

A Note from the Editor



Photo by Ron Klataske.

2020 has been in many respects a calamitous year. The human death toll from Covid-19 has been appalling, and continues to mount; the economic consequences have been massive, and are still impossible to finally assess. Floods, a seemingly unending procession of hurricanes, and unprecedentedly huge out-of-control forest fires ravaging our forests come as harbingers of the even more dire results scientists have predicted from anthropogenic climate change. Our clean water and clean air continue to be beset with reckless government deregulation, while long standing protections like the Migratory Bird Treaty and the Endangered Species Act come under attack and are chiseled away, as are protected lands and National Monuments. As the economy tanks, 501(c)(3) organizations like Audubon of Kansas can particularly feel the pinch of hard times.

But in the midst of so much bad news, AOK, at least, has some cause to celebrate. Last year was the twentieth year of our existence as one of the most active conservation organizations in the Northern Great Plains, being the voice of Nature on many fronts, challenging environmental threats, and publically championing education, awareness, and appreciation of the natural world. On the brink of the New Year, 2021, AOK faces a momentous transition: our founder and long-time Executive Director, long and for many the face of AOK, Ron Klataske, will retire after so many battles and successes. He will be succeeded as Executive Director by an able, energetic, and enthusiastic biologist, teacher, organizer and administrator, Jackie Augustine, who comes to us from the state of Ohio, but with deep roots and connections in Kansas. In this issue of *Prairie Wings*, we will look back over Ron's service and achievements over the past twenty years, and also look forward, introducing Jackie, and learning about some of her plans for AOK's future.

In this issue we are also delighted to introduce McKay Stangler, our new (as of this year) Director of Philanthropy. He brings vital experience in organization development, a fertile mind and great energy to this crucial role.

We will also look in this issue at some continuing, unique initiatives by AOK. The third annual "Celebration of Cranes" was innovatively virtual this year, but consequently designed to reach, educate, and inspire an even wider audience. AOK continues to advocate for the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, a crucial migration stopover for Sandhill Cranes and other waterfowl, as well as the endangered, magnificent Whooping Crane.

No less than the cranes, if less imposing a presence, Prairie Dogs have been an iconic species in short-grass prairie, a keystone species on which numerous threatened predators, including Ferruginous Hawks, Golden Eagles, and the rare, endangered Black-footed Ferret, are dependent. Ron Klataske updates AOK's long-standing efforts to protect Prairie Dogs and reintroduce Black-footed Ferrets, educating and gaining the cooperation of conservation-minded landowners to save Prairie Dogs as a keystone species and reintroduce Black-footed Ferrets in short-grass prairies.

The climate crisis triggers rapid development of green energy alternatives. In windy Kansas, wind turbines have proliferated across the landscape. But both public enthusiasm and development have been largely uncritical. AOK is one of the few conservation organizations in the Midwest to point to the threats to wildlife of rash, unconsidered siting of wind farms. In this issue of *Prairie Wings*, the editor publishes a thorough-going examination of environmental hazards from carelessly sited wind turbines, and airs considerations for choosing and monitoring sites to do the least damage to birds, bats, and natural ecosystems. In addition, the editor and John Schukman collaborate on a brief report on the importance of baseline surveys of flora and fauna, both in wind farm siting decisions, and in establishing diachronic studies of wildlife on conservation properties, like the AOK sanctuaries.

Finally, AOK is not solely about fighting in the trenches for environmental causes. We highlight appreciation and enjoyment of nature here in Kansas. In this issue, the AOK Sanctuaries are represented in Elizabeth Dodd and Dave Rintoul's beautifully written and illustrated photo-journal of a visit to the Hutton Ranch. Ron Klataske provides an update on improvements at another AOK sanctuary, the Connie Achterberg Wildlife-friendly Demonstration Farm. Beth Schultz's article on Lisa Grossman's *plein air* Kansas landscapes captures the inspiration and uplift we can derive from the reflection of our rivers and prairies in the work of an accomplished artist's eye and hand.

We hope that you will find in this issue of *Prairie Wings* pleasure, food for thought, and stimulation to go out, enjoy Kansas wildlife and wild scenes, and work for the appreciation, preservation, and restoration of our natural ecosystems.

--The Editor