

# 2015 KANSAS Year-End Report

## **PROTECT-TRANSFORM-INSPIRE**

The Nature Conservancy's workplace is the whole planet, focusing on global challenges to the well-being of our land, water, oceans, cities and climate. We seek solutions to these challenges, using all the tools at our disposal. We undertake expanding conservation efforts around the world, each that seeks to

- » protect and restore landscapes, rivers and oceans at an unprecedented scale;
- » transform how we use the world's natural resources by affecting policy and practices locally and globally; and
- » inspire global action by people who value nature and its role in ensuring thriving communities and dynamic economies.

The articles that follow illustrate our work in **Kansas to Protect, Transform and Inspire.**

# PROTECT. TRANSFORM. INSPIRE.



“Thank you for your part in our conservation success this past year. We have much to celebrate...and we have much to do.”

— Rob Manes

## DEAR CONSERVATION PARTNERS:

With your strong and sustained support, The Nature Conservancy and its allies made significant progress last year in our work to safeguard the most wild and natural parts of Kansas. **We** – both you and I – are responsible and accountable for the condition of the natural environment that our children and grandchildren will inherit. Importantly, our work isn’t only for nature’s sake – the well-being of streams, prairies, forests and wildlife. Clean rivers benefit our own health. Functional wetlands clean our groundwater. Robust native grasslands feed us and store carbon. Similarly, healthy lands and waters undergird nearly every facet of our economy and our communities. Seldom are the interests of nature and people at odds.

Last year, we moved forward in our cooperative work with private landowners in the Flint Hills, Red Hills and elsewhere. We have been a major influence in the vast majority of the nearly 160,000 Kansas acres protected with voluntarily granted conservation easements, including nearly 50,000 easement acres granted to the Conservancy. As I write this, we are about to accept our first conservation easement to forever guard the natural richness of a Red Hills ranch.

We have improved the natural health of lands we steward as owners also. Major changes in burning and grazing management for Smoky Valley Ranch bison and cattle have produced better habitat for prairie chicken, prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets, burrowing owls and a host of other species. We have expanded the bison herd at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve to more than 70 truly wild animals, and we continue to work with the National Park Service to expand visitor opportunities there. At Cheyenne Bottoms, hundreds of acres of invasive trees that once diminished the function of that world-renowned wetland have been removed. We have also worked to ensure that oil and gas development in the area respects the Bottoms’ global importance to migrating birds. At Anderson County Prairies, we successfully relocated endangered Mead’s milkweed plants that were in the path of a highway expansion project. The Grasslands of the World Symposium at Konza Prairie Biological Station brought together experts from around the globe with prairie enthusiasts for the exchange of knowledge and passion about grassland ecosystems.

Perhaps more importantly, we worked together to foster conservation on lands where we have no title or ownership. In these cases, “we” includes countless ranchers, crop producers and other landowner conservationists who put their hands and hearts to the task of restoring and protecting what is natural about Kansas. Our strategic goal is to influence conservation on at least five acres for every acre where we hold an easement or ownership interest. In pursuit of this, we provide fire equipment and training to Red Hills landowners; we assist with controlled fire on thousands of acres; we help to foster wind energy development in areas where it does not damage natural landscapes. We also neared completion of the scientific investigations that will designate the Flint Hills as a landscape of hemispheric importance for migrating shorebirds. Our support of allies like the Ranchland Trust of Kansas, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Tallgrass Legacy Alliance also broadened our conservation footprint in the Smoky Hills and Flint Hills. It would be a major oversight if we didn’t mention our work to bolster important state and federal conservation programs and policies, including conservation easements and funding for wildlife protection.

So, I thank you for your part in our conservation success this past year. **We** have much to celebrate...and we have much to do.

Sincerely,

Rob Manes

**DIRECTOR, The Nature Conservancy — Kansas**



JEFF RUMANS

## NEW GRAZING STRATEGY TRANSFORMS HABITAT

The American bison is a major feature of the history and ecology of North America’s grasslands. They are icons of the prairie. Their nomadic grazing habits were perhaps the most significant non-weather influence on the ecology of the continent’s grasslands. Wild fires presented the other major ecological influence, but were less frequent in the shortgrass prairie than the other prairie types found in Kansas. American bison grazing, in addition to cattle grazing, is used at Smoky Valley Ranch in Logan County to manage plant communities toward defined ecological goals. In addition, American bison are a major point of interest and education to visitors.

The fundamental management factor, or consideration, for Smoky Valley Ranch is the “carrying capacity” of its grassland and the diversity of plant and animal species that inhabit the area. In particular, the carrying capacity supports (and limits) the number of grazing animals that survive. The most pervasive of these grazers are insects, black-tailed prairie dogs, bison and domestic livestock. Increases in grazing by any of these generally must be offset by decreases in others. Without these offsetting changes, the condition of the grassland habitat declines. This dynamic relationship drives many of the management decisions for Smoky Valley Ranch, including recent changes in American bison grazing to accommodate lesser prairie-chicken nesting and brood-rearing.

