



The Nature
Conservancy



KANSAS
2023 YEAR IN REVIEW

Letter from the Director

Reflecting upon the past year, I am overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude. I am grateful to be named the Kansas State Director this year. I am equally thankful to have witnessed firsthand how our staff, trustees, donors and partners have all embraced change with an attitude of purpose and resilience.

Similarly, my family and I have embraced our own changes as I transitioned to The Nature Conservancy. I have the unique opportunity to combine my passion with my career in this great field we call conservation. That pairing, along with The Nature Conservancy's work to combat biodiversity loss and pragmatically address the climate crisis—plus our staff's excellent reputation—all drew me to commit myself fully to our work in Kansas.

Not only have we all embraced change, but we haven't skipped a beat. We continue to drive our work forward in meaningful ways. This year-in-review report is evidence of all the conservation success initiated and achieved in Kansas this past year. However, we certainly won't be content to marvel at our accomplishments. I encourage us all to look to the future and dream even bigger.

In 2024, our Kansas staff will lead The Nature Conservancy's renewable energy work in the central United States. Our energy partners are working to expedite their deployment of renewable energy responsibly and change how we view energy. The Nature Conservancy is positioned to enable that change. I'm excited about the progress of our Southern High Plains Initiative, which is working to preserve large swaths of intact prairie in southwest Kansas and beyond, changing how we look at land protection. Yes, change can be scary, but it can also be good and lead to significant results.




I should end with nothing more than a heartfelt declaration of thanks. Thank you to all who have donated, contributed to our cause and supported our work in countless ways as we navigate these changes.

Ben

Ben Postlethwait
Kansas State Director, The Nature Conservancy



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Big Wins in Land Protection

From our humble beginnings purchasing 80 acres in Harvey County in 1965, The Nature Conservancy's land protection in Kansas has grown to 161,851 acres protected, including these latest projects:

10,086 acres mixed-grass prairie along the Arkansas River

Mixed-grass prairie provides habitat for bobwhite quail and other wildlife. Native prairie grasses stabilize the sandy dunes and wetlands provide habitat for migrating cranes.



637 acres tallgrass prairie along Coyne Creek

Two miles of Coyne Creek in the heart of the Flint Hills provides high quality habitat for many different fish including minnow and sunfish. The property connects to more than 5,200 acres previously protected with a conservation easement.



1,475 acres lesser prairie-chicken habitat in Gove County

Two properties in Gove County were brought under single ownership with a conservation easement that permanently protects 1,475 acres of mixed-grass and shortgrass prairie known to have a large prairie-chicken lek.



3,658 acres shortgrass prairie along Twin Butte Creek

TNC and Ducks Unlimited partnered to purchase a conservation easement on a private ranch just two miles from TNC's Smoky Valley Ranch. Shortgrass prairie and nearly seven miles of Twin Butte Creek provide habitat for both grassland and freshwater wildlife.



Helping Farmers Adopt New Technology and Use Less Water

Over the past three years, Megan and Luke Schroeder participated in a research project led by The Nature Conservancy to increase irrigation efficiency and reduce groundwater withdrawals from the Great Bend Prairie aquifer while maintaining or improving farm profitability. Researchers worked with farmers to develop a water use approach that utilized improved monitoring and application technology, engineering and technical support, aerial photography and peer networking to test real-world solutions for water efficiency—specifically in the south-central Kansas landscape with sandy soil, a shallow water table, low rainfall and periodic drought.

Megan and Luke Schroeder both grew up on farms. In 2020, they took over Megan’s family farming operation in Haviland, Kansas. That same year, the Schroeders signed on to a TNC project that split the cost of new irrigation equipment, soil moisture sensors and access to a water scheduling tool developed by Kansas State University. Technical assistance helped them optimize the new systems, and data was collected every step of the way.

“There are practices in farming that are very beneficial, but the initial costs can be expensive,” explains Luke. “This program allowed us to make improvements that we would have had a hard time affording otherwise.”

In addition to the cost-sharing, the Schroeders also received

frequent visits from Lee Wheeler, an agricultural engineer, to answer questions and help with mechanical repairs.

“Lee has been a great resource for Luke,” says Megan. “They worked together to fix pressure problems on the system, water pattern problems and more.”

Like tuning up your car, each repair improves water efficiency. But trust in new technology—and a willingness to deviate from long-standing farming practices—takes time.

“We heard from many farmers that they disregard studies or data from different geographic areas,” says Heidi Mehl, TNC’s director of water and agriculture in Kansas. “They can’t be sure whether it will work the same way for them.”

If producers are looking for visible proof that new technologies are suitable for their particular location and crops, the best source of that proof is often a neighbor’s field.

“You can see the difference from last year to this year. I was a little hesitant at first, but after seeing the benefits, I am on board 100%,” says Megan. “This program is a great tool for all parties to see what improvements we can make to ensure we make responsible decisions with our water.”

Results from the three-year farm trials showed that the technology can help save water, but it ultimately depends on how people use it. TNC hopes to expand the project to reach more farmers and realize greater water savings next year.



This work is supported by the Conservation Innovation Grants On-Farm Trials program at USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. Heidi Mehl is the principal investigator. Key partners include WaterPACK, Kansas State University Research and Extension, Lee Wheeler Engineering, and Groundwater Management District 5.

Grassland Stewardship Program Will Soon Span the State

In 2023, The Nature Conservancy supported improved management on more than 15,000 acres of land with conservation easements in the Flint Hills, including treating invasive sericea lespedeza, removing trees and developing grazing and prescribed burn plans. Next year, the program will expand to include all 41 (and counting!) TNC easements across the state.

