

Jeff Hansen —

# An Inspiring Field Naturalist

By Bob McElroy

**A**mong my many pleasures of being involved in the Audubon community at both the state and local level has been getting to know Jeff Hansen. Jeff is a largely self-taught expert or autodidact on native plants and flowers, knowledgeable birder, probably one of the best field naturalists in Kansas, leader and enthusiast of the local Audubon Society and the Kansas Native Plant Society. He publishes almost daily e-mail commentary on birding and the activity around his backyard feeder, water source and multiple birdhouses. Jeff is a proponent of backyard science and acute observation of on-the-ground nature that does not require a PhD in ornithology. Without dispute, observations of naturalists like Jeff yield incredible insights on bird ecology.

To spend a few hours with Jeff in the field is to experience his humor, laughter and wit while he points out one obscure or obvious plant after another in a field I thought consisted only of grass. On my farm south of Topeka, which contains native or virgin prairie, he identified 342 different species from a varied landscape. He has an almost boyish sense of wonder in the presence of a distinctly beautiful bird, insect or flower. Frequently his only comment or reaction is “Wow.” It is hard not to want to be part of that wonder and joy of the immediacy of what he is sharing; he is a gifted observer and teacher.

To give one a sense of Jeff’s enthusiasm and observations, below is a very small collection of emails received over the past several years. Many are accompanied by pictures made by Jeff or Randy Winter, a very talented Kansas wildlife photographer.

**Nov. 26, 2008**

Bob: Janeen Walters and I walked through a bit of your property this afternoon. Thought you would like to have a list of what we saw. First, the woodpeckers: Red-bellied, Downy,

Hairy, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Add to those Eastern Bluebird, Blue Jay, Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Junco, Tree Sparrow, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Great Blue Heron, various gulls, Bufflehead, Mallard, Winter Wren, Carolina Wren and Northern Flickers. It was a really nice day and we appreciate you letting us enjoy your land.

**Feb. 20, 2010**, To all Native Plant Lovers, The Kansas Native Plant Society has been helping with the initiative started by a high school class in 2006 to name a state grass for Kansas. All the surrounding states have a state grass to help school children learn about our prairie heritage, the importance of conserving what is left of this endangered ecosystem and to get them

out into the prairie enjoying nature. More information is posted at <http://www.kansasnativeplantsociety.org/littleblue/stategrass.htm>

**April 27, 2010** Bob

Wow, I’ve found 342 species of plants on your property. Found lots of “new” things in the woods north of the watershed dam. You have Jack in the Pulpit and Green Dragon, Downy Yellow Violet, Spikenard...just to name a few.

**Sept. 14, 2010**

Topeka Audubon Society has a new website and the best part of the site in my opinion is the google calendar. With this calendar, you can click on an event and get a google map of the meeting location, as well as sign up for email reminders for specific events.

Check out our new site:

<http://www.topekaaudubonsociety.org/>

**Oct 26, 2010**

Wow, what a great morning for birding, went outside and there were birds galore: tons of Yellow-rumped Warblers, but also lots of Ruby-crowned Kinglets, one Orange-crowned Warbler, 2 Red-breasted Nuthatches, a Brown Creeper, and Carolina Wren.

Then I went to the Kansas History Museum to try to id sparrows. I did positively id tons of Song Sparrows, one Lincoln Sparrow, one Field Sparrow, and a Le Conte’s Sparrow—all in the grasslands. Going back to car saw Chipping Sparrows and Juncos in a mowed area.

**Nov 1, 2010** TAS List Subscribers, I am working on a list of public lands in Shawnee County along with who the contact person is for each area. At some point, I’m going to put up a webpage on our site with information on each “park”. This is my list so far. It’s amazing how many public “wild” areas there are in Shawnee County. If you have additions, let me know.



