

KANSAS

Wildlife & Parks Magazine

FOR HUNTERS, ANGLERS AND OUTDOOR ENTHUSIASTS | \$2.75 | SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2018





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KANSAS
Wildlife & Parks Magazine

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INSIDE FRONT COVER Kansas is home to a variety of lizard species, including the collared lizard. Staff photo.

Contact the Editors: mike.miller@ks.gov or nadia.reimer@ks.gov

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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A Pleasure To Serve

As you read this, I will be preparing to or will have already moved on to my next adventure as the manager of the Kansas State Fair. Even though I am looking forward to this new role, it is with sadness that I leave the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWP). The last almost eight years have been the most rewarding of my professional life. I have never worked with more dedicated people who are doing work they are so passionate about.

We are truly blessed in Kansas to have an agency that for 113 years has not just managed our natural resources but enhanced our natural resources, providing some of the most diverse outdoor recreation opportunities in the country. Each generation of KDWP staff has built on the good work of previous generations to, through science and hard work, keep the Kansas outdoors relevant and an important part of the Kansas quality of life.

In my tenure here, I have had the great opportunity to meet many retirees eager to tell their stories of time with the agency. They speak with great pride of the advances made and programs they implemented, programs that in many cases are still in place and more often than not have been built upon to be even better than they were at inception.

In recent times the agency and the state of Kansas have been blessed with the vision of two governors. Governor Mike Hayden's vision to merge the Park and Resources Authority and Fish and Game Commission and make it a cabinet-level agency was significant. The merger and resulting reorganization created an efficient structure that helped keep the department responsive and relevant in changing political times. Governor Brownback's executive order to bring Tourism into the agency prepared KDWP better than most wildlife/parks agencies to meet the challenges faced as our biggest group of outdoorsmen and



women, the Baby Boomer Generation, retire and new groups of outdoor enthusiasts emerge.

Finally, I have enjoyed our constituents, who are as passionate as our employees. We have ushered in a lot

of change over the last eight years and our constituents have never been shy about expressing their thoughts. Even at times when some disagreed with us, we knew their views were heartfelt and genuine. I am proud with the transparency under which we have operated, working with a dedicated Commission that balanced the recommendations of the agency with the

views of our constituents in public meetings. I think they have done a great job.

To all of you, thank you for the most rewarding job I have ever had. 🐮



Letters To The Editors

Write the editors at: mike.miller@ks.gov or nadia.reimer@ks.gov

Rare Kite Sighting

Editors:

[Here] is a photo of a swallow-tailed kite that I saw at the Sand Hills State Park in Reno County, on Saturday, Aug. 11, 2018. It is a rare migrant to this area, coming from the Gulf states. Yet another reason to visit our state parks – you never know what you might see!

Beth Wiechman, Sedgwick



Spiny Softshell

Hi, Mike and Nadia,

I was wondering who wrote the spiny softshell species profile in the latest *Kansas Wildlife & Parks Magazine*? Or who I could attribute authorship to?

I am adding it to the Kansas Herp Atlas library and would prefer not to list it as anonymous.

I enjoyed the profile.

Thank you,
Travis Taggart, Hays

Travis,

Annie Fischer wrote the species profile with input from Daren Riedle. Annie handles magazine circulation and is the Information Section's administrative specialist. Daren is our wildlife diversity coordinator in the Ecological Services Section and he's our go-to guy for herp questions.

-Editor

MARTIN RECOGNIZED FOR QUAIL CONSERVATION

KDWPT is staffed by some of the most dedicated, hard-working, and passionate individuals in the conservation field today; people who are determined to make a difference. And district wildlife biologist Logan Martin is a perfect example of that.

Martin was recently named the 2017 Firebird Award winner by the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI) – an organization made up of 25 state fish and wildlife agencies and various conservation organizations aimed at restoring wild bobwhite quail populations. The award is given each year to recognize those making significant contributions to bobwhite quail restoration at the state level – an award befitting of Martin.

When changes in personnel left the KDWPT without a Southeast Kansas Quail Initiative coordinator, Martin, a biotech at the time, was asked to take over the program.

As his nomination letter read, “This left him not only trying to convince landowners of the importance of managing for quail, but also trying to convince biologists of the importance of paperwork for tracking and reporting.” But Martin pulled through – and then some.

The native Kansan then went on to play a major role in KDWPT's newly-invigorated, statewide private lands habitat program, Habitat First. Apart from serving on the program's committee, Martin also stepped outside of his comfort zone into the realm of marketing, overseeing the program's branding and promotional efforts led by an outside contractor.

It's because of these efforts and more that Martin was then asked to represent Kansas in NBCI's Outreach Committee – providing a valuable link between NBCI and the Kansas Habitat committee.

Though he's only been with the Department since 2013, Martin's contributions are commendable.

As his nomination letter reads, “Logan's efforts to not only improve habitat within his own district, but to look for ways to engage landowners across our state, demonstrates his commitment to quail in Kansas and beyond.”



-KDWPT staff

BIRD BRAIN

Swainson's Hawk

with Mike Rader



Fall migration is underway in Kansas, with many species on the move. One of my favorite fall migration events involves Swainson's hawks. This medium-sized member of the *buteo* family is common in Kansas and throughout the rest of their range, which covers most of central and western North America during spring and summer. Named after a famous British naturalist, William Swainson, these majestic birds are often seen around farmland and grasslands, hunting prey to feed themselves and their young during the breeding season. In fall, Swainson's hawks travel from as far north as Alaska, Canada and the western U.S. to wintering grounds on the Pampas of Argentina in South America.

Fall migration for this species can be quite impressive, with flocks or "kettles" numbering in the hundreds. They like to forage on the ground for insects and have an affinity for harvested soybean and alfalfa fields. In my travels in central Kansas, I have been lucky enough to see this occur many times, witnessing up to 500 of these birds sitting on the ground or circling overhead while feeding. At dusk, they will often gather in a communal roost in a nearby shelterbelt. Swainson's hawks will follow tractors working agricultural fields, opportunistically catching rodents and insects displaced by the activity

About 90 percent of Swainson's hawks display the light color morph, with a whitish body underneath, grayish-brown upperparts, a banded tail, dark-grayish wings and a

dark bib and head. The birds exhibiting the intermediate and dark color morphs, which can be almost black overall, only constitute around 10 percent of the overall population, which is estimated at 580,000. They are more slender than red-tailed hawks and their wings appear longer when seen in flight. They have smaller feet and talons than red-tailed and ferruginous hawks, adapted for the typically smaller prey taken.

While on their breeding grounds, Swainson's hawks construct a nest about 2 feet in diameter out of old, loose sticks and sometimes using old rope or wire. It is lined with green, leafy twigs, grass or weeds. A clutch will have

one to five eggs and incubation takes 35 days. Young birds will fledge after about two weeks, and the parents teach them how to forage and prepare for the long journey south. This is one of the raptor species that can be seen in "hawk watches" in Texas and Mexico where thousands of birds can be counted flying through.

These hawks have maintained a stable population

since protections have been added, and especially since the use of highly-toxic pesticides in agricultural fields in South America was curtailed. Thousands of Swainson's hawks were killed each year before this change. Education played a large role in helping this interesting species recover and now flourish.

Swainson's hawks are smaller than the more-familiar red-tailed hawks and typically take smaller prey.

In summer, they eat mainly small mammals such as ground squirrels, mice, voles, gophers and bats, but will take birds and reptiles, as well. Interestingly, they feed almost exclusively on insects during migration and while on their wintering grounds, taking grasshoppers, dragonflies, crickets, beetles moths and butterflies.



LAW MATTERS

Training Season

with Colonel Ott

As sportsmen around the country prepare for this fall's hunting season, so do Kansas game wardens. The life of a law enforcement officer varies from day to day and that is often one reason those who work in this field choose it.

Part of that preparation includes study and training to stay on top of any regulation changes. This not only includes KDWPT regulations, but also state and federal law. Game wardens attend and provide training around the state and country.

Hunting, fishing and boating enforcement are the focus of Kansas game wardens, but we also provide traditional law enforcement responses every day. Game wardens are also called on to assist with search and rescue operations. It is not uncommon for a game warden to deal with a domestic dispute, make a narcotics case and check deer hunters in the



Technology, such as the use of drones, changes quickly, and officers must keep up on the latest trends.



Kansas game wardens must complete 40 hours of training each year to ensure the safety of officers and citizens.

were put right into field training because they were already certified law enforcement officers. Training to become a game warden is a long process. It takes nearly a year before a new warden will work completely solo in their respective areas. Even with this new class of game wardens, we're always seeking good, qualified candidates. If you have an interest, go to www.ksoutdoors and click on "JOBS" to learn more.

For the experienced warden, a wide variety of specialized positions are available, including investigations, K9 handlers, boating enforcement specialists and police trainers.

As we approach our busy seasons, game wardens are diligently working to be ready, and they're still providing fishing and boating enforcement. And whenever there's a break, Kansas game wardens are try to get their own vacations, family time and outdoor activities worked in.

Hope to see you in the Kansas outdoors!

same day. This requires that a game warden stay current on all changes to the law enforcement field. The state of Kansas requires law enforcement officers, including game wardens, to have 40 hours of training annually.

Preparations for the busy season actually began when the previous season ended. Training sessions are scheduled, conferences are attended, and equipment is cleaned, serviced, repaired or replaced. A game warden's vehicle is really a mobile office and a lot goes into equipping it. Game wardens may spend 8-12 hours a day in their vehicle and may travel 100 miles or more from home, so having necessary equipment is paramount.

The KDWPT has recently hired a class of new game wardens who are either currently attending the Kansas Law Enforcement Training Center, recently completed training, or



Game wardens are trained in the use of Seated Standardized Field Sobriety testing to enforce BUI laws.

Game Warden Profile

Amanda Alexander, Clay County

What is the most memorable investigation you have worked on?

My most memorable investigation so far happened by pure luck. I was patrolling the wildlife area when I drove around a bend and saw someone toss a large black object from a vehicle into the ditch. Upon investigation it turned out the black object was a turkey carcass. What I thought would be a simple case of littering snowballed into several game violations all because I was in the right place at the right time.

What is the best thing about being a game warden?

The best thing about being a warden is having the freedom and opportunity to pursue your individual interests. The job entails so much more than just law enforcement! If I get stuck on a particular task I can take a break and teach a class, conduct a program, or assist another division.

If you weren't a game warden, what would you be doing?

This is a difficult question because there are so many opportunities, but if I had to choose, I would say I'd be a full-time farmer. They say if you enjoy what you do you won't work a day in your life. That's how farming is for me. It's not a job, it's a lifestyle.

What do you enjoy in your spare time?

I spend time on the farm. I help out on a small cow/calf operation in my free time, and calving season is my favorite time of year. I'm still looking to buy a house, but eventually I'm going to have the works: cows, horses, chickens, and a huge garden.

What/Who influenced you to become a game warden?

My dad pushed me to become a game warden for several years, but I didn't like the idea of confrontation. Eventually I ended up as a Code



Enforcement and Animal Control Officer where I discovered how rewarding it is to make a positive difference in my community. One day I received a call about a dead vulture so I contacted my local game warden, Jake Brooks. Officer Brooks told me KDWP was accepting applications and suggested I apply.

What is your favorite area in Kansas to hunt or fish?

One of Kansas's best qualities is the fact that it is comprised of so many different biomes, and therefore different hunting and fishing opportunities. I can go to western Kansas and hunt mule deer and pheasants, eastern Kansas for whitetails and waterfowl, and great fishing everywhere in between.

What activities can people enjoy in your area?

The biggest attraction in my area is Milford Lake. It is the largest reservoir in the state and offers fantastic fishing, camping and boating. During the winter, the focus shifts to the wildlife areas where you can hunt anything from waterfowl and upland birds to deer and turkey.

How are you involved in your communities?

I live in town so being involved is easy. I attend the local sports games and help kids with 4H projects in my free time. While on duty I assist my Pheasants Forever chapter and teach Hunter Education classes.

Do you have any special certifications or training as a game warden?

I was recently promoted to a Boating Enforcement Specialist position, which requires specific training. I am certified to instruct Seated Standardized Field Sobriety Testing and have completed Boat Accident Investigation training. I still need to attend the Advanced Boat Accident Investigation and Marine Theft Investigation courses.

Do you have any advice for someone considering a career as a game warden or in the wildlife management field?

My advice would be to actually talk with a game warden so you know what to expect. It seems like most people have heard of game wardens, but they aren't sure what the job entails.

Do you have a dream of an outdoor adventure that you'd like to fulfill?

When I was very young my family would go javelina hunting from horseback. We'd set up a huge canvas tent with a stove inside, and I remember us kids getting so excited when my dad and uncle would come back from a successful hunt. Those are some of my fondest childhood family memories. Someday I want to hunt javelina like my dad did.

What is one thing about your patrol area that most people don't know?

Most people don't know that my patrol area is not limited to my assigned county.



BOAT KANSAS

Ramp Rage

with Chelsea Hoffmeier

As summer comes to an end and you reflect on all the positive memories and experiences you had at the lake this year, is your time spent at the boat ramp one of them? Have you witnessed “Ramp Rage,” or even experienced it yourself? Well, whether you’re finished boating for the season or still have a few months left, now is the time to assess your boat ramp experiences, good and bad, and adjust your actions accordingly for next year.

Unfortunately when you purchase a boat, you are seldom taught the boating rules of the road or launch-ramp etiquette. “Ramp Rage” is often provoked by boaters who don’t know the rules of the ramp or are apathetic to the fact that they’re inconveniencing other boaters who may not have all day to be out on the water.

If you follow several simple boat ramp procedures, you and everyone around you will be happy. Prepare to launch and load up your boat well away from the ramp so that you are not in anyone’s way. Unload and load your boat with the help of at least two experienced people to keep the process quick and efficient. When preparing to load up for

the day, keep your boat away from the launch lane until your vehicle and trailer are on the ramp and ready to load.