When landowners grant a conservation easement, they voluntarily sell or donate certain rights associated with their property, often the right to plow, subdivide or develop. At the same time, a private land trust or public agency agrees to hold the right to enforce the landowner's promise not to exercise those rights. In essence, the rights are forfeited and no longer exist. The land trust must then annually monitor each easement to guarantee that the easement terms are upheld.

A conservation easement selectively targets only those rights necessary to protect specific

conservation values, such as habitat for grassland birds, water quality and migration routes, and each easement is individually tailored to the property. Because the land remains in private ownership, with the remainder of the rights intact, an easement property continues to provide economic benefits for the area in the form of jobs, economic activity and property taxes.

Protecting land with a conservation easement is an important step (and a huge conservation win!), but the day-to-day management of the property enormously impacts the conservation values. Most of the time, it's difficult—if not

impossible—to include detailed management prescriptions in a conservation easement that will stand the test of time. Take, for example, an easement on tallgrass prairie in the Flint Hills. There are too many unpredictable variables: rainfall and drought, price fluctuations for cattle, the changing climate, extreme weather events, increasing threats from invasive species and more all play monumental roles in how the land will be stewarded. Land managers need the freedom to adapt to changing conditions while still adhering to the broad conservation goals of the easement.

easement process and then returns to monitor each property, she sees first-hand the challenges landowners face, like the spread of the invasive plant sericea lespedeza and eastern red cedar. If she sees an issue on an easement property, it might not violate the easement, but it could be a serious threat to the conservation values. She can now follow up to provide the landowner with additional technical support and resources.

“It's always been a long-term commitment by the landowner, but being a good steward is getting

“The Nature Conservancy is building a long-term relationship with the land. We can't just protect the land with a conservation easement then ignore the conservation values. We're obligated to see this through.”

PAULA MATILE
Conservation Easement Stewardship Initiative Manager



© Nick Krug

Conservation Easement

A conservation easement is a voluntary, legal agreement between landowners and qualified conservation organizations. Conservation easements limit certain types of uses or prevent development from taking place on the land in perpetuity while the land remains in private hands. A conservation easement is legally binding, whether the property is sold or passed on to heirs.

“It seems like once an easement goes on, we forget about it and move on to the next piece of land,” says Bill Sproul, a rancher in the Kansas Flint Hills. “Sericea lespedeza and Old World bluestem don't know there's an easement on it, and they don't care either.”

TNC recognized this problem and launched a program in 2021 to provide landowners who had already protected their land with additional resources to adopt conservation land management practices. For three years, this Conservation Easement Stewardship Initiative has focused on the Flint Hills but will soon cover all TNC easements across the state.

Paula Matile, who has been monitoring The Nature Conservancy's conservation easements since 2006, also leads the stewardship effort. Because she is brought in at the beginning of the

harder and harder,” explains Matile. “My priority right now is helping people manage invasive species.”

Matile and TNC can also help new landowners of properties with conservation easements. Conservation easements are perpetual; they never end. When someone buys land encumbered with a conservation easement, they know about it upfront from a simple title search. Still, the new owners may not have the same conservation vision as those who originally granted the easement, and that's where TNC can help.

“The Nature Conservancy is building a long-term relationship with the land,” says Matile. “We can't just protect the land with a conservation easement then ignore the conservation values. We're obligated to see this through.”



Bald eagle at Milford Lake © Acorns Resort via Flickr (CC by 2.0)

Small Changes in Lake Management, Big Benefits for Fish and Birds

Late this year, The Nature Conservancy and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers developed a set of strategies to adjust water levels in four freshwater reservoirs located on tributaries to the Kansas River. Coined “environmental pool management” this approach to lake management generates benefits to the whole river ecosystem. Shared goals for Wilson, Kanopolis, Milford and Harlan County lakes include supporting the life cycles of fish and bird species found along the river. They are also all located in the Central Flyway, the path migrating shorebirds and waterfowl follow throughout much of the interior United States.

The environmental pool management recommendations are the latest development in a partnership designed to improve the health and life of the Kansas River. TNC 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 to

optimize benefits for people and nature in 2002. Now known as the Sustainable Rivers Program, 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. The Kansas River was added to the Sustainable Rivers Program in 2018.

Milford Lake, near Junction City, and Harlan County Lake, along the Kansas-Nebraska state line, were formed by impounding the Republican River. Kanopolis Lake in central Kansas was created from the Smoky Hill River and Wilson Lake to the west from the Saline River. USACE originally constructed all four reservoirs with the primary purpose of flood

control, and by creating four human-made lakes, they also provided thousands of acres for public recreation, from boating and swimming to hunting and fishing.

But damming rivers alters their flow. A natural flow pattern has both high and low water cycles, fast-moving currents and slow trickles, occasional floods, and more variability throughout the year. Dam-altered flows generally move the same volume of water in a predictable, steady fashion. Environmental flow plans, which are developed for every dam in the Sustainable River Program, provide guidelines for reservoir releases to reintroduce some of the natural flow variability into the river downstream. These flows are designed to benefit fish spawning cycles, freshwater mussels, sandbar-nesting birds, and other components of the river ecosystem.

Environmental *pool* management is a relatively new approach implemented at just three other Sustainable Rivers Program sites—two in Missouri and one in Iowa. Environmental pool plans describe deliberate conservation actions within the reservoir, addressing more than just the flow of the river downstream.

