

CONSERVATION AND Camaraderie Are Complementary COMPANIONS

Article by **William R. Browning, MD**

Included in this issue is a complete list of the AOK Board of Trustees. The full board meets three times yearly and that might seem to some an onerous task, especially considering that meetings might be held anywhere from Lawrence to Oakley in Kansas to northern Nebraska. But there are at least two mitigating conditions.

The camaraderie, singleness of purpose, and the sense of community that comes with each member to each meeting means that all come with a sense of pleasant anticipation and leave with a feeling of shared accomplishment. AOK gets things done.

Icing on the cake can frequently be an associated field trip, often an experience that is rarely available to the general public. Here are a few of the most memorable.

It is not widely known that AOK via our Executive Director has played a role in the acquisition of the Tallgrass Prairie preserve in Oklahoma and even the Konza Prairie in the early 1970s by The Nature Conservancy or that we were involved early on with the Prairie National Preserve at Strong City and in fact held the “right of first refusal” on that property (the Z-Bar Ranch) as we leveraged it into the Preserve in its current form. Audubon was the catalyst in Ted Turner’s acquisition of the sister Z-Bar Ranch in the Red

Hills southwest of Medicine Lodge. It was that event that led to one of our most exclusive field trips – a tour of that 42,000-acre ranch. It had been in Turner’s hands only a short time when we were there and our guide, Keith Yearout, gave us a ground floor introduction to the future plans for Bison and other aspects of management. Perhaps the most unique features were at the southern end of the ranch where it spills over into Oklahoma. There we saw country rugged enough to make horseback travel an uncertainty, briefly explored a bat cave. I glimpsed two probable Roadrunners – if only fellow board members Patty

Marlett and Carol Cumberland had been standing next to me for confirmation.

Another example of special access was a trip to a Logan County ranch operated by a fine western Kansas family. They welcomed our large group into their home for a meal that was preceded by a ranch tour. Their ranch included some unusually rugged “bad lands” and was adjacent to “Lone Butte,” a striking formation in a vast nearly level expanse. Aside from viewing two fine Mule Deer bucks bounding through rugged country, exploring the ruins of an ancient stone home and searching for the native Swift Foxes, the focus of our tour was the ranch’s thousands



Former AOK Trustee Dudley Alexander of Platte City, Missouri, and William R. “Bill” Browning riding in the bed of a pickup. As head of the Trust Department for Boatmen’s National Bank of Kansas City, Dudley made acquisition of the Z-Bar Ranch possible for creation of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

of acres of prairie dogs. This is perhaps the largest remaining prairie dog colony in our state. Since that visit the dog town has been the focus of four Black-footed Ferret releases – and now several dozen wild-born ferrets live on this private land complex. A few board members have availed themselves of the opportunity to participate in annual ferret survey operations. Imagine spotlighting all night for this very secretive and rarest of all North American mammals.

The most fascinating and haunting of our trips was to the University of Kansas Natural History Museum and its Department of Ornithology. Two hours flew by as we sat huddled around the department's Collection Manager, Mark Robbins, and learned about the museum's history and mission. We were enthralled by countless trays of bird pelts or skins. Birds of our own continent, birds of the rain forest, and trays of tiny hummingbirds were displayed up close. Finally (and I had secretly wondered about this when I learned that we would have this opportunity) all of the lost birds of our continent were brought out – and not just one but multiple specimens of each of these lost creatures. The Carolina Parakeets were so much larger

then I had imagined, the Ivory-billed Woodpeckers so beautiful, the Dusky Seaside Sparrows, and the Passenger Pigeons, so sad. Birds of legend.

And on a lighter note, let's go to Nebraska. For reasons explained elsewhere, AOK owns and operates a 5,000-acre ranch on the Niobrara River in the Sand Hills of northern Nebraska. It is a grassy plateau, dissected by deep valleys with clear spring-fed streams draining past wet meadows to the ranch's border with the sandy Niobrara – a river that has its beginnings in the high plains of Wyoming hundreds of miles to the west.

As AOK management of the ranch evolves the opportunities for wildlife are enhancing by the season. A light hand on the grazing pressure, removal of invasive species (notably cedar), and reintroduction of prairie fire to this ecosystem have all been processes that multiple field trips have allowed visitors to observe. The evolution of the land toward a pristine ideal once envisioned is now very close to attainment and we have participated in its culmination.

So when you look at the list of Trustees, think of service, but also think of opportunity and adventure.



Trustees enjoy a picnic at the Niobrara Sanctuary.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

– **Margaret Mead**, American Cultural Anthropologist.

AOK Needs a Few Good Women and Men

As an organization that relies on volunteer leadership, Audubon of Kansas needs Trustees and others in leadership capacities who are willing to contribute a combination of the qualities needed within a board as a whole, and within our program partnerships. Charles H. Callison, former Executive Vice President of the National Audubon Society, once outlined the needs as the three "w's": "wisdom" in the form of expertise and experience, "work" in the form of skills and a willingness to be involved, and "wealth" including a willingness to provide outreach to help build membership and financial support to sustain effectiveness. Please let us know if you want to be involved or supportive in any capacity.