The importance of these grazers to the health of the prairie is clear, yet it takes considerable infrastructure to ensure the animals are handled safely. This year, the team at Smoky Valley Ranch wrapped up Phase 1 of modifications to the bison and cattle handling facility. This included installing

and utilizing previously unused materials for working with bison such as a handling chute, tub and hydraulic gates. This additional capacity will allow the staff to move both cattle and bison through the handling facility for yearly monitoring and examination. Facilities must be much bigger and stronger to accommodate bison and keep everyone – including the bison – safe. As part of Phase 1, approximately 1,200 feet of existing panels were replaced with steel pipe fencing six feet tall. This fall and winter, 14 additional gates will be hung with catwalks and gate rope assemblies and will allow us to put our existing herd through the facility sometime in 2016. Phase 2 will include purchase and installation of a permanent scale that will be critical to evaluating bison performance and health relative to our grazing experiments and goal of demonstrating a year-long grazing operation with bison. An additional 1,200 feet of pipe fencing will be required to ultimately handle a desired herd of 160 bison, including a calf working area, by 2020.

DONOR PROFILE

Childhood Lessons Inspires Giving

MARLENE WATSON, LANSING, KANSAS  
NATURE CONSERVANCY MEMBER SINCE 2007



LAURA ROSE CLAWSON



GEORGE IVY/TNC



DEVAN KING/TNC



KRIS KNIGHT

**Marlene Watson** is an Oklahoman by birth, was an American living abroad for a time, settled and raised a family of Iowans, and has chosen to live out her life as a Kansan. Most importantly, she considers herself a citizen of the world and, as such, she has a responsibility to do right by the Earth. She has supported the Conservancy’s work in Haiti and Africa as well as efforts to advance clean energy and reduce impacts from energy development.

**MW:** My father instilled the concept of conservation in me. He was trained both as a minister and in agriculture. He taught classes on conservation in Oklahoma in the 1940s and 1950s. There weren’t many people concerned about saving other people’s land back then, but Dad’s conscience told him to do what’s right. The first hymn I ever learned was “This is My Father’s World” and that stuck with me – “though the wrong seems oft so strong” I’m thankful I can do some good.

But she wasn’t always certain how to have an impact. **MW:** My husband Herb and I visited Jamaica, but I couldn’t enjoy it because I saw too many people were hurting. I wanted to help but I realized I can’t do it

myself. I need people that know what they’re doing, like The Nature Conservancy. I like the way the Conservancy works with people and governments and villages to get cooperation. The Nature Conservancy works with people and other organizations so well. It really impresses me.

How does she decide what projects to support? **MW:** Everyone responds to something different. I want to enjoy giving. I give to what’s most fun. Or sometimes what’s most upsetting. Poaching has been making the news lately, and it makes me so mad. I realize they’ve got to make a living but think ‘how can they do this?’ The Nature Conservancy finds ways to protect “My Father’s World” while helping people, too.

Parting thoughts? **MW:** The only sense of doom I have in my life is the climate. People can be so shortsighted. If we carry on this way, we’re not always going to have a world that’s healthy for our children and grandchildren, for the next generation to grow up in. I’m glad that the Conservancy is there to help turn things around.



If you’d like to learn more about ways The Nature Conservancy works outside of Kansas, visit [nature.org](https://www.nature.org) or give us a call at 785-233-4400.

UPDATE

Embracing Renewable Energy Responsibly

The Central Great Plains Grassland Initiative is a collaborative effort to conserve two vast areas of native prairie in parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Conservancy staff from Kansas and Oklahoma met near Pawhuska, Oklahoma in June 2015 to assess next steps associated with this important initiative. Perhaps the most important and timely effort in this initiative is the Conservancy’s work related to wind development in the Great Plains. The Nature Conservancy is a strong proponent of renewable energy development that is deployed in ways that protect our most important ecological resources. A detailed analysis conducted by several Conservancy scientists shows there are many places that can accommodate wind energy farms in an environmentally sensitive way, minimizing impacts to sensitive habitats and species and avoiding impacts to the most sensitive areas altogether. In fact, across portions of Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas included in this initiative, there are more than 7.4 million acres of available land with high wind potential suitable for wildlife-friendly development. That’s an area more than four times higher than what’s needed to meet U.S. Department of Energy goals for renewable wind energy for the entire three states combined. It is important to understand that the market for wind energy in the Great Plains may include as many as 18 states that could receive power generated from wind farms in Kansas and Oklahoma alone. Potential for market demand makes it more important than ever to work to ensure wind farms are sited in an environmentally sensitive way.



JIM GRIGGS

Reclaiming Freshwater Streams

**IN A LAND-LOCKED STATE LIKE KANSAS**, it can be easy to focus on the seas of grass. With a mission to conserve the lands *and* waters on which all life depends, The Nature Conservancy is working to protect rivers, lakes and watersheds as well.

Fresh water sources are in stark jeopardy globally. A billion people around the world face daily water shortages. Energy production, sprawling cities, food production, a burgeoning human population and a changing climate threaten the sustainability of this most vital natural resource.

