

Saving Quivira's Unique Qualities



Black-necked Stilts displaying
– © Bob Gress

for Wildlife and Nature-based Visitation

By Ron Klataske,
*Reflecting the Audubon of Kansas
Position Statement*

The 22,135-acre Quivira National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in central Kansas is the most critical habitat within the state for Whooping Cranes, and one of the most important wetland habitats for shorebirds, wading and other water birds, and waterfowl in the central Great Plains. It is also one of the nation's premiere places for people from throughout the country to see, experience and photograph birds and other wildlife.

It has become “the place” for wildlife enthusiasts to visit because of the management of this unique wetland and sand-prairie complex. It has a sufficient, but limited, system of roads that are not excessively intrusive. In the past the refuge has been closed to hunting when Whooping Cranes are present and somewhat restricted at other times. That enhances the appeal for autumn visitation because it is one of the few wildlife areas



Wilson's Phalaropes,
spring migration.
– © Bob Gress



White-rumped Sandpipers, spring migration. – © Bob Gress

in the state that is closed to shooting during significant periods in October and November.

Unfortunately, much of that may change if the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is pushed by individuals within its own staff and our state agency's wildlife section to transform the refuge into a facility emulating a "public hunting area." In the plan being considered, hunting for virtually everything in season within the state would be open on much of the refuge and that use would generally eclipse other visitor opportunities and interests. Although hunting is generally compatible (and often complementary as an additional "public use") in most other places, an excessive amount of hunting disturbance here could be at the expense of conservation of a number of rare, at-risk, threatened or endangered species. With continuous loss of wildlife habitat and declining game species populations, and the trend of waning numbers of hunters and the resultant decreased revenue from licenses, the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) has been advocating to have every available piece of public land opened to maximize hunting opportunities.

In May 2013, Audubon of Kansas filed a comprehensive statement on the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment for the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. You can read our perspective on AOK's website at:

www.audubonofkansas.org. A decision on a future direction for the refuge by the Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is expected at any time. The deadline for official comments has passed, but as constituents and taxpayers anyone can always share their thoughts with the USFWS Regional Director.* Be sure to express appreciation for improvements in the final plan.

As acknowledged in the draft, *"Peak birder visitation usually coincides with the peak shorebird and waterfowl migration seasons in the spring and fall. Besides birders, Quivira Refuge is popular with more general wildlife observers who visit to view deer, beaver, bald eagles, and the considerable amount of geese, ducks, and cranes that regularly visit during the same period. A large percentage of visiting birders and general wildlife enthusiasts are also photographers. Many professional and other experienced photographers use the refuge on a regular basis."*

Unfortunately, the draft plan devotes very little attention to maintaining the quality and future enhancement of wildlife observation and photography opportunities.

The draft plan raises the prospect that the refuge would be open for various hunting activities through most of the year. The exception being during part of the peak nesting season. Substantial portions of the refuge would even be open to hunting when Whooping Cranes are present in other parts of the refuge.

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**American White Pelican, September.
– © Bob Gress**



