

*AOK accepts opportunity to share  
stewardship responsibility for the*

# **Connie Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm**

**I**t wasn't long ago when hundreds of thousands of farms in the plains and Midwest were the source of much more than crops and livestock. Family life, community life and a way-of-life were an inseparable part of rural farm life.

Cultivated and hayed lands and pastures were just one element, essential for rural livelihoods. Farms were diversified with livestock and poultry, orchards and gardens, and an array of different crops. Within the patchwork of fields, many farms had remnants of native prairies and woodlands. With streams, hedgerows, and wild fruit-bearing thickets along fencerows and lanes, farm landscapes provided places for wildlife and wildflowers – and places for children to explore.

It was ordinary. However, looking back, we now realize that it was extraordinary.

This lifestyle provided a cherished sense of place, and memories of every aspect of life on the land and beyond tied to family, friends and neighbors. The assistance of neighbors sharing equipment and labor was often essential, and rural towns had all the essentials provided by family-owned businesses. It is no mystery why generations who left the farm and rural communities for other careers brought with them a strong tie to the farms, ranches and towns of their youth – and their families' heritage.

Connie Achterberg is one among millions who left the farm but never lost her love for the parcel of land that was her childhood home, or her fondness for the surrounding countryside and community. As a child her mother allowed her to play and explore. She spent countless hours and days playing in the Smoky Hills stream that coursed across their farm. The meanders of Bullfoot Creek and the woodlands that lined it remain intact today, along with a native prairie meadow that was once the farm pasture.

Her grandfather, Adolph Achterberg, owned the

**A view of Bullfoot Creek in June with  
Virginia Wild Rye and other lush  
vegetation along the stream and  
within the forest understory.**

farm and grew watermelons in one of the small bottomland fields nearly encircled by the creek. As described by Connie, “He would often come out to check on his watermelon crop or to chop wood.” His small dog, “Spotty” usually accompanied him and it was a joy for a little farm girl. There were many good times, and most certainly in the 1930s there were hard times. Connie remembers the dust storms. The sky and the whole world around them turned yellow. The air was filled with yellow dust. Born in 1929, she wore a “little mask” when the dust storms came. Adolph died in 1934 of dust pneumonia.

Connie’s father worked for Northern Natural Gas and the family sometimes traveled with him. She graduated from high school in Casper, Wyoming. From there she attended Northwestern University completing coursework as an undergraduate, and then from the Law School at the University of Kansas in 1953. She was one of five women in a law school with 140 students. Thus, she was obviously a leader in America’s movement to realize the *exceptional promise* of women in all professions. She continues with a private practice in Salina.

Her late husband enjoyed flyfishing. Connie joined him as it was something special they enjoyed together – and



possibly a natural transition for a woman who grew up often playing along and in a Kansas stream. She continues to make annual trips to Montana, to fly fish for trout in the company of friends made in their earlier trips.

Following considerable thought and reflection over an extended period, Connie recently decided to make a gift of her farm to Audubon of Kansas. The plan is for Connie to retain a life estate and stewardship

responsibilities for the remainder of her life. Audubon of Kansas will partner with her to further enhance some parts of the property for native flora and fauna. The property will be named the **Connie Achterberg Wildlife Friendly Demonstration Farm**, and has become the newest addition to the AOK sanctuary system. It consists of 240 acres located southwest of Lincoln, Kansas.

Due in large part to Connie’s stewardship and to natural features of the land, it is already an excellent example of farm conservation programs and habitat protection with wildlife clearly in mind. The confluence of streams and waterways with considerable riparian forest results in that being the most prevalent “cover type” across the center of the farm. The woodlands and a couple small sections of grass



Northern Bobwhite in a hedge tree.

The photos above include a Great Spangled Fritillary Butterfly, one of many native pollinators, on a Common Milkweed; a stately Bur Oak, likely present here since the 19th century; and, an excellent stand of native grasses in the CRP field buffer planting.



**AOK Trustees, chapter leaders and others touring the property on September 28. Participants pictured in the prairie meadow include Anice Robel, Kevin Groeneweg, Matt Gearheart, Dan Baffa, Tom Ewert, Kathie Roy, Patty Marlett, Dick Seaton, Randy Rathbun, Cathy Lucas, Bob McElroy and R.W. Lucas.**

waterways total about 45 acres. The extensive riparian forests along Bullfoot Creek are impressive and wide enough within the heart of the area to provide a feeling that one is within a central Kansas “forest,” and not in the midst of farmland and rangeland.

