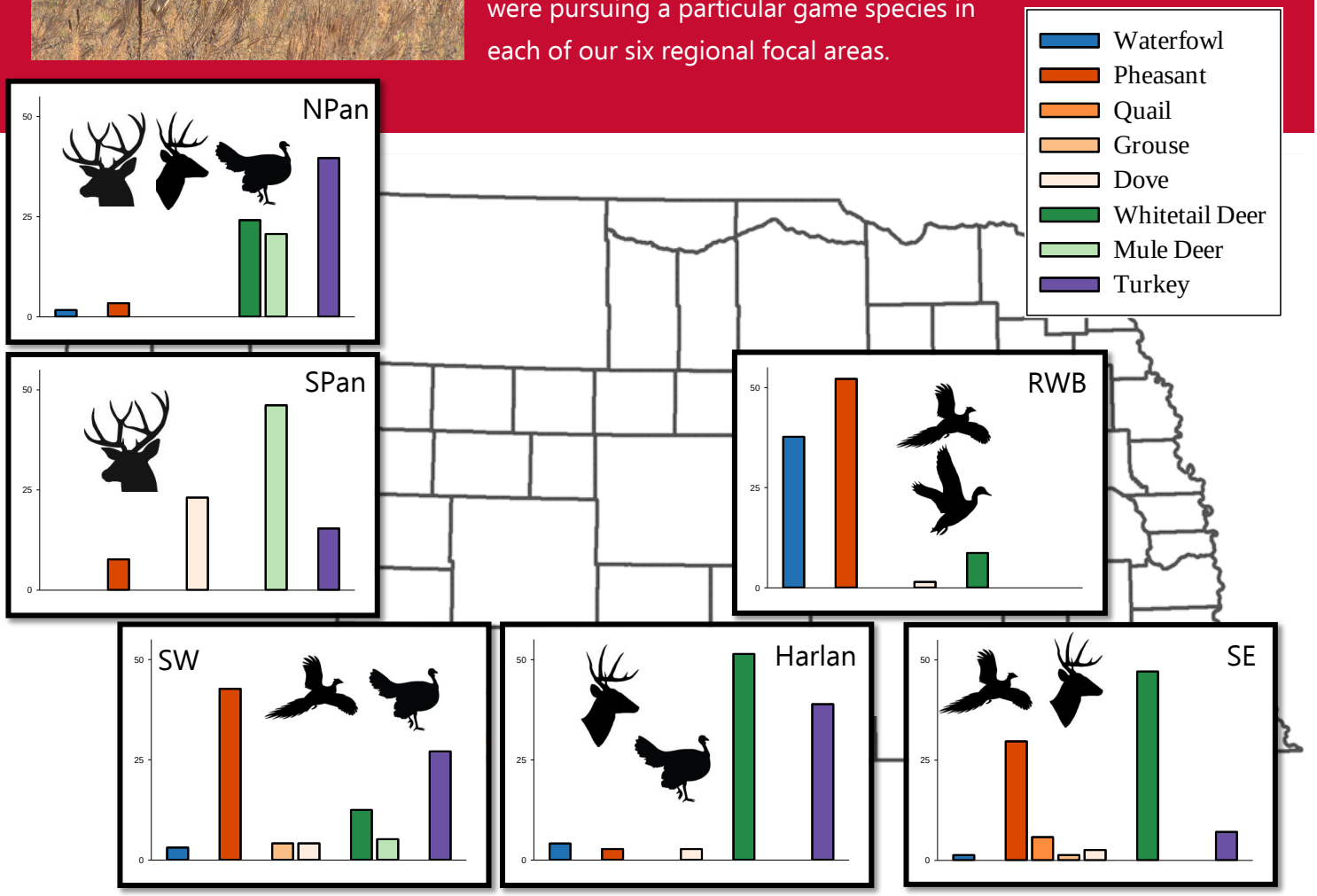
The season is open . . .

