



Niobrara River Valley near Pischelville  
NPS

### **39 Mile District – Niobrara Reach Driving Tour**

The 39 Mile District of the Missouri National Recreational River is something of a misnomer. While it encompasses 39 miles of the relatively free flowing Missouri River from just below Fort Randall Dam to Running Water, South Dakota it ALSO includes the lower 20 miles of the Niobrara River as well as 8 miles of Verdigre Creek which flows into the Niobrara. This driving tour will take you along the banks of these watercourses as well as up onto the bluffs overlooking the lower Niobrara River valley.

**Know Before You Go:** Most of this driving tour takes place on winding, gravel roads. Make sure your car is in good working condition. There are no services along these roads and only the occasional rural farmstead. Cell phone coverage is spotty at best. Be sure to prepare accordingly. A front wheel car should do fine on these roads, four wheel drive is not needed, but do not attempt to travel on these roads during or after heavy rain and snow.

Due to the relative remoteness of this region, the driving tour will take you back in time to an age where rural life ways were once the rule not the exception in the United States. This is an adventure into the heart of America.



Abandoned homestead in the Niobrara River Valley  
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**Mile 0.0** - Start in the Village of **Niobrara, Nebraska** and take Highway 12 west

**Niobrara:** The village of Niobrara was founded in 1856 at the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri Rivers . A claim to the area was made when a group of men constructed a log garrison on the banks of the Missouri. The town was eventually named "Niobrara" for the nearby river. It is an Indian word which means "Running Water." Flooding has played a prominent and fatal role in the village's history. A spring thaw in March 1881 flooded the town and it had to be moved.

The Missouri again spilled over its banks and into the town during the spring of 1952. Even with Fort Randall Dam's completion in the 1950's flooding still continued to be a major issue. Silt from the Niobrara River caused the river bed to rise at its confluence with the Missouri. The water level rose and in 1973 the town was yet again moved to higher ground. Niobrara continues to hope for the best, but is preparing to face the challenges of siltation and the possibility of rising river waters.

**Mile 3.0** – Turn left onto 522<sup>nd</sup> Ave. - Soon you will see the **Mormon Monument**

**Mormon Monument:** Newel Knight, his family, and a company of Mormons, left Nauvoo, Illinois, to search out a home in the West in the late 1840s. Due to hardships, the group could not go on and they built a fort of log cabins by the Niobrara River. Due to illness, all died. The Mormon Monument was built in 1908. Those buried there are: Newell Knight, Mr. Caval, Lucy Brunson, Ann Boyce, Mr. Rufus Tach, Mrs. Spicer Crandall, Mrs. Newell Drake, Mrs. Dame Gardurout Noble and Benjamin F. Mauer 1846 - 1847.

**Mile 4.0** – Turn left onto 521<sup>st</sup> Ave.

**Ponca Tribal Self-Help Community Building Historic District:** The main structure in the district is the

Ponca Tribal Self-Help Community Building (Community Building) constructed in 1936. The district is significant for its association with the Indian Emergency Conservation Work program, a New Deal program designed to provide relief for Native Americans during the Great Depression. The Community Building is still today an important cultural center for the Ponca Tribe in Nebraska.

**Mile 5.0** – Veer left as road turns to gravel

### **Spotlight on Human History**

The lower Niobrara river valley and its adjacent lands have provided a livelihood for generations of Native Americans, farmers and ranchers. Prior to Euro-American settlement this was the homeland of the Ponca tribe. They hunted inland while using the river valley for shelter and sustenance. Ponca culture was irreparably altered by contact with fur traders and more disruptively white settlers. They were removed from the land by the United States Government and sent to live in what was then known as Indian Territory, present day Oklahoma. Many Ponca fought back by traveling back to their traditional lands. They became known as the Northern Ponca.

Today the Poncas no longer have a reservation in the area, but they do have a presence with a tribal headquarters and buffalo pasture. Following the removal of the Ponca, Czech and German immigrants came to this valley in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, finding the freedom, land and space they craved. On this driving tour you will see both past and present reminders of their impact on the landscape. Farms and ranches have been placed on this landscape by these immigrant settlers to maximize the land's agricultural output.



The Lower Niobrara River beneath an expansive sky

**Mile 5.0** – Veer left as road turns to gravel

**Spotlight on Geology**

The Niobrara River is a groundwater-fed river draining the Nebraska Sand Hills. The river is an ideal example of a highly dynamic, unaltered, and braided, prairie channel providing habitat for many shorebirds, including the federally endangered interior least tern and the threatened piping plover. The Niobrara contains a wide variety of physical features, including floodplains, sandbars, islands, and chutes. Pierre shale outcrops, while not unique to the region, are interesting and visible in this reach. Landslides and loess deposits are generally absent in this river segment.

**Mile 11.0** – Road changes to 517<sup>th</sup> Ave.

**Mile 12.0** – Turn left onto 891<sup>st</sup> Ave.

**Mile 14.0** - Turn left onto 892<sup>nd</sup> Ave.



National Park Biologist holding a channel catfish

### **Spotlight on Fish and Wildlife**

**Fishery:** Natural flows, water temperatures, and sediment transport in the Niobrara River sustain an intact native fish community of 37 species within a dynamic braided channel. Unimpaired, natural river conditions are scarce throughout the region. Large river species such as the federally endangered pallid sturgeon, federally threatened shovelnose sturgeon, and blue suckers, have also been found in the lower Niobrara River. In addition, the natural tributary flows from the Niobrara River are essential in sustaining the natural production of paddlefish and saugers in the adjacent reach of the Missouri River.

**Mile 15.0** – Go straight at stop sign



The Lower Niobrara River at Pischelville  
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**Mile 15.0** – Go straight at stop sign

**Mile 16.0** - Turn left onto 514<sup>th</sup> Avenue

### **Spotlight on Ecology**

The dynamic Niobrara River is a naturally braided stream in the Great Plains that has outstanding channel complexity and large woody debris. The river is connected to its floodplain and naturally moves across the valley. This reach contains numerous backwaters, chutes, sandbars, islands, and wetlands that support

multiple special status species. The species include: Federally endangered interior least tern Threatened piping plover Federally endangered pallid sturgeon This river segment contains some mature cottonwood forests and sandbars that provide potential habitat for cottonwood regeneration and ideal nesting habitat for endangered least tern and threatened piping plover.

### **Mile 17.0 – Pischelville Bridge**

**Mile 17.2 – Community of Pischelville -Pischelville Lodge Hall Sladkovsky:** is one of the most notable lodge halls in the state and is believed to be the first Czech lodge hall constructed in Nebraska. The modest one-and-one-half-story frame structure is located in the Pishelville or "Second Bottom" Bohemian community, first settled in 1869-70. The original building was constructed in 1884, and around 1920 a rear addition was added. In 1897 Lodge Sladkovsky was among thirty-one midwestern and plains lodges to found the new Zapadni Cesko Bratske Jednoty (Z.C.B.J.) or Western Bohemian Fraternal Association headquartered in Omaha.



Pischelville Czech Hall - Rad Sladkovsky  
NPS

**Important Driving Note:** At this point turn around at Pischelville and head back the same way you just came on 514th Avenue. After five miles you will come to 515th Avenue.

**Mile 22.0** – Take a left onto 515<sup>th</sup> ave.

**Mile 27.0** – Turn right on Highway 12.

You will arrive on the outskirts of Verdel, Nebraska. Take a left onto Highway 12 to head toward Spencer, Nebraska (also in the direction of Fort Randall) or take a right to head back to Niobrara, Nebraska.

Safe Travels!