For example, lowering the water level in the spring has multiple benefits: it stimulates seed germination for aquatic plants; improves aquatic plant and animal diversity; and helps prevent harmful algae blooms along with other ecological and environmental benefits. Raising water level at key times increases water flow to nearby wetlands that provide habitat for migrating shorebirds and waterfowl. Next steps for the Kansas River system are to incorporate Perry and Tuttle Creek lakes into the project and investigate additional strategies to address excess nutrients and climate resiliency before implementing the comprehensive plan.

So, what does the plan prescribe? No single prescription will support all ecological communities, including humans. Developing a plan requires complex analysis and balancing of competing needs. For example, lowering reservoir water levels in the spring helps ensure walleye have access to the rock and rubble where they spawn near the dam. These releases also allow more water to flow into the river downstream and cue spawning for native river fish. Other times of the year, exposing shallow areas invites

shorebirds and waterfowl to feed on macroinvertebrates like worms and insects hidden in the mud. Sometimes ecological needs for species in the reservoir compete with those in the river downstream. Keeping water levels high in the winter provides stability for hibernating animals like beavers and muskrats—but could mean less habitat for migrating whooping cranes. Environmental pool plans aren’t static and, for the Kansas River, likely won’t look the same every year. Management decisions will be made based on changing conditions, like wet years vs. dry years, and can target different ecological needs year-to-year.

Environmental pool plans are developed within the constraints of authorized purposes of the reservoirs, water rights, and other human use requirements and in collaboration with stakeholders. We are grateful to everyone who participated in this initial planning phase for their interest and contribution to improving the health of the Kansas River system. The extensive contributions and collaboration efforts from various agencies and individuals are integral to the effort now and for future coordination and implementation efforts.

Is it a Reservoir or a Lake?

Reservoirs are lakes that are intentionally created by people. In some ways, they function much the same as naturally formed lakes—you can swim, fish and boat on many reservoirs, and they often have lake in their names. But when rivers are dammed to create reservoirs, it alters the ecosystem of the river. The Sustainable Rivers Program provides the opportunity to modernize river infrastructure and improve river health.

A Greenway Vision for the Blue River

The Nature Conservancy teamed up with researchers at Kansas State University to assess and quantify the ecosystem services the Blue River currently provides and what it could deliver if we turned to green infrastructure, protecting the headwaters and restoring the stream corridor. The report showed this wouldn't just help nature—it makes economic sense, too. Moving from analysis into action is all part of the Blue River Greenway Vision. This century-old idea has new life thanks to the numerous municipal and not-for-profit partners collaborating to fully protect, connect and restore the Blue River Greenway.

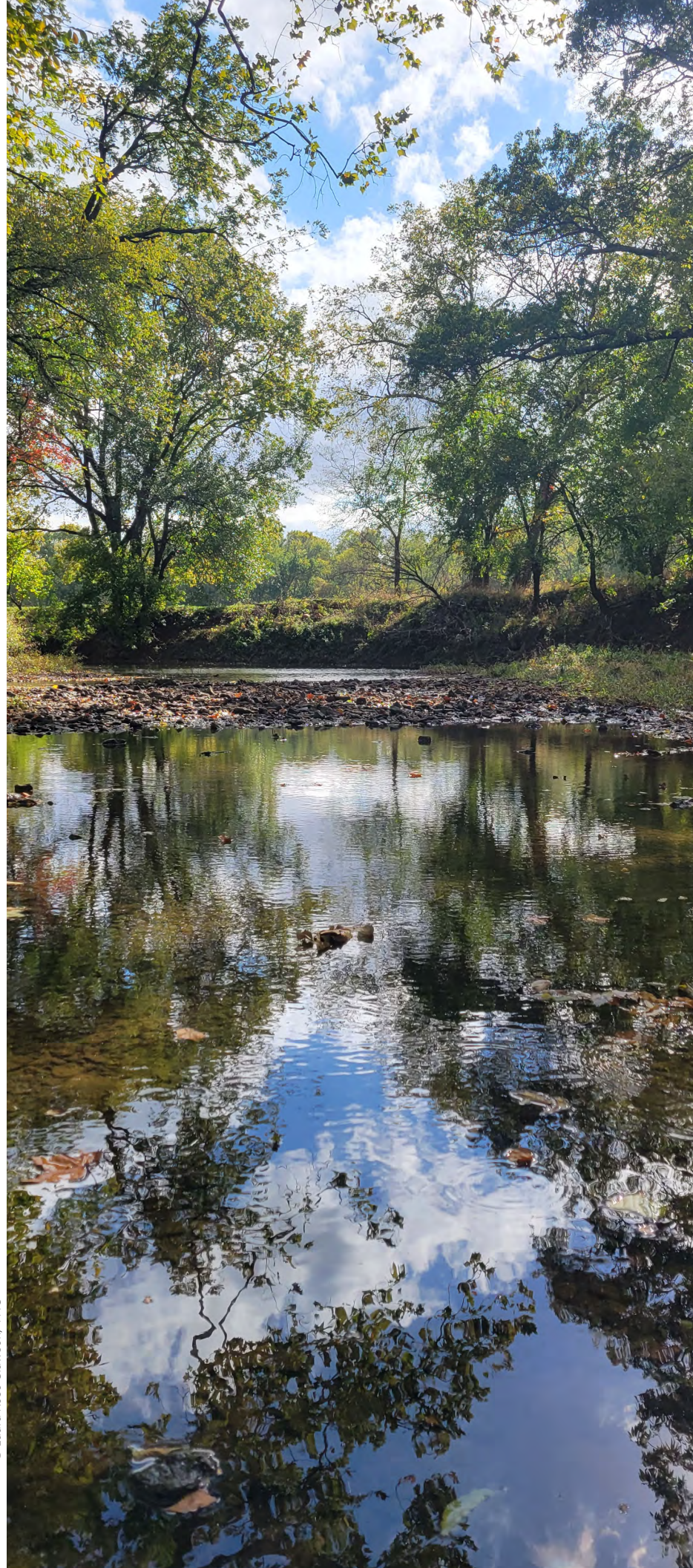
Three main tributaries converge to form the Blue River in Johnson County, Kansas—Wolf Creek, Coffee Creek and Camp Branch. The river then flows 40 miles through 20 cities, five counties and two states before joining the Missouri River near Independence, Missouri.