Ron Klataske Photo

Nov. 9, 2010

Several members of KNPS came to the “*Honeysuckle Kill Site*” along Shunga Creek in Topeka. Those in attendance were James Morrisey, Vernon Montgomery, Allen Casey, and others. It was fun learning from Vernon his days as child playing along Shunganunga Creek in Topeka. We were able to rescue a small grove of Pawpaw trees that were being consumed by honeysuckle. I enjoyed teaching one of the participants how to identify tree-of-heaven. Crush the leaves and smell. He didn’t think it was a pleasing odor. Vernon discovered another invasive, burning bush (*Euonymus alata*), but we also saw our native *euonymus*: Wahoo. It was also nice to see the work we did this past spring. After working, some of us went for a walk along shunga, enjoying the day. It was a good day, and the best part was getting to know each other.

Jan. 7, 2011

Just wanted to share with everyone what a great time I had on the FIRST ANNUAL HOLTON CBC. I met Dan Larson at 6 a.m. to drive up to Holton. Met Marie Plinsky and Doris Burnett at the convenience store. We split into two teams with a lot of area to cover.

**Highlight 1.** Holton Cemetery for a Great-horned Owl. We then got chased out of the cemetery by security!

**Highlight 2.** Bird of prey on a fencepost, barely caught a glimpse of it. Maybe it was a Short-eared Owl?

**Highlight 3.** A lone Rusty Blackbird

**Highlight 4.** Visiting Fred and Nancy Coombs at their farm and counting lots of birds at their feeding area known as “Birdland,” saw a Barred Owl too.

**Highlight 5.** A Winter Wren on the edge of Banner Creek Reservoir while we are trying to look at tons of Mallards and Canada Geese.  
**Highlight 6.** Lunch at the Holton House chicken place. We all met there for nice lunch and to share what we were seeing.

**Highlight 7.** The Loggerhead Shrike, both Dan Larson and I put our binocs on it and both said “SHRIKE” at the same time. We got good views. It was our “bird of the day”

**Highlight 8.** At the end of the day within 15 minutes we added Purple Finches, Red-headed Woodpeckers, and a lone Mourning Dove

**Highlight 9.** We tried to find a Short-eared Owl, and saw a rooster Pheasant flying at dusk

There was always an adrenaline rush with every new bird.

European Starlings and House Sparrows are not native to North America, aggressive and destructive to native birds that depend on tree cavities and nesting boxes, and they are not protected by state or federal law.

May 22, 2010

The House Sparrows chased my bluebirds out of their bluebird house. The Coombs had them kill one of their Tree Swallows. The Starlings are ousting woodpeckers from their homes. I’m tired of them winning. These non-native birds always seem to win out against our native birds, so I am ready to start a trapping program.

Here is a good site with ratings on bird house traps:

<http://www.sialis.org/traps.htm>

The website’s motto is, “May all your blues be birds!” Bluebirds!

I just ordered some VanErt traps for my houses, and I plan to build a nest box big enough for the Great Crested Flycatchers. Yesterday I saw a pair of Great Crested Flycatchers checking out a bluebird house, which I don’t think they can enter because of the small entry hole.

Also, there was a kid (eagle scout) selling bat houses at the farmers market. His houses work. He has had bats take up residence in them. He builds them himself.

Sept 17, 2012

I had to share this story with everyone. I was sitting outside Sunday morning enjoying the gorgeous weather. I noticed a hummingbird going from to my empty feeders and my empty oriole feeder and to some flowers. Then he approached me. He was 1 inch from the front of my face...staring me in the eye. I stayed still and he didn’t leave. I closed my eyes and I felt a little tickle. It was a bizarre experience. I filled my hummingbird feeders immediately.

*“I still find each day too short for all the thoughts I want to think, all the walks I want to take, all the books I want to read, and all the friends I want to see.”*

John Burroughs

(American Essayist and Naturalist, 1837-1921)

Sept 28, 2012

I just got back from the Chimney swift roost. What can I say...it was incredible. I estimated 5000 swifts going into that poor chimney. They started going in at 7:10 and ended after 7:40. I wonder if the roost hasn’t grown over the past few days. Watching them exit in the morning might be just as interesting to watch. This was my 3<sup>rd</sup> birding trip of the day. I’m now officially a bird nerd. I also got my First-of-Season song sparrow at Warren this evening.