The opening of any season is a big deal, but the first days of pheasant and rifle deer seasons bring nearly twice as many people out to public-access lands than any other day of the year.



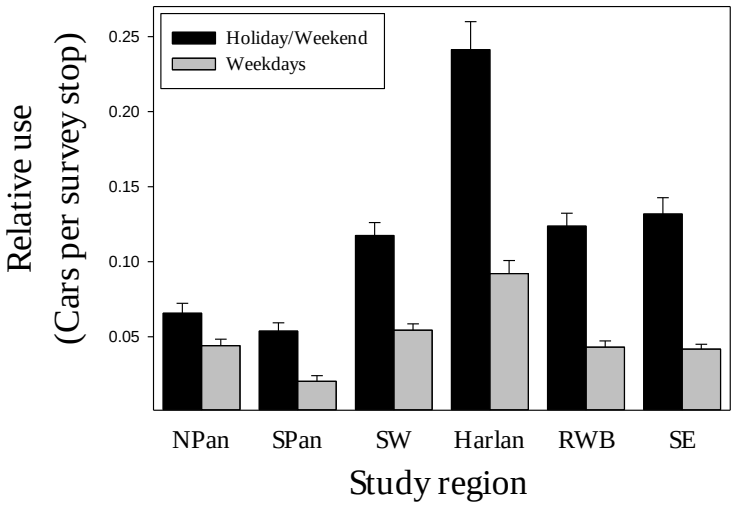
Each part of Nebraska provides a unique hunting experience

In general, hunters fall into four major categories: waterfowl, upland birds, deer, and turkey. Hunters specializing in particular game species will take advantage of hunting opportunities throughout the state, but some areas of the state get more use than others. The graphic below shows the percentage of hunters we interviewed that were pursuing a particular game species in each of our six regional focal areas.



Weekend warriors

Weekends and holidays are important times to hunt. In Southeast Nebraska and in the Rainwater Basin, 75-85% of hunters return home each night. In contrast, hunters in the North Panhandle have longer trips which include more weekdays, with more than 75% of them stay overnight in a campground or hotel.