The river used to be surrounded by rich woodlands and other vegetation that absorbed rainwater, shaded the river channel and protected it from erosion. But as the Kansas City metro area grew, the Blue River lost much of its surrounding ecosystem to urban development, concrete channels and eroded banks. Straightened river channels and increased runoff from surrounding pavement, roofs and roads have caused devastating floods, resulting in millions of

dollars in avoidable damage and lost homes and businesses.

TNC has been protecting land around the Blue River's headwaters with conservation easements since the 1990s. Since 2017, TNC has partnered with the Heartland Conservation Alliance and other groups to protect, connect and restore the Blue River watershed and its urban green spaces.

“Heartland Conservation Alliance is a crucial partner for us. The Nature Conservancy brings decades of land protection experience and a grounding in science to the Blue River,” says Heidi Mehl, TNC's director of water and agriculture in Kansas. “We knew that continued land protection was one of the most important things TNC can do for



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the Blue River. We're now looking more closely at what restoration of the entire riparian corridor could do for the river and the Kansas City metro.”

Late last year, researchers at Kansas State University completed an analysis commissioned by TNC to quantify the ecosystem services provided by the Blue River. Ecosystem services are the benefits that people get from healthy ecosystems like clean water and flood control. So, what is that worth when it comes to the Blue River? The flood control benefits of maintaining and restoring a 150-foot-wide riparian buffer on each side of the Blue River are valued at up to \$12,320 per acre, per year. The same buffer would improve water quality by reducing phosphorus, nitrogen and sediment loads by as much as 500%. The value of that level of water quality regulation is \$1,850 per acre, per year.

TNC and the Heartland Conservation Alliance took this information and much more to develop the Blue River Greenway Vision and a strategy for implementation. A greenway is

a path through undeveloped land near an urban area and is managed for environmental protection and recreation. The shared vision of many partners is that the Blue River Greenway will be the backbone of a healthy, prosperous, connected and resilient region. Numerous municipal and not-for-profit partners are collaborating to fully protect, connect and restore the greenway from the Overland Park Arboretum in suburban Johnson County, Kansas, to Corrington Park in urban Kansas City, Missouri, near the confluence of the Blue and Missouri Rivers. The project builds on the existing network of public lands and trails, identifying gaps and opportunities to secure land and public access, protect and enhance habitat and fully connect trails.

“The concept of the Blue River Greenway dates back to the early 1900s,” says Scott Schulte, board member for Heartland Conservation Alliance. “Countless partners have been working for years to protect and restore the Blue River watershed. We want to go back and finish the job.”

Riparian Corridor

A riparian corridor is the land and vegetation that lines a river or other natural body of water along with the stream channel itself. The plants and soils of a riparian corridor are often different than are found in the broader surrounding ecosystem.

Ecosystem Services

Ecosystem services are the benefits that ecosystems provide to people. Blue River ecosystem services are things like controlling floods, filtering water, providing aquatic habitat for fish and keeping carbon locked in vegetation instead of releasing it into the atmosphere.

Focused Conservation for Resilient Wildlife and Ranching

Landowners pledge to improve nearly 34,000 acres of mixed-grass and shortgrass prairie in Kansas to establish core areas of healthy grasslands that support wildlife and the local ranching economy. Dubbed *Generational Grasslands*, these landscapes are some of the last remaining places where targeted conservation can outpace threats to grasslands at a meaningful scale.

As many little houses were erected on the prairie—and homesteaders made their living on the range—Kansas prairie suffered a less romantic fate. Much of the grasslands here have been plowed under and converted to cropland. In some places, invasive trees and other plants are taking over. Not enough water is a constant threat. What prairie does remain today is stewarded by ranchers who rely on a healthy prairie to sustain their livestock, just as the prairie relies on the natural processes of grazing and burning. Here, cattle have largely replaced the bison and elk that once roamed the region and partnerships with ranchers are the key to large-scale grassland conservation.

With the Generational Grasslands approach, The Nature Conservancy is building on a long history of protecting special places and helping nearby landowners improve rangeland and forage management to improve habitat for wildlife. These focal areas of voluntary, incentive-based conservation include a foundation of permanent protection surrounded by more land where ranchers formally commit to increasing grassland resilience and habitat. Think of it like a bullseye: core areas of protected land that can't be converted—like a TNC preserve or ranch protected with a conservation easement—anchor a larger area of improved management. Grassland specialists meet with ranchers to talk through their options,

Generational Grassland

Generational Grasslands are a places of focused collaboration with producers and communities to uphold a way of life that provides critical ecological goods and services for generations to come. These are core areas of permanent conservation (~50k acres) surrounded by a larger landscape (~150k acres) where producers are increasing grassland resilience. All lands remain viable working lands.

providing technical advisory services, conservation planning support, and financial incentives to implement effective range management and other conservation practices in their operations. It's all designed to kickstart a positive feedback loop between land stewardship and ranching profitability. Once the Generational Grasslands reach the scale to sustain ecological function and biodiversity over time, around 200,000 acres, then attention can shift to the next place with similar potential.

