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LIFE

article and photos by **Bill Graves**

Nebraska's Natural Wonder

Sculpted by wind and covered in grasslands, the Sandhills span more than a quarter of the Cornhusker State and rest on one of the largest aquifers in the world



The largest grass-stabilized sand dune formation in the Western Hemisphere is in north-central Nebraska. It's called the Sandhills. It runs 200 miles east to west and more than 100 miles north and south. In some places, the sand is 400 feet deep.

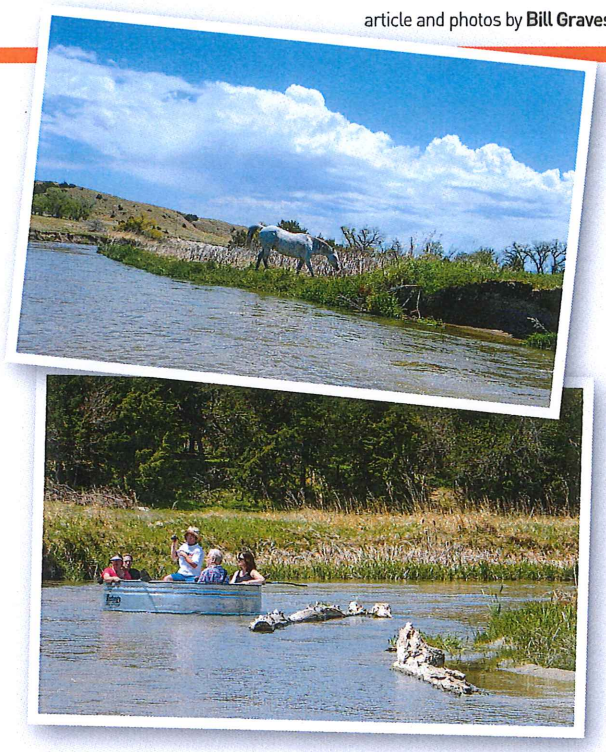
The Sandhills are covered with a thin layer of rich topsoil that supports a blanket of grass. Traveling the roads that cross it, it appears as a gently rolling prairie. You would not know it's all sand unless you see a "blowout," usually on the side of a hill, where the wind has blown away the topsoil, exposing a rounded-out area of sand.

This unique project of nature does not end there. Under the Sandhills is one of our continent's largest aquifers. It extends into eight states and underlies 83 percent of Nebraska, where it is almost twice as big as Lake Superior. It runs as deep as 1,000 feet in places. It's convenient for farmers and ranchers here, as ground water can often be found just beneath the surface.

Because there is plenty of grass and water, this is cattle country — there are more cows than people in the Sandhills. Ranchers tell me that grazing cattle here requires a disciplined balance in the use of the land, as the topsoil is so fragile. The grass helps keep the soil in place. Overgrazing could weaken the soil to the point that the wind could blow it away, so cattle are constantly being moved.

With all the underground water, springs have popped up all over the Sandhills, creating rivers that flow at a near-constant level year-round. One is the Middle Loup River that runs a mile north of the town of Mullen. Here, Mitch Glidden has fashioned an ingenious way to tour the Sandhills using hardware that is found on every ranch. He has taken round stock tanks, used to water cattle, and turned them into "boats." They're made of steel, are flat-bottomed and are perfect for floating a family down the Loup.

Some friends and I joined Mitch in a tank for a two-hour ride. The river drops about 10 feet per mile, so it keeps moving at roughly 6 to 8 MPH. It is wide but very shallow — just a couple of feet deep in most places. Consequently, it has more than its share of debris and fallen trees that are hung up on the bottom. Mitch kept a paddle handy to keep us out of the clutches of Mother Nature's derelicts.



(Top) Animals, wild and domestic, drink from spring-fed streams that crisscross Nebraska's Sandhills. (Above) Mitch Glidden wades in the shallow Middle Loup River to free one of the "boats" in the author's group that got hung up on a derelict log.

A tank in our group did get itself entangled, so Mitch beached our tank, got in the water and pulled the other tank from the grip of a dead tree that, in deeper water, would have floated down the river.

Mitch said, "I am usually not around to do that. When it happens, and I am sure it does, somebody just hops in the water and does what I did."

What's great about the tank is that it slowly turns as it drifts. Sitting stationary, I had a constantly changing 360-degree view as we drifted.

"Some people make a day of it. They pack a lunch and stop along the way so the kids can splash around in the water," Mitch said. "Horses and cattle come down to drink, so things are happening along the river all day. We have Canada geese here right now. It's always a great ride for bird watchers."

I have heard about the Nebraska Sandhills all of my life. I never imagined, however, that I would be seeing the area for the first time on a river from inside a cow's water bowl.

Welcome to America's Outback.

NEXT MONTH Bill will be at the *Titanic* museums in Branson and Pigeon Forge. To connect with Bill, email roadscribe@aol.com