



Lesser prairie-chicken © Harland Schuster

Lesser Prairie-Chicken Recovery

30,302-acre sand sagebrush prairie establishes species stronghold

The sand sagebrush prairie of southwest Kansas may not be as well known as the Flint Hills, but don't let the anonymity fool you. Stretching from the Colorado border nearly to Garden City, this native grassland has just as much to offer. The namesake plant—also called sand shrub or sandhill sage—grows in distinctive clumps, reaching one to three feet in height. Tallgrass plant species like little bluestem and sideoats grama are common. The deep, sandy soil also produces shallow playa lakes—ephemeral wetlands that fill with rain and snow and gradually dry up. Then there's the wildlife: Swainson's hawk, scaled quail, swift fox, black-tailed prairie dog, burrowing owl, ornate box turtle and lesser prairie-chicken.

The Nature Conservancy's partnership with the Western Association of Fish

and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) protected more than 30,000 acres of sand sagebrush prairie last year, establishing a stronghold in Kansas for the imperiled lesser prairie-chicken.



Playa © Jim Griggs

The partnership agreement is designed to conserve and recover lesser prairie-chicken populations across five states (Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas). As part of the effort, WAFWA purchased a 30,302-acre ranch in Hamilton County and The Nature

Conservancy holds a conservation easement on the property. It is the single largest parcel of land that the Conservancy has protected in Kansas. In addition to facing pressure from energy and cropland development, the ranch was vulnerable to subdivision due to its large size. Subdivision can be devastating for lesser prairie-chickens and other wildlife who rely on large open range. The property also supports local ranching heritage through carefully managed cattle grazing while keeping the landscape ecologically intact.

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8.17

miles of Rattlesnake
Creek restored or
enhanced so far;
another 8.2 miles in
progress.

**Stream Restoration
to Benefit Wetland of
International Importance**



Whooping cranes © Dan Witt

Whether birdwatching, hiking or just enjoying a quiet moment, nature offers something for everyone. Photos clockwise © Ryan Donnell, © Dan Witt, © Jim Griggs

Experience Nature

Get out to the lands and water you help us protect!

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve | 2480 K-177 Highway, Strong City

Managed in partnership with the National Park Service, this Conservancy preserve features open spaces, a bison herd, 40 miles of public access hiking trails that are open 24/7 and catch-and-release fishing on three ponds and one creek. Stop in the Visitors Center and speak with a park ranger about prairie bus tours.

Cheyenne Bottoms

5 miles north of Great Bend

Off-road hiking is prohibited, but a network of public roads at Cheyenne Bottoms weaves throughout the wetland complex. The Kansas Wetlands Education Center on K-156 highway overlooks the Bottoms and features exhibits that tell the story of this wetland.

**I never thought I'd ever see
so much open space again in
my life.**

Bob R., age 94, visiting Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve

Smoky Valley Ranch | *Hiking trail head on County Road 350, Oakley*

Experience the prairie, its history, its conservation and scenic vistas through the use of hiking and horse trails on the west side of Smoky Valley Ranch. A small parking area and trail head are located on County Road 350, between Plains Road and Indian Road. Trails are open during daylight only. **NOTE: At the time of printing, the Little Jerusalem rock formations at Smoky Valley Ranch were not yet open to the public.**

Rattlesnake Creek begins in Ford County and flows northeast into Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. After the water filters through the Quivira wetlands, it joins the Arkansas River in Rice County. The surrounding land is primarily used to grow irrigated crops like corn, soybeans and cotton. The Nature Conservancy has partnered with WaterPACK (a coalition of agricultural producers), Kansas State University and the state's Groundwater District #5 to ensure sustainable agricultural water use in the Rattlesnake Creek watershed so that Quivira—a wetland of international importance—remains healthy. The work is just beginning, but nearly 2,000 acres have already been restored. Visit nature.org/streamsinkansas to learn about this and other freshwater projects.