“Being strategic about where we target conservation efforts is essential,” says Matt Bain, who leads the Generational Grasslands work for TNC. “This is not just any conservation in any place. We’re targeting regions with exceptional, at-risk biodiversity and natural resources. In the end, lesser prairie-chicken and other grassland birds will have better habitat and these lands will be more resilient to future drought. We’ll also see benefits called “ecosystem services” like carbon being stored underground in soil and cleaner water.”

It's all part of TNC's Southern High Plains Initiative, aiming to conserve a network of lands and waters spanning 71 million acres in Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas to boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity and support sustainable rural communities. The first two Generational Grasslands projects are both based primarily in Kansas. In the Chalk Bluffs of northwestern Kansas, the work focuses on protecting remnant tracts of prairie, restoring crop fields back to native prairie plant species, and improving drought resilience. In the Red Hills of south-central Kansas (and extending into Oklahoma), one of the highest priorities is controlling the rapid spread of eastern red cedar trees. This year, landowners in both locations enrolled a combined 33,937 acres for enhanced management before funding ran out for the year.

“Visiting with landowners to hear the stories about their land is a special privilege I get by working in conservation that I didn't anticipate when I started,” says Mason Scheetz, a grassland specialist in the Chalk Bluffs. “This past year I worked with numerous producers to help match them with programs that fit their operation, many who didn't even know those programs existed.”

Crucial funding for Generational Grasslands was contributed by the Bobolink Foundation, Kansas Governor's Ringneck Classic, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, Walmart Foundation, and USDA.



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Why Cattle?

Every species plays a role in an ecosystem. For grasslands, grazing by animals like bison, elk and pronghorn helps keep the prairie, well, prairie. They eat grasses that might otherwise dominate the landscape, giving numerous other plant species a chance to thrive—plants like milkweed that pollinators need to survive. Grazing animals can create areas of short vegetation required by some birds, like horned lark. The areas they don't graze can become dense thatch that provides cover for nesting birds like prairie-chickens. Without key ecological processes like grazing and fire, invasive species can overrun prairie or eventually turn it into a forest.

Prairies are important ecological systems not only for their critical wildlife habitats but they are also valued for their agricultural productivity. Prairies need grazing and domestic livestock need places to graze. The modern reality is that, where grasslands remain in North America, it's because they have been grazed by cattle rather than plowed for crops or otherwise developed. Ranching protected the prairie, but ranchers now face the challenges of responsibly managing an ecosystem that others took for granted. Working with the ranchers who steward the last of the prairie here is the only path toward conservation success in grasslands.

Meet Legacy Donors Elizabeth & Greg Burger

The Nature Conservancy's donors are a dedicated and inspiring group of people who ensure our conservation work gets done. Many of them, like Elizabeth Burger and her husband Greg, have enhanced their giving by making a planned gift, such as a bequest, a gift that pays income or a gift of appreciated securities.

Where did your appreciation for nature originate?

Nature has been a part of our lives since our earliest memories. Greg grew up on a family farm in northeastern Kansas. I grew up on the banks of Hogshooter Creek in northeast Oklahoma. Although we both loved being outdoors as kids, we didn't appreciate the significance until later years of life. First, you begin to realize how your body and mind crave nature and the sense of peace it provides, how it played such a formative role in childhood, and how it centers you as an adult today. Then, just as that true gratefulness develops, you wake up and grasp the sheer fragility of the ecosystem and the ultimate permanence of land that is lost to development. Loss of land represents two deaths—obviously the environment itself but also the lost opportunity for future generations to live the way we always have, in step with nature.

Do you have a favorite Nature Conservancy preserve or project?

Our first inclination would be to say Little Jerusalem Badlands

State Park or the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. But as I have learned more about TNC and how it works, my favorite project is actually the TNC approach. I am impressed with the truly collaborative and regional mindset of TNC here in Kansas. Nature doesn't have man-made boundaries or egos, so neither should conservation work. TNC also has a thoughtful, strategic, long-game vision. I appreciate the way TNC acknowledges that people see land in different ways, but it seeks to find common ground and views everyone as a potential partner rather than an immediate adversary. Growing up rural and now living rural, that mindset of meeting in the middle is particularly important. Most people want the next generation to have access to nature. I think TNC has the right approach in helping everyone work toward that vision, regardless of where they live or their political affiliation.

What advice would you give to the next generation of conservationists?

Do not let the enormity of the problem dwarf your desire to



help. Hopelessness gives birth to apathy, and, as the great Jane Goodall said, "the greatest danger to our future is apathy." There are many big-name funders out there, and thank goodness, but I believe that the small givers have the greatest potential to change hearts and minds. After all, we have the most power and influence among our family, friends and co-workers. TNC's magazine and annual reports can be wonderful conversation starters. More than once, I have mailed a clipping to someone with the note, "Hey, thought you'd find this interesting." I don't have to pressure or openly advocate. The message and photos do it for me. So, one piece of advice is to give what you can, no matter how small. My second is to share the joy of why you are giving and let organizations like TNC do the rest.

