



KANSAS

2022 YEAR IN REVIEW

The Nature
Conservancy 

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR



Big Conservation: People Make it Happen

By any measure, 2022 was a successful year for The Nature Conservancy in Kansas—and for the people who make us so effective. We completed the five-year, \$17.5 million *Generations* campaign, and I was awed by the powerful support from thousands of TNC members across Kansas and around the world. In 2022 alone, our trustees, staff, donors, and volunteers contributed more than \$4 million to support the "Big Conservation" we do. Many of these people also provided political power, expert counsel, technical advice, and guidance on an overwhelming number of opportunities and challenges.

We remained committed to large-scale conservation that is science-based, durable, and beneficial to all the people our work impacts. Thousands of people helped us bring tens of thousands of additional acres under permanent ecological protection—and they helped us improve the natural condition of hundreds of thousands of more acres. That's Big Conservation.

The people who support us financially, intellectually, and in many other ways made it possible to advance our work on Terrace Lane Farm in Dickinson County. That property, half-native pasture/half cropland, will be a place we work with farmers, ranchers, and ag researchers to test cutting-edge production practices. Those practices will lead to improved soil productivity, ecosystem health, agricultural profitability, and reduced water contamination and greenhouse gasses. The lessons we learn there will help improve food production on millions of privately-operated acres. That's Big Conservation.

Kansas is also at the heart of two multi-state, vast grassland conservation programs: the Flint Hills Initiative across 4 million acres of eastern Kansas and northern Oklahoma and the 71-million acres Southern High Plains Initiative that includes western Kansas, eastern Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. In these two priority geographies, The Nature Conservancy leverages our supporters' resources to create lasting outcomes through land protection and management, connecting entire ecological landscapes, and helping at-risk wildlife move and adapt to climate change. That's Big Conservation.

These endeavors include our traditional work to protect land and waters, and they also rely heavily on collaboration with ranchers to improve the health and productivity of rangeland. Grazing cattle *can* produce healthy grassland ecosystems, but economic pressures and lack of resources and information make it difficult for some land managers to make changes. Our work in the Flint Hills, Southern High Plains, and other large native prairie landscapes is making a difference that benefits people around the globe. That's Big Conservation.

The amazing successes of The Nature Conservancy in Kansas are gifts from people—our incredibly talented and expert staff, stellar trustees, and powerful and generous supporters. Every piece of the landscape we protect, restore, connect, and conserve stands in testimony to the Big Conservation these people create.

Thank you,

Rob Manes

Kansas State Director, The Nature Conservancy



**The mission of
The Nature Conservancy
is to conserve the lands
and waters on which all
life depends.**

We envision a world
where people and nature
thrive.

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Cover: Bison calf in snow
© Jenny Zhao/TNC Photo Contest 2022

This Page: Shallow water along sandbar © Rory Doyle



292-Acre Land Donation Has Ripple Effect

Five years ago, a long-time member let us know that he had included The Nature Conservancy in his estate. Upon his passing late last year, we learned that the bequest was of 292 acres of land in Cowley County, Kansas.

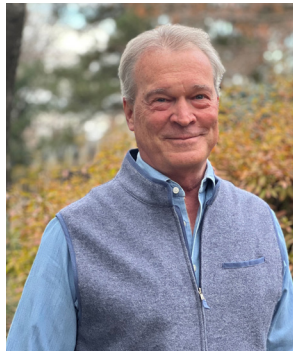
"This property is in an area of the Flint Hills that doesn't have a lot of permanent protection," explains Tony Capizzo, Flint Hills Initiative Manager. "I think that when people see the work we plan, to restore fire and plant more native species, it will inspire more protection,"

In addition to that potential, the approximately \$1 million value of the land was used as a required match for a grant that will protect 3,700 acres elsewhere in the state.

"We still need to determine what long-term protection will look like for this property, but we're going to leverage this donation in as many different ways as possible," says Capizzo.

Not all donations of land can be kept as conservation properties, but all support vital conservation work. You can learn more about the different ways to leave a legacy of nature for future generations at nature.org/plannedgiving or contact Kelly Blandford at kelly.blandford@tnc.org.

LETTER FROM THE BOARD CHAIR



Thanks to the dedicated and effective work of its professional staff and volunteer board of trustees, along with thousands of generous donors, The Nature Conservancy in Kansas has much to celebrate as we review the past five years. Our programmatic work in support of our mission—to preserve the land and waters on which all life depends—has expanded materially, the staff to accomplish this work has grown apace, and the critical fundraising to put this essential work on-the-ground has reached a new, record-breaking level. All of this was accomplished in an environment where public support of conservation, as well as potential government funding of this work, seems newly invigorated.

In Kansas, where public lands are quite limited compared to other states, land conservation remains an understandable priority for The Nature Conservancy. We are pleased to have protected an additional 50,909 acres between 2017 and 2022, including the Terrace Lane Farm near Abilene, which will be operated as a demonstration site for leading farm and ranch management practices. Through our advocacy and education efforts, we have also influenced an additional 193,409 acres owned by others to engage in more robust conservation practices.

