



Visiting the Niobrara Sanctuary:

Two Inviting Guesthouses and an Unforgettable Prairie Landscape

Article by **Ryan Klataske**

During the Fourth of July holiday, my wife Rachel and I had the opportunity to introduce four of our friends to the Niobrara Sanctuary. We spent most of our afternoons lounging in the shallow, warm water of the Niobrara River, which runs along a three-mile stretch of the Sanctuary’s northern edge. This nationally designated scenic river, one of the treasures of the Great Plains, is enjoyed by tens of thousands of visitors annually. However, from our spot along the quiet “lower” stretch that borders the Sanctuary, we felt as if we had this inspiring landscape all to ourselves. The only sign of the everyday world around us was an old windmill across the river and a row of hay bales in the distance. Our only other company on the river were the Cliff Swallows that swooped across the sandbanks and the Green Heron resting nearby. Small schools of minnows nipped at our feet, offering the feeling of a “high-end spa treatment,” as our friend, Andy Norman, later wrote.

On one of our most memorable evenings, we loaded our musical instruments – two guitars, a washtub bass and a musical saw – into the bed of the red, four-wheel drive pickup that is available for Sanctuary guests. We drove to a bluff overlooking the river valley, circled our instruments, and sang old-time songs as the sun set. A small group of deer passed by on the next hillside, stopping briefly to investigate.

As the sky darkened, nighthawks zipped overhead as if to offer their soprano sounds to our jam session. The evening of “prairieoke,” as we termed it, became the idea for a group event sponsored by the non-profit organization, HEAR Nebraska, which later brought together a group of music enthusiasts for a weekend of camaraderie and song in this natural setting.

We hope that all guests who visit the Niobrara Sanctuary leave with special memories such as these. Like Andy and his wife Angie, we hope that this landscape and the unique experiences it offers inspires them to bring back their friends and family, or plan their own retreat for music, nature photography, biking, birding, astronomy or other interests. Nature-based tourism such as this can play an important role in the future of the Great Plains and be a vital tool in support of prairie conservation.

For the Niobrara Sanctuary, visitors help to support the range of conservation efforts on the property, including restoration of native plant communities, reintroduction of wildlife, and protection of important habitats. Nature-based visitation promises to help support sustainable range management practices on the Sanctuary, and hopefully, highlights the opportunity for other landowners to integrate wildlife enjoyment and conservation into the



"We had two fine days on the ranch, which is quite beautiful, rooms very comfortable. We loved the bird books – as an aside, I wrote a long travel guide to the Bahamas for Rough Guides during my "old" career as a travel writer, and I found a book on the shelves by James Bond, Birds of the Bahamas, which I used during research. Quite an unusual volume.

"I wanted to also say that your on-site manager, Lana, could not have been nicer nor more professional. She took two hours to drive us through the sanctuary, down along the river, and into places we never could have gone. She was terrific."

– Gaylord Dodd

"This land is a place where wandering deer and turkeys are commonplace, and you might even get to see a black mink rush across the road, like we did."

– Andrew Norman



Consider planning an extended weekend retreat, family gathering, holiday or vacation stay in one of the two Niobrara Sanctuary guesthouses. Visit www.niobrarasanctuary.org for more information.

"working landscapes" of the Sandhills. In order to make it possible for guests to experience the prairie, with exclusive access to explore the canyons and meadows of the property, the Sanctuary offers two different self-catering guesthouses – both perfect for families, couples, and small groups.

The Sanctuary's Hutton House is situated beneath tall Cottonwoods and surrounded by grassland. This home of former ranch owners, Harold and Lucille Hutton, is now fully renovated and beautifully refurbished with modern amenities. During our stay in July, much of our time was also spent in front of the large living-room bay-window. We sank into the leather sofas and watched turkeys pass by in the afternoons, and fireflies scramble in the dark at night. With the windows open and the breeze blowing through the four bedrooms, no one had trouble sleeping. We woke up to the melodious song of Western Meadowlarks and astonishing sunrises. In the mornings, we enjoyed coffee around the kitchen table, overlooking a small grove of trees and a nearby meadow, often the crossing point for White-tailed Deer mothers with young fawns.

The Hutton House provides sophisticated accommodations, with all new beds and high quality bedding, all

new appliances, wireless internet, three bathrooms with new fixtures, and a spacious living and dining area decorated with art and photography. A cozy, sunken fireplace room connects to an office, a two-car garage, and opens up to a shady back patio where we rolled out the grill!

Just down the road, nestled in a shady grove of trees, is the Lazy Easy Ranch House. Guests are sure to find that the comfort and charm of this guesthouse comes from its simplicity, casual atmosphere, and quiet setting. Supporters have donated much of the eclectic furnishings, helping to make this house both "greener" and more affordable, and at the same time, creating a place to relax and put your feet up after a long hike or a day on the river – possibly on a float trip east of Valentine. This house features four fully furnished bedrooms, two bathrooms, kitchen, and a large living and dining room. One can take in the traditional ranchstead outbuildings from the front porch swing, along with the sight and sound of an array of "woodland edge" birds in summer. During the winter, after hiking and reading the messages of animal tracks in fresh snow along the miles of trails, one can enjoy the warmth and coziness of the living room, settle in with a good book, or take on the challenge of a jigsaw puzzle.