In Kansas, streams – from large rivers to small creeks – are arguably the state’s most neglected natural features. A 2012 assessment conducted by the Kansas Department of Health & Environment found 75% of streams in the state are impaired for human use. A land that was once laced with clean, grass-fringed and shaded flowing waters is now home to some of the most degraded streams in North America. While not all Kansas streams are recoverable, many can be restored, and some are still nearly as pure and wild as they were before European settlement.

Restoration and conservation of the region’s streams often utilizes many of the same practices that are essential to healthy grasslands. For example, traditional conservation easements can be targeted to protect the headwaters of streams, protecting the source of freshwater.

The Red Hills region of south-central Kansas, also called the Gyp Hills due to the presence of exposed gypsum deposits, features diverse plant and wildlife communities and a thriving livestock grazing culture. This area is dissected by spring-fed streams, red-walled canyons and dramatic topography. The streams eventually flow into the Medicine Lodge River or the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River. Invasive eastern red cedar trees are increasing exponentially throughout the Red Hills. These trees result in the loss of valuable livestock forage and negatively impact the flow of Red Hill streams. A single eastern red cedar can absorb 30 gallons of water per day, which equates to 50,000 gallons of water per acre per day on heavily-infested rangeland. In some cases, streams have dried completely due to the invasion of eastern red cedars. The good news? Tree removal combined with strategic grazing plans can successfully return the flow of water. In 2015, the Conservancy worked closely with private landowners using controlled fire to eliminate cedar trees affecting stream flow.

The benefits of improving the health of our streams in Kansas reach far beyond healthy aquatic ecosystems for fish, birds and plants. All Kansans can benefit through healthier drinking water, the reduced need for municipal water purification, natural flood protection, reduced sedimentation of reservoirs, recreational opportunities and a more sustainable water supply for all users. In the Conservancy’s 2015-2017 Strategic Plan for conservation in Kansas, securing freshwater was given particular emphasis.

In 2016, a dedicated freshwater initiative focused on healthy streams will be launched thanks to start-up funding from the David Beals Charitable Trust, Bank of America, N.A., Trustee. The main goals of the **David T. Beals, III Healthy Streams for Kansas Initiative** are:

- » Long-term, large-scale protection of remaining pristine streams, headwaters and streams.
- » Restoration and subsequent protection of degraded streams.
- » Increased awareness and understanding among Kansas, inspiring action for stream conservation.
- » Improved water quality and security for Kansas communities, industry and agriculture.



JIM GRIGGS

# ENHANCING BIRD HABITAT AT CHEYENNE BOTTOMS

**RECENTLY, ROBERT PENNER AND KEITH REIF** got a little lost while working near Blood Creek at Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve. With a combined 34 years of experience working at Cheyenne Bottoms, they were understandably surprised to look up from the creek bed and not know exactly where they were. “I never realized how much we used the trees as landmarks” said Penner, Avian Programs Manager for The Nature Conservancy in Kansas. Over the past year, Penner and Reif have been working to remove the trees from both Blood Creek and Shop Creek in an effort to restore the flow

of water – a necessary ingredient in the detailed recipe to turn dry grass fields into wet marshes where thousands of sandpipers, cranes, herons, fowl and other birds rest their wings and fill their bellies midway through their migrations.

Cheyenne Bottoms is a naturally occurring wetland basin in Barton County, Kansas – formed by the dissolution of underlying salt formations millions of years ago. Historically, it encompassed 41,000 acres, and today, more than 27,000 acres is protected by The Nature Conservancy and the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism. When the state acquired nearly 20,000 acres in the 1950s, it was designated a wildlife area and a series of dikes and canals were constructed to both impound and divert water as necessary. In 1990, the Conservancy began purchasing what is now the almost 8,000-acre Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve in an effort to protect additional wetlands north of the state property. In 1996, Penner was hired to manage the preserve and he hasn’t slowed down since. At that time, an extensive 100-page wetland restoration and management plan was designed for the Nature Conservancy properties at Cheyenne Bottoms. That plan, coupled with regular strategic plans, continues to guide conservation efforts. “We have more projects in the works now than we ever did” says Penner.



DAVE BRYAN

“To appreciate the beauty of birds, you just need to open your eyes and ears. To care about their future, you have to open your heart and soul.”

— Robert Penner

The list of accolades for the Bottoms goes on and on: a Hemispheric Reserve\*, a Globally Important Bird Area†, a Wetland of International Importance‡. Those distinctions help to keep up the preservation momentum, but they don’t mean the job is done. With less than 20% of the state’s wetlands remaining, it’s imperative that The Nature Conservancy continue to improve operations and ecological conditions at Cheyenne Bottoms and also work to conserve other wetlands sites.

This year, The Nature Conservancy partnered with Ducks Unlimited and Kansas Wildscape Foundation to purchase 320 acres adjacent to the Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve. The property was long ago converted to cropland and a series of berms and ditches spanning the entire area was cut to drain the water away. Penner and Reif have plans to work with those same partners to restore the hydrology of the land, smoothing out the field and encouraging flooding in the spring; which brings us back to the tree removal along Blood Creek and Shop Creek. A single salt cedar can absorb as much as 200 gallons of water a day, and too many trees means more than just a lot of water not making it down the channel. By removing 200 acres of trees and dead limbs, approximately 1,000 acres of the wetlands will be restored. That work is just one element of what Penner calls Phase One of his current restoration efforts. More projects are planned across the Cheyenne Bottoms complex – reconstruction of water control structures, acquisition of inholdings – as well as protection of other important wetlands across the state, like Talmo Marsh to the north and McPherson Wetlands to the east.