As we all know, trailering can be difficult, especially when you have a crowd of impatient boaters waiting. So, if you’re not already a trailer backing pro, spend some time practicing in a pressure-free environment before heading to the boat ramp. Another helpful hint is to learn the proper depth that your boat will load most easily, so you will be able to drive on to your trailer without power loading.

From crowded ramps to an approaching storm, there are many reasons that courteous and efficient boat ramp conduct should be practiced. Loading and unloading your boat shouldn’t be a stressful event, no matter the circumstances. If you happen to be taking on this task alone, don’t hesitate to ask for help. Most boaters are happy to share their knowledge and assist you to make the process go faster. Just remember to use common sense and consider that there are other boaters waiting to get their boat in the water, and you’ll be on your way to a fun day on the water.



HUNTING HERITAGE

with Kent Barrett

There's No Substitute For Preparedness

It's early fall and the hunting seasons are upon us, so we should be prepared for to ensure we are safe and can enjoy our passion for hunting. There are no short-cuts. What we put into preparation, will determine what we get out of the hunt later by way of success and enjoyment.

For me, this means lacing up my boots, loading the pack and pounding out some miles getting ready for the activity of the hunt. I'm too old to expect my body to respond to a day or two of workouts, so I am working into hunting condition. I know a hunt is less enjoyable if I'm not in shape. In addition to improving my physical conditioning, I work on my shooting skills, following five rules to make my practice sessions better.

First, slow down. I take time to make my shots count. When hunting, your first shot will be your best shot. I don't want to blow the opportunity to make a clean, ethical kill with that first shot. I work at making the first shot count in every practice session.

Second, I dry fire. There is no substitute for dry fire practice. I use inert practice rounds to protect my

gun's firing system and practice dry firing. It's cheap, quiet, no recoil, I can do it at home, and it helps me focus on making the first shot count. It also helps me become more familiar how my gun operates. I let everyone in the house know what I'm doing so nobody walks into a room and finds themselves looking down the barrel of my gun.

Third, I get off the bench. I practice using field shooting positions, including prone, sitting, kneeling and standing. I use my bipod or shooting sticks at the range and at home dry firing, so deploying them and shooting from them is second nature.

Fourth, I vary my training routine. I try not to do the same thing every time I practice. I use my time to hone and maintain my basic shooting skills, but I try new things, trying to imagine situations I might encounter in the field.



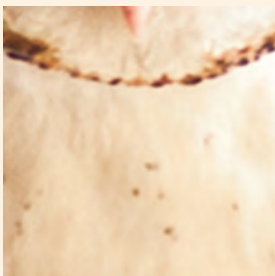
And fifth, I know when to call it quits. There are times when things just aren't going the way I think they should. If it's hot and I'm thirsty and tired, my mind wandering to the air conditioned man cave or the reloading room, I pack it in. There is always tomorrow. To do your best you need to be able to give your best. When you can't, you are wasting your time and ammo.

Let's get ready for some quality hunts this fall. Now is the time to begin.



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 like to eat my food whole.
2. I wear a heart on my face.
3. A group of my kind is called a parliament.

>>> See answer on Page 14

Fish Squeezer

with Tommie Berger

My Favorite Fishing Hole

Every angler has a favorite fishing hole; a place where you always catch fish, where you know your favorite lure will work, and perhaps where you don't fight a crowd. I have such a place and we call it the Kitty Pond.

The Kitty Pond is a 28-acre watershed lake back in the middle of a large ranch that I am very fortunate to have access to. This pond was built in the early 1990s and has the perfect blend of aquatic habitats. The main body of the pond is a typical watershed pond, just about square with maximum water depth of about 13 feet when full. But, the best feature of this pond is the small, live creek that winds almost a half-mile to the south. This creek is dotted with trees and stumps and a number of half cuts that the managing fisheries biologist (me) has added along the shoreline.

The dam has no rip-rap except for a few rocks around the outlet tower, which sets about a quarter of the way in from the northwest corner. The shoreline slopes very gradually for about 100 feet before dropping sharply into deeper water. This shallow flat has sparse aquatic

vegetation growing on it when the pond is full and grows a great crop of weeds when the pond level falls a foot or two. It provides great spawning habitat for bass, bluegill and crappie.

The pond was initially stocked with largemouth bass, bluegill, black crappie, and channel catfish. The creek held a few green sunfish, bullheads, and golden shiners that added to the fish population. I haven't seen a bullhead for years, but there are enough green sunfish to provide an occasional hybrid sunfish, and the golden shiners are just abundant enough to fatten up the bass.

This is my favorite fishing hole because on almost any given day from ice-out in the spring to ice-up in the fall, I can catch between 40 and 75 bass, ranging from 6 inches long to as weighing 7 pounds. In the early spring the crappie and bass move into the upper creek area where the water is warmer. It is not uncommon to catch 100 crappie in a day. In the summer I can still do that over my brush and tire piles in the main lake. When the water warms up around



Memorial Day, we can catch 7- to 10-inch bluegill on their spawning beds. I don't fish for channel catfish but catch one occasionally while fishing for bass or crappie, including one that weighed nearly 10 pounds this spring on a 1/32-ounce jig baited with pink waxworms. What a fight!

When I retired, my goal was to haul my boat to the lakes and reservoirs I managed as a fisheries biologist, rotating from one to another catching fish. Well, I started going the Kitty Pond regularly and catching bass until my arm got tired. Then I'd catch enough crappie or bluegill for a nice mess or two and head home. Rarely did I see another person unless I took them with me, but I would see deer, turkeys, ducks, geese, quail, and pheasants. And no one would hear me mumble and grumble when I lost a 6- or 7-pounder. Why go anywhere else when I have paradise to fish? Oh, by the way all bass go back, that's my number one management rule.

Next time I'll tell a little more about this ranch and why so many kids have learned to fish here.

WAY outside

BY BRUCE COCHRAN



EVERYTHING OUTDOORS

Great Plains Education In The City

text and photo by Marc Murrell

In the early 1990s, a naturalist with the Wichita Wild Program had an idea that would educate the public about wildlife and habitats of the Great Plains. Not only was Bob Gress' vision realized with the creation of the Great Plains Nature Center (GPNC) in 1996, it is still going strong. Today, millions of people have benefitted from this one-of-a-kind facility.

The GPNC is a collaborative effort of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Kansas Department of Wildlife Parks and Tourism (KDWP), the City of Wichita Park and Recreation Department (CWPRD) and the Friends of the Great Plains Nature Center (FGPNC). The facility was completed in 1996 and nature education displays opened to the public in 2000 after an unexpected delay (a natural disaster, actually) with exhibit construction.

This incredibly unique partnership and likely the only of its kind in the country was recently renewed with the signing of a 10-year Memorandum of Agreement, which runs through 2026. The USFWS owns the building and the seven acres of land it sits on. The KDWP pays (through money generated from the sale of hunting, fishing and trapping licenses) for operation and maintenance of the facility (one wing of the building houses KDWP's Region 3 office) and the CWPRD maintains the outside of the building and adjacent 240-acre Chisholm Creek Park. The FGPNC includes an active board of directors that supports the educational mission of the GPNC and its parent agencies. Employees come from each of the four partners.

Visitors can enter the free facility and experience the sights and sounds of wildlife and habitats of the Great Plains. A full-size, mounted bison and pronghorn, complete with realistic sounds, greet people upon entry to the Koch Habitat Hall. Other interactive displays and dioramas let visitors compare their eyesight to that of a pronghorn or their



hearing to a bobcat's. Touch tables and other hands-on activities appeal to all senses and are popular with young and old. A 2,200-gallon aquarium is filled with representative Kansas sport fish and sits beside the Bob Gress Wildlife Observatory, which overlooks a beautiful wetland teeming with wildlife. The Owl's Nest Gift Shop features terrific gift ideas, natural trinkets and treasures as well as resource books and materials on a wide variety of wildlife-related topics.

The educational mission is accomplished through programs, both on-site and off, often with live animal components, that teach kids and adults about the importance and wise use of all natural resources. In 2017, the GPNC had a total visitation of 208,143 individuals. This total was comprised of 46,616 kids (including nearly 10,000 considered "At Risk" by U.S.D. 259 standards), 1,988 adults attending scheduled programs, 43,988 facility visitors and 117,539 trail users. Additionally, another 87,988

people were reached in offsite booths or exhibits. The GPNC has a terrific volunteer support group that logged 5,765 hours in 2017.

Several major events highlight the busy schedule at the GPNC and include the popular Walk with Wildlife (2019 will be the 35th annual event), O.K. (Outdoor Kansas) Kids event, Kids C.A.N. (Care About Nature), Pollinator Party and National Hunting and Fishing Day, Art on the Trail, Junior Duck Stamp Judging Contest, assistance with Eco-Meets, Science Olympiad and others. Entering its 4th year in 2019, the Passport to Nature is an annual fundraiser that's received wonderful support from individuals, groups and organizations, and corporate sponsors.

For more information about GPNC programs, volunteer opportunities or becoming a Friend of the Great Plains Nature Center, check out their website at www.gpnc.org.

Shutterstock/jmdermotillo illustration



Every so often I'll hear a person say something or I'll read something related to the outdoors that just makes the "editor" in me cringe. Whether it be an improper pronunciation, simple grammatical error, misspelling, poor syntax, or worst of all - inaccurate information - I want so badly to bust out my trusty red pen and start correcting. Of course, I rarely, if ever, do; I don't want to come across as overly critical. So, I

internalize my editor angst and quickly, albeit begrudgingly, move on. My husband gets a good chuckle out of my urge to edit, especially during my quests to find errors in restaurant menus - one, because I'm off the clock and no one is paying me to do that, and two, because, well, who does that for enjoyment?! Me. His wife. I do. If finding errors in restaurant menus was a sport, I'd be an elite athlete.

Luckily, when it comes to conservation-related communications published by our agency, I DO get paid to find the "wrongs" and make them "right" (or at least leave them better than I found them). After all, our constituents and our partners rely on timely and accurate information and I want to be the person who provides that to them. For me, there's nothing more gratifying than a coworker saying "that sounds so much better!" after I've given their work a quick edit. But I digress.

As you read this, the fall seasons are here, and I'm making a mental checklist of all the equipment and clothing I'll need, but I'm also making an invisible checklist of all of the things I know I'll hear this fall that are going to, yet again, make me cringe. On the off chance you might be one of the good-hearted (but ultimately, guilty) violators of the conservation communication crimes listed below - please, for the love of all things wonderful and wild: consider coming off the repeat offender list and get "right." You'll sound more educated and informed, and reality is, unless your full name is "Restaurant Menu," I still don't want to be that person who corrects you.

P.S. Not all small fish are "perch" or "minnows." I'll save that lesson for another day, but just trust me.

COMMUNICATION OFFENSE

1. Canadian geese
2. bunnies
3. "Bambi"
4. "catch" anything on a hunt
5. horns on a deer
6. deer in felt
7. Writing "possum" / Saying "o-possum"
8. buffalo
9. deers
10. Saying "Ar-kan-saw" River (when in KS)

CORRECT ACTION

- Canada** geese
rabbits
fawn
shoot, harvest, kill, bag
antlers
velvet
 Write: **opossum** / Say: "**possum**"
bison
deer (already in singular and plural form)
 Say: "Ar-**Kansas**" River or "**Ark**" River

Park View

with Kathy Pritchett

Fall Into a Kansas State Park

The rush of summer vacationers has passed. Kids are back in school, leaves change daily, and wildlife are on the move. And Kansas state parks are quieter (most of the time). With cooler weather, the trails heat up with activity, and events are scheduled, with more added daily. Many of the parks host Halloween-related events, too, like night hikes or costume contests. Fall fun is about to begin.

Perry State Park will host two trail rides and two trail runs this fall. Kanopolis and El Dorado State Parks both have trail rides, including a North American Trail Ride Conference competitive ride at Kanopolis in October. The Prairie Longrifles group will rendezvous at Kanopolis State Park.

In preparation for hunting seasons, both firearm and archery events are

scheduled, and our shooting ranges are busy. It's cooler for fishing, too, so anglers are hitting the water both for fun and tournament fishing. Check out our events calendar at ksoutdoors.com for up-to-date information on when those take place.

It's generally cooler, making it more comfortable to sit outside the camper and enjoy the evening lights - fireflies and stars. In fact, spending time in the dark benefits human health. Camping, especially in a tent or a camper without blackout shades, re-syncs your internal clock with nature. A recent study by the University of Colorado at Boulder found that just one week of camping, where the only lights came from the sun, moon and campfire, reset participants' internal clocks to a more natural rhythm, moving

"night owls" closer to "early birds."

But the fun doesn't have to end when the sun goes down. There may be some night sky viewing events held in the parks this fall, too, so watch for more information. Early October brings the Draconids Meteor Shower, while the Orionids shower occurs later in the month. From September to December, the Taurids Meteor shower puts on a minor show that peaks in early November. This shower is unique in that it produces two separate streams of meteors, one caused by dust leftover from an asteroid and the other by a comet.

Summer is a great time to visit our state parks, but there's something about fall that you just have to experience for yourself.



A Worldly Publication

with Annie Campbell-Fischer

As the gal who handles the circulation for *Kansas Wildlife & Parks Magazine*, I receive subscription requests from all over. While most of our subscribers hail from the Sunflower State, we also have readers in every corner of the U.S, including Alaska, Maine, Florida and Hawaii. We've got loyal readership in neighboring Missouri and Colorado, and Pennsylvanians and Californians are high on our list.

I've often wondered, "Where has *Kansas Wildlife & Parks Magazine* been?" So, I did a little research and guess what? We are worldwide! Yep. You read that correctly. Our magazine has travelled to our friends in Canada, Japan, Slovenia, Norway, Italy and across the pond in England.

