



**Defending wildlife and habitat
through:**

**Advocacy
Conservation
Education**

News & Updates: January 2024

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[Visit our website](#)

**AOK Celebrates 25 years
of Advocacy, Conservation, and Education**



Audubon of Kansas will be celebrating our 25th year this year. Audubon of Kansas was created in 1999 when the Kansas Audubon Council decided to rename itself, take on additional conservation efforts, and hire Ron Klataske as its first Executive Director.

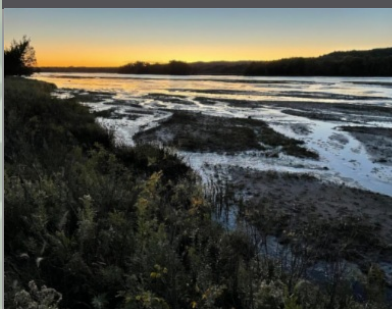
Ron was previously the Regional Director for National Audubon Society. In that role, he championed some of our most cherished places in the Great Plains: Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Oklahoma, Konza Prairie and Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Kansas, and the Platte and Niobrara Rivers in Nebraska. That relationship Ron built with landowners along the Niobrara River led to Audubon of Kansas' first sanctuary: the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary. As Ron tells the story, Harold and Lucille Hutton wanted to donate their beautiful ranch along the Niobrara River to an environmental nonprofit for preservation. Ron provided them with a list of organizations with Audubon of Kansas listed at the bottom. The Huttons contacted many of those organizations, but none guaranteed that their entire property would remain as a sanctuary with no portions being sold - except Audubon of Kansas. The Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary was acquired in 2003 and is maintained according to the Huttons' wishes as a wildlife sanctuary and ranch with cattle grazing and haying. Along with Hutton Ranch, Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie and the Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm make up the three sanctuaries under AOK management today.

Advocacy has always been at the forefront of the AOK story, and we have the reputation of being unapologetic for our unwavering support for wildlife. We are best known for our efforts during the 'Prairie Dog Wars' in the late 2000s. At that time, landowners in Logan County, KS, understood the complex ecological benefits provided by prairie dogs, including being the sole food source for Black-footed Ferrets. They had plans to reintroduce the endangered ferrets with the help of the USFWS. However, Kansas law provides that counties can enter private land and poison prairie dogs without the landowner's permission (and charge the landowner for the 'service'). After a series of court battles, the landowners won their case and the ferrets were introduced in December 2007 - 50 years after they had been extirpated from the state. The site remains the only place the ferrets can be found in Kansas. Other AOK advocacy efforts include advocating for private lands conservation through the Farm Bill and other legislation, speaking out about the dangers of invasive species like Old World Bluestem, communicating the need for energy development be sited in areas that do not degrade our irreplaceable natural landscapes, and being a loud voice for prairie-chicken conservation. Additionally, AOK is ensuring the protection of Sandhill and the endangered Whooping Cranes during their migration by protecting their critical stopover sites: Quivira National Wildlife Refuge and Cheyenne Bottoms.

Environmental Education is the third pillar of our three-fold mission. It started with our *Prairie Wings* magazine which is sent yearly to donors. It has been praised for its diverse articles, research-informed story-telling, timely updates on environmental issues, and summaries of Audubon of Kansas activities. We host two birding festivals annually - the Celebration of Cranes the first weekend of November and the Kansas Lek Treks Prairie-Chicken Festival in mid-April. We also have a growing Nature Adventurepack program that provides binoculars, field guides, and other resources to libraries for their patrons to check out.

It is amazing how AOK has grown over the last 25 years. Thank you for being a part of that success.

Photos: Left - Niobrara River as viewed from Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary; Middle - Black-footed ferret; Right - Nature Adventurepacks being distributed to libraries.



AOK joins Kansans for Conservation at the statehouse to promote HB 2541



On Monday, January 22nd, the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources held a hearing on HB 2541, which would establish a state conservation fund supporting working lands, wildlife, and outdoor recreation. The committee room was standing room only as conservation supporters filled its seats. Kansans for Conservation provided four presenters in support of the bill, displaying the diverse composition of the coalition and support for conservation funding.