This past year also saw the emergence of the Southern High Plains Initiative, which brings the five states of Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas together to work collaboratively preserving landscape-scale tracts of native grassland. This work, accelerated by innovative acquisition financing, promises to help meet The Nature Conservancy's ambitious global land conservation goals.

Essential work also continued to improve the condition and operation of high-priority rivers, streams and other freshwater ecosystems. These projects are multi-year efforts to bring lasting water-quality benefits to the citizens and wildlife of Kansas.

The Site Wind Right tool, first developed in Kansas, expanded in 2022. The new Site Renewables Right map identifies where both wind and solar energy can be developed in the central U.S. while still conserving important wildlife habitats and natural areas at the same time. Site Renewables Right covers 17 states and is being adapted for international use.

As a financial foundation for all of this, we were delighted in 2022 to announce the successful completion of our \$17.5 million *Generations* campaign, a five-year effort to raise a record amount of cash funding for Kansas conservation priorities. Including donations of land and in-kind gifts, our campaign raised a total of \$24,201,530. This is an outstanding result. Thank you.

I close by thanking our hard-working and generous board of trustees, particularly my predecessor as board chair, Brad Bradley. Brad served as chair for four years, double the standard term and during the pandemic years, and is responsible for leading the way on everything described above. He will remain active on our Board and has also been tapped to lead volunteer efforts on soil health and regenerative agriculture nationally for The Nature Conservancy. I would be hard-pressed to identify an individual whose passion for the TNC mission exceeds Brad's.

Thanks to you all,

Bill Lyons
Chair, Kansas Board of Trustees

Generations Campaign, 2017-2022

15k
members
in Kansas

24M
dollars
raised

33.58
stream miles
improved

1,417
acre
expansion at
Smoky Valley
Ranch

3,021
new acres
permanently
protected in the
Flint Hills

193k
acres of
improved
land
management

100
acres protected in
Anderson County

2,519
volunteer hours
contributed

\$1.4M
to projects
outside Kansas

154
acres added
to Cheyenne
Bottoms
Preserve

33
farms enrolled in
Rattlesnake Creek
irrigation
efficiency project

1
new river
joins
Sustainable
Rivers Project

For This Family, Saving the Last of the Tallgrass Prairie Isn't Hyperbole

When you think of endangered ecosystems, the prairie might not be the first that comes to mind. The reality is that the world has already lost more than half its grasslands. Grasslands enrich our world with epic wildlife that inspires us, food and water that nourishes us, and ways of life that define us as a people. Yet every year, more grasslands are degraded, fragmented, developed, and plowed. And tallgrass prairie has fared far worse than other grassland types. The last significant expanse of tallgrass prairie remains in the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas and northern Oklahoma. Here, there is more tallgrass prairie than all other places combined.

The Flint Hills offer dramatic, rolling panoramas of breeze-bent grasses, wild flowers, and unbounded skies. In this grand grassland wilderness, prairie-chickens, bison, seldom-seen birds, rare fishes, bumble bees, and a host of other wild creatures find bountiful habitats. The tallgrass prairie's strength and resilience were acquired through eons of fire, grazing, and extreme temperature and precipitation. It's a place where people connect with the prairie and its wildness.

The Nature Conservancy's work in the Flint Hills starts with long-term protection—sometimes owning land as a nature preserve but mostly using conservation easements and other tools on land owned by others to ensure the last of the tallgrass prairie doesn't get plowed or fragmented. Then we take it a step further and look at how the land is managed. Working alongside private landowners and ranch operators, we help them adopt conservation practices to ensure the land doesn't get degraded.

This year, Josh and Gwen Hoy of the Flying W Ranch in the Flint Hills worked with The Nature Conservancy on both fronts. They granted a conservation easement on 1,594 acres of their ranch and worked with Shelly Wiggam, Conservation Easement Stewardship Initiative manager, to start projects like controlling trees and old world bluestem, grazing plans, and improving wildlife habitat while also maintaining forage for livestock.

What led you to ranching for a living in the Flint Hills?

JOSH HOY: I was reared in the Flint Hills. I'm a fifth-generation rancher. The Flying H Ranch is my family ranch located just north of Cassoday, Kansas. I grew up helping my grandfather, following him around like a pup riding out horseback at three in the morning to help neighbors and prowl pastures. He was a true old-school pasture cowboy, and my father was an English professor who taught history and folklore. Between them, I developed a love for ranching and cowboy culture and for the art of stockmanship. As a young man, I cowboied in a dozen states from Maine to California, working on



FAMILY AFFAIR Daughter Josie joins Josh and Gwen Hoy on horseback to move cattle on the Flying W Ranch. © Laura Mead

dozens and dozens of ranches. I never found any country more beautiful or better suited to ranching than my native Flint Hills. So when my cousin approached me about starting a ranch together, I never considered settling anywhere else. The rich biodiversity and natural fertility of old growth tallgrass prairie is like nowhere else in the world—and conservation ranching is the only tool we have to save what little is left.

“The ranches that I worked on that were thriving with healthy people, animals, and land were ranching with nature—not struggling against it.”