“I won’t be here forever, but the Conservancy will. I’m doing what I can now to make it the best it can be when someone visits 99 years from now,” says Penner.

\*listed by the Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network, indicating more than 30 percent of an entire species population utilizes the site.  
† designated by the American Bird Conservancy.  
‡ designated by the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty adopted in 1971 to ensure the conservation and wise use of all wetlands.



JIM RICHARDSON

# LONG-TERM CONSERVATION NEEDS SUPPORT AND ADVOCACY

“Conservation will ultimately boil down to rewarding the private landowner who conserves the public interest.”

— Aldo Leopold

**IN 1992, THE KANSAS LEGISLATURE** authorized the use of conservation easements, defining their purpose as “retaining or protecting natural, scenic or open-space values of real property, assuring its availability for agricultural, forest, recreational or open-space use, protecting natural resources, maintaining or enhancing air or water quality or preserving the historical, architectural, archaeological or cultural aspects of real property.” Since then, conservation easements have been used to conserve about 160,000 acres of privately owned agricultural land and natural areas in Kansas and The Nature Conservancy played a role – large or small – in most of them.

Conservation easements allow land to forever remain substantially unchanged from its natural condition. Landowners often report that the primary reason they pursued a conservation easement is the long-term opportunity it offers. Just as it wouldn’t help to reduce climate change much if a tree were planted one year only to be cut the next, conservation easements rely on perpetual maintenance.

Most of the conservation easements in Kansas are on agricultural grasslands grazed by cattle or hayed for grass feed and ensure it remains protected yet productive. As the world population approaches 9 billion, it is imperative to keep conservation easements a permanent and viable choice for landowners. As State Director Rob Manes says, “If we as Kansans don’t take care of it, the loss of an entire ecosystem is on us.”

In early 2014, a bill was introduced into the Kansas Senate that would limit the duration of conservation easements to a set number of years. Nature Conservancy staff and members, as well as countless other Kansans, rallied to defeat the proposal that would have effectively eliminated the value and use of one of the most important land preservation tools in the state.

Over the past year, the Conservancy added three easements in the Flint Hills of Kansas, worked closely with other land trusts and public agencies to assist with their easement programs, and began the lengthy process to initiate the first conservation easement in the Red Hills. As we near the 2016 Congressional session, the Conservancy will continue to talk with lawmakers about the benefits of conservation easements and their importance to Kansans.

**DEFINITION:** Conservation easement: a legal agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization, such as The Nature Conservancy, that restricts future activities on the land to protect its conservation features.

“The opportunity to make a legal contract for the future of a piece of the Flint Hills is something The Nature Conservancy and other land trusts have to offer. There is no change of ownership, no sale of property. I am still the steward of this land. I chose to donate my conservation easement rather than ask for payment because then funds are left with the Conservancy to do other good work. I am happy and at peace knowing that my exuberant prairie will keep its beauty forever.”

—Valerie Wright and her husband Simon Malo donated a conservation easement on their Flint Hills property to The Nature Conservancy in early 2015.

LAND OWNER PERSPECTIVE

Transforming My Family Ranch

TED ALEXANDER  
ALEXANDER RANCH, BARBER COUNTY



KEN BRUNSON

**I TOOK OVER THE ALEXANDER RANCH IN 1984.** Originally, it was part of the larger Skinner Ranch from my mother’s side and covers more than 7,000 acres. When I started here, this ranch was infested with cedar trees – more than infested, three-quarters of what should have been open prairie was covered with trees. I’ve spent every year since 1984 cutting cedar trees and conducting controlled or “prescribed” burns on a regular schedule to keep new tree growth at bay. I’ve also done other work to transform the rangeland to a productive grazing operation. In recent years, I’ve turned over the management to my son, Brian, who is continuing with the same practices.

I’ve participated in a number of programs through the years to help share the cost of the cedar cutting improving watering facilities and grazing programs. With the assistance of staff from the Natural Resources Conservation Service\*, I initiated a rotational grazing program which permitted a regular rest of grazed pastures so that grass had a chance to have adequate recovery. This has helped greatly with the overall rangeland and soil health. I’ve been very interested in soil health in recent years. Good soil health gets to the basis for sustainable rangelands and I see The Nature Conservancy’s involvement here in helping draw additional attention and efforts to this most important issue.