The magazine has reached as far as 7,680 miles from home. New Zealand comes in first as our furthest subscription. Since *Kansas Wildlife & Parks Magazine* isn't available online yet, our collection of outdoor articles, photographs and stories can be sent to mailboxes anywhere. Gift subscriptions are available at any time and we'll even send a post card announcing your gift! No matter where you call home, *Kansas Wildlife & Parks Magazine* will be there bringing the excitement of the Kansas outdoors to you with every issue.

See the tear-out subscription card in this magazine or call 620-672-0756 for more information about subscribing and giving gift subscriptions.



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Exploring the Western Vistas Historic Byway

text and photos by Jennifer Leeper

According to its definition, a byway is a road or path not following a main route, or in other words, a minor road. However, there is nothing minor about Kansas' 12 byways, which are stretches of highway that take you through parts of the state significant for their scenic beauty and historic value. The byways are featured at travelks.com. Nine are scenic, two are classified as National Scenic Byways, and three are historic byways. The Western Vistas Historic Byway offers both scenic Great Plains views and classic American western history, connecting the cities of Oakley, Sharon Springs and Scott City, along U.S. routes 40 and 83. It takes drivers 102 miles with opportunities to explore the history and landscape of western Kansas.

The Buffalo Bill Cultural Center, which sits near the intersection of routes 40 and 83 in Oakley, is an attraction in its own right with a recently refurbished 16-foot-tall bronze statue of Buffalo Bill Cody on his horse, Brigham.

"We're right at the midpoint of the byway," said Laurie Millensifer, the Center's administrator, pointing out that visitors can start their trip down either stretch of the byway from there.



Wallace, boasting a newly renovated museum that spotlights the history of the fort and the area.

Follow up relatively recent history with a prehistoric experience at Garden of the Gods, off K-25 near Russell Springs. Here Cretaceous-era limestone outcroppings attract fossil hunters that included Dr. George F. Sternberg and Charles H. Sternberg, namesakes of the Sternberg Museum in Hays. The museum is regarded internationally for its collections of Cretaceous marine and Neogene terrestrial vertebrate fossils.

From the bottom of history to the top of the world (well, the top of the Sunflower State anyway), Route 40 passes near the highest point in Kansas, Mt. Sunflower. Located about 15 miles northwest of Weskan, the name of this well-marked site is deceptive as there's no mountain, or even a molehill. The elevation of this "peak" comes in at 4,039 feet.



Venturing along this leg of the byway reveals a relaxing, scenic drive along rolling high plains, dotted by tiny towns and even a small butte here and there. One must-stop is Fort



Start this stretch at the Fick Fossil Museum, where Ernest and Vi Fick first introduced their vast, personal collection of shark teeth and fossils to the world. This collection features the world's oldest known mosasaur fossil, a 15-foot *Xiphactinus Audax*. Beyond fossils and shark teeth, the museum showcases Vi's folk art, synthesizing

shells and fossils with oil painting, along with a large collection of rocks and minerals from the Oakley area and around the globe.

North of Scott City is Monument Rocks where large chalk formations, mesmerize and mystify, rising out of the prairie like otherworldly ruins. These formations are rich in fossil remains and were designated by the U.S. Department of the Interior as the first National Natural Landmark in Kansas in 1968.

To discover more about the Western Vistas Historic Byway or plan a trip, visit www.travelks.com/ksbyways/western-vistas/.



The Grilling Game!

Fall is trying to break summer's hold, and cooler weather ignites my passion for approaching hunting seasons. This time of year also fires my grilling passion because that's one my favorite ways to fix wild game meat.

Doves are standard grilling fare this time of year and once again I will work to perfect my methods. My grill, which was gas, had a moving hotspot and I was often disappointed with results. So, I painstakingly rebuilt it from the box up, thinking I'd fix it. Long story, shortened, I spent too much time babying that grill. It has since been gutted and I use it as a charcoal grill.

A friend of mine is proud of his grilling skills and he has invited my family over for perfectly-cooked steaks on

numerous occasions. I decided to observe him to figure out how to improve my grilling methods. First off, I noticed he used lump charcoal instead of briquettes. No gas. He explained that lump charcoal burns longer and more evenly than briquettes, though he wasn't opposed to using briquettes for hotdogs, brats or burgers.

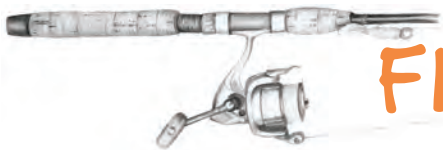
Next, I noticed his grilling box was made of extremely heavy steel. I have always shied away from heavy boxes because they seem to sell those cookers by the pound but there's no arguing the great results from grills and smokers made this way. I underestimated the value of a well-insulated grilling environment.

After his charcoal had burned down and the cooking chamber heated up, he filled the grates end to end and front to back with steaks. Each came off the grill 25 minutes later perfectly cooked. I was lucky to get two hamburgers cooked the same on my old gas grill.

Game like doves, teal and deer back-

strap steaks that I wrapped in bacon, had to cook directly over the flame on my gas grill, one at a time. Flare-ups were often a problem because of fat drippings and that often lead to unpredictable results. The heavier metal retains heat better and distributes it more evenly through the grill, which also reduces how fast the fuel needs to burn. This allows fattier items to be cooked offset or direct, while reducing possible flare-ups. His grill also allowed for the raising and lowering of two separate coal carriages either to separate two different types of meat that may need cooked differently or managing a hot or dying fire.

I have cooked plenty with charcoal briquettes in the past and the biggest drawback is that they're dirty. After observing a quality charcoal grill at work, I think I may be in for an upgrade. My budget is tight with two kids playing every sport imaginable, but I can see that paying a little more will help me enjoy the seasons I love: hunting and grilling.



FISHIN'

Overlooked Fishing

with Mike Miller

September is an important month for Kansas hunters. It's been along summer without hunting, and Sept. 1 marks the opening of the dove season. Deer seasons open, then teal season; there's a lot going on in September and October and not enough days to do it all. And because of that, some great fishing opportunities can get overlooked.

While early-fall weather can look and feel a lot like August, the summer crowds are gone from our lakes and reservoirs. Anglers can have the lakes to themselves in September and October and after a busy summer, an uncrowded lake can be as satisfying as a fish on the line.

If you have boat, rig some spinning outfits with 6- or 8-pound test line, braid or mono will work, but braid with a fluorocarbon leader is best. Tie on an orange jighead with a white twister-tail grub on one. Tie a white or silver jigging spoon or slab on another. Go early or stay late because when the water is flat, you can spot whites and wipers chasing shad on the surface. Get close and cast into the frenzy. Schools may

stay up for seconds or minutes. However, when you've found shad, sport fish will always be nearby. Keep casting or jigging vertically when the schools go down, but keep an eye out for nearby surface activity.

Catching whites and wipers on light tackle might be one of my favorites, but you can catch crappie and catfish this time of year, as well. For crappie, jig near standing timber or over brush-piles and cube clusters. Look for fish in 10 to 20 feet of water. Channel catfish can be caught over chum holes or around any moving water. If there's water running in or running out, get your bait down there.

Cast spinner baits and topwater plugs on smaller lakes and ponds. Bass will emerge from summer lethargy to begin feeding in preparation of winter. Young-of-the-year bluegill, frogs, and minnows are all in good supply this time of year and bass will take advantage.

Fall fishing will get better as the temperatures cool, making October and early November great times to fish. See you on the water.



"WHAT AM I?" answer: darn owl



The Way I See It

with Todd Workman

Bullet Trap, My Foot!

When two of my law enforcement buddies invited me over for target practice one rainy afternoon, I assumed the rain would postpone our fun. However, they informed me that they had a shooting range in their basement. I was excited to see what they had built because just two weeks earlier I had been over to watch a ball game and at that time, it looked like any other basement.

Imagine my disappointment when I discovered it was same old basement – the only difference was a small black metal box with a target hung on it.

“That’s your shooting range?” I asked, obviously disappointed.

“I said we were going to target practice,” my buddy snapped. “I never said I had a shooting range. We have a .22 pistol bullet trap.”

I looked at the bullet trap dubiously. It was a simple-looking metal contraption about 18 inches wide and a foot tall. Distance to the trap was 25 feet, which to me with a pistol might as well have been 25 miles.

My buddies punched holes in the paper target with every round they fired, but my first round hit the side of the bullet trap, turning it sideways. My second shot whined off the edge of the trap, ricocheting somewhere in the basement.

“Bullet trap, my foot!” I exclaimed. “This thing isn’t trapping any of my bullets.”

When I stopped shooting, my two friends scrambled out from behind a hastily-overturned couch and disarmed me with an efficiency only learned at the academy. Target practice was over.

I decided I was done with .22s, until three years later when my wife got me a neat little .22 rifle for Christmas. It was a serious lapse in judgment, because unlike socks or cologne, this was something I could do damage with. I couldn’t wait to sight it in and take it rabbit hunting, but bad weather would keep me inside for the next three weeks.

With time on my hands and a new

gun waiting to be shot, I remembered my friends’ bullet trap. I had some metal and a welder; how hard could it be to build one? My wife was on her way out the door when she saw me strap on my tape measure.

“What did I say about you building things while I’m gone?” she said, as she snatched my tape measure off my belt loop. “I have half a mind to call in sick to keep you from destroying something.”

When I was a rookie, I would have headed to the garage to start working on my bullet trap as soon as she walked out the door. But relying on my years of husband experience, I sauntered into the kitchen, poured a glass of OJ, opened a box of pop tarts and sat down in front of the TV. Sure enough, five minutes later my wife burst through the door with a big “Aha,” which fizzled when she saw me innocently watching the tube.

“Did you forget something, sweet baby?” I asked, smiling smugly.

An hour later, I was staring at a contraption that remotely resembled a bullet trap through the scope of my new rifle. Lacking a real target, I had grabbed a box of Raisin Bran, which fit perfectly inside the trap.

I fired off my first round, hitting the smiling sun on the front of the box. I heard another thud right after the report, but didn’t think anything of it. I fired off two more rounds in quick succession, this time, clearly hearing another thud, followed by a ricochet sound and stuff breaking. My satisfac-

tion with a 1-inch group in the smiling sun of the Raisin Bran box was doused by the nagging memory of the unexplained thuds and ricochet and the vision of the wife’s pointing finger. I knew I hadn’t broken anything of mine, but I was pretty sure that whatever the bullets hit was hers and was valuable. It was time to clean up the evidence.

I swept up the cereal mess and burned the box. Then I bought a new box of Raisin Bran to cover my tracks. Lastly, I spent several hours searching for where the bullets went and what I had broken. I came up empty. I hoped that if I couldn’t find anything, neither would my wife. I was wrong. Years later, while rummaging through the old cabinets in the basement for garage sale items, the truth came to light.

“Oh look honey, our wedding album,” the wife said, full of nostalgia. Then she let out a yelp.

“Why are there bullet holes in our wedding album?” she shrieked.

“Looks like a little mouse found our album,” I stammered, trying not to look guilty.

“A 6-foot-2-inch-tall rat with too much time on his hands would be more like it!” she barked.

“Why would you use our wedding album for a target?” she demanded.

My years of husband experience told me the only way out was the truth.

“I made a bullet trap so I could shoot my .22 rifle in the basement and the bullets ricocheted and must have hit our wedding album.” I blurted out.

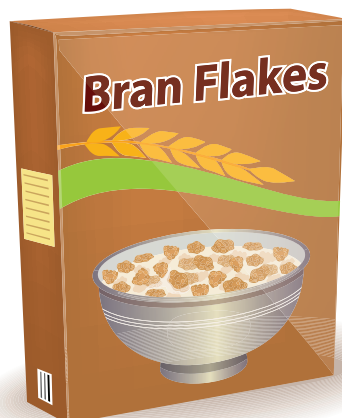
You can’t make a confession like that up. My wife was stunned.

“You shot a gun in our house into something you contrived?” she asked in disbelief. “Give me the keys to the gun safe.”

And just like that, I lost my .22 rifle.

Later, I discovered the rest of the evidence, crammed way in the back of the same storage cabinet.

As I tossed it in the trash, I eulogized my invention – “bullet trap, my foot!”



My Favorite Photograph

text and photo by Dan Witt

I'm often asked, "Which is your favorite photograph." My permanent answer is "I haven't taken it yet." I suspect that is probably true for most photographers. If our best shot is in our files, it's time to sell the cameras, grow a ponytail, and get a Corvette. The quest for a better picture burns bright in most of us.

However, the question may require more than just a flip answer. I have been a hunter most of my life. Wild game is high on my list of favorite foods and hunting is my favorite pastime. I have always loved the smell of the forest, the serene silence of tall trees, and the intense focus of the hunt. Food never tastes as good as it does in hunting camp. It is a shame that you can't take a picture of "joy," "tired," or "the adrenalin rush of the hunt." That limitation forces most of us into the role of a documentary photographer, recording the hunt or its results. There are some great photographers who have the insight and skill to arouse our senses and thoughts with images of the hunt. Capturing the moment an arrow is released from over the shoulder of a hunter with the target in the background can put a lump in most archers'

throats. It is difficult to record yourself and it's rare to have pictures of a hunt in progress. (An exception might be the Go Pro cameras, which allow the live documentation of the event.)

Generally, we record the process and results of our adventures and leave the feelings and intimate details in the forest—perhaps as it should be. One of our Professional Hunters in Africa always insisted that each hunter spend a few minutes of solitude with each animal he harvested to acknowledge its life and be grateful. I always thought that image of a hunter with bowed head over his trophy had value. I never took that picture -- but I keep it in my memory with the beauty of Africa.

Cell phones have made almost everyone a photographer of some sort. They get better and more sophisticated all the time. I strongly recommend a strong basic course in cell phone photography to maximize your skill level with these instruments. It will save a lot of pictures and reduce the number of bad images. I continue to be amazed at the sophistication of these cameras.

I know some noteworthy photographers who have over 100,000 pictures

stored on their computers. They are categorized, color and number coded, and organized according to the date the picture was taken. They can find the wolf picture from 1997 with no trouble. Organizing your photos with an application such as Lightroom is important, especially if you give talks or presentations.

