



*Promoting the Enjoyment, Understanding, Protection, and Restoration of our Natural Ecosystem*

AOK Newsletter

*Prairie Wings* March 2010

## A State Budget Cut that Would Benefit Ecological Resources in Kansas

We all want the State of Kansas to have sufficient funds to support education and fulfill other important obligations. Thus, many of the budget cuts are troubling. However, there may be one small sliver of silver lining surrounding the revenue shortfall clouds. Maybe, just maybe, we can use this occasion to impress Governor Parkinson, Kansas Dept. of Transportation (KDOT) and Kansas Turnpike Authority (KTA) staff, and members of the Kansas Legislature that this is a great time to eliminate excessive – often ecologically destructive – mowing along state highways and the Kansas Turnpike, and to adopt the limited mowing practices recommended by a broad base of conservation organizations.

**An article related to roadside mowing was printed in the Wichita Eagle on December 27, 2009.**  
[www.kansas.com](http://www.kansas.com)

Audubon has been actively promoting improved highway right-of-way management in this state since the early 1970s. Substantial progress has been made at times, and then the policies are ignored by some district engineers who build budgets and expand their work force based on demands they create to more frequently and completely mow out ROW vegetation.

KDOT Secretary Deb Miller has made great progress advancing the idea that vegetated roadsides can be a positive resource. In response to requests from Audubon of Kansas (AOK), Secretary Miller established an Aesthetics Task Force (ATF) in February 2008 to develop recommendations for enhancement of roadsides.

**Please contact Kansas Governor Parkinson at 1-877-579-6757 or [governor@ks.gov](mailto:governor@ks.gov) and your state representative and state senator ([www.contactingthecongress.org](http://www.contactingthecongress.org)) urging them to save approximately \$3 to \$4 million annually in state revenue by cutting that amount from the KDOT budget of more than \$6.6 million that is spent excessively mowing vegetation in the outer parts of the right-of-way (ROW) along state highways.**

The task force met monthly in 2008. It included representatives of state and federal agencies, Audubon of Kansas, Kansas Native Plant Society, Kansas Wildlife Federation and individuals with special expertise.

**Links to the ATF Executive Report & the Executive Summary can be found on our website: [www.audubonofkansas.org](http://www.audubonofkansas.org)**

**ATF Executive Report** includes the following comments on the issue of roadside mowing:

*Mowing Policy – It is the general consensus of the Task Force that the policy as written is not followed uniformly throughout the State. There seems to be entirely too much mowing in most areas and both sides of the highway are rarely left unmowed at the same time.*

*Mowing native grasses and forbs is generally unnecessary, except for the control of invasive weeds (including brome and fescue) and woody plants in specific areas.*

### Join Now!

**Please Help With This and Other Important AOK Initiatives**



We need your help. Please donate now to keep Audubon of Kansas on the front lines undeterred by controversy or the absence of other conservation organizations in the trenches, working for wildlife in every forum possible, joining landowners and others who strive to protect prairie landscapes and ecological values, pushing agencies to change operational paradigms and go beyond their comfort zones. We greatly appreciate any support you can provide.

*At the request of the Task Force Coordinator, the District One Maintenance Engineer provided mowing expense data and found that a 3-year average fiscal year expenditure for KDOT mowing statewide was \$6,608,868, and that the average annual area mowed was 316,907.9 acres. On the basis of expenditures alone, a significant amount of savings could occur in this area; especially in light of the dramatic increases in fuel costs recently.*

**Benefits and Concerns for Limited Mowing – Will save financial resources that can be used to lower tax burdens, help KDOT address higher priority needs, or the savings can be used to invest in enhancement of roadside areas with supplemental native grass and forb plantings.**





This photo was taken this fall along Highway 18 southwest of Manhattan, KS in an area that has been rebuilt (and replanted!) in the past couple of years.

Limited mowing can become part of the State's energy conservation plan by limiting fossil fuel consumption through reduced miles driven/hours of operation for tractors and support trucks.

Limited mowing will result in enhancement of State roadsides for the display of native grasses and wildflowers throughout much of Kansas—a Prairie State—and the enjoyment of the traveling public, both residents and visitors.

Limited mowing will result in enhancement of roadside habitat for numerous species of birds and beneficial pollinating insects, including butterflies and bees.

