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KANSAS

Wildlife & Parks Magazine





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MAGAZINE STAFF

Nadia Reimer, Executive Editor

Jessica Ward, Associate Editor

Megan Mayhew, Digital Content Editor

Dustin Teasley, Graphic Design Specialist

Annie Swisher, Circulation

FRONT COVER A rooster pheasant flushes from sight. Charles Cummins photo.

INSIDE COVER A mule deer is carefully transported by helicopter as part of a study. Staff photo.

Editorial Creed: To promote the conservation and wise use of our natural resources, to instill an understanding of our responsibilities to the land.

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COMMON GROUND

with Brad Loveless



Righting a Wrong

On a Saturday in early October, I met with Governor Laura Kelly, Senator Anthony Hensley and Representative Mark Schreiber to open a new 19-mile section of the Flint Hills Trail (FHT) running from the west side of Osage City to Allen. It was a gorgeous fall day; the trail was in top shape and our short speeches were holding up about 100 bicyclists anxious for the inaugural ride. In my remarks, I remembered our outstanding Parks staff and leadership, our engineering contractor Doug Walker and the abiding critical role he and the Kanza Rails-Trails Conservancy had played, and Elizabeth Burger, also present, and the great support the Kansas Sunflower Foundation has provided.

But I forgot about the landowners. Unforgivable! Attending was Rich Porter, a cattleman, farmer, conservationist and trail neighbor from near Miller, about 10 miles west on the trail. I forgot to mention Rich or other landowner neighbors despite him being with us that morning. When the rail lines were abandoned, rails and ties picked up about 25 years ago, neighboring landowners did what anyone would – they started to make use of them. Some used them as a good roadway to get across their property, others as a place to park equipment and still others as a high and dry place to store big round bales of hay. So, seven years ago when KDWPT began working to convert the railroad bed into a hiking, biking and horseback trail, we had lots of conversations with those neighboring landowners, but not all of them got easily used to the idea right away. Some were angry.

In 2018, the Kansas legislature created the FHT Advisory Council, convened by KDWPT's Parks division with Rep. Dave Barker (Council Grove), Sen. Jeff Longbine (Emporia) and representatives from towns all along the 117-mile trail. The goal was to increase public involvement and effectively communicate and coordinate trail improvements as they were planned and completed. In the 2019 legislative session, the House Agriculture Committee asked the Sunflower Foundation to conduct public meetings and survey cities and individuals along the FHT. The results were encouraging, often showing initial lukewarm attitudes turning consistently positive as concerns about increased trash and vandalism transformed into good visits with trail users, increased revenue for businesses along the way and improved community vitality. The Ottawa Bike and Trail shop opened right where the Flint Hills and Prairie Spirit trails connect in downtown Ottawa because of the new opportunities, and the city created a beautiful outdoor public venue. In the next year, Osage City will improve the section of trail through the north part of town and build a connecting section to their downtown. The Governor was in Osawatometie the week after Osage City, cutting the ribbon for the beginning section, the easternmost (for now) edge of the FHT, which the city thoughtfully brought right into town.



But back to Rich Porter. Rich told me that at first, he also had trouble getting used to the idea of the public crossing his land. Over time, true to the Sunflower Foundation results, the idea grew on him. Rich saw the positives for the towns along the trail and for all of the Kansas and visitor trail users benefitting from the exercise and Flint Hills beauty that he so much appreciated. As the trail was being worked on through his place, he offered for construction crews to make use of his land and suggested a partnership with KDWPT to provide a restroom and drinking water as trail users traveled through.

Rich's generosity is remarkable, but the evolution of landowner attitudes toward the trail and its users is not. It's the nature of Kansans that I have come to treasure and the foundation of a long and productive relationship with the trail's neighbors that is being forged from Osawatometie to Herrington. And we all know the necessity of a substantial and dependable foundation – nowhere more evident than in these Flint Hills whose bedrock spine determines and defines it. When you combine these fine people and this subtly spectacular place, that's something you don't want to miss! 🐮

A Model Employee: Richard Sanders

by John Reinke



The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism lost considerably more than an exceptional employee when district fisheries biologist Richard Sanders passed away unexpectedly on September 23, 2020.

Sure, he was the reigning Fisheries Division Outstanding Employee, but that could have been the case every year since 1984. A consummate professional, Richard started his tenure in 1983 and was the fisheries biologist in the Lawrence district his entire career. Though a proud Texan, over the years Richard became one of the most knowledgeable fisheries managers in the state. His district encompassed Clinton and later Melvern Reservoirs, among many other impoundments, but also the urban fisheries responsibilities for Lawrence, Topeka, and surrounding areas.

Though requiring different skill sets, Richard quickly mastered both fisheries disciplines. From complex fisheries systems knowledge, to public relations, to educating thousands of youth on fishing fundamentals, Richard was the best. As a fellow district fisheries biologist for 29 years, and his “supervisor” for the last two and a half years, his willingness to share

his knowledge and help in any way needed were but two layers of icing on his cake.

Vocal he wasn’t, but those who learn quickly figured out that when he spoke out, you better be listening or miss out on a golden opportunity to learn. Richard was the best mentor that I and other fledgling district fisheries biologists could have had. There are at least seven of us he “trained,” and that doesn’t count those working for other agencies or outside of Kansas.

Richard also was the calm within the storm. His upbeat, can do, never wavering attitude repeatedly turned possible “Titanic” type situations into a pleasure cruise – literally and figuratively. These qualities also served Richard well in his life outside of his professional career. The death of his son and a victorious battle over cancer were two unfair challenges he faced head on that never derailed him, and you would never have known he was fighting with either, other than seeing his bare face for the first time since his college graduation photo.

For those of us blessed to know Richard as more than a coworker, these were the least of his most enviable qualities, however. He was kind, caring, and a model human being, as one friend stated. He would take time for conversations, even when hurried by looming events. He was such an inspiration that those who are not the type to share feelings did so, and in public settings nonetheless.

A better hunting or fishing companion could not be found. His knowledge and pension for enjoyment were undeniable, regardless of the outings’ “success.” We had more fun not catching fish, or not harvesting quail, ducks or geese, than could be imagined. (I won’t mention the Marias Des Cygnes goose hunt or Glen Elder White Bass trip if you don’t mention the Clinton duck hunt or quail hunt.) We did have the best Spoonie hunt ever, though. I know he will now be covered up by mallards, geese, biting fish, and coveys of quail whenever he desires. I will always be grateful to Richard and his family for welcoming me and mine into their home and lives.

I think I will miss Richard’s pop-ins to the office most now. We would discuss work, but also important topics such as his grandkids, memorable events involving co-workers, family, and friends, and maybe even share a new beer review. His Texas drawl was always so comforting; I could talk with him for hours about nothing, and a time or two we did.

I keep his experienced hat next to my desk now, hoping a portion of the knowledge and grace it absorbed through the years will transfer somehow to all who enter. A model employee – definitely. A revered co-worker, mentor, friend, and “older” brother – the best. Those that really knew him will never be able to live up to the example Richard set, and yes, it will hurt to try. He will always be loved and missed, but never replaced.

Two Kansas Trails Receive National Designations

Two Kansas state parks recently received possibly America's highest trails honor. Flint Hills Trail and Prairie Spirit Trail state parks were designated National Recreational Trails by the National Park Service.

"This is significant, not only for those parks and our state parks system as a whole, but for the state of Kansas," said Linda Lanterman, Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWP) state parks director. "This is going to draw valuable attention to two great state parks and all they have to offer. And, ultimately, help the local economies that are developing along those trails. This is a big deal."

The designation brings no monetary prize, but the parks can now use signage that denotes their high quality. The trails will also get special recognition on some maps of America's trails. Both the Flint Hills Trail and Prairie Spirit Trail are built along abandoned railroad lines and have involved a tremendous amount of private labor to establish, build and maintain.

The Flint Hills Trail is a 117-mile trail that reaches from near Osawatomie to Herington, passing through landscapes that vary from steep, heavily timbered ridges to the tallgrass prairie of the Flint Hills.

Prairie Spirit Trail stretches 51 miles from Ottawa to Iola, and also crosses a wide range of topography.

The two trails intersect in Ottawa. Businesses including bed and breakfasts, cafes and

bicycle shops now benefit from the thousands of trail users who annually come from many states and nations to use the trails.

Both are funded by state park fees and grants. There is no charge to hike, cycle or horseback ride on either trail. And, the trails are maintained solely by a small number of staff and generous volunteers.

"We couldn't have done any of this without our volunteers and private landowners," said Lanterman. "They're incredible and a huge reason why these trails have been so successful."

Lanterman credited Kathy Pritchett, retired trails grant coordinator for KDWP, with supplying the National Parks Service with the necessary documentation to be considered for a National Recreational Trail designation.

The National Parks Service made the announcement on Oct. 22 when 30 trails, both water and land, amid 25 states received the coveted distinctions.

Kansas was the only state with four trails recognized. As well as the state parks, the Migrant's Mile Trail at Quivira National Wildlife Refuge and Outlet Campground Trail System at Melvern Reservoir also received recognition.

Also in Kansas, 192 miles of the Arkansas River and 173 miles of the Kansas River have been designated National Water Trails.

Current estimates state Kansas is home to more than 4000 miles of maintained, public trails. Find one to discover today at ksoutdoors.com.





BIRD BRAIN

Adapt and Observe

with Mike Rader

The year 2020 has certainly been a challenge for us humans. Despite the negatives, one good by-product is that more people are taking advantage of what the natural world has to offer. Higher usage of parks, wildlife areas and other outdoor resources is obvious, with plenty of money spent on pursuing those outdoor activities. There has been a marked increase in demand for camping equipment, canoes and kayaks, reservations for campsite and cabin stays, and all-time highs for recreational vehicle sales. According to most information I've read, bird watching has also seen a definite rise in participation, as it was identified as an activity that can be pursued safely close to home with family and close friends or alone. All this points to more and more folks spending time outside; utilizing and enjoying the wonders of what we have in Kansas.

Fall is a fantastic time to get out and enjoy birds. Although migration is winding down for neotropical birds, migration of waterfowl, cranes, gulls, sparrows and many other species are on the upswing. The tremendous drought, fires and lack of food in the mountains to the west of Kansas is having an interesting effect on many uncommon birds being seen in the southwestern part of the state as of this writing. Birds observed on the Cimarron Grasslands and Elkhart area of extreme southwest Kansas in early October have included Woodhouse's scrub jays, Steller's jays, Pinyon jays, and Mountain chickadees; I'd bet that more typically montane species will come out on to the plains as the season progresses. Though probably somewhat stressful on the birds, it's interesting to see these species within our borders.

Christmas Bird Count (CBC) season begins in mid-December, running into early January as usual, but there will be a different feel to it this year. The National Audubon Society has instructed compilers that if counts are conducted and submitted to them, they are to do so following these guidelines:

1. Wait until November 15 at the earliest to confirm the CBC will take place, if local regulations allow.
2. Cancel all in-person compilation gatherings.
3. Social distancing and/or masking are required at all times in the field.
4. Carpooling may only occur within existing familiar or social "pod" groups.
5. Activities must comply with all current state and municipal COVID-19 guidelines.

I'm happy that the National Audubon Society is willing to allow CBCs to be conducted and we can continue to provide the data. And, it is commendable that they are trying to ensure the safety of all. It changes how compilers assign areas within a count circle and compile numbers at the end of the day, but we can all adapt rather easily. I'm looking forward to getting out into the field, even though it will not be the "social activity" of a typical count season. Watch the Kansas Birds website, www.ksbirds.org, and the Kansas Birding and Kansas Ornithological Society Facebook pages for more details on counts after mid-November.



BOAT KANSAS

Take an Online Boating Course

with *Chelsea Hofmeier*



With temperatures no longer ideal for a weekend spent boating, now is a great time to enroll in a boating education course. Most states have some form of education program that encourages – and sometimes requires – boaters to take a course in person or online. In Kansas, a boating education course is required for anyone born on or after January 1, 1989, under 21 years of age and wanting to operate a motorboat or sailboat unaccompanied. Even when courses are mandatory, many boaters overlook boating education requirements as the excitement and heat of summer grips them and they head to the water. Our goal as boating safety educators is to get boaters thinking about education *before* the spring and summer weather

starts enticing people outside.

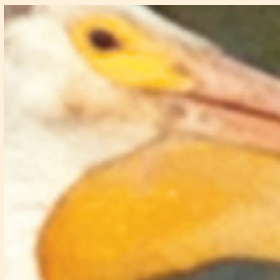
With today's wide variety of courses available, there's a course for every boater's schedule. One great option is to take an online course. A quick and easy way to get up to speed on important boating knowledge, online courses can be a fun and convenient way to get your certification. With technology such as interactive videos to keep the student entertained, online courses are more engaging than ever, too.

There are currently five approved online courses available to Kansans looking to get certified, including an interactive "game style" course. Here, you will learn about important boating safety topics such as navigation, required equipment, life jackets, and what to do in emergency situations. You can enroll on any device at any day or time and take as much time as you need to get through the course. Costs vary for each course, but the advantage is an immediate printable temporary card after you have passed the exam. That temporary certificate is good for 30 days, and within that timeframe, the company will send you a permanent plastic card in the mail.

Boating trends and statistics tell us that educated boaters have fewer accidents, are more confident, and enjoy the boating experience more than those who have not taken a boating education course. Sit back, relax, and remain in the safety of your own home by getting your boating education certification online! Visit www.ksoutdoors.com/boating/boating-education and start your online boating education journey today.

WHAT AM I? ID Challenge

Using only the image and clues below, see if you can figure out this month's mystery species!



Clues:

1. I commonly weigh 20-30 pounds
2. I can live up to 25 years
3. My bill can hold more than my belly can.

>>> See answer on Page 14.



Welcoming wildHERness with Tanna Fanshier

Founded in May of this year by Jess Rice, wildHERness hit the ground running amidst a global pandemic, and has quickly become one of the fastest-growing women's outdoor groups in the state. As president of the group, Rice is joined by vice president and director of Risk Management, Jess Banes, treasurer and resource manager, Alex Moisman, and secretary and director of Community Affairs, Sharenda Birts. The impressive all-women crew cited a January doe hunt as the starting point of the group's formation.

"We looked at our diverse backgrounds, realizing that none of us were 'normal' in terms of the typical hunter or angler," recalls Rice. "That pushed us to consider that we had a strong platform from which to engage other women and young girls in outdoor pursuits."

The "Core Four" as they often refer to themselves, also share a love of giving back, and emphasize the importance of serving the communities and organizations that support the wildHERness mission.

That mission is no small feat, boasting a goal that goes beyond getting women into the outdoors.

"We want to create authentic sportswomen," Rice insists. "Those who know how conservation departments are funded, but also where and how that funding is acquired, how the spaces they love and the game



animals they pursue are managed... We teach skills to empower women - providing the experience they need to recreate, hunt, fish and feed their families without having to rely on the help of anyone else!"

This powerful mission has guided the group to great success, filling each of their varied courses to-date with newcomers and loyalists alike. Supported solely through donations and merchandise sales, wildHERness employs the help of diverse partners to back their mission, provide instruction, and outfit participants with the necessary equipment to participate at any experience or skill level. The adventurous group is always open to new event suggestions and welcomes input from participants.

"We run the gamut of outdoor activities," Rice explains. "With four strong women who love the outdoors, there's not much that's off limits."

Exemplifying their no-limits attitude, the group looks forward to hosting their upcoming Advanced Furharvesting course Dec. 4-6 in Ottawa, where participants will learn how to set a trap line, handle furs, and experience hunting raccoons with hounds.

Extending a warm invite to readers, Rice stresses, "We are a diverse and welcoming group of women. Your background, ethnicity, skill level, lifestyle and past don't matter to us—we are here to bond over mutual enjoyment of the outdoors."

Interested in joining wildHERness at their next event? Follow the group at Wildherness.org or on Facebook and Instagram @_wildherness_.