I do have some favorite pictures. Photographers can feel validated by winning a contest, getting a request for a print, or having their image on the cover or lead article for one of the magazines. A few of the people in Kansas who have influenced my efforts include Jim Glynn, David Seibel, Bob Gress, Judd Patterson, Jim Griggs, Michael Pearce and Mike Blair. I count all of them as friends and know that if you see their work you will be impressed. Great Plains Nature Photographers is a club with a lot of terrific members with huge credentials. I would recommend that each of you get the camera of your choice join a club or find a mentor and start searching for your own "favorite picture." It will be a life-long journey filled with agony, ecstasy and learning. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have.





Aquatic Biodiversity Center Opens

by Michael Pearce

With the opening of the Kansas Aquatic Biodiversity Center (KABC) at the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism's (KDWP) Farlington Fish Hatchery, some of Kansas' threatened or endangered aquatic species may soon be leaving their dubious lists. In addition, work at the KABC, which opened on Aug. 16, 2018, will also shorten the recovery time of sensitive species impacted by an ecological disaster like a chemical spill into a stream.

Dan Mosier, Farlington Fish Hatchery manager who will also serve as KABC manager, said the main goal will be the propagation of imperiled aquatic species. That could mean releases into areas where populations were recently damaged by human activities, like pollution. It could also allow reintroductions into waters where populations were extirpated long ago due to habitat changes or human exploitation. It will also serve as a holding facility for live specimens rescued from a disaster area, will be kept healthy until the area is safe for reintroduction.

Initially, work at KABC will entail propagation of common, non-imperiled animals to develop procedures and make sure all systems are running properly. Once the systems and

procedures are ready, KABC staff will begin propagating imperiled species that KDWP determines are in need of immediate assistance.

Doug Nygren, KDWP Fisheries Division director, said the planning, designing and building of the center was 10 years in the making.

"We've been able to do so much with restoring or improving sport fish populations through the years," said Nygren. "Now this will allow us help other, non-sport species, some of which are really needing the assistance. They're important, too."

KDWP, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, (KDHE) all contributed to the \$853,000 cost of the center. KDHE paid for more than half, largely from funds collected from mitigation agreements with corporations responsible for past biological disasters. Leo Henning, KDHE director of the Division of Environment, said his agency will continue to deal with things like pollution and clean up of environmental disasters. They'll also gather such mitigation agreements to help fund the center's operation.

"But now we'll be able to jump start the process of the recovery,"

said Henning. "This facility will be able to get the needed species reproduced so much faster than Mother Nature ever could."

Ed Miller, KDWP endangered species specialist, said the ability to mass produce things like mussels may be about the only way to bolster populations enough to get them off threatened or endangered species listing. In some areas, populations are currently so low, reproduction is nearly impossible for sedentary creatures, like mussels. Miller said about one-third of Kansas' 40 species of native mussels are on the threatened or endangered species list. Miller added that healthy mussel populations benefit an entire stream ecosystem.

"The way they filter water, every mussel we can add acts like a little water treatment plant," said Miller.

Mosier said the KABC is currently working with a Missouri university on a research project involving alligator snapping turtles.

The Farlington Fish Hatchery is located at 101 Hatchery Rd., Farlington, below the dam at Crawford State Lake. The KABC will not be open to the public, but tours can be arranged by calling (620) 362-4166.



Camping Life

text by Brent Frazee | photos by Jenny Frazee

Tom Coffelt takes pride in the fact that he hasn't put many miles on the fifth-wheel trailer he purchased in 2014.

Relaxing in front of his 42-foot-long RV parked at Hillsdale State Park, he said, "I bought it from a dealership 11 miles from here, drove it here, and it hasn't moved since."

"Other campers tell me about all the great trips they've taken, and that's fine. But I have no desire to haul this RV all over the country. I'm happy here. This is my paradise."

For many, camping is a weekend "get-away-from-it-all" experience. For Coffelt, 72, there is nothing to get away from. Hillsdale State Park is his full-time residence. He is the camp host at the Scott Creek Campground and can't imagine a place where he would rather live.

"My wife Karon and I sold our house and we just moved into our RV," he said. "She passed away four years ago, but I just stayed here."

"This is home for me."



Tom Coffelt, pictured above, volunteers as a camp host at Hillsdale State Park in Miami County. In return, he gets to live full-time in the park in his 42-foot RV.



Coffelt isn't the only one who is attached to the camping lifestyle at Kansas state parks. Pull up a chair around the campfire and we'll tell you their stories.

A Campsite That is "Home"

Coffelt has done a lot of living in his corner campsite that backs up to the woods at Hillsdale State Park.

He has met campers from 28 foreign countries and every one of the states in the U.S. He sees wildlife –everything from deer to turkeys to quail – cross his lot on a regular basis. And he is serenaded by the howls of coyotes practically every night.

He enjoys the state park so much that he rarely leaves, except to get groceries or take care of other

essentials. When he isn't working, he often is at the target range in the park or relaxing with his 14-year-old Brittany, "Frebe."

"I named him that because I got him for free," Coffelt said.

Ask him about his most memorable moment, and he'll talk about a September day in 2015 – the day a tornado ripped through the Scott Creek Campground almost without warning.

"I watched seven RVs go up in the air, spin around and just explode," said Coffelt. "There was a woman in one of them, but she survived.

"I dove under one of the campers and just held on. It moved my big, heavy trailer by 18 inches and it damaged the roof, but it wasn't destroyed. I had over 80 cuts and I went into shock and had

to be taken to the hospital. But I was out in a few days, and I was back at the campground."

Life has been pretty uneventful since then. Coffelt, a former law enforcement officer, splits his time between working at the main office at the state park and serving as a camp host. It's a volunteer job, but his campsite and utilities are paid for by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. And that's big, in Coffelt's eyes.

"I don't have a house anymore," he said. "This is it."

His yard is filled with memories. He calls a crooked tree that survived the tornado "the Arch to Scott Creek." Hanging from one of the branches is a wind chime that has sentimental value.



“My wife put it in that exact same spot and I haven’t moved it,” Coffelt said. “There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think about her. I miss her.

“But I have a good life. I love this place.”

Kansas Camping? Check

At age 36, Jacob and Emily Engle of Abilene consider themselves too young to have a bucket list.

They would rather call it a checklist, and it’s of each of the Kansas state parks where they have camped.

“Our goal is to camp in every one of them,” Jacob said. “So far, we’ve checked 12 off the list. And we plan to do a few more this summer.”

Considering that 23 of the 28 Kansas state parks offer camping, the Engles are on the right track.

Jacob and Emily discovered the fun of camping in Kansas state parks before they had children. They would pitch a tent in Milford State Park and enjoy life in the outdoors.

Now, they have four children (ages 9 to 1), but that hasn’t slowed them down a bit. They bought a small pop-up camper, but still enjoy the feeling of “roughing it.”

“We’re low-cost campers,” Jacob said with a laugh. “We want to show kids how much fun it can be to stay out in nature without all the conveniences of home.”

Especially computers or video games.

“As a parent, camping is great for family time,” Jacob said.

“There aren’t a lot of distractions. We’re spending time together.

“We like to hike together, and the state parks have some great trails. And the kids love the swimming beaches.”

Family Time

Sue Rippe and her sister, Merry VanderGiesen, grew up in a camping family.

They spent their early years in Colorado and would regularly stay in tents with their parents in the mountains.

“We were just outdoor kids,” Sue said.

Their parents, Russ and Sharon Kingsbury, maintained their camping lifestyle once they moved



Twenty-three Kansas state parks offer camping, with thousands of utility and primitive campsites, more than 100 cabins, and dozens of facilities such as shelters, shower houses, and restrooms.



the family to Kansas. They adopted Glen Elder State Park in the northcentral part of the state as their home away from home and the girls loved it.

"We stayed in an old fifth wheel but we didn't use the air conditioning or the electrical hookups. But that didn't bother us," Sue said. "My dad loved to fish and we loved being outdoors."

Years later, that love of camping hasn't worn off. Both Rippe, who lives in Osborne, and VanderGiesen, who lives in Gaylord, have families of their own, and they're still at Glen Elder State Park every chance they get.

It can be a large gathering. Sue and her husband Doug have six grown children and 16 grandkids. Merry and her husband Glen have four grown children and 11 grandchildren.

"You never know who will pop in when we're camping," Sue said. "When we get together, we can take up a big part of one campground."

"We're mostly weekend campers, but we spend some of our vacation time there, too."

Aaron Stohs is familiar with the advantages of living close to a state park. He and his children – Addy, Matt and Laney – drove only a half-hour from their home in Louisburg to find an ideal place to pitch their tent in Hillsdale State Park on a weeknight in July.

Before long, they were swimming, building a campfire, roasting hot dogs and making S'mores – traditional camping stuff.

"My wife was working, so we planned a little camping trip," Aaron said. "We just got done with the kids' tournament season (for baseball and softball), so this is a chance for us to just relax."

"You can't beat a campsite like this. We're right on the water, the kids can go swimming right here, and there's plenty of room to play catch."



Learn more about Kansas state parks at ksoutdoors.com where you'll find information on each park, including maps. You can also reserve campsites and cabins.

Stohs paused and laughed.

"I don't even know what time it is," he said. "When you're out here camping, it really doesn't matter."

A Fan of Perry State Park

Brian Lane, 51, has been camping at Perry State Park for almost half of his life.

Today, he is a full-time camper there, serving as a camp host when he is not running his Valley Ag agricultural store. He stays in a fifth-wheel trailer and relaxes in nature after a long work day. But he hasn't forgotten his camping roots.

"I've been camping my whole life," Lane said. "We grew up without air conditioning, so being outdoors in the heat never bothered me."


Lane discovered Perry State Park at an early age and fell in love

with the place. Fishing, boating, camping, hiking, morel hunting – he has done it all at or near the state park in northeast Kansas.

"A friend and I went in together to buy our first boat," he said. "It cost only \$2,000, but that seemed like a lot."

"We didn't have much in those days, but we got a lot of use out of that boat. We'd be at Perry almost every weekend and we would camp at the state park with our wives."

Today, Lane is no longer married, but he carries on his camping lifestyle. For seven years, he has lived full-time in the state park campground.

"It's great to get home from work and just walk the shoreline of the lake and unwind," Lane said. "This really is a great place to live." 



WIPERS ON THE FLY

text and photos by Michael Pearce
outdoor content manager, Tourism Division

The surf was up, Kansas style. Pushed by our infamous south wind, gusts cleared El Dorado Reservoir's dam and created row after row of waves that grew in size and severity as they rolled northward.

Wisely, no boaters seemed brave enough to bob amid the whitecaps. Even cormorants and assorted gulls, which had rafted by the thousands mid-lake the day before, sought shelter in protected coves.

But at the north end of the lake Doug Meyer waded 100 feet from shore, in water from shin to mid-chest deep, depending on the wave. Spray from rolling white caps kept him coated in a fine,

blowing mist.

But all that blowing water couldn't wash the smile from Meyer's face as he held onto a nine-foot fly rod bowed to the bottom eye, while line screeched from a twirling reel. Eventually Meyer led a silvery fish 22 inches long, and too thick for a one-handed grip, to his net. After a few photos he removed his hand-tied fly and allowed the fish to swim away.

"That's something that just never gets old, catching wipers on a fly rod," said Meyer, seconds before he waded back out against the pounding waves and began casting again.

Catching such fish, on such equipment, is now an angling passion for someone who once went years without getting a Kansas fishing license. Raised in Washington County, Meyer spent his youth spin-fishing farm ponds for largemouth bass. A trip to Missouri's Roaring River State Park got him hooked on fishing for rainbow trout, and eventually fly fishing.

Like many, Meyer assumed his fly rod was useless in Kansas and for several years he limited his fly fishing to trout trips to the Ozarks and Colorado. Years passed before he again wet a line in Kansas.

He eventually started catching



a few largemouth bass close to his Wichita home. It took strangers and a trip to Arkansas to spark his interest in fly fishing for wipers, arguably Kansas' hardest-fighting fish. Meyer's fly casting skills improved to the point that he's now considered one of the best certified casting instructors in the region. That reputation took him to an instructors' workshop in Arkansas.

"A lot of the sport's big wigs were there, and at a meet and greet people started asking me about our wiper fishing in Kansas, like it was something really special," remembered Meyer. "When I told them I fished for largemouth bass nobody wanted to talk to me. I took the hint that if I wanted to rub shoulders with these people I'd have to learn my area waters better and figure out how to fish for wipers."

The following spring he caught his first two wipers at Cheney Reservoir. One came from the Ninescah River above the reservoir, a 19-incher on a five-weight (think crappie and trout-sized) fly

rod. He caught another slightly smaller on the lake's dam.

The shear power and speed of a fish that is the hybrid between striped bass and white bass more than left an impression. It created an obsession. But it took a while to find consistent success.

The shear power and speed of a fish that is the hybrid between striped bass and white bass more than left an impression. It created an obsession.

"I learned I had a lot to learn," said Meyer. "I spent a lot of time fishing empty water but things started coming together, eventually."

Wading limited Meyer's options as he learned wipers are primarily a deep-water fish. He also learned they're voracious eaters and will go where they must to gorge on gizzard shad, their favorite forage. At certain times of the year that can be water as shallow as two feet deep. And

he also learned he had basically a six- to eight-week window in the fall and spring when the water temperature is between about 45 and 65 degrees.

"In the fall the wipers usually get going about the second weekend of October, when the water's down around 65 degrees," said Meyer. "How long they stay on the pattern varies. If it's a warm fall and winter I've seen it go almost until Christmas. A couple of big cold fronts can kill it pretty quickly."

His spring fly fishing for wipers normally gets going in mid-April and can go to the end of May. But just not any day within those time frames will do. One of the key factors is a steady wind that blows plankton on which shad feed to one area. As the shad follow their food, the wipers follow the shad. Meyer said he can sometimes catch fish with as little as a 5 mph wind, but prefers 10 mph to 15 mph.