An array of tree species of various sizes make it obvious that it hasn’t been logged in a very long time and regeneration hasn’t been impacted by winter stocking of livestock on the farm. The most magnificent trees are large Bur Oak and Hackberry.

Horse Creek enters from the south and merges with Bullfoot Creek near the center of the property, the most wooded area. Together these two streams provide about two miles of woodland edge, an ecotone that is attractive to a variety of native birds, including Red-headed Woodpeckers, Eastern Bluebirds, Eastern Kingbirds, Indigo Buntings, Northern Bobwhites and many others.

Another established feature further enhances the value of this bird and



**Connie Achterberg is pictured in the riparian woodlands within the property.**

wildlife habitat. Twenty-seven acres of native grass field buffers, also referred to as upland gamebird buffers, have been established and are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). They extend along most of Bullfoot Creek and Horse Creek woodlands, along a quarter-mile stretch of the long-established hedgerow (planted Osage Orange trees) along the southwest edge of the property, and along the base of a hill on the southeast corner of the farm.

The presence of the hedgerow on the south third of the western boundary is noteworthy. It is an example of the thousands of miles of hedgerows that were once established in Kansas only to be largely removed in the second half of the 20th century. This one provides excellent wildlife habitat characteristic of the best of the hedgerows and it connects woodlands with grasslands to the south. Connectivity of different habitats is important. This hedgerow is like a piece of heaven for a covey of Northern Bobwhites.

Although most of the tillable land has been cultivated and is in crops or CRP, one native prairie remnant of about 9 acres remains.

Restoring this prairie remnant will naturally be a high priority for AOK. It is a reminder of the time when most Kansas farms had native prairie hay meadows. They were vital as sources of quality hay for draft horses, which were an essential part of farming for at least fifty years from homestead settlement until well into the 20th century.

Controlling brome grass invasion in the meadow (already a problem) and in a few other places within the field buffers will be one management challenge addressed to protect the native prairie and also the impressive understory of Virginia Wild Rye existing within the timbered areas.

We also plan to inter-seed some of

***“Nature has been for me, for as long as I remember, a source of solace, inspiration, adventure, and delight; a home, a teacher, a companion.”***

*– Lorraine Anderson, author of Sisters of the Earth: Women's Prose and Poetry About Nature  
– Quoted in The 12 Secrets of Highly Creative Women*

the buffer areas to increase the species richness and abundance of native wildflowers and other forbs. This will enhance the value of these areas as bird and pollinator habitat. Eventually, we hope to plant additional shrub thickets within or along the buffer strips and/or other field borders. Chokecherry and other shrub thickets will further highlight the strategy of the farm as a wildlife friendly showplace. American Plum thickets and other native shrubs including Wild Gooseberry, Golden Current and Elderberry will also be included. Shrub-nesting songbirds that are particularly attracted by and utilize shrub thickets during the breeding season include Brown Thrashers, Bell's Vireos, Indigo Buntings and Catbirds. Thickets serve as "covey headquarters" for Bobwhite Quail, and are utilized as escape cover for Cottontail Rabbits – a familiar farm species that is not nearly as common as it was fifty years ago.

The cropland will continue to be farmed by a neighboring farmer, a mutually beneficial partnership. Currently wheat, alfalfa and soybeans are grown. Grain sorghum (milo) and corn are other crop options.

With all of the above features already in existence, and the modest enhancements outlined, the **Connie Achterberg Wildlife Friendly Demonstration Farm** will become a signature sanctuary addition to the AOK sanctuary system, and it will be complementary as a part of AOK conservation advocacy and education initiatives.

With recent acceptance of the Achterberg farm, and the Hutton Ranch along the Niobrara River in Nebraska property in 2002, the Audubon of Kansas Board of Trustees has taken a unique approach to acceptance of property that qualifies as part of the AOK mission. Benefactors often want assurance that their heritage of land will never be sold and it will be managed in a manner consistent with their vision. Many, if not most, other entities do not routinely provide that commitment.