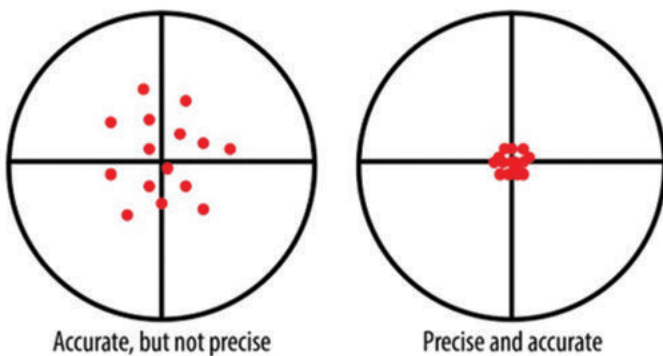
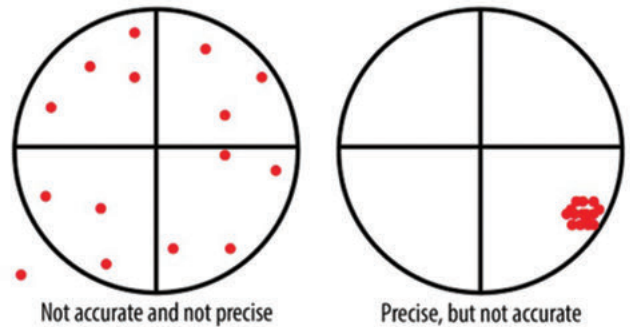
Accuracy vs. Precision

The primary purpose of Kansas Hunter Education is to produce safe, knowledgeable, responsible and involved hunters. In hunter education classes, we discuss the important topic of hunter responsibility. One of the key ideas we cover is the responsibility of hunters to know their own abilities, the limits of their equipment and what they can effectively do with that equipment. We come to know these limits through our experience as we practice at the range before the hunt. Something that can help us understand these concepts better is knowing the difference between accuracy and precision.

Precision refers to how close the delivered results are to each other. Precision, for a shooter, is consistently producing the same results that are inherent within the system. **Accuracy** refers to how close a result is to the accepted value. For the shooter, accuracy means consistently producing the same results that are inherent to the target. In other words, accuracy is putting precision where the shooter wants it.

For a rifle, the closed system consists of a barrel and an action. If we clamped this system to a fixed object and fired the rifle, the bullets would then leave the system and impact a target. How closely together these bullets impact the target would be a demonstration of the precision of that fixed system. This would be independent of where on the target these bullets impacted. Shooters like a precise rifle, one that is capable of firing tight groups. But precision is not enough, because precision does not consider where on the target the bullets are going to impact.

Accuracy, on the other hand, is something that we can affect. We can make changes to the system that allow us to maneuver the point of impact to the designated spot we choose. Through sighting in our optical system, dry-fire training for trigger control, and live-fire training for conditioning and muscle memory, we can know our limits with our equipment and prepare ourselves for success.



Precision is inherent in the system so the shooter tries not to do anything that will take away precision from their firearm system. Changing stocks, optics, triggers, ammunition and using suppressors are all changes that can take precision out of the system but none of these can introduce precision into the system. Mechanically speaking, "it is what it is."

As shooters we should strive for consistency - doing the same thing over and over that will produce the desired outcome every time we pull the trigger. We have a responsibility to give the best that we can give but, more importantly, the wildlife of Kansas deserve the best we can give. The ethical hunter knows that it is not enough to do the bare minimum in our preparation. Head to the range and see if you can improve your accuracy once you know what precision you can expect from your equipment.



Wingstem | text and photo by Krista Dahlinger

Tall, dark grey-green, shade loving plants with long leaves blooming bright yellow flowers in late summer are known as wingstem, *Verbesina alternifolia*. Wingstem plants can reach 5 to 8 feet tall when mature. The stems are sturdy and non-branching, except toward the top of the plant, where multiple stems radiate outward in a domed panicle, which provides space for the yellow daisy like flowers to bloom. Wingstem is named for the “fins” or “wings” that grow along the length of the stems; small coarse hairs may grow on these stems in between the wings. Leaves are staggered alternately along the stems, growing up to 10 inches long and several inches wide in a lance shape, with pointed tips. Overall, the plant has a leafy look from top to bottom. The flowers are bright yellow with ray petals that can be somewhat droopy and irregularly spaced – they do not form a perfect circle, giving the

blooms an off-centered appearance.

After the wingstem’s flower petals drop, round spiky structures appear to produce seeds, and the seeds develop in flat papery covers with pointed awns. Seeds are dispersed in the wind and by lodging pointed the awns in passing animal fur. Wingstem also reproduces by spreading rhizomes, and will form a clumping colony over several years.

Silvery checkerspot and summer azure butterflies use lay eggs on Wingstem plants for their larva to feed. The caterpillars may consume major amounts of foliage, but the plants recover. Other butterflies, bees and skippers dine on nectar from the plant. Wildlife do not browse the somewhat bitter leaves, but smaller animals may use the mass of leafy vegetation for cover and habitat; livestock will not graze Wingstem.

Wingstem plants bloom from August through September

across the central United States and provide an important nectar and pollen source for late summer insects. In Kansas, wingstem can be found across the eastern half of the state in understory, rich woodland moist soils, in open spaces under tall canopies or at the edge of thick woods.

To add Wingstem to your landscape, collect seeds late in the year once seed heads have turned brown. Plant them directly into the soil or deep flower pots and lightly cover with soil. First year growth may not be remarkable – less than 2 feet – but as the plant secures a root system in the soil and matures, it will grow taller each year and likely increase outward. Wingstem is recommended for growing in a large open understory space due to the eventual large size of plant.



Giddy Over Jigs

with Marc Murrell



I've never been big on "crafting," as I don't consider myself particularly handy, nor do I have the patience for some of these activities. Plus, it's easier to just buy what I need at the store and roll out. But with the recent rise in popularity of crappie fishing (I think, largely due to Garmin's LiveScope and several crappie tournament circuits and notable Facebook phenoms), jigs of all kinds are making a comeback on store shelves. While I've always professed most lures need only attract the attention of an angler with money in their pocket, there is no doubt certain lures or color combinations work better than others. So, I decided to try my hand at tying my own crappie jigs. Why not?

I hit up Cabela's and for less than \$75, I was able to get everything I needed to start tying my own feather (you can also use various hair or fur) jigs. Assorted colors of feathers, chenille and 1/16-ounce jig heads allowed me to make each jig for less than half of retail cost and in the exact colors I wanted. I watched one 5-minute video on tying hair jigs (thanks Wired2fish) and sat down one Monday evening last October and made it happen.

The first jig I tied was hideous. I laughed out loud when I showed my wife, but she was encouraging, "It looks nice." My only hope was the fish were starving. I tied exactly four more jigs. Each got better and I must admit, the last couple looked like anything you'd buy in the store.

My impatience returning, I couldn't stand the suspense and hooked up the boat the next afternoon. My goal was simple: Catch ONE crappie on the first jig I tied. I began to doubt myself when I'd fished for 10 minutes or so without a bump. But then it happened... THUMP!

I set the hook and was giddy as I reeled in a beautiful slab that weighed nearly 1.5 pounds; I was shaking from excitement trying to get my phone to work to record the auspicious occasion. After the photos, I put the fish in the live well and cut the jig off knowing it would now hang in a place of honor in my office. I then replaced it with a "prettier" version and went back to fishing.

Over the course of the next three hours, I caught more than 30 keeper-sized crappie. During the process, I lost one of my hand-tied beauties - reducing my inventory by 20 percent - and nearly shed a tear knowing it was one of my first ones. I quickly tied on another and it resulted in the biggest crappie of the day - a 2.29 pound, nearly 16-inch fatty!

I kept the lake's limit of 20 crappie and as I transferred them to a cooler full of ice, I was happier than normal. I'd done this numerous times several months prior, but this fishing trip was different. All was the same, except for the fact I caught every fish on something my own hands and mind created. There's something rewarding about it and it's truly gratifying. Give jig tying a try and get giddy.





FISHIN'

Fishing With the Times

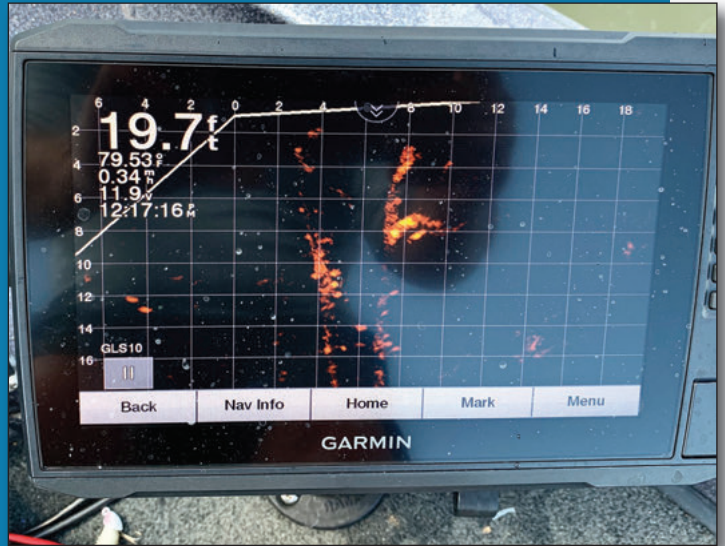
with Mike Miller

I clearly remember the first time I fished from a boat equipped with a sonar unit, referred to as a "flasher." It was 1983, and I was excited to see what was below, even if it was pretty basic information. The flasher provided real-time information about water depth and the presence and depth of fish. With this new technology, how could we ever get skunked again? Believe me, we did.

When I bought my first boat, LCD sonar was just emerging, but the detail left something to be desired. I had to have a paper graph, which burned an image on paper with, what we considered at the time, amazing detail. It was fun to watch and there were times it helped me catch fish. I soon learned, though, that just marking fish on paper didn't mean I could catch them and I was never sure what kind of fish I was seeing. Keeping a supply of paper rolls was a pain and I still got skunked.

In the 1990s, LCD sonar advanced with much better detail, effectively making the paper graph obsolete. And while keeping a supply of paper was no longer an issue, LCD sonar still didn't guarantee catching fish.

Next came LCD with color imaging and more detail. Global Positioning System or GPS was also an option, and it truly has been a beneficial



advancement. You could mark spots and return to them with precision and, with a map card, navigation became simple and safe.

Today, we have downscan and sidescan imagery that provides amazing detail. And the newest technology is called livescope or live view, which is real-time scanning, almost like a sonogram, or a movie of the lake bottom with fish visibly moving within the water column.

Is it an unfair advantage? That's a matter of opinion, but in my experience, it won't guarantee an angler catches fish. Livescope won't replace angling and boat control skills or lake knowledge. However, it may flatten the learning curve for anglers on a lake they're unfamiliar with, helping them quickly learn where fish are located. And it can definitely make anglers more efficient, eliminating water and structure that aren't holding fish, and helping anglers keep track of moving schools.

The truth is: The best anglers, who are usually those who spend the most time on the water, will still catch most of the fish, with or without the latest technology. But it sure is fun to try.

WAY outside

BY BRUCE COCHRAN



"HEY DAD! THIS IS NO ORDINARY LEG BAND!
IT SAYS, 'MARVIN... ALL MY LOVE. LUCILLE!'"



Writings from a Warden's Daughter

with Annie Campbell-Fischer

Eyes in the Sky

Dad always knew that with the first frost of fall and the hours of daylight fading, deer poaching complaints would increase. Poachers like to operate under the cover of darkness, so night surveillance, teamed with the use of aircraft, are often part of game wardens' weekly patrol activities. On one mid-November evening, 10 wardens paired up and positioned themselves in five locations in eastern Pottawatomie County and western Jackson and Shawnee counties. A pair of Kansas Highway Patrol (KHP) pilots and a game warden who knew the lay of land and roadways below provided "eyes in the sky." At 2100 hours, the KHP aircraft left Topeka and within minutes was crisscrossing overhead of the surveilled area. The cold, cloudless night was perfect for spotting even the slightest suspicious light below and almost immediately, the aircraft spotters alerted wardens of a vehicle parked in a secluded creek bottom. Wardens found several individuals illegally pursuing furbearers, issued tickets, and sent them home.

At 2200 hours, the aircraft was tracking a vehicle shining a spotlight near the Jeffery Energy Center in Pottawatomie County. Dad and his partner were soon en route. The suspects did not continuously shine the spotlight and appeared to drive without headlights, but aircraft spotters gave Dad the last known direction of travel. Just as Dad and his partner arrived in the area, the aircraft located the suspect vehicle and provided a location just three miles away; Dad knew exactly where they were. Nearing the spot, Dad dimmed his truck lights as he crested a hill and spotted the blacked-out vehicle below. Using only ambient light, Dad and his partner continued down the one-track road. However, when Dad turned on his truck's emergency lights, the chase was on. In the first quarter-mile, the wardens were close behind when they saw several deer cross in front of the fleeing SUV. Through the dust cloud, the wardens could see the SUV strike one of the deer. Eventually, the dust required Dad to drop back, but the eyes in the sky never lost sight of the vehicle.

Twelve miles into the chase, spotters in the aircraft reported seeing the SUV dim its lights and stop. Only a minute behind, Dad and his partner found the empty SUV in the ditch, the driver's door open, and steam rising from under the hood. The occupants fled the vehicle, leaving a freshly-killed white-tailed doe inside. Dad radioed in the tag number, finding it registered to someone they had charged with poaching three deer in Pottawatomie County only eight months earlier. An ice chest in the SUV bore the name of another known deer poacher. Both individuals were known to be involved in robbery, as well as drug use and sales.

Soon, additional game wardens, deputies from the Pottawatomie County Sheriff's Office, and KHP troopers arrived on scene. They searched the area well into the night and even with a K-9 unit, they came up empty.

Dad and another warden drove 20 miles to the residence of



the SUV owner, contacting a sleepy wife who claimed her husband had left town. She asked about her SUV. Dad told her it had hit a deer, overheated and was likely in bad shape. The wardens knocked on a few more doors that early morning before returning to process the scene. The deer, several knives and a spotlight were removed as evidence. That night, the temperature dropped to 14 degrees.

At noon the next day, Dad met with two wardens and a K-9 Officer and his partner. They resumed the search at the scene hoping the K-9 would alert on a track or discover evidence, such as a firearm. Thirty minutes into the search and within half-mile of their starting location, the wardens located two abandon campers and their K-9 alerted on a pack of cigarettes lying not far from the campers. As their K-9 approached, it was obvious someone was inside one of the campers. After a verbal command to come out, an individual around 50 years old emerged and appeared to be in physical distress. Dad recognized him as the owner of the SUV. A quick search of the campers did not turn up a second suspect. The apprehended suspect was suffering from hypothermia and the wardens called for EMS. After a six-hour stay in an area hospital, Dad transported the suspect to the Pottawatomie jail where he spent time until convicted of numerous wildlife and traffic violations. As a felon on probation, his probation was revoked, and he went back to prison. The court awarded the SUV to the tow company for their initial tow and storage. The second suspect remained missing for three days. However, Dad could not provide evidence beyond a shadow of doubt that the second individual was in the SUV during the chase and he was never arrested.



Delicious is in the Details

with Dustin Teasley

Have you ever ate something a friend made and thought, “Man, I need that recipe,” but even with a photo-copy in-hand, you still can’t seem to reproduce the same taste? We all have. I think the reason for this is there are simple, overlooked techniques not written down.

I have some pretty reliable recipes and learned over the years to not make any kind of modification. If a recipe calls for a pinch of salt or a dash of pepper, then it gets a pinch of salt or dash of pepper. There’s one guy I make sausage with, that if he tells me to mix ingredients while hopping on one foot, I am mixing the ingredients while hopping on one foot.

All joking aside, most cooks do little things they rarely even notice themselves that contribute to the quality of the final product. It is best when making a recipe handed down to you that you first observe it being done correctly, looking for these nuances as you go.

One time, I was apprenticing at a sausage-making event and was asked to bring cloves of garlic to mince. I showed up with a jar of minced garlic. The two ol’ timers looked at the jar, looked at each other, then grinned.

One grabbed the jar, looked at it in disgust and said “Yip. That’s minced garlic.”

He handed the jar back and politely told me to take it home and use it. He then pulls out a bag of fresh garlic that we proceeded to clean and mince by hand. I didn’t see the difference, other than the extra work, but went along with it anyway. I later tried the recipe with a jar of minced garlic instead of fresh and they were right - it wasn’t the same.

Another time, I tried using packaged dried orange zest as a substitute for fresh zest in a jerky recipe. Bad idea. The potency of the packaged zest was nothing compared to fresh and as a result, totally changed the flavor of the product.

As I learn things on my own, I try to make sure I hit up my local circle of cooking buddies to help them avoid making the same mistakes I’ve made. One huge mistake

involved adding pickled jalapenos in my bratwurst recipe. I love pickled jalapenos and I love cheese, so it made sense to put them in my brats. They tasted great freshly made, but after a month or so in the freezer, they tasted a little “off.” It wasn’t until I read a recipe blog that pointed out to use fresh jalapenos instead of pickled because the vinegar chemically changes the meat surrounding it, producing an odd flavor. The next batch I made I used fresh jalapenos and sure enough - success.

