

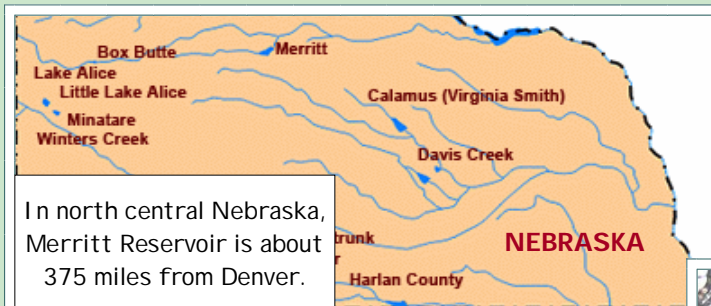
The author

MERRITT RESERVOIR, NEBRASKA

MAY 18TH THROUGH 21ST, 2012

By Andy McKenna

Back in February, 2012, Larry Kline floated the plan for a trip to do some paddling and star gazing at the remote Merritt Reservoir, tucked away in the Sand Hills of Nebraska.



In north central Nebraska, Merritt Reservoir is about 375 miles from Denver.

Our plans for the trip evolved throughout April, and after the drop-out rate finally reached zero we were a committed group of four: Larry Kline, Frank Bering, Clark Strickland and me. The trip was scheduled for a maximum of five days, May 18th through May 22nd, inclusive of travel days.

We arranged carpools, pairing Larry and Frank in Frank's car and Clark and me in my car. Clark and I hit the road on Friday the 18th at 7:15am and made Oglala, Nebraska, by early afternoon and started driving north towards the Sand Hills. Our departure from Oglala was quickly followed by:

- The discovery of a loud metal squeaking noise from my car's front passenger wheel well.
- A chance roadside meeting with Larry and Frank

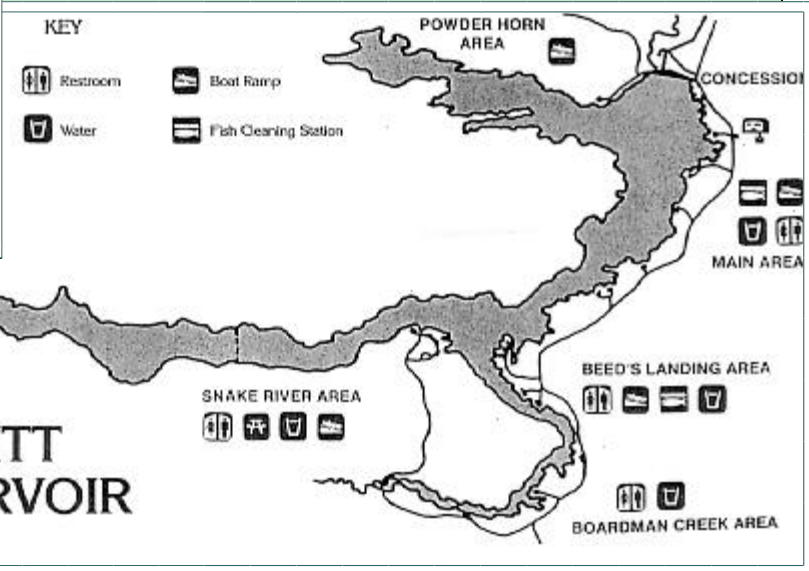


After discussing our situation, Clark and I headed back town for repairs while Larry and Frank went ahead. Long story short, my brakes needed replacement at the end of the trip and we decided to forge ahead to our paddling destination once a friendly local mechanic ground off the "warning whistle" on the offending brake pad. Clark deserves a medal for riding along as I often used engine braking the rest of trip.



Clark Strickland, Frank Bering and Andy McKenna

The drive through the Sand Hills was scenic, to say the least. Scenes include spectacular, rolling hills boasting many varieties of plains and prairie grasses, wild flowers, old and new ranches, meadows and marshes, and the unexpected sight of bikini-clad coeds floating down the Middle Loupe River in livestock watering tanks.



All four of us made it to the campground by 4:00PM and got acquainted as we unloaded and set up camp along the south shore of the reservoir's Snake River arm.

We enjoyed some light fare for dinner before a big storm came up on us fast. By 6:30 we were all settled into our tents, riding out an intense spring storm with tent-eating winds gusting to 40 knots and lightning that I am sure was specifically looking for Larry. The storm missed Larry, but it did eat my tent for dinner. Larry was generous enough to loan me the use of his already setup second tent for the duration of the trip. (Thanks again, Larry!) We retired as the daylight waned. Our stargazing would have to wait, but the lightning show outside dazzled and amused us for quite a while that evening.



Clark and Frank

Saturday morning was like "Friday night lite", with lingering rain and winds gusting up to 30 knots. We were blessed with an absence of lightning. Our Saturday paddle coincided with a walleye fishing tournament at Merritt Reservoir, so we were extra alert for power boat traffic, which was surprisingly light. We filled up on tea, coffee, and hot breakfast food and prepared to hit the water, snug and warm in dry suits.

Our minor mishaps continued as we prepared to embark. Unfortunately, Frank tripped over a tent anchor and injured a shoulder. He tested out his paddling at the boat launch and was not comfortable with his condition and elected to remain at camp.

Larry, Clark and I launched sometime after 10:00AM into windy, choppy water, steadily progressing under fast moving clouds that seemed close enough to touch. We enjoyed glimpses of blue sky and the subtle beauty of the Sand Hills as we paddled northwest along the north shore of the Snake River arm of the reservoir. We used the lees created by the steep hillsides for occasional rest breaks after battling the often head-on winds. Larry's suggestion of a "follow the leader" paddling formation worked very well for the three of us, offering each of us



opportunities to set the pace, check our group's safety, practice communicating, and practice staying with a group.

