



2008

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

The Good News for 2008, Some of it is Great!

When Audubon of Kansas commits to an important conservation cause, we recognize that it may take years to fully achieve our goals. On the educational front, our investments of talent and resources are equally strategic. In everything AOK does, we effectively combine programs to build appreciation for wildlife and nature, and the positive things that people are doing to preserve our natural heritage.

In terms of conservation achievements, 2008 has been a banner year for Audubon of Kansas initiatives. During the past twelve months 74 captive-raised Black-footed Ferrets have been released on the shortgrass prairies of western Kansas, and at least four litters of young kits were born in the wild this summer from the first ferrets released a week before Christmas 2007.



Thirty-four ferrets were released this fall on the 10,000-acre ranch complex owned by Larry and Bette Haverfield, Gordon and Martha Barnhardt and Maxine Blank. Their commitment to this endangered species reintroduction project is incredible. Black-footed Ferrets cannot thrive and recover in the wild without the existence of extensive prairie dog colonies. Prairie dog colonies are scattered across approximately 6,000 acres of their contiguous properties. BFFs are small predators in the weasel family. They prey on prairie dogs and live within their abandoned burrows. A female with a litter generally requires a hunting territory of 100 acres.



We are pleased that Audubon of Kansas was called to assist these landowners in the fall of 2005. Even at that time Logan County Commissioners were threatening to poison their lands without regard for the Swift Foxes, Golden and Bald Eagles, Ferruginous Hawks, Burrowing Owls and other wildlife dependent on the prairie dog colonies for habitat and prey. Ron Klataske of AOK recognized that these properties (1) fulfilled a key goal of the Kansas Black-tailed Prairie Dog Management and Conservation Plan (part of a multi-state sponsored initiative), and (2) this prairie dog complex offered the best place for reestablishment of a wild population of BFFs in the central Great Plains.

Now An Impending Threat:

On November 17, Logan County Commissioner Carl Uhrich wrote to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service indicating the county is going to poison the prairie dog colonies on ranch lands owned by Larry and Bette Haverfield and Gordon Barnhardt. He said they will launch the county's poisoning campaign on 2,200 acres – the same area where 22 captive-raised Black-footed Ferrets (BFF) have been released in the state's first attempt to reestablish this endangered species in its native habitat in Kansas. That letter was followed by another from the county ordering these and numerous other landowners with colonies of prairie dogs in the county to eradicate them within 15 days, or the lands would be poisoned by the county's prairie dog control agent who doubles as a private contractor. He happens to be the son of a commissioner.

Audubon of Kansas (AOK) was already in action anticipating this move, and we have since been mobilizing every strategic resource available on all legal, political, agency and media fronts to stop the ecological "scorched earth" assault. County commissioners act as if they have vendettas against landowners who do not cower to their demands for eradication. Audubon of Kansas will remain resilient and outspoken in our support for these courageous landowners. We will continue to do everything we can to assist as the landowners strive to incorporate the highest level of wildlife conservation commitment imaginable as an important component of their land stewardship.

The Logan County Commission, urged on by the Kansas Farm Bureau, has been attempting to use the state's century-old statutes to forcibly eradicate prairie dogs from private ranch lands throughout the County. Once it was realized that the colonies on this ranch complex would serve as an ideal site for reintroduction of BFFs, the commissioners and the Farm Bureau became determined to destroy this unique wildlife conservation opportunity. The eradication statutes must be repealed by the Kansas Legislature.

Although blocking the county's senseless poisoning plan is paramount, all of the conservation partners involved have made every conceivable effort to accommodate the interests of neighboring landowners who do not want increasing prairie dog numbers on their land. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other entities have provided funding to completely pay for control within three miles of the BFF release sites. AOK is helping to provide fencing to deter dispersal from the conservation sites. As the state's leading advocate for wildlife, we are also insisting that two entities (including K-State Research and Extension) stop using Rozol – a poison that kills eagles, badgers and other species, including BFFs and Swift Foxes, that feed on poisoned prairie dogs. Zinc Phosphide Oat Bait is less likely to kill these at-risk species.



AOK Advocates Taking Pride in Prairies

Audubon Advocacy of prairie appreciation and conservation extends back nearly 30 years, and includes development of and spearheading the proposal that led to creation of the 10,894-acre Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in 1996 as a unit of the National Park Service system of preserves.

Other major prairie conservation commitments have included our strong and steady advocacy for state siting standards designed to protect the Flint Hills and other intact prairie landscapes from tax-subsidized developments that threaten to fragment or destroy the ecological integrity of these areas. With 30 million acres of already altered/cultivated lands in Kansas, some of these areas are

more appropriate for industrial windpower complexes. Intact prairie lands vital for Prairie-chickens and other grassland birds should be spared. Two destructive projects, one south of Beaumont in the Flint Hills and the other in the Smoky Hills, are already two too many.

Surprisingly, the state's largest landowner and manager of "grasslands" in Kansas is the Department of Transportation (KDOT). With most of our state's residents and virtually all visitors exposed to the 10,000-mile network of state highways, where better to promote appreciation for prairie plant communities than on the 146,000 acres of vegetated roadsides. Audubon advocacy led to establishment of an Aesthetics Task Force by KDOT Secretary Deb Miller. AOK, the Kansas Native Plant Society and representatives of other entities participated in a series of meetings devoted to improvement of this resource.

Future management will include a shift to all-native grasses and wildflowers in new rural plantings, reduced mowing to within 15 feet of the road shoulder except for "mow out" to the boundary fences only once every three or four years. Delayed mowing to late fall will allow prairie wildflowers and grasses to flower and produce seed, further enhancing diversity and abundance. Broad rights-of-way areas provide habitat for butterflies, beneficial pollinating insects, and numerous birds at various times of the year. Standing vegetation holds snow and reduces drifting on roadways, serves as filter strips that help purify water runoff and prevent litter from washing into streams.

Now, we are asking the Kansas Turnpike Authority to implement similar roadside management protocols to showcase our prairie heritage along that roadway. KTA has nearly as much acreage as the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, and it is viewed by tens of thousands every day. Managing habitat for its potential, wherever it exists, is vital if we are to retain biodiversity and wildlife resources – from Bobwhite Quail to Fritillary Butterflies.



For more information and ideas on how you can be involved, or how we can assist you with your conservation interests, please contact **Ron Klataske**, Executive Director and other staff at Audubon of Kansas, 210 Southwind Place, Manhattan KS 66503. Phone 785-537-4385, e-mail aok@audubonofkansas.org. Please contact **Michael Hudson** regarding gifts, planned giving and philanthropy. Visit the website at www.audubonofkansas.org and sign up for our AOK e-News for monthly updates.