Brand names can also come into play. Soy sauce is one ingredient I never waiver on - LaChoy is the only brand for me; nothing else will do. I also use the same brand of teriyaki sauce. Our local store carried it, then didn’t. As a result, I went online and ordered a case of it. I like it so much better than others I was willing to buy bulk.

Most unique ingredients can be found online with a three to five-day delivery. Sometimes substitutions are for the better of the recipe, but I don’t make a habit of it, especially in handed down traditions.

This winter if you are learning the art of sausage making, curing, smoking or grilling wild game, pay attention to the details. Also, if you are the one passing along these traditions, don’t overlook things that might serve someone learning, no matter how small or insignificant the detail may seem.



CATFISH CHAMPIONS

by Michael Pearce, *outdoor writer*

In high school, Eric and Jordan Horton fished for catfish at Butler State Fishing Lake as a cheap date activity.

On Oct. 30 and 31, the now married couple went fishing at Milford Reservoir and brought home a check for more than \$51,000. The Derby couple won the 2020 Cabela's King Kat classic national championship.

Their combined two-day catch of 169.4 pounds was 54 pounds heavier than the anglers who finished in second place with 115 pounds.

Jordan's best fish, 48.7 pounds, won the big fish award for the tournament, too.

"She usually catches the biggest and the most," said her husband, Eric. "It's been that way for a long time. We started dating and fishing together when I was a sophomore and she was a freshman."

The husband and wife are now 32 and 30 years old, respectively.

A move to Texas after high school had the Horton's out of fishing for several years. But their return to Kansas,

and the purchase of a boat, led them to where they are now - atop one of catfishing's top tournament trails.

"When we got the boat, we learned we could catch big catfish pretty consistently," said Jordan.

Their Kansas location plays well into their love of catching big blue catfish. Milford is one of America's top blue cat lakes. Cheney, El Dorado, Melvern and Perry reservoirs also have strong blue cat populations.

The King Kat circuit includes about 20 tournaments around the nation annually. And the 62 spots for the national championship were earned; The Horton's finished third at a Texas tournament so they could fish in the Milford championship.

Two days of pre-fishing were brutal and left Eric dejected.

"I was really confused and worried but when I talked to Jordan, she told me I knew the lake and to just fish it like I normally would," said Eric.

Their first fish of the tournament was the huge 48.7-pound blue catfish that was the tournament's largest. Their baits were dead, foot-long gizzard shad, tails removed.

Later that day, they caught another blue at about 41 pounds. Tournament rules said only two fish per boat, per day could be weighed.

Fishing conditions were horrid the second day, with high winds and five-foot swells. Still, the Horton's managed to weigh in two more big blue cats, each well over 30 pounds.

"After the first day, I figured our odds were good," said Eric, "but I never thought we'd win by that much."

What will they do with the prize money?

"I'll use it to pay off the boat and other things," said Eric, with a chuckle. "This has turned into a hobby that I fell down into the rabbit hole with. I just keep getting deeper into it. But we love it."

"WHAT AM I?" answer: Pelican

KDWPT Among First to Make Hunting Information Available in Spanish

The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism – in partnership with the Kansas Wildlife Federation and the Kansas Hispanic and Latino American Affairs Commission – is taking its first large stride toward making hunting and other outdoor recreation-related information available to a wider audience. New this year, on KDWPT’s Espanol webpage, ksoutdoors.com/Espanol, is the department’s first-ever Spanish-language version of the 2020-2021 Kansas Hunting and Furharvesting Regulations Summary, *2020-2021 la cacería y recolección de pieles de Kansas resumen de regulaciones*. The 48-page, full color document contains critical information related to Kansas’ hunting and trapping seasons, license and permit requirements, unit boundary maps, office and staff contact information, and more.

It’s just one facet of KDWPT’s all-new language access program, “Afuera Para Todos” meaning “Outdoors For All.” As part of Afuera Para Todos, KDWPT has immediate plans to offer additional Spanish-translated materials, to include the 2021 Kansas Fishing Regulations Summary (produced annually), 2022-2023 Kansas Boating Regulations Summary (produced every two years), area signage, website and social media content, and more.

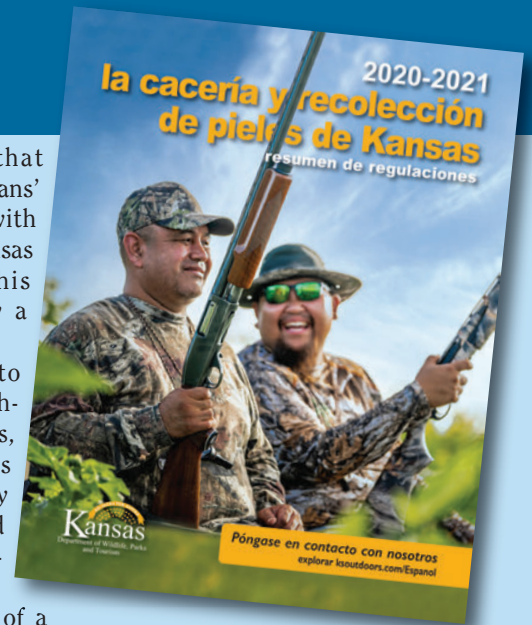
“At KDWPT, our responsibility is to manage Kansas’ natural resources and to serve those who wish to engage in outdoor recreation associated with those natural resources, regardless of ethnicity or preferred language,” said KDWPT Secretary Brad Loveless. “While we recognize the tremendous opportunity that exists here for us to expand our user-base, more importantly, we know it’s simply the right thing to do. I’ve encouraged and challenged my staff to continue identifying and removing barriers for our state’s most underrepresented groups because the reality is, language is just one

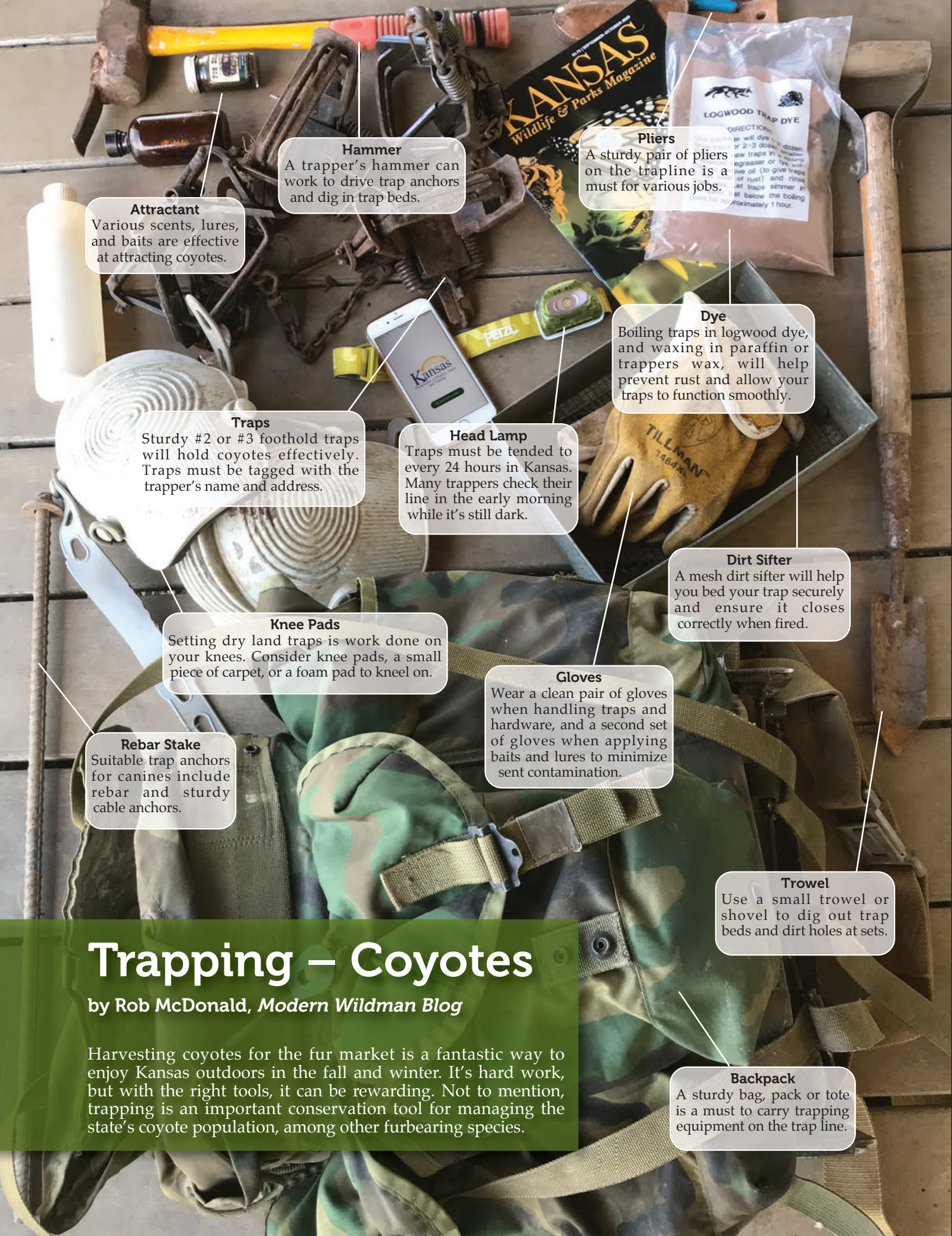
barrier of many that might affect a Kansans’ ability to engage with our agency and Kansas outdoors, but this effort is certainly a great place to start.”

In addition to offering Spanish-translated materials, KDWPT has increased its capacity to field phone and email communications in Spanish through the hiring of a dedicated bilingual information representative. Information on how to utilize this resource can be found at ksoutdoors.com/Espanol.

However, the improvements don’t stop there. Beginning in 2021, other mission critical priorities for KDWPT will include increased diversity in the agency’s marketing and promotional materials, as well as its workforce.

“Diversity, ‘Equity’ and ‘Inclusion’ aren’t just going to be ‘power words’ that live and die on a planning document at our agency,” said Nadia Reimer, KDWPT chief of Public Affairs. “This is our agency’s commitment to creating a culture of inclusivity where underrepresented groups are authentically recognized and welcomed as valuable members of the Kansas natural resource community, and it’s also our commitment to creating a workforce that more closely represents the constituents we serve.”





Attractant
Various scents, lures, and baits are effective at attracting coyotes.

Hammer
A trapper's hammer can work to drive trap anchors and dig in trap beds.

Pliers
A sturdy pair of pliers on the trapline is a must for various jobs.

Dye
Boiling traps in logwood dye, and waxing in paraffin or trappers wax, will help prevent rust and allow your traps to function smoothly.

Traps
Sturdy #2 or #3 foothold traps will hold coyotes effectively. Traps must be tagged with the trapper's name and address.

Head Lamp
Traps must be tended to every 24 hours in Kansas. Many trappers check their line in the early morning while it's still dark.

Dirt Sifter
A mesh dirt sifter will help you bed your trap securely and ensure it closes correctly when fired.

Knee Pads
Setting dry land traps is work done on your knees. Consider knee pads, a small piece of carpet, or a foam pad to kneel on.

Gloves
Wear a clean pair of gloves when handling traps and hardware, and a second set of gloves when applying baits and lures to minimize sent contamination.

Rebar Stake
Suitable trap anchors for canines include rebar and sturdy cable anchors.

Trowel
Use a small trowel or shovel to dig out trap beds and dirt holes at sets.

Backpack
A sturdy bag, pack or tote is a must to carry trapping equipment on the trap line.

Trapping – Coyotes

by Rob McDonald, *Modern Wildman Blog*

Harvesting coyotes for the fur market is a fantastic way to enjoy Kansas outdoors in the fall and winter. It's hard work, but with the right tools, it can be rewarding. Not to mention, trapping is an important conservation tool for managing the state's coyote population, among other furbearing species.

More Tips & Tricks

Coyotes are plentiful in Kansas in all landscapes including prairie, woodland, and cropland. Here are a few tips and tricks to get you started on the trap line to harvest them.

- **Trap Selection** - Coyotes are tough, and strong for their weight and size. When you are selecting foot hold traps for coyote trapping, look to #2 and #3 traps with strong springs.

A few trap modifications can go a long way to holding a coyote in a trap in a humane manner. Consider laminating the jaws on your traps to increase the holding surface. Center swivels, and multiple “crunch proof” swivels on the trap chain, will help prevent coyotes from twisting your trap and chain into a bind. Adding a steel base plate to your traps will increase the trap’s frame strength and help to prevent bent frames, popped jaws, and lost coyotes. Most commercial trapping supply stores carry fully- or partially-modified traps just for coyote trapping if welding and riveting aren’t for you.

- **Finding the Spot on the Spot** - Coyotes prefer to move in open areas, following pasture tire tracks, long fence lines, and field edges. Look for signs, like tracks and droppings to locate the exact area where coyotes are moving when planning your sets.

Consider the prevailing wind conditions, and the types of attractants that a coyote will investigate in the area.

- **Coyote Baits, Lures, and Attractants** - Use attractants like coyote, fox, or bobcat urine, gland lures, or prepared coyote baits to lure coyotes to your set and into your trap. Be careful with visual attractants like fur, feathers, or livestock carcasses that attract birds of prey.

- **Use Dry Dirt** - Using dry dirt (look under bridges, or in old barns) will help to alleviate issues with frozen dirt rendering your traps useless.

- **Anchoring Your Traps** - Rebar steel stakes, and cable-type stakes are viable options for anchoring coyote traps, but make sure your stake is secure before building your set.

- **Trap Prime Fur** - Wild fur is at its highest value when it is “prime.” Coyotes taken between Thanksgiving and Christmas



holidays will generally be considered prime. As the winter season progresses, the coyote mating season kicks off and furs will become rubbed, quickly affecting their market value.

- **Find a Mentor** - Probably the fastest and most productive way to learn the ropes when it comes to trapping furbearers is to ride along with a seasoned trapper. The Kansas Fur Harvesters Association, and many Kansas fur harvester groups on social media, can help you find a mentor and get your trap line going this season.

Care & Sale of Wild Fur

Wild fur is both beautiful and functional. This renewable resource can be highly marketable, and if cared for properly, will bring you a premium for your product at the fur buyer. It is acceptable for trappers to sell fur in several ways:

In the Round refers to selling fur that is still on the carcass. Many fur buyers won’t accept fur in the round. If your local buyer is willing to buy fur still on the carcass, expect deep discounts. It is still critical to take care of the fur if you plan to sell in the round.

In the Grease or Green is a common description for fur that is skinned but not fleshed, stretched, or dried. Selling fur in the grease is a great compromise for trappers running a small holiday break trap line. Fur sold in the grease should be combed clean of burs, washed clean of mud and blood, and the fur – not the skin and fat – should be dried. Skinned green furs should be frozen flat, and fur side out in storage, and then mostly thawed when taking them to your buyer.

As a trapper, caring for your catch is both a matter of respect for the resource, and respect for the product that you intend to sell. Finding a mentor to help you through the “fur shed” process is a fantastic option for anyone ready to try their hand at catching wild fur this season.



- Contact your buyer before you set your trap line to make sure the fur you intend to catch is marketable, and ask about any special instructions for finishing your fur.

- Fresh furbearers skin much easier than animals that have been frozen, or even left overnight. Whenever possible, skin your trapped fur the same day it’s caught; it will save you time, frustration, and money.

- Cold water and fabric softener work great for cleaning blood, mud, stickers, and burs from wild fur. Clean and fresh fur is more presentable, respectful, and will fetch a better price at the buyer.

- Get a tail puller. Pliers will work, but a quality tail puller tool from any trapping supplier makes the job of pulling tail bones much easier. Tail bones must be pulled, and the tail hide split so that the fur can be properly finished, and the tail preserved.

First Day Hikes

by Rick McNary
outdoor writer and photographer

While some of the days have been pleasant with mild temperatures – it is Kansas, after all; You’re never sure what the weather is going to be. However, the weather does not appear to be a deterrent for Kansas’ growing number of First Day Hike participants. In fact, it seems that the colder it is, the more people attend. That’s the spirit of Kansans: they like a good story to tell of bravely facing the harshest elements.

Kansas state parks are spread out across the state, providing recreation opportunities within a short drive for most – especially to enjoy New Year’s Day

hiking with family, friends and pets (on a leash, of course). Each state park offers relatively easy hiking on well-maintained trails. These hikes are generally around a mile or two in length and are led by park staff.

