# Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs

*Land Protection Planning in Nebraska and South Dakota*

USFWS

*The Missouri River as seen from Ponca State Park, Nebraska.*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Park Service (NPS) are assessing the potential for increased conservation efforts in cooperation with local communities and willing landowners. The study areas for the proposed project are along the Missouri River—an important natural resource in the United States—in northeastern Nebraska and southeastern South Dakota.

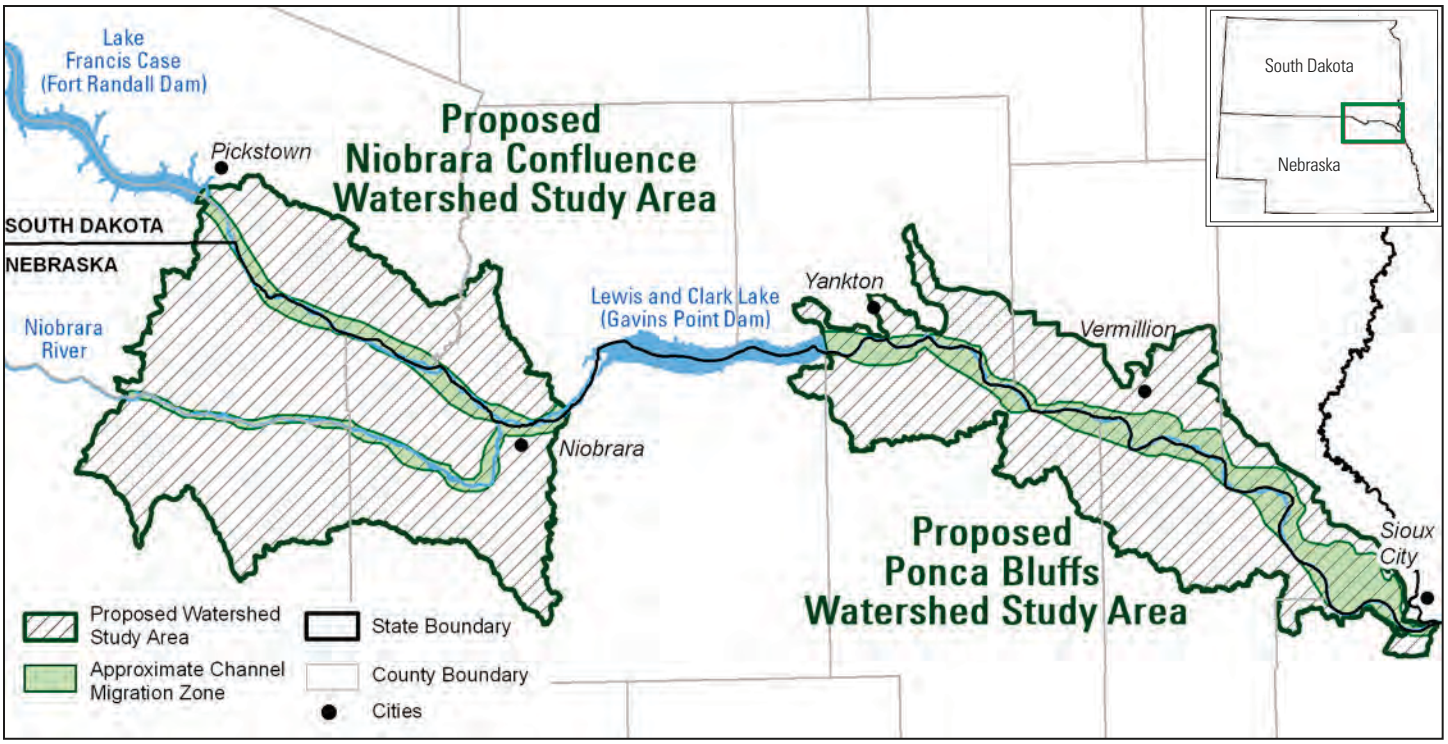
## The Missouri River

The Missouri River basin encompasses 530,000 square miles, which is approximately one-sixth of the contiguous United States. The main stem of the river—stretching from Three Forks, Montana, to St. Louis, Missouri—is the longest river in the United States at more than 2,300 miles. Historically, the Missouri River was a dynamic ecosystem characterized by the changing interplay of its habitat components: open free-flowing river, braided channels (multiple, weaving waterways), sandbars, wetland, prairie, and forest. Although structures and human activities have altered many of the river's natural processes, important habitats still remain for a rich diversity of plants and animals. Portions of the Missouri River have shown resiliency—exhibiting many of the river's historical characteristics witnessed by Lewis and Clark during their explorations in the early 1800s—despite significant alterations including water impoundments such as dams and streambank stabilization.