Limited mowing practices and the planting of native grasses and forbs on roadsides serve as filter strips and buffer areas, which help to remove pollutants from roadside runoff and help to keep many kinds of litter from washing into nearby streams, rivers and lakes. Allowing deep-rooted native plants to mature also help to prevent ditch erosion and bank slides.

Comments are regularly received from the field that mowing needs to be accomplished prior to snowfall, and that areas prone to drifting need to be mowed out to "allow the snow to blow across the road." It has generally been proven that mowing for snow control is not only unnecessary, but may be exacerbating the problem of drifting on road surfaces. Natives left at their natural height actually collect and hold snow in the manner of living snow fences, rather than allowing it to drift across the highway surfaces.

The task force recognizes the fact that regional differences across the State have a direct impact on the treatment of roadsides, especially during the establishment period. Where the establishment of grass may occur relatively quickly in the eastern part of the State, woody seedlings and other undesirable growth also develop rapidly. The western

part of the State may take years to develop any kind of permanent cover, allowing undesirable weeds to proliferate. On the other hand, once mature stands are achieved in the western part of the State, many roadsides may rarely need mowing. The ATF believes, however, that mowing on a 4-year cycle is beneficial to natives, replicating somewhat thatch removal by fire. It is suggested that normal scheduling should include:

**Year 1 - East side of all north/south roadways**

**Year 2 - North side of all east/west roadways**

**Year 3 - West side of all north/south roadways**

**Year 4 - South side of all east/west roadways**

This policy will encourage regrowth, control trees and shrubs, and be the simplest to implement.

**Mowing Recommendations** – Changes to the mowing policy would reduce or limit all mowing to a 4-year cycle, except for shoulders, safety zone mowing for sight distance, and for the control of undesirable weeds and woody tree seedlings. When mowing is necessary or scheduled in areas outside the shoulders, it should not occur between April 15 and November 1 due to the sustainability of native grasses, wildflowers, and the protection of ground nesting wildlife, unless specific problems need to be addressed.

Shoulder strip mowing should be confined to one mower width (about 10-15') adjacent to the paved shoulder or edge of roadway.

In addition to the spring, summer and fall benefits, standing vegetation provides living snow fences that reduce blowing snow across roadways. That results in improved safety for travelers, reduction of snow removal costs and the quantity of salt applications.

Audubon of Kansas presented Deb Miller with an award recognizing her leadership on this subject at the organization's February 5, 2010 board of trustees meeting in Lawrence. The award plaque includes a photograph of a vast expanse of wildflowers along Highway 18 southwest of Manhattan taken in September of 2009, and it reads as follows:

**Deb Miller**  
**Is recognized by Audubon of Kansas**  
**with this**  
**Public Land Stewardship & Roadside**  
**Beautification Award**

During the summer of 2008 fuel prices were extraordinarily high and that was an added motivation for reduction of mowing. Most KDOT maintenance units limited mowing to approximately 15 feet out from the shoulder, and as a result native grasses and wildflowers were incredibly showy along state highways that fall. However, far more extensive mowing, and mowing out to the fencerows in many places while native grasses and wildflowers were still in full bloom was commonplace in the fall of 2009. It appears mowing recommendations of the ATF are already being ignored.

One of the best ways for citizens to help make state highway roadsides more attractive in Kansas is to urge KDOT to fully adopt the ATF recommendations and adhere to a limited mowing protocol throughout the state. One can contact Secretary Deb Miller by sending an e-mail to her administrative assistant at [PeggyH@ksdot.org](mailto:PeggyH@ksdot.org).

The state highway system includes approximately 10,000 miles of roadway (20,000 miles of ROW) with more than 150,000 acres of vegetation. That is more than 13 times the acreage of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, and this roadside grassland is viewed by hundreds of thousands of residents and visiting travelers every day. Our rich prairie heritage of native grasses and wildflowers should be projected in the most positive way possible at every season of the year. It can be done in a manner that reduces the use of fossil fuels, saves taxpayer dollars, and improves the ecological and environmental benefits of this public land. **Yes, it is public land.**

**Links to the ATF Executive Report & the Executive Summary can be found on our website: [www.audubonofkansas.org](http://www.audubonofkansas.org)**



# Representative Holmes Advocates Killing of Mountain Lions in Kansas

Although there may only be a few in the state at any one time, and it has only been in the past year that the Kansas Wildlife and Parks Department (KDWP) has acknowledged the modern existence of any, Mountain Lions are under attack by a member of the Kansas Legislature. His idea is to exterminate the species once again as part of our state's natural wildlife heritage.