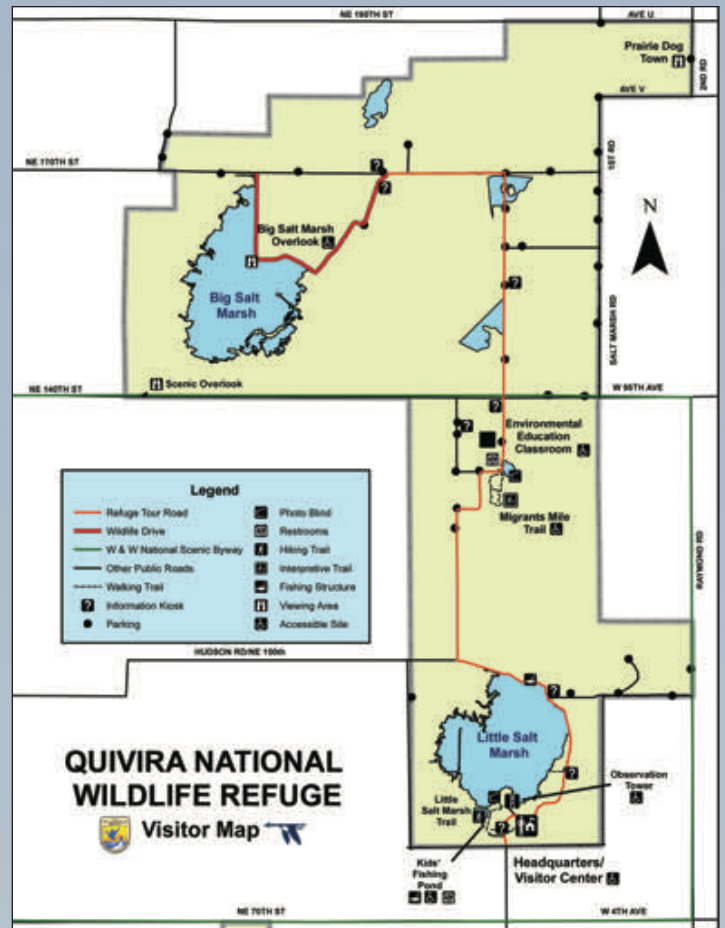
Whooping Cranes, November.
– © Bob Gress

Migrating Whooping Cranes Deserve Priority for this One Migratory Staging Area

To paraphrase an observant biologist at the refuge, the protection and safety of these birds are paramount. Often Whooping Cranes arrive at Quivira weary and hungry from travel. Allowing them an undisturbed period on the ground with access to water, shallow water roosting sites and feeding areas is very important. That advice was published in newspapers in mid November, next to another news title declaring that “Hunting season for rare bird opens” in reference to Lesser Prairie-chickens.

Apparently some hunters have complained because they cannot always plan in advance for when Whooping Cranes might or might not be present on the Quivira refuge. However Cheyenne Bottoms, McPherson Wetlands, and other public hunting areas are almost always open during the various hunting seasons. In recent decades, Whooping Cranes have often been present from October 10 to November 20. Audubon of Kansas recommends standard closure between those dates, so unrealized expectations are not raised, and Whooping Cranes are not subjected to unnecessary disturbance when present, caused to leave Quivira, and being in jeopardy elsewhere by mis-identification between Sandhill Cranes and Whoopers--especially during times of low light or when silhouetted against the sun or sky. Sandhill Cranes and waterfowl are hunted in most fields surrounding Quivira. Tragically a group of three Whooping Cranes were shot there in 2004.

One of the most important purposes served by the Quivira NWR is as a safe, relatively “low disturbance” migratory stopover area for the one self-sustaining and rebuilding wild population of endangered Whooping Cranes. Based on the records of use in recent decades, and the absence of sufficient other wetland complexes with a similar history of use which



“On motionless wing they emerge from the lifting mists, sweep a final arc of sky, and settle in clangorous descending spirals to their feeding grounds. A new day has begun on the crane marsh.”

– Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

To the fullest extent possible, Whooping Cranes should be protected from disturbance while they are present and they should be able to use the full range of suitable habitats within the Quivira NWR. The various management strategies to accomplish this objective should include reduction or elimination of vehicle activities in the immediate vicinities of night roosting, loafing and any feeding habitats they are using, as well as restrictions on human access and various activities that may result in disturbance. This should include restrictions on wildlife viewing and photography that infringe on the birds and threaten to disrupt their behavior or sense of security.

Friends of Quivira, Audubon of Kansas and others should Co-Sponsor an annual “Crane Celebration”

Much more needs to be done to draw attention to the opportunity for people to see – at an appropriate distance – Whooping Cranes, and highlight this opportunity for residents and visitors. Audubon of Kansas believes that an annual early-November Crane Celebration would be an ideal event for the Quivira area, and an added way to draw attention to this refuge, Kansas’ wildlife heritage, and the birds that depend on the refuge—including tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes.

As stated in a “Conservation Action Plan” document prepared by an impressive task force of Whooping Crane biologists and conservation leaders: *“The conservation of Whooping Cranes is often referred to as a success story – a job well done. What many may not realize is that the story of the long-term success and viability of the North American Whooping Crane has only just begun.”* It has taken 75 years to bring them back from the brink of extinction.

