



Sharp-tailed Grouse blind participants. Photo by JK Augustine

PARTICIPANTS FLOCK TO THE FIRST ANNUAL KANSAS LEK TREKS PRAIRIE-CHICKEN FESTIVAL!

JACKIE AUGUSTINE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AOK

Audubon of Kansas (AOK) held its first annual Kansas Lek Treks Prairie-Chicken Festival from April 7-10, 2022 in Hays, KS. Hays was chosen because opportunities to see both Greater and Lesser Prairie-Chickens are within an hour's drive of Hays. **National advertising attracted 90 participants from 25 different states and one international attendee.** About 25% of attendees were from Kansas. Participants saw both Lesser and Greater Prairie-Chickens on private lands in eastern Gove and western Trego Counties in Kansas, and Sharp-tailed Grouse during pre- and post-festival trips to AOK's Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary in northern Nebraska. We provided two options for viewing. The first was viewing from a blind where participants got close-up looks. The second was viewing from a van, which both provided opportunities to see the

prairie-chickens at a distance through spotting scopes, and gave participants with mobility challenges an opportunity to see the birds. Field trips to Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area, Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, Smoky Valley Ranch, Castle Rock, Monument Rocks, and Scott Lake State Park were also offered. Social events included an opening reception, wine tasting at Shiloh Winery, informal chats with prairie-chicken experts, behind-the-scenes tours of the Sternberg Museum, and a closing banquet. The banquet featured a welcome by Brad Loveless, Secretary of Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP), and a presentation by Nate Swick, host of American Birding podcast. Nate Swick discussed how birdwatching is good for mental and physical health. Funding was obtained through registration fees, a Kansas Department of Tourism grant, and sponsorships

from KDWP and The Nature Conservancy in Kansas. Additional partners included the Sternberg Museum of Natural History, Kansas Wetlands Education Center, and “Boomer,” the prairie-chicken mascot from the Missouri Department of Conservation.

Next year’s festival will be held Apr 13-16, 2023. Tiffany Kersten will speak at our banquet about “Birdie Big Year: Elevating Women Birders.” Tiffany Kersten didn’t set out to do a big year, but after a series of unanticipated and serendipitous events, she suddenly found herself amidst one. As a sexual assault survivor, she spent 2021 traveling to all corners of the Lower 48 States, tallying birds and gifting personal safety alarms to women she met along the way. Her goal was to see 700 species, and to raise awareness of women’s safety in the outdoors. She ended up surpassing her goal and

setting a new Lower 48 Big Year record of 726. In her presentation, Tiffany will lead us through the fear, empowerment, struggles and healing that all played vital roles in the personal growth she experienced on this wild adventure.

Get involved! Plan on attending next year’s festival if you have never seen prairie-chickens or want an opportunity to experience the thrill of seeing them from a blind (See “Prairie-Chickens: Home on the Range” in the 2021-22 edition of *Prairie Wings* for a description of the blind experience; available at <https://www.audubonofkansas.org/prairie-wings.cfm>). Volunteers are needed and conservation partners are welcome. More information can be found at <https://www.kansaslektreks.org/> or by contacting Jackie Augustine at 785-537-4385 or jackie@audubonofkansas.org.



Sharp-tailed Grouse. Photo by JK Augustine



Behind the scenes tour of Sternberg Museum with Curtis Schmidt. Photo by JK Augustine



Van tour participants. Photo by T. Ewert