His name is Representative Mitch Holmes. In February he introduced House Bill No. 2639 designed to allow "mountain lions and wolves to be hunted" in Kansas. Everyone in the state with a firearm could conceivably attempt to kill anything they perceive to be a Mountain Lion. Often other animals are mistaken for the cats, including Golden Retrievers, English Mastiffs, Deer, Coyotes, Bobcats and even domestic cats.

With the use of hounds, which are very effective at trailing Mountain Lions, it would be increasingly likely that any Mountain Lions detected would be treed and needlessly killed.

Representative Holmes addressed the KDWP Commission at their meeting in Topeka on March 11 to request that the Department pursue the feasibility of allowing

hunting as provided by his bill. Various reasons, such as "this is a way to learn more about them", were given. KDWP staff have not endorsed the proposal.

Audubon of Kansas staunchly opposes this bill, and any attempt to exterminate this native species. Ron Klataske advised the Commission to reject the unfounded, misguided attempt to encourage killing of Mountain Lions—unless specific animals are responsible for livestock damage or present some type of threat. The mere existence of a few of these remarkable animals, in a state with 52 million acres, is not a reason for preemptive eradication.



**Kansas City Star article:  
A Kansas lawmaker from  
cattle country has mountain  
lions in his sights  
[www.kansascity.com](http://www.kansascity.com)**

**We urge Kansans who care for our wildlife heritage, and support science-based conservation, to contact members of the KDWP Commission, and members of the Kansas Legislature. Please urge them to resist any senseless attempt to allow hunting or needless killing of Mountain Lions in Kansas, and to implement a pro-active conservation protocol for dealing with confirmed depredations involving livestock, or any threats to humans because of proximity of the animals to residential properties. Nebraska and several other states have established management plans – and they are designed to discourage unnecessary killing of these native cats.**

**Below is the contact information for the seven KDWP commissioners:**

**Kelly W. Johnston (Chairman)**  
4710 E 26th St. N. • Wichita, KS 67220  
316-263-2173 (W) • 316-685-5160 (H)  
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**Gerald W. Lauber**  
P.O. Box 8009 • Topeka, KS 66608  
785-267-5522 • [gerald@kawvalleybank.com](mailto:gerald@kawvalleybank.com)

**R. Douglas Sebelius**  
105 S. North Ave • Norton, KS 67654  
785-877-5143 (W) • [rdsebelius@yahoo.com](mailto:rdsebelius@yahoo.com)

**Robert J. Wilson**  
1004 W. 1st • Pittsburg, KS 66762  
620-231-5789 • [rockyflats@cox.net](mailto:rockyflats@cox.net)

**Frank A. Meyer**  
505 Sand Lane • Herington, KS 67449  
785-258-3870  
[fsmeyer@tctelco.net](mailto:fsmeyer@tctelco.net)

**Shari L. Wilson**  
51 S. 64th St. • Kansas City, KS 66111  
913-287-6879 (W) • [sharilea51@gmail.com](mailto:sharilea51@gmail.com)

**Debra J. Bolton**  
1009 Gillespie Pl • Garden City, KS 67846  
620-275-9164 (W) • [dbolton@ksu.edu](mailto:dbolton@ksu.edu)

The Black Hills of South Dakota supports a population of approximately 200 Mountain Lions. Millions of people, residents and visitors, enjoy the outdoors in that area each year without incident. Likewise, thousands of people reside in rural parts of the Black Hills and livestock conflicts are infrequent - and readily resolved. Cougar numbers there are sufficient to support regulated hunting, but the harvest is carefully controlled to maintain the population.

Lethal measures should not be employed by the agency when Mountain Lions are encountered, unless it is necessary. Ideally, any captured cougars should be radio-collared and then released to be monitored and studied.

If KDWP proposes an open a season on Mountain Lions, as Representative Holmes has requested, Audubon of Kansas will alternatively propose and petition to have this rare species considered as a candidate for a higher level of protected status. Although it is certainly an "at-risk" species, it is conceivable that it could qualify as a threatened species in this state.

