

# PROTECTED FOREVER

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# Sowbelly Ranch: One Tasty Piece of Nebraska Elk Country

*1,304 acres protected*

Where mammoths once mingled along the northwest corner of Nebraska's Pine Ridge, white monoliths of crumbling sandstone rip grasslands into mountainous moonscapes. It's an unexpected sight a few miles north of Highway 20 and the flat-ground town of Harrison.

Tucked into the steep canyon folds lies Jim and Christine Voellers' Sowbelly Ranch, where cottonwoods mingle with ponderosa pines to create superb habitat for a rich variety of wildlife. Retired ranchers, the Voellers recently teamed up with the Nebraska Land Trust to make sure their land stays that way by placing a 1,304-acre conservation easement stretching for miles through the heart of Sowbelly Canyon. RMEF and other partners provided additional funding to help support the project.

About 275 elk from the Hat Creek herd use the lush grasslands and protective canyons in this area for calving. The steeper ridges are home to Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep and mule deer, with Merriam's turkeys roaming the bottoms. Gurgling Sowbelly Creek below is narrow enough to cross in one emphatic leap, but big enough to be deemed one of the state's Coldwater Class A fisheries where brown trout rule the riffles.

The ranch comes with a hearty past. In the late 1800s, Fort Robinson soldiers trapped in the canyon by a Sioux war party went days without food. By the time a rescue party was able to free them, the rescuers had only sowbelly—akin to modern bacon—left for the soldiers. The area earned its moniker for the tasty rescue. In 2006 fire blackened more than 40,000 acres of these Pine Ridge hills. In 2012, as the land was regenerating, Nebraska Game and Parks chose Sowbelly Ranch as a reintroduction release site for bighorn sheep from Alberta, Canada. Then Mother Nature struck again. Floods ripped through the narrow canyon in 2015, backing up crystal clear trout waters with behemoth cottonwood logjams. Jim Voeller was instrumental in initiating flood clean-up that is still ongoing.

But through it all, the Hat Creek herd of elk have continued to ramble from the agricultural plains into the Sowbelly. This adds to more than 18,400 acres already forever protected by RMEF and its partners in Nebraska and helps ensure that elk and other wildlife will always find tasty provisions in this remarkable canyon.