

## AUDUBON OF KANSAS' SANCTUARIES:

# CONSERVATION DOES NOT MEAN THE LACK OF HUMAN USE

By Dr. Jackie Augustine

Sanctuaries fulfill the conservation portion of Audubon of Kansas' three-fold mission of advocacy, conservation, and education. AOK sanctuaries not only conserve habitat for wildlife but also do so in the context of human land use. Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie not only supports diverse native plant and animal species, it also serves as a public park highlighting the site's contribution to human history. The newest sanctuary, the Connie Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm near Lincoln, Kansas, is an example of how grassland buffer strips between agricultural land and riparian woods can create an ideal habitat for bobwhite quail and other wildlife. The Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary demonstrates how cattle grazing can contribute to the creation of grasslands of different heights and density to support various wildlife. This sanctuary harbors mountain lion, elk, Greater Prairie-Chicken, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Sandhill Cranes, and other species. These three unique sanctuaries offer multiple ways to connect people with nature.

Below is an account of significant happenings this year from each of our sanctuaries.

### **Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie is placed on the National Register of Historic Places**

The portion of Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie that is owned by Audubon of Kansas is adjacent to a much larger parcel owned by the Mount Mitchell Prairie Guards. They are key partners in maintaining habitat and public trails on both properties. This year, the

Prairie Guards also compiled a vast record of historical information relating to the area and applied for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. This 69-page document outlines the key historical features on the property including 1) Heritage Prairie, a sizeable native prairie landscape, 2) a Native American archaeological site, 3) Fort Riley Road, 4) memorial monuments, and 5) the Captain William Mitchell Farmstead.



*Mount Mitchell by JK Augustine*

The application describes these historical features as follows: The Heritage Prairie is approximately 163 acres, over 60 acres of which have never been plowed.

The archaeological site is a burial mound dating to approximately 1800 years ago. Fort Riley Road follows the route used by Native American hunters, fur trappers, and explorers, and by emigrants after Kansas Territory was opened to European-American settlement. There are two twentieth-century monuments on Mount Mitchell. The Fielding Memorial Monument is likely a glacial erratic (that is, a stone deposited by an iceberg drifting in glacial Lake Manhattan more than half a million years ago) found on the site. It has a bronze plaque that reads “In memory of ‘Dodge’—Doer of Good Deeds. Captain George T. Fielding III. 192nd F.A. Bn, 43rd Div., U.S.A. Killed in Action Near Manila. P.I. April 30, 1945. Aged 28 years.” The second monument consists of a tall rectangular smooth-cut Onaga limestone block with a bronze plaque that states: “In commemoration of the Connecticut Kansas Colony known also as the Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony, which settled in Wabaunsee in 1856, and in memory of Capt. William Mitchell, a member of the colony, this monument is erected on Mount Mitchell through the generosity of his son, William I. Mitchell, by the Kansas State Historical Society, 1956.” The buildings of the Captain William Mitchell farmstead include a log house, stone well house, and a stone gambrel-roof type barn.

Visitors can access the public trails from Mount Mitchell Road, but the buildings are not open to the public.

Audubon of Kansas thanks the Mount Mitchell Prairie Guards for all their hard work in getting the site recognized on the National Register of Historic Places.

On August 13, Audubon of Kansas hosted a wildflower walk with Courtney Masterson, the Owner-Operator and Ecologist of Native Lands LLC, an ecological restoration organization based out of Lawrence, Kansas. Courtney told stories about her “favorite” plants (she has many favorites) that included hints for correctly identifying the plant, which insect species it hosts, how

flowers are pollinated, how seeds are dispersed in the wild, and how seeds must be prepared for re-seeding new areas.

Dale Nimz, the member of the Prairie Guards who drafted the application to the National Register, was also able to attend and discuss the fascinating and multi-faceted history of the area.

