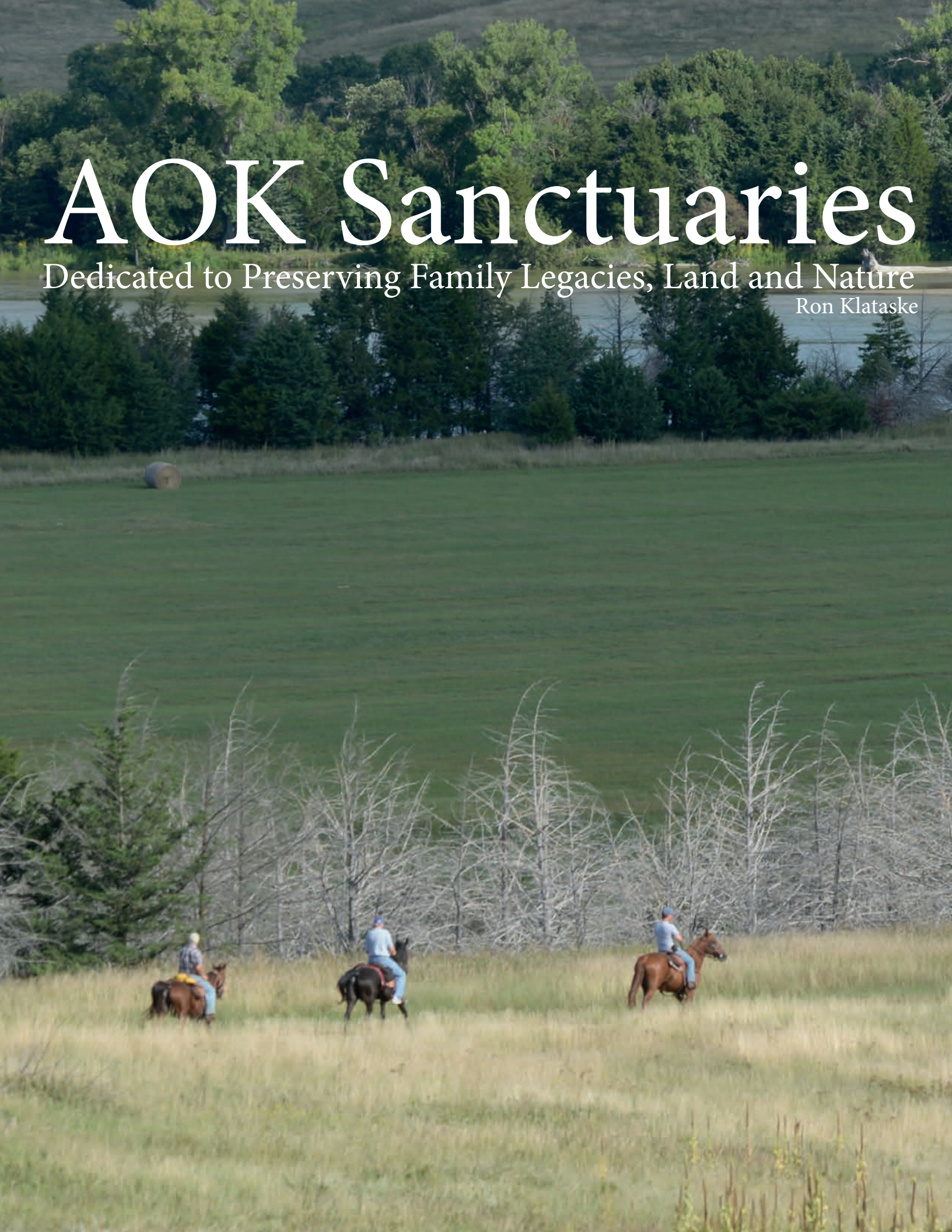


AOK Sanctuaries

Dedicated to Preserving Family Legacies, Land and Nature

Ron Klataske





The Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary – This place is incredible, even during a warm evening in August or the morning after a fresh snow in February. At dusk in late August we stopped on the main sanctuary road as a covey of nineteen Bobwhite Quail walked up the track to within a few feet of our vehicle and then flew out into the adjacent field of tall Indiangrass to roost. On up the two-track county road closer to the Hutton Guesthouse two Mule Deer does stood with two cute fawns. The following evening, before another beautiful August sunset, the same route produced a brood of twelve Sharp-tailed Grouse and a flock of Nighthawks working their way south.

A Burrowing Owl was perched atop a mound checking out our

small prairie-dog colony in the morning, and a crowded yet-to-fledge brood of Barn Swallows remained in a nest in the old barn. In mid-August there were at least forty swallows hanging out on the electric wires, but most left their post in the previous ten days. The barn's main purpose is to provide for Barn Swallows. With about twenty-five active nests during the peak of the breeding season, it makes an impressive contribution. It is too bad that so many old buildings are razed just because people do not reflect on or consider the diversity of wildlife that utilize the habitat provided by overgrown farmsteads.