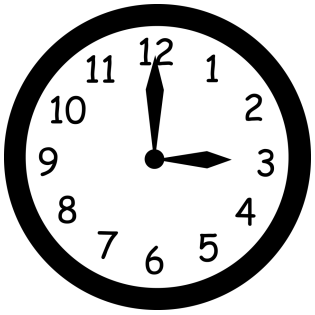


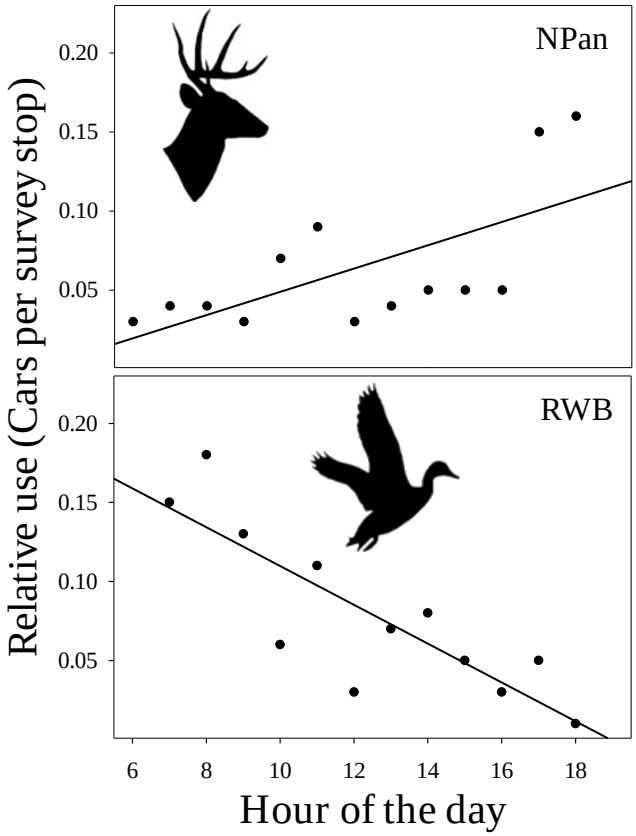
Public-access is important

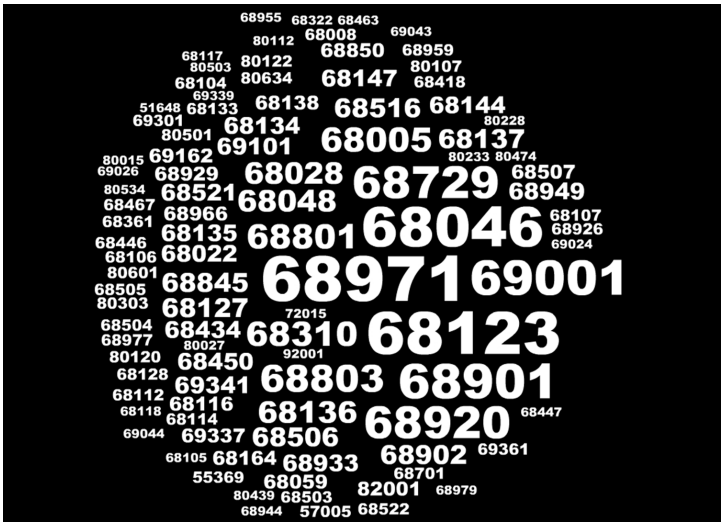
Not having a place to hunt is often cited as the number one reason why hunters quit or fail to ever start. Of the hunters we interviewed 60% had limited access to private property. In fact, that a property was public-access was the second most common reason why hunters chose a site. But not all lands get the same amount of use: of the 451 properties we surveyed, we never found any users on 108 properties (24%), while only 5 properties (1%) accounted for 10% of annual use across the entire state.

Timing matters

In general, hunters are out on public-access lands in the morning. 76% of upland bird hunters and 66% of waterfowl hunters start hunting before noon. In the Rainwater Basin, where 80% of parties are hunting birds, there is a sharp decline in use throughout the day. But in the North Panhandle, where there are more deer hunters than bird hunters, use increases throughout the day.







Nebraska and beyond

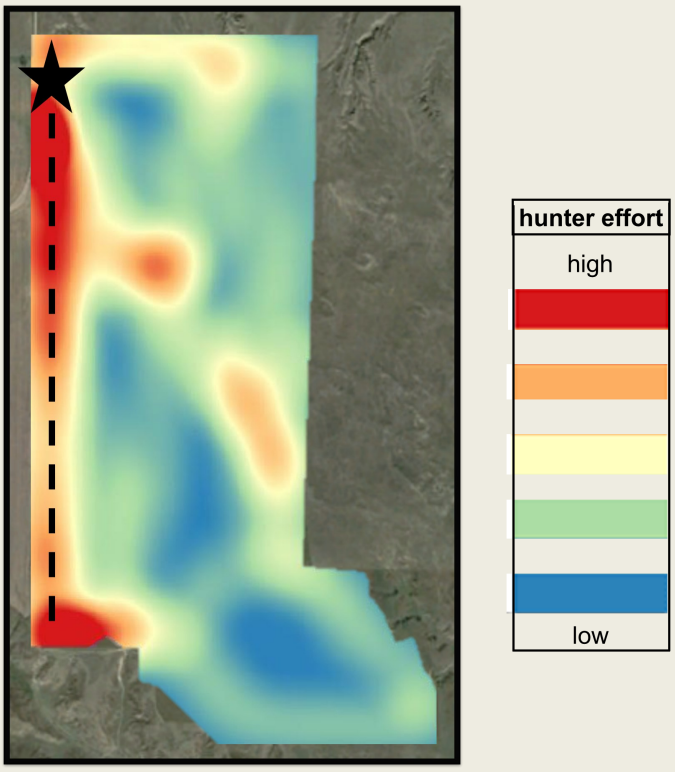
70% of the hunters we interviewed are from Nebraska, but hunters using public-access lands are from as far away as South Carolina, Arizona, and even Alaska.

