



lonely planet

WINTER 2018

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# Best in Travel

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## MY TRIP

# Preserving the Prairie

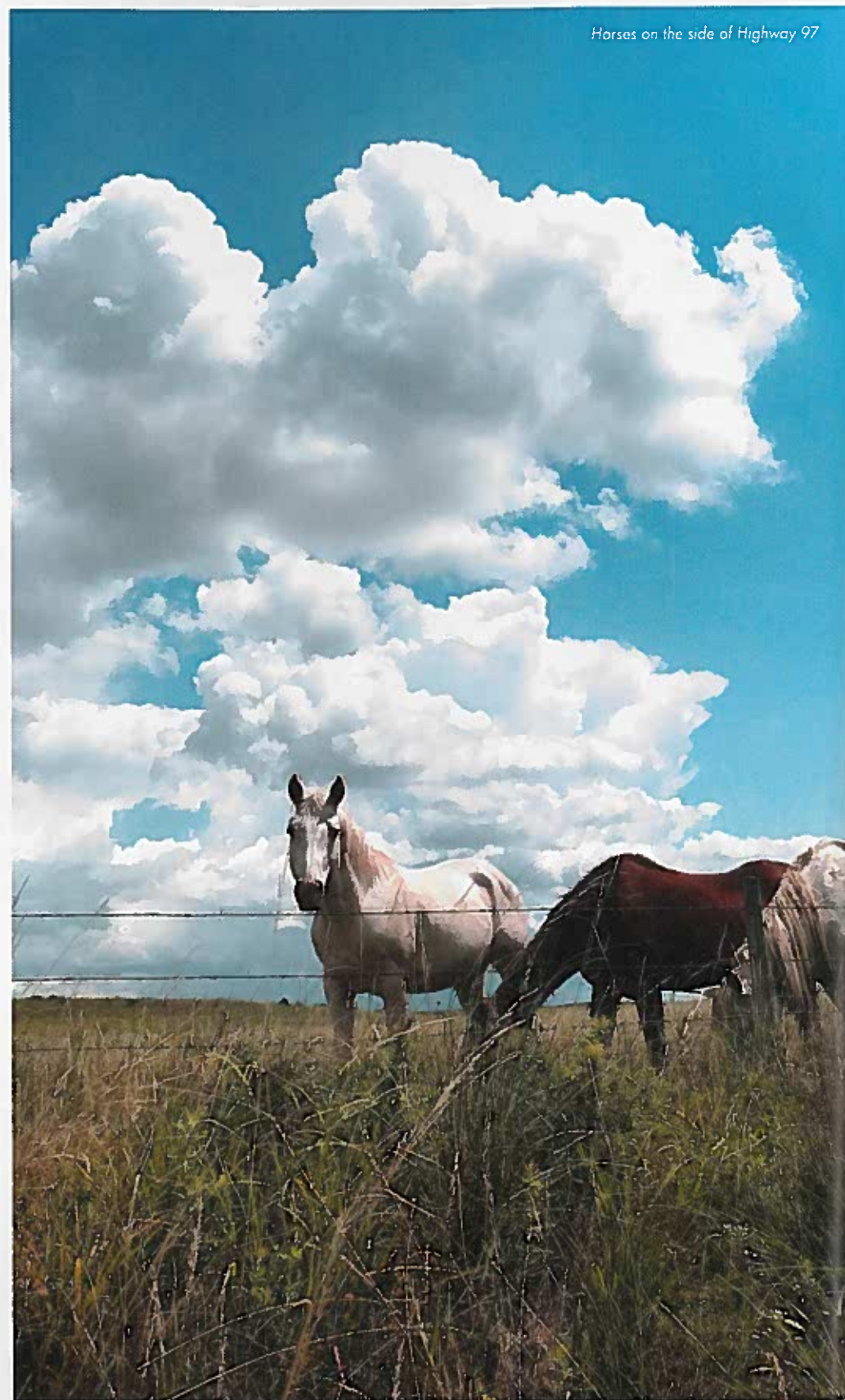
Nebraska contains one of North America's most endangered ecosystems, but thanks to the conservation efforts of ranchers and small-business owners, it's being preserved for the next generation.

by KRISTINA JUODENAS

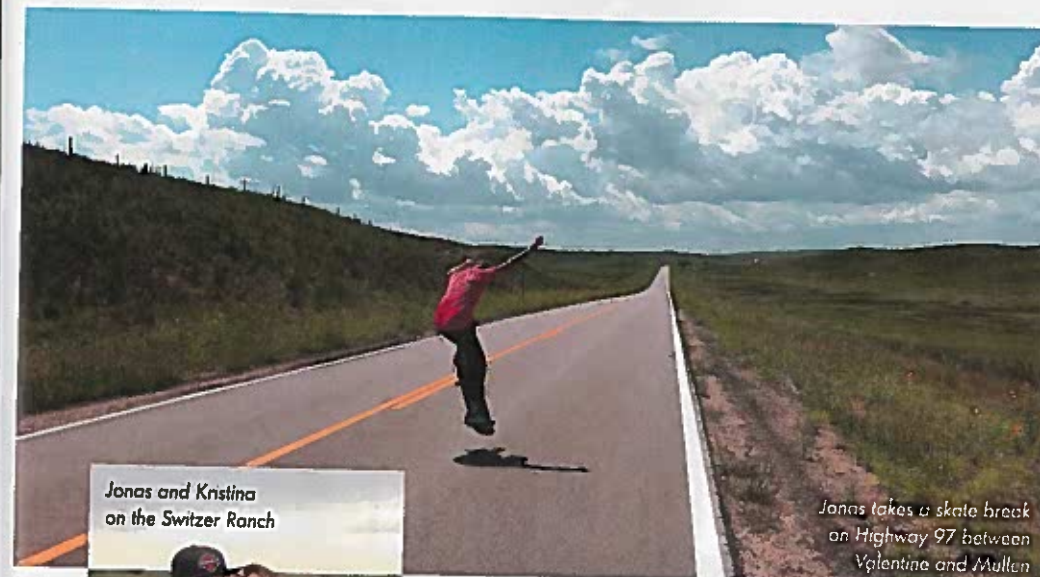
"Is this the smallest airport you've ever seen?" I ask my 14-year old son, Jonas. We've just landed in North Platte, Nebraska, a town of some 25,000 situated roughly in the middle of the state. From under his mop of faded green hair he shoots me a look that only a teenager is capable of, a look that says he is simultaneously exasperated and bored.