Josh Roe testified on behalf of the Kansas Corn Growers Association, Kansas Association of Wheat Growers, and the Kansas Farm Bureau. Roe outlined how conservation funding supports the long-term economic success of producers through voluntary measures and how rural communities are boosted through tourism from outdoor recreation. Dan Meyerhoff with the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts followed with an overview of conservation districts and discussed the \$86 million in applications the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) received in 2023 from farmers but was unable to fund. Meyerhoff illustrated how HB 2541 would help close the gap. Next was Erika Devore of the Kansas Recreation and Park Association who provided a comprehensive overview of the economic, social, and health benefits that access to outdoor recreation provides to all Kansans. Rounding out the coalition's testimony was Abe Lollar with Ducks Unlimited. Abe discussed his experience working with private landowners to collaboratively achieve their management goals as well as the competitive advantages that neighboring states have over Kansas with existing state conservation funds. Including written, the committee received testimony from 30 proponents. Opponents to HB 2541 cited concerns about federal interference and involuntary land transfers. The coalition is actively working with legislators on language that would preclude these concerns and looks forward to collaborating with all stakeholders to continue the effort.

Prior to the hearing, Kansans for Conservation hosted a Day at the Capitol with 24 organizations and 80 attendees braving the icy conditions to meet with legislators about conservation issues. In addition to the legislator meetings, coalition members tabled on the 1st floor rotunda and hosted a lunch for legislators. The event, a first for the coalition, provided opportunities for in-person networking and advocacy.

Reprinted from the [Kansans for Conservation blog](#).

Left photo: packed hearing room provided by Kansans for Conservation

Right photo: Rex Buchanan, Jackie Augustine, and Vanessa Avara representing AOK at the event.

Experience the Dance: Sharp-tailed Grouse at Hutton
Sanctuary



Reservations are now being accepted for opportunities to view Sharp-tailed Grouse at AOK's Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary. Tours occur from mid-March through early May. You will get amazing views as the males strut their stuff to attract a female. The males' synchronized dancing is a spectacle unique to this grouse species. You will view the birds from a blind where males may approach as close as 20 feet! We provide the blind, a chair, and a guide so you don't get lost in the dark! Lodging available for an

additional fee.

All proceeds support Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary.

[Get more information about the Grouse Tours](#)

Christmas Bird Count documents bluebirds making a comeback

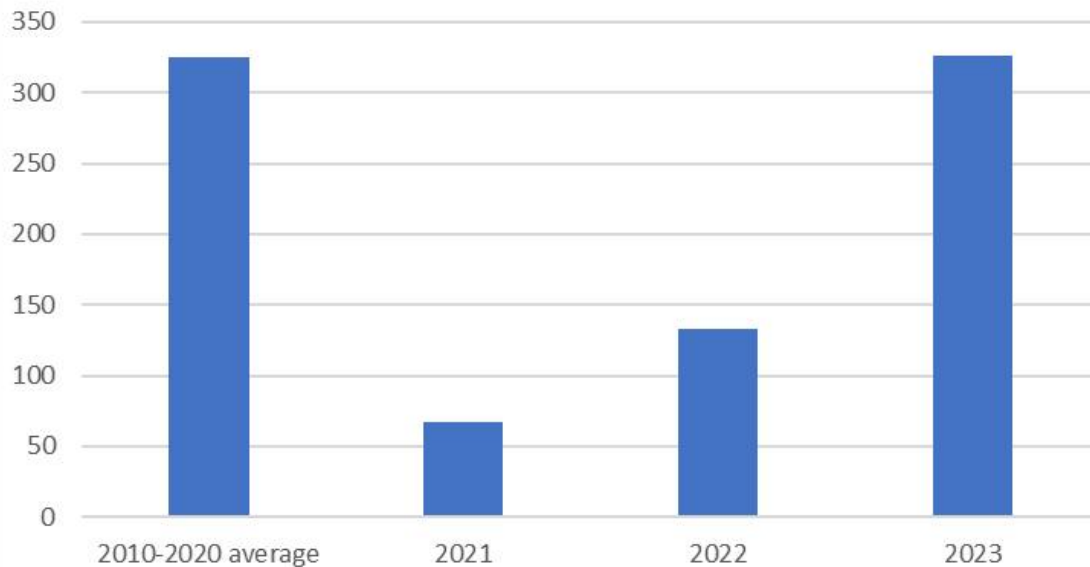
During this year's [Manhattan] Christmas Bird Count (CBC), I found several decent-sized flocks of Eastern Bluebirds, after seeing very few on the previous 2 CBCs. As you may recall, this part of the country had a killer cold snap in February of 2021, bottoming out at - 21° F here in Manhattan in mid-February of that year. Bluebirds were among the victims of that lethal weather.