Following the discussion about Mountain Lions, the Commission received a briefing on the 2009 Deer Hunting Season, and population status. Because of high numbers, various entities continue to push KDWP to increase harvest, especially of antlerless deer. Deer related vehicle accidents peaked at about 10,000 per year in the late 1990s, and are now approximately 9,000 annually.



## In Memoriam



### Mary Catherine Waiss

Mary Catherine Waiss, 79, passed away on February 1st, 2010. She was a long-time member of Audubon, and she had some very strong views on animal rights. Mary Kay believed that the wild areas needed to stay wild so that the animals that lived there could continue to do so, and that developers should set their sights elsewhere. She was very excited about the re-introduction of the wolves to Yellowstone as well as the black footed ferrets to Kansas. She loved animals big and small, from ground squirrels to white tigers, from cardinals to eagles. In the last years of her life her bird feeders outside the window were a source of joy for her. There was never a time in her adult life when she was without a pet, and she passed her love of animals down through her family- that's why we have decided to set up this donation and memorial in her name. Her love of animals will live on.

The Family of Mary Kay Waiss  
Walter Murphy  
Lawrence Memorial Hospital Laboratory

When present, Mountain Lions play a natural and beneficial role in helping to control deer and other prey populations. Kansas has an abundance of natural prey, including raccoons, deer, wild turkeys, rabbits and similar-sized mammals.

**Arkansas is advertised as  
"The Natural State."  
We hope that Kansas won't  
become known as  
"The Eradication State" based on  
this bill and the antiquated  
statutes that allow misguided  
county commissioners to  
force landowners to eradicate  
prairie dogs.**

Representative Holmes represents an area of the state that includes Pratt, operations headquarters for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, and the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge – one of the state's premier wildlife viewing areas. Residents throughout the state should urge him to take pride in our wildlife heritage, and forgo attempts to diminish it. His e-mail address is [mitch.holmes@house.ks.gov](mailto:mitch.holmes@house.ks.gov).

*Additional information on Mountain Lions may be found at [www.audubonofkansas.org](http://www.audubonofkansas.org).*

**Please send an email to your  
state representative and state  
senator urging them to block any  
bills that would permit  
eradication of this native species.  
[www.contactingthecongress.com](http://www.contactingthecongress.com)**

*This publication was originally the AOK E-news letter. If you would like to receive our e-news letters please sign-up at [www.audubonofkansas.org](http://www.audubonofkansas.org)*

## Please Help With this and Other Important AOK Conservation Initiatives

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To donate online, simply to go to: [www.AudubonofKansas.org](http://www.AudubonofKansas.org)

Or send a check and money order to:

**Audubon of Kansas • 210 Southwind Place • Manhattan, KS 66502**

If you are considering a gift or bequest to Audubon of Kansas and would appreciate receiving additional information regarding our purpose and mission, please e-mail us or call (785) 537-4385.

## The Audubon Family

**Mike Hudson** joined our staff this year as Director of Development. Mike adds another element of youthful enthusiasm for birding and prairie appreciation. **Lana Micheel** became our Onsite Sanctuary Coordinator for the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary. Lana serves as our visitation coordinator, hosts and guides sanctuary visitors and lodge guests.

Audubon lost a dedicated conservationist in early November. **Jan Garton** was vital in conservation of Cheyenne Bottoms in the 1980s when the water rights of that internationally important resource were threatened – and it appeared that the future for this unique area was destined to be a largely and usually dry remnant of a once great wetland. Jan Garton, in partnership of Sil Pembleton, and others including Joyce Wolf led a decade-long statewide campaign to restore priority water rights for Cheyenne Bottoms. As a leader for the Kansas Audubon Council and the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, Jan provided the passion and intellect that was the catalyst for turning the fate of Cheyenne Bottoms from one of dryland fields to a wonderfully managed wetland complex.

Several memorial gifts have been given to Audubon of Kansas in honor of Jan. Our plan is to dedicate the funds to specifically benefit places she loved. Three dozen Whooping Cranes called Cheyenne Bottoms and the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge home at the time of Jan's death. Her spirit was undoubtedly under the wings of these magnificent birds as they lifted in thermals to continue their migration.



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