The First Day Hike is part of a nationwide effort of America’s State Parks to provide a means for individuals and families to welcome the coming year in the outdoors, exercising and connecting with nature. Last year, all 50 states participated with more than 55,000 people enjoying 133,000 miles of guided hikes on January 1.



Annual First Day Hikes on January 1 might be your ticket to overcoming the winter blues. Bundle up and brave the elements through the best scenery that Kansas has to offer this New Year.

Since more than 82 percent of Americans live in urban areas, the opportunities to get outdoors and enjoy rural settings are often limited. However, the state park system is a great way for city dwellers to access rural America.

Kansas Lt. Governor Lynn Rogers led more than 200 hikers on a First Day Hike at the El Dorado Lake State Park to ring in 2020.

"I'm impressed with the number of people that started their year here with us," Rogers said. "Kansas really love their state parks. Every elected official needs to understand how important our parks are to the people of our state.

"State parks remind you that you can live without Wi-Fi and your cell phone once in a while," Rogers says. "It's rejuvenating to get back to the rural parts of the state.

For information on First Day Hikes in 2021, visit ksoutdoors.com/State-Parks.





Fried Duck Filets

by Michael Pearce, *outdoor writer*

- 1 to 1.5 lbs. Skinless, duck breast filets**
- 2 Cups Flour**
- 2 Tbls. Seasoning (Cajun, Italian, or seasoned salt)**
- 1 tsp. Baking soda**
- 2 tsp. Baking powder**
- 2 Eggs, beaten**
- 1 Cup Milk**
- Cooking oil**
- Tenderizing mallet**

Trim the gristle from the edge of the duck breast. Lay the meat membrane side up and tenderize with tenderizing mallet or Jaccard tenderizer. Work with the meat until uniform thickness reaches about 1/4-inch.

Mix flour and dry ingredients well and place in a wide bowl. In another bowl, combine the beaten eggs

and milk. Begin to heat the oil in a pan at medium-high heat, or about 350 degrees.

As the oil heats, press the filet into the seasoned flour mixture to thoroughly coat. Next, dip the filet in the egg-wash and press into the seasoned flour, again. Carefully set the breaded filet on a plate (do not stack, as this will remove the coating).

Next, cook each filet for 2.5 to 3 minutes per side, depending on thickness. Ideally, the meat will still be pink in the middle. Carefully remove the filet from the oil and set on a paper towel for a few minutes before serving.

Serve with mashed potatoes and white gravy, with enough gravy to pour extra on the fried duck filets. Then, if you're lucky enough to have leftovers the next day, turn your filets into the ultimate sandwich. Enjoy.

Celebrating 25 Years of **WIHA**



Jon Blumb photo

WIHA: The Beginning

by Wes Sowards, KDWPT Wildlife Division assistant director & WIHA coordinator

“Not crazy about the idea.”

This was Steve Williams' response when asked of his original impression of the Walk-In Hunting Access program, known as WIHA. A program designed to lease the hunting rights from private landowners to allow public hunting access, by foot. Steve is currently the president of the Wildlife Management Institute and former director of the United States Fish & Wildlife Service. To better understand why this thought cropped up in his mind, it might be beneficial to step back 25 years to 1995, the year that Steve was appointed by the Governor to lead our agency and the inaugural year of the WIHA program. Prior to 1995, the thought of directly promoting a limited resource, to get more hunters to come to Kansas to pursue game species, was not at the forefront of our minds.

In the late 1980s, Kansas was celebrating some of the largest hunter numbers of all-time, especially upland bird hunters. Access was still relatively plentiful if you were properly taught the correct, cordial way to broach the subject with landowners. However, this narrative was steadily changing by the mid-1990s. Our deer herd was on the rise and Kansas was thrust into the spotlight for non-residents wanting an opportunity to harvest a trophy whitetail buck. Add to this the growing concerns of liability throughout the country and other societal factors and the

result: more and more closed gates and purple paint.

Steve was not crazy about the idea because he was concerned that by the state leasing the hunting rights from landowners, it would continue to promote the mechanism (private leasing) to other hunters, thus further promoting the idea of leasing one's hunting rights to someone else for their singular use. Secretary Williams, while initially hesitant, could foresee the benefits that lay ahead. After all, this program was the brainchild of several highly accomplished KDWPT employees – not a political “push” handed down to him. He trusted the human dimension surveys that showed the new barriers to access, he trusted that the program would not burden wildlife populations, and he trusted in our wildlife professionals who share in the Kansas hunting heritage to bring forth a program that benefits sportsmen and women, local communities, and the wildlife resources that we are hired to protect. He trusted Rob Manes, the assistant secretary of the department at that time, his right-hand man. Rob was confident that the right pieces were in place thanks to field-level leadership and vision

from Steve Sorensen, retired wildlife regional supervisor, and Brent Konen, a wildlife biologist technician at the time and currently our Public Lands manager at Council Grove Wildlife Area. Brent leased many of the first WIHA tracts in southcentral Kansas. Many other wildlife professionals like Joe Kramer, Mike Mitchener, and Brad Simpson helped to push the program above 1 million acres by 2004. Others, like our current wildlife division director, Jake George, helped to move the program into the 21st Century with colorful, accurate mapping that leaned on Geographic Information Systems to create a more polished Hunting Atlas and to bring the map to the



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worldwide web in an online format. The Online Hunting Atlas receives the bulk of our website traffic on an annual basis.

Coupled with the "Pass It on" program created in 1996, WIHA has been our Agency's key-stone tactic to recruiting, retaining, and re-activating hunters in Kansas. This program, led for many years by Mike Miller, our current assistant secretary, was integral in helping to shape the WIHA program while simultaneously addressing additional barriers to sportsmen and women.

Options to fund the WIHA program were vast, in the beginning, with talks centered around an additional Access Stamp, individual permits, revenue bonds, and even the transfer of restitution funds (fines paid for fish and wildlife violations). However, since 1995, we have funded the program in one distinct way: sportsmen and women. You fund the WIHA program. We take a portion of our hunting and fishing license revenue and match it threefold with Wildlife Restoration dollars. These funds come from the ever-

famous Pitman-Robertson (P-R) Act of 1937, the single-most important legislation for the health of terrestrial wildlife. This follows, very closely, the North American Model of Wildlife Management, where hunters pay for wildlife conservation with their purchase of hunting equipment; most notably, firearms and ammunition and the states manage the resource. Wildlife Restoration dollars comes directly from an excise tax placed on this equipment and is then apportioned to the states based on land area and total licensed hunters. Currently we are matching about \$1 million of state license funds with over \$3 million from the federal Wildlife Restoration program annually. That's it; no smoke and mirrors. You fund WIHA and you have been the key to keeping this successful for 25 years. Steve knew from the beginning as he told me "it was so important at the time that hunters understood that they could ruin the program". It was and still is the silver bullet to keeping this program alive. Respect the land and cherish the landowner that voluntarily gave you the rights to use their land.





A Place To Go

by Jeffrey Hancock, board member, Kansas Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

Ants with anticipation, I did not sleep at all that night. For four years, I watched my older brother shuffle out the door early in the morning on opening day of bird season with my grandpa. Today was my day. It was November 14, 1987. Today we would head to an area where a swarm of farmers centered around a large dairy farm would be our “where to go.” We literally had thousands of acres to hunt.

Over the summer I had accompanied my grandpa to this area; we had delivered peaches and watermelons to all of those farmers. It was a grandiose time to be hunting. The quail were thick and places to go thicker. It was as much fun visiting with those farmers during the summer months as it was going there to hunt. I loved every part it.

This had all started long before me. After WWII, like many veterans, my grandpa took to the field. In those years, if it wasn't posted, you hunted it, and nobody really thought anything of it, which is how he came across this area we were in this day. Years later, those farms changed hands or were passed down to other generations and the access changed. Old tires labeled “No Hunting” were followed by classier sig-

nage, which turned into written permission slips, before landing on “Leased.”

I have great memories of hunting those lands with my grandpa and my older brother, but I don't have a lot. One is vivid; I recall a trip so thick with birds my brother inadvertently stepped on one before it flew. It was not long after I started hunting many of those properties became out of our reach. My last memory of hunting there was in the early 90s. The quail population had dwindled some, but more importantly, what was thousands of acres had quickly turned to hundreds of acres and then no acres.

We still had places to go. Throughout the 90s, and after my grandpa's age did not allow him to hunt, I continued to hunt with my brother, cousins, and friends in different places through connections of relatives who farmed. Each year there would be fewer places. On one of those trips, I saw a WIHA sign and didn't think much of it, nor did I know what it was. It was several years later before I connected the dots between someone saying “Wee-Ha” and WIHA. In the early 2000s, I started dabbling in WIHA. I liked hunting but not the complications nor the low success rate of asking.

In those early two-thousands, something clicked and hunting became more than trying to pile up limits of birds. I started enjoying the hunt beyond the act of pulling a trigger. All of the sudden a thirst for the experience took off. I have Tater to thank. Tater was a fully trained and experienced Llewelin Setter I purchase off of an ad in the newspaper.

For 10 years, Tater and I traveled all over western Kansas discovering uncharted WIHA. I recall one hunt with a half dozen family members and a high school classmate in a strip of enrolled cut milo a mile long. There was snow on the ground, and not far from entering the field my brother knocked down a rooster, but as they sometimes do it ran...and ran. Tater chased it, but never could get the drop. After a brief absence she made her way back. I watched Tater rework the field from where the bird fell, over the entire mile, to where it finally holed up in a ditch unable to escape Tater's nose. Tater held her point and, as I approached, the bird did what it had done for a mile, run. This time though Tater got the drop. With bird in hand, I left the field.

WIHA saved me. As I look back on a life of hunting, I am certain WIHA has had a substantial impact on how I am defined. I don't have a favorite shotgun hanging on the wall to remind me of what once was. In fact, my ears won't even accept the idea it was once better. Instead I have shotguns worn by experiences. I have split stocks, shine on the bluing, scratched forearms and bent ribs. I have crossed hundreds, if not thousands, of fences and have the ripped pants to prove it. I have followed Dollie,

Doc, Tater, Summer, Stella, Gloria, and now Jolene through those fields. I have patched scratched hides, pulled stickers, and carried dogs out of WIHA. I have walked days through WIHA without even the idea of seeing game and I have walked minutes in WIHA so amazed by the abundance of wildlife I didn't have the heart to shoot.

WIHA has provided the stage for a path set by a grandpa. Now in my mid 40s, I have my own kids who are making footprints in WIHA. Where would I be and where would they be without WIHA? What path, without a slope toward hunting, would I be taking them down? Would we endlessly knock on doors seeking permission only to be burnt out by "no?" Would I be hunting at all anymore? Fortunately, I don't have to answer these questions. WIHA empties my life of this complication.

"Is this field public?" My pre-teen children ask this question all the time as we move about different WIHA tracts. Influenced by a father who recognizes only public hunting and non-public hunting, they can pick out a good spot. As soon as they do, they want to know if we have access to it. Strange how it all comes together. I can recall a time when I asked my grandpa if a property was related to a watermelon delivered several months earlier.

Antsy with anticipation. I see it in both of my kids as fall approaches. Nothing describes the feeling of kids reacting to something in the same positive and energy filled way I did years ago. It is beyond comforting to know it is in their blood and they have a place to go feed their desire. They have over one million acres to

roam from one corner of the state to the other, without asking anyone. Frankly, my kids are so used to WIHA they don't know any different. In terms of defining success, I think this does it.

My kids set their path on an opening morning on WIHA when they were in their single digits. It had been a steep learning curve for our family's nine-month-old Llewelin, Stella. She had already bumped a covey a quail, missed a few singles, and torn through a couple of pheasants all in front of tired kids' legs. At long last, Stella was on something and moving about in the stealthy fashion of a cautious bird dog. The last stop she went solid and from my feet busted two roosters, one of which was downed in an uplifting air of excitement as kids and dog began to connect the dots. In an instant it was 1987 again and everything I recalled from my first hunt was written on my own kids' faces. I knew the path they had chosen to go. It would not have happened without WIHA.

As the Kansas WIHA program celebrates 25 years, I am hopeful the next 25 years will build on its success for the next generation of WIHA regulars. This generation is in my house. It is comforting to know I can go through traditions so important to my character and how I am defined which would otherwise be unreasonable without WIHA. Thank you to all of the willing ranchers and farmers who recognize the overwhelming importance of WIHA. I am certain when the program started the goal was access to hunting; but the ancillary impacts far exceed a simple place to hunt. WIHA is a place to go to become the people we want to be.



Kansas Transplant

by Marshal Loftus, board of directors, Kansas Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

When I moved to Kansas in late 2012, I didn't have a worry in the world. I had lived in Iowa my entire life and it was an amazing place to grow up. It was especially great for a kid completely obsessed with hunting, fishing and trapping. My dad is a farmer, so I had unfettered access to all his farmland and to many of the neighboring properties. Access was never an issue and game was plentiful – a paradise of sorts for a teenage kid.

My primary obsession as I got older was whitetail deer hunting. So, when my wife and I moved to Kansas I was excited. What could be better? I can hunt these giant Kansas bucks that I had grown up reading about, and I can drive a few hours up to Iowa and hunt anytime I want. Well as you can imagine there were a few major details I had overlooked in my naïve plan. The first being that I was now a nonresident to Iowa. Deer tags are neither easy to get or cheap as a nonresident (\$644 plus fees to be exact).

The one major detail I had overlooked in my grand plan of hunting deer in Kansas was access. I did have a plan for access, but that plan did not come to fruition. I spent many hours e-scouting for hunting properties using the county GIS websites and Google Earth. I used these resources to develop a list of properties and landowners that I would then go talk to about hunting permission. Once I had a good long list of landowners put together, it was time to go knock on some doors. My hope was that if 20 percent or so of the landowners granted hunting permission, I would at least have a few great properties to hunt. In my mind it was just a matter of knocking on lots of doors. Well that number turned out to be exactly 0 percent of landowners that granted permission. I was told "No" in as many ways as you could imagine. This was something that I had not really experienced in the past. When I asked neighboring landowners for hunting permission as a kid, permission was almost always granted. The obvious difference being that these are people that I do not know. The permissions I had been granted in Iowa were from friends and neighbors. It was now time to move on to plan B, which didn't exist yet.

I went back to doing some online research about hunting in Kansas and decided to see what the state had available for public hunting opportunities. I wasn't expecting to find much. I assumed Kansas would be similar to the area where I grew up in Iowa.

There are a few small parcels of public hunting land, but I never looked at them as great places to hunt due to the amount of hunting pressure they received. I was pleasantly surprised to find that not only does Kansas have some excellent public land, but also that I had access to over 1 million acres of private land through the WIHA program. This discovery made me very optimistic about the hunting opportunities in Kansas.

After thoroughly researching and scouting many WIHA properties over the next couple of seasons, I was able to find some excellent hunting opportunities. As with any other property, public or private, it does take time to learn a property and properly hunt it. My experience was no exception to this learning curve. Now looking in the rearview mirror on my first eight years living in Kansas, it is amazing to think about all the incredible hunting experiences I have had on WIHA properties.

The culmination of all my hard work scouting and researching finally paid off on one magical morning in November 2016. The whitetail rut was in full swing and I was finally in the perfect spot. Whitetail hunters often dream of days in the timber where the rut peaks in a frenzy of activity. In reality, those days are few and far between, but this was definitely one of those days. I had a constant flow of bucks and does running wildly around my tree stand all morning. Finally, a great buck presented a shot and I took it. He ran about 30 yards and expired. I climbed down and was preparing to start the process of quartering and packing the buck out, but then heard some noise heading my direction. I looked up and a group of does were walking directly toward me. I nocked an arrow and after a few minutes I was able to take one of the does and fill my antlerless tag as well.

This is just one of many successful hunting stories I could tell about WIHA properties in Kansas. It's hard to imagine what my hunting experience would have been in Kansas over these past eight years if the WIHA program didn't exist. Finding places to hunt as a transplant to a new state is incredibly hard. The WIHA program provides a turn-key solution to the growing hurdle of limited hunting access. This is not only important to folks like me who are new to Kansas, but also to new hunters who are new to hunting entirely. I am incredibly grateful that the WIHA program exists and I hope it continues to be a great success for many years to come.

