

Chaplin Nature Center Celebrates 40 Years

A Celebration of Nature was held at the Chaplin Nature Center (CNC) on Saturday, October 12, marking its 40th Anniversary.

Photo by Sabra Cazel

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One of the main features of the afternoon was a concert by the Tallgrass Express String Band. A trailer served as the stage in the lower meadow, with hay bales for seating. The band entertained visitors with some good old-fashioned bluegrass music. Many of their songs were nature-themed, featuring their love for the tallgrass prairie, wildflowers, birds and other wildlife found there.

There was a walking tour with several stations that included live animals and many other natural features within the woodlands and prairie. But the station that attracted the most attention was the one at which we served sautéed crickets! Quite naturally that is not for everyone's palate. Thus, we served more typical fare too, with a big buffet providing plenty to eat for all.

The weather was fantastic and folks of all ages had a great time as we reflected on the long and meaningful history of the Chaplin Nature Center. The Center is a 230-acre preserve located along the west side of the Arkansas River three miles west of Arkansas City. The center is a

priority education focus of the Wichita Audubon Society, and a property devoted to conservation.

The Audubon chapter, organized in 1954, purchased the property from Hazel and Stedman Chaplin in October of 1973. The purchase realized a long-held dream of Wichita Audubon. The property



features bottomland forest, several restored prairies, and riparian areas, both along the Arkansas River and Spring Creek. Miles of trails let visitors explore and learn about these different habitat types.

The Chaplins purchased the property in 1938 and for 35 years managed it to benefit wildlife. Both enjoyed feeding birds and observing the abundant wildlife on the property. They discovered a group of like-minded friends in the Wichita Audubon

Society, which held its first field trip to the Chaplin farm in 1960 that became an annual event. When discussions began about creating a nature center, the Chaplin property came to mind.

Development began in earnest with the hiring of full-time naturalist Gerald Wiens in 1980. CNC was now open for educational programs, miles of hiking trails were developed and plans for an education and interpretive building began. Over 1,500 visitors were registered that first year. Construction of a visitor center began by the end of the decade. The new building was dedicated in September of 1989, providing interpretive displays and becoming the gathering place for educational programs.



A class from Arkansas City examines life on a fallen log. Bottom photos on opposite page: A Big Brothers Big Sisters group on an outing to CNC. The bluff staircase leads from the Visitor's Center to the trails to the Arkansas River. Photos by Patty Marlett.

In 1997, after more than 16 years of dedicated service and assistance in making the vision and goals of the nature center a reality, Gerald left to pursue other personal and professional interests.

Current naturalist, Shawn Silliman was then hired, and has continued the development of the property and the educational programs for school classes from across south-central Kansas, as well

as for civic organizations, youth groups and the general public. A major renovation of the interpretive displays was completed in 2008.

The trails through the woods and prairies, leading to the sandbars of the Arkansas River, are open to the public from sunrise to sunset year round. Funded by the generosity of our members and friends, programs at CNC are free and open to the public. Over the last year Shawn has conducted ninety-two school programs for more than 2,000 kids and nineteen public programs for more than 500 people. Shawn has also hosted eleven groups, including weddings and other events with nearly 700 participants and over 2,200 Chaplin Nature Center visitors.

In addition to the 40th anniversary celebration of nature and fund-raising event, CNC programs included for the year included Monarch Butterfly tagging, an astronomy program, night hikes, Bald Eagle watches, a twilight kayak float on the river and the annual butterfly count.

Check out the full schedule at wichitaaudubon.org and plan a visit soon!



A class of students from Wichita explores the new exhibits in the Visitors Center. Patty Marlett photo.

You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns.

– Henry David Thoreau from the chapter “Brute Neighbors” in *Walden*