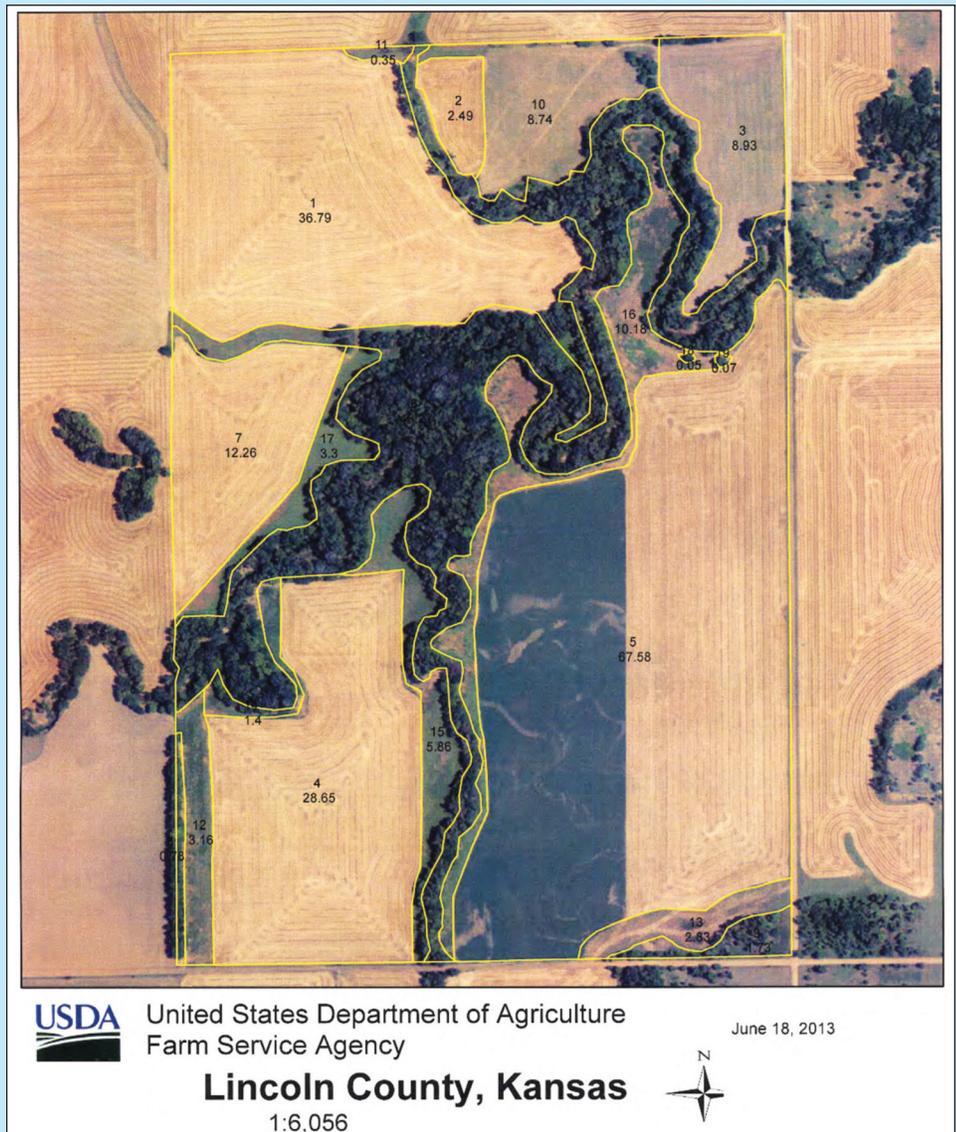
An educational walking and wildlife-viewing trail along the edge and within the woodlands will become an added educational feature. It will give visitors an

opportunity to see and learn about various elements of the wildlife habitat and stewardship. The property, including the trail, will only be open by reservation and permission. This arrangement will help prevent excessive disturbance of wildlife during certain seasons, reduce the prospect of poaching and/or other unauthorized activities.

When members of the AOK Board of Trustees and Smoky Hills Audubon Society chapter leaders held a brief tour of the property on September 28, a Blue-

headed Vireo and a male Summer Tanager were among the top attractions in the trees. County bird lists are maintained by the Kansas Ornithological Society – and this was the first Summer Tanager record for Lincoln County.

– Article and photos by **Ron Klataske**



A USDA aerial photo of the Achterberg Farm delineating the various cultivated fields, the prairie meadow, and other features including woodlands along the streams, two grass waterways between fields, and the upland gamebird buffers along the riparian woodlands and hedgerow bordering the fields.