

Stretching in a narrow band from near the Nebraska border south into northern Oklahoma, the Flint Hills is a serene landscape of gentle, prairie-dominated hills made up of limestone and chert with shallow limestone soils that are unsuitable for cultivation. The Flint Hills is by far the largest expanse of intact tallgrass prairie left in the nation. Less than four percent of North America's original 140 million acres of tallgrass prairie remains, and two-thirds of it is in Kansas.

The flora and fauna of the Flint Hills evolved through fire and grazing, particularly by bison and elk. Fires sparked by lightning and Native Americans left behind a legacy of fire-tolerated species. Luxuriant native grasses – big bluestem, little bluestem, Indiangrass and switchgrass – grow several feet high and blanket these hills, along with numerous other plants and wildflowers. The area is critical for ecological sustainability and as a food and habitat source for native wildlife. The Flint Hills is one of the most important remaining grassland habitats in North America for the greater prairie-chicken, and The Nature Conservancy also is working to protect other key bird and fish species in the area including Topeka shiners, greater prairie chickens, Henslow's sparrows, Upland Sandpipers and American Golden-Plovers. Threats to the Flint Hills ecosystem include development, habitat fragmentation, fire practices, indiscriminate herbicide use, overgrazing and harmful non-natives such as sericea lespedeza.

Flint Hills Initiative

Unlike most tallgrass prairies, the Flint Hills remains relatively intact. A 150-year tradition of cattle ranching has maintained the tallgrass prairie landscape and helped preserve the region's



Prairie Chicken (© The Nature Conservancy)

biodiversity. As part of the Conservancy's ongoing efforts to preserve the landscape, the Kansas Chapter has initiated a community-based conservation program called the Flint Hills Initiative, which involves multiple strategies to abate critical threats, maintain the unfragmented nature of this landscape and improve the quality of site-specific habitats for target species and natural communities.

While ranching continues as the main land use and economic activity in the Flint Hills, other uses

Continued...

For More Information

Ruth Palmer
The Nature Conservancy in Kansas
700 Sw. Jackson St., Suite 804
Topeka, KS 66603
Phone: (785) 233-4000
Fax: (785) 233-2022
Email: rpalmer@tnc.org

nature.org/kansas

that are less compatible with a functioning tallgrass prairie are gradually establishing footholds. Fragmentation of native rangeland by energy development and low-density housing developments are becoming increasingly common. Through voluntary cooperative – including extremely important partnerships with Flint Hills ranchers – the Kansas Chapter is working with landowners and public and private entities to help preserve the biological integrity of the region. Partner organizations include the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA), KLA Ranchland Trust, Kansas Land Trust, Tallgrass Legacy Alliance, Tallgrass Ranchers, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, National Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Defense-U.S. Army, and Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks.

One of the most practical ways to protect this extensive prairie landscape from development while preserving its ranching heritage and economic base is the use of conservation easements. Landowners benefit by protecting their lands from future development while retaining ownership and keeping the land in agricultural production. The Conservancy's goal is to preserve the conservation value of the tallgrass prairie's habitat and wildlife while maintaining the integrity of its ranching culture and economy.

Konza Prairie, Flint Hills Tallgrass Prairie Preserve.

The Conservancy owns some important tallgrass prairie tracts within the Flint Hills in eastern Butler and western Greenwood counties. The 2,188-acre Flint Hills Tallgrass Prairie Preserve is home to several hundred species of tallgrass prairie plants and numerous bird, amphibian and reptile species.

To the north, just five miles south of Manhattan, more than 8,600 acres of tallgrass prairie known as Konza Prairie is owned by the Conservancy and Kansas State University. The prairie was named for the Konza Indians who once inhabited is area. It



Controlled burns at Flint Hills (©Kevin Sink)

supports more than 500 species of wildflowers along with shrubs and trees, and bison have been reintroduced. Fourteen miles of self-guided hiking trails are open to the public.

Konza Prairie is managed by the university's Division of Biology as a field research station and is dedicated to ecological research, education and prairie conservation. More than 100 scientists have active research projects on site, many of which are part of the National Science Foundation's Long-Term Ecological Research Program. Research focuses on the three key natural processes that regulate and sustain the tallgrass prairie: grazing by hoofed animals, periodic fire and climate extremes. Fire – reintroduced today through controlled burning – benefits deep-rooted prairie grasses and flowers by removing dead vegetation, encouraging new growth and preventing the infiltration of brush, trees and non-prairie grasses. This improves habitats for prairie birds, mammals and butterflies.



Konza Prairie (©Harold E. Malde)