Josh Hoy, Flying W Ranch

GWEN HOY: I grew up on a hog and row crop farm near Burlingame, Kansas. It seemed like our whole life was a struggle fighting nature: killing weeds, drought or flood, suffering from storms and diseases. We had relatives we would visit on the other side of the Flint Hills near Walton. As we would drive through the hills, I would dream of riding my horse through those beautiful hills. After college, I moved to Chase County to work for the Crofoot ranch, and I’ve been cowboying and ranching here ever since.

Why do you want to implement conservation practices on your land?

JOSH: Working horseback all over the country, I could see how degraded and altered most landscapes were. The ranches that I worked on that were thriving with healthy people, animals, and land were ranching with nature—not struggling against it. The first thing I did when I partnered up with my cousin, Warren Kruse,

on what would become our Flying W Ranch was talk to some of the conservationist ranchers I respected the most; to start figuring out how to best achieve my goals of preserving and enriching the prairie.

GWEN: Growing up in conventional agriculture, I realized how awful and exhausting fighting against nature can be. When Josh and I met and soon married, being introduced to conservation ranching seemed like the most natural and wonderful way to live. Working with nature and staying out of her way is fun and deeply satisfying—and beneficial to everyone.

What made you want to work with The Nature Conservancy?

JOSH: I’ve always had an affinity for The Nature Conservancy. It’s the conservation group that best fits my philosophy and understanding of what conservation should and could be. Once I discovered Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* as a kid, I was able to understand and articulate my own conservation ethic. We consider ourselves to be participants in and caretakers of the entire landscape—not just the acres we own and manage directly, but also the Coyne Creek watershed and all of the Flint Hills. The choices and decisions we make for our property echo throughout the landscape around us.

Why did you decide a conservation easement was right for you and the Flying W Ranch?

JOSH: I learned about conservation easements in the 1990s working on ranches in California and Colorado. I instantly realized how important a tool they could be for stopping the fragmentation and destruction of ranch lands. At that point, I had seen several small and large ranches I worked at get split up, fractured, and disappear. I realized the only way to create a truly durable, resilient, and sustainable ranch was to protect it with a perpetual conservation easement. I knew that it didn’t matter if I spent my whole life and all my



Left: Josh Hoy and his father Jim Hoy, family photo



Right: The Hoy Women - Farrell Hoy Jenab, Gwen Hoy, Cathy Kruse Hoy (Josh & Farrell’s mother), and Josie Hoy © Laura Mead

effort to protect and enrich a piece of prairie if it was chopped up and fractured when I was gone.

My cousin and I started trying to get conservation easements on our ranch as soon as we bought the first thousand acres in 1996. At first, we struggled to find anyone in our area who even knew what a conservation easement was. Soon I met and befriended Brian Obermeyer of The Nature Conservancy at a Tallgrass Legacy Alliance meeting. He started us down the road to where we are now. We began with the Grassland Reserve Program, [a USDA easement program that is no longer offered.] This year, we were able to get a conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy on all of our remaining acres. I was able to convince my folks to put easements on their Flying H Ranch; theirs are through the Ranchland Trust of Kansas. We’ve also gotten several neighbors to place easements on their adjoining property and have created a substantial block of perpetually protected ground.

Did your impression of conservation easements change after working with The Nature Conservancy?

JOSH: Yes, the process was very collaborative. Our GRP easements were very one-sided with no ability to give input and no flexibility. The care

and effort by all The Nature Conservancy staff was impressive and appreciated.

What does the technical support, management plans, and facilitation you receive from The Nature Conservancy mean for you and your ranch?

GWEN: Having Shelly and the Conservation Easement Stewardship Initiative is the reason for us jumping off into the tree management project we just started. That program is helping us plan winter grazing and some spring restoration projects. Without it, we wouldn’t be able to get most of these even started. It’s hard enough to keep the daily operations of the ranch running. Having this kind of support is wonderful.

JOSH: We were very excited to learn about The Nature Conservancy’s Conservation Easement Stewardship Initiative when it began a couple of years ago. It is perfect for enhancing our efforts and making us more effective in executing our plans. It can be overwhelming to navigate all the programs and projects out there. The Nature Conservancy definitely helps with that.

This land was conserved, in part, by funding from The Conservation Fund made available as mitigation for impacts caused by the construction and maintenance of the Enbridge Pipelines, LLC, Flanagan South Pipeline in partnership with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.



The Facts and Fiction of Conservation Easements

Conservation easements are voluntary, legal agreements between landowners and qualified conservation organizations. They allow the landowner to preserve the agricultural and conservation values of their land for future generations. The State of Kansas authorized the use of conservation easements in 1992. Since then, they have been used to conserve more than 200,000 acres of agricultural land and natural areas across the state. Still, misconceptions and false representations of conservation easements abound. Read on to learn the facts and fiction of conservation easements.



A CONSERVATION EASEMENT IS

Conservation easements are a tool for landowners to exercise their long-term vision for privately held farms and ranches. They allow the conservation of important wildlife and habitats without removing land from private ownership or agricultural production.

