



The Blue River runs 40 miles through three counties and two states. © Heartland Conservation Alliance

Green Development for the Blue River

Two-thirds of water in Kansas City metro area drains into this urban stream

There aren't many opportunities to protect a watershed before it's entirely developed, but The Nature Conservancy's Heidi Mehl and Kelly Blandford are doing just that for the Blue River.

The Blue River begins in Johnson County, Kansas and flows into Missouri where it joins the Missouri River near Independence. Two-thirds of the water in the Kansas City metropolitan area drains into the Blue, and increased residential, commercial and industrial development has hurt water quality and intensified the impacts of downstream flooding.

According to Mehl, manager of TNC's Healthy Streams for Kansas Initiative, there's still time to find

nature-based solutions—also called green infrastructure—that can reduce water treatment costs and mitigate flood damage.

“Conserving and managing the land along the headwaters of the river can make a big difference,” says Mehl. “We can get it back to naturally filtering water before it flows into the river and absorbing excess water during flood events.”

TNC has been protecting land around the river's headwaters with conservation easements since the 1990s. Blandford says now is the time to do more, before the Kansas-side of the Blue River is completely paved over. So earlier this year, TNC joined a coalition led by the Heartland Conservation Alliance (HCA)

and Mid-America Regional Council to chart a course forward for the Blue River. TNC and HCA partnered to bring in Kansas State University doctoral candidate Kelsey McDonough to expand a modeling study that predicts impacts of future land development and off-setting conservation strategies like stream buffers, parks and greenspace. The report will be completed in December 2018 and will be available to all the coalition organizations to prioritize conservation projects protecting the watershed.

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Red Hills Easement a First

Amid the rugged, red soil and mixed-grass prairie of the Red Hills, the male lesser prairie-chickens gather at dawn to begin a ritual of dance and song called “booming” in hopes of attracting a female mate. The grassland bird has been on a serious decline—recent surveys show the global population is less than 40,000 birds—but a new conservation easement protects nearly 1,500 acres of its habitat.

The easement is the first one in the state’s second-largest area of native prairie. The Nature Conservancy’s Red Hills Initiative coordinator, Ken Brunson, says the protection of this land will serve as an anchor for future conservation efforts in the region. Held by TNC, the easement ensures that this prairie in the heart of the Red Hills will never be plowed or divided.



Indian blanket flower (*Gaillardia pulchella*) in the Red Hills © Harland J. Schuster

“It’s not just prairie-chickens. So many species rely on undisturbed, contiguous prairie in the Red Hills,” adds Brunson. “That’s really our focus here: conserving the prairie on a large scale. This easement is a huge milestone but there’s still more to do.”

The Red Hills—also called the Gypsum Hills—stretch through seven counties in Kansas (including Clark, Comanche and Barber) and extend into Oklahoma. In addition to easements, TNC is helping bring prescribed fire back to the Red Hills, restoring a natural process to transform the landscape for the better.



Pronghorn, often called American antelope, prefer vast, open range where they graze prairie grass and other vegetation. © Bob Gress

Putting the Pieces Together

240 acres at center of Smoky Valley Ranch purchased

Ever since The Nature Conservancy purchased Smoky Valley Ranch in 1999, it has had its eye on adding the donut-hole of cropland that disrupted the otherwise intact ranch. With the recent purchase of 240 acres, two of three parcels in the center have been incorporated into the ranch. The 17,530-acre cattle and bison ranch in Logan County is the centerpiece of TNC’s work in western Kansas, where 80 percent of the native prairie has been converted to some other use.

“The inholdings have created logistical and operational inefficiencies for the ranch,” says Matt Bain, western Kansas conservation manager for TNC. “Owning this property and incorporating it into Smoky Valley Ranch will maximize the impact of limited funding for conservation.”

It is critical that we demonstrate healthy wildlife populations and successful ranching can go hand-in-hand.

Matt Bain, western Kansas conservation manager

and more iconic American wildlife. The new acres will also remain in agricultural production once they have been restored to shortgrass prairie. After seeding the land with grasses and other native plants, TNC will continue restoration through cattle and bison grazing.

“Like on the rest of Smoky Valley Ranch, our fundamental conservation strategy will be moderately stocking cattle and using ‘rest and rotation’ grazing,” explains Bain. “If we want to save the 20 percent of native prairie that’s left out here, it is critical that we can demonstrate healthy wildlife populations and successful ranching operations can go hand-in-hand.”