

AOK Sanctuaries: **Not Just Wildlife Friendly—People Friendly, Too!**

Margy Stewart



Photo 1: Ankledeep: The creek was a popular feature during the evening! Here Zeki Ismail from the Job Corps wades in the creek. Gary Haden photo.

Photo 2: Happy Explorers: Retired educator and retired army veteran Fred Reid loaded up the “buggy” with McDowell Creek youngsters and Job Corps students. They drove through the creek and explored the tall grass prairie! Gary Haden photo.

Since AOK launched its “Sanctuaries Initiative,” two more properties have become prospective AOK wildlife refuges. These are “legacy sanctuaries,” so named as the owners are bequeathing their lands to AOK. They include Gary and Carolyn Haden’s 285-acre property in Morris County and Margy Stewart and Ron Young’s half-section of Flint Hills land on McDowell Creek in Geary County. The two legacy sanctuaries are in line to join AOK’s existing preserves—the 5000-acre Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary, the 240-acre Connie Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm, and the 47-acre Mt. Mitchell Prairie Heritage Preserve/Historical Park.

In furtherance of AOK’s philosophy that sanctuaries should be people friendly as well as wildlife friendly, Margy Stewart and Ron Young hosted a “Celebrate Juneteenth” cook-out and wildflower walk at their Bird Runner Wildlife Refuge, on June 16, 2019. The event was a joint effort among four organizations—Audubon of Kansas, Junction City Juneteenth Community Association, McDowell Creek Community Association, and Prairie Heritage, Inc. Special guests at the event were twenty-five students from the Flint Hills Job Corps hailing from numerous Kansas counties, several Great Plains states, and at least two continents. Among these latter were refugees from Darfur Sudan, Myanmar, and one boy who came from Tanzania, but whose family was originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Like the home-grown students, these youths were in the Job Corps to learn a trade and get an education.

AOK trustees joined residents of McDowell Creek and Junction City in welcoming all the students to the Flint Hills and introducing them to the flora and fauna of the tallgrass prairie. To the celebration of native prairie was added a celebration of

“Juneteenth,” a folk holiday marking the abolition of slavery. (Word of the Confederacy’s defeat reached Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865—“Juneteenth”—which ever since has been commemorated with community celebrations—officially in some states, unofficially everywhere else.)

Delicious food has traditionally been part of Juneteenth celebrations, and the gathering at Bird Runner was no exception. The AOK cook-out included bison-burgers donated by the Flint Hills Prairie Bison Reserve and fried fish caught in local streams. Ron Young deep-fried some okra, which especially pleased those present with southern roots. The McDowell Creek Community Association served the meal, did the set-up and clean-up, and provided tables and chairs.

It was a beautiful June evening, with hosts and visitors alike exploring the creek, making paper from native plants, and following paths through native grasses and wildflowers. Toward the end of the evening, “Buffalo George” from the Bison Reserve brought out his mandolin, and Nick Dalpu from the Job Corps picked up a guitar. Though they had just met, the two instantly harmonized, while the group gathered around to sing along. The lovely music drifted over the prairie, as darkness fell and fireflies emerged. It was a soothing lullaby end to a memorable Flint Hills evening, where people and the wild ecosystem of the prairie came together.

For more information on the Sanctuaries Initiative, go to audubonofkansas.org or email AOK@AudubonofKansas.org. Copies of *Your Land, Your Legacy*, the new brochure explaining ways to support the AOK Sanctuaries Initiative, can be obtained from the AOK office on request.