Conservation easements are legal agreements that prevent specific development and land conversion. They obligate the current and future landowners to the terms of the easement, thus ensuring that the land will be conserved for future generations.

Conservation easements are always voluntarily granted. The option to grant permanent conservation easements is an important private property right.

Conservation easements benefit landowners in many ways. They often reduce federal income and estate tax burdens. They can help families with succession and estate planning and provide a way to maintain the intactness and economic viability of farms and ranches.



A CONSERVATION EASEMENT IS NOT

Conservation easements do not take land out of private ownership or grant access to the government. Claims that conservation easements lead to unintended land acquisitions are false.

Conservation easements do not prohibit agricultural uses like grazing, burning, or haying. Current use and management of the land is maintained with no impact on day-to-day activities.

Conservation easements do not cause land productivity or property tax valuations to decline.

Conservation easements do not prohibit all development. Each conservation easement is tailored to the specific needs of the landowner and the traits of their property.

Conservation easements do not grant public access to private land. That right remains under the landowner's control.

Conservation easements do not lead to additional enforcement of endangered species regulations. No conservation easement requires participation in endangered species programs.

LEFT: A view of one of three adjoining conservation easements in the Chalk Bluffs of western Kansas. This remnant native prairie is generally located lower on the landscape, associated with the Smoky Hill River basin, and includes great topographic variability. © Jim Griggs

A Banner Year for Migrating Shorebirds at Cheyenne Bottoms

At Cheyenne Bottoms, perfect weather conditions and good management made for the highest shorebird counts in decades

BY LAURA CASTAÑÓN

Originally published by Manomet, July 2022

Every spring, the mudflats of Cheyenne Bottoms are filled with the clamoring calls of shorebirds. The central Kansas wetlands are hundreds of miles from the nearest coast, but serve as a vital refueling stop for Hudsonian godwits, Baird's sandpipers, long-billed dowitchers, and many other species making their annual migration north.

This year, thanks to a combination of good management and good fortune, more birds descended on Cheyenne Bottoms than have been seen there in several decades. Using visual surveys, photographs, and even a few drones, researchers at Cheyenne Bottoms counted more than 500,000 shorebirds stopping at the wetlands this spring, including over 30 percent of the entire population of Hudsonian godwits en route to Alaska.



“It just shows how important this area is to shorebirds,” says Robert Penner, avian conservation manager at The Nature Conservancy in Kansas. “If you create the right conditions, they’ll show up in big numbers.”

Cheyenne Bottoms is the largest wetland area in the interior U.S. and has been designated a “site of hemispheric importance” by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN), an international coalition of volunteers and

conservation partners working to conserve shorebird habitat. The site is a combination of semi-permanent marshes and more ephemeral ponds and seasonally flooded meadows, with conditions varying significantly from year to year.

“There are only 23 sites with that designation across the western hemisphere,” says Lisa Schibley, North American coordinator for the International Shorebird Survey, a volunteer-based community science program that stretches across the Western Hemisphere and has been coordinated by Manomet scientists for decades. “And sometimes, while these sites met the criteria threshold of 500,000 shorebirds originally, for one reason or another the numbers aren’t quite there anymore. When you get one that’s back at 500,000, it’s very exciting.”





Marbled godwits, pictured here, are less common at Cheyenne Bottoms than Hudsonian godwits, a close relative. Peak migration for marbled godwits is mid-April to early May. © Tom Blandford

The Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks manages about 20,000 acres of Cheyenne Bottoms and The Nature Conservancy manages another 8,600 acres or so. To keep the wetlands an inviting habitat for shorebirds, managers are constantly battling invasive plant species and working to keep the meadows cut short. The Great Plains no longer have herds of bison acting as itinerant lawn mowers, but The Nature Conservancy leases the land as grazing space for portions of the year to have cows perform the same duty.

“Cheyenne Bottoms is a postage stamp in a sea of agriculture,” Penner says. “All the things that helped create Cheyenne Bottoms and maintained it as an important area for shorebirds—bison, more frequent wildfires—those are all gone. So that’s why we have to actively manage it.”

This year, the weather helped things line up perfectly for shorebirds: When spring migration started in March, there was plenty of surface water, which was followed by rapid evaporation thanks to a dry and windy April.

“These huge pools, I mean miles across, were drying up, creating mud flats and shallow-water habitat at the exact perfect time for shorebirds coming through on migration,” Penner says.

The vast majority of shorebirds pass through Cheyenne Bottoms in late April and early May, stopping for a few days to rest and gorge themselves on the bounty of invertebrates in the marshes before continuing north. For some, it’s their first break after thousands of miles of flying.

“A significant portion of the Hudsonian godwit population

winters in southern Chile,” Schibley says. “When they are ready to head north, it’s often a 6,000-mile nonstop flight to places like Kansas where they pause to refuel before they continue their journey to their breeding grounds in the arctic.”