How did you determine a bequest was right for you?

We are not wealthy people with unlimited resources. We considered what we could do now, what we could do in the future while still alive, and

“ We consider this bequest to be our final love letter to nature, thanking it for everything it provided while we were here.”

ELIZABETH BURGER
TNC Donor

what we could do when we are gone. We currently give an annual gift through our donor-advised fund and fully expect this amount to grow larger as we grow older. But we also have TNC written into our will. We consider this bequest our final love letter to nature, thanking it for everything it provided while we were here. Our method might not be right for everyone, but we are both financially conservative savers with a strong sense of delayed gratification. The combination of annual giving and a bequest gift allows us to contribute now and in the future.

What do you hope your legacy will be?

Although our personal land project is not connected to TNC, it is aligned in spirit. For the past five years, we have saved every cent we can to purchase undeveloped land adjacent to our piece of wild heaven in northwest Douglas County. Initially, we just wanted to expand the perimeters for privacy, but somehow, that morphed into the powerful desire to conserve every inch of open space for the benefit of the

birds, bees, flowers and fauna. Some of the land we purchased was unfortunately (and literally) trashed by previous human owners, so we have many years of expensive clean-up ahead. But the ultimate goal is to determine how to best preserve this land in perpetuity, with appropriate public access via sustainable trails.




We look to and support TNC for its big-picture vision of saving important natural spaces in Kansas and the region, and we remain grateful for their work and the incredibly smart and dedicated people. But we also treasure the opportunity to save a bit of wild places, literally in our backyard, knowing that nature is not just majestic mountains and sweeping savannahs. Nature is also that small bit of undeveloped land that gives our amazing ecosystem one more step toward survival. We hope our humble attempts will inspire similar endeavors in others. When I see that favorite barred owl returning year after year, I am filled with a sense of peace, knowing we did everything we could for her.



Create Your Own Conservation Legacy.

What better legacy is there to leave than your commitment to protecting the Earth for future generations? Whether you are taking the first steps toward planning your estate or are in the process of updating your estate plan, The Nature Conservancy is here to help.

Contact The Nature Conservancy in Kansas today.

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THE NATURE CONSERVANCY CANNOT RENDER TAX OR LEGAL ADVICE. PLEASE CONSULT YOUR FINANCIAL ADVISOR BEFORE MAKING A GIFT.

BARRED OWL © SIMMIE ISSENBERG/
TNC PHOTO CONTEST 2019

Leveraging Our Lands

The Nature Conservancy's unrivaled land portfolio gives us unique and powerful advantages in pursuing our mission. We use our land holdings for many purposes: protecting biodiversity, demonstrating best management practices, testing innovative conservation strategies and bringing people into nature. Learn more, including which preserves are open for visitation, at [nature.org/kspreserves](https://www.nature.org/kspreserves).



SMOKY VALLEY RANCH In 2022, Smoky Valley Ranch experienced the worst drought in recorded history and received just 6.5 inches of rain for the entire year—less than a third of the average yearly rainfall. Thankfully, 2023 brought above-average rainfall all summer and the grass is back to growing. This is particularly good news for 770 acres in the center of the ranch where TNC has been restoring cropland back to mixed-grass prairie using a diverse seed mix that benefits monarch butterflies and other native pollinators. Wildflowers like showy milkweed, dotted gayfeather, and heath aster joined grasses like sideoats grama to provide habitat for butterflies during their breeding and migration cycles. This restoration also supplied the opportunity for students at Fort Hays State University to study soil and climatic variables in semi-arid landscapes and pollinators using the newly restored rangeland.

HIGH PLAINS
CHALK BLUFFS

GREAT BEND
SAND PRAIRIE

RED HILLS

FLINT HILLS

CHEYENNE BOTTOMS PRESERVE The origins of the 41,000-acre natural land sink known as Cheyenne Bottoms in Barton County, Kansas aren't fully known, though theories suggest stream erosion, dissolution of underlying salt beds and prehistoric land changes. We do know that, once formed, water flowed into the basin from Blood Creek in the northwest and Deception Creek to the north. This area is where TNC owns and manages nearly 8,000 acres as Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve. (The nearly 20,000-acre Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area in the southeast portion of the basin is owned and managed by Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks.) In the summer of 2023, TNC began restoring a creek channel on the preserve that had been cut off from the main channel of Blood Creek. Prior to TNC ownership, this waterway had been purposely filled with soil so that the land could be cultivated. Thorny locust trees that lined the old creek channel have been removed. Up next is digging out the creek channel so that it can hold more water and for longer. It will take two years to complete the restoration, but, in the end, the long winding wetland basin will return to historic conditions.



KONZA BIOLOGICAL RESEARCH STATION Long-term research conducted at Konza Biological Research Station shows it's hard to predict the complicated relationship between grasslands, rivers and "woody plants"—the hard-stemmed trees, shrubs and vines that are encroaching prairies everywhere. For years, the flow of water in Kings Creek on Konza has declined. Researchers from Kansas State University suspected that an increase in woody plants was to blame. In 2010, they cut all woody vegetation along a small watershed on Kings Creek, and every other year new trees and shrubs were cut or burned. Surprisingly, the shrubs re-sprouted more densely than before cutting and there was no subsequent rebound in streamflow. The study results suggest woody expansion is extremely difficult to reverse and can fundamentally alter terrestrial and aquatic habitat connections in grasslands.



