



KANSAS

Impact Report

2025

Dear Friends,

Kansas is known for its thunderstorms. The ominous dark clouds, the lightning on the horizon. Sheltering inside as the pelting rain travels across the field. Livestock standing in stoic resignation. And then that fresh evening air and birdsong after the rains have passed.

Fortunately for us at The Nature Conservancy, storms don't distract us from what needs to be done. This year, as federal policies and funding decisions changed seemingly daily, our work continued. From protecting nearly 17,000 acres (26 square miles) to improving visitor services at Smoky Valley Ranch, we remain steadfast in conserving our Kansas prairies, streams and wildlife—and providing access for people to enjoy them—even when the forecast isn't in our favor.

Weathering storms is not for the faint of heart. This is why I am proud of our team in Kansas. When a job needs to be done, they do it. When a problem needs solving, they put their heads together and figure it out. Policies change and the relentless news cycle can make our heads spin, but The Nature Conservancy keeps the mission front and center, always.

I'm particularly excited that we're expanding our Generational Grasslands program to the Flint Hills. This innovative approach, which started only 4 years ago, has already impacted 250,520 acres of private lands, generated over \$8 million in funding for research, implementation and incentive payments and engaged over 300 ranching families in western Kansas. Now, we are turning east to scale this work even further.

But most of all, this work is possible because of you, our supporters who believe in us. Whether you planted a common milkweed in your garden for migrating monarch butterflies, wrote your legislators or included The Nature Conservancy in your will, your contribution is vital and appreciated. It takes all of us to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends, and together, we find a way.



With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie Roby". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "R" at the end.

Katie Roby
Kansas State Director

The Nature Conservancy is a global environmental nonprofit working to create a world where people and nature thrive. Our mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. And we've worked to do that in Kansas for 36 years, permanently protecting 180,000 acres—including six nature preserves open for public visitation.

Our approach reflects decades of learning and refining, and the special role TNC can play side-by-side with partners, communities and decision makers.

We have years, not decades, to take on the interconnected crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. By working together, we're overcoming barriers to the solutions our planet needs.



**Together, we
find a way.**



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2025 HIGHLIGHTS

by the

NUMBERS



**16,851 acres and
37 stream miles**
protected across the state



625 monarch butterflies
tagged by staff and volunteers



25 native seed species
collected for prairie restoration



3,774 seedlings
*planted at our newly established
native plant nursery in the Flint Hills*



111 bison calves
*born at Smoky Valley Ranch and
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve*

2,080 pounds
*heaviest bison weighed during
annual roundup*

New Visitor Experiences

at Smoky Valley Ranch



This year, we teamed up with TravelStorys GPS, an award-winning developer of accessible and informative multimedia tours, to create a guided audio tour of Smoky Valley Ranch. Visitors are invited to immerse themselves in the history of the land, learn about its biodiversity and discover more than ever before. The free, self-guided audio tour through Smoky Valley Ranch and Little Jerusalem Badlands offers a unique way to explore the area's rich ecology, geology and history.

Located 30 minutes from Oakley, Kansas, along the Western Vistas Historic Byway off of I-70, Smoky Valley Ranch features remarkable rolling hills, flowing grasses and abundant wildlife, including lesser prairie chickens and herds of pronghorn, mule deer and bison.

Can't make it to Smoky Valley Ranch? The tour can be enjoyed from the road or from the comfort of home. Scan the QR code to start your journey!



The Smoky Valley Ranch Audio Tour was made possible with funding in part by Kansas Tourism.

Policy Makes Conservation Possible

Advocating for Nature in Kansas and Beyond



Kansas Statehouse
© Henry Sadura



State Director Katie Roby and Kansas trustees Stephanie Turner, Kelly Harrison, Dale Trott and Chuck Rice. © Freya Sargent

Our approach to policy isn't just about influencing legislation—it's about creating lasting systems that protect nature and benefit people. Whether it's defending public lands or shaping climate policy, our strategy is built for long-term success. And right now, the policies and funding that protect our lands, waters and communities are under serious threat.

In October 2025, TNC hosted its largest-ever Advocacy Day during the biannual Volunteer Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., despite a government shutdown. More than 340 trustees from all 50 states and 11 countries held over 240 Hill meetings, including 131 with Republican offices

and 109 with Democratic offices. Kansas staff and trustees met with Senators Moran and Marshall, Representatives Davids and Schmidt, and staff from Representatives Mann and Estes to advocate for a new Farm Bill, defend public lands and share real stories from Kansans whose lives are shaped by conservation.