"I can sometimes catch them when it's blowing 20, but it can be tough casting," he said. "I have no

doubts (wipers) are in the same shallow places when it's blowing even harder. It's just that I can't really throw a fly line when there's that much wind."

He also has to select his areas where the shoreline is relatively open, so he doesn't get tangled with his back-cast as he works on longer casts.

Best times of day seem to be related to water temperature. His fly fishing is best early in the morning when temperatures are near the high side of his preferred temperatures. When it's barely cracking 45 degrees, he does best mid-day.

Meyer said overcast days seem to be better than sunny. Steady weather patterns, without a lot of shifting winds, also help.

Living in Wichita has given Meyer access to three of the state's best wiper lakes – Cheney, El Dorado and Marion reservoirs. El Dorado has given him his best trips, at least for numbers.

One of his best-ever days, as far as numbers, was at El Dorado during his first spring of learning how to catch wipers, and other fish, on windy points.

Fly fishing with a steady north wind, Meyer walked out on a shallow point near the dam and began casting. Action came quickly, and often. He estimates he caught close to 20 wipers and more than 20 smallmouth bass, that were also feeding in the shallows.

"Nothing was huge, but a lot were close to 18 inches," said Meyer. "The action was fast enough I figured I was on to something, and that's largely how I've been fishing since."

He's taken the same tactic of fishing wind-swept points, near deep water, spring and fall, to



other Kansas waters. Meyer has caught stripers at Wilson Reservoir and has done well on nice wipers at the new Herington City Lake. That's where he landed his biggest wiper on a fly, a fish of 25 inches.

"I'm sure I've had bigger fish hooked, but they just tore me up and broke off," said Meyer. "Their speed and power never ceases to

amaze me, really."

Other parts of Kansas offer fly-fishing for wipers, too. About a decade ago my son, Jerrod, and some fellow fly-fishing-loving students from KU found they could catch up to 50 or more small wipers per trip casting from the dam at Clinton Reservoir in late April. The numbers aren't as high these days but the wipers are certainly bigger.

Ron Johnson, owner of Yager's Fly Shop in Lawrence, said last spring fly-fishermen caught a lot of wipers between 5 and 15 pounds, with many weighing around 11 or 12 pounds.

"That's a heck of a lot of fish on a fly rod," said Johnson. "That's a heck of a lot of fish on any kind of rod."

As well as different lakes, Meyer has learned his fall and spring fly-fishing pattern works well on other species. He often catches smallmouth bass at El Dorado and other lakes. Last year a bronze melon of a 20-inch smallmouth took a streamer I was casting as Meyer tutored me.

He's also caught walleye, catfish, white bass and white perch while casting for wipers or stripers.

Through time Meyer has refined



his equipment to meet the specific challenges presented by the power of the fish and the wind. He uses a seven-weight rod, which is what many would use for bass fishing in Kansas ponds and lakes. It's lighter, and easier to handle, than the eight and nine-weight rods many use for wipers. Meyer's casting ability allows him to use the lighter rod.



Attached to the end of his weight-forward fly line is 7 ½-feet of fluorocarbon leader. Most fly shops, like Johnson's, sell tapered leaders that make casting bulky flies easier. Johnson said most of the anglers at Clinton use Clouser flies, a streamer made of mostly bucktail with barbell-shaped lead weight for eyes.

The extra weight helps propel the fly line faster, and keeps the fly well below the lake's surface, where the wipers are feeding.

Meyer has caught wipers fishing with such gear, but now customizes his own leaders and flies for wipers. He ties up his own leaders for added strength. Near the end of the leader is about an 18-inch length of fly line that's designed to sink. A section of 15-pound-test fluorocarbon is tied to the other end of the sinking line, then to the fly.

"I used to use 12-pound test but wipers kept ripping my flies right off," said Meyer. "I now use 15-pound test and I'm not losing nearly as many flies. That's good, because I'd rather be fishing than tying more flies."

His hand-tied flies are made of synthetic material, and replicate gizzard shad. Tops of his flies are gray and the lower part white. He adds a bit of bronze tinsel to add flash to the flies.

To match the size of the baitfish at the time, Meyer

uses flies about two-inches long in the fall and three-inches long in the spring.

About a half-inch of 20-pound-test monofilament line, with a tiny tungsten bead at the end is tied and glued to the front of the fly, to keep the hook riding upwards and away from snags. No other weight is added to the fly.

Best lakes for wipers in Kansas this year include Sebelius, Marion, Cheney, El Dorado, Milford and Glen Elder.

"If you put too much weight on the fly, it rises and sinks in a jiggling action. If you put the weight in the (leader) it pulls the fly so it darts horizontally. (Largemouth) bass really seem to like the jiggling action but I've found wipers really


like things that dart, like real shad," said Meyer. "I find that keeping the weight in the leader also lets the fly-line cast a lot easier than weight at the end, on the fly."

The smoother casting rig allows Meyer to get longer casts, and puts less strain on his body. That's good, because some trips he does a lot of casting, with heavy winds adding extra drag on his fly line

and fly.

Meyer normally starts shallow, and works his way out on the shallow point. He fan casts all directions to make sure he's covering 180 degrees as he goes. Being able to cast right or left-handed helps tremendously.

Retired, Meyer does much of his fishing mid-week in total privacy. Sometimes he shares an area with local spin fishermen who've learned they can catch wipers while wading, too. Meyer said most are casting three-inch, white swimbaits and often do well.

"They can cover a lot of water and can cast more easily in the high winds. Sometimes they really out-fish me," said Meyer "But that's OK. There's just so much more to catching a wiper on a fly rod. It's so much more fun." 



Call In The Dog(s)



When the blood trail goes cold, who ya gonna call?

by Rick McNary

Have you ever lost something valuable and, after an exhausting search for days or even weeks, sadly given up? Then you can understand how a hunter feels to lose a deer that bounds away after it has been shot. Some never find the animal and grieve over the loss whether it's a trophy buck or a doe.

Now, thanks to regulations passed by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism Commission in 2014, hunters have another option to help find a mortally wounded deer. This regulation allows the use of a specially trained dog on a leash to track the game.

Shane Tillison is one such hunter who has occasionally lost whitetails in northwest Kansas. "I love to hunt whitetails," Tillison says. "Nothing compares to a frosty Kansas morning so quiet you can hear mice scurrying about. My heart races when the deer slowly moves into range, I quietly draw my bow and wait for that exact moment for the perfect shot. I'm wound up as tight as my bow. This is the

moment I've been waiting for all year!"

Like Tillison, all hunters know that moment of exhilaration of letting the arrow fly or pulling the trigger that's quickly followed by anxiety as the deer disappears into heavy cover. Contrary to popular belief, few deer drop in their tracks when hit by an arrow or bullet. At the hit, deer will run for several seconds before dying. Blood trailing is a learned skill that is as important to deer hunters as being accurate with their bow, muzzleloader or rifle. However, there are times when a blood trail goes cold or the shot didn't hit the intended mark and no matter how skilled the hunter is, the trail is lost. Sometimes, a deer can cover hundreds of yards in just minutes before dying.

"I got my dog, Remi, because I hated losing deer," Shane says. "It's a horrible feeling. We have a deep respect for the animal and want to find it. It tears us up to not recover an animal. Remi, has made me and a lot of other hunters happy by finding deer."

Shutterstock/Lenkadan photo

Dogs Weren't Legal For Deer Hunting

It's difficult for Kansans younger than 50 to imagine that just 40 years ago, deer were rare and a century ago were extirpated from the state. Kansas deer populations were decimated by unregulated subsistence hunting and changes in habitat. When deer numbers began to rebuild in the 1960s, management plans and hunting regulations for a game species that had been so rare were conservative. Seasons and hunting methods allowed were designed to ensure populations flourished. While hunting deer with dogs was traditional in southeastern states, that wasn't the case in Kansas. Using dogs to hunt deer wasn't considered fair chase and regulations did not allow it.

Regulation Change

As the deer population resurged, so did the sport of deer hunting. However, methods and attitudes about fair chase were

slow to change. Even when hunters in other states were allowed to use dogs to find hit deer, such a change to Kansas regulations was resisted. However, comments from began to sway the opinion of staff and commissioners.

"Regulations often come about when someone approaches the Commission and asks for a change," said Mike Miller, Chief of Information for KDWP. "A new regulation or amendment takes a minimum of three meetings. First, there is discussion about the request. After that, our staff researches the topic thoroughly. Second, the issue is discussed in a Workshop Session of a public meeting. Third, a recommendation is presented during the Public Hearing portion of a Commission meeting. Public comment is invited at all meetings. Commissioners vote on the recommendation at the Public Hearing."

Here is how the regulation reads: *Dogs may be used to retrieve*

dead or wounded big game animals with the following restrictions: each dog shall be maintained on a hand-held leash at all times while tracking the big game animal; an individual tracking big game animals outside of legal shooting hours shall not carry equipment capable of harvesting the big game animal.

There is an important distinction about this regulation: the use of a blood tracking dog comes after the animal has been shot. And, in Kansas, that dog has to be on a leash.

A Dog's Sense of Smell

Dogs are known for their unique olfactory senses. Dogs can be trained to sniff out contraband, cancers or cadavers because a dog's sense of smell is 100,000 times better than a human's. A dog has more than 300 million olfactory receptors compared to 6 million in a human's nose. If you were to compare a similar proportion to vision, what a human could see clearly at one-third of a mile, a



Mike Fitzsimmons and "Marley," a Wirehaired Dachshund, helped hunter Becky Mzingo, Parsons, find her buck.

Mike and his wife Suzie like the smaller dachshunds because they are easier to handle on a leash in rough terrain.



Ron Gray and his Brittany Spaniel, "Sadie," helped Dennis Rhuems find this buck. Dogs will be most effective on trails that haven't been trampled by lots of people.

dog could see clearly at 3,000 miles.

Scientists have also discovered that when a dog breathes, the air is separated into two different paths: one for olfaction, the other for respiration. Although you and I smell and breathe at the same time, the nose and brain of a dog separates those functions. The ability of a dog to smell a particular smell is so acute that researchers liken it to picking out one rotten apple out of two million barrels of apples.

Although sometimes referred to as blood-tracking dogs, they are more accurately called scent trackers because they don't require the presence of blood to track. Once the dogs are taken to the spot where the deer was shot, it picks up the scent of that particular deer and tracks just that deer. Every deer has scent glands on its back legs that emit a unique odor.

The Best Type of Dog

Each tracker has their favorite breed but all agree the best dog is a well-trained dog. Some trackers, like Tillison, have their dogs trained by professional trainers like David Egger of Rio Concho Kennels in Texas, who has trained

Blood Hounds, Bavarian Mountain Hounds, Walker Hounds, Alpine Dachsbrackes, Jack Russell Terriers, Jagdterriers, Drahthaars, and German Short-haired Pointers.

Another favorite is the German Wirehaired Dachshund, used by Mike and Suzie Fitzsimmons of Oswego.

"Some people laugh when we show up with Marley, but a small dog on a leash is so much easier to handle than an 80-pound dog dragging a woman with knee-replacement surgery up and down creek banks," Suzie says. "A couple of guys called when they couldn't find a monster buck one of them had shot. We searched and searched, then Marley found the deer two and a half miles from where it was first hit. The guy was so happy he cried."

Although some take their dogs to professional trainers, many trackers, like the Fitzsimmons, train their own using the book, *Tracking Dogs for Finding Wounded Deer*, by John Jeanneney. This is considered by many to be the blood-tracker's bible.

Another Dachshund owner is Paul Ehrhart of Belle Plaine.

"I trained Scout using

Jeanneney's method," Ehrhart said. "I learned the hardest, but most important thing, is to trust the dog. I remember one particular hunter who called after he shot a deer and couldn't find it. Fortunately, the hunter had the sense to back out so he didn't mess up the trail. Scout took us out way past the last sign of blood and well beyond what we could see. The hunter didn't think the deer went the way the dog was headed, but I told Scout, 'this is on you now.' Sure enough, Scout found the deer and the hunter was ecstatic. You've got to trust the dog."

Handling A Tough Blood Trail

The more people blood trailing a particular deer, the more confusing the trail will be for a dog. People unknowingly pick up blood on their shoes and move it around. One of the first questions a tracker will ask you is how many people have been looking for the deer. Some trackers refuse if the area has already been grid searched by a group of people.

Ron Gray, of Girard, tracks with Sadie, a French Brittany. When a hunter calls, he runs through a list of questions taken from Jeanneney's book.

Questions For Bowhunters

- Where did you hit the deer and from what angle?
- How much penetration occurred?
- What did you find on the arrow?
- What kind of broadhead was used?
- What did the blood look like – how much, pattern, placement?
- What were the reactions of the deer when the arrow entered?
- How far did you follow the deer?

Questions For Firearm Hunters

- Where did you hit the deer and what was the angle of the shot?
- What cartridge/bullet was used?
- What did you see at the hit site?
- What did the blood trail look like?
- What was the reaction of the deer at the shot?
- How far was it possible to track the deer?
- What is the coyote situation?

Doug Girth, of Frontenac, tracks with Gibbs, a Blue Lacy. He wanted to name it Dog, after John Wayne's dog in "Big Jake," but his daughter insisted on Gibbs, after the crime scene investigator on TV.

"I reckon I got more than 30 calls last year to track lost deer," Girth said. "I had to turn them down because it takes up a lot of time to track. One young fellow shot his first deer and we searched until after dark. It was near a city and

the deer had run through houses so we were poking around in the dark with a dog and flashlights in a residential area. The neighbors got kind of nervous until we explained why we were there.