Black Rails Nest and Many Other Rare Birds Rest at Quivira

The Audubon of Kansas statement requested that rail hunting, and hunting of other webless migratory birds, not be permitted on the Quivira NWR. KDWPT authorizes shooting of Sora and Virginia Rails with an extraordinary bag limit of 25 per hunter per day and possession limit of 75. However, very little if any practical attempt is made to educate hunters of the risk of shooting other at-risk rail species. None of the rail species are abundant in Kansas and some species (including Virginia Rails) have suffered considerable declines in the past. Black Rails are designated as a state species in Need of Conservation in Kansas.

Black rail populations have been declining in the eastern United States for over a century, resulting in a retraction of its breeding range, an overall reduction in the number of breeding locations within its core range, and a loss of individuals within historic strongholds. Over the past 10 to 20 years, some reports indicate that populations have declined 75% or more and have become dangerously low.



Black Rail, May. – © David Seibel



Long-billed Dowitchers, migration. – © Bob Gress

The best-known and most-consistent nesting colony of Black Rails in the state of Kansas is in a flooded meadow within the Quivira NWR; however, it only accommodates a few birds. Preferred nesting sites appear to be marshy areas with stable water levels. That is a feature not common at most Kansas wetlands.

Kansas ornithologists have indicated that King Rails “presumably nest at Quivira NWR,” but this has not been sufficiently documented. In the last 60 years, King Rails have all but disappeared from areas where they were once locally common, including river marshes along the Missouri River. Black Rails and King Rails are classified as “rare” on the refuge, and Virginia Rails are classified as “uncommon.”

There are no compelling reasons why hunting of rails, snipe (classified as “uncommon” on the refuge) or woodcock (classified as “rare”) should be encouraged or permitted on the Quivira NWR. The refuge is a migratory stopover habitat for many similar-sized shorebird species, often using the same wet habitat. Minimizing disturbance of these species, especially considering that there are so few alternative wetlands in Kansas, should be a USFWS priority.

Rail hunting requires trampling through the wet areas, flushing out these

and other secretive birds. Few people have ever seen a Black Rail, and in field-hunting conditions it isn’t easy to distinguish one from a more common Sora. All are very small and do not qualify as significant table fare. A live Sora weighs 2.6 ounces, Virginal Rails weigh about 3 ounces, and Black Rails weigh 1.1 ounces.

Likewise, Snipe and Woodcock (uncommon and rare at the refuge) are not always easily distinguished from Dowitchers and an array of other shorebirds. While Snipe hunting with a state waterfowl biologist, I saw him mistakenly shoot a solitary sandpiper. This happens – usually unintentionally. But there is no reason to have it occur within the critically important migratory shorebird habitat within Quivira. The disturbance of all the wetland birds present is likely a more significant factor.



Great Blue Heron with Carp. Black-necked Stilt flying. – © Bob Gress



White-faced Ibises, May. – © Bob Gress

Hunting for a Balance at Quivira

It is just as appropriate to have a national wildlife refuge that is largely a “wildlife refuge” without most of it being open to extensive hunting as it is to have a national park. The parallel is the fact that the primary mission is to protect wildlife, preserve nature, and provide visitors with unique opportunities to enjoy our wildlife heritage.

Those of us who enjoy hunting have no reason to feel slighted by substantial limitations (if they are established) on this one unique wildlife refuge. The presence of a “sanctuary” dramatically improves hunting opportunities for waterfowl in a large area surrounding the refuge. It is also good to keep in mind that the other three national wildlife refuges in Kansas have substantial areas open for hunting. Wildlife Management Areas (generally referred to as “public hunting areas”) provide opportunities of importance to hunters throughout the state, and the state has invested handsomely in those opportunities. As a result, public hunting is available on approximately 300,000 acres of state lands, plus federal lands including 108,000 acres at the Cimarron National Grassland, 72,000 acres at Fort Riley, 22,072 acres at the three OTHER federal refuges, along with sixteen Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and six Bureau of Reclamation (USBOR) reservoir areas. In addition, about 1.1 million acres of private land is open to public hunting with Walk-In-Hunting Area agreements. The federally-funded USDA Conservation Reserve Program enhances the habitat values and hunting potential of many of these acres under contract, as well as other lands within the 2.3-million acre total enrolled in the program in Kansas. Many of these fields are enrolled in the Walk-in-Hunting program, and others are available for “Hunting with Permission” as are most of the rural lands within Kansas – the vast majority of the state’s 52 million acres.



