

# 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



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

**A**ntsy 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

**T**he 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.

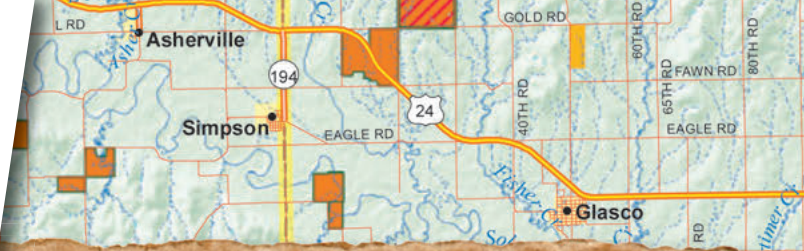
This hasn't always been the case though. If you can find someone lucky enough to have experienced the good old days of pheasant hunting in Kansas, they will likely recount the big groups walking large wheat stubble fields and with birds boiling out in every direction. This was a time when our crop fields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

**H**abitat 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

**SEPT. 1 - MAY 31**



**FOOT TRAFFIC ONLY**

PROJECT OF THE KANSAS DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE, PARKS AND TOURISM.

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