"Mom, you've been to every airport I've ever been to," he says. This is true, but it won't be for long. We're here to embark on our last summer vacation before he starts high school in a few weeks – the latest in a series of separations that began the moment I gave birth to him.

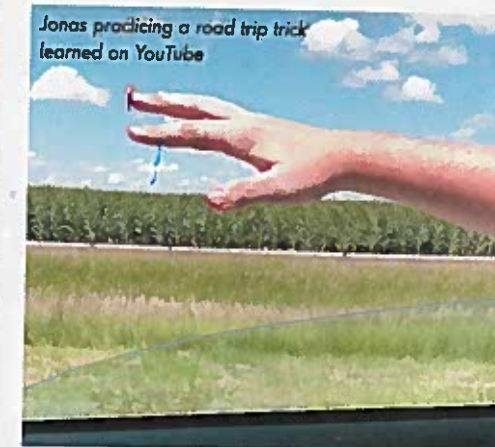
As for the choice of location, Nebraska is the kind of place where lots of people have been, but few choose as a destination. It doesn't have a reputation for stunning beauty among those whose experience is limited to I-80, which cuts a line through the lower half of the state. We're headed north, however, to the little-known Sandhills region, a wild and open prairie in one of the world's largest areas of grass-stabilized sand dunes. Hundreds of years spent facing invasive species, overfarming and loss of native species like the American bison that were once numerous



Horses on the side of Highway 97



Jonas and Kristina on the Switzer Ranch



Jonas practicing a road trip trick learned on YouTube

have taken a toll on the area. Today it's one of America's most endangered ecosystems.

We collect the keys to a white Subaru Outback from the sole rental counter and Jonas commandeers the stereo as we head out onto the highway. "The sky is so big here," I say.

"Mom, the sky is the same size everywhere," he retorts. Funny how teens can always be counted on to point out lapses in your own logic, but can rarely be counted on to operate logically on their own. Early Nebraskans had a saying: "Anyone can love the mountains, but it takes soul to love the prairie." With a few wording changes the same could be said of teenagers.

Two hours and countless YouTube rappers later we arrive at the 12,000-acre Switzer Ranch, near Burwell, and are greeted by Sarah Sortum, whose family has been cultivating this land for the past 100 years. She moved away for a while, ran a luxury ranch in Colorado, and got married, but she always dreamed of coming back. "We wanted to raise our kids here," she tells me as we set out for a prairie tour in her '90s model burgundy Tahoe. The ranch is a family affair and I wonder what it would be like to raise a family here. "The 11-year-old's going to turn 12 in two

weeks and I'm like, 'Dang how did that happen?'" she says when I ask how old her boys are. Even in the middle of the prairie, time can slip by at alarming speeds, I think as I glance in the back seat and see Jonas scrolling through Instagram.

Sortum runs the ranch with her brother, and both of their families live here. To make it financially feasible they've turned to tourism to supplement their ranching income. Under the moniker Calamus Outfitters (named for the nearby Calamus River basin), they rent kayaks and canoes, provide lodging, and give tours to bird-watchers and nature enthusiasts. Their relationship to the land is simple. "We try to incorporate as much biodiversity as we can into the system," Sortum says, "because we feel like, for one, it will make us more resilient." This includes well-managed grazing, and a prescribed burn program each spring. "You know it's not rocket science. The Great Plains have been shaped with fire and grazing for a long time."

In Valentine, another two hours away on the northern edge of the Sandhills, we visit Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge. It's one of the few public land areas that's managed in a public-private partnership using both the refuge's bison herd and the cattle that ranchers lend to graze the land – work that would have been done by bison alone 1,000 years ago. As we drive the loop around the resident prairie dog village, Jonas is momentarily amused by a house cat that's gotten past the perimeter fence and proudly trots across our path with his prize, a young prairie dog he's caught. There's nothing

like a little gore to catch the attention of a 14-year-old boy.

About 200 miles south, in Mullen, the relationship between the ecosystem and ranchers is echoed by Mitch Glidden at Glidden Canoe Rental. He and his wife rent canoes and run a roadside motel, but the birds are a big part of their business. They arrange bird-watching expeditions during the prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse mating seasons, setting up blinds in old school buses on a friend's ranch where people come from all over to watch the birds' extravagant dances.

"I think these birds have figured out the pivots that are here watering the alfalfa," Glidden says, pointing to the large metal irrigators. "If they hang around there and nest close to that thing there's always dew on the grass." Glidden credits their irrigation system for the birds' success. "In the eastern U.S. they lost some of the birds because of too much farming. They have to have so much grass for their habitat. If you have too much farming then you lose them and if you don't have enough farming it's hard for the chickens to get by."

That could be said about parenting as well. Too much and you smother your children; too little and it's hard for them to get by. It's a fragile ecosystem that I've somehow been able to manage up to this point. Hopefully that will continue into this new era of the high school years – and if we're lucky, due to the efforts of some dedicated caretakers, the prairie will still be there for Jonas's children to see.