Penner had a hunch that this would be a particularly special year, so he and his colleagues planned a more comprehensive survey than usual. For the past 25 years, Penner has been participating in Manomet’s International Shorebird Survey at Cheyenne Bottoms. For the survey, volunteers estimate shorebird counts at their site using binoculars or spotting scopes. They try to visit the same locations in 10-day intervals from March 15 to June 15 and use the same methods each time.

“Not only does an ISS count give us a snapshot of the shorebirds at a particular site,

but with repeated surveys through migration and over many years, we’ve built up information about arrival and departure timing,” Schibley says. “Combining this information from hundreds of sites across the hemisphere has given scientists significant insight into the trends of these shorebird populations.”

This year, Penner and his colleagues added photo points throughout their survey route and used a drone for aerial photography. They also adjusted some of their survey methodology to account for species that have shorter turnover rates—meaning they spend less time at Cheyenne Bottoms.

“Between adding turnover rates and the photographic evidence, along with the International Shorebird

Survey, we came up with huge numbers and we feel that these are probably even low because we still couldn’t see everything out there,” Penner says.

Penner is working with a graduate student at Fort Hays State University to create and refine protocols for conducting surveys with drones carrying standard and infrared cameras, to be able to find and count shorebirds even more accurately. These new observation methods aren’t intended to replace the International Shorebird Survey—having long-term data collected with consistent methods is extremely valuable—but they can provide additional details for unusual years like this one.

Shorebird populations have been in sharp decline in recent years, as they continue

to face threats from coastal development, habitat loss, and the many disturbances associated with climate change. But these numbers are promising, and show how good management can create the conditions these birds need to survive.

“If you set the dinner table, and set it right and have all the right conditions, they’ll show up,” Penner says. “And that’s what we’re seeing this year.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: After Spring 2022 saw record bird numbers, drought soon set in. Cheyenne Bottoms was completely dry during fall migration. Fortunately, a late October rain filled the marshes at Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, just 45 miles to the south, ensuring a place for these long-distance migrants to rest and refuel. Read more about our work around Quivira on page 23.



Hundreds of shorebirds at Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve in April 2022 © Robert Penner/TNC

A Turning Point for Grasslands

Kansas leads one of the largest opportunities for grassland conservation in the country

"We're losing the prairie," says long-time Nature Conservancy employee Matt Bain.

That's not what you want to hear from someone who's dedicated his life to prairie conservation. But Bain is nothing if not pragmatic.

"We can't afford to lose any more of our grasslands. And we don't have to."

After ten years as The Nature Conservancy's Western Kansas conservation manager, Bain was tapped this year to work on a new project: the Southern High Plains Initiative. His office now covers a staggering 71 million acres across Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Home to pronghorn, bighorn sheep, grassland birds, and more, the Southern High Plains contains large, connected natural areas and watersheds.

The region includes more than 30 million acres of intact prairie, cliffs and canyons, forests, and riparian corridors along rivers and streams with high conservation value. The Nature Conservancy is working with partners to conserve a network of lands and waters across state boundaries that will boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity, and support sustainable agricultural communities.

"Many times conservation efforts come down to either/or," explains Bain. "Either long-term protection or addressing land management. We have to tackle both at the same time and in the same landscape."

The vision is nothing less than bringing together partners, landowners, and stakeholders to create one of North America's largest conserved, connected, and

resilient landscapes. Long-term protection has long been a priority for TNC. Nearly 500,000 acres in the Southern High Plains have been protected already. And the plan is to fundraise and leverage a land protection fund to protect another 1 million acres.

One of the new projects goes beyond protection and relies on social science.

"We're calling it *Generational Grasslands*," says Bain. "It concentrates resources on the highest priority landscapes and looks at how we can ensure the conservation will last."

Two *Generational Grasslands* pilots launched this year—both in Kansas. Rangeland specialists in the area around The Nature Conservancy's Smoky Valley Ranch and in the Red Hills of Kansas and Oklahoma sit down with



1. Red Hills of south-central Kansas © Jim Griggs; 2. Red-legged grasshopper on snow-on-the-mountain © Jim Griggs; 3. Pronghorn © Justin Roemer/TNC; 4. Yucca © Meleda Wegner Lowry; 5. Burrowing owl © Paulette Donnellon/TNC Photo Contest 2022; 6. Cactus at Smoky Valley Ranch © Chris Helzer

farmers and ranchers and talk through some of the options already available, like cost-share programs from the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