So I did a quick look at the numbers for the Manhattan CBC circle over the past decade or so to see if my perceived experience was supported by actual data. We averaged about 325 Eastern Bluebirds on this count in the decade leading up to 2021 (range 119-435). In December 2021, only 67 Eastern Bluebirds were found in our count circle. It was about double that number last year, and it looks like the numbers have recovered this year. Here are the data. NB - these are just raw numbers, uncorrected for effort (party miles) or observer numbers.



Essay and photos provided by [David Rintoul](#)

Eastern Bluebird, Manhattan CBC

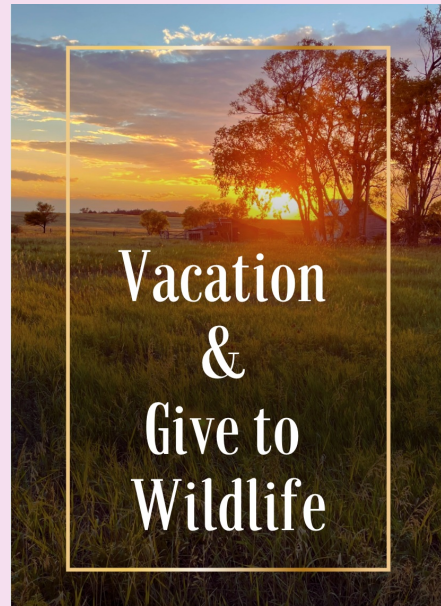


Philanthropy Corner: Support a Sanctuary and Relax in Nature During 2024

As the newest team member at Audubon of Kansas, I can't wait to take a trip up to the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary near Bassett, NE. We've documented over 1,000 species that are living on 5,000 protected acres, and we're investing every dollar you spend on your stay with us directly into habitat management needs of wildlife living there. **Plan your next vacation or reunion in Hutton House today and make a difference!**

Hutton House guests have access to the sanctuary for hiking, bird-watching, stargazing and fishing. It is fully updated with 5 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, a full kitchen, modern HVAC, and WiFi. To make a reservation, contact Amy at (402) 382-5538 or amy@audubonofkansas.org and request your preferred dates. Reservations are subject to availability. We suggest a \$250 donation per night, but accommodations can be made based on occupancy needs and length of stay.

--Ellen Johnson Mosley, Director of Philanthropy





Make Your 2024 Reservation

AOK Events

There are several opportunities to connect with AOK at an event in the coming month:

- **Feb 5 at 7pm: "Audubon of Kansas - Protecting Wildlife and Wild Lands in Kansas for 25 Years"** at the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library (1515 SW 10th Ave, Topeka, KS); hosted by Topeka Audubon Society
 - Audubon of Kansas has been the unwavering voice for wildlife in Kansas and the Great Plains since 1999. Dr. Jackie Augustine, Audubon of Kansas Executive Director, will discuss conservation initiatives, the sanctuary program, and how you can become involved in this growing organization.
- **Feb 6 at 7pm: "Home on the Range - Breeding Biology of Prairie-Chickens"** at Parsons City Arboretum (S 21st St & Briggs Ave., Parsons, KS); hosted by Southeast Kansas Audubon Society
 - Dr. Jackie Augustine, Audubon of Kansas Executive Director, will discuss the biology of Greater and Lesser Prairie-Chickens, a species that she has been studying for over 20 years. These charismatic birds perform impressive displays to gain mating opportunities. Come hear about the rolling prairie, the antics of prairie-chickens, and the challenges of studying these declining species.
- **Feb 7 at 7pm: "Marvelous Migration"** at Old Prairie Town (124 NW Fillmore St. Topeka, KS); hosted by Topeka Area Water Garden Society
 - Over 350 species of birds migrate from North America to Central and South America and back every year. Dr. Jackie Augustine, Audubon of Kansas Executive Director, will describe the challenges of this arduous journey and how you can help migrating birds in Kansas.
- **Feb 17 from 1pm-4pm: "Great Backyard Bird Count"** at Hutton Niobrara Ranch