TERRACE LANE FARM Staff at Terrace Lane Farm in Dickinson County have a recipe for compost that could help farmers save a lot of money. This year, TNC built two Johnson-Su Composting Bioreactors to create compost dominated by fungi. Traditional kitchen compost tends to be dominated by bacteria, like the soil on most tilled land. But healthy soils teem with microbial life—both bacteria *and* fungi—that breaks down nutrients into forms that plants can absorb. Every year, farmers in this part of the state spend as much as \$100 per acre on fertilizer to balance soil microbes. In the bioreactors at Terrace Lane Farm, worms, water and heat work together to break down a precise ratio of straw, wood chips, hay and manure, creating compost with thriving fungal colonies. In the spring, the fungi will be strained and mixed with water to create "compost tea" that will jumpstart microbial activity in the soil and unlock nutrients currently unavailable to crops without fertilizer. This is one of many strategies used at Terrace Lane Farm to improve soil health, water quality and agricultural resiliency.



FLINT HILLS TALLGRASS PRAIRIE PRESERVE For the first time in 50 years, the Flint Hills Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Cassoday, Kansas is open to the public. Enjoy a leisurely half-mile stroll to the South Fork Cottonwood River or hike the 2.5-mile and 4-mile trails. Access is limited to the marked hiking trails within the fenced pasture during daylight hours. This TNC property is located 30 miles south of Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and is less than an hour's drive from Wichita.

Kansas Photo Contest Winners

This year, photos taken in Kansas and submitted to our annual global photo contest were also eligible for additional local prizes. More than 500 photographers submitted 1,389 stunning pictures that captured the beauty and wonder of nature in Kansas. Thank you to our judging panel: Jim Richardson, Douglas Spale and Meleda Wegner Lowry. Congratulations to the winners!

FIRST PLACE

Dale Stephens



The judges agreed that when it comes to prairie-chicken photos, this one is special. It has compelling action, elegance, grace and great lighting, but it's the vibrant blue sky that really sets it apart.

DANCING PRAIRIE CHICKENS Two male greater prairie-chickens dancing in Smith County, Kansas in late March after a dusting of snow. © Dale Stephens/TNC Photo Contest 2023



SECOND PLACE

Bruce Hogle

This photo also received an Honorable Mention in the global contest's lands category.

PLANNED BURN AT CHASE STATE FISHING LAKE This is the late evening on April 17, 2014 with the planned pasture burn creeping along the ridge of the hill at the end of the lake. The evening was cool and got downright chilly by 1:30 AM when we finally quit photographing. Driving back from a ranch outside Elmdale, KS, I spotted the red glow, which looked like there might be a chance it would be reflecting in the lake, and it was! © Bruce Hogle/TNC Photo Contest 2023



THIRD PLACE

Lisa Grossman

FALL CAMPING ON THE KAW This is a drone shot of a Friends of the Kaw kayak/camp trip on a huge sandbar we call the Oasis, downstream from DeSoto, Kansas. The September morning fog over the river was incredible. © Lisa Grossman/TNC Photo Contest 2023



**JIM RICHARDSON
JUDGE'S CHOICE**

Phil Frigon



**HONORABLE
MENTION**

Matthew Gerlach



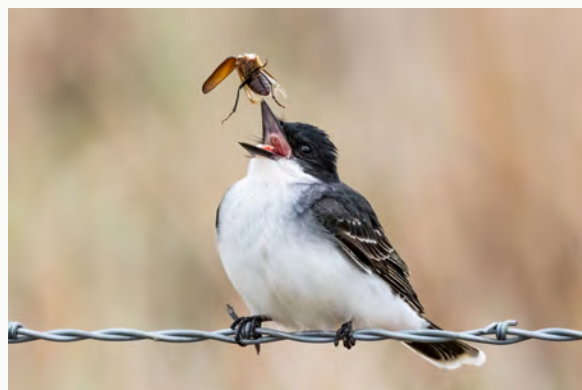
**MELEDA WEGNER LOWRY
JUDGE'S CHOICE**

James Claassen



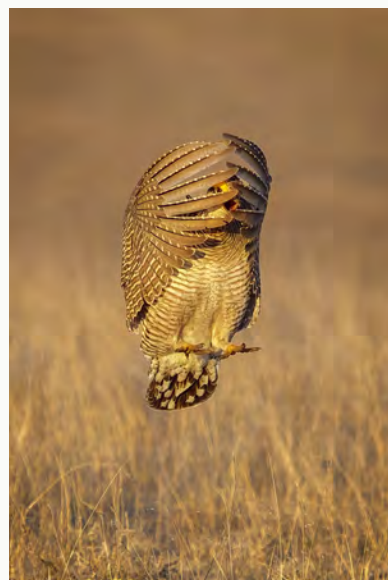
**HONORABLE
MENTION**

Jim Griggs



**DOUGLAS SPALE
JUDGE'S CHOICE**

James Claassen



GLOBAL

Mike
Krehbiel

*This photo received
second place in the global
contest's birds category.*

Kansans for Conservation Coalition

The Nature Conservancy is excited to announce that the Kansans for Conservation coalition has launched a legislative initiative seeking to establish a state conservation fund that would provide a legacy investment into the natural heritage of Kansas. If successful, this initiative would provide more than \$60 million in annual funding to working lands, parks and recreation, wildlife conservation, and educational programs in the state.