It is inspiring to stay a few days at the Hutton Guesthouse or the Lazy Easy Ranch Guesthouse and experience wildlife, expanses of

prairie and wooded canyons, a succession of wildflowers and all of nature at different times of the day and year, under varying kinds of weather. Discovering a night's worth of animal activities recorded in fresh snow can be one of the most memorable experiences. We think of the 5,000-acre Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary as a sanctuary for wildlife and people!

Our brightest guiding light for stewardship is to honor the detailed vision that Harold Hutton expressed many times to me—a vision that the property become a wildlife sanctuary and an inspiration for others. We have continued his legacy and made dramatic steps toward his goal of restoring the native prairie-plant communities within all of the rangelands. Following a period of years when a tenant imposed intensive grazing pressure, one couldn't hide a golf ball in most areas. Now Sharp-tailed Grouse and other grassland birds can hide almost everywhere. We have removed thousands of invasive cedars from several thousand acres of native grassland, with special thanks to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service for their assistance.

An upland-watering system and exclusion fencing also keep cattle from adversely impacting aquatic life and riparian habitat of Willow and Rock creeks.

The wet meadows and wetlands in the bottomland along the Niobrara River are phenomenal. Because Bobolinks nest in the wet meadows, we delay hay harvesting until after they have fledged young in mid July. A pair of Sandhill Cranes has been nesting in the wetlands and bring their young chicks out to forage in the wet meadows. They are apparently the first Sandhill Cranes to nest along the Niobrara since the valley was homesteaded.

The Hutton family homestead site is nestled in a Bur Oak grove along a spring-fed stream that waters the adjacent wetland. Secretive Ovenbirds nest in the native woodlands along the slopes and back into the canyons. American Redstarts and Scarlet

Tanagers are occasionally seen and they provide another glimpse of colorful birds that connect the property to the tropics of Central and northern South America.

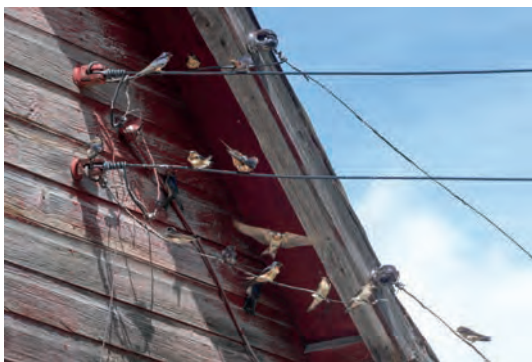
We are in the process of stabilizing and restoring Harold Hutton's childhood home so it will be maintained pretty much like it was when the Hutton family lived there. It will serve as a day shelter for visitors to the northern part of the sanctuary, including those walking the trail system we have developed, and as a place from which to view and enjoy wildlife. It also provides a historical "sense of place," reflective of early settlement, that adds another dimension for educational purposes.

An advisory committee, consisting of Nebraska friends of the sanctuary and other AOK trustees, has reinforced our commitment to all of the stewardship goals we have implemented. Most of our management objectives are immediately endorsed, but others take a bit longer—maybe even a generation. Reestablishment of a modest Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony for ecological, scientific and educational purposes required steadfast dedication. Claims that the relocated prairie dogs would disperse and cause problems for others have not materialized.

Native grasses and forbs have been reestablished on 200 acres of previously cultivated fields. Pollinator habitat was specifically planted to 30 acres and more is planned. It is exceptional as nesting and brood habitat for prairie grouse and quail.

We've undertaken an ambitious effort to thin invasive red cedars that threaten to overwhelm most vegetation, including other young trees, from within deciduous forests. Harvesting cedars for fence posts and logs is part of the plan.

NEBRASKA LIFE magazine published a spectacularly illustrated feature article on the sanctuary in the May/June edition. Families and small groups of friends, including Audubon chapters, make reservations through the AOK office for retreats at the sanctuary. A group of accomplished photographers have already reserved dates next summer when there is a new moon for sky photography. The website www.niobrarasanctuary.org provides additional detail.



AS MANY AS 25 PAIR OF BARN SWALLOWS NEST IN THE OLD BARN BEHIND THE HUTTON GUESTHOUSE.



WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT BOUNDS
ACROSS THE **NIOBRARA SANCTUARY.**



A FIELD PLANTED TO POLLINATOR
HABITAT AT **THE CONNIE
ACHTERBERG FARM** IN EARLY MAY
WAS HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL WITH NATIVE
WILDFLOWERS IN FULL BLOOM BY EARLY
SEPTEMBER.