Back home, The Nature Conservancy is a proud member of **Kansans for Conservation**—a growing coalition of over 40 organizations representing farmers, ranchers, educators, businesses and outdoor enthusiasts. Together, we're pushing for long-term, dedicated conservation funding in Kansas. In 2025, we mobilized more than 100 advocates for a day of action at the statehouse. After introducing bills in 2024 and 2025, we've refined our strategy, expanded our coalition and built momentum. In 2026, we're advancing our strongest proposal yet to invest in working lands, wildlife and outdoor recreation.

The stakes are high—but so is our resolve. We're committed to advancing policy that is nonpartisan, science-based and rooted in practical, on-the-ground experience.

Scan the QR code to visit the Kansans for Conservation website to learn how you can get involved.



Leveraging Local Talent

Kansas Staff Selected to Guide Conservation at Scale

Dr. Heidi Mehl was selected for two important positions that will guide water conservation in Kansas and beyond for years to come. This year, Mehl became The Nature Conservancy's Great Plains Division Freshwater Director, having previously served as Director of Water and Agriculture programs for Kansas. In her new role, she will coordinate water conservation strategies spanning the division's 10 states, including Kansas.

Mehl was also appointed as a voting member of the Kansas Water Program Task Force, established by the Kansas Legislature earlier this year. **With only six positions for non-legislative members, this is a big win for conservation.** The task force aims to identify risks to water quality and quantity, determine approaches to manage those risks and find a long-term, dedicated funding source for water projects. The task force will submit reports of its findings and recommendations to the governor and legislature in 2026 and 2027.



"Water connects us all across communities and across landscapes. It's a crucial element that's needed by all living things.

However, human activity has impacted freshwater ecosystems more than any other habitat type. Freshwater plants and animals have declined by 83% since 1970 and only a third of the world's longest rivers remain free-flowing.

Forging partnerships and finding pragmatic solutions that work for both people and nature is the key to reshaping the way we manage our water resources."

Mehl holds a doctorate in geography with an emphasis on fluvial geomorphology and the cultural geography of water resources. Known for her collaborative and community-minded approach to conservation, she has worked on issues related to water quality and water sovereignty in the United States, Siberian Russia and Kenya. She is experienced in both agricultural and urban settings, working to improve water security for people and nature.

Heidi Mehl & Kansas River © Daniel Videtich

Preserving the Prairie

A Legacy of Science and Stewardship at Konza

Smooth sumac spread
© Chris Helzer

Nestled in the northern Flint Hills, the Konza Prairie Biological Station stands as a living laboratory and a testament to the power of partnership between The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Kansas State University (K-State). Together, we are working to study and protect one of the last remaining tallgrass prairies on Earth—an ecosystem as complex as it is fragile.

K-State's Dr. Jesse Nippert is at the forefront of this effort, tackling one of the prairie's greatest threats: the invasion of trees and shrubs, known as woody encroachment.

In the 1960s, TNC members dreamed of establishing a tallgrass prairie preserve in Kansas. But without local staff or an office in Kansas, the vision needed a local champion. That champion was K-State professor Lloyd Hulbert, who, since 1956, had been discussing with other faculty the need for a prairie ecological research site. In 1971, Hulbert helped secure 916 acres southeast of Manhattan, Kansas, with support from The Nature Conservancy and philanthropist Katherine Ordway. By 1977, the preserve had grown to over 8,600 acres and was officially named the Konza Prairie Biological Research Station.

Since 1980, Konza has been one of the original sites in the National Science Foundation's Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) program. This initiative has made Konza one of the most intensively studied grasslands in the world, generating over 2,200 scientific publications and supporting more than 1,000 undergraduate research experiences.

From Student to Steward

For Jesse Nippert, what began as a student job collecting data at Konza evolved into a lifelong calling. Now a University Distinguished Professor in K-State's Division of Biology, Nippert leads a team of researchers and students in exploring how prairie ecosystems function and adapt. His work is rooted in the foundational LTER research on fire, grazing and climate variability—three forces that shape grasslands globally.



A native Kansan, Nippert graduated from K-State with his bachelor's degree in park resource management and environmental sciences. He received his master's degree in forest resources from the University of Idaho and a doctorate in ecology from Colorado State University. He joined the K-State faculty in 2007.