It’s also been quite rewarding to have helped create and be involved in the Comanche Pool Prairie Resource Foundation which has helped with grants to help promote some of the same range improvement programs in the Red Hills. I was very interested in The Nature Conservancy coming into the Red Hills to add to the partnerships and efforts already underway. We can use all the help we can get! The Nature Conservancy’s involvement has assisted the Gyp Hills Prescribed Burn Association, of which I have been a founder and member, with equipment, public relations and information, and training workshops. The encroachment on grasslands by cedar trees and other invasive plants is the biggest threat to not only the wildlife which depends on healthy soil and rangeland but also our livelihoods as ranchers. With The Nature Conservancy joining us and our other partners here, they are contributing to the overall effort to help keep Red Hills’ wildlife and cattle grazing ranches viable. I applaud The Nature Conservancy’s foresight in making the Red Hills a priority and in establishing programs to help with the amazing natural resources and ranching culture here.

\*EDITOR’S NOTE: The Nature Conservancy’s Red Hills Initiative was launched in part by a partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The Conservancy’s work with NRCS focuses on improving habitat for lesser prairie-chicken and cedar tree removal along with conservation of native resources such as caves, rare herpetological species, bats, rangeland and streams.

LEADING THE WAY FOR PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION

**THE MAJORITY OF LAND IN KANSAS IS PRIVATELY-OWNED.** Beyond the day-to-day management of the millions of acres of native prairie, Kansas landowners face many challenges regarding the future of their lands. The Nature Conservancy looks beyond the borders of preserves to share proven conservation practices with other organizations and private landowners. Increasing conservation on critical lands across the state and making a larger environmental impact requires a collaborative approach that resonates both ecologically and economically.

The Conservancy’s three-year strategic plan for Kansas, implemented in 2015, identified a goal to influence at least five additional acres for every acre owned. This can only be accomplished through continued conservation partnerships; cooperative ventures with landowners; and sharing of research, experience and information. Three ways the Conservancy worked in the past year to influence the management of private lands are through controlled fire initiatives; hosting range management schools and other educational outreach; and assisting landowners with the development of their grazing plans.



Fire is one of the best tools to ensure rich grazing pastures that also allow for wildlife and plant diversity. Witnessing the annual burns in the Flint Hills has become a bucket-list worthy experience for many visitors. However, in other parts of Kansas, the lack of planned prairie fires has allowed the grasslands to become overrun with cedar trees and other invasive or non-native plants. In the Red Hills of south-central Kansas, the Conservancy supplies local burn associations with equipment and training support to ensure safe and effective controlled fires. Each burn – 15 so far this year – is a community event, involving members of partner organizations like the Gyp Hills Prescribed Burn Association, Kansas Prescribed Burn Association, Cherokee Strip Prescribed Burn Association and Barber County Conservation District. Typically, at least 20 people assist with each burn, and on one burn there were 50 people and 20 fire rigs.

Through partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Conservancy staff conduct vegetation assessments and assist with the development of grazing plans adopted on dozens of properties covering thousands of acres. These plans are designed to improve habitat for species like lesser prairie-chicken while ensuring rangeland health for cattle. The Conservancy is also able to direct landowners to programs that provide financial incentives to implement management changes that benefit the ecology and health of the prairie.

The bi-annual Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition range schools again featured two Conservancy properties, Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and Smoky Valley Ranch. The range schools, held in August in both eastern and western Kansas, feature topics ranging from plant ecology and grassland identification to managing rangelands for wildlife and evaluating management decisions. Nearly 50 ranchers and conservation partners attended the three-day schools to learn from their neighbors, Conservancy scientists, and agency and university staff.

The Conservancy also partnered with the Ranchland Trust of Kansas to present two workshops to help landowners navigate lesser prairie-chicken regulations and understand how the Endangered Species Act listing impacts their cattle ranching operations.



KATIE HAWK

# Next Generation Conservationists

THE DEMAND FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SPECIALISTS IS EXPECTED TO GROW 15 PERCENT BETWEEN 2012 AND 2022, OUTPACING THE NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT AVERAGE.

**LONG HOT DAYS ON THE PRAIRIE** checking on cattle and fences may not be everyone's idea of a dream summer, but for college students looking to jumpstart their careers it's maybe the best place to be. This past summer, The Nature Conservancy hired two college students as seasonal field staff providing real-life work experience. The Conservancy received the benefit of extra hands during a busy season and empowered the next generation of the conservation workforce.

To students like Cale Hedges and Justin Roemer the opportunity to work for the Conservancy means more than a summer job.

For Emporia State University senior Cale Hedges, it was a chance to build his reputation as an up-and-coming conservation professional and connect him to other conservation professionals. At Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve,

Cale oversaw a nine-person maintenance crew made of up high school students. As part of the National Park Service's Youth Conservation Corps, the crew was responsible for cutting trees, trail maintenance and other activities.

"Right away you need to establish yourself as a hard worker and gain significant experience that will translate into professional jobs. This summer, I was supervising students not much younger than me, but the experience was important because it gave me confidence on how to manage a staff and effectively communicate our goals," said Cale. "My work at the Conservancy allows me to get my name and experience into the right ring of people. I want to work as a land manager and I think this experience will be invaluable."

Fort Hays State University senior Justin Roemer has worked two summers at Smoky Valley Ranch, first as an intern and then as a seasonal employee. His primary responsibilities were helping with the bison and cattle operation and showing the ropes to the new intern this summer. Justin hopes his experience with the Conservancy will lead him to other cultures and countries.

