

## Q&A with Kirk Nelson - Nebraska Game and Parks

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*By Alex Duryea, Ecotourism Consultant, Nebraska Tourism Commission*

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is implementing a plan to restore native prairie grasses and increase pollinator habitat along the Cowboy Trail. I talked with Kirk Nelson, the Assistant Division Administrator of Planning and Programing Division, who is leading [the effort](#).

**Q: Tell me about the Prairie Restoration Plan for the Cowboy Nature and Recreation Trail**

**A:** The trail is both a recreation and nature trail, it's nationally designated as such. We're interested in both facets of that designation. We want to increase the recreation aspect and increase the nature part of it to make it more of an ecological component of importance to wildlife. It's a narrow corridor, so it has it's good sides and bad sides — but right now we're focusing on prairie restoration.

**Q: What was the catalyst in the pollinator movement?**

**A:** There's a national effort to help all pollinators. One of the big species that's up front is the monarch butterfly. We're focusing on milkweeds, first off, because we can get milkweed seedling and, second off, it's something we can do that involves the communities [like] people planting the milkweeds and then learning about the plight of the monarch. So the milkweed is one component of that, the other component is a broader pollinator approach that benefits all pollinators. That's the prairie restoration part.

**Q: Why the Cowboy Trail?**

**A:** Well it needs work. We haven't done much on it as far as habitat enhancement, and it was kind of a step-child that never got a lot of attention. It was expected to be a lot bigger of a recreational tourism component than it's proven to be. So we're looking at whatever avenues we can find to increase that. We're hoping that people will be drawn to the trail if it has more ecological appeal. If you drive along it, ride along it, hike along it and see more butterflies, see more wildlife — watchable wildlife is one of the nation's biggest outdoor activities, and we're trying to hook into it.

**Q: Any challenges you've faced implementing the Prairie Restoration Plan?**

**A:** It's tricky, but it's something that can be overcome. I think the biggest stumbling block we've got is the cost. It's expensive. Prairie seed is expensive, it's expensive to plant it, it's expensive to maintain it. Those are items we're going to have to have help with as we go on. That's another thing that is something we can turn over to the communities.

**Q: What role will the communities play in this plan?**

**A:** Right now I hope they [come out and help us plant](#) and then maybe they can help us water these things, because it's staying awful warm. These little milkweed plants need water ... that's the first major emphasis. After that if they want to start to do more with other pollination species, we're going to continue to expand this whole project to include them. We're willing to work with people if they're willing to work with us.

Learn more about the [monarch migration here!](#) See which of our ecotourism partners are good sites to [see butterflies and other pollinators here](#).