CRP & WIHA

by Jeff Prendergast, KDWP small game specialist

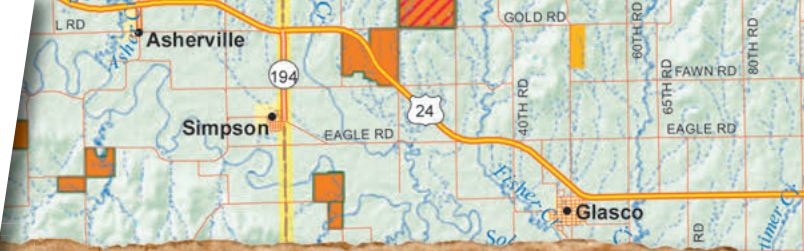
The second Saturday of November – a date that is marked on the calendar of thousands across Kansas and around the country. It's not a date of mourning some national tragedy – no, quite the contrary. It is a day of excitement and anticipation. A day we've been anticipating for nine months. It's a day when thousands flood the state all with one common mission, finding where the roosters are hiding. For most of us this will include finding the familiar little white signs that signal our beloved WIHA properties. But even among these properties you find us being picky, and many of us will be wading through the knee to chest high stands of golden waving grass that make up a portion of the 2 million acres that are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the state.

This hasn't always been the case though. If you can find someone lucky enough to have experienced the good old days of pheasant hunting in Kansas, they will likely recount the big groups walking large wheat stubble fields and with birds boiling out in every direction. This was a time when our crop fields across much of the west half of the state were dominated by a wheat fallow rotation. This rotation was a perfect combination

of tall lush growing wheat in spring providing excellent nesting cover and wheat stubble that was tall and full of other weedy plants that served as a perfect home for young chicks. This weedy stubble also was excellent over winter for food and cover. In the late 70s and early 80s, we routinely shot a million pheasants or more in Kansas including a few years when the state lead the nation in pheasant harvest. Our pheasant harvest peaked in 1982 at over 1.5 million roosters; this was three years before the first acres of CRP were planted. In fact, since the CRP program started, we have never topped 1 million in our estimated harvest again. So why then is it that CRP is so coveted by pheasant hunters? Because our state looks much different than it did in 1982.

Agricultural advancements and intensification to meet the demands of an increasing population have changed the way our farmers are doing business. Where pheasants use to be an accidental byproduct of our agricultural landscape, the increased efficiency and intensified production have transitioned us to a period where we have to manage specifically for pheasants, and this is where





continued to decline CRP has become all that more important to hunters. Nationally the acres of CRP were slashed almost in half in our previous farm bill, this amounted to a loss of one-third of our acres in Kansas. While there is a much greater demand for a diversity of hunting opportunities in the state then when the program began, CRP is still a major target for the department. Approximately 50 percent of our current WIHA properties include at least some portion of CRP. Since we don't own or actively manage the WIHA properties, this pairing with CRP is an easy assurance of habitat quality for hunters when they show up. In recent years there have been many additional incentives and increased payment rates on CRP acres to entice more of this cover type into the program.

While we love to walk through these fields of waving grasslands, hunters shouldn't overlook the indirect benefit of CRP to their pursuit either. Crop stubble also makes up a good number of acres in the walk-in program as well. In a landscape that is adjacent to or intermixed with CRP this can provide foraging areas for birds that reside in the surrounding CRP grass. Without the quality nesting and brooding cover provided by this habitat the birds have much less opportunity to raise young. Keen hunters that have a good understanding of pheasant behavior and conditions can take advantage of the foraging and loafing pheasants that have made their way out of surrounding CRP into these stubble fields or other cover.

Our biologists are committed to managing habitat and access in a way that maintains a strong population of pheasants and the traditions of those that pursue them. We know that with only a fraction of the state enrolled in CRP we cannot rely solely on this habitat for that purpose. With the ever-changing support of CRP in the farm bill, we have to look for ways that improve pheasant habitat across the landscape while benefiting our farmers. However, we will fight to maintain CRP in our toolbox and as long as CRP remains we will utilize it to the betterment of the resource and hunters through access agreements. Because after all on the second Saturday of November there is nothing like the sound of footsteps through crunching grass interrupted by the flurry of wing beats and a shotgun report.

CRP comes in. Our farmers have, through voluntary rental agreements with USDA, taken the less productive soils or sensitive soils out of production and set these acres aside to be planted to native grasses. These native grasses happen to provide ideal nesting and brood rearing cover when managed correctly as well as winter protective cover where our hunters can find birds. So, while within crop field habitat has decreased in quality, a high-quality habitat has been added that helped mitigate the loss of weedy stubble habitat. We currently have just under 2 million acres of CRP, but at its peak, nearly 3 million acres of Kansas cropland were enrolled in the program. These 2 million acres are critical in pheasant production with this being the cover holding the most pheasant nests and having the greatest hatching success rates.

From the beginning of CRP, we fast forward to 1995 – the first year of the WIHA program. This was a time when non-resident deer hunting was in its infancy in the state, a time when turkey hunting was still just ramping up, most of the waterfowl hunting opportunities were on state owned and managed properties. This was a time when there were more pheasant hunters in Kansas than hunters chasing any other game in the state and the department was looking for ways to make it easier for them to participate. This being 10 years into the CRP program the quality hunting opportunities provided by CRP for pheasant hunters was well understood and these fields were sought after by many hunters. So naturally the WIHA program started off primarily targeting CRP. As habitat has



Threats to WIHA: Past and Present

by Victoria Cikanek, KDWPT district wildlife biologist

I would assume that 25 years ago when my predecessors envisioned our WIHA program, it was a simple idea. The state will pay a set amount to lease private land for open hunting. That was it! No matter where in the state the property was, what type of habitat was on the property, or what kind of structures were located on the property. The payment was what it was, and the land was enrolled for public use. Sounds simple, right? Well, unfortunately, things can never be that simple. We have found over the last 25 years that no property can be treated equal and no landowner or hunter has the same ideas in mind for what they want out of this program. So, our Kansas WIHA program has had to become very flexible and fluid.

Uncertainty of CRP and Other Changes on the Kansas Landscape

Habitat in Kansas is always changing, and it has proven to be difficult to keep up with that change when it comes to enrolling quality ground into our WIHA program.

To start, the WIHA program was aimed at increasing access in pheasant country and it was highly tied to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and crop fields in western and central Kansas. At that time, CRP was a hot topic as crop prices were down and the USDA was paying very good money to enroll low quality crop ground to be planted to native grasses and wildflowers. Offering extra money to those, basically idol, CRP contracts was an easy sell to landowners and offered an excellent opportunity for our hunters. Plus, we would lease surrounding crop acres that were planted in milo. However, with the most recent Farm Bills, CRP is become a lot less attractive than what it used to be. The total acres allowed in the program across the US has drastically declined and the rental payments have gone down considerably, making the program less desirable to most landowners – if they can even get enrolled at all. This has been a

major hit on our WIHA program out west. CRP is good quality year-round habitat for both pheasants and quail and provides great hunting opportunities during the winter. With the fate of CRP being uncertain and some of that ground being tilled under and put back into crop production, we must do whatever possible try to help to ensure continued quality habitat in our WIHA program. To do this, we have created ways to help incentivize staying in CRP or at least keeping less productive acres in native grass (such as pivot corners and waterways) and only farming the more profitable acres. We have also been advocating, and sometimes incentivizing, several other conservation practices that help benefit wildlife such as the use of cover crops as an alternative to chemical fallow wheat stubble.

For lands not enrolled in CRP, and therefore are still in production, it was important to keep the program as simple and appealing as possible. The biggest way to do that is to not interfere with their production operations. When a landowner enrolls in WIHA, they have never been required to change their crop rotation or how they graze. The biologists inquire about their normal operations and decides to enroll





those acres or not based on the potential hunting opportunities. In the early years of WIHA, we paid a flat rate based on location of the property, total acres and the length of the season it would be open. With this simple method, we were able to grow the program fairly easily. However, recently our enrollment of good quality habitat (outside of CRP ground) had stalled and we realized we were losing some of the best habitat that had been enrolled. To help solve problems, we came up with a new pay scale. We are still not asking landowners to change their normal operation, but we are now offering lease payments based on habitat quality. The goal of this is to offer more money to the higher quality property and to those types of habitat that are in more demand from our hunters to hopefully incentivize those landowners to stay enrolled in WIHA. This is something new in the last five years, so we will continue to evaluate the pay scale and adjust it as need be.

Along with an increased payment for better quality habitat, we also offer funding through our Habitat First program to increase habitat quality on a WIHA property to make properties currently enrolled better long-term for wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities. Biologists visit with landowners and makes suggestions to their operation that will hopefully not affect, or maybe improve their bottom line, but will improve the habitat quality on the landscape. Then they can work with NRCS and our Habitat First program to find some funding to help the landowner complete the projects needed.

Eastward Expansion

As WIHA began to expand from its' infancy, there was a demand for more hunting opportunities outside of upland bird hunting in the west. Big game hunting was becoming more popular and people were wanting to see more prime habitat for species like deer and turkey, especially in the eastern part of the state.

Our biologists were also interested in expanding the program more into eastern Kansas, as that is where the majority of



the resident hunting population is. However, this proved to be difficult. A lot of land was already leased for hunting either to private individuals or outfitters and landowners close to populated areas had concerns of too many people accessing their properties and over harvesting animals.

Leasing was an issue when WIHA first started, and still is. It is arguably the biggest hurdle for the WIHA program in eastern Kansas. Private leasing for deer hunting has become a lucrative business in the last decade. Everyone is out to get that big Kansas deer, and many people are willing to pay top dollar to have that opportunity. In many cases, our WIHA lease payments can't compete with these leases. So much so, that even when we acquired a property for public hunting, a person or outfitter would come along and offer the landowner more money and we would lose out. We have attempted to address the leasing issue by adding an eastern incentive payment to WIHA leases in eastern counties (basically from I-35 and east). This was a way to make leasing ground into WIHA more competitive. Those landowners would get an increased payment rate for their WIHA lease on top of the other benefits of enrolling with the state, such as the landowner being freed from the threat of a potential liability law suit for a hunting related incident and the increased amount of department employees (and legal hunters) keeping an eye on the property – neither of which can be guaranteed with private leases. I have been told by some WIHA cooperators in eastern Kansas, they prefer WIHA to private

leases because we are more reliable with our payments, so I suppose that can be considered another bonus of working with the state.

Addressing the overcrowding concern was a little more difficult. Limiting people on WIHA was not part of the plan when the WIHA program was thought up. We wanted the program to remain simple. The main point of WIHA hunting leases were to allow open hunting. The one option we had at the time was to 'piggyback' on a program that our public lands had started a few years prior. Their Special Hunts program was created to have limited amount of people in an area that may be sensitive due to it being a refuge area or an area that would otherwise be off limits to hunting (i.e. state park area). This was exactly what we needed in the eastern part of the state. With this new private land Special Hunt option, landowners could work with the biologists to designate dates they were comfortable with hunter being on the property and how many hunters could be there at a time. They were then paid a lease payment based on the amount of 'hunter-days' that were allotted during the season not to exceed the payment for regular WIHA, should they have chosen that option. The properties were then listed on our website alongside all the public land Special Hunt areas and interested hunters could apply for the draw to be able to access the area during the designated dates.

The private land Special Hunts was working okay, but it was never as popular as the public lands to our hunters and for some reason it wasn't growing much

with landowners. We still needed a way to enroll more lands closer to urban areas without having the overcrowded issues. So recently we, again, piggy-backed on a program our public lands staff was using – iSportsman. And thus, the idea of iWIHA came into fruition. Using iSportsman to check into a property eliminated the need for hunters to apply ahead of time and hope they got to hunt an area; they could just look in the system that day and see if the area was available, check in and hunt. To make it more appealing to landowners, we incentivize the lease payments. This iWIHA program is still very new, but so far has been successful at increasing access in the eastern part of the state and areas closer to urban communities.

Human development and urban sprawl

As the WIHA program has progressed throughout the last 25 years, we have hit several unexpected roadblocks. One of the first involved properties with sensitive areas on them, such as houses, playgrounds or camping areas on city lakes. To accommodate these types of properties, we added ‘no firearms deer’ property types. Recently, these were changed to ‘archery shotshell only’ properties to ensure only short-range equipment could be used to help protect the sensitive areas nearby. As long as there was a valid reason for having this restriction on the property, there was typically no reduction in payment for the owner. We have also created “Stop: Safety Zone” signs that can be posted around those areas to even further bring attention to our hunters where it is unsafe to shoot.

The need for more restrictive WIHA properties will continue to pop up as people in urban areas continue to try to move out to the country. We get calls and concerns every year from individuals who decided to move into a house next to a WIHA property. Most often, they are unfamiliar with our program or with hunting, and they are not too excited about having hunters walking the neighbor’s property with rifles and shotguns on most weekends. In many cases, educating them about the program and having them talk with a game warden is enough to ease their minds, but in sometimes, they become adamant about removing WIHA from the area. By appealing to the landowner or complaining to a representative, these new rural homeowners have caused the loss of some high quality WIHA properties.

Another issue has been the construction of wind turbines. Not only do the wind farms decrease the available wildlife habitat on the property, but more recently, the companies constructing these wind farms have requested no open hunt on the property during

construction and added in the contracts that the landowner is responsible for any damage to the turbine due to hunting. With more wind farms being developed across the state, this could be a huge setback for our WIHA program in the future. Biologists are trying to work with the companies and the landowners at the local level to ensure that hunting can still continue, but it has proven difficult in several areas.

Continued Issues and Where to go from here

The WIHA program has been hovering around the 1 million acre mark for over 10 years now. We have surveyed our hunting public and understand that for the most part, they would like to see more acres enrolled but they would also like to see more quality hunting acres, which can be subjective depending on what the individual is interested in hunting that day. And they would like to see more acres closer to home. Since most of the general Kansas public live in the eastern part of the state, it is safe to say that means we need to continue to focus on public access in the east.

Funding for our WIHA program will always be a concern. We have not had any issues so far acquiring federal grant funding for the program, but what will happen if that money isn’t there? Can we continue to lease over 1 million acres in the future? As we continue to try to increase acres and raise lease payments for higher quality habitat to compete with private leases, our funding needs will continue to increase as well.

Some of the responsibility of the future of WIHA does fall back on the hunters. Their respect for these private properties is crucial. Leaving gates the way you found them (closed if closed, open if open), leaving the place cleaner than when you found it, equipment and signs in the field are not practice targets and understanding that in most cases, the landowners are still trying to make a living on the property. So don’t complain if one year the field that you hunted is in winter wheat when it was in milo last year, or that this year the rancher had to leave the cattle on a little longer into the hunting season because he didn’t have anywhere to put them until December. Trust me, you would run into these issues if you held a private lease yourself.



Interactive Access

by Jon Beckmann
KDWPT wildlife supervisor

In the nearly 40 years I have been hunting in Kansas, I have seen a lot of changes, ranging from the establishment of the CRP program to the shift towards more deer and waterfowl hunters in relation to upland game bird hunters in the state.

One of the most pronounced changes I have seen has been the continual shift of the state's population to urban centers from rural areas – a trend also seen nationwide. In fact, by the 1920 census, more Americans lived in urban areas than in rural areas – a milestone reached in Kansas by the 1950 census – and the trend has continued with 50 percent of rural counties in the USA having fewer residents than they did in 2000. Fewer than 15 percent of Americans and less than 25 percent of Kansans currently live in rural counties. This change has resulted not only in more people living in urban areas such as Wichita, Kansas City and their associated suburbs, but also a shift towards absentee landowners in many rural areas of the state.

Gone are the days when a hunter could knock on a door and reliably find some hunting access opportunities. These issues have been further intensified by the leasing of private lands by both in-state and out-of-state hunters. All these factors have combined to make it even more challenging for urban residents to find access to quality hunting locations close to home compared to 40 years ago, particularly in more highly populated counties near urban centers. This includes areas around Salina, Lawrence, Manhattan and Topeka in addition to Kansas' two largest urban centers of Wichita and the greater Kansas City metro area.

In 2017, recognizing the fact hunters living in urban areas were being even more disenfranchised by declining opportunities to hunt close to home, KDWPT biologists Aaron Deters, Wes Sowards and others discussed creative ways to potentially recruit, retain and re-engage hunters from Kansas' urban areas. Out of these conversations, the concept of a new daily electronic





permitting program was born. Interactive Walk-In Hunting Areas (iWIHA) offer opportunities close to home – a factor repeatedly highlighted in human-dimension surveys of hunters as important to keep them engaged in hunting. iWIHA has several additional advantages not only for hunters from urban areas, but also for landowners near urban areas interested in enrolling their private lands in the program.

One of the challenges of enrolling willing landowners near urban areas in the conventional WIHA program has been their concerns about the amount of hunting pressure their land may endure with unlimited access. The iWIHA program is similar to the WIHA program in that it opens private land to public hunting, but iWIHA has several notable differences.