"A place like Australia really appeals to me. They have a similar mixed-grass prairie ecosystem which I am familiar with in Kansas, but they have a really unique culture with the aboriginal population," said Justin. "I like the idea of taking the experience I gained here and using it to improve grasslands in other parts of the world."

Cale Hedges, Emporia State University

Both of these young conservation professionals credit their families for fostering their interest in the outdoors. For them, the calling to pursue a conservation-related career is born out of a desire to ensure that natural areas are protected beyond their lifetimes.

"Our natural world is shrinking fast. We have urbanization of rural areas and development pressures. I think about places like the Flint Hills and worry that this huge grassland will continue to disappear. I want a career where I can always enjoy a beautiful prairie sunset and ensure others enjoy it, too," said Cale.

Justin sees communication as the key to future generations being invested in nature. "You have to be able to tell your message in a way that people understand and care about; whether that's through hands-on experience or using technology," said Justin. "The outdoors make life worthwhile. Shouldn't we want to protect it?"



STACEY HEDGES



KATIE HAWK

## GRASSLANDS OF THE WORLD:

In June 2015, more than 7,400 people attended a series of events where grassland experts from five continents shared their experiences in restoration, protection and the impact humans have on the grasslands around the world. Special thanks to our partners Symphony in the Flint Hills and the National Park Service and sponsors AT&T Kansas, Bill and Erma Riley, Phil Howe and George Terbovitch.



Take a peek into the other cultures and regions that derive their livelihoods from grasslands through videos, photos, and articles at [nature.org/grasslandssymposium](http://nature.org/grasslandssymposium)



KATIE HAWK

From left to right: Leandro Baumgarten, Randy D. Rodgers, Bob Hamilton, Chris Pague, David Hinchley, Terry Riley, Mike Harrison, Laura Paulson, Brian Obermeyer



RUTH PALMER

Justin Roemer, Fort Hays State University

# NATURE'S CLASSROOM AND LABORATORY

**SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WORK** that can be done with land by The Nature Conservancy is research. Often conducted in partnership with local universities, Conservancy lands offer opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students to conduct research and launch their careers in the field of natural resources. 2015 was no exception, as numerous projects were either ongoing or completed on the Conservancy's preserves in Kansas.

At Smoky Valley Ranch in western Kansas, numerous research projects were underway this past year. Several projects in partnership with Kansas State University involved research related to lesser prairie-chickens, black-tailed prairie dogs and grasshopper sparrows. One project tested remote sensing technologies to monitor vegetation. The development of this fast and accurate monitoring will allow ranchers to determine if their grazing management plans are working by identifying the amount and quality of forage available for cattle while also assessing conditions for lesser prairie-chicken habitat.



KEVIN SINK



KEVIN SINK



MELISSA MEYER

Several other researchers from Texas A&M University, Southern Illinois University, and Colorado State University are utilizing Smoky Valley Ranch for research related to plant diversity in grasslands, prairie stream ecology and herpetology research. Colorado State University is also conducting herpetology research at the Conservancy's Cheyenne Bottoms preserve. Also at Cheyenne Bottoms, Fort Hays State University is conducting research to understand the effects of weather on deer movement.

Konza Prairie Biological Station, owned by The Nature Conservancy and managed by Kansas State University as a research site, is dedicated to research about the tallgrass prairie. Since its inception in 1971, scientists conducting studies at Konza have published over 1,580 scientific papers and over 250 graduate students have received their Masters and/or Ph.D. based on Konza research.

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, managed in partnership with the National Park Service, is another location with extensive research taking place. Kansas State University researchers and students are conducting native pollinator, fisheries, stream ecology and vegetation studies. Emporia State University is conducting research related to limestone geology and seasonality of fire to control invasive species.

University of Southern Illinois researchers are studying the insects that live in streams at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, and the University of Wisconsin is using the preserve as a site for a living plant genome reserve program.

And in case you were feeling like another large university in Kansas was left out, the University of Kansas and Kansas Biological Survey conducts extensive research and assists with management at our Sunset Prairies in Anderson County. Research at this preserve includes study of vegetation, plant response to fire, bird surveys including greater prairie-chickens and transplantation of Mead's milkweed.



MELISSA MEYER

**DOWNY BROME**



DAVE BRYAN

**A GODWIT**



JIM GRIGGS

**A DICKCISSEL**



KEVIN SINK

**CLAPBOARD HILL FENCE, FLINT HILLS**

# EXPLORE KANSAS!

Since 2004, The Nature Conservancy and National Park Service have cooperatively managed the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, a nearly 11,000-acre national park unit nestled in the heart of the Flint Hills. The National Park Service turns 100 in 2016, and in the spirit of their centennial celebration, The Nature Conservancy invites you to get out and explore Kansas!