Moving on

Hunters we interviewed spent nearly four hours hunting a site, with about 25% hunting multiple public-access sites in a day. Upland bird hunters were the most mobile, with 35% of parties visiting multiple public-access sites. The most common reason upland bird hunters moved: they had hunted the whole property.

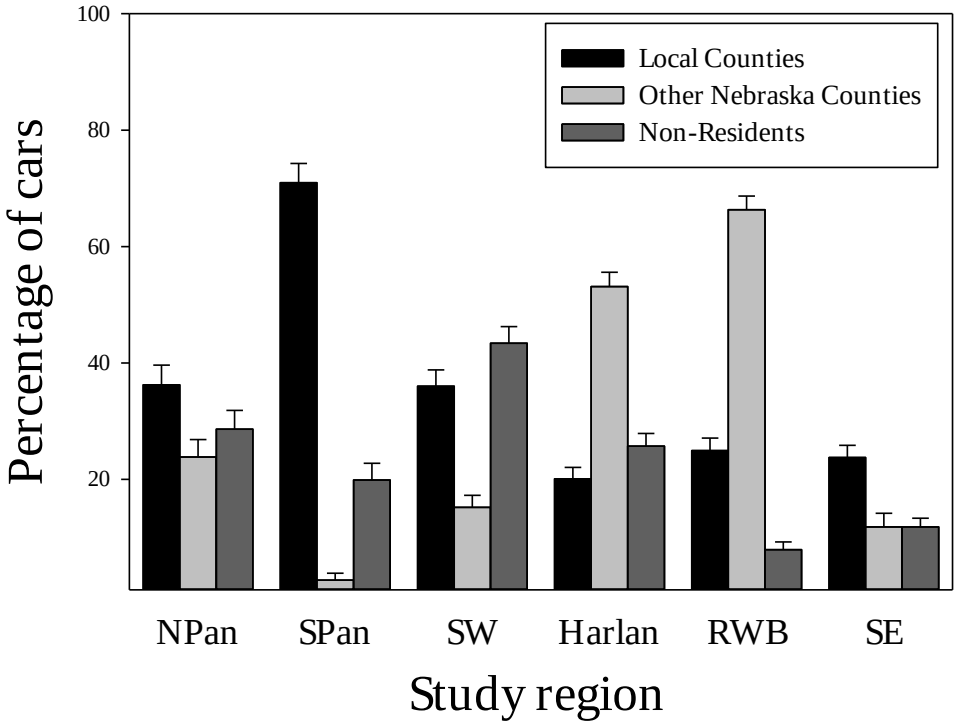
How we hunt

Understanding how people use public-access lands doesn't stop at the parking lot. Infrastructure such as parking areas and habitat conditions within a field can affect the hunting experience, but how? We have been working with pheasant hunters to better understand how access to a field affects where they spend time hunting. The map to the right shows that pheasant hunters on this field in Southwest Nebraska spent more time hunting near the parking area (star) and trail (dashes), while there were large areas of the field where hunters never walked.



