

like they are between a rock and a hard place, we expect them to be rock solid when it comes to standing for sound biological science and their respective agency's mission.

— Ron Klataske

*When the sun came shining,
and I was strolling,
And the wheat fields waving
and the dust clouds rolling,
As the fog was lifting a voice
was chanting:
This land was made for you
and me.*

—Woody Guthrie. 1944 lyrics



Ron Klataske photo

Black-tailed Prairie Dog pups. Prairie dog colonies are key to establishment of Black-footed Ferret populations in the wild.

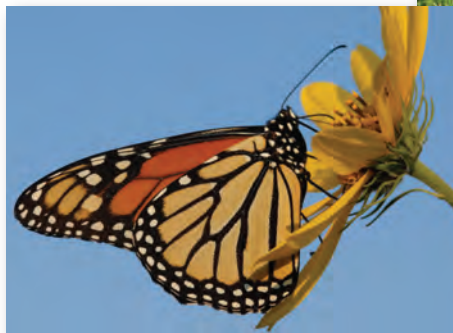
Highway Roadside Vegetation Increasingly Important —But Some Roadsides Harbor an Invasive Threat

Roadsides are certainly “humble places,” and we believe they can readily be managed to offer natural beauty for everyone’s enjoyment. At least everyone except those who choose to “see nothing” or regard natural vegetation that is not mowed as “unkept.” Fortunately, major strides for ecologically and economically commendable policies have been made in recent years:

* Governor Sam Brownback met with conservation leaders on this subject again this past summer. He expressed his continued support for reduced mowing policies to the conservation community, and administrative staff in KDOT is aware of his perspective.

* Administrative staff in KDOT headquarters in Topeka generally support the limited mowing policies included in the Aesthetics Task Force report of 2008 (and similar policies already on the books at that time).

* It was widely recognized within KDOT that the \$6 million spent annually on mowing in previous years could be substantially reduced; in our opinion surely to a third of that while retaining *all necessary mowing*.



Monarch Butterflies are in danger because of habitat loss, deforestation in Mexico and elimination of milkweed—their main food source—in the U.S. County roadsides are needlessly sprayed with herbicides, and until recently KDOT roadsides were repeatedly mowed. This impressive stand of milkweeds was along K177 in the Flint Hills.



* The State of Kansas has budget challenges, putting pressure on many state programs, from K-12 education to solving major ecological problems associated with KDOT lands (described below) which most people likely regard as more important than unnecessary mowing.

However, many in charge and those doing the mowing in 212 different KDOT *fiefdoms* have little incentive to change their approach and reduce *their* budget. One wonders what would occur if every subdivision within other state and federal agencies all marched to their own drummer as seems to be the case with KDOT. For some maintenance staff, spending days or weeks within the cab of a climate-controlled New Holland tractor is their most pleasant endeavor. It beats road repairs any day!

Some KDOT maintenance staff are as reluctant to park their mowers—when there is vegetation remaining along the state’s highways that *could be mowed*—as the Clantons were to turn their guns over to Wyatt Earp in Tombstone in 1881.

Although roadsides in some areas are managed according to policies and with a sense of pride in the state’s prairie heritage, this is not true for many areas. In some KDOT subdivisions, it is as if any grass left unmowed is a threat to what should be a sterile landscape. Virtually every blade of grass along KDOT and KTA roads in Sedgwick County, for example, has been mowed off in recent years. There is no place for a Meadowlark—the state bird—to nest, or for a covey of Bobwhite Quail to find cover adjacent to cropped fields.

As almost every square inch of remnant grasslands and shrubs in many rural landscapes are plowed or bulldozed, intensively grazed or mowed, roadsides are increasingly important because they often provide the only remaining “cover” for a number of nesting, wintering or migrating bird species. The same loss of habitat is true for many beneficial pollinating insects. The decline of Monarch Butterflies is alarming. The least we can do is to allow milkweeds—vital for Monarch reproduction—and other wildflowers to thrive along roadsides.

As outlined in some detail in the article entitled “*The Good, the Bad & Extraordinarily Beautiful*” on roadside management in the Winter 2012/Spring 2013 edition of PRAIRIE WINGS, properly managed roadside vegetation that is protected from unnecessary mowing can reduce snow drifting across roadways, serve as filter strips to remove sediment and pollutants to improve water quality, conceal and keep litter from washing into nearby streams, and add greatly to the aesthetic appeal of our landscape.

“Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing.”

—Camille Pissarro, (1830-1903) a Danish-French impressionist painter born on the island of St. Thomas

Unfortunately, much of the 160,000 acres of grasslands included in 20,000+ miles of rights-of-way administered by KDOT and KTA appears to fall into the realm of the “**Tragedy of the Commons**,” where various people take what they want because it belongs to “nobody” specifically and has no prominent value-added purpose. A lot of roadside vegetation is mowed to the principle purpose of providing jobs to do repeatedly. In addition, KDOT’s policy of giving away this resource to others to mow for hay—without any financial fee or any consideration to the values of public interest—further diminishes the public interest values of the vegetation.

The most tragic aspect of errors of highway roadside management is the fact that these areas are collectively the portal for the most destructive invasive threat to native rangelands and prairies in Kansas. Caucasian bluestem was apparently introduced with contaminated seed or mulch, and is being spread by mowing activities. It is being ignored as it takes over roadsides and adjacent pastures like a cancer, killing all other vegetation. Hay harvesting of roadsides threatens to spread it far beyond this source. If this continues, the potential damage to Kansas grasslands will be in the tens of millions of dollars required for control—and once widespread, control will be almost impossible.



Ron Klataske photos

The Caucasian Bluestem along this road is taking over native range in the Flint Hills.