



# Foundation Document Overview

## Niobrara National Scenic River

Nebraska



### Contact Information

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## Purpose



*The purpose of NIOBRARA NATIONAL SCENIC RIVER is to preserve its free-flowing condition, the significant scenic, geologic, biologic, historic, and prehistoric resources of the Niobrara River Valley in concert with local custom and culture, and provide opportunities for resource-based recreational use that is compatible with protection of the significant resources.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Niobrara National Scenic River resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

1. The Niobrara River is an outstanding example of a largely free-flowing Great Plains river.
2. The Niobrara River Valley contains a large concentration of scenic river cliffs and waterfalls that are rare on the Great Plains.
3. The high bluffs along the river provide scenic vistas of the Niobrara River Valley and its many plant communities. From the north rim of the valley, distant views of the Sandhills prairie to the south are unusual in the Great Plains states. The river valley itself provides scenic views.
4. The braided lower river provides important nesting habitat for the federally endangered interior least tern and threatened piping plover. The river also provides important migratory habitat for endangered whooping cranes and the recently delisted peregrine falcon and bald eagle.



# Fundamental Resources and Values



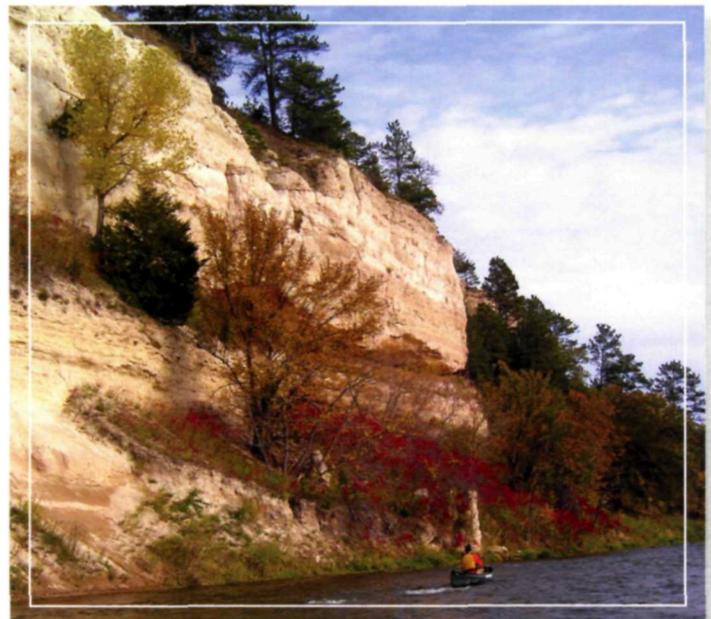
5. The Niobrara River Valley supports exceptional biological diversity within its narrow confines. The following ecosystems exist in the same area or in proximity to each other: northern boreal forest, western coniferous forest, eastern deciduous forest, tallgrass prairie, northern mixed-grass prairie, and Sandhills prairie.
6. Approximately 160 species of plants and animals found in the Niobrara River Valley are at the perimeter of their range. The number of plant species at or beyond their normal geographic range, the wide variety of plants, and the number of distinctly different plant communities found close together is unusual. Some plant and animal species are considered rare or are state or federally listed as threatened, endangered, or candidate species.
7. The Niobrara River Valley is an excellent example of a rural cultural landscape that contains ranches, limited development, and scenic vistas. Ranches are an important and integral part of the historic landscape and can be of intrinsic value.
8. The area contains scientifically important deposits of mid-Tertiary and Pleistocene fossils. These fossils are important to our knowledge of past life forms.
9. The Sandhills near the river act as both a filter and reservoir of high-quality water to sustain spring seeps, unusual plants, aquatic lifeforms, river flow, and scenic waterfalls.
10. The western portion of the designated Niobrara River offers high-quality and relatively safe river recreation for people of differing skill levels.
11. The Niobrara River Valley provides a high-quality setting for a wide variety of resource-based recreation.