The dynamic nature of the Missouri River means that habitats change on a daily, seasonal, annual, and long-term basis. Erosive forces constantly transport sediment down the river—creating and modifying habitat and removing vegetation from some areas while creating suitable conditions for new plants to grow in other areas. Seasonal riverflows flood wetlands in the river bottoms and maintain lakes in the floodplain; these areas are important habitat for breeding and foraging wildlife. The combination of open water, floodplain wetlands, and river vegetation is particularly important for the large number of migratory birds that use the Missouri River during spring and fall migrations.

### Niobrara Confluence

The Niobrara Confluence river segment—between Fort Randall Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake—is one of the last portions of the Missouri River that remains unchannelized, relatively free-flowing, and undeveloped. This area of the river's main channel lies in a wide valley that contains important habitat for at least 60 native fish and 26 sport fish. In addition, the riparian woodlands and island complexes are important for approximately 25 bird species that are year-round residents and 115 species of migratory birds including piping plover, least tern, and bald eagle.




### Ponca Bluffs

Located between Gavins Point Dam and Sioux City, the Ponca Bluffs segment of the Missouri River is a diverse, relatively unaltered, riverine and floodplain ecosystem. The area consists of a main channel, braided channels, a wooded riparian corridor, pools, chutes, sloughs, islands, sandbars, backwater areas, wetlands, a natural floodplain, upland forest, pastureland, and cropland. This area supports a wide variety of wildlife and fish similar to the Niobrara Confluence.

## Proposed Land Protection

The FWS and NPS would work with local communities and willing landowners to conserve stretches of the Missouri River that are significant for natural resources. The opportunity to preserve, and even improve, important processes and habitats for fish and wildlife would benefit the visitors, neighbors, and local communities of the Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs areas, now and into the future. Preventing or reversing impacts in other river segments—through a combination of actions along a spectrum from protection to restoration—would maintain and revive the unique nature of the Missouri River.

We will design the proposed project to improve conditions in the Missouri River's channel migration zone, the area in which the river channel dynamically moves over extensive periods. The proposal will emphasize retaining those habitat characteristics important to federally managed species such as pallid sturgeon, least tern, and piping plover. In addition, we will design the proposed project to enhance opportunities for recreational activities such as boating, fishing, hunting, and camping while increasing scenic values along the river.

Wayne Nelson-Stastny/USFWS

*An angler relaxes as evening settles over the river.*

### What is a land protection plan?

The FWS and NPS use land protection planning to study opportunities for strategic conservation of land through long-term lease, conservation easement, or purchase. Planning involves the following: (1) the detailed identification and prioritization of lands suitable for addition to the National Wildlife Refuge System or the National Park System; (2) a description of the lands' natural resource values; and (3) an explanation of how the lands support the missions of the Refuge System or Park System, or both. We conduct land protection planning to look at individual land tracts as well as lands at the landscape, or eco-

system, scale. During planning, we use the FWS's model for Strategic Habitat Conservation, which contains guidance for determining species' goals and setting objectives, implementation procedures, and techniques to monitor accomplishments.

### How does the process work?

Before approval of a land protection plan, we will complete an environmental analysis that involves the tribes, local communities, State agencies, other Federal agencies, and various organizations. As part of this process, the FWS and NPS will fully involve the public. An environmental impact statement, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act, will document our evaluation of project alternatives and their expected environmental effects on the physical, biological, and socioeconomic environment. If a land protection plan is approved, the FWS and NPS would work with willing landowners and partners only to implement the conservation actions.

### What other management will this effort complement?

In the proposed project area, several State and Federal agencies have specific programs in place for conserving various aspects of the Missouri River's resources, as described below. The environmental analysis for land protection will address these programs as they relate to the project proposal—to ensure coordinated and strategic conservation efforts—along with identifying how all agencies and willing landowners can efficiently work together.