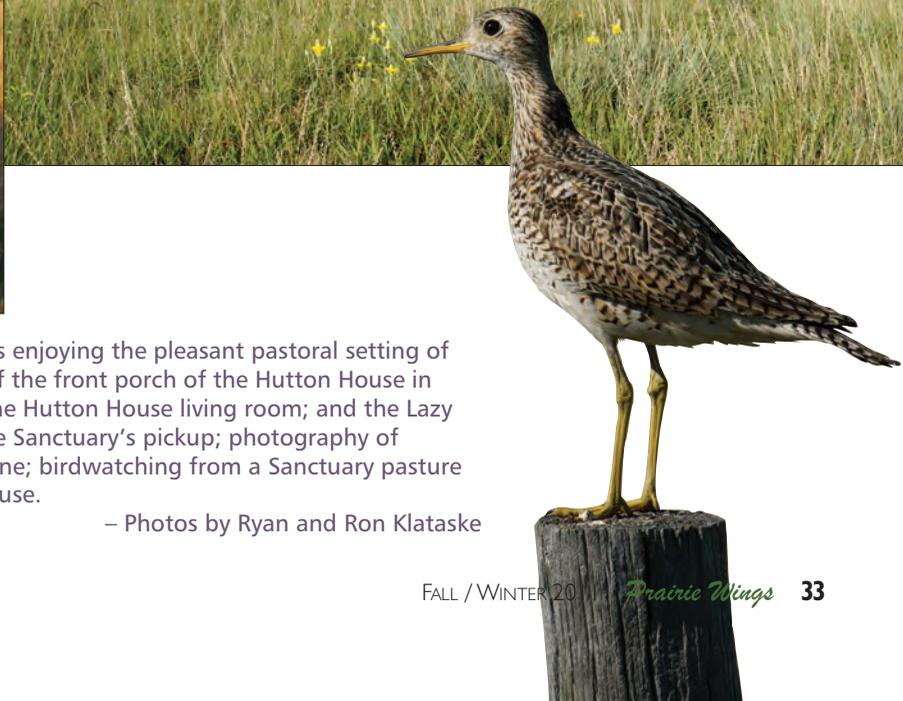
An evening of music on the Niobrara Sanctuary. From left to right: Angie Norman with musical saw, Rachel Klataske singing, Ryan Klataske on wash tub bass, and Andrew Norman and Nick Molen playing guitar.

– Photo by Shannon Molen



On winter mornings during the 1980s, Harold Hutton fed corn to a flock of Sharp-tailed Grouse that would visit the meadow in front of the Hutton House. We hope to re-establish that tradition for the enjoyment of guests – as well as a way to offer a modest supplement to the birds’ foraging needs. During the summer months, these same meadows fill with native wildflowers and butterflies. From the doorstep, guests can set out to explore the 5,000-acre Sanctuary on foot or horseback, or follow the network of country lanes by bicycle or automobile. In a landscape without traffic congestion or city lights, it seems nearly mandatory to walk outside on clear nights, as we did, to admire the unforgettable night sky and vastness of the Milky Way. We hope you will also come stand under the stars, explore the prairie, and experience this special place for yourself!

Ryan Klataske and his wife Rachel both grew up in Manhattan, Kansas, but currently live in Michigan. Since early childhood, Ryan has frequently visited the Niobrara River Valley getting to know local landowners and other individuals who cherish this natural resource. He often stayed on the ranch of Franklin and Lillie Egelhof, who became close family friends. Ryan is currently working on a Ph.D in Anthropology at Michigan State University, and is conducting research on private land conservation, wildlife management and land use in Namibia, located in southern Africa. His research focuses on private land conservancies – partnerships among landowners who cooperatively manage wildlife as a complement to livestock grazing and a source of ecotourism on semi-arid rangelands. Ryan recently developed the website for the Niobrara Sanctuary, www.niobrarasanctuary.org, which includes information about visitation and reservations for the guesthouses.



First page photos information (counter-clockwise): guests enjoying the pleasant pastoral setting of the Lazy Easy Guesthouse from the front porch; a view of the front porch of the Hutton House in March; the Andy Andersen Bedroom and Library Suite; the Hutton House living room; and the Lazy Easy living room. This page (top to bottom): Riding in the Sanctuary’s pickup; photography of flowers and butterflies; a leisurely walk on a Sanctuary lane; birdwatching from a Sanctuary pasture road; an Upland Sandpiper; and a view of the Hutton House.

– Photos by Ryan and Ron Klataske