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Fish and Wildlife Value**
- **Free-Flowing Condition and Water Quality Values**
- **Geologic Value**
- **Paleontologic Value**
- **Recreational Value**
- **Scenic Value**

Niobrara National Scenic River contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Historic Value**
- **Cultural Value**



## Description

The Niobrara National Scenic River flows through 76 miles of beautiful, varied scenery and diverse plant and animal communities in north-central Nebraska. A Tier III Outstanding National Resource Water under the Clean Water Act, the river offers outstanding recreational opportunities for novice to highly experienced paddlers.

Most of the first 4 miles of river, located within the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS]), are not accessible to the public. A public landing immediately downstream of a low-head dam allows the first access point to the river. The dam, which pre-existed the 1991 National Scenic River designation, is the only impediment to the free-flowing river.

The relatively narrow canyons in the western portion of the Niobrara National Scenic River display high, eroding bluffs topped by Ponderosa pine and eastern red-cedar interspersed with open vistas of mixed-grass prairie. A narrow, sheltering floodplain harbors plains cottonwood, green ash, and boxelder. The latter species is often festooned with river grape or Virginia creeper. Low-structured shrubs, such as smooth sumac, skunkbush sumac, wild plum, and chokecherry, provide food and hiding places for a variety of wildlife. Spring-branch canyons, mostly on the south side of the river, draw spring water from beneath the Sandhills prairie and are enclosed by trees more typical of the eastern United States, such as basswood, eastern hop-hornbeam and American elm. Most notable and striking, however, are the paper birch and aspen, relics of the ice age. The spring-branch canyons constitute a cool, moist microclimate uncharacteristic of the Great Plains in which numerous plants persist well outside their normal geographic range. Mosses, liverworts, and ferns can be found here. When walking into one of these moist, wooded canyons from the dry, sunny prairie, a person is struck by the rapid change in environment, scenery, and biology. Here, the sound of splashing water might be preceded by the startling view of a high waterfall tumbling over successive ledges of a geologic formation called the Rosebud. Hundreds of such waterfalls can be found here, most are tucked away in these canyons back of the river, with some spectacularly dropping directly into the river to canoers' delight.

The river and the valley widen as one proceeds downstream, the adjacent bluffs are now farther away and more rounded and gentle in appearance. Sandbars and vegetated islands become a prominent feature. Rare birds such as piping plover and interior least tern nest on bare, dry sandbars in mid-summer and whooping cranes sometimes make a brief stop during their spring and fall migrations across the plains. Otter and beaver easily navigate the current and deer spring from their island hideouts.

Given this vast diversity of plant communities and land forms, it is no surprise that wildlife is equally diverse. Several eastern and western species co-mingle here to hybridize and confound biologists' efforts at classification. This portion of the Niobrara River Valley is known as the biological crossroads of the Great Plains. The river provides the corridor along which eastern, western, and a few northern woodland species mingle and interact. Even species long dead surface here along the banks and within world-renowned fossil quarries adjacent to the river. The fossil finds chronicle millions of years of evolution, as represented by extinct horses, camels, rhinos, saber-toothed cats, and mammoths. All these educationally valuable resources make this an unparalleled research library for scientific study and visitor appreciation.

The upper portion of the scenic river is popular with floaters. Thousands of canoers, kayakers, and tubers take advantage of the free-flowing waters to enjoy time with friends and family in a beautiful setting. Slow, peaceful stretches offer serenity and sightseeing, while short rapids and chutes focus your attention on the water ahead. Several outfitters rent the craft of your preference, and most offer campgrounds for overnight stays on the north bank of the river, accessible by a county road. Most of the land bordering the Niobrara National Scenic River is in private ownership, with only a small percentage of publically accessible land. While most visitors float the river, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge and Smith Falls State Park (Nebraska Game and Parks Commission) offer land-based recreational opportunities. County roads also offer an alternative view of the outstanding scenic qualities. Fall and spring offer quieter periods and varied colors, but in any season this remarkable valley is worth exploration.