"Gibbs is an investigator and he's after one particular deer. He might chase an occasional cat simply because he hates cats, but he doesn't chase just any deer because he's trained to track only a wounded deer. You see, it's all about the reward; he gets rewarded when he finds that one particular deer. And he takes it real personal if he can't find it, but it's seldom his fault. Most of the time it's because a bunch of hunters grid searched the area and traipsed deer blood all over the place first," Girth added. "Every once in a while he comes back and says, 'Sorry, but that deer ain't dead yet. We have to keep looking.' You've got to trust your dog."

Trackers, like Girth, receive more calls than they can accom-

modate so are looking for ways to expand the network. He, and others, exhibit at sporting trade shows with their dogs to increase awareness. Many trackers are not even hunters but love the thrill of working with a well-trained dog to help find lost deer. Some charge a fee and others ask for travel expenses and a tip.

Hunters in Kansas are excited to have these new allies. They are just like Gibbs; they take it real personal when they can't find their deer. And now, they're learning to trust the dog. 🐕

Trackers in Kansas

- **Paul Ehrhart**
Belle Plaine
Home: (316) 371-7866
Cell: (316) 371-7866
- **Doug Girth**
Frontenac
Home: (620) 687-1394
Cell: (620) 687-1394
- **Sean Bechtold**
Hillsboro
Home: (620) 947-1631
Cell: (620) 947-1631
- **Susie Fitzsimmons**
Oswego
Home: (620) 795-2009
Cell: (785) 493-5220
- **Ron Gray**
Girard
Home: (620) 724-6645
Cell: (620) 249-6645
- **Shane Tillison**
Oklahoma/Kansas
Home: (405) 487-8789
Cell: (405) 487-8789

Websites:

www.unitedbloodtrackers.org
www.stdeertracking.com

Facebook:

[Kansas Deer Recovery](#)



Shane Tillison used his trained Bloodhound, "Remi," to find this buck. Dogs used to find dead or wounded deer in Kansas must be kept on a leash while tracking, and individuals tracking after shooting hours may not carry equipment capable of harvesting a big game animal.



Discovering

HIGH PLAINS SPIRIT



*text and photos by
Jennifer Leeper*

I was surprised and impressed to discover the **Prairie Dog State Park** office open on a Sunday. I shouldn't have been surprised, however, since the park itself is an unexpected detour along a stretch of High Plains interrupted only by the occasional windmill or farmhouse.

KDWPT photo



“The desire is to be open seven days a week,” said Jeff Porter, administrative specialist for Prairie Dog State Park. Porter added that while it’s been a challenge (due to thinned office staff), they’re fortunate in that they know they can rely on their cabin hosts – two of which happen to be in law enforcement, adding an extra sense of security to the park.

Even on a Sunday, several visitors trickled in to the office to purchase day-use permits and ask questions. Porter said the busy season runs about a couple of weeks before Memorial Day through the end of September.

So what are they all coming for? Well, if you ask Porter, he’ll say guests come for the area’s fishing, camping and archery range. And the adjacent Norton Wildlife Area is also a destination for turkey, pheasant and deer hunters.

Former park ranger and acting park manager, Luke Vanskike shared there is also a regulation-sized basketball court that’s usually full of kids by the afternoon, and the park will soon add a regulation-sized sand volleyball court.

A large beach below one of the campgrounds is a popular attraction, as well, and the new Lake View Shelter attracts about 10 couples every summer who want to celebrate their weddings

in the park.

But the most unique feature of all has nothing to do with sports or even people, for that matter. It’s the park’s black-tailed prairie dog town.

“It’s an attraction,” Porter said.

And while the park’s name seems obviously inspired by the dog colony, its namesake is actually a nearby creek. But names aside, kids and adults alike will get a kick out of watching these busy critters pop in and out of the ground. (See the “Dog Town” section for more on this.)

Lastly, you’ll want to check out Prairie Dog’s Steve Mathes Nature trail. The 1.4-mile trail is based on the StoryWalk® concept, which encourages physical activity and literacy through a series of outdoor stations. As you walk through the trail, your family can read through sequential excerpts from a children’s book.

Off to Explore

With my arsenal of knowledge from the park office, I ventured out to the nature trail that greeted me with a sign with information about wildlife I could observe along the trail. This included: cottontail rabbits, bluebirds, ring-neck pheasants, prairie rattlesnakes, prairie dogs, coyotes, white-tailed deer and meadow larks. Additionally, periodic signs about native grasses such as big and little

bluestem, and trees like the red cedar offer a quick education on what else thrives in the area.

Although temperatures grazed 100 degrees that day on the trail, I didn’t break a sweat thanks to the winds of the High Plains. It also didn’t hurt that the trail was a paved sidewalk over easygoing terrain.

The trail meandered by partial views of the Keith Sebelius Reservoir, completed in 1962. Just three short years later, the state park followed. These peeks of lake on a hot day lured me back to my truck and toward the water.

On the way to the reservoir, an adobe house caught my eye. I later found out it was built in the early 1890s. The John Spencer family constructed the home, using adobe bricks – a mixture of mud and straw. Finishing out the historic complex are an eye-catching wooden-wheel windmill and a two-horse, dirt-moving wagon.

Vanskike said Hyman Morrison originally owned the home and filed the patent for the land.

“This home is the only one in Kansas still in its original location,” said Vanskike.

Volunteers preserved the home while the state park was built, repairing the roof, walls and windows, and cleaning the interior, furnishing it with



donated antique furniture. If you're a history buff, make the trip to see it.

Another historical feature that caught my eye was the park's well-preserved, one-room schoolhouse, also circa 19th century. The Hillmon Schoolhouse – now housed near the park entrance – once stood about 1.5 miles south of the Kansas-Nebraska border where it was originally a dugout and log structure. The current structure was built in 1886, about a mile south of the original, and was eventually relocated to Prairie Dog State Park in the late 1960s and dedicated in 1969.

Finally arriving at the water, I spied a wide boat ramp near a small dock, a small boat on the water, and a family fishing just off the shore. These people had the right idea. I cooled off for a bit, took in the view, and then started my way back to see if I could find these herbivorous rodents up close.

Dog Town



Just as one would presume the park is named for the rodent, one might also extrapolate that prairie dogs were on site when the park was established, but “dog town” didn't

exist until the 1990s when 25 dogs were introduced. According to Vanskike, that number has since ballooned to about 800 prairie dogs.

A shelter with a few picnic tables provides shade for a leisurely viewing of the dog town colony. After just a few moments, the show begins. Just like in a game of whack-a-mole, furry bodies popped up here, then there among the dog's signature network of burrowed holes. I was surprised to be the only spectator that afternoon, but it made me wonder if I would have seen as many dogs if there had been a crowd. I also wondered about the habits of these creatures that split time between the world above and below ground. If their time above is any indicator of the action taking place below, I'm sure it's nothing short of entertaining.

Cabins & Camping

While I just made a day trip of my visit, Prairie Dog State Park has everything you need for an overnight stay. With two modern cabins and two primitive cabins, your stay won't require hauling around much – that is, if you aren't already enjoying the park from the comfort of an RV, or getting the full outdoor experience from any of the park's 130 primitive camping sites, 77 electric/water sites, or one of 12 electric-only sites.

One thing of note: Burn bans are common in this part of the state because of frequently dry and windy conditions, so before lighting a campfire, it's important to check with the park office or visit the park's webpage for current fire information.

Norton Wildlife Area

Visitors interested in fishing and hunting will be interested in also checking out the 6,400-acre Norton Wildlife Area, which includes Keith Sebelius Reservoir and adjacent lands. Besides turkey, pheasant and deer, game opportunities also include rabbits and a variety of furbearers.

As for the anglers, they can enjoy fishing for black bass, walleye, wiper, crappie, catfish and saugeye in the reservoir.

“Sebelius Reservoir is listed as a 'Bassmaster 100 Best Lakes,' so in the early spring, campers will flood into the park to fish for the weekend when a lot of fish are becoming active,” said Vanskike.

Wildlife Viewing

As for wildlife viewing: take your pick. Park guests can spy the following species just about year-round at Prairie Dog: Canada and snow geese, red-tailed hawks, Northern harriers and flickers, burrowing owls, coyotes, red fox, box turtles, and prairie rattlesnakes. In the winter, visitors can also observe thousands of geese and ducks, as well as majestic bald eagles.

Though I didn't make an overnight or weekend experience of my visit to Prairie Dog, I had a fun and full experience.

For those who are passing through, perhaps en route to Colorado, along U.S. Route 36 or further south along I-70, this park is quickly navigable and at the very least, there are a few prairie dogs waiting to welcome you to their hometown. 🐾

Plan a visit here for the length of a happy memory, however long that is for you.



Frank Miller made Kansas fishing history in March of 1964 when he landed a 4.02-pound white crappie. The fish was caught out of a farm pond in Greenwood County.

FISH for THE AGES

text by Brent Frazee

When Hazel Fey's bobber went under on a fall day in 1957, she unknowingly became a part of Kansas fishing history. Fishing at Lake Fegan (now known as Woodson State Fishing Lake near Yates Center), she caught a black crappie that weighed 4.63 pounds, a state record. A state record for the ages.

Sixty-one years later, Fey's mark still stands. It is the longest-standing state record in the Kansas books, the holy grail of Kansas crappie anglers.

Fey passed away in 2010, but many anglers say her record will live on forever.

But hers isn't the only Kansas record that has withstood the test of time.

- The record bluegill, 2.31 pounds, was caught 56 years ago in a Scott County farm pond.
- The record for white crappie, 4.02 pounds, has survived since 1964.
- The mark for northern pike, 24.75 pounds, has been in the books since 1971.
- The record for green sunfish, 2.36 pounds, has lasted 36 years.

Will they ever be broken? With today's advances in technology – everything from sophisticated fish finders to better rods and reels, and lures that look more realistic than ever – you would think there's a chance. Regardless, it will take a special set of circumstances, and a lot of luck.

"These are one in a million fish," said Doug Nygren, Fisheries Division director for the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT). "They had to have a good food base, avoid predators, and avoid getting caught by fishermen to live long enough to grow to exceptional sizes.

"The odds of these records being broken aren't good. But we never say never.

"There could still be a few of those rare fish out there."

HAZEL'S MOMENT OF FAME

There was little to indicate that Hazel Fey would brush with fame when she went fishing on Oct. 21, 1957 at Lake Fegan in southeast Kansas. She was just looking to pass the day by catching a few crappie, maybe enough for a meal.

"I was a rookie. I had hardly fished at all," Fey told me, when I worked at The Kansas City Star.

But that changed when a huge crappie swam up and inhaled the minnow at the end of Fey's line.

"When I finally wore it out, that fish came up and laid on its side and it looked like a board," she said. "I knew it was the biggest fish I had ever caught. But I didn't think it was anything special."

Moments later, she discovered just how special her catch was. Other anglers flocked around her and oohed and aahed at what she had just caught. And their message was clear: You need to have that crappie weighed.

A game warden placed the fish on the scales at the concession stand, and it was confirmed. Fey caught a state-record black crappie.

"I was going to have that fish mounted, but my husband told me, 'There are fish a lot bigger than that one out there,'" she said. "So, we gave it to a friend to eat.

"Years later, I wish we would have had that fish stuffed. Back in those days, I could have had it done for \$11."

Hazel and her husband, Richard, operated the concession stand at Lake Fegan for years, and never saw another black crappie close to being as big as the one she caught. Neither has anyone else in Kansas, for that matter. As for Nygren, well, he isn't that surprised that Fey's fish has withstood the test of time.

"We don't have that many quality black crappie fisheries in Kansas," Nygren said. "Our larger reservoirs are dominated by white crappie. Black crappie are usually found in smaller bodies of water.

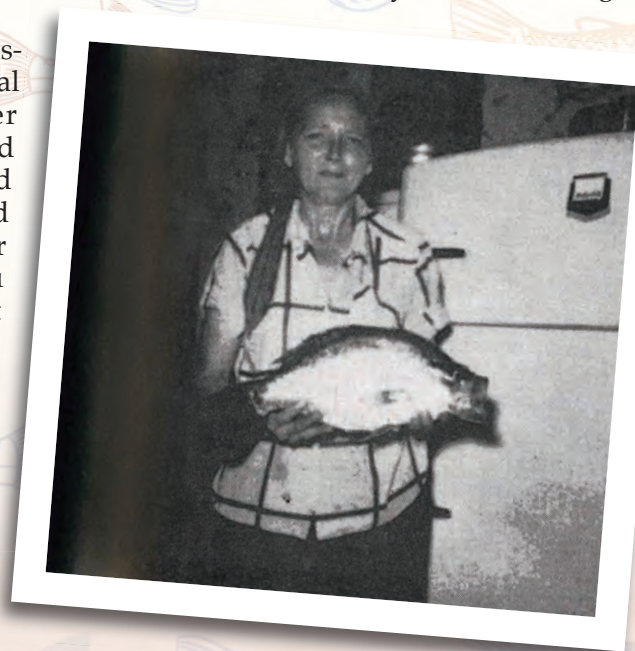
"What probably happened here is that there was a stunted population of crappie and one fish survived long enough to grow to this size and feed on the smaller crappie, in addition to the normal forage."

ANOTHER EYE-OPENING CRAPPIE

In a state known for its white crappie fishing, many anglers wonder how Frank Miller's record catch of 4.02 pounds has survived for 54 years.

But maybe it's not that much of a mystery when you talk to fisheries managers. Studies show that white crappie grow quickly but don't live long in Kansas; most live only four to five years. According to Nygren, the oldest white crappie biologists have found in surveys was eight years old.

Also, take into account the white crappie's enormous popularity in Kansas. When the fish flock to the shallows to spawn each spring, they are followed by thousands of anglers who catch thousands of fish. Even when the survivors retreat to deeper structure after the spawn, they are no longer as protected as they once were. With sophisticated fish finders now on the



Pictured above is Hazel Fey – the Kansas record holder for biggest black crappie. Fey caught the 4.63-pound fish at Woodson State Fishing Lake (formerly known as Lake Fegan) in the fall of 1957. Fey's record still stands today.