The Silent Spread of Shrubs

Since 2010, Nippert has been investigating how native woody plants like American plum, rough-leaf dogwood and smooth sumac are overtaking grasslands. These species, once confined to specific areas, are now spreading rapidly. Resistant to traditional control methods, they threaten the biodiversity and resilience of the prairie.

“The problem is these woody shrubs won’t stay small,” Nippert warns. “We don’t yet have the tools to stop this threat.” The shrubs are clonal, meaning they reproduce through vegetative propagation, often via underground stems called rhizomes, to form large, connected colonies. This clonal growth gives them advantages like rapidly resprouting after disturbances and spreading to shade out competition.

His research has revealed that these plants don’t just crowd out native grasses—they alter the very soil and water systems that sustain the prairie. One of Nippert’s studies determined that, even after woody plants were removed from streambeds, water still failed to flow. The reason? The plants had changed the subsurface structure, creating deep channels that persist for decades and reduce water available to other species.

Nippert’s message to landowners is clear: early detection is critical.

“The only thing that is effective is to not ignore these species when they show up in locations where they can spread. It’s so much easier to remove an individual specimen before it takes over the landscape.”

Local Lessons, Global Impact

Nippert’s work extends beyond Kansas. For over 20 years, he has studied bush encroachment in South Africa, comparing results across continents to better understand how clonal shrubs behave and how best to manage them. These insights are helping to inform conservation strategies not just in the Great Plains, but in grassland ecosystems worldwide.

Through his collaboration with The Nature Conservancy, Nippert is helping shape management plans for landowners that support both ecological health and community stewardship of Kansas prairies and beyond.





Explore the
places we
protect.



2025 Kansas Yearbook:

Wildlife Voted Most Likely to...

Our Impact Report is a “yearbook” of sorts for our Nature Conservancy work in Kansas, and the high achievers of the prairie deserve their own feature. Enjoy this lighthearted look at the seriously rich diversity of Kansas wildlife.



Find romance in a bison wallow: Plains Spadefoot

Despite the bony lump between his eyes, the plains spadefoot enjoys an active love life when temporary pools and shallow ponds form during summer rains in the depressions created by bison wallowing. Known as “explosive breeders,” these toad-like amphibians get busy: after a heavy rain, they will emerge from underground so the females can lay up to 2,000 eggs at a time, which will hatch in 2–4 days. The tadpoles have just enough time to mature before the pools dry up.



Win the gym’s pushup challenge: Common Lesser Earless Lizard

Like many lizards, the common lesser earless lizard is territorial of its home range. The area may contain many individual lizards, but one male serves as king. Get too close, and dominance will be asserted by bobbing and push-ups in a distinct and threatening cadence. Though only 4–5 inches long and well camouflaged, you might spot them at TNC’s Little Jerusalem State Park or Smoky Valley Ranch.



Hang out all day at the pool: Topeka Shiner

The federally endangered Topeka shiner just wants to chill out in a cold, slow-flowing Flint Hills stream. Percolating groundwater keeps them going swimmingly during the hot summer months when water is scarce. You will know a Topeka shiner from other minnows by the black chevron at the base of its tail fin.

Plains spadefoot © Chris Helzer; Lesser earless lizard © Chris Helzer; Topeka shiner © Katelyn Weisbrod



Be a finalist on The Voice: Whooping Crane

That snowy white plumage! The crimson cap! The graceful dance moves! The whooping crane has both the style and talent to dominate any bugling competition it enters. Its 5-foot-long trachea is what gives it the power to belt out courtship duets with its sweetheart, and why it's loud enough for the audience to enjoy from across the marsh. Whooping cranes make a special appearance in the Cheyenne Bottoms area during spring and fall migrations in March and April, and again in October and November.



See you coming a mile (or four) away: Pronghorn

With eyesight eight times better than the vision of humans, it's difficult to surprise pronghorn from across the vast grasslands where they feed, rest and ruminate. But if they need to get away, they make it look easy: with speeds up to 90 mph, pronghorn are North America's fastest mammal. They thrive best in the wide prairie spaces of far-western Kansas, which makes Smoky Valley Ranch a good place to see them.



Bring you flowers: Regal Fritillary

With its bright orange forewings and black and white spots, the regal fritillary looks like a fuzzier, tougher version of the monarch. The regal fritillary is a homebody, however, preferring to live its entire life in the tallgrass prairie. June seed collection at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve is focused on violets: when regal fritillary eggs transform over winter and emerge as caterpillars, they do so right alongside baby violets, which serve as a fresh meal to help their growth.



Most likely to make a difference for nature: You!

