

YOU ARE INVITED TO

# Experience the Night Sky, Wildlife, and a Wonderful Natural Setting

RON KLATASKE

Photo by Scott Bean

Audubon of Kansas received the following thank you and testimonial from four Kansas artists who enjoyed a visit to the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary in June of 2017.

*“The Kansas artists’ recent trip to Hutton Niobrara Sanctuary could not have been better. Four of us made the journey to north central Nebraska to immerse ourselves in much that the property has to offer.*

*We were able to spend a couple of nights making images of the Milky Way. And those of us with experience photographing the night sky were in awe of the opportunities that the ranch’s dark sky location provided. Some very nice images were created.*

*We spent many an hour wandering the property making images of various landscapes, intimate landscapes and the flora, insects, birds and fauna that revealed themselves to us. All agreed, it is a truly wonderful property and we were honored to be able to experience many of its features.*

*As I stood on the bank of the Niobrara River on our last night there, waiting for sunset to paint the sky and river in warm red hues, I was lucky enough to observe a large beaver working the property side bank near our position for over 30 minutes. And Matthew, the painter among us, was able to make a stunning video of his close encounter with that same beaver.*

*Which brings me to say thank you. Thank you for the lifetime of work that you have invested to save, protect and manage properties such as this. Without the commitment, dedication and foresight of individuals like yourself, we would never have been able to experience such a diverse and wonderful natural setting. We all owe you and Audubon of Kansas a debt of gratitude for your collective service to nature.”*

*--Wayne Rhodus*

*P.S. We very much hope to return during other seasons, particularly in the fall, to capture more of what the sanctuary has to offer.*



Photo of Scott Bean, Matthew Richter, Wayne Rhodus and Eldon Clark. Photo by Wayne Rhodus



Photo by Eldon Clark

It is a delight to wake up to the song of Western Meadowlarks. It inspires me to think of the many rural school children that loved that sound and the beauty of these birds at a time when so many families lived on farms and ranches. Throughout the expanses of native grasslands, the patchwork of hay meadows and pastures, and even country schoolyards, the birds' clear, cheery song was present almost everywhere in the prairie states.

Thus, when state birds began to be selected in 1927, it was only natural that the Western Meadowlark was chosen by Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, Wyoming, Montana and Oregon.

In the spring and summer, when dueling meadowlarks lay musical claim over the meadows and pastures surrounding the Hutton Guesthouse, I prefer to sleep with the windows open. Their songs can be heard from dawn to dusk. Sometimes, too, on spring mornings, the sound of Sharp-tailed Grouse courtship rituals can be heard from the front porch. Their lek is less than a half-mile away on the hilltop in the pasture just across the road.

Although they are seldom seen, a pair of Long-billed Curlews has made the Hutton Ranch their home every summer since the sanctuary was established. In 2012, a pair of Sandhill Cranes first nested in the wetland and wet meadow habitat in the bottomland along the Niobrara River. We do all we can to help them succeed. Access to that area is restricted when they are present to diminish human disturbance. Every year, Bobolinks and Virginia Rails utilize the same habitats as the cranes. Upland Sandpipers, Western Meadowlarks, Grasshopper Sparrows and Ovenbirds provide a hint of the diversity of birds that nest on the property.

### **How Audubon of Kansas became the stewards of the Niobrara Sanctuary, and how we achieve our stewardship**

Audubon of Kansas manages the **Hutton Niobrara Ranch**

**Wildlife Sanctuary** in a dynamic way designed to optimize habitat for grassland birds and other wildlife. Cattle grazing is part of the overall system, but the modest stocking rate and rotation timing is designed to maintain sufficient residual cover each year for the following year's nesting season. Grazing is used to help curtail the ongoing pressure of non-native, cool-season grasses, including Smooth Brome and Kentucky bluegrass, from invading and overwhelming native, warm-season grasses and forbs.

Prescribed burning is also an important management tool; AOK has used it since 2011 as part of our quest to control cedar invasion in grasslands. Cedar cutting, primarily with skid-loaders with blades or mulchers on the front, has required a monumental investment to restore thousands of acres of grasslands and two hundred acres of deciduous woodlands. Meanwhile, fields that used to be cultivated with marginal productivity have been planted to native grasses and wildflowers, with nearly fifty acres of specific-pollinator habitat planned. Another old field is serving as the site for the re-established prairie dog colony.