Robert Jeffries' 2.31-pound record bluegill was caught on May 26, 1962 from a Scott County farm pond. He landed the history-making fish with a worm.

GIANT PANFISH

Many Kansas farm ponds contain bluegills – some of them as big as 7 to 8 inches long. But those fish look small in comparison to the one Robert Jeffries caught on May 26, 1962, on a farm pond in Scott County.

Using a worm as bait, Jeffries landed a bluegill that weighed 2.31 pounds. Once that fish went into the record books, it became one of the state's "untouchables." That record has lasted for 56 years.

"We rarely sample bluegills measuring over 9 inches," Nygren said. "Even in farm ponds, we don't hear of the huge fish being caught – not even close to this one."

Nationally, Jeffries' bluegill isn't in a class by itself. The world record weighed 4 pounds, 12 ounces, caught in 1950 in Alabama. Even some of Kansas' neighbors have larger state records. Missouri's state-record bluegill weighed 3 pounds. Nebraska's mark stands at 2 pounds, 13 ounces. Still, the Kansas bluegill record is impressive in anyone's book.

So is the state's green sunfish record, 2.36 pounds. That giant panfish was caught in 1982 by Fae Vaupel of Russell, on a grasshopper at a farm pond. That fish is larger than the fish recognized by the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) as a world record. That fish weighed 2 pounds, 2 ounces, and was caught in 1971 at Stockton Lake.

So why the discrepancy? Both the IGFA and the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame have no record of an application ever being filed.

"If a pond is strictly for family and friends, we don't allow fish caught there to qualify as world records," said Emmett Brown, director of the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame. "Or it could be that she just didn't apply or didn't know how to apply."

Vaupel passed away in 2015.

UNLIKELY WORLD RECORDS FROM KS

When Clinton Boldridge went fishing in 2004 on a 10-



market, a lot of anglers are much better at finding and catching fish. That works against crappie surviving long enough to grow to extraordinary sizes in public waters. But in

private waters that receive limited fishing pressure, there is always an outside chance.

That's where Miller caught his huge crappie. He was fishing on a farm pond in Greenwood County in late March of 1964. Word spread quickly, too. A photo showing Miller with his trophy crappie ran in the Eureka Herald on April 2, 1964. A description of the catch started, "Not all the big ones get away!" Another photo of Miller holding his catch in front of the Baithouse Café also was displayed in town.

It wasn't the first time Miller caught an attention-getting fish. An article in the Eureka Herald said that he landed a state-record bullhead just two years prior. That record has since been broken.

Miller passed away in 1974, but his crappie record lives on.

Fae Vaupel (right), Russell, put a grasshopper on a hook that would eventually be swallowed by a 2.36-pound green sunfish. Vaupel's lucky 1982 farm pond catch landed her a spot in Kansas fishing history. The record remains in place.





Using a doughball in hopes of catching a big carp or buffalo, Clinton Boldridge got the surprise of a lifetime when his bait landed something much bigger – a paddlefish. The 144-pound fish gave him quite a fight on his light-action rod and 8-pound test line.

Boldridge's paddlefish went on to become a Kansas state record, and a world record (because it was caught in the mouth and not snagged).

never see him.”

Because the fish was caught in an Atchison County pond, not far from the Missouri River, fisheries biologists surmise that it might have been snagged on the river, then “stocked” in the pond by some well-intended angler.

Ken Paulie had a similar experience in 1998 when he landed a 123-pound flathead catfish at Elk City Reservoir. He was fishing from the bank for crappie when his moment of fame materialized. Using a jig tipped with a minnow, he hooked into something huge and managed to land it. After being verified and weighed by KDWPT, that fish qualified as a state record. Not long after that, it also became a world record.

acre watershed lake, about the last thing he was expecting to catch was a giant paddlefish. He was using a doughball in hopes of persuading a big carp or buffalo to hit.

Paddlefish are commonly found in big reservoirs or rivers. They feed on plankton and generally won't hit bait. So you can imagine the surprise that Boldridge felt when he finally laid eyes on the creature that had given him a lengthy fight – a 144-pound paddlefish.

That monster not only shattered the Kansas state record, it also qualified as a world record because the fish was caught in the mouth, not snagged.

“I was using a light-action rod, a little spinning reel and 8-pound test line,” Boldridge said, shortly after his catch qualified for the record. “That equipment isn't designed to do what it did.

“Twice, the fish almost ran all the line off my reel. I kept thinking, ‘He's going to break that line and just keep going and I'll

Ken Paulie was crappie fishing from a bank when his moment of fame materialized. His jig tipped with a minnow caught the attention of a 123-pound flathead catfish.

Paulie's catch is now both a Kansas state and world record fish.

THE FUTURE

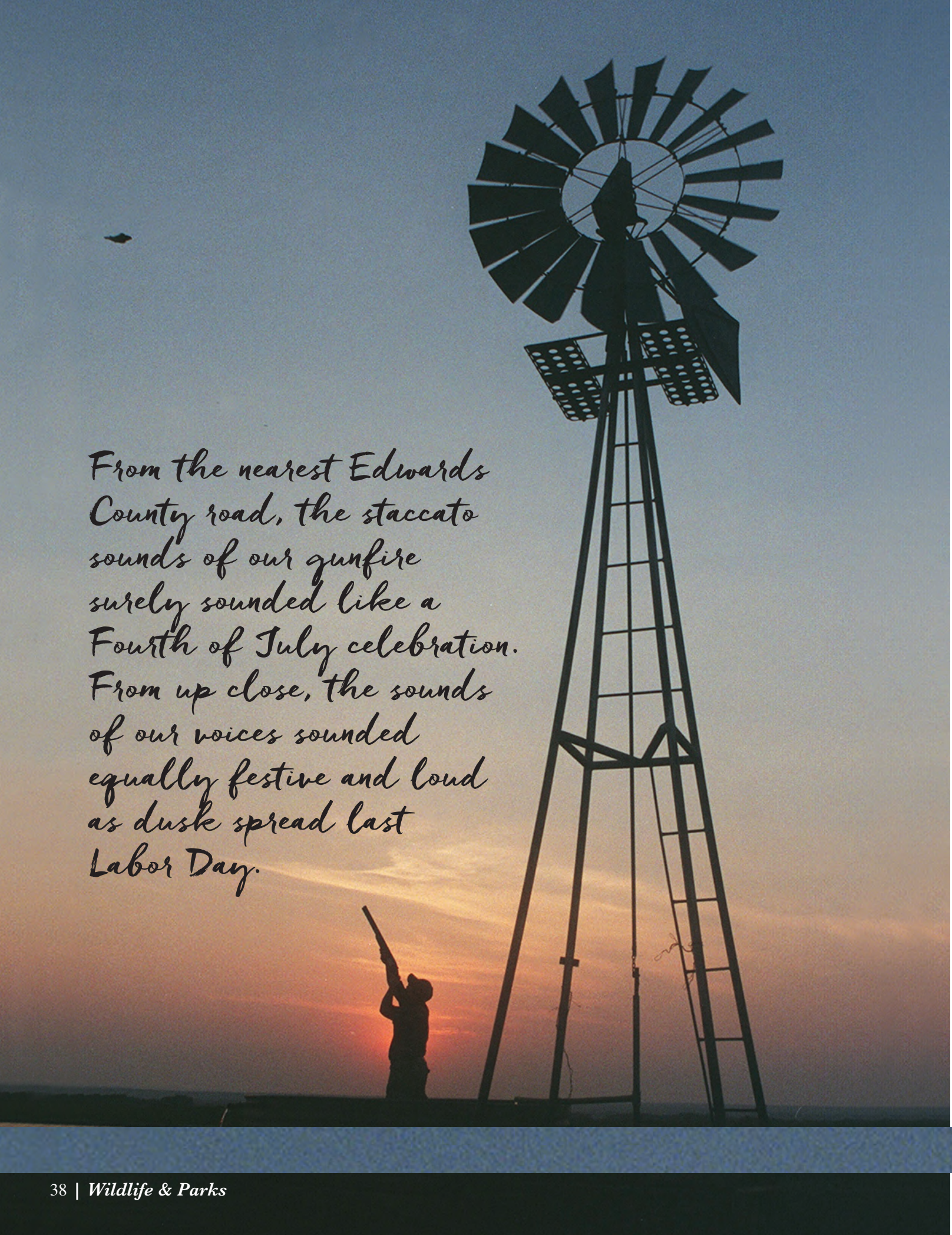
So what are the chances that some of these seemingly untouchable state records will be broken?

Well, that's the great thing about fishing. At any time, even an inexperienced angler can land that freak fish that somehow overcame the odds and grew to an extraordinary size.

“Our waters are food-rich,” Nygren said. “There's always a chance for a fish to grow to an exceptional size.

“Everything has to work just right. But it could happen.” 🐮



A silhouette of a person holding a rifle in front of a large windmill against a sunset sky. The windmill is a tall, lattice-structured tower with a large, multi-bladed wheel at the top. The person is standing on the ground, holding the rifle up towards the sky. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, indicating a sunset or sunrise. The overall scene is peaceful and evocative of a rural landscape.

From the nearest Edwards
County road, the staccato
sounds of our gunfire
surely sounded like a
Fourth of July celebration.
From up close, the sounds
of our voices sounded
equally festive and loud
as dusk spread last
Labor Day.

A Dove Tradition

by Michael Pearce | outdoor content manager, Tourism Division

Old memories and new ones

Three men roared in laughter as young Jacob Holem poked his shotgun at first one target then another a half-dozen times without firing a shot, as a large squadron of doves dipped and darted by, their legendary speed also pushed by a 20 mph south wind.

"There were so many it's hard to pick one bird sometimes," the 15-year-old hunter from El Dorado said with a wide smile. Seconds later he dropped a single bird flying the same flight path.

Jacob and I were stationed behind a fence post on one side of a glorified pasture puddle. Friends Tom Turner and Charlie Scriber waited by an identical post on the other side of the water. By each post sat happy Labrador retrievers. Their tails wagged wide Vs in the dust as they watched and awaited the next fallen bird, and verbal release to fetch.

Only a half-hour into the hunt the assorted 28-, 20- and 12-gauge empty hulls ringed each shooting station like red and yellow sprinkles on a donut.

We took turns at our respected posts, only one hunter shooting at a time. The on-deck hunter helped spot incoming birds, marked the location of downed doves and, of course, offered good-natured razzing when shots failed to connect. But there were no snappy excuses or disappointment. It was laughter and smiles as more and more doves kept coming.

Turner several times preached patience and safety, as he walked away from his unloaded 28 gauge to help direct hunters and their dogs to downed doves.

"We're going to get our birds," he said. "When it's like this, there's no hurry."

So it often goes on early September evenings, by a good prairie waterhole. Many contend, myself included, it's the finest hour of wingshooting Kansas has to offer. It's also why annual Labor Day weekend westward trips make the holiday as cherished as Christmas or Thanksgiving for me.

We Kansans are blessed with such a wide variety of fantastic bird hunting experiences. From border to border we can walk past statue-still pointing dogs,

anticipating all-feathered heaven to break loose as either a raucous rooster pheasant or a startling covey of bobwhite buzzbombs explode at our feet.

Nothing represents classic waterfowling like being amid sideways sleet at Cheyenne Bottoms, when a major push of migrating mallards arrive.

Wary geese, unpredictable greater prairie chickens and scaled quail that too often run like roadrunners have their special places, too.

But when it comes to full-out fun, it's tough to beat a good dove hunt. The action can be fast, and the shooting challenging. The hunts can be as social

When it comes to full-out fun, it's tough to beat a good dove hunt. The action can be fast, and the shooting challenging. The hunts can be as social as a class reunion, complete with laughter and conversation. Very young and old alike can enjoy a good dove hunt.

as a class reunion, complete with laughter and conversation. Very young and old alike can enjoy a good dove hunt.

And thankfully Kansas has plenty of dove gunning opportunities. Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism biologists and wildlife area managers are some of America's best at creating and managing public dove hunting opportunities. Many thousands of doves are annually harvested from sunflower patches planted for just such a purpose. A check on ksoutdoors.com, beginning in late

August, can provide the location of such fields nearest you.

With permission, private patches of harvested corn or wheat can be almost as good. Great gunning can also come at places like middle-of-nowhere timber patches as doves literally flock in at dusk to roost in gnarled locust and Osage orange groves. Old farmsites, decades from human habitation, can host hundreds of doves for the night.

But I'll drive far past good gunning at feed fields or roosts to parts of Kansas where every pond, puddle and windmill is cherished by man, beast and bird.

It's become a holiday tradition.

When my kids were young and new to hunting, we'd annually head west to secluded windmills around Coldwater for Labor Day weekend. If we hustled leaving Newton after school on a Friday we got in an hour or so of great gunning at a windmill between Greensburg and Coldwater.

What I've called "social isolationism" was perfect for a father with two young guns. We sat only a few yards apart, each facing a different direction. Zones of fire were easy to remember. If Lindsey or Jerrod missed a shot, or didn't see a bird because they were

taking a swig of soda, another dove always came along shortly.

They, of course, mostly appreciated the shooting. I relished the many hours of quality conversation.

Our kids are now adults in other parts of the country but I keep the wingshooting holiday tradition alive, making annual three-day pilgrimages to see friends and gun waterholes that have produced for decades..

It's worth adding that while I do most of my waterhole hunting on private lands, there are public options. The windmills and waterholes at the Cimarron National



Grasslands are legendary for their dove hunting. Those who do some research can usually find good spots on Walk-In Hunting Area fields that open Sept. 1.

Good friend Matt Shook has taken me to a great WIHA pond in west-central Kansas, where he and his family often have great shooting three consecutive days. Others have found good WIHA windmills in other parts of Kansas.

Compared to asking permission for such glory species as deer or pheasants, access to private waterholes is far easier. It helps to keep your group small and promise to remove all your empty shotgun hulls.