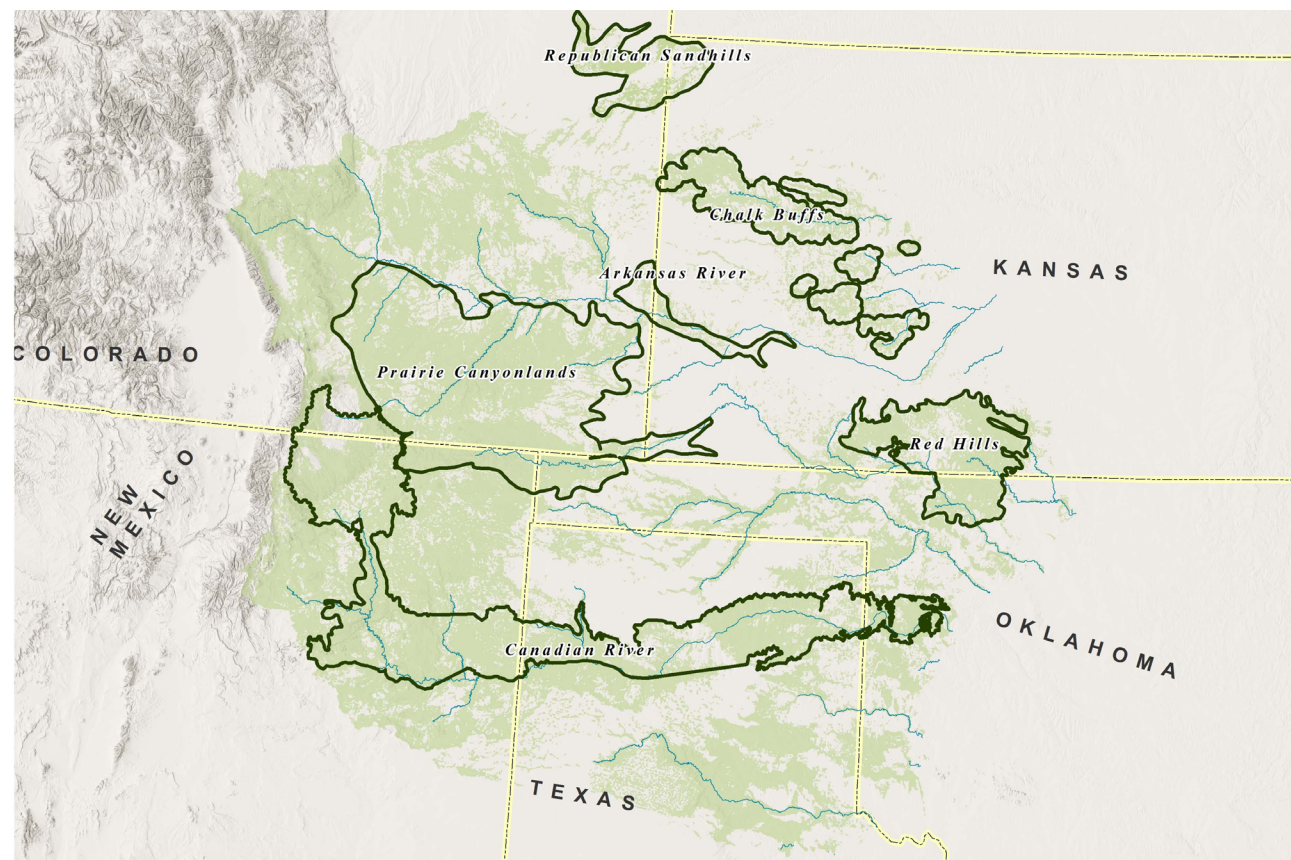
"We're asking, 'does this program work for you? If it doesn't, can you tell us why?'" describes Bain. "We're trying to understand what

needs to change to help private operations undertake things like drought planning, controlling invasive species, and transitioning Conservation Reserve Program land into grazing land."

The goal is to expand *Generational Grasslands* to the most important landscapes across the five-state Southern

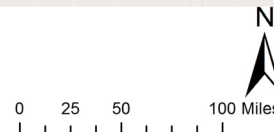
High Plains area. Each one will tackle an average of 200,000 acres at a time.

"We're focusing on where we can have the biggest impact and then moving on and replicating it. That's the only way we and our ranching partners will reach our shared goals for sustainable rangeland management." •



Southern High Plains Initiative

□ Focal Areas □ Priority Lands
 □ State Boundaries



2022 Collegiate Interns & Fellow

Each year we are amazed by the talent and dedication of our student interns. While we strive to give them the best experiences possible, we are also grateful for the tremendous skills and valuable insight they bring to The Nature Conservancy.



DAWN LEDEBOER Conservation Easement Stewardship Initiative Intern
 Dawn conducted extensive invasive species mapping on rangeland in the Flint Hills. She also supported forage inventory and rangeland health assessments on key properties.



TREVOR JONES David T. Beals III Healthy Streams for Kansas Fellow
 Trevor conducted a fish chronologies study to support the Sustainable Rivers Program. He also led sampling surveys on streams at Terrace Lane Farm to inform ongoing management.



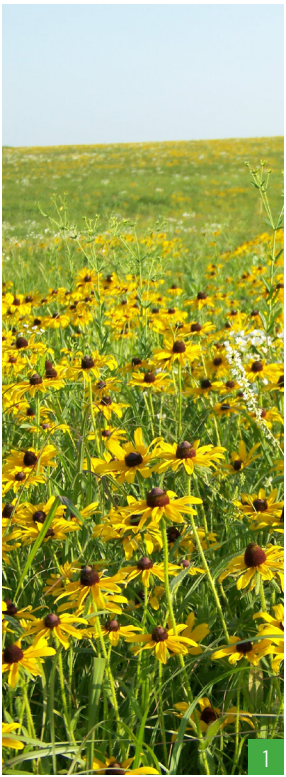
MARIO RODRIGUEZ Smoky Valley Ranch Intern
 Mario assisted with rangeland monitoring by setting grazing cages throughout the ranch. He has also learned about low-stress livestock handling and assisted with breeding bird and vegetation surveys.