Historically, this rural landscape was dramatically altered with the advent of homesteading and early European settlement. Audubon of Kansas has not sought to erase all evidence of the homesteading, farming, and pastoral traditions of this place; after all, the donors of the Hutton Ranch, Harold and Lucille Hutton, were part of that history. They cared deeply about nature and the unique place they had inherited and expanded with additional acquisitions. Relics ranging from lilac bushes to root cellars are scattered throughout the property. They reflect the location of several farmsteads, and the families who tried but failed to establish a livelihood. AOK recently restored the physical integrity of Harold Hutton's childhood home in an oak grove, located in a now-secluded spring-fed valley. That home and site provides a sense of place where one can reflect on the Hutton-era legacy. Visitors enjoy it as a day shelter and a peaceful place to appreciate a very special natural setting.



Photo by Eldon Clark

Harold and Lucille's outreach to Audubon of Kansas was based on a relationship established starting in 1978 when I worked in partnership with landowners along the Niobrara River to design and win congressional approval for a seventy-six mile stretch of the river as a National Scenic River. Congressional approval came in May 1991. I was employed by National Audubon until 1998 and then became Executive Director of Audubon of Kansas, Inc. an independent organization with board leadership extending throughout the central Great Plains.

The Huttons' 5,000-acre property was gifted in 2001 to Audubon of Kansas to establish the sanctuary that would preserve Harold's childhood home and the natural surroundings he had grown up with, and had grown to love. AOK was the only entity that would agree to embrace Harold's vision for the property, and promise to maintain it in perpetuity and to never sell any portion of the ranch.

For AOK's first sanctuary, the Board of Trustees set the bar high—and intends to build on this standard as we develop an “archipelago of sanctuaries.”

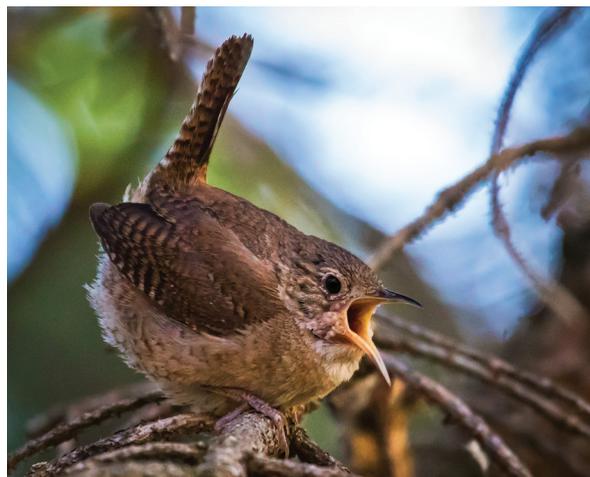
AOK substantially improved the house Harold and Lucille built and lived in during the last three decades of their lives, engaging in preventative maintenance and repairing damage from frozen pipes in an exterior wall in 2010. In 2005 Audubon of Kansas purchased a nearby 160-acre property referred to by the previous owner as the “Lazy Easy Ranch.” The Lazy Easy house makes it possible for additional guests, families and groups to enjoy the sanctuary experience.

### **How you can experience the Niobrara Sanctuary and the unique ambience of the prairies, woodlands, wetlands and river**

With the opening of Harold and Lucille's home as the Hutton Guesthouse and the acquisition of the Lazy Easy Ranch, two tremendous lodging opportunities are provided for guests at the sanctuary. The Hutton Guesthouse is a modern two-story home with five bedrooms and three bathrooms, kitchen, dining and living rooms. The Lazy Easy Ranch Guesthouse has four bedrooms, two bathrooms, kitchen, dining and living room, all on one story. The combined facilities have

accommodated fourteen enthusiastic members of the Topeka Audubon Society for one of their annual birding adventures, couples and families seeking a retreat, artists and photographers. As the opening letter attests, the facilities and opportunities available on the sanctuary often leave visitors with a desire to return, and the recognition that there is much more to experience in all seasons of the year. This letter, written by one of four “Kansas artists” who recently spent several days in June 2017 exploring the property, testifies to their enthusiastic endorsement of the sanctuary and our ongoing conservation efforts.

Visitation to the sanctuary is limited to groups or individuals who have made reservations for one of the guesthouses or been granted permission to enjoy the sanctuary without lodging. Local zoning regulations do not provide for “public access,” and our foremost objective is to provide an exceptional sanctuary for wildlife. Donations from guests and others make it possible for AOK to provide the range of opportunities for appreciation of the natural world within the sanctuary. Persons interested in staying at one of the guesthouses or visiting the sanctuary are encouraged to contact the AOK office. The email address is [aok@audubonofkansas.org](mailto:aok@audubonofkansas.org), office phone is 785-5374-4385 and mailing address is 210 Southwind Place, Manhattan KS 66503.



House Wren near the porch at the Lazy Easy Guesthouse. Photo by Wayne Rhodus