Where do you come from, where do you go

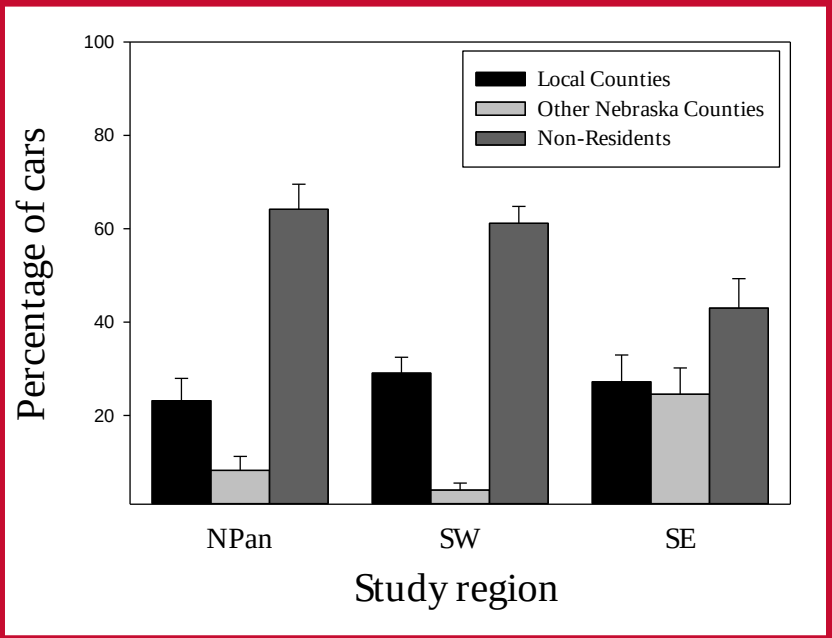
Each region of the state draws a unique group of hunters. The graphic below shows the percentage of hunters using public-access lands in each region based on license plates. Some regions, like the South Panhandle, are primarily used by locals, while others, like Harlan and the Rainwater Basin, are used by hunters from all over Nebraska. Southwest Nebraska takes the award for drawing the most out-state users: 45% of hunting parties we interviewed there had a member from Colorado.



County numbers on Nebraska's license plates help us identify

Travelin' for turkey

With abundant populations, a long season, and a liberal bag limit, Nebraska's spring turkey season draws many non-residents to the state, with public-access lands providing important opportunities for hunting.



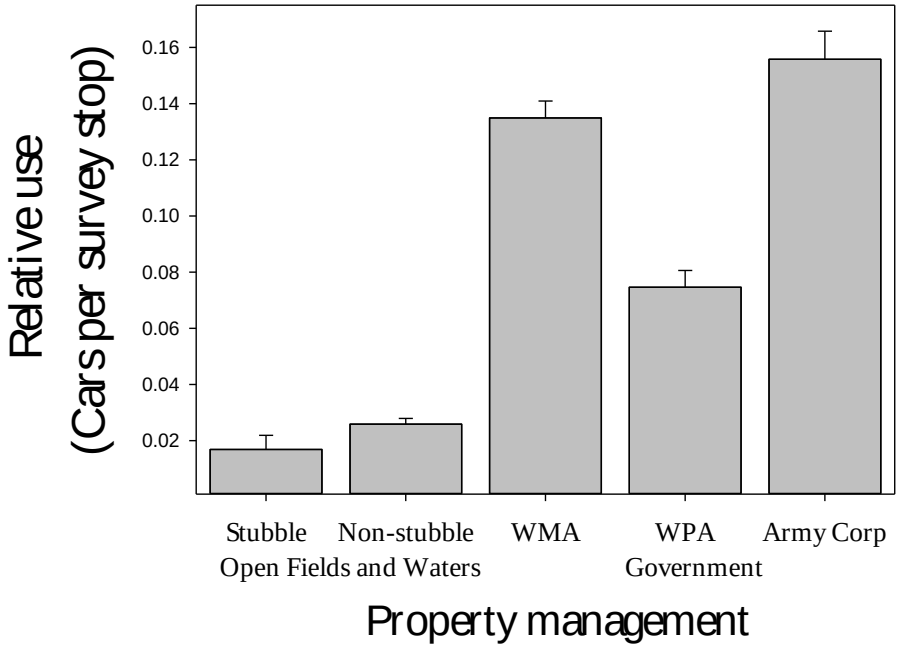
Hunting traditions

Tradition is important in hunting, so not surprisingly 23% of hunters we interviewed chose a site they had hunted before and nearly 80% indicated they would hunt the same place again. For people looking for a new experience, 41% used the Public Access Atlas to find a place to hunt.

