

# Rediscovering the Prairies and Great Plains, Sharing the Nature of Kansas and Nebraska

**W**e were delighted when Governor Sam Brownback hosted an Ecotourism Summit on April 28 at the Kansas Wetlands Education Center at the Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area, and also with recent news that an appointed committee of 16 people will explore ways to enhance opportunities for hiking, biking, camping, wildflower walks, wildlife watching, river floating, enjoyment of unique landscapes and many other outdoor activities

In March of this year, it was a special honor to accompany Governor Brownback on an afternoon trip to the Lillian Annette Rowe Bird Sanctuary along the Platte River in central Nebraska. Governor Brownback joined Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman and Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper to discuss and experience nature-based tourism and share ideas on interstate water compacts.

It is always nice to be back on the Platte with tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes every spring. I first experienced this natural world spectacle and started hosting annual tours and conferences there in 1971. Those gatherings have continued for 42 years in various Audubon-sponsored and other similar events as the nationally acclaimed “Crane Celebrations/Festivals” in Kearney and Grand Island. National Audubon acquired the first parcels of land to create the sanctuary from farm families who shared our conservation vision in 1973.

Other initiatives combining conservation and nature appreciation/nature-based tourism have included development of the proposals and spearheading the efforts that led to the Niobrara National Scenic River in Nebraska, Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Kansas, trail systems using current flood-control levees and abandoned railroads in Lawrence and Manhattan, and the Tallgrass “Prairie Parkway” Wildlife and Natural Heritage Trail. Most recently AOK’s contributions have included the Niobrara Sanctuary with two guesthouses and Mt. Mitchell Prairie Heritage Preserve.

During the next few weeks we will be sharing our ideas, and others that you and other members or partners of Audubon of Kansas submit to us. KDWP&T did not invite any specific representatives of Audubon organizations or the Kansas Ornithological Society to be on the committee. Therefore it is important for birders and others to



After touring the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center, Rowe Sanctuary Manager Bill Taddicken, governor’s Dave Heineman, Sam Brownback and John Hickenlooper lead the way to the wildlife viewing blind on the banks of the Platte River.

develop proposals on how wildlife-viewing opportunities can be improved in Kansas and present these ideas for consideration to committee members or directly to the governor’s office. As he recalled his trip to Africa, we share Governor Brownback’s thought that some “out-back” type, overnight shelters could be provided at Cheyenne Bottoms or on some other wildlife areas where the sounds and sights of nature could be experienced in ways that are not otherwise available to most people – young or old. It could be not only compatible with wildlife – but inspirational.

We believe that additional wildlife-viewing and photography blinds – on public and/or private land – will attract and reward more people. Opportunities to experience Prairie-chicken courtship rituals are limited and have to be carefully orchestrated to avoid disturbance. However, at the other end of the spectrum, prairie dog colonies can provide year round fascination, educational and enlightenment perspectives.

During the first couple weeks of November, the state of Kansas has an opportunity that is somewhat comparable to the gathering of

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**“I’ve never been to Kansas, but I’ve driven through.”**

– a declaration first heard many years ago. So much is missed when travelers stay on the interstate and pass through America’s heartland.

Sandhill Cranes can be seen in both Kansas and Nebraska.



Sandhill Cranes each spring in central Nebraska. The Quivira National Wildlife Refuge is the most consistent and one of the best places to view Whooping Cranes during fall migration. Family groups of whoopers arrive and there are often a dozen or more at Quivira and/or Cheyenne Bottoms for days in early or mid November. They are often joined by tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes and lots of waterfowl. Audubon of Kansas recommends creation of, and we are willing to partner in, an extended “Celebration of Cranes” to draw attention to the birds and provide assistance to visitors.

Although some members of the committee represent organizations that have staunchly opposed Rails-to-Trails initiatives in the past, we urge the committee to recommend that the State does everything feasible to preserve abandoned railroad lines in a “rail banking system” and promote the creation of a network of trails. In a state that ranks 50th in public ownership of land, this is the easiest way to provide access for enjoyment of the countryside.

There are also overlooked opportunities in Kansas metropolitan areas to utilize flood-control levees as trails, as we have done in Lawrence and Manhattan. Topeka and Wichita have similar potential trail possibilities. In addition, with elimination of unnecessary and too-frequent mowing of the floodways, those areas could provide more wildlife and wildflower viewing – and provide additional habitat for Meadowlarks, Harris’ Sparrows, Juncos, Northern Bobwhites and attract raptors as well.

Some of these areas consist of hundreds of acres, and are places where kids could

experience a bit of nature. Maybe, just maybe, state and local leaders should provide managers of these lands with copies of the book *LAST CHILD in the WOODS/ Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. We need to provide ways through the fences and access beyond the “No Trespassing” signs.

Full implementation of the recommendations to KDOT included in the 2008 Aesthetics Task Force report, will help to sell Kansas as the “Prairie State” with some of the most pleasing displays of native grasses and spectacular displays of wildflowers at various times of the year. We recommend inclusion of a KDOT staff member on the eco-tourism committee. KDOT has been a valuable partner in building appreciation for the Flint Hills.

Country roads also provide far-too-few-of-us with a chance to view the changing seasons and experience many dimensions of nature. An array of striking fall flowers gives way to the crimson leaves of sumac and bright yellow leaves of ash in early autumn. A fresh snowfall calls for a holiday from everyday tasks. Redbuds and wild plum blossoms color April. One doesn’t have to go to Vermont for fall colors or Texas to see their famous roadside wildflowers. The Flint Hills, Smoky Hills, Red Hills and Chautauqua Hills



Inside the wildlife viewing blind, Marian Langan (center), Audubon Nebraska Executive Director, joins the governors and Bill Taddicken for an historic photograph.

are wonderful contenders. All that is required is that we recognize these special pastoral places, awaken our collective awareness of their value, and find ways to share them with others.

– Ron Klataske

## ECOTOURISM AND OUR ECONOMY

### 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation

Last year, 90.1 million Americans 16 years old and older enjoyed some form of fishing, hunting or wildlife-associated recreation. Outdoor recreation is a huge contributor to our nation’s economy. Expenditures by this group of outdoor enthusiasts were \$145 billion.

Almost 37.4 million Americans participated in fishing, hunting or both in 2011. On average each sportsperson spent \$2,407 in 2011. Nearly 71.8 million people engaged in wildlife watching. That number fed birds, photographed and/or observed wildlife. Approximately 22.5 million participated by taking trips for the purpose. Overall trip-related expenditures pursuant to wildlife watching increased 67% from 2001 to 2011.