Wildlife Sanctuary (88923 453rd Ave., Bassett, NE)

- The Great Backyard Bird Count is an international event where individuals and communities gather to report bird sightings in their backyard. Join Sanctuary Manager Amy Kucera on February 17th from 1 p.m. - 4 p.m. at the Hutton House on the Hutton Ranch to view and document birds from an interior viewing window. Adventurous participants may also bring binoculars and seasonally-appropriate clothing for a hike around the sanctuary to see what birds might be found. Refreshments will be provided. For more information, contact Amy at amy@audubonofkansas.org or call/text #(402) 382-5538.
- **Feb 27 at 7pm: "Give me a Home Where the Buffalo Roam"** Winter Lecture Series at Dyck Arboretum of the Plains (177 W Hickory St., Hesston, KS)
 - Over 60 million American bison once roamed between the Rocky and Appalachian Mountains in North America. They were a keystone species of the prairie, essential to its natural and cultural history. Their foraging and wallowing behaviors once helped foster a diverse prairie landscape for both plants and animals. Wildlife naturalist, George LeRoux, owner of Flint Hills Prairie Bison Reserve and Audubon of Kansas Board Member, will discuss the bison life cycle, ecology, behavior, and history in the Great Plains
 - Cost \$5/person. More information can be found [HERE](#).



**KANSAS
LEK TREKS**

**And, don't forget to
register for the
Kansas Lek Treks Prairie-
Chicken Festival!**
Events are filling fast.

Visit the Kansas Lek Treks website for more information

Chapter Spotlight:
Burroughs Audubon Society collaborated with AOK to get
Nature Adventurepacks and presentations to eastern Kansas



BURROUGHS AUDUBON SOCIETY
of Greater Kansas City



Burroughs Audubon Society of Greater Kansas City has been collaborating with AOK and several Johnson County Master Naturalists to bring the Nature Adventurepack to Johnson, Wyandotte, Linn, and Miami Counties. Burroughs funded the Adventurepacks in the area. AOK provided training and the backpacks. The Master Naturalist-trained volunteers gave in person presentations in the area. What a successful collaboration! Ann Tanner should be commended for her work on this initiative. She recently presented the project and lessons learned to AOK's monthly

chapter meetup (virtual meeting of chapter leaders), and encouraged other chapters to participate.

But the Nature Adventurepack program isn't the only amazing thing this chapter is

doing - they also have great programs and field trips. The next field trip is Jan 30 for the Jerry Smith Park Winter Bird Census. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information.

[Visit Burrough's webpage](#)

[Upcoming Burroughs Field Trips](#)

AOK shares favorite birding spots!

Frazier Park in Ulysses is more than meets the eye

1370 Frazier Park Rd
Ulysses, KS
37.564527, -101.335839

On one of my tours out west giving presentations for the Nature Adventurepack program, a librarian recommended that I visit Frazier Park in Ulysses. When I first arrived, I feared that it would be your typical public park - full of recreation offerings (playground, picnic tables) but endless mowed grass and little actual habitat. However, I soon found the lake which was a good size for a park. On the day I visited only a few geese greeted me, but I could imagine that it would be more lively during migration. I then walked the trail and found that the south and east sides of the lake were mostly natural habitat. There were several species of sparrows in the vegetation and along the disc golf course.

Over 200 species have been recorded here according to eBird. Snow Geese and 18 species of ducks can be found in March and November, with songbird diversity peaking in May.

Text and photo by Jackie Augustine



[More information about Frazier Park](#)

Contact AOK!

Jackie Augustine - Executive Director - General Questions, Programs, Sanctuaries Management jackie@audubonofkansas.org

Ellen Johnson Mosley - Director of Philanthropy - Gift Planning, Membership, Endowments, Events Management - ellen@audubonofkansas.org

Amy Kucera - Sanctuary Manager - Questions about AOK sanctuaries and habitat management amy@audubonofkansas.org

Lana Arrowsmith - Hutton Niobrara Coordinator - Hutton Sanctuary Management & Reservations lanamicheel@gmail.com

Audubon of Kansas
PO Box 1106 - Manhattan, KS 66505
785-537-4385