*Missouri National Recreational River.* The Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs river segments are located within the Missouri National Recreational River (MNRR), an area that Congress has designated as a wild and scenic river and a national park unit. The Secretary of the Interior designated the NPS as the river-managing agency; in addition, the NPS manages the Ponca Bluffs river segment in cooperation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The MNRR comprises two NPS districts: (1) the 59-mile river segment (Ponca Bluffs) from Gavins Point Dam to Ponca, Nebraska; and (2) the 39-mile river segment (Niobrara Confluence) from Fort Randall Dam to Running Water, South Dakota, which includes the lower 20 miles of the Niobrara River and the lower 7 miles of Verdigre Creek. Both areas were designated under the Wild and Scenic River Act for their free-flowing condition, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable recreational, fish and wildlife, scenic, historical, and cultural values. The proposed land protection project is consistent with the Department of the Interior's charge under Section 10(a) of the Wild and Scenic River Act to protect and enhance the values for which the designated river was established.

Wayne Nelson-Stastny/USFWS

*A young girl inspects a dragonfly along the river.*

Wayne Nelson-Stastny/USFWS

*Piping plover chicks explore the sandy shoreline near their nest.*

*Karl E. Mundt National Wildlife Refuge.* The 1,063-acre Karl E. Mundt National Wildlife Refuge is located south of Pickstown, South Dakota, along the Niobrara Confluence river segment. The FWS manages this refuge to protect bald eagles and their habitat.

*Lake Andes Wetland Management District.* Part of the Lake Andes Wetland Management District in South Dakota is along the Niobrara Confluence river segment. Throughout the wetland management district's agricultural area, the FWS protects designated wetlands and grasslands.

*Missouri River Recovery Program.* The Army Corps of Engineers implements the Missouri River Recovery Program, as authorized by the Missouri River Bank Stabilization and Navigation Project and the Fish and Wildlife Mitigation Project designated in the Water Resources Development Act of 1986, as modified in 1999. The creation and enhancement of habitat through the Missouri River Recovery Program is to mitigate the loss of habitat due to dam operations and other management activities on the main stem of the Missouri River.

The Army Corps of Engineers owns (in fee title) lands that are recreational areas and that provide habitat along the MNRR. In addition, the Corps manages easements on some of the private land that is periodically flooded within the MNRR.

*States of Nebraska and South Dakota*. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission manages the Niobrara State Park, Ponca State Park, and several wildlife management areas within the Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluff river segments. The neighboring State agency—South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks—manages several wildlife areas and three recreation areas adjacent to the Missouri River.

## Next Steps in the Process

Over the next several years, the FWS and the NPS will jointly develop land protection plans for the Ponca Bluffs river segment and the Niobrara confluence river segment. This process is open to the public, and we welcome your comments!

The first step is public scoping from February 1 through March 2, 2012. Individuals can provide comments by attending a public meeting, submitting comments via the Web site, or mailing them to the planning team leader, Nick Kaczor.

All comments should be received by March 2, 2012.

## Project Information

**Web Site**—http://parkplanning.nps.gov/niob-ponca

**Email**—niobrara_ponca@fws.gov

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**NPS Park Superintendent**
Steven Mietz
Missouri National Recreational River
605/665 0209

## Public Meetings

**Tuesday, February 21, 2012**
The Outdoor Campus
4500 S. Oxbow Avenue
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

**Thursday, February 23, 2012**
W.H. Over Museum
1110 Ratingen Street
Vermillion, South Dakota

**Friday, February 24, 2012**
WFLA Hall
Spruce and Park Avenues
Niobrara, Nebraska

**Schedule for all meetings:**
5:30 p.m. *Open House*
6:30 p.m. *Presentation with questions and answers to follow*

**Project Timeline**

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|---|---|
| *February 1–March 2, 2012* | Public scoping |
| *Spring–Summer 2012* | Develop draft land protection plan and environmental impact statement |
| *Fall 2012* | Public comment on the draft plan |
| *Winter 2012–Spring 2013* | Develop final plan |
| *Spring 2013* | Final plan and decision available to the public |

*January 2012*

**Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs**
**Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge Complex**
**38672 291st Street**
**Lake Andes, SD 57356**

**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**