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of states establishing dedicated funding for conservation. Providing this perennial opportunity for local and private entities to access state match creates a highly competitive edge in receiving federal funds which are at an all-time high. For example, Mississippi established a conservation fund in 2021 and received four times the state investment in federal and private match. Now that Kansas is one of the fifteen states without such a fund, we stand to fall behind many states that don't have nearly the natural resources as the Sunflower State.

In 2017, a group of organizations gathered to address the growing need for dedicated funding aimed at conservation in Kansas. The Nature Conservancy is proud to be a founding member of the Kansans for Conservation coalition that has grown to 27 organizational members representing diverse sectors of the conservation community such as agriculture, environment and recreation. Together, we've joined forces to support a shared cause that will not only increase the health and quality of life for Kansans, but also make the state more competitive for federal and private funding. The coalition represents the largest and broadest policy effort in the history of the Kansas conservation community.

Kansans for Conservation will be introducing a bill next spring during the 2024 legislative process. The bill would establish a state conservation fund to support three distinct areas of conservation: working lands, wildlife and parks & recreation. Sign up for email updates at kansansforconservation.org to learn more about this effort and how you can use your voice for nature.



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- Natalie Busby** *Operations Manager*
- Tony Capizzo** *Flint Hills Initiative Manager*
- Karen Casebolt** *Associate Director of Philanthropy*
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- Brett Koehn** *Grassland Conservation Intern at Smoky Valley Ranch*
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- Zander Opperman** *Smoky Valley Ranch Conservation Steward*
- Toria Robert** *Flint Hills Stewardship Technician*
- Cole Starkey** *Flint Hills Stewardship Technician*

Letter from the Chair

On behalf of our exceptionally capable and dedicated volunteer board, I am pleased to mark the completion of another busy year of growth and success for The Nature Conservancy in Kansas.

We proudly welcomed our new state director, Ben Postlethwait, only the third state director in our 34-year history. Ben succeeded Rob Manes, who was appointed to lead The Nature Conservancy's North America Regenerative Grazing Lands strategy—a well-deserved promotion. Ben joins us from a private sector energy company, Evergy, where he was responsible for conservation initiatives including carbon sequestration programs, water resource protection and wildlife habitat conservation. He also led Evergy's Green Team, an employee volunteer group that worked frequently with The Nature Conservancy. Welcome, Ben!

The conservation of lands with ecological importance remains a key part of creating a world where both people and nature thrive. In 2023, The Nature Conservancy acquired one of the largest properties along the Arkansas River, the 10,086-acre Sandhills Ranch between Dodge City and Greensburg. This acquisition was part of our Southern High Plains Initiative, a Nature Conservancy collaboration to conserve grasslands across Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. We expect more big wins to follow.

We also significantly increased our advocacy efforts. In February, trustees and staff visited with legislators in Topeka to discuss our conservation priorities, which included fully funding the state water plan. We traveled to Washington, D.C. in October to meet with Kansas Senators and Representatives. In November, we joined the other member organizations of the Kansans for Conservation coalition to announce a legislative effort seeking dedicated state funding for conservation programs. Thirty-five states have such funding, and Kansas needs to join their ranks. Stay tuned for more.

As always, thank you for supporting The Nature Conservancy in Kansas and our work to conserve the lands and waters upon which all life depends.

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Chair, Kansas Board of Trustees

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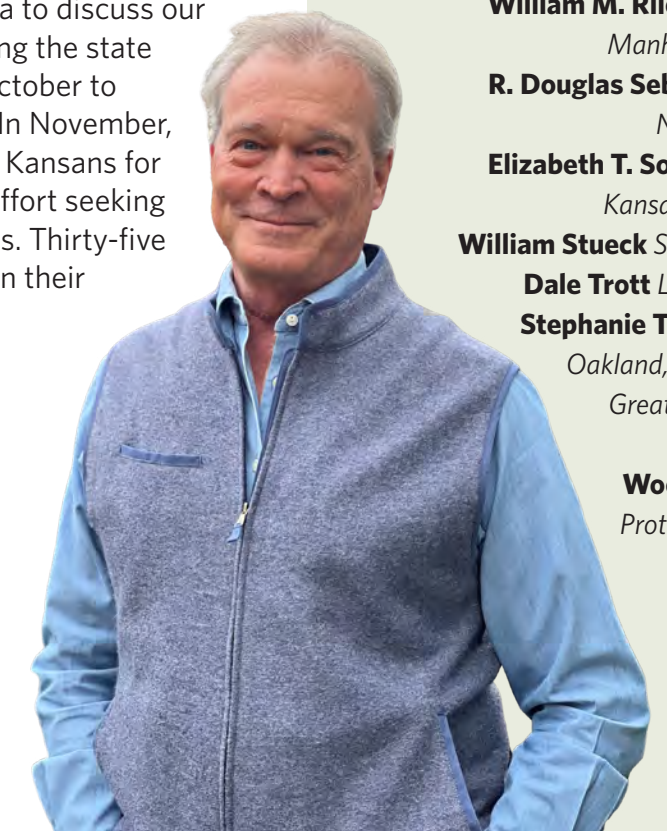
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The Nature Conservancy's accomplishments are only made possible by the many individuals, organizations, businesses, and foundations that make financial contributions to our conservation programs. We are honored to recognize the following donors who made contributions of \$100 or more from July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023. Everyone listed here has ties to Kansas. Some live here, others live elsewhere and prefer their gifts be used for projects in Kansas. In some cases, these contributions supported conservation in other parts of the world. We deeply appreciate every gift and regret that space constraints prevent us from listing all donors.

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