Sometimes a cattleman will make guests a good hunting spot by activating a windmill in a pasture with no cattle. Friend Joey Yaeger, of Cimarron, runs several hundred feet of old and assorted garden hoses from his farmyard to the dip in a nearby terrace.

The puddle he creates is a few inches deep, only a few feet wide and maybe ten yards long. The gunning there can be nothing short of fantastic. As well as limits of 15 mourning doves, most hunts will add five to 10 Eurasian collared doves to the bag, too.

No matter the origin of the water, the dove gunning is always best when the weather is at its summertime worst. Think July in the Sahara and you have ideal conditions. Any late August rains that most cherish for their lawns mean doves have their choice of too many ponds, low spots, pot-holes and even cattle tracks holding water. Dove hunting is always best at waterholes when sprinklers are all that's keeping lawns alive.

Last Labor Day weekend, hunting conditions were ideal when I headed west for my annual dove fest. Clouds of dust rolled up



behind my pickup like vapor trails behind a jet when Jacob and I turned off Highway 81 near Scott City the first afternoon.

Jacob and I met five years ago, when he was an 11-year-old fatherless boy longing for chances outdoors and I was a father with adult children looking for someone young to share time afield. Like all his age he'd drifted further from adults and closer to his peers as time passed. Last August his mom suggested the teen needed some quality adult male time away from his teen-aged friends. I was more than glad to assist.

We found a perfect place for such a reconnection and great gunning where the late Ron Kershner and Brad Boulware had created a virtual Disneyland for doves and dove hunters. The refurbished windmill sat amid fields of harvested wheat. The windmill's tank held water cleaner than in some sinks and overflowed into a low, open spot where drinking was

easy for doves.

My friends had hauled a dead tree to the spot and leaned it against a dirt pile. A set of faux utility lines stretched between several carefully planted power poles. The old tree and wire lines certainly attracted doves looking for a place to land.

Doves were perched on the lines as thick as barbs on a wire fence we when unloaded gear at the spot. Jacob had two birds by the time Cade, my Lab, and I returned from parking the pickup 200 yards away. I'd barely gotten a fistful of shells in my pockets when it was my turn to shoot.

Nearly every dove we saw in the distance swung our way, drawn more to the faux utility lines than water, tree or decoys. Action was steady but spaced enough we had good conversation. Cade, even silly for a Lab, kept cool, waiting between birds neck deep in the clear, 70-degree water of the windmill's tank.

Taking turns, we had our limit

of 15 each with enough time to grab some drive-thru food and get the birds cleaned before dark.

We did well the next evening on a table-sized seep on a big ranch 40 miles north.

On Monday, the last of our three days of shooting, both the highway and temperature were 96 when we headed east to where we'd meet Turner and Scriber near Kinsley at 6:30 p.m.

When we started hunting together ten or so years ago, I always insisted we arrive at Turner's waterholes two hours earlier. Most times we'd only manage a few doves before the great flocks arrived during daylight's last hour.

On the hunt last Labor Day we had exactly an hour of legal shooting time when we reached a solar-pumped waterhole in a 3,000-acre pasture.

Within minutes, water-bound doves were pouring through a dip in the sandhills to our south like water from a hose.

Some rolled by out of range over the ridges to our east and west. Most seemed to be on strafing runs, zipping low over the prairie heading to the waterhole meant for cattle, wildlife and hunters.

With just two guns blazing at a time, zones of fire were easy to maintain. No matter how many targets were at hand, we made sure muzzles were up when the Labs were doing what they were born to do.

Still, I doubt any of us totaled more than 30 minutes of shooting to get our 15 doves. Turner said it was good, but a few days before it had been even better.

Nothing surprises me when it comes to gunning doves at such spots.

On my second hunt with Turner years ago, I'd left my shooting stool to help an old Lab, Hank, find my sixth dove of the day. Suddenly the flights started coming so fast we didn't make it

back to the stool until I had my limit of 15.

The dutiful host, Turner was the last to fill his limit last Labor Day, kindly moving to a ridge to the west so I could take silhouette photos as Jacob gathered up a small mountains of empty hulls.

We cleaned the birds at another tank, setting the parts we wouldn't eat in the open so things like hawks, coyotes and vultures could.

It was pushing 9 p.m. when we headed toward Newton, where Jacob's mom would be waiting before another 45 minute-drive to their home in El Dorado. The kid didn't complain that he'd only have a few hours of sleep before school the next day.

In, fact somewhere between Macksville and Stafford Jacob said he'd probably be free this Labor Day weekend and ready for another trip west should I need company.

I assured him I probably would. I'm always counting the days. 🐃



Grandpa Harry and The Once-in-a-lifetime Dog

By Rick McNary

"Well, Ole, Boy, you still got it in you," Harry said scratching the Golden Retriever's ears. "That's a mighty fine litter of pups you and Daisy have. You're pretty proud of them young'uns, ain't ya?"

Chauncey's tail brushed the floor as he gazed up at the old man in the wooden rocker.

"I'm sure anxious to see Ethan again. Want me to read his letter? You say I've read it a hundred times? Well, do you want me to read it again or not?"

Chauncey ran to Harry's side. "Sit. Here comes Ethan!"

Ethan leaned out the window of the slowly approaching car.

"Chauncey!" he shouted. "Come here old buddy!"

The golden retriever sat still, but his wagging tail cleared gravel from the lane.

"Good boy," Harry said, rubbing the dog's head. "Good boy."

The car came to a stop.

"Go!" Harry whispered. Chauncey raced to Ethan.

They began to wrestle in the grass while the squirrels ratcheted up their commetary. Ethan's mother soon drove away.

"Let's go inside," Harry said. "I have dinner on."

Ethan slipped his hand in Harry's as they walked up the lane.

"Grandpa, why didn't Chauncey come when I called him?"

"I gave him a command to stay. He won't move until I release him; that's how

I trained him."

"Is it hard to train a dog? I have a friend with a dog, but they yell at him all the time and he doesn't listen."

"That would be the owner's fault, not the dog's," Harry said. "The owner hasn't spent the time to help the dog understand what he expects."

"How'd you learn to train dogs?"

"I got my first dog when I was ten and I had a book on how to train dogs. It's still on the bookshelf in Gladys' sewing room."

"Mom says I can't have a dog until I'm 16."

"I've had a lot of dogs in my 89 years. I have loved them all, but Chauncey's a once-in-a-lifetime dog."

"Why is that?"

"He's the last gift Gladys gave me before she died."

Chauncey perked his ears and raced to the door.

"There's someone coming up the lane, Grandpa. It's an old pickup."

They all went outside.

"Hello, Martha," Harry said as the truck pattered to a stop.

"Hi, Harry! Is this Ethan?" Martha smiled. "I have a special delivery for you young man. Here, I believe this belongs to you." Martha handed him a ball of wiggling golden fur. Ethan squealed as the puppy licked his face.

"Really? This is my dog? That's awesome! Thank you, Grandpa!"

"You need to thank Chauncey, too. He's that little girl's daddy."

"What's her name?" Ethan asked.

"Well, she's your dog, you should name her." Martha said.

"Can I borrow your book to train her," Ethan asked.

"Of course," Harry smiled. "Let's find it and talk about names for her."

"Oh, I already know what I want to call her. I'm gonna name her Gladys because she is my once-in-a-lifetime dog."

Dear Grandpa,
I'm headed your way soon!
I got an A+ on a report I did about
Chauncey and how you trained him using
hand signals.

Mom said you have a big surprise for me.
I'm dying to know what it is. All my friends
want to take a class trip and come visit
you. In fact, some of the kids in my class
started writing their grandpas or
grandmas, too.

I'll see you soon!

Love, Ethan

P.S. Tell Chauncey I'm bringing him a new
blanket for this winter.

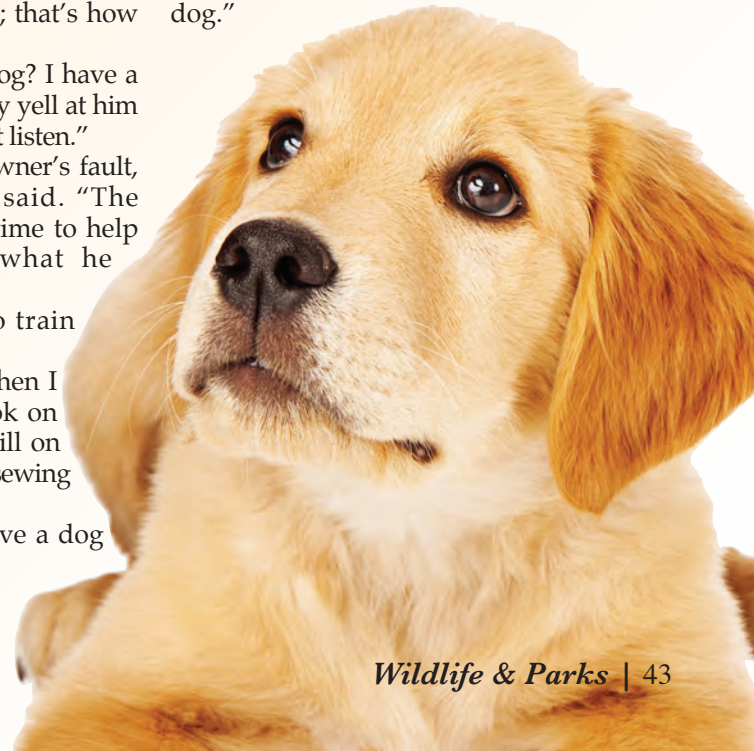
Chauncey's tail wagged feverishly. He loved Harry's 10-year-old grandson and often sat on the porch, forlornly looking down the lane waiting for Ethan's arrival. Chauncey moped around for days after Ethan left. But then, so did Harry.

"Well, Chauncey, shall we go to the mail box?"

Once off the porch, Chauncey bolted down the lane scurrying squirrels that chided back as he barked them up a tree. It was a daily ritual, one tormenting the other but both lacking any desire for real confrontation.

A car turned down the lane.

"Chauncey, come," Harry said.



Species Profile

Mississippi Kite

We know what they look like, what time of year to expect them, and all about their “dive-bombing” tendencies, but how much do we really know about Mississippi kites? You might be surprised to learn there is more to these birds than you’ve been told.

Standing tall at a respectable 14 inches, Mississippi kites glide the skies with an impressive 31-inch wingspan.

While often spotted in urban areas in Kansas – especially in our parks and around golf courses – Mississippi kites also consider windbreaks and shelterbelts suitable habitat.

A Mississippi kite pair works together to build a nest where the female can lay between one and three eggs. And remember that “dive bombing” move you’ve been told to watch out for, or may have been the victim of? Well, here’s the “why” behind it: They’re simply trying to protect the nest and eggs they’ve just worked so hard to build.

They’ve got good reason to protect that nest, too. Mississippi kite nestlings, like many young in the wild, are born helpless. But more importantly, they are covered in white down – an easy-to-spot color in the wild, as opposed to the mottled, brownish-gray color that helps many species’ young remain camouflaged and safe from predators.

Since the nesting season has come and passed, you’re likely to spot Mississippi kites “staging,” or gathering in large groups this time of year in preparation for migration. Look for them in areas with a healthy abundance of insects, especially dragonflies and cicadas.

The next time you see a Mississippi kite, maintain a safe distance, but know that these birds aren’t looking to give you a headache. Chances are, they’re just doing what they can to keep their nest safe, and ensure everybody makes it safely to migration.





Backlash

with Mike Miller

Practice Your Shot

When I was younger, my enthusiasm for the fall hunting seasons was almost uncontainable. Late-summer days crept by so slowly, I thought the Sept. 1 dove opener would never arrive. However, anticipation didn't translate into thorough preparation. Back then, getting ready for dove seasons constituted rounding up all the shotgun shells I could find, finding my camouflage T-shirt and cap, and loading the dog box in the back of the truck.

We didn't have sporting clays or five-stand back then and the local gun club was closed. We could have found a box of clay targets and a hand thrower for some wingshooting practice, but we didn't. There was an unspoken assumption that you were either born a good wingshot or you weren't. Secretly, I had my doubts.

Unfortunately, those doubts came the surface on some hunts. There's an old saying about wingshooting, "The more you think, the more you miss," and I can fully attest to the truth in those words. If I missed a couple of easy shots on doves, I would start thinking and I would miss more easy shots. It snowballed.

Years later I had the opportunity to shoot sporting clays on a regular basis. The local gun club reopened and we put in a five-stand. I learned by watching and talking to experienced shooters, reading shooting magazines and watching videos. While humbling, shooting sporting clays, five-stand was enlightening. I learned about shooting techniques, chokes, gun fit and more, but the old saying about thinking and shooting always rang true.

The premise is that your conscious mind can only think of one thing at a time. If you're trying to think about gun mount, lead, pulling the trigger, what technique to use or if you're thinking about missing, you will. But the concept of thinking of only one thing is only possible through practice.

Why? Because your subconscious must control everything but the one thing you think about, and subconscious functions can only happen through practice and muscle memory. Consistent gun mount must be subconscious. The shooting technique you use - swing-through, pull away or sustained lead - must be subconscious. Pulling the trigger, believe it or not, will be subconscious.

So, what is the one thing you think about? Focusing your eyes on the target. You have to practice enough to let everything else going on with the shot happen without thinking. Your conscious mind must be about focusing on the target - more specifically focusing on a particular part of the target, such as the front edge.

Trusting your subconscious mind to compute the correct lead and pull the trigger can be difficult, especially for a type-A personality who wants to control everything. But with practice and positive reinforcement, it becomes more natural.

Today, I don't anticipate opening day of dove season with the same fervor, but my preparation for the season is a little different. In addition to taking a shotgun inventory and digging out a camo T-shirt, I try to shoot some five-stand ahead of the season. You may be born with good hand-eye coordination and good vision, but you're not born with wingshooting skill. While the science of shooting a flying target with a shotgun can be complicated, breaking targets consistently is really simple: practice so you don't have to think. You'll break targets and have more success in the field this fall. 🐔





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