The Connie Achterberg ‘Wildlife Friendly’ Demonstration Farm

– It is a special delight to work with a landowner who has donated a property to become an AOK sanctuary. In 2013 Connie donated the family farm where she lived as a small child in the 1930s and early 40s. She retained a life estate on the productive 240-acre farm near Lincoln, Kansas and continues to lease most of the cropland to a neighboring farmer. However, Connie also wanted to jointly implement conservation practices that demonstrate how a farm can protect natural features and enhance habitat for wildlife.

The natural features include more than a mile of meandering Bullfoot Creek and Horse Creek with considerable woodland acreage with large Bur Oak trees and other species native to the surrounding area in central Kansas. A small 8.74-acre native prairie meadow remains intact, although this needs restoration to repopulate some of the wildflower species that may have perished due to past herbicide applications or other factors. Prescribed

burning is being employed to arrest intrusion of brome grass. Because few areas remain that haven’t been adversely impacted by human activities or invasive plants, restoration is often a required management strategy, but it can be fun and rewarding.

A 2.5-acre part of the meadow was plowed a few years ago. We have decided to turn that plot into something special. In the spring of 2016 we planted it to pollinator habitat. By September it was an impressive field of flowering Maximilian’s Sunflowers, Black-eyed Susans and Blue Sage. The following month Goldfinches were harvesting seeds from the sunflowers, and “little brown birds” (unidentified native sparrows) were flitting around under the canopy.

Connie and tenant farmer Ron Battenhoff planted 26.7 acres of native grass habitat as “filter strips” and “quail buffers” between most of the fields and the wooded stream corridors, and along a



boundary hedgerow in 2007. With that excellent habitat already in place, we decided to extend and diversify those Conservation Reserve Program practices. In 2015 Connie enrolled an additional 7.84 acres in quail buffers. It consists of a 30-foot wide strip along the perimeter of the five cultivated fields. With these new plantings of grasses, forbs and shrubs, the farm is now framed like a painting with a border of habitat. This includes ten shrub thickets of approximately 50 shrubs each. The Chokecherry, American Plum, Sand-hill Plum, Fragrant Sumac and Serviceberry shrubs were planted with volunteer assistance and equipment provided by farmers who have long been family friends. Because much of the naturally occurring habitat on nearby farms has been and/or continues to be eliminated, the dependence of wildlife on this property is readily apparent. Hopefully, that will encourage other landowners to consider establishment of similar habitat.

It is also a neat place to visit and to enjoy the conservation stewardship of a girl who left the farm, but never forgot the joy of wading in the creek, exploring the woods and listening to the birds.

The Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie – In mid-November when the “Super Moon” was making its brightest appearance since 1948, several Audubon friends from Manhattan traveled to Mt. Mitchell to experience the moonrise. Although it may not qualify as a mountain, it is a prominent prairie hill with public access, associated with our state’s cultural history, and a place to enjoy life close to earth and the universe beyond.

Mt. Mitchell is located three miles south of Wamego, and a half-mile east of Highway 99. It consists of 31 acres previously held by the Kansas Historical Society and an additional 15 acres purchased from a neighboring landowner.

Sanctuaries are an integral part of Audubon heritage – The history of several state Audubon organizations, and that of the National Audubon Society as well, were built in many areas on establishment of wildlife sanctuaries. The Massachusetts Audubon

Society, founded in 1896, accepted its first property for this purpose in 1916. Fast-forward a hundred years and the organization has a statewide network of 56 wildlife sanctuaries, with many more properties waiting in the wings. The organization’s foundational concept is to have a wildlife sanctuary within about twenty miles of everyone in the state, ideally as places where nature can be explored and appreciated. Many have educational programs, some with centers. Other lands are conserved specifically for their ecological values.

The Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary on the Platte River in central Nebraska is the National Audubon Society’s signature sanctuary in the Great Plains. As the Society’s regional representative I had the

opportunity to acquire most of the land to establish the sanctuary in the 1970s and 80s. With field trips and annual crane festivals since 1971, and in recent years addition of the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center, the migratory staging of Sandhill Cranes along the river has become an attraction for wildlife enthusiasts from every state and many countries. Purchase of the sanctuary was made possible by a bequest from a woman in New Jersey.

It will take Audubon of Kansas, Inc. a while to have a sanctuary system and associated educational programs comparable to those of the long-established state Audubon organizations in New England. However, with a sanctuary system of three unique properties in place, and evaluation of several other properties AOK has been asked to consider, we can envision an impressive network of lands dedicated to conservation in this way.

It is unlikely that the State of Kansas will authorize purchase of much land for public access, conservation or educational purposes in the foreseeable future. Natural features in the landscape are also being lost at an alarming rate due to more intensive agriculture and other developments. With those considerations in mind, it is important that individuals and organizations, including Audubon of Kansas, consider other innovative private initiatives to protect additional lands and make them available for complementary enjoyment and educational opportunities.

About the contributor: Ron Klataske is Executive Director of AOK, and a leading conservation advocate in the Great Plains Region for many years.