**1. Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, 2480 K-177 Highway, Strong City, [www.nps.gov/tapr](http://www.nps.gov/tapr)**

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve is nearly 11,000-acres in the heart of the Flint Hills. Managed in cooperation with the National Park Service the preserve features wide open spaces, seasonal wildflowers, a bison herd, hiking trails, fishing ponds and daily tours. | *Nature Conservancy preserve*

**2. Konza Prairie Biological Station, 100 Konza Prairie Lane, Manhattan, [www.keep.konza.ksu.edu](http://www.keep.konza.ksu.edu)**

Konza Prairie Biological Station is a 8,600-acre nature preserve and research area located near Manhattan. Konza’s hiking trails take you through lowland forest, across Kings Creek, over limestone ledges that lead into thousands of acres of open tallgrass prairie. Please note: portions of the preserve are off-limits to the public to ensure the integrity of research being conducted. | *Nature Conservancy preserve*

**3. Cheyenne Bottoms, Kansas Wetlands Education Center, 592 NE K-156 Highway, Great Bend, [www.wetlandscenter.fhsu.edu](http://www.wetlandscenter.fhsu.edu)**

Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve is an 8,000-acre wetland area adjacent to the 19,857 Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area near Great Bend. The entire wetland basin features seasonal migration of thousands of shorebirds and waterfowl and offers exceptional bird watching opportunities. | *Nature Conservancy preserve*

**4. Smoky Valley Ranch, Hiking Trail Head on 350th Road, Oakley, [www.nature.org/kansas](http://www.nature.org/kansas)**

Smoky Valley Ranch is a nearly 17,000-acre remnant of shortgrass prairie in Logan County. The bison and cattle ranch features two hiking trails. The chalk badlands in this part of the state contain a fossil record of animals that live 80 million years ago. | *Nature Conservancy preserve*

**5. Big Basin Prairie Preserve Wildlife Area, North of the intersection of Kansas Highways 283 and 160, Clark County, [www.ksoutdoors.com](http://www.ksoutdoors.com)**

Big Basin Prairie Preserve is a 1,818-acre nature preserve near Ashland in the Red Hills region. The site is known for St. Jacob’s Well, a water-filled sinkhole which lies in the Little Basin and the Big Basin, a lush mile-wide crater-like depression, also resulting from a sinkhole. The area is grazed by bison and is open to the public. | *Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism*

**6. Dingus Natural Area, 12654 W 750th Road, Mound City, [www.ksbirds.org/kos/Dingus.htm](http://www.ksbirds.org/kos/Dingus.htm)**

Dingus Natural Area is a 167-acre woodland in Linn County. There are no trails or roads leading into the area, so exploring takes some effort. Once there, you can enjoy many species of woodland wildflowers and excellent birding. | *Kansas Ornithological Society*

**7. Olathe Prairie Center, 26235 West 135th Street, Olathe, [www.ksoutdoors.com](http://www.ksoutdoors.com)**

The Prairie Center is a 300-acre tallgrass preserve and education site located just five minutes from downtown Olathe. Hiking trails wind through prairie and riparian woodlands. There is also a small lake for fishing and water studies. The preserve is open every day from dawn till dusk. | *Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism*



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To learn more about the National Park centennial and tour a park near you, visit [www.findyourpark.com](http://www.findyourpark.com).

## OUR MISSION

The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

### The Nature Conservancy’s Values

Our approach to conservation has earned us the trust and support of millions of people across the world and is reflected by The Nature Conservancy’s Values. Our values are not mere platitudes; they are deeply held convictions for all who represent The Nature Conservancy:

#### Integrity Beyond Reproach

We will meet the highest ethical and professional standards in all of our organizational endeavors and, in doing so, we hold ourselves accountable to our mission and to the public.

#### Respect for People, Communities and Cultures

Enduring conservation success depends on the active involvement of people and partners whose lives and livelihoods are linked to the natural systems we seek to conserve. We respect the needs, values and traditions of local communities and cultures, and we forge relationships based on mutual benefit and trust.

### KANSAS STAFF LIST

Rob Manes, State Director, 10 years  
Delane Atcitty, Rangeland Specialist, Smoky Valley Ranch, 1 year  
Matt Bain, Smoky Valley Ranch Project Manager II, 3 years  
Rich Bailey, Director of Philanthropy, 16 years  
Ken Brunson, Red Hills Project Coordinator, 4 years  
Natalie Busby, Operations Coordinator, 1 year  
Chelsea Carter, Operations Coordinator, Iowa and Kansas, 3 years  
Jake Christianson, Conservation Ranch Hand, less than 1 year  
John Cougher, Associate Director of Philanthropy, 4 years  
Jim Hays, Conservation Project Coordinator, 8 years  
Cale Hedges, Tallgrass Prairie Seasonal Conservation Assistant, summer 2015  
Ralph Jones, TIS Operations Manager, Nebraska and Kansas, 10 years  
Kris Knight, Director of Conservation, 7 years  
Paula Matile, Conservation Specialist II, 9 years  
Kerry Morris, Director of Operations for Kansas & Iowa, 21 years  
Laura Norian, Grants Specialist, Nebraska and Kansas, 15 years  
Brian Obermeyer, Landscape Programs Manager, 14 years  
Ruth Palmer, Executive Assistant, 18 years  
Robert Penner, Cheyenne Bottoms & Avian Program Manager, 19 years  
Keith Reif, Cheyenne Bottoms Land Steward, 15 years  
Justin Roemer, Conservation Ranch Hand, less than 1 year  
Laura Rose Clawson, Philanthropy Specialist, 6 years  
Shelby Stacy, Marketing & Communications Coordinator, 9 years  
Gregory Wingfield, Conservation Land Specialist, 10 years

Special Thanks to Kate Shorrock, Land Protection Manager with the Colorado Field Office, who served as Interim Director of Conservation for Kansas in 2015, along with Brian Obermeyer and Robert Penner.