Snow Geese, November. – © Bob Gress

Recognizing the Myth of “Exclusive” Funding and the Value of Partnerships

One individual wrote to AOK suggesting that non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts shouldn’t be given any consideration because, he said, “hunters provide all the funding.” Actually, that is not true. Everyone who pays taxes contributes to MOST OF THE FUNDING (at least indirectly) for wildlife habitat conservation in this state. This includes the cost of USFWS management of the national wildlife refuges—financed by federal funding. Thus, even those who do not annually purchase KDWPT hunting, fishing or trapping licenses are equal stakeholders in stewardship decisions involving the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge.

Our nation's general funds also pay for USDA, USACE and USBOR programs—including the acquisition and most of the management of the hundreds of thousands of acres administered by those agencies in Kansas. Another major program financed by all taxpayers is for contracts involving all of the 2.3 million acres



Snow Geese, November. – © Bob Gress

enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program in the state. CRP plantings on private land have become the most important habitat for Pheasant production and hunting opportunities. It alone represents an annual investment of \$95 million. CRP is also important for both species of deer, Northern Bobwhites and other wildlife. In addition, it became a major part of the habitat that has allowed Lesser Prairie-Chickens to hang on with a potentially-viable population.

In addition, general funds through a Farm Bill grant program provided KDWPT with \$3 million in 2011-2012 to sign up and finance agreements with landowners to provide Walk-In Hunting access, and for the fishing access program. Funding for hunting access is complementary to the CRP. It would be desirable to expand the program to provide wildlife viewing/nature appreciation access on other private land.

Other programs including the Wetlands Reserve Program, Grassland Reserve Program, Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program, Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), and USFWS Partners for Wildlife program are financed with general revenue funds at the federal level. Approximately \$26 million in EQIP funding was expended in Kansas in 2013, some of that is beneficial for wildlife (and certainly for water quality).

In an overarching context, it should be kept in mind that the interests of all wildlife enthusiasts – **that includes folks who hunt and others who do not** – are generally complementary and need to be combined whenever possible to help provide support for habitat and conservation programs. (Unlike Missouri with a 1/10th of a percent sales tax and a number of other states, Kansas does not have an adequate way for the general public to



Prairie-chickens. – © Bob Gress

financially contribute to the state's wildlife agency. As a result, the agency's focus is almost exclusively on species that are priced with a license.) The total fish and wildlife (staff and operations) budget for KDWPT is currently \$22 million.

We Support Return of Prairie-chickens to the Refuge and Restoration of Prairie Landscapes

Quivira: A Flagship Attraction

Following an Ecotourism Summit in April 2012, Governor Sam Brownback appointed a committee to explore ways to enhance opportunities for wildlife viewing, nature appreciation and other outdoor activities in Kansas.

The report published a year later, *Kansas Ecotourism 2013*, is available online. In the first meeting Governor Brownback expressed the desire for quick, focused action. He mentioned the Flint Hills and Cheyenne Bottoms among places in Kansas where he believes the state can accomplish a great deal in a short period of time. We hope that KDWPT implements this philosophy and many of the specific recommendations at Cheyenne Bottoms. Meanwhile Quivira National Wildlife Refuge is recognized as a *flagship attraction* for wildlife viewing and photography, leading an impressive central Kansas armada that includes the Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area.

As articulated in the Executive Summary, "Quivira NWR has two wildlife drives, an observation tower, a nature center, and a series of hiking trails. Quivira is best configured and enhanced for ecotourism. The state's Cheyenne Bottoms WMA allows access along the levee roads, but these may or may not be adjacent to areas of shorebirds and waterfowl concentrations. The artificial wetland built behind the Kansas Wetland Education Center has been dry for much of its brief life."

