

# TRAGICALLY, CONSERVATION OF NONGAME WILDLIFE, IMPERILED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES

## ...CONTINUES TO BE A LOW PRIORITY FOR THE STATE OF KANSAS

Conservation of wildlife is a challenge of the present, but it must be designed with the future—our children and grandchildren—in mind. Unfortunately, the approach of far too many people and entities is still grounded in the past. We are reminded of errors of the past in the following text from the small book, **INHERIT THE HUNT** by Jim Posewitz, included in the chapter entitled “FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF CHAOS”

*“As a pioneering culture spread westward, wildlife experienced its own equivalent of the Dark Ages. It was a darkness from which species like the passenger pigeon and Audubon’s sheep would not emerge.”*

Are we now going to add Black-footed Ferrets (BFF’s), Lesser Prairie-chickens, and numerous other species to the darkness of extinction in the wild?



In 2007, shortgrass prairie landowners Gordon and Martha Barnhardt, Larry and Bette Haverfield, and Maxine Blank hosted reintroduction of BFFs on their ranchland in western Kansas. Their land, managed as one unit, continues to provide the best habitat for BFFs, Burrowing Owls, Swift Foxes, Ferruginous Hawks and Golden Eagles in Kansas.

### This Report

is a second installment on the articles (pp. 42-45, 46-49) on the same subject in the Spring/Summer 2014 edition of *PRAIRIE WINGS*. As we have pointed out previously, it is concerning that the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) continues to: 1) issue resident and nonresident capture permits for the taking of Ferruginous Hawks even though they are becoming extinct as a nesting species in the state; 2) endanger Whooping Cranes by having sunrise to sunset shooting hours of Sandhill Cranes at Cheyenne Bottoms and other critically important wetland stopover sites; 3) allow liberal trapping provisions for the taking of River Otters and Swift Foxes—even though their populations are very limited in the state due largely to limitations of habitat availability, and their ecological and other values should be paramount considerations; 4) ignore and has not implemented any serious on-the-ground conservation provisions of the 2002 Black-tailed Prairie Dog Management and Conservation Plan; and 5) be an obstacle to federal Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funding that could benefit recovery of endangered Black-footed Ferrets—and benefit many other species associated with prairie dog colonies.

As a member representing wildlife resource interests on the USDA State Technical Committee (STC), I have an opportunity to be an advocate for wildlife habitat conservation practices. Many of the other members naturally have other areas of expertise and priorities. Following the STC meetings of September 29-30, I wrote the following email to Robin Jennison, Secretary, KDWPT, and received the reply posted on the following page.



Conservationist Steve Sorensen and his granddaughter, Alexis Sanchez, are pictured as they await the release of additional BFFs during a visit in 2008. Alexis is shown helping Brenda Pace release a ferret on her parents' property.

Robin, [Cc. Kansas Nongame Wildlife Advisory Council (KNWAC) members]

I understand the recent KNWAC meeting at the Wetlands Education Center was a “good one.” I regret I wasn’t able to attend, but I was obligated to work that week at the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary.

I am confident that you will recall discussions we had during the conservation alliance/KNWAC meetings in Topeka a year ago, regarding EQIP funding approval for the Black-footed Ferret landowner partnership incentive program developed by NRCS and the Fish and Wildlife Service that is available to the states. You indicated that you would withdraw your earlier objection to it being an eligible practice for EQIP funding in Kansas. Your earlier objection was based on a concern to keep this program from competing for funds that might otherwise be going to other traditional wildlife practices. However, as we pointed out last year, only a small percentage of the funds allocated for wildlife practices in EQIP were used for wildlife benefit in 2014. With that in mind, you said you would not object to funding the program going forward (which for timing purposes meant for the 2016 EQIP program). As it turns out, only 1.5 percent of Kansas EQIP funds were utilized for wildlife this year in the 2015 program—although 5 percent has been set aside for wildlife practices as a guideline at the national level. Only \$281,463 was obligated, even though \$901,997 would have been available in Kansas if there had been applications.

Our request to you is for you to contact Eric Banks (NRCS State Conservationist) as soon as possible to request that the Black-footed Ferret practice/program be included in the 2016 Kansas EQIP. Unfortunately, it will take quick action to get the program in place for enrollment. This consideration is made more feasible because there aren’t likely to be more than three landowners eligible and ready to apply. Thus, if Eric allows it to proceed it shouldn’t be a problem to get specs in place prior to the November 15 deadline for EQIP applications. The program is operational across the state line in Colorado, with five BFF recovery sites included and approximately 15 landowners enrolled. Others are also interested. Ken Morgan, Private Lands Coordinator for the Colorado Department of Wildlife, is an ideal contact if you need additional information. As additional contacts, Pete Gober and John Hughes with USFWS are also well informed and involved. And, Patty Knupp with NRCS in southeastern Colorado is another person on the ground making this program work in Colorado. **The same could occur in Kansas, and it would demonstrate that the State of Kansas is interested in taking proactive steps with landowners to make conservation of threatened and endangered species possible.**

Thanks for all you can do. Please let us know if we can be of assistance.

—Ron Klataske



*Ferruginous Hawks are largely dependent on Black-tailed Prairie Dogs as prey in the Great Plains. With widespread poisoning of prairie dog colonies, and secondary poisoning when Rozol is used, these raptors are now an imperiled species.*



Ron Klataske photos

Ron,

As you know, the past several years the allocation to the Wildlife funding category had been 2-3% of the total general EQIP funds provided to Kansas. This amounted to approximately \$350,000 to \$500,000 per year. We typically obligate \$250,000 to \$350,000 of those funds. When the question came up during a KTC meeting a few years ago concerning the possible development of a BFF recovery program in EQIP similar to Colorado’s, our position was we were concerned it would draw funds away from other priority species, so we were not in favor of pursuing the program for Kansas at that time.

With passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, by current law at least 5% of EQIP funding is to go towards wildlife. Ron, you are correct that our 5% allocation would have been \$901,997 last year and we obligated \$281,463, leaving a significant amount of dollars that were shifted to other resource concerns within the state. We have been making efforts with NRCS to increase participation from landowners using this funding source for wildlife.

Although you believe “it shouldn’t be a problem to get specs in place” before a sign-up deadline in November, it is my understanding, NRCS staff at the meeting stated they have no technical guidance or specifications developed at this time for: 1) proper grazing to benefit prairie dogs, 2) exclusion methods to keep the prairie dogs off neighboring properties and 3) monitoring protocols for landowners. Much work and time will be required to develop these practices and technical guidance documents.

The Department believes the position Matt Smith (KDWPT area biologist) stated at the meeting was the best path forward, on what will certainly be a controversial BFF recovery initiative, should be a landowner driven effort, where a coalition of several landowners or a cattleman organizations come together at the local level to request the kind of technical and financial assistance needed to conserve the species. The effort in Colorado was led by the cattleman’s association, without their support any effort would surely be doomed to fail.

The reality is there are only a handful of landowners that have an interest in prairie dogs and BFFs. There are questions surrounding the suitability of Kansas for BFF recovery efforts and NRCS does not have the technical expertise at this time to develop a program in a short time frame. And of course there are the legal issues surrounding having prairie dogs on private lands in Kansas which other states do not have.

Bottom line is yes there are funds to implement a BFF recovery program in EQIP in Kansas but we have many unanswered questions regarding the feasibility and potential benefits from such a program.

Our opinion is we should focus on those priority species and landscapes already identified within the EQIP Wildlife Ranking Category. Therefore our efforts will have a measurable effect when there is widespread willingness from landowners to improve and conserve appropriate habitat for those species.

—Robin Jennison