In Memory of Lance Hedges, Director of Conservation 2012-2014.

### Commitment to Diversity

We recognize that conservation is best advanced by the leadership and contributions of men and women of diverse backgrounds, beliefs and cultures. We will recruit and mentor staff to create an inclusive organization that reflects our global character.

### One Conservancy

Our strength and vitality lie in being one organization working together in local places and across borders to achieve our global mission. We value the collective and collaborative efforts that are so essential to our success.

### Tangible, Lasting Results

We use the best available science, a creative spirit and a non- confrontational approach to craft innovative solutions to complex conservation problems at scales that matter and in ways that will endure.

### KANSAS BOARD OF TRUSTEES

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# TEACHING THE SCIENCE BEHIND HOW NATURE WORKS FOR US

Nature is the fantastic factory that makes the building blocks of all our lives – food, drinking water, the stuff we own, and the air we breathe.

That’s why The Nature Conservancy and its 700 scientists created the website NatureWorksEverywhere.org – to help students learn the science behind how nature works for us and how we can help keep it running strong.

Nature Works Everywhere gives teachers, students and families everything they need to start exploring and understanding nature around the globe alongside Nature Conservancy scientists—interactive games, videos and interactive lesson plans that align to education standards and can be customized for each classroom.

## SAMPLE LESSON PLANS:



**BEE DETECTIVE**  
Discover the Culprit Behind Declining Bee Populations



**THE NEED IS MUTUAL**  
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**FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE**  
Can fire positively impact and ecosystem?



**THE DESERTS AND GRASSLANDS OF AFRICA**  
A Virtual Field Trip

## FINANCIAL STATEMENT:

The Nature Conservancy in Kansas is one operating unit within The Nature Conservancy’s global organization.



To view audited financial information, please go to [nature.org/annualreport](https://www.nature.org/annualreport)



## DIG INTO NATURE

Find NGSS-aligned lesson plans that connect nature to your classroom



# At the Forefront of Important Climate Change Solutions

**CLIMATE CHANGE IS ONE OF THE GREATEST THREATS** to the mission of The Nature Conservancy. It has the potential to undermine the 60 years of significant investment in conservation that our organization has made. Strong U.S. leadership is necessary to address climate change and its impact on our global ecosystems, economies and communities. The Nature Conservancy is committed to seeing comprehensive action to reduce emissions, foster innovation to adapt to a changing climate and propel global progress toward cleaner energy and sustainable land uses.

“The project is designed to be a research platform for others in the scientific community to conduct additional research activities.”

— John Briggs

vast quantities of carbon stored in soil, and increases connectivity of habitats to aid wildlife and ecosystems as they adapt to climate change.

» The grasslands stretching across the state in the Flint Hills, Red Hills, and Smoky Hills store carbon deep underground in their root systems and the soil. When the prairie is plowed, that carbon is released into the atmosphere. More than 30% of the world’s carbon is contained in the grasslands around the world and keeping the grasslands intact is vital.

» Konza Prairie Biological Station, owned by The Nature Conservancy and Kansas State University, supports two of the longest running climate manipulation experiments in the world, dating back to 1991. In 2012, the Extreme Drought in Grasslands Experiment was established with six sites in North America, including Konza, to advance knowledge of how grassland ecosystems will respond to climate change. According to Konza Director John Briggs, “the project is designed to be a research platform for others in the scientific community to conduct additional research activities.”

**DEFINITION:** Climate is more than just temperature. Climate takes into account the full variety of weather conditions - from temperature and humidity to precipitation and wind – and how they interact over a span of time. A single weather event or hot summer is not an indicator of climate change, but when viewed collectively they can indicate the effects of a climate changing over time.



May 2015 Kansas State Director Rob Manes and other Conservancy senior leaders worked together to build five reef structures at Arlington Cove in Mobile Bay, Alabama. Oyster reefs are one way to naturally protect communities from flooding and storm surges.

OUR DONORS

The Nature Conservancy’s accomplishments are made possible by the many individuals, organizations, businesses, and foundations that made gifts to our vital conservation programs. Every gift plays a crucial role in our work, for people and nature. In addition to acres conserved, your contributions support many other areas of conservation work, such as science, research, policy and educational internships, represented in this year-end report.

The Nature Conservancy is honored to recognize the following donors who made contributions from July 1, 2014 through June 30, 2015 that supported our work in Kansas. All of the donors have ties to Kansas, and in some cases their donations went to support Conservancy projects in other parts of the world. We deeply appreciate every gift and regret that space constraints prevent us from listing all of our donors.

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For more information, contact us in Kansas:

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