

Teamwork Builds the Sanctuary Envisioned

*Connie Achterberg
Wildlife-Friendly
Demonstration Farm*

One can have confidence that if Connie Achterberg were present, she would be pleased. She would be pleased with the partnership she initiated with Audubon of Kansas to manage and share the land that was her childhood family farm. Connie often reflected on memories of hard times on the farm including dust storms, and good times involving her grandfather's watermelon patch, exploring the woods, and fishing along Bullfoot Creek during the 1930s.

She would have been especially delighted this past summer when two Kansas State University students played a lead role in the design and clearing of a trail within the riparian woodlands along Bullfoot Creek. Emma Pettay—one of Ryan Klataske's students in anthropology



Monarch on Maximilian Sunflower in Pollinator habitat

and environmental science at K-State—and her friend, Emily Larocco, partnered in this internship program.

It was difficult finding days when the temperature was lower than 90 plus, so that became the standard for the field work. AOK Trustee Chair Gary Haden brought his chainsaw and joined us for the first of several hot days.

In addition to the trail, Emma and Emily built several Leopold benches to provide places where visitors walking the trail will be able to relax and enjoy the serenity of natural silence and sounds, sometimes accented by the pastoral sounds of nearby farming and ranching activities. Aldo Leopold, the person regarded as the father of 20th century wildlife management and author of *A Sand County Almanac*—his most widely read book—is credited with making the bench popular among outdoor enthusiasts. One can sit backward on the bench, prop their elbows on the backrest, and hold binoculars steady.

The Leopold benches bring to mind Leopold's famed "shack" in Wisconsin where he and his family restored an abused farmstead and where much of his writing occurred. The inspiration to select this design was provided by our good friend Ed Pembleton. In addition to a career with Audubon, he served as director of the Leopold Education Project for Pheasants Forever. Ed and Sil have a Leopold bench at their home here in Manhattan!

The trail that Emily and Emma worked on is the first of what will likely be two or three when fully developed. Plans call for



Emily and Emma enjoy the Leopold bench

All photos by Ron Klataske



Pollinator habitat on Achterberg Farm

this original trail to possibly be extended on the south side of Bullfoot Creek, likely along but possibly over Horse Creek—if we find funding for a footbridge over that stream. Grant funding opportunities for this purpose, for surfacing, and for more signage and educational information will be pursued.

Other highlights this year included the spectacular response of native wildflowers and native grasses within the upland bird habitat introduced by field border plantings and filter strips surrounding all five cropland fields within the farm, as well as within the small field planted entirely to pollinator habitat in 2016. These areas are enrolled in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Management requires prescribed burning once or twice during the contract term, depending on whether they are ten-year or fifteen-year contracts. With volunteer assistance of George LeRoux, an AOK Trustee from Wabaunsee County, on April 13 I took out my relatively old farm pickup with a spray unit custom built by a friend and we burned about half of the acres enrolled in CRP. We protected the shrub thicket plantings included in the field border strips, while “rejuvenating” the native grasses and wildflowers by burning the thick thatch that builds up in the absence of mowing or grazing over an extended period of several years. Soil moisture and weather conditions were ideal.

A covey of Bobwhite Quail flushed from the security of a chokecherry thicket, as usual demonstrating the birds’ affinity for shrub thickets located near grassland habitat and fields planted with small grains, especially grain sorghum. Bobwhite Quail were Connie Achterberg’s favorite bird, and they are much loved by many of us who grew up on farms during an earlier era when many or most farms had a diversity of habitats along fencerows and natural waterways that supported the birds’ year-round needs.

Those differing cover types, including vegetation that is often referred to as annual weeds, are important as sources of invertebrates for young quail chicks and for many passerine



Heavy work preparing pollinator field

birds during the summer months. These plants also provide highly nutritious seeds throughout the year. Decades ago, crop subsidy programs used to require idling some acres to reduce grain surpluses and when areas grew up in annual weeds, they were the “cat’s meow” for pheasants, quail and seed-eating songbirds. Considering that idling acres is no longer encouraged within many cropland landscapes, our approach on the Achterberg demonstration farm is to utilize plantings of perennial forbs/wildflowers as we have done within the pollinator habitat planting and field borders.

Demonstrating these strategies for enhancing and managing habitats for wildlife is part of the framework for our agreement with Connie to name this sanctuary as a “Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm.” She also appreciated productive farm and ranching operations when wildlife conservation is incorporated on the land. Thanks in no small part to Ron Buttonhoff, our tenant farmer, a bountiful harvest of soybeans and milo were harvested this fall.



Emma and Emily working on the trail



*Above: Connie Achterberg pitches in planting shrubs in 2016
Right: Characteristic limestone fence posts of 'Post-Rock Country'*

Lincoln County is in the heart of an area of about 3 million acres given the distinction of "Land of the Post Rock." Early European settlers found insufficient timber to supply their needs for fence posts, but they discovered that a layer of limestone near the surface could be readily mined and used for this purpose and for building. Connie recalled that the boundary of their farm was lined with rock posts. However, at some point a neighbor asked if he could take them and her father agreed. Hundreds if not thousands of miles of rock posts have been removed, but many remain in use, or as monuments to the hard work of previous generations throughout the area.

One of our goals has been and remains to obtain posts that have already been removed and then restore them along part of the boundary surrounding the Achterberg Farm. Some have been offered and our next challenge is to secure the assistance and equipment to make their transplantation a reality and restore an added element of this property's historical heritage. The local community welcomes our initiatives to make the sanctuary inviting for visitors, and one of our most appreciative fans is Aaron Zier, an adjacent farmer who enjoys seeing more Wild Turkeys and other wildlife on the property than ever before.



All photos by Ron Klataske