

Agricultural cropland dominates the Kansas landscape, confirming the state's reputation as the nation's "breadbasket." Before waves of settlers came to the state, Kansas was a wondrous mix of prairies. In the west, the plains were covered by a mix of hardy, short grasses such as blue grama and buffalo grass. The state's midsection consisted of mixed grass prairie, while tallgrass prairie dominated in the east. During the past 100 years, the seemingly endless miles of prairie have given way to cultivation and dryland farming. Today, intact shortgrass and mixed grass prairie habitat exists only in fragments. By working with partners and landowners, The Nature Conservancy hopes to fulfill its mission of safeguarding these irreplaceable grasslands

### *Smoky Valley Ranch*

Significant tracts of shortgrass prairie remain along the Smoky Hill River and its tributaries in Wallace, Logan and Gove counties. While many of these prairies have been thoughtfully managed as grazing pastures for decades by resource-sensitive ranchers, inconsistent cattle prices compel increasing numbers of landowners to convert native pasture to cropland.

The 1999 purchase of the Smoky Valley Ranch Preserve was one of the largest private land conservation acquisitions ever for Kansas. Characterized by dramatic bluffs overlooking the Smoky Hill River, this magnificent 16,800-acre area in west central Kansas is made up of large grassland tracts, chalk bluffs and rocky ravines – a transition zone between the mixed grass and shortgrass prairies.

Smoky Valley Ranch is a top priority for the Conservancy's Kansas Chapter, which seeks to establish a preserve that will support the rich diversity of animals and plants that inhabited the



Milweed thistle (©Alan Pollom)

shortgrass prairie prior to settlement in the late 1800s. Smoky Valley Ranch is home to pronghorn antelope, ferruginous hawks, burrowing owls, golden eagles and other creatures that depend on the shortgrass prairie for sustenance. The green toad and the swift fox are two rare species protected here.

The ranch is a working model and catalyst for shortgrass prairie conservation. At annual range management seminars, the Conservancy and local government agencies share data with ranchers. These discussions focus on grazing techniques that can improve grass and beef production. The Conservancy is working to gradually return the plant communities on the ranch to a condition similar to pre-settlement days. As stocking rates

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### For More Information

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are reduced, plant vigor is improving. More desirable forbs, legumes and wildflowers are expected to make a resurgence. Bison, which enhance the health of the shortgrass prairie, have been reintroduced to the ranch.

### *Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve*

Cheyenne Bottoms is a complex of marshes and uplands in a 41,000-acre lowland basin that constitutes the largest system of wetlands in Kansas. The Conservancy owns and manages 7,364 acres of critical wetlands in the midst of this world-class natural wonder. Cheyenne Bottoms is located in Barton County, near Great Bend.



White pelicans at Cheyenne Bottoms (©Tomanek)

The “Bottoms” is a natural basin-like feature ringed on three sides by limestone, sandstone and shale bluffs. Large pools of wetlands and adjacent mud flats are alive with foraging birds during the seasonal migrations, when thousands of birds at a time stop to rest and feed. Shallow marshes make Cheyenne Bottoms a top shorebird spring migration staging area. Nearly half of all North American shorebirds migrating east of the Rocky Mountains visit the Bottoms each year, along with up to 250,000 waterfowl.

As the richest wetland feeding grounds in the migratory bird route known as the Central Flyway, Cheyenne Bottoms is critical to the survival of many species. Some 320 species of birds frequent Cheyenne Bottoms, including the federally endangered whooping crane, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, least tern and piping plover.

### *Anderson County Prairies*

Just an hour’s drive southwest of Kansas City and slightly east of the Flint Hills is a latticework of historic tallgrass prairies of high biological importance and subtle beauty. The Anderson County Prairies are a precious fragment of the millions of acres of tallgrass prairie, which once covered North America.

The Conservancy has owned and managed 128 acres of tallgrass prairie in Anderson County since 1998. In November 2003, the Conservancy acquired 1,242 acres of tallgrass prairie adjacent to the original Welda Prairie and renamed the area Anderson County prairies. Over the next five years, the Conservancy seeks to protect an additional 4,000 acres of ecologically significant prairie in Anderson County through direct acquisition and conservation easements.

While the Flint Hills prairies are better known, Anderson County’s deeper soils and higher annual rainfall support unique natural communities and more species. The fertile landscape abounds with healthy populations of native grasses – big bluestem, Indian grass, switchgrass – as well as purple coneflower, leadplant, prairie clover, black-eyed Susan, prairie gentian and spiderwort. The area is best known for a portion of the world’s largest population of Mead’s milkweed, a globally threatened plant that is the subject of ongoing University of Kansas research. The Henslow’s sparrow, a grassland songbird in sharp decline, and other grassland nesting birds and the crawfish frog live here as well.



Smoky Hill River, Smoky Valley Ranch (©Harold E. Malde)