When landowners enroll their property in iWIHA, they are able to decide how many hunters will have access to the property both daily and over the course of various hunting seasons, when they can have access (e.g. days of the week or dates within a season), what equipment they can use and what seasons they are allowed to hunt. Because hunters must reserve an iWIHA property online before they hunt and no other hunter or group of hunters can sign up on an iWIHA property once it is reserved, both the hunter and the landowner have assurances that there will not be any additional use during that timeframe. This gives the hunter the peace-of-mind that they will have exclusive access to the tract, while at the same time ensuring the hunting pressure will not surpass the landowner's comfort level on their property. The assurance of exclusivity on an iWIHA property once it has been reserved has led to more hunters mentoring youth and other new hunters, as revealed by KDWPT surveys. This is an important benefit, as recruitment of a new generation of hunters is a goal not only for KDWPT but the hunting community as well.

With these factors leading to higher quality hunts, the program has taken off

since the pilot year in 2017 when a few properties in Atchison and Osage counties were enrolled. As of fall 2020, the iWIHA program has 71 tracts totaling 12,908 acres, all obtained prior to much advertising of the nascent program as it became established. Hunters have harvested deer, teal, turkeys, squirrels, quail and pheasants just to name a few of the species from iWIHA properties.

iWIHA is accessed through the iSportsman application or online at <https://kdwpt.isportsman.net/Locations/iwiha.aspx>. iSportsman was already being used on more than 25 KDWPT wildlife areas where it replaced paper daily hunt permits. Hunters can check in and out and submit harvest reports by phone or computer using iSportsman. iWIHA will also be applied to Special Hunts on private lands, allowing access to hunts that do not fill up during the online application process. Currently the iWIHA program includes 21 counties in the most densely populated regions of the state. Counties currently in the iWIHA program include: Atchison, Butler, Cowley, Doniphan, Douglas, Franklin, Harvey, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Leavenworth, Lyon, Miami, Osage, Pottawatomie, Riley, Saline, Sedgwick, Shawnee, Sumner, and Wyandotte.

Hunters from urban areas that value quality hunting opportunities close to home will find those available through the iWIHA program. Landowners closer to urban centers can also take advantage of the program as a source of income while having the assurances of being able to control timing and levels of access to iWIHA tracts. Those of us at KDWPT look forward to seeing hunters take advantage of these unique hunting opportunities and wish you happy hunting!

WIHA

WALK-IN HUNTING ACCESS

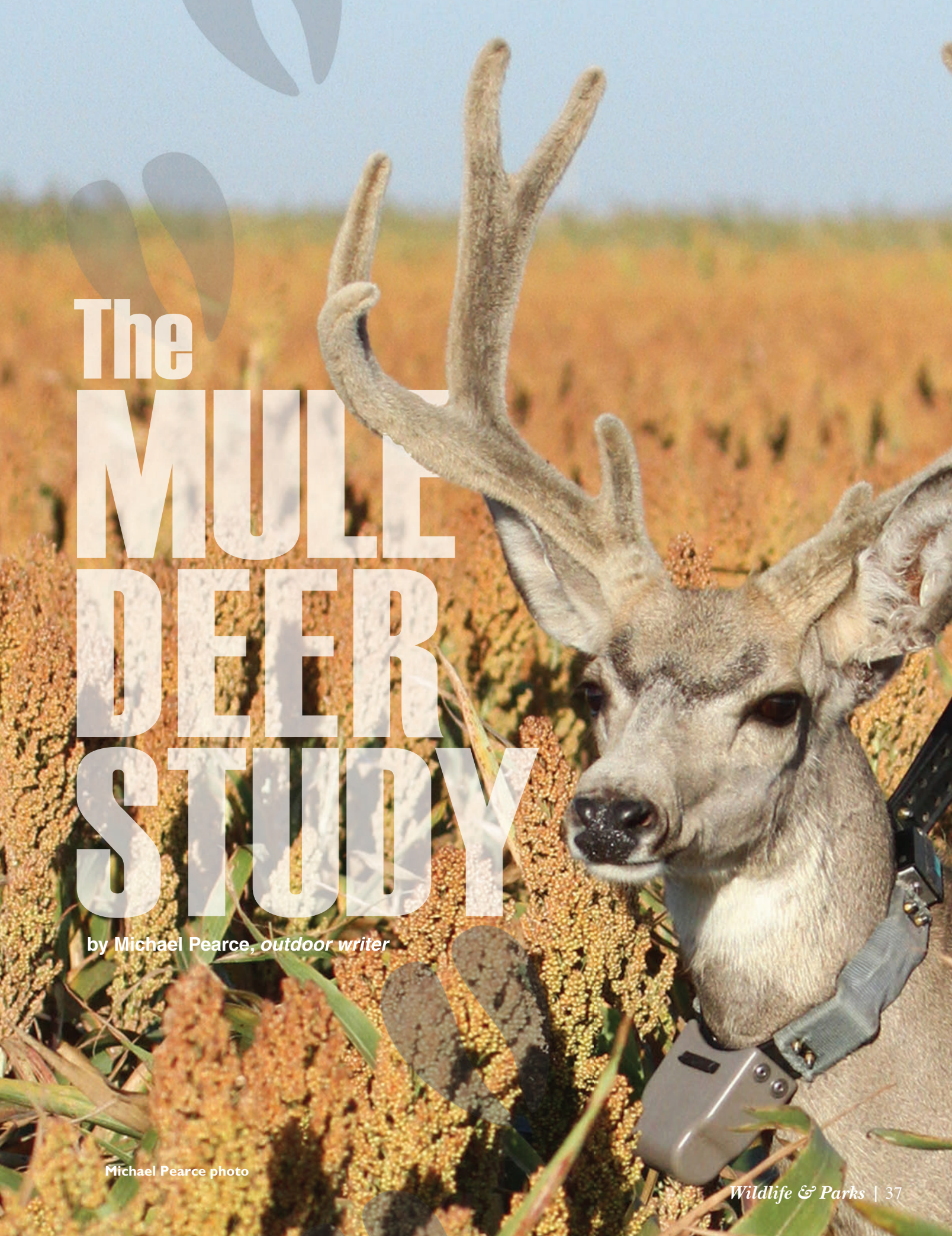
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The MULE DEER STUDY

by Michael Pearce, *outdoor writer*

Michael Pearce photo

An unseen mule deer exploding from cover a few feet away would startle most people. But the one that flushed almost within touching distance of Talesha Karish late last summer was very much anticipated and appreciated.

"It's big enough it should be able to survive and make it on its own now," said Karish, a Kansas State University doctoral student as she watched the fawn, mature enough its spots were gone, bound across a broad field of uncut milo between Scott City and Oakley. "That's what we like to see."

Karish and fellow researcher Alexandria Hiott then folded up the telemetry equipment that had found the fawn's high-tech collar and went in search of other deer.

Thanks to similar collars placed on hundreds of western Kansas deer over the past three years, biologists hope to find ways to help more mule deer make it to maturity. It's hoped a myriad of unknowns about our High Plains deer herd will also come to light from the study that ends in a few months.

"There's a lot of concern about mule deer," said Levi Jaster, Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWP) big game program coordinator. "We'd like to know why they're retracting their range to the west.

There's a lot of concern if our management is correct. Is there something we can improve on?"

The process of answering those questions formally began in 2016 when applications were sent in for funding. Field biologists also began getting permission from landowners.

The actual field work began on some windswept late winter days in 2018. Small armies of biologists, college students, area landowners and assembled to help do health checks and place tracking collars on about 120 deer that had been captured in nets fired from a helicopter.

Half were bucks and half does. It was a similar split between mule deer and whitetails. There were equal number of collared deer amid two separate study areas.

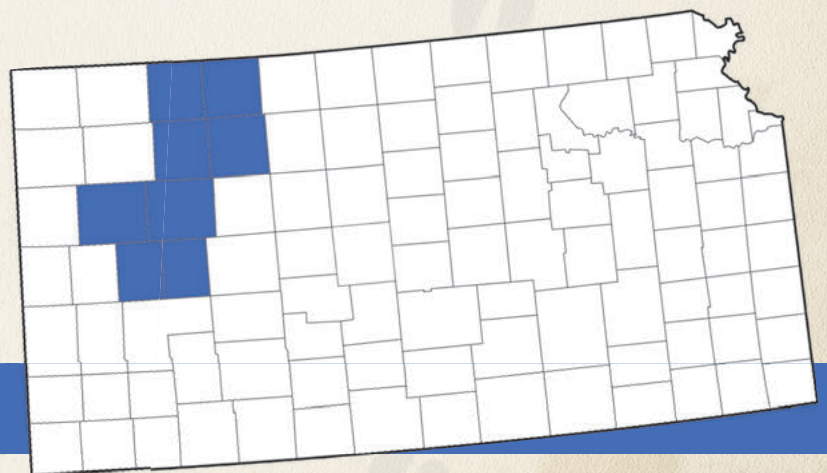
The northern study includes portions of Decatur, Graham, Norton and Sheridan counties. The southern study area is within Gove, Lane, Logan and Scott counties.

While the study is informally known as "the mule deer study" to many, Jaster is quick to point out whitetails are being studied, too.

"We know we have a lot of whitetail out there and we need to know what that might be doing to our mule deer population. It's not uncommon to see mixed herds but it seems one species (mule deer) are largely in decline while the other (whitetails) are increasing," said Jaster. "This study could help tell us what impact whitetails are having on our mule deer populations, if any impact at all."

Dave Haukos, unit leader for the Kansas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, and one of two principal investigators overseeing the research, also said this is the first major deer research study done in Kansas. It's also one of the best funded and equipped for studying prairie deer in history.

"There hasn't been a whole lot of deer research done on the Great Plains," said Haukos. "There haven't been many studies done out here that have





Approximately 120 deer were captured in nets fired from a helicopter during the study.



Collars are placed on deer to find ways to help more mule deer grow to maturity.

used so much modern technology, like the collars and tracking devices. We should be able to learn how the two kinds of deer do or don't share habitat and how they respond to things like hunting pressure and farming practices. We really want to learn just how important (Conservation Reserve Program) fields are to these deer."

Jaster said the study's cost was around \$2.8 million, the majority of which came from federal excise taxes placed on the sale of any hunting and shooting gear.

"It's basically Kansas money coming back to Kansas," said Jaster. Kansas State University is largely in charge of the research. Funding also came from KDWPT and some conservation groups, like Kansas Bowhunters Association.

Use of the helicopter and specialized crew all three winters was expensive. So were the tracking collars that employed enough high-end technology to make a NASA engineer envious.

Bucks and does were fitted with GPS collars that regularly sent exact location signals via satellite to research computers.

The collars on bucks had enough battery life for three years, when they'd automatically disconnect from the animal. They also were made of stretchable material so their diameter could expand as a buck's neck swelled during breeding season.

Collars put on adults does only lasted one year. Project does were recaptured every winter and checked for pregnancy using ultra-sound technology.

Pregnant does were refitted with tracking collars. A small signaling device was inserted into their birth canals. Fawns pushed the mechanism out at birth, turning on a signal that let researchers know a new deer was on the ground ready to be checked and collared.



Fawns were fitted with old-fashioned telemetry collars that require in the field locating with traditional tracking equipment. Fawn collars stretched as the animal grew and departed the animal after a year. All collars had mortality switches to signal researchers when an animal died.

While much of the money, and attention has been placed on the study's use of high technology, it's also employed a lot of old-fashioned legwork.

Haukos said the project involved the work of three researching graduate students, including Karish. He said over 20 field technicians have also been employed, at various times, to help with field research.

As much data as possible has been gathered concerning the birth and survival of mule fawns, a critical area of concern. Karish said researchers went to birth sites to see what kind of habitat the doe had selected. Detailed information was also gathered where fawns thrived and where they perished. Plants were identified and measured.

All deer that died during the study were investigated to great lengths. Karish described how they'd look for signs of a struggle to tell if a deer died of predation, like from coyotes. Researchers also took assorted samples to send off for testing. Searching for chronic wasting disease, especially as a cause of death, was an important part of the project.

It will be months before all of the data is prop-




erly organized but Jaster and Haukos shared a few initial observations.

Over the first two years, the rates for fawns surviving their first 10 weeks averaged 41 percent for whitetails and 25 percent for mule deer. A lack of ideal habitat could be a contributing factor.

"We've been finding for fawn habitat, they're liking grass that's between 24 and 36 inches, so basically between your knee and your waist. That's where they've had the best survival," said Jaster. "Unfortunately, there's not a lot of that kind of habitat around in a lot of places."

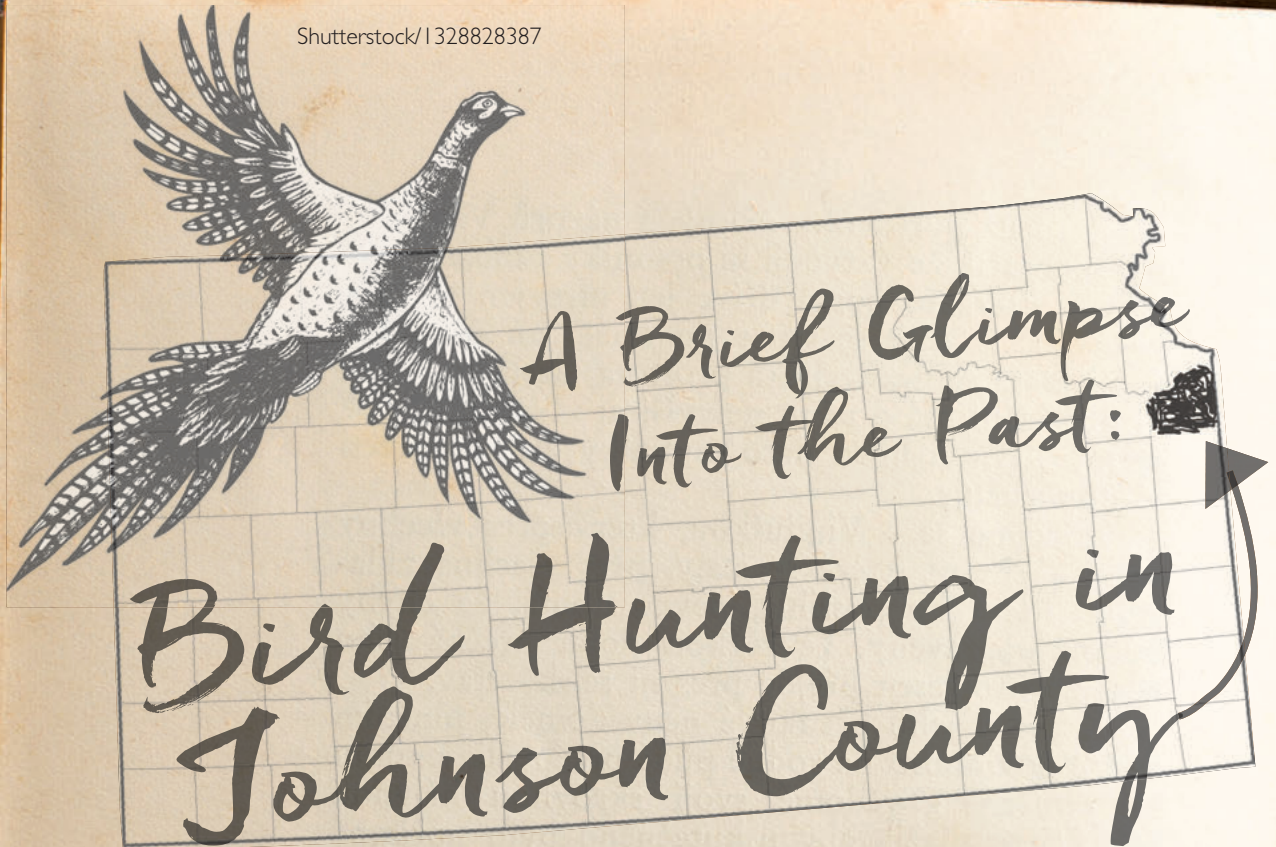
While Kansas has a higher mule deer fawn mortality rate than some other prairie states, our adult mortality is generally lower. Hunter harvest of mule deer does was basically non-existent amid study animals. Only a few whitetail does were harvested, though hunters were urged to disregard collars when selecting animals to harvest.

Much more information will be coming upon the study's completion. The biologists look forward to comparing what they've learned about Kansas deer with biologists in other states. Nebraska currently has an in-depth study in progress on mule deer.

"We know we're going to get some great information that we've never had before," said Jaster, "and we'll definitely be able to draw some conclusions. We'll likely see some changes in our deer management after this." 