### Trail at Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm officially opens to the public

At a ribbon cutting ceremony on September 26, Audubon of Kansas unveiled a new hiking trail at Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm near Lincoln, Kansas. The trailhead is located on 170th Ave., 0.5 miles north of the intersection with E Iron Dr. in Lincoln County.



*Achterberg ribbon cutting  
by Kris Heinze*

### Trail Highlights

The one-mile trail consists of two loops. The first loop passes ruins from a former homestead including

a chicken coop and foundations for a house and milkhouse. The trail then circles a re-established prairie while weaving through a wooded riparian forest. Hikers will enjoy excellent views of horseshoe bends in Bullfoot Creek as it cuts its way across the property. The second loop circles another prairie restoration, but also enters a more extensive wooded area where Bullfoot and Horse Creeks meet. The area abounds in wildflowers, insects, birds, deer, and other wildlife, including Bobwhite quail, a favorite bird of the sanctuary's namesake, Connie Achterberg.

### Trail Establishment

The Connie Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm was established in 2014 when it was donated to AOK. On September 11, 2022, volunteers from AOK, Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever, Women on the Wing, and Sterling College established the hiking trail. The Kansas Trails Council provided expertise and equipment through its "Trail in a Box" program. Fallen trees, woody brush, and grasses had to be removed to establish the trail. We thank Kris Heinze at Live Lincoln County for helping advertise the trail and for taking photos during the ribbon cutting.

### Wetland Easement at Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary receives regional attention

This year, Audubon of Kansas finalized a wetland easement on 300 acres at Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary, near Bassett, Nebraska. The US Fish and Wildlife Service is now our partner in managing that land. They will also make wetland improvements by creating a berm to retain water longer and create larger wetlands. By expanding the marsh habitat, we hope to increase the population of secretive marsh birds like Virginia Rail and Sora (See "Animals tell Audubon of Kansas that our habitat management is successful" in this *Prairie Wings*).

Ron Klataske, the former Executive Director, started this process and should receive the credit. There were numerous hurdles along the way. The most recent was Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts issuing an Executive Order placing restrictions on conservation easements. Paul Hammel, reporter for *The Nebraska Examiner*, wrote a wonderful piece detailing the process and why Audubon of Kansas was able to obtain an easement when easements sought by other private landowners in the area have not been successful; see: (<https://nebraskaexaminer.com/2022/08/20/wildlife-group-gets-conservation-easement-despite-opposition-by-ricketts-county-niobrara-council/>).



Portion of Hutton easement river overlook.  
Photo by JK Augustine

Easements generally restrict the suite of things that can happen on a parcel of property. They are tied to the deed, and therefore will be in effect in perpetuity, even if the ownership of the land changes. Easements can have various restrictions, but common restrictions limit development and promote habitat or agricultural management. Because there are limits as to what can be done on the property, the assessed tax value of the land





*Mountain Lions Hutton trail cam  
by L Arrowsmith*

goes down, and owners benefit from reduced property taxes (as well as the comfort that comes from knowing the land and habitat they worked to restore will be protected in perpetuity). Nebraska Governor Ricketts' Executive Order required easements to be approved by County Commissioners before they take effect. Many County Commissioners in Nebraska are rejecting the easements that come before them.

Our easement was no exception: it was rejected by the Rock County Commissioners. So, how were we able to continue with our easement? Our easement was with the federal government and states cannot restrict the activities of the federal government. Most easements are held by Land Trusts, nonprofit organizations committed to protecting land. The governor's Executive Order applies to easements to be held by Land Trusts.

## Did you know?

Audubon of Kansas pays property taxes on all our sanctuaries. We do this to support the local communities.

Because our easement was rejected by the county commissioners, Audubon of Kansas will not receive any property tax reduction as is typical of conservation easements. We decided to continue with the easement because we welcome the partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to conduct wetland habitat improvements, and we received a cash payout equal to the estimated loss in economic value of the property. We will add this money to the Hutton endowment to support habitat restoration on the property.



*Portion of Hutton easement wet meadow.  
Photo by JK Augustine*