Feb 20, 2013

Last night at *Birds and Beer* (a regular gathering of Topeka Audubon members), I was telling the people around me about my success with trapping house sparrows and starlings this winter. Some wanted to know about the traps I use. Unfortunately the introduced house sparrow and starling start adopting their nesting places before our native songbirds do. The sparrows had already filled my bluebird boxes with nesting material. I’ve counted 20 house sparrows in my backyard. No way a bluebird/chickadee/titmouset/flycatcher can compete with that.

I use the Van Ert trap. It catches them alive. You put a clear bag over the house and open it. The bird flies into the bag. If you catch a native species you can just release it. The invaders, I just hold them firmly so they cannot breathe, takes about 30 seconds. Find the trap at [http://www.vanerttraps.com/mywebsite\\_005.htm](http://www.vanerttraps.com/mywebsite_005.htm)

Over the winter I have caught 14 house sparrows and 7 starlings. This should be a banner year for native species in my yard. I currently have seven nest boxes up, one is a flicker box. It's good to have more than one box because if something nests in one you can use the others to trap sparrows/starlings. Sparrows will kill adult and baby bluebirds. Starlings will kill other birds too.

I really love woodpeckers but read about the affect starlings are having on them. It's really quite sad.

#### June 6, 2013

Bluebirds have raised one brood and now are starting their second. They moved to a house that is about 60 feet away from the first house they raised young. No House Sparrows in my yard, thanks to nest box trapping. I've removed 30 House Sparrows this season. Imagine if they all raised a couple broods. How can one pair of Eastern Bluebirds compete with all those House Sparrows? They can't. I also keep seeing Purple Martin houses that are put up with good intentions but mismanaged. They are full of House Sparrows and Starlings, creating more of these nonnative invasive species.

#### March 18, 2014

A pair of Northern Flickers appears to have adopted one of my nest boxes as their home. I first experienced the male

hammering on the roof. Later the female appeared from within the box. I believe the male hammering on the roof is announcing his territory. The flickers moving into this nest box would not have been possible if I didn't trap Starlings. Starlings are an introduced species that competes with flickers for nest sites. For more information on Starling control go to [http://www.kansasnativeplants.com/yard\\_birds\\_europeanstarling.php](http://www.kansasnativeplants.com/yard_birds_europeanstarling.php) FYI: I'm up to 110 starlings trapped.

#### April 27, 2014

I made a video of a Northern Flicker excavating its nest box. It had excavated all of the chips and I was worried so I added more. Still waiting for eggs to appear. Normally he doesn't just toss the chips on the ground but flies away with them. But it was so windy the day of my video I think he just tossed most out the hole and let the wind blow them away.

#### April 28, 2014

I just checked the flicker nest box. There are TWO eggs. They are unreal looking...translucent white eggs. This is WAY cool. I wonder how big of a clutch they will have. Interestingly the pair takes turns guarding the house. Just this morning, the male is standing guard and in comes the female.

She lands on the box. He flies away; She looks around and enters the box.

#### May 5, 2014

Well, I was gone for 3 days, and the flicker nest is gone. There are NO eggs, and a starling flew out of the nest box this morning. Does anyone know if the starlings would remove the eggs? Poor flickers. What is really irritating is there were empty nest boxes the starlings could have used but they had to destroy an occupied nest. It's what they do. —Depressed in Topeka

#### June 6, 2014

I checked the nest box yesterday and the Great Crested Flycatchers have SIX eggs. Last year they only had four. Pretty exciting. The bluebirds have brought all three of their young with them to the meal worm feeder. The young won't come down to the feeder but the parents take food to the young who are perched up in the trees.



Jeff Hanssen Photos



*It was a "glorious experience." With constant attention to keeping Starlings at bay, with a continuous trapping program, Jeff's efforts paid off with the first success of Northern Flickers nesting in his yard this spring, 2015. First a male, and then a female, arrived in late March—with each drumming on the available nest boxes. By May 1 there were six eggs with the appearance of light rose pearls. With shift changes for brooding, five of the eggs hatched within a couple weeks. The first adventurous youngster was seen peering out of the nest box by June 2, being fed by the parents at the hole. The Great Crested Flycatchers nesting in another did a bit of diving and the flickers moved dining inside. On June 5 the two last fledglings left the nest, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. One might say they were "climbing the walls" to experience the world.*