AUDREY VAN ZELFDEN Flint Hills Conservation Intern
 Audrey worked extensively on invasive species control, from identification to mapping and management plans. She also helped assemble virtual fence radio towers and led a seed collection project.

Audrey received the Lance Hedges Conservation Award, a scholarship named in memory of The Nature Conservancy's former Kansas director of conservation.

Photos 1 & 4 © Helen Wayner; Photo 2 © Going West Productions; Photo 3 © Laura Rose Clawson/TNC; Photos 5 & 6 © Rick Marolf



1



2



3



4



5



6

75 Acres in Anderson County Protected

Just east of the Flint Hills lies a special pocket of tallgrass prairie in Anderson County, Kansas. The area holds unique prairie plant communities that are typically more diverse than the more celebrated tallgrass prairie of the Flint Hills. This landscape abounds with prairie grasses—big bluestem, Indian grass, switchgrass—and wildflowers such as pale coneflower, leadplant, purple prairie clover, black-eyed Susan, prairie gentian and Ohio spiderwort. In the mid-1990s, The Nature Conservancy purchased 128 acres near the small township of Welda to protect the endangered Mead’s milkweed plant. Over time, the nature preserve grew as more land was purchased for protection, and—with this year’s 75-acre acquisition—the Anderson County Prairie Preserve now totals 1,218 acres.

In addition to safeguarding rare plants and animals like the prairie mole cricket, the preserve functions as an outdoor laboratory for the Kansas Biological Survey & Center for Ecological Research at the University of Kansas. Research projects target plants like Mead’s milkweed, grassland bird species, pollinators, fire in the prairie, and the soil microbiome.

The Kansas Biological Survey & Center for Ecological Research manages the Anderson County Prairie Preserve in consultation with The Nature Conservancy. It is not open for visitation.



GREEN SUNFISH, *Lepomis cyanellus* (Walbaum)



BULLHEAD MINNOW (Female), *Notropis signatus* (Baird & Girard)



BLUEGILL, *Lepomis microlophus* (Mitchell)



SPOTTED BASS, *Micropterus dolomieu* (LeRoy)

1908 fish illustrations by Charlotte M. Pinkerton and Lydia M. Hart Green



© Heidi Mehl/TNC

Sustainable Rivers

Twenty years ago, The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—the largest water manager in the nation—launched a collaborative effort to find more sustainable ways to manage river infrastructure and optimize benefits for people and nature. Now known as the Sustainable Rivers Program, or SRP, this collaboration has grown from eight rivers in 2002 to 44 rivers in 2022, influencing 12,079 miles of U.S. waterways and including 90 associated reservoirs and dams. Two Kansas rivers are Sustainable Rivers Program sites: the Kansas River and the Marais des Cygnes River which becomes the Osage River when it crosses into Missouri.

The SRP focuses on determining environmental flow requirements for rivers and then creating operating plans for dams that incorporate these flows. Environmental flows are scientific prescriptions for the timing, quantity, and quality of water flow that must occur downstream and upstream of dams in order to sustain critical ecological functions and habitat for species. The SRP is successful because it combines scientific expertise with a collaborative approach that engages stakeholders in reviewing and determining new flow patterns.

KANSAS RIVER

This year, The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expanded the scope of the Kansas River SRP site to include Wilson, Lovewell, Waconda, and Harlan County (NE) reservoirs.

OSAGE RIVER

The Marais des Cygnes/Osage River was added to the SRP in late 2021. Science team and technical workshops were held this year to identify available data and determine what information is still needed before environmental flow recommendations can be made.

Trevor Jones was The Nature Conservancy's 2022 Beals Healthy Streams for Kansas Fellow. He conducted a fish chronology study in both the Kansas and Osage river systems to better understand when and where fish are spawning. This information is critical for environmental flow recommendations to support fish life cycles. Trevor documented 17 different fish species and 1,366 total fish.

QUICK NOTES


REBUILDING TERRACE LANE FARM Imagine trying to farm where the soil has eroded so much you can stand in the gullies, stretch out your arms, and still not reach the sides with your hands. In The Nature Conservancy's first full year of owning Terrace Lane Farm in Dickinson County, rebuilding the namesake terraces was step one. The use of terraces, or dirt embankments, to control soil erosion dates back to ancient civilizations. They became a widely-recognized conservation practice for farmland in the United States after the Dust Bowl of the 1920s. At Terrace Lane Farm, terraces built in the past had degraded, allowing gullies more than 4 feet wide and 6 feet deep to form. This year, The Nature Conservancy began re-contouring the fields so that rainwater runs into grassy channels. The network of grassed waterways slows down the water flow and directs it into nearby West Turkey Creek to prevent gully erosion in crop fields.

