



The Sandhills Ranch in Kiowa County is TNC's latest protection project in Kansas. © Brad Cory/TNC

10,000+ acres Sand Prairie Protected

Latest acquisition in Kansas uses new tool to fund long-term conservation

It's not often the opportunity to conserve more than 15 square miles of contiguous prairie arises in Kansas. So, The Nature Conservancy jumped at the chance upon learning the 10,086-acre Sandhills Ranch in Kiowa, Edwards and Ford counties was coming on the market.

"A large, intact prairie like this is harder and harder to find in Kansas," says Lindsey Reinartz, conservation real estate manager for TNC in Kansas. "It's located in an area we've identified as a conservation priority, along the 'great bend' of the Arkansas River in central Kansas. This might have been our only opportunity to protect something this big in that landscape."

In the Great Bend Sand Prairie, undulating sand dunes are stabilized by an extensive network of native grass

roots, dominated by sand bluestem, prairie sandreed, needle-and-thread grass, little bluestem, and hairy and blue grama. A diverse array of wildflowers, along with scatterings of sandhill plum thickets, provide important habitat for shrub-loving birds, like bobwhite quail, lesser prairie-chicken and Bell's vireo.



The Sandhills Ranch is located within the five-state Southern High Plains focal area for TNC.

In addition to wide-open stretches of prairie, this property contains interdunal wetlands, where rainwater remains at the surface because of an underlying layer of impervious clay. These wetlands provide critical habitat for wildlife, including migratory birds such as sandhill and whooping cranes.

Grasslands as a whole are one of the most resilient carbon sinks in the context of countering climate change. Conversion to cropland is both the primary threat to the Great Bend Sand Prairie and the primary method of releasing the carbon stocks stored deep underground. TNC's purchase of the property ensures that the Sandhills Ranch will remain in its natural state, guaranteeing that it will continue to serve this vital ecological function.

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Left: Cattle are drawn to an interdunal wetland on the Sandhills Ranch. © Brad Cory/TNC; Right: Bobwhite quail © Bob Gress

Before TNC purchased the Sandhills Ranch in December 2022, it had been in the same family for more than 80 years. The previous owners and manager were recognized for their long stewardship of the property by the Kiowa County Conservation District in 2018. But threats to nature loom large, and even land that has traditionally been spared is now at risk. The Great Bend Sand Prairie has been categorized as Endangered by TNC’s Crisis Ecosystem analysis. In a Crisis Ecosystem, much of the original habitat has been converted, and what remains is not well protected. The dominance of row-crop agriculture in central Kansas and rising commodity prices mean that conversion of remaining native prairie is likely—and that poses a significant threat to local wildlife.

Protection of the ranch is also part of a larger vision, the Southern High Plains Initiative, which seeks to conserve a network of lands and waters across the region to boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity and support sustainable rural communities. The initiative spans 71 million acres at the intersection of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

Funding conservation at this scale is always challenging, so for the Sandhills Ranch, TNC turned to a tool that’s proving successful in other locations. Nicknamed “Purchase, Protect, Resell,” or PPR, this model builds on traditional land protection, like the creation of nature preserves and conservation easements. Now that TNC owns the property, we will develop a long-term management plan and address immediate needs like the restoration of prescribed fire. In several years, TNC will sell the property to a conservation buyer with long-term protection and biodiversity guarantees. Funds recovered from the eventual sale of the Sandhills Ranch will be reinvested for further conservation work within the Southern High Plains.

“Until recently, little conservation work has focused on this particular habitat in Kansas,” says Reinarz. “I’m excited about what this protection project will mean for the area in the future. This is just the beginning for the Great Bend Sand Prairie.”

The Sandhills Ranch will not be open for public visitation. Learn about other places TNC protects in Kansas, including preserves you can visit, at nature.org/kspreserves.

Student Employment Opportunities

Calling all Kansas college and university students! Jump-start your career with a full-time summer position at The Nature Conservancy. You’ll work with and learn from experienced staff on priority conservation projects in Kansas. Now recruiting for summer 2023.

David T. Beals III Healthy Streams for Kansas Fellow

Open to all Kansas college/university students; fellow may work remotely with some in-state travel. Fellow may conduct research, review scientific literature, map data, assist with fieldwork, attend meetings with partners and complete other work to advance the Healthy Streams Initiative.

Apply at careers.nature.org.

Smoky Valley Ranch Intern

Must be a student at Fort Hays State University; intern will work on-site at Smoky Valley Ranch in Logan County, KS. Intern will learn land stewardship with hands-on conservation and ranch management projects.

Apply by contacting Dr. Tara Phelps-Durr in the Biology Department, tphelpsdurr@fhsu.edu.

Flint Hills Intern

Must be a student at Emporia State University; intern will be based in Cottonwood Falls and work throughout the Flint Hills. Intern will learn land stewardship with hands-on projects ranging from vegetation assessment to trail maintenance.

Apply by contacting Dr. William Jensen in the Biological Sciences Department, wjensen1@emporia.edu.

Learn more about careers with The Nature Conservancy and view all open positions at nature.org/careers.