Collars on bucks have enough battery life to last for three years while collars on adult does only last for one year.



It appeared we were far from the truck. Looking back now as an adult returning to the area where I walked along a cut grain field at the edge of some woods, we were merely a hundred yards or so. As we get older distance shortens and time lengthens. It was fall in the early 1980s, my father and I were accompanying my two friends and their dad for some small game hunting. Allowable game to shoot consisted of rabbits and squirrels. No mention of anything else was made.

I remember clutching the department store purchased shotgun tightly that morning. I had on dark indigo blue Wrangler jeans and a brown plaid shirt. Although oversized, I wore my father's tan canvas bird vest. Its elastic shell holders, now overstretched, filled with yellow 20-gauge shells. The vest had a dark quilted shoulder patch to ease the kick of the shotgun. Holding it in my hands now, the shoulder patch was nothing more than an extra piece of fabric sewn on. It would offer no protection. I also had donned his original Jones Cap, in what we call now "old-school camo."

We were several miles west of Olathe Lake hunting a friend's small farm; it was

more of a social gathering. My friends and I walked as we carried our shotguns talking about events at school, girls we thought were "pretty," and who was going to win the next game of kickball. Our focus was on more important things. Suddenly, a blur of tiny little brown plump birds scurried down the hedge lane. No one said anything. My buddies were still talking about "Lori" and suddenly I was focused on these, little dozen or so windup birds. A whirl of wingbeats erupted. My baptism into the world of upland birds gave birth. "Quail!" was yelled. No shots were fired. We continued our walk for rabbits and squirrels.

Another memory I recall is setting off with the same two friends for a day of walking on the railroad tracks as we traveled north. For lunch, we hopped the fence and rested against hay bales as we ate sandwiches wrapped in wax paper and drank RC sodas. It was a scene right out of the movie "Stand By Me." However, what I recall the most is the peculiar birds that sat atop the haybales in a vast field – they were chicken-like. What I know now, the birds were prairie chickens; a bird unseen or thought to have vanished many years ago from the area.



Photo Courtesy: Johnson County Museum

Two men hold a line on which approximately 20 prairie chickens hang in the early 1900s.

Reflecting on those memories, it amazes me I really wasn't too far from civilization. Both incidents I was merely on the outskirts of town. The land and even farming practices within Johnson County were different back then and have changed dramatically. As with everything, growth is inevitable.

Recently I began to wonder how those before me could have possibly hunted the very same landscape. History always has the answers, and what I discovered was grand. Johnson County was described by early settlers as a land rich in harvest potential and plentiful game. Upland game flourished by many records. In a journal entry made by traveling settlers on May 10, a young girl writes, "I noticed great numbers of prairie chickens. In some instances, we drove flocks of them in advance of us on the road. They appear much larger than those I have seen in Texas." The girl was referring to a species found only in Texas, the now endangered Attwater Prairie Chicken.

While on his journey up the Missouri River, James Audubon, the famous American ornithologist, journaled that two ruffed grouse were "taken" near the southern edge of Leavenworth. That is a hop, skip, and a jump from Johnson County. The habitat would have been similar and possibly had held Ruffs within the wet woodlands of the county, too. Prairie chickens and wild turkey were listed as abundant on both sides of the



Photo Courtesy: Johnson County Museum

Peter "Guy" Walker (second from left) and others on the Walker Farm located at Moonlight Road between Olathe and Gardner in 1910.

Missouri River, what is now Kansas City.

The year 1905 saw Senate Bill No. 147 proposed for the protection of quail and prairie chicken in Johnson County. In "Birds of the Kansas City Region" (1919), the author explains although the book's focus is Kansas City, the region encompasses Johnson and Douglas County. Gamebirds listed include the greater prairie chicken, Bobwhite quail, and woodcock. Another book "The Breeding Bird of Kansas" (1964) describes prairie chickens are found in eastern Kansas, in and about bluestem prairie grassland, while Bobwhite quail are listed as a common resident within broken woodland and other edge habitats are found in Douglas and Miami counties. Johnson County would have had a similar landscape and based on my experience listed previously, coveys were still around in the 1980s, and the American woodcock could possibly nest in Douglas County.

Giving more credibility to upland birds still surviving at least from the 1950s-1980s come



Photo Courtesy: Johnson County Museum

Two men holding shotguns on the Walker Farm.



Photo Courtesy: Johnson County Museum

Jenk Payne and Peter "Guy" Walker on Walker farm in 1909.

from eyewitness accounts from family members and friends. My father-in-law's childhood cohorts tell tales of hunting Bobwhite quail at various farms within Johnson County. They speak of shooting old side-by-side Parker shotguns and wooden "corncob" pumps from American firearm companies such as Remington and Ithaca. Occasionally seen feeding in cut grain fields are small flocks of prairie chickens. My wife's uncle tells stories of

shooting woodcock while quail hunting near Desoto along the river. Another man, now in his late 70s, told me stories of large coveys of quail at almost every Johnson County farmstead when he was a boy. Along with an ol' English Setter, he would hunt quail weekly during the fall, providing a second staple for a family of 11.

The more research I conducted on gamebirds historically inhabiting Johnson County, the more I discovered. A search through Johnson County Archives revealed some very interesting photos. Men depicted carrying shotguns, bird dogs, and strewn prairie chickens! Based on the photos, these and most likely other men hunted within Johnson County often.

While on this path to uncover the history of upland bird hunting in Johnson County, I have discovered through my quest it has taught me that sometimes we forget the simple things from our past. Be it personal recollections such as experiencing my first covey flush just west of Olathe Lake, to observing chicken-like fowl while on a boyhood adventure. Sometimes it takes a collection of memories to trigger us to dive deeper into learning about the good old days.

Yes, Johnson County has seen an explosion in expansion, commerce, and communities, but by being inquisitive I have discovered this county's rich past where men and their sons hunted for quail, prairie chickens, and woodcock. 🐃

About the Author

Edgar Castillo was born in Central America in the country of Guatemala. He moved to the United States with his family, where they settled in Kansas. He recently retired as a law enforcement officer for a large Kansas City metropolitan agency after 25 years, as well as serving in the United States Marine Corps for 12 years.

Edgar found his way into the world of upland bird hunting at a young age as he accompanied his father into the field. This passion has since blossomed into a significant social media presence that allows him to share his experiences and connect with other hunters. He is a contributing writer for Project Upland and various other journals and websites.





2020 *Kansas* UPLAND BIRD FORECAST

BACKGROUND

Two important factors impact availability of upland game during the fall hunting season: number of breeding adults in the spring and the reproductive success of the breeding population. Reproductive success consists of both the number of hatched nests and chick survival. For pheasant and quail, annual survival is relatively low; therefore, the fall population is more dependent on summer reproduction than spring adult numbers. For prairie chickens, reproductive success is still the major population regulator, but higher adult survival helps maintain hunting opportunities during poor conditions.

METHODS

In this forecast, breeding population and reproductive success of pheasants, quail, and prairie chickens will be discussed. Breeding population data were gathered using spring calling surveys for pheasants (crow counts), quail (whistle counts), and prairie chickens (lek counts). Data for reproductive success were collected during late-summer roadside surveys for pheasants and quail, which quantify both adults and chicks observed. Reproductive success of prairie chickens cannot be easily assessed using the same methods because they do not associate with roads like pheasants and quail.

HABITAT CONDITIONS

Kansas has a dramatic rainfall gradient from more than 50 inches of average annual rainfall in the far east to less than 13 inches in the far west. The amount and timing of rainfall plays a major role in reproduction for upland birds. In the west, wet years typically improve the available cover and increase insect availability for chicks. In the east, dry years are typically more optimal, as heavy rains during spring and summer can reduce survival of nesting birds and young chicks. In 2020, Kansas had below-average precipitation throughout the winter and early spring across the state, resulting in poor habitat conditions entering the nesting season. Precipitation events beginning in late May and continuing through much of the summer improved habitat conditions across many areas. These summer rainfall events created abundant weeds within crop stubble that is typically beneficial to upland birds. The drier than average weather prevailed longer in the southwest region and impacted production in that region.



Jon Blumb photo

CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

Under the 2018 Farm Bill, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acreage cap will gradually increase over the next five years. Kansas currently has 1.9 million acres of CRP statewide. There was a new enrollment period in 2020; however, with 504,000 acres expiring and only 436,000 acres offered, there will be a net decrease in acres this year. Lower interest is currently attributed to reduced rental rates and incentives. In addition to loss of acres, the quality of habitat on the remaining acres may also be impacted. There were 27 counties in Kansas that were released for emergency haying and grazing of CRP due to drought conditions. As a condition for reenrollment of many of the renewal acres, landowners are required to hay these fields as part of management. This should improve these fields in the future but will cause an immediate reduction in habitat. A large portion of properties in the WIHA program include CRP and expirations can reduce habitat quality or exclude properties from the program. However, the Kansas WIHA program remains strong, with nearly 1.14 million acres enrolled (atlases are available at ksoutdoors.com/wiha or at any license vendor).

OVERALL OUTLOOK: “GOOD”

Kansas should have good upland bird hunting opportunities this fall. Kansas has nearly 1.7 million acres open to public hunting (wildlife areas and WIHA combined). This is only a small portion of the more than 52 million acres of private land that also provides ample opportunity where permission can be obtained.

The opening date for pheasant and quail seasons is November 14, and youth season is November 7-8; Youth hunters must be 16 years of age or younger and accompanied by a non-hunting adult that is age 18 or older. Please consider taking a young person hunting this fall!



Jon Blumb photo

STATEWIDE SUMMARIES

PHEASANT

Heavy rainfall in 2019 made for good residual nesting cover across much of the state coming into 2020. However, Kansas entered a long dry spell across most of the pheasant range early in 2020 with below average rainfall from February through May. This dry pattern broke in June with several scattered storms events across the northwest and central regions of the state. The timing of this rain was critical for producing brood cover for hatching pheasant chicks as well as copious amounts of insects. Continued rainfall through July maintained good habitat conditions and improved conditions in the southwest. Opportunistic brood reports from department staff and others suggested that brood sizes were up this year, as well as seeing considerably more broods; however, summer brood survey results have estimated that there was a decrease in the overall pheasant abundance. Roadside counts in the northwest remained similar to last year while numbers decreased through the rest of the state. Given the precipitation patterns through June were erratic, combined with the opportunistic reports, hunters will likely find that densities will vary widely on the landscape this season. Despite declines, Kansas continues to maintain one of the best pheasant populations in the country and the fall harvest should again be among the leading states. The highest densities this year will likely be in the Northern High Plains region of northwest Kansas.

QUAIL

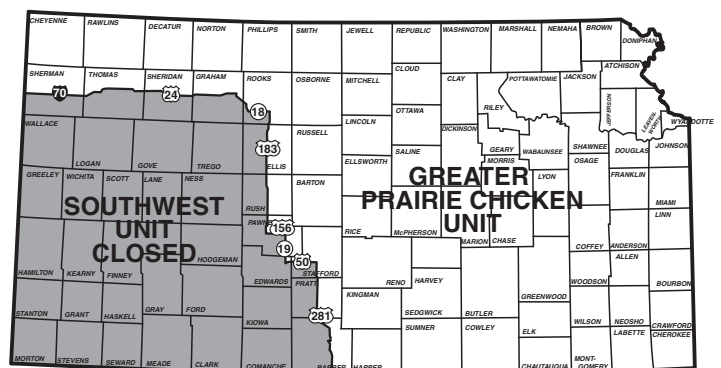
Kansas continues to support above-average quail populations. The peak nesting for quail is later than pheasants, and they are more likely to make multiple nesting attempts. This allowed quail to take advantage of the summer rainfall better than pheasants and led to production levels that were higher or stable across most of the state. The bobwhite whistle survey in spring 2020 saw a significant increase, while the roadside survey index was the same as 2019. The only region showing notable declines was in the southeast, which has not maintained the above average densities like the rest of the state. Kansas maintains one of the premier quail populations in the country and harvest will again be among the highest this year. The best opportunities will be found in the central regions, with plenty of quality hunting scattered in the remaining regions.

PRAIRIE CHICKEN

Kansas is home to both greater and lesser prairie chickens. Both species require a landscape of predominately native grass and benefit from a few interspersed grain fields. Lesser prairie chickens are found in west-central and southwestern Kansas in native prairie and nearby stands of native grass established through the CRP. Greater prairie chickens are found primarily in the tallgrass and mixed-grass prairies that occur in the eastern third and northern half of the state. Greater prairie chickens have expanded in numbers and range in the northwestern portion of the state while declining in the eastern regions. Hunting opportunities will be best in the Northern High Plains and Smoky Hills Regions this fall, where populations have been either increasing or stable, and public access is more abundant.

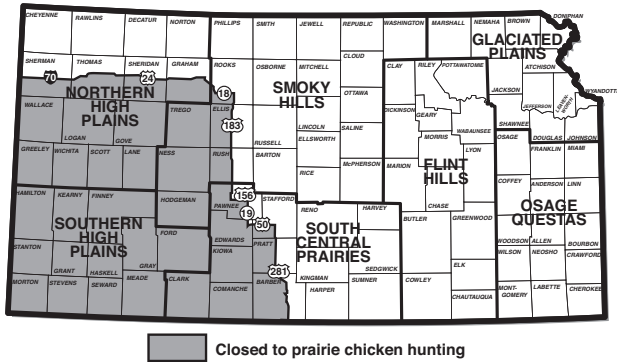
The Southwest Prairie Chicken Unit, where lesser prairie chickens are found, will remain closed to hunting this year. Greater prairie chickens may be harvested during the early prairie chicken season and the regular season with a two-bird daily bag limit in the Greater Prairie Chicken Unit. All prairie chicken hunters are required to purchase a \$2.50 Prairie Chicken Permit. This permit allows KDWP to better track hunter activity and harvest, which will improve management activities and inform policy decisions.

GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKEN UNIT MAP



REGIONAL SUMMARIES

REGIONAL UPLAND BIRD MAP



Northern High Plains (Northwest)

Public Land: 12,849 acres
WIHA: 386,709 acres

Pheasant – Regional bird indices remained similar to last year and the region boasts the highest regional index from the summer brood survey again this year. The following spring breeding densities were similar to 2019. With no significant changes in any pheasant surveys, hunting opportunities should remain similar to 2019 as well; however, with areas furthest west receiving less rain this year, densities will likely be less in those counties compared to last year. The highest densities will be found in the northeastern portion of this region.

Quail – Quail are limited and are typically harvested opportunistically by pheasant hunters. Recent weather patterns have facilitated a population expansion into the area where appropriate habitat exists, providing hunters with a welcomed additional opportunity in recent years. Densities on the summer roadside survey decreased and remained the lowest regional density, most notably two of the routes in the region that had been recording higher numbers of quail had no detections this year. Opportunity will remain the best in the eastern-most counties of the region.

Prairie Chicken – Prairie chicken populations continue to expand in both numbers and range within the region. Only portions of this region are open to hunting (see map for unit boundaries). Lesser prairie chickens occur in the southern and central portions of the region within the closed zone. Within the open area, the best hunting opportunities will be found in the northeastern portion of the region in native prairies and CRP grasslands.

Smoky Hills

Public Land: 106,558 acres
WIHA: 323,658 acres

Pheasant – After a slight increase, the spring calling surveys remained above average, but pheasant counts from summer roadside surveys declined. Total regional harvest was highest in the Smoky Hills last year, but success rates were lower than the other major pheasant regions. With reduced densities, success rates may decrease again in this region. Given its size and variability, this region will still be important to pheasant hunters and be a major contributor to the overall harvest. The northwestern portion of the region had the highest roadside densities this year.

Quail – The spring whistle survey increased this year, while roadside surveys remained the same. After large increases in the roadside survey last year, stable numbers maintained the region as having the highest roadside index for quail in 2020. Total regional harvest in 2019 was the highest in the state with good hunter success rates. Hunters in the area are becoming accustomed to the high densities experienced across the region in the past few years, making birds relatively easy to find; however, targeting edge habitat and weedy areas with nearby shrubs will be the most productive. Densities appear best in the north half of the region but several other areas across the region produced good estimates as well.

Prairie Chicken – Prairie Chicken hunting opportunities in the region should remain good. Production was likely improved with good residual cover and spring counts remain relatively good. This region includes some of the highest densities and access in the state for prairie chickens. Greater prairie chickens occur throughout the Smoky Hills where large areas of native rangeland are intermixed with CRP and cropland. The best hunting will be found in the central portion of the region, but several other areas support hunttable densities of birds in appropriate habitat. Lesser prairie chickens occur in a few counties in the southwestern portion of the region within the closed zone (see map for unit boundaries).