Quivira isn't anything close to Yellowstone in size; in fact it is almost exactly one percent as large. But in terms of wildlife viewing and photography opportunities, it is the closest thing we have in Kansas to compare to Yellowstone or the Everglades National Park. In addition to prairie and water birds, Quivira's majestic White-tailed Deer bucks have been the focus for the photography pursuits of outdoor writers.

The "Comprehensive Plan" goes a bit afield by suggesting, at this point, that if a Prairie-chicken population can be reestablished on the refuge, hunting should be allowed "if a refuge population can support it or for health purposes, as decided by the State." First, any decision to initiate shooting of Prairie-chickens on the refuge should be made by the USFWS. Second, to the best of our knowledge, it is doubtful there will be any reason to believe that Prairie-chickens will have to be hunted for "health purposes." Third, it is highly unlikely that a substantial population of Greater (or Lesser) Prairie-chickens will be reestablished on the refuge within the foreseeable future. It is even less likely if the refuge implements the transformation of management to dramatically expand public hunting areas and seasons on this relatively isolated parcel of prairie. Prairie-chickens are very sensitive to excessive human activity.

Bringing a sustainable breeding population of chickens back would be

miraculous. If it occurs it will be in part because sufficient expanses of unfragmented native grasslands will have been restored. The ongoing removal of invasive patches of trees, combined with patch burning, enhances the prospects of success. Construction of additional roads and parking lots should be minimized. If more roads, parking lots, signage and water control structures (dams) are build, as outlined in the plan to accommodate more public hunting pressure, they may contribute to more prairie fragmentation and disturbance by all users.

The Refuge has Unrealized Potential for Black-tailed Prairie Dogs, Burrowing Owls and Black-footed Ferrets.

Although the plan states that the USFWS will: *“Actively conserve and, as appropriate, improve environmental conditions within refuge boundaries to promote sustainable native ecological communities and support species of concern associated with this region of the Great Plains,”* there are gaps in the ecological overview.

One obvious gap is the absence of planning for the conservation and management of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs and the diverse and numerous associated species.

At present there is one small colony on the very northeast edge of the refuge, and because of its severely limited size it is of little significance even as a potential breeding area for Burrowing Owls or other species. Grazing does not appear to be sufficiently intensive in potential habitats to allow expansion within the refuge, and illegal shooting appears to occur. Prairie dogs would, if reasonably abundant within an area of the refuge, provide a reliable food source for Ferruginous Hawks and Golden Eagles when they are present in winter and/or during migration. Black-tailed Prairie Dogs are recognized as a keystone grassland species. Black-tailed Prairie Dogs should be recognized as a focal species for conservation of grassland communities and also recognized as a valuable resource for wildlife viewing and photography.

The refuge encompasses 9,512 acres of native, grass-dominated vegetation outside of what is defined as wetland.

It is obvious that there are sufficient grassland areas within the Quivira refuge to support larger colonies of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs for conservation purposes. This goal can be achieved uniquely in this “mid-grass prairie” area if neglect and illegal shooting are replaced with purposeful management. It can readily be accomplished without creating problems on adjacent lands. A mosaic of colonies with short grass combined with areas of taller vegetation would benefit focal species including Burrowing Owls, Western Meadowlarks, Grasshopper Sparrows, Field Sparrows, Lark Sparrows and Upland Sandpipers.

It is important for USFWS to recognize that the Quivira NWR presents an opportunity to establish a prairie dog colony complex of regional significance that goes far beyond that envisioned in the



Burrowing Owl on prairie dog mound at Cheyenne Bottoms in 2007. That prairie dog colony no longer exists. – © Judd Patterson

draft plan. If half of the 4,163 acres of predominantly “native-short-mid, sparse-medium-grassland habitat” described in the report is devoted to establishment of a prairie dog complex over the next ten years, it could be ecologically significant for many of the associated wildlife species—and the complex could become a suitable site for reintroduction of Black-footed Ferrets.

One of the most severe limitations for success of Black-footed Ