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The Saline Wetlands Conservation Partnership bought the 160 acres in June 2003 for \$472,000.

Funding for this acquisition was provided in part by a \$250,000 grant the city received from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and \$222,000 from a 2001 State Wildlife Grant awarded to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The partnership uses grant money to acquire saline wetlands through fee title (ownership by one of the partners) or conservation easements with private landowners.

Partnership members include: City of Lincoln, Lower Platte South Natural Resources District, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, The Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Conservation Service, private landowners, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Nebraska Wildlife Federation, Nebraska Sierra Club, Home Builders Association of Lincoln, Conservation Alliance of the Great Plains and Wachiska Audubon.

PHOTOS BY KRISTANILES/Lincoln Journal Star

Frank Shoemaker Marsh, a 160-acre preserve north of Lincoln, is relatively unknown and unexplored by the public. It is named in honor of Frank Shoemaker, an amateur naturalist who traveled throughout Nebraska to study ecological conditions. One of his favorite spots was the salt marshes of north Lincoln.

A red-winged blackbird perches on the tall grasses of Frank Shoemaker Marsh north of Lincoln.

A yellowthroat looks out onto Frank Shoemaker Marsh. Yellowthroats are usually found in second-growth forests, overgrown fields, brushy areas and marshes.

A deer skull lies among fallen dead reeds at Frank Shoemaker Marsh. The 160-acre preserve is home to at least 50 nesting bird species, but other animals, including deer, use the habitat.

Common grackles perch in a tree overlooking the tall grasses of Frank Shoemaker Marsh north of Lincoln.

HEAD: A secret haven

DECK: Lincoln's little-known Frank Shoemaker Marsh is a naturalist's dream come true

If it were not for the big wooden sign, most people wouldn't know about Frank Shoemaker Marsh, a secret garden on the northern outskirts of Lincoln.

It's a place known mostly to amateur birders and naturalists. They come here to spy on belted kingfishers, northern flickers, pied-billed grebes, blue-winged teals and spotted sandpipers. These birds and dozens of others stop, and sometimes nest, on this 160-acre oasis north of Interstate 80 on North 27th Street.

The preserve is named for Frank Shoemaker, a turn-of-the-century amateur naturalist who loved to study birds, beetles and wild plants. His interests took him all over the state, but one of his favorite haunts was the salt marshes north of Lincoln.

It was there, on the saline flats, that he collected many of his Salt Creek tiger beetles, or "tigers," as Shoemaker often called them. He had a special reverence for the insects, which are listed as an endangered species by the State of Nebraska. They are also being considered for federal protection as an endangered species.

"Tigers in the United States were just as hard to get - pound for pound - and just as beautiful when caught, as any tiger that creeps through - jungles."

That thought was expressed on Oct. 23, 2003, when the City of Lincoln dedicated the marsh.

Jim Ducey, a Lincoln conservationist who has researched the life of Frank Shoemaker, noted that wherever Shoemaker traveled, a camera was his constant companion. Many of his nearly 3,500 photographs and his detailed notes are housed in the Love Library archives at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The photos show landscapes, birds and nests, bugs and habitats and anything else that caught his interest.

"He was a very avid birder and did some of the bird studies in the state. He was more of a naturalist than a photographer," Ducey said.

Tom Malmstrom, the saline wetlands project coordinator for the Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department, said the main reason for acquiring the tract of land was because it contained nearly 50 acres of saline wetlands.

Saline wetlands are about as rare in Nebraska as Salt Creek tiger beetles, which are found only in such wetlands. At one time, there were about 20,000 acres of saline wetlands in Lancaster County. About 4,000 acres remain.

Frank Shoemaker Marsh was purchased to help save the few remaining saline wetlands around Lincoln. In recent years, many of those areas have been destroyed by developments on the northern edge of Lincoln.

The partnership plans to restore the marsh and is working with the Flatwater Group, a Lincoln engineering firm, to come up with a conceptual design.

"The major priority is to restore the saline marsh area and any habitat for the Salt Creek tiger beetle," said Malmstrom.

But there's more to the marsh than saline wetlands. Deer, waterfowl and shorebirds also call it home.

"It's just a nice haven for wildlife," Malmstrom said. "There's a lot of diversity on the site."

Larry Einemann of Lincoln knows a lot about the wildlife of the marsh. An amateur birder, his first visit to the area along North 27th Street was in 1966. Einemann was taking an ornithology course under Paul Johnsgard, who is now a noted author and an emeritus professor in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Biological Sciences.

The memory of the visit is still vivid in his mind, mostly because of what he saw: a white-faced ibis. It usually nests in isolated colonies from Oregon to Kansas, but its center of greatest abundance seems to be in Utah, Texas and Louisiana.

"You don't find them around here too often," said the 60-year-old Einemann. "That was my exposure to the marsh."

The experience made Einemann into a lifelong birder and a fan of the marsh, where he has led many a field trip over the years. He said he likes to visit the area a couple of times a week, just to see what types of birds he can spot.

Einemann hopes the marsh can be improved. He laments the fact there are too many cattails in the marsh and says more plant diversity is needed to attract different species. Some restoration efforts are in the works. A 20-acre section will soon be seeded with native grasses to attract different bird species and wildlife.

"Some of it's fine. However, if you want other species to utilize it, you need to look at their needs," said Einemann.

Right now there's a small pool of water in the middle of the marsh. More water would help attract more waterfowl and shorebirds. Nearby Little Salt Creek, which meanders through the property, provides some relief during dry times.

There are no marked paths through the marsh. Visitors can find their way through a few well-worn trails. A note of caution: Use bug spray and take other steps to protect yourself from ticks if you venture into the marsh.

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