REGIONAL SUMMARIES

Glaciated Plains

Public Land: 51,469 acres

WIHA: 75,703 acres

Pheasant – Opportunities will remain poor with pheasants occurring only in pockets of habitat, primarily in the northwestern portion of the region or areas managed for upland birds. Spring crow counts increased from 2019, however pheasants were detected on only one roadside route in 2020. Pheasant densities across the region are typically low, especially relative to other areas in central and western Kansas.

Quail – After falling last year, roadside surveys indicate birds increased on all routes this year in the region. Like many regions, the last five years have provided above average opportunity for quail. While densities will still be lower than western regions, the above average densities will provide better opportunities for those spending time in northeast Kansas this winter. With the limited amount of nesting and roosting cover throughout much of this in the region, targeting areas with or near native grass is key for success. Roadside counts were highest in the northwestern portion of the region.

Prairie Chickens – Very little prairie chicken range occurs in this region and opportunities are limited. Opportunities for encounters are highest in the western edges of the region along the Flint Hills, where some large areas of native rangeland still exist.

Osage Cuestas

Public Land: 109,883 acres

WIHA: 36,569 acres

Pheasant – This region is outside the primary pheasant range and very limited hunting opportunities exist. Pheasants are occasionally found in the northwestern portion of the region at very low densities.

Quail – Opportunities will be poor this year. Densities had increased in this region similar to the rest of the state; however, three consecutive years of poor production have resulted in population declines. Roadside surveys were substantially lower in the region this year with nearly all routes indicating a decline. This region had the lowest roadside estimate of any region in the primary quail range. Hunters should expect den-

sities below last year in most places. The best hunting will be in the western counties in grasslands extending east off the Flint Hills.

Prairie Chicken – Greater prairie chickens occur in the central and northwestern portions of this region in large areas of native rangeland. Populations have consistently declined over the long term. Fire suppression and loss of native grassland has gradually reduced the amount of suitable habitat in the region. The best hunting opportunities will be in large blocks of native rangeland along the edge of the Flint Hills.

Flint Hills

Public Land: 196,901 acres

WIHA: 75,518 acres

Pheasant – This region is on the eastern edge of the primary pheasant range in Kansas and offers limited opportunities. Pheasant densities have always been relatively low throughout the Flint Hills, with the highest densities found on the western edge of the region. The spring crow counts and summer roadside survey both remained stable. The best opportunities will be in the northwest portion of the region along the Smoky Hills.

Quail – This region had a slight decrease in the index of whistling bobwhites but remained above average. Summer roadside counts were slightly better than 2019. Quail production was likely impeded in the core of the Flint Hills with above average burning limiting nesting cover. Hunters will find the best success in areas that maintained nearby nesting cover and have retained shrub cover that has been removed from large areas of the region during invasive species control. The northern half of the region recorded the highest roadside indices this year.

Prairie Chickens – The Flint Hills is the largest intact tallgrass prairie in North America and has been a core habitat for greater prairie chickens for many years. Management changes resulting in both areas of too little and too much prescribed fire have gradually degraded habitat quality and prairie chicken numbers have declined as a result. More grassland than average was burned in 2020, resulting in less nesting cover; however, summer rainfall created good brood cover and quality habitat entering the fall. Hunting opportunities will likely be similar to last year throughout the region.

REGIONAL SUMMARIES

Southcentral Prairies

Public Land: 41,125 acres

WIHA: 65,801 acres

Pheasant –The spring crow survey remained unchanged from 2019 and near long-term averages. While total observations in the summer roadside survey declined, the pattern was inconsistent, with some notable improvement in the west half of the region. The highest pheasant densities in the region will be found in the west half again this year.

Quail –The spring whistle survey saw a marked improvement this year. This was followed by slight increase in the summer brood survey. As such, the region should have above average densities and was the second-highest regional index on the roadside survey this year. Harvest rates for quail were good in the region last year and opportunities should be better this year with these increases. The intermixing of quality cover types in the region provides more consistent opportunities in the Southcentral Prairies compared to other regions. The roadside counts were highest in western half of the region with some declines across the eastern half.

Prairie Chicken – This region is almost entirely occupied by lesser prairie chickens and areas included in their range are closed to prairie chicken hunting (see map for unit boundaries). Greater prairie chickens occur in very limited areas in the remainder of this region and will occur in very low densities with encounters most likely in the few remaining large tracts of rangeland in the northeastern portion of the region.

Southern High Plains

Public Land: 116,821 acres

WIHA: 176,800 acres

Pheasant –The pheasant crow index was unchanged this spring and remained the highest regional crow index this year. However, roadside brood surveys showed declines after dry conditions, persisting in the area through June, reduced overall nesting success. Last year, this region boasted the highest success rates for hunters, but with lower densities this year, success rates will likely decline. The highest pheasant densities will be in the southeastern portion of the region.

Quail –The quail population in this region is highly variable and dependent on weather. Whistle counts were slightly down this spring across the southwest. Despite fewer adult quail in the spring, roadside survey results were the same as last year. Quail typically nest later than pheasant and were able to take advantage of rains the area received later in the summer. The highest densities will be found along riparian corridors where adequate woody structure exists. This association with riparian corridors also makes surveying the region for an accurate density of quail challenging, and opportunities can be better than roadside surveys suggest at times. Scaled quail can also be found in this region but make up a small proportion of quail in the region.

Prairie Chicken – This region is entirely occupied by lesser prairie chickens; therefore, prairie chicken hunting is closed in this area.



Jon Blumb photo

Kansas *Wetlands* Education Center

by Pam Martin
KDWPT education specialist

From the plants and tiny invertebrates living in the mud to the birds and apex predators, all are vital parts of the 41,000-acre Cheyenne Bottoms wetland ecosystem - the largest wetland in the country's interior.

Interpreting this wetland ecosystem for the public is the mission of the Kansas Wetlands Education Center (KWEC), operated as a partnership between Fort Hays State University (FHSU) and the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT).



After several years of planning, this partnership culminated in a visitors' center at Cheyenne Bottoms, near Great Bend. Since officially opening on April 24, 2009, KWEC's mission of "educating the public about wetland communities, their importance and the need for conservation and restoration, with emphasis on Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge," hasn't changed, but several additions and improvements have occurred.

A new introductory video to the Bottoms is often visitors' first stop. The 11,000 square foot center includes a large auditorium and the Koch Wetlands Exhibit gallery, featuring newly renovated interactive exhibits, courtesy of a Dorothy M. Morrison Foundation donation. A timeline tracing the history of Cheyenne Bottoms beginning 12,000 years ago encompasses the west wall. Interactive exhibits popular with all ages include an augmented reality watershed simulator, a wetland floor projection game, an activity area, build-a-bird and build-a-plant stations, adaptation magnetic boards, an aquatic invertebrate viewer and a section on wetland fauna. A children's section contains games, magnetic boards and coloring activities. Adults and children can enjoy the bird-watching station that includes audio bird calls.

Several live examples of local wildlife are on display, including the Kansas state reptile, the ornate box turtle, and the state amphibian, the barred tiger salamander. KWEC's two black-tailed prairie dogs, Indy and Sweet Pea, are visitor favorites, along with the spiny softshell and painted turtles.

A large gift store contains an extensive collection of field guides for adults and children, along with varied t-shirt selection and nature- and science-

Interactive exhibits are popular with visitors of all ages.



oriented children's items. Kansas artist creations from ceramics to photography complete the inventory.

Although indoor exhibits are top notch, getting visitors outside to experience wetlands is paramount at KWEC. Two small wetland areas are located behind the Center, along with a half-mile nature trail. For those taking a Cheyenne Bottoms self-guided tour, recent bird sightings, maps and wildlife checklists are available at the front desk. Guided 30- or 90-minute van tours led by FHSU graduate students are available for a nominal fee. Guides point out plants and animals, while sharing historical and manage-



Indy, one of KWEC's black-tailed prairie dogs enjoys a treat of dandelion flowers. KWEC displays 28 species of local wildlife from insects to mammals.



In addition to a wall of field guides, visitors can browse through children's science kits and books and Kansas artisan creations in KWEC's gift shop.

ment information about Cheyenne Bottoms. Three observation towers throughout the Bottoms provide an overlook of the marsh.

Plant it and they will come. And “they” definitely have come, since the demonstration pollinator/wildflower garden was established. Planted predominantly with native wildflowers, and the addition of some specific non-native pollinator plants, the garden attracts a host of insect pollinators, birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals. Six species of milkweed draw monarch butterflies as a food and host plant. KWEC uses the garden as a teaching tool for all ages, with students studying plants and insects and, each summer, adults participate in “Gifts from the Garden” classes, which have ranged from edible flowers to eco printing.

Additional buildings include a multi-purpose shelter used for programming and events, a cabin for graduate student housing and a connected lab.

On-site and outreach programming are key components to KWEC's education mission. In addition to over 600 annual school programs, KWEC staff provide field trips, out-reach and on-site programs for libraries, recreation commissions, Girl and Boy Scouts, 4-H, home school groups and various other organizations.

In September, KWEC hosts the Wetlands Day field trip for 400 Barton County second graders. Students rotate between seven stations, all dealing with wetlands. The Friends of Cheyenne Bottoms assist with organizing the event.


KWEC's largest event, the annual Butterfly Festival held in mid-September, draws up to 800 visitors. From the very youngest to the elderly, everyone gets into the act of finding monarch butterflies to tag. Even if peak migration is missed, there are some monarchs to tag and kids are happy catching

grasshoppers! There's plenty of other entertainment too - an insect zoo, magic and puppet shows, crafts, beekeeper and master gardener exhibits, a dress-up booth, making wildflower seed bombs and more.

Other special events include the biennial Wings and Wetlands birding festival, attracting people from across the country; family programs throughout the year; summer camps in July; monthly Turtle Tots preschool programs; the Perseid meteor shower event in August; hunter appreciation breakfast in October; holiday open house in December; quarterly STEM events; monthly Wild Club meetings; prairie chicken lek tours; and other timely events, such as Earth Day celebrations. KWEC offers several outreach programs for organizations with various topics, from a general overview of Cheyenne Bottoms to birds, butterflies, and wildflowers of the area.

In addition, KWEC participates in several citizen science projects, such as the NABA butterfly count, FrogWatch monitoring, Christmas Bird Count and monarch butterfly tagging.

KWEC emphasizes getting the public immersed and excited about nature. A large collection of waders in children and adult sizes, in addition to muck boots, provide access to macroinvertebrate sampling in the wetland. When students say, “this is the best field trip ever,” it makes the cleaning of 50 pairs of boots worthwhile.

Whether it's providing school programming, events and van tours or talking to visitors, KWEC strives to portray the wild, wonderful nature of wetlands. 

A Discovery camper shows off a dragonfly naiad he caught during macroinvertebrate sampling.





Kansas Wetlands Education Center

592 NE K-156 Highway
Great Bend, KS 67530

No admission fee

Open Monday through Saturday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Sunday 1 - 5 p.m.

*(Closed on Mondays
Nov. 1–March 31
and major holidays)*

(620) 566-1456

wetlandscenter.fhsu.edu



Species Profile

Painted Turtle

Size: Up to 8 inches in length

Appearance: Smooth, dark brown to green top shell with red to yellow markings along the outer edges. The bottom shell (plastron) is red to orange with a series of black and yellow markings along the center. The head and legs have many yellow to red stripes and spots.

Food Preferences: Adults are primarily vegetarian. Hatchlings will eat a wider variety of food items including small invertebrates and carrion.

Reproduction: Females lay two to eight eggs in late spring with the eggs hatching in late summer.

Painted turtles are often seen basking on logs in ponds and backwaters on warm sunny days year-round. But what about the cold days of winter? As ectotherms, the painted turtle's metabolism slows down to allow adults to overwinter under ice; sometimes they will bury themselves up to 45 cm in the mud beneath the water! While submerged in the winter, painted turtles absorb oxygen through their skin, mouth and cloaca instead of their lungs. They can also reduce oxygen consumption by reducing their heart rate from 40 beats/minute to one beat every 10 minutes!



Shutterstock/681305554



This coming January marks eight years that I've worked for our agency, and over time a common saying of mine has become, "Never did I think I would _____." For instance, "Never did I think I would be able to explain to someone how to identify a fish by their anal fin." Or, "Never did I think I would get to grab a wild goose, band it, and set it free again." And then there was the time that I got to say, "Never did I think I could grow to love spiders so much." The same could be said for our magazine.

Each year, I find myself skimming and editing content that I never thought I'd see as a college-aged student preparing to work for a big-city advertising firm. And yet, here I am! So, I'd like to take you through this year's past issues and share my favorite "Never did I think moments" as they relate to our publication. But before I do, I must give a ginormous "thank you" to the extremely talented, patient, and creative freelance writers and photographers and staff who contribute to this publication. Because of them, I have learned, I have laughed, but above all, I have grown to love my job more and more every year. Thank you.

January/February Issue

Never Did I Think I Would: Look at a picture of a turkey vulture eating dried up road kill and think, "That's what I'm looking for! Let's print that!" Now, a lot of people give turkey vultures a look of disgust for their eating habits, but I happen to think these scavengers are providing a much-needed public service for our roadways. And who doesn't appreciate a non-picky eater?! I've grown to love these bald-headed birds, and salute them for cleaning up what others leave behind.

March/April Issue

Never Did I Think I Would: Know what someone meant when they said "Batesian mimicry." Now I do! In a "Digging Deep Into Gardening" workshop hosted by our local K-State Research and Extension Office, I heard from a phenomenal speaker who exposed me to the fascinating world of butterflies and moths. A defense tactic that plump, vulnerable caterpillars deploy in order to avoid being eaten is "Batesian mimicry," which is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as the "resemblance of an innocuous species to another that is protected from predators by unpalatability or other qualities." So, in essence, caterpillars are basically putting on costumes for a cause. Genius!

May/June Issue

Never Did I Think I Would: Learn how to trap "murder hornets." Granted, I haven't had to practice this method for lack of Asian giant hornets in Kansas (thank goodness), but it's nice to have this tool in my toolbox if I ever come face-to-face with a 2-inch-long *Vespa mandarinia*. When these honeybee-feasters took over news media by storm, I began conducting research for my Backlash article. I found it so interesting that Asian giant hornets are attracted to fermented rice milk AND that you could create a similarly-attractive odor by filling a bottle with sugar, alcohol and vinegar. Bon appétit.

July/August Issue


Never Did I Think I Would: Edit a recipe for "Squirrel Egg Rolls." Yep, you read that right. Now, I've tried a lot of interesting dishes from my coworkers over the years, but it still feels a little odd to edit a piece that begins with the line, "Lay cleaned, dressed squirrels in a large slow cooker." To Rob McDonald's credit - the recipe's author and outdoor

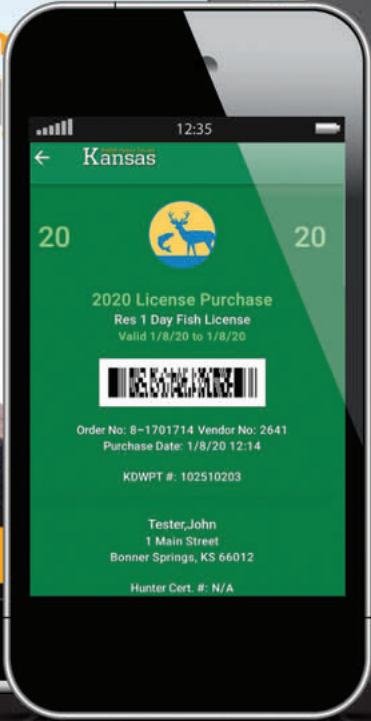


adventurer behind the blog Modern Wildman - all of his recipes are drool-inducing-good. Plus, let's be honest - I'll never pass up an opportunity to dip my food in hoisin sauce.

September/October Issue

Never Did I Think I Would: See our Wild About Kansas photo contest make it to its 8th year! Wild About Kansas was a pet project of mine as a newbie in the Information Production section (now Public Affairs). My boss and mentor, Mike Miller, gave me the creative leeway to initiate a project and run wild with it. So, with his permission, I settled on a photo contest. The first year, we received just 77 entries. Last year, we received more than 400. I still remember many of our entries that first year, and am always amazed at the growing amount of talent we see each year to follow.

I'm not certain what this next year will bring, but if it's anywhere near as exciting as the past seven, I'd say I still have plenty more "Never did I think moments" ahead of me. 



CampIt KS



HuntFish KS