BRINGING FIRE BACK TO THE RED HILLS Fire is a natural part of the grassland ecosystem and helps maintain its health and vigor. After a fire, blackened patches quickly revive with new, green grasses and abundant, showy wildflowers. Without fire, the habitat changes and prairie soon becomes a forest. Modern-day land managers carefully use prescribed fire, with detailed plans and training, to bring fire to grasslands every few years. In the Red Hills of south-central Kansas, decades without prescribed fire have allowed trees to overrun the prairie, greedily sucking water and overtaking forage for cattle. Here, The Nature Conservancy partners with prescribed fire co-ops to help ranchers bring fire back to the prairie.

HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY FOR NATURE This year, The Nature Conservancy and multiple partners launched a 5-year, multi-state research project to determine if virtual fencing technology can help ranchers significantly improve environmental and economic outcomes for their operation. Cows are outfitted with special GPS-enabled collars that emit signals to direct the cattle to desired locations at set times based on their connections to GPS satellites. Using a combination of GPS and radio signals, land managers can easily create and change virtual pastures in ways not possible with barbed wire or electric fences. In Kansas, The Nature Conservancy is testing the use of virtual fencing at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and the adjoining Mushrush Red Angus ranch. The experiments will help us assess the impacts of virtual fencing on the habitat of grassland-dependent birds and water quality. Key partners include Kansas State University, National Park Service, and the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition.

HOPE FOR THE BLUE RIVER A new report commissioned by The Nature Conservancy and conducted by Kansas State University, shows there is still opportunity to realize the multiple benefits gained by protecting and restoring riparian areas along the Blue River in Johnson County, Kansas. Even as urbanization continues to transform land uses throughout the area, there are paths forward to maintain the ecological function of this ecosystem along with flood regulation and carbon sequestration. The Nature Conservancy will continue to focus efforts on protecting the riparian zone to have the greatest impact on water quality and quantity downstream.

WHOOPING CRANES This endangered species relies on flooded marshes at Quivira National Wildlife Refuge during migration. © Joshua Pelta-Heller/TNC Photo Contest 2021



More farms, More data, More drought

Drought affected agriculture across Kansas this year and didn't spare farmers in Edwards, Kiowa, and Stafford counties along Rattlesnake Creek. Rattlesnake Creek is a primary water source for Quivira National Wildlife Refuge and local farmers. Both need water at the same time each spring. Lately, there's not enough to go around. Last year, The Nature Conservancy and many partners launched an irrigation efficiency research project to learn whether water-saving technology can become a real-world reality for farmers. This year was the second of the planned three-year study, and eight additional farm fields joined for a total of 33 fields enrolled. But both 2021 and 2022 were drought years, and it's hard to draw meaningful conclusions on such a short window for data, so the study will extend to a fourth year. Participating farmers received a grant to cover half the cost of new irrigation equipment and access to a water scheduling tool developed by Kansas State University. Regular field days and technical assistance help them optimize the new systems for water and fuel efficiency.

This work is supported by the Conservation Innovation Grants program at USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Nature Conservancy's Heidi Mehl is the principle investigator, and key partners include WaterPACK, Kansas State University, and Groundwater Management District 5.

“When anything is going to happen in this country, it happens first in Kansas.”

William Allen White, 1922



Fall at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Chase County, Kansas © Carbonbrain/stock.adobe.com



JUSTIN COBB
Government Relations Manager

In 1922, Emporia Gazette editor William Allen White wrote, “When anything is going to happen in this country, it happens first in Kansas.” Much has changed over the last 100 years, but many things remain true. The Flint Hills are still vast and peaceful. Migrating birds still wet their beaks at Cheyenne Bottoms. And Kansans still love their natural heritage.

This widespread love of nature that helps The Nature Conservancy advance science-based, practical solutions that work for Kansans *and* nature. Our nonpartisan recommendations are drawn from hands-on experience and decades of working with people from all walks of life. We’ll focus on three key policy areas for Kansas in the coming year: Water, Conservation Easements, and Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements (C-PACE) legislation. If you know of an issue that deserves our attention, we’d love to hear from you.

Water is Life

Water is our most precious resource, and Kansas is facing a water crisis. We have a choice: continue in the current direction or make a change. TNC will be part of emerging solutions to ensure we have enough fresh water before it’s too late.

Protect Conservation Easements

Conservation easements are voluntary transactions that provide benefits for landowners and the public. TNC will continue to work with state legislators to counter misinformation that threatens the effectiveness of conservation easements.

Pass C-PACE Legislation

Commercial property assessed capital enhancements (C-PACE) financing for commercial and agricultural properties will create jobs and enhance economic growth while conserving water and energy. Kansas needs to pass C-PACE legislation in 2023.

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THE PRAIRIE ECOLOGIST IN KANSAS Daddy longlegs, rough green snake, and Eastern box turtle on the Elk River Trail, near Independence, Kansas; regal fritillary butterfly at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Strong City, Kansas. All four photos © Chris Helzer. Chris Helzer is director of science for The Nature Conservancy in Nebraska. He raises awareness about the value of prairies and prairie conservation through his photography, writing, and presentations. You can read his blog at PrairieEcologist.com.



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