



# NATURAL JEWEL



Courtesy photo

The Schramm Bluffs as seen from the Patterson Farm, one of seven properties in the area protected by conservation easements.

## Land trust guides owners in preserving land such as the Schramm Bluffs

By Dave Sands



I've all been there — talking to someone who expresses the opinion that Nebraska is scenically challenged and devoid of anything but agriculture. When I hear such remarks, I wonder if they saw our state from 30,000 feet or through a windshield

on Interstate 80.

I've seen a lot of Nebraska and know that it is a place of stunning landscapes, biological diversity, pristine rivers, world-class wildlife and important history. But to be fair, the skeptics are right about some things: 97 percent of the land is privately owned and most of that is in agriculture.

For those of us who appreciate Nebraska's scenic views, wildlife and historic sites, we largely have agricultural landowners to thank for preserving these public benefits at no cost to the taxpayer. However, continuing agricultural stewardship is not a given, especially in our most scenic and development-prone areas.

The Schramm Bluffs of western Sarpy County offer a prime example. On the final leg of its journey to the Missouri River, the Platte cuts through a ridge of limestone, creating steep bluffs and rolling farmland with deep ravines sheltering locally rare oak/hickory woodlands. It offers some of the best wildlife habitat in eastern Nebraska, and the woodlands are especially important for migrating songbirds.

The region also has sustained people for millennia, as shown by archaeological sites nearly 1,000 years old. It still sustains us with drinking water, but water quality could suffer from development in the bluffs. Because of the steep terrain, soil erosion from construction sites or the first flush of polluted urban runoff after a rainstorm would quickly reach the Platte, with one of Omaha's municipal well fields downriver.

The area also is a magnet for recreation and the bluffs are visible from three popular state parks, Interstate 80, Quarry Oaks Golf Course, Safari Park and the Lied Bridge.

To preserve any landscape, the first step is local recognition that there is much to lose and a willingness to protect it. With an active landowner base advocating for preservation and county officials willing to listen, Sarpy County took this step when it designated the 11,000-acre Schramm Conservation District as the county's most important and vulnerable environmental area that should be preserved.

Voluntary land preservation agreements known as conservation easements were identified as the tool of choice, because they are more economical while keeping land in private ownership, on the tax role and often in agriculture. Some people find the permanence of conservation easements disagreeable, and they aren't for everyone, but few would question a landowner's right to sell his farm for a shopping mall. That is a permanent

decision as well. A conservation easement is the flip side of this same property right, which allows a landowner to determine the future of his land.

In 2001, the Nebraska Land Trust was formed to work with private landowners who wanted to leave a legacy of preservation by using these voluntary agreements. From the beginning, the lower Platte Valley has been a priority for the land trust because it harbors important resources in a region that is projected to have 2 million people within 50 years. However, conservation easements are most-effective when focused on areas of highest importance. It didn't take long for the land trust to recognize that the Schramm Bluffs deserved its focus, especially with so many landowners interested in preservation.

In the assessment of 13 properties for conservation value, it was no surprise that several of the best prospects were working farms. This also meant that the owners' financial security was tied to their land. When landowners grant conservation easements, they reduce the value of their land through relinquishment of development rights, and in Sarpy County, the value of these rights is substantial.

To make the purchase of these agreements possible, the land trust has obtained two grants from the Nebraska Environmental Trust, which is funded by proceeds from the state lottery. These grants allowed the land trust to obtain nearly \$2 million in matching federal funds from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Other partners have included the Lower Platte

South, Lower Platte North and Papio-Missouri River natural resources districts; the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and the landowners themselves. Other foundations and individual supporters have helped along the way.

Of course, the real measures of success are the acres and resources preserved. Currently, the land trust has 957 acres under protection, including productive farmland, deep ravines, spring-fed streams, oak/hickory forest, sites eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and 269 acres adjacent to 330-acre Schramm Park. Anyone can readily view most of these protected properties from public places, especially a scenic stretch of Nebraska 31 as it winds through the Platte Valley.

These lands are just the start; preservation of irreplaceable landscapes is a long-term proposition. Land preservation also requires funding from irreplaceable state sources such as the Nebraska Environmental Trust, and voluntary tools for private lands such as conservation easements. This is especially true in landscapes with a high potential for development, such the Schramm Bluffs, where landowners want to leave a legacy of preserved resources that benefits us all.

Dave Sands is executive director of the Nebraska Land Trust.

### Nebraska trust earns national accreditation

The Nebraska Land Trust recently received accreditation by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission last week, the first land trust based in Nebraska to be accredited.

The designation means the Nebraska trust meets national standards for excellence, upholds the public trust and ensures that conservation efforts are permanent.

The Nebraska Land Trust holds 22 conservation agreements in nine counties totaling 8,974 acres. Protected properties include oak woodlands, prime farmland and archaeological sites along the lower Platte River in Sarpy County; a working ranch along the Niobrara National Scenic River; the most sacred site in the Pawnee's ancestral homeland; bighorn sheep habitat in the Pine Ridge; and the historic site of the Cheyenne Breakout next to Fort Robinson State Park.