What do hunters see?

Even though only 10% of hunters we interviewed chose a property for the habitat, 73% of parties thought the habitat conditions on public-access sites were above average. However, 43% of hunters thought game populations were less than they expected. The exception was duck hunters—more than half thought duck populations on public-access lands were above average.

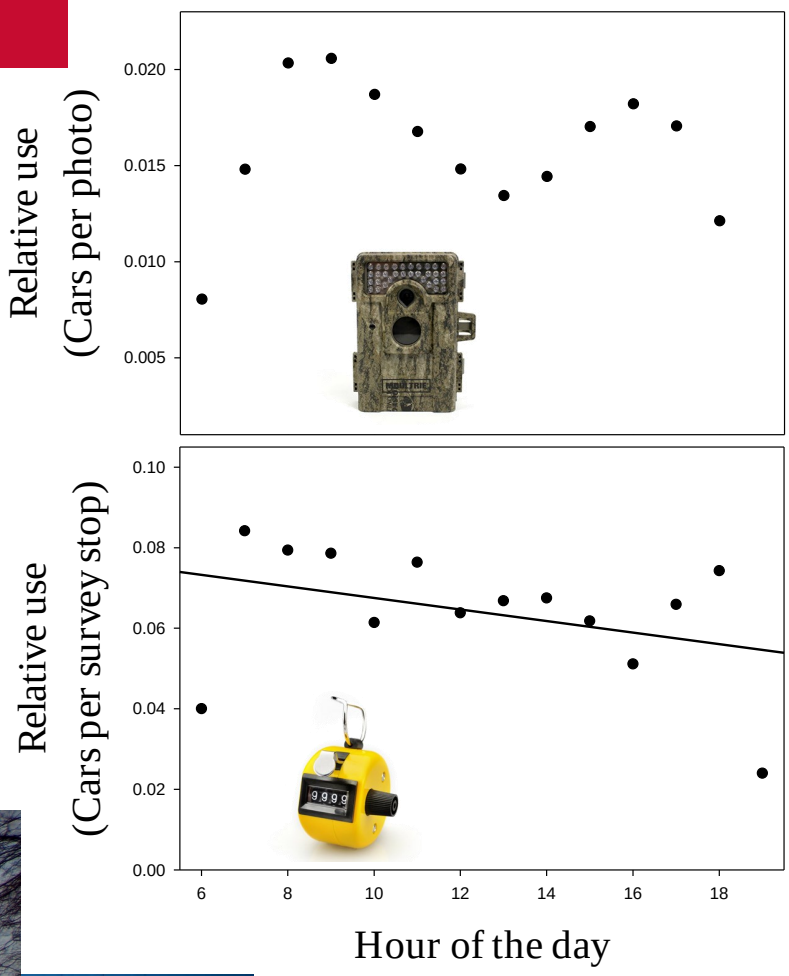
Property type matters

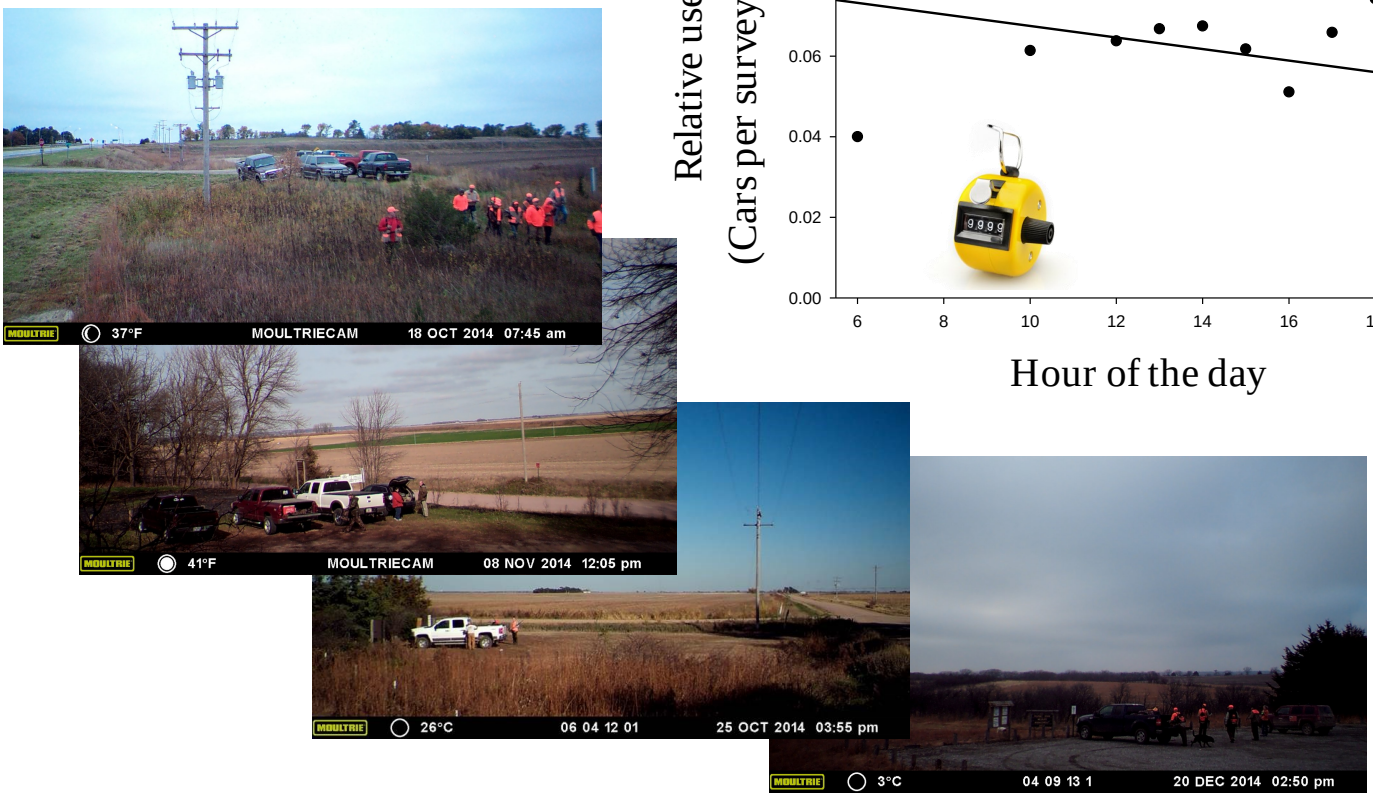


Government-owned properties have generally been open to hunting for years, which may explain why hunters, who traditionally visit the same sites year after year, may use them more often than private lands enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters Program. Government-owned lands are also often larger, and bigger properties are visited more frequently.

A picture tells . . .

In some places we were able to use time-lapse photography in addition to our regular survey routes to track how hunters used properties throughout the day. The graphs to the right both show how hunters use public-access lands, but they tell a different story. By taking a picture every five minutes, we can see two peaks in hunter use that was not apparent from our site visits which we only did a few times per week.





Hey buddy . . .

Hunting is a social activity: 80% of the parties we interviewed had two or more people. Nearly 80% of upland bird hunting parties included at least one four-legged friend, too. Whitetail deer hunters, on the other hand, were often alone. Archery hunters went solo 70% of the time.

Public Access Hunter Survey 2014/2015 Quick Facts

- 828 properties
- 194,755 acres of public-access lands
- 248 days of surveys
- 39,144 car counts
- 4 million time-lapse photos
- 1,200+ hunters interviewed

For more information visit us online

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WILDLIFE RESTORATION

Federal Aid Project
Funded by your purchase of hunting equipment

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