Every acre we preserve, every river mile we restore and every wildlife habitat we save starts with a gift from supporters like you.

Scan the QR code and make your impact today.

Whooping crane © Joshua Pelta-Heller/TNC Photo Contest 2021; Pronghorn © Jeffrey Rich; Regal Fritillary © Charles Larry

Generational Grasslands Expansion

Collaborating with Ranchers in the Flint Hills

Tallgrass prairie once stretched from Texas to Canada, a sea of grass with big bluestem that grew over eight feet toward the sky. Today less than 4% of it remains, and the largest swath is in the Flint Hills of Kansas.

Ranching has been the backbone of the Flint Hills economy since the 1850s and has played a vital role in preserving tallgrass prairie. Cattle thrive on the nutrient-rich grasses, and their grazing allows room for other plant species, such as milkweed, and areas of short vegetation required by some birds, like horned larks. The areas cattle don't graze can become dense thatch that provides cover for nesting birds like prairie chickens.

Recognizing that ranchers are key to the future of this endangered region, this year TNC expanded its innovative Generational Grasslands program to the Flint Hills. **By keeping grasslands intact, ranchers provide an enormous benefit to society: healthy grasslands that clean our air and water, store carbon and provide food and recreation.**

The goal of Generational Grasslands is to establish an economic model that partially compensates ranchers for the benefits their land is providing to society and incentivizes the long-term stewardship of grasslands. By working together, ranchers and TNC conservation specialists can preserve critical areas, make ranching more profitable and bolster rural communities.

The support we provide to participating ranch families can include:

- assistance with federal funding applications
- additional private funding and incentives
- sustainable grazing plans
- estate and generational transfer planning
- invasive removal and treatment assistance
- prescribed fire recommendations
- workshop and field demonstrations

This is the latest chapter in The Nature Conservancy's long history of protecting special places in the Flint Hills. The Flint Hills expansion joins earlier and ongoing Generational Grasslands projects in the Chalk Bluffs of northwestern Kansas and the Red Hills of south-central Kansas and into Oklahoma. Since the program began in 2021, TNC has provided technical and/or financial assistance for more than 300 ranching families.

Grazing cows © Jim Griggs



Burning Better Together

Preserving Nature's Balance through Prescribed Fire

Grasslands evolved with fire—both natural wildfires and those used intentionally by Native caretakers before colonization. Today, prescribed fire remains a crucial tool for maintaining and enhancing prairie health, yet its use varies widely.

Since European settlement, fire has largely been suppressed in North American grasslands, contributing to ecological and economic degradation from woody plant encroachment.

Eastern red cedars and other woody plants now invade rangelands at alarming rates, reducing biodiversity and grazing productivity. In the Flint Hills, a strong culture of burning has helped keep cedars in check, but western Kansas faces greater challenges where fire has been less common historically.

Burning also supports economically important beef weight and prevents trees and woody shrubs from crowding out prairie plants. Research supports innovative techniques like patch burning—burning one-third of a ranch each year—to create a diverse, “patchy” landscape that benefits species such as grassland birds while maintaining cattle weight gains.

In addition to using “good fire” as a critical management tool on our own preserves, The Nature Conservancy partners with private landowners and organizations like the National Park Service and Konza Prairie Biological Station to restore fire’s natural role and help communities prepare for, manage and coexist safely with fire. We help create burn plans, share equipment and provide technical support. In western Kansas, TNC also supports community-led prescribed burn associations, who work together to put more fire on the ground and control cedar spread.



These strategies strengthen both ecology and economy, ensuring Kansas grasslands remain resilient for future generations. By promoting fire as a practical and sustainable management tool, we can protect native wildlife, improve ranching operations and preserve the unique character of Kansas prairies.

Prescribed burn at Chase State Fishing Lake © Bruce Hogle
Drip torch © Morgan Heim

Thank You, Donors!

The Nature Conservancy's accomplishments are only made possible by the many individuals, organizations, businesses and foundations that make financial contributions to our conservation programs. We are honored to recognize the following donors who made contributions of \$250 or more from July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025. Everyone listed here has ties to Kansas. Some live here; others live elsewhere and prefer their gifts be used for projects in Kansas. In some cases, these contributions supported conservation in other parts of the world. We deeply appreciate every gift and regret that space constraints prevent us from listing all donors.

We make every effort to ensure that our donor list is correct, but occasionally errors occur. If we have inadvertently left off your name, please accept our apologies and inform us by contacting (785) 233-4400 or kansas@tnc.org.

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