Early afternoon blessed us with calm winds, broken clouds, and a pleasant lunch break in one of the many coves that form when this reservoir is close to full.

The calm and shallow coves I saw were teeming with tadpoles and young frogs.

While we ate and relaxed I shared my space with a dozen denizens of the Sand Hills, including various beetles, wasps, and grass spiders, that passed by me innocuously, or rested on my neoprene encased legs. Honestly, I love spiders but I can't handle them crawling on my skin. Having the wetsuit and drytop on definitely made me a lot more comfortable with sharing the place. The Sand Hills are critter country and I experienced more of that later in the trip. "Tick Checks" were a frequent part of the trip. The remainder of our Friday paddle went the way of our morning as the winds once again picked up and we retraced our path back to the camp. Brian Hunter was with us in spirit that day as the winds met us head-on for the return trip.

We landed close to 4:00PM, tired, a little chilled, ready to eat, and with a slightly used five gallon bucket that Clark rescued from the opposite shore. We cooked our own meals and shared what we had, including good wine, fun conversation, a visit from Wilson, and the true meaning of "escuela!". We all went to sleep under calm skies and broken clouds. Once again, the fabled stargazing of the remote Sand Hills remained just that.



Wilson

Sunday morning greeted us with warm, calm air, some scattered clouds and the promise of a great day on the water. Frank again decided to forego paddling, as his shoulder was still sore.

We drove 15 minutes to our launch point near the dam on the north side of the Powderhorn arm. We launched and paddled northwest along the shore and into a maze of islands, coves, nooks, crannies, and fun! Merritt Reservoir was made by the impoundment of the Snake River and Boardman Creek. The Boardman Creek arm is sheltered, shallow, and mostly silted in. The Snake River arm is somewhat plain and smoothed out by the



Clark, Larry and Andy

Snake River. The Powderhorn arm is another world, reflecting what one might expect as the steep-sided hill country was partially submerged. There are miles of shoreline to explore, hidden channels, and ponds that only connect to the larger lake when water levels are high enough. Larry's memory of place was spot-on that day as he guided us through the mazes of islands and channels, leading us to idyllic and surprisingly deep ponds with sizeable beaver lodges or simply a wonderful sense of solitude and calm.



We explored bayou-like coves where we tested our strokes and braces as we weaved through the partially submerged trees, scooted over sandbars and logs, ducked (mostly) branches and spider webs, and startled some rather large fish and a great many frogs.

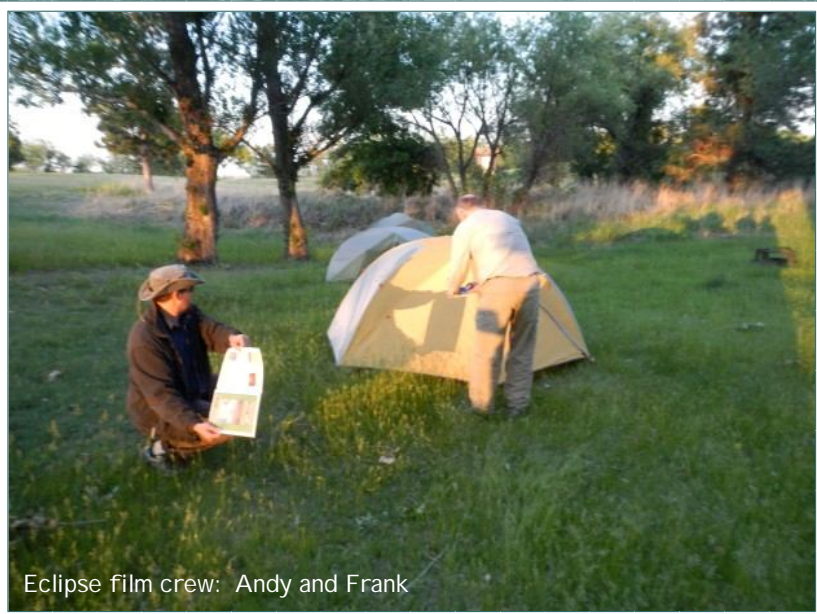


Clark and I landed mid-afternoon about 30 minutes ahead of Larry, as he wanted to check out one particular island on the south shore of the Powderhorn arm but I was ready to get off the water.



We returned to camp and cleaned up for a night on the town in tiny nearby Valentine, Nebraska. The four of us rode in Larry's car and settled on one of two open local steak houses, The Peppermill. We all enjoyed a good meal together. The food and service were good, despite a marked lack of atmosphere. I was fortunate enough to also keep the company of one *Rhipicephalus sanguineus*, aka the Brown Dog Tick. He got to my neck while in camp and dug in shortly before dinner. He defied my many attempts

at removal, so I decided he would not eat much while I enjoyed a steak dinner with my fellow paddlers. After dinner we headed back to camp and arrived just in time to enjoy the only astronomical phenomenon not completely obscured by clouds, the solar eclipse. We took photos of the eclipse image projected on our tents. The light from the eclipse made for an unusual, eerie sunset I will never forget. We finished the evening with drinks, stories, and a successful team effort to remove the stubborn dog-tick from my neck.



Eclipse film crew: Andy and Frank



We decided to break camp on Monday the 21st. Our return trip was uneventful and we all made it back safely. The only casualties were Larry's paddling jacket and my tent, both victims of fast moving air. I am going back next year for more of the beauty of the Sand Hills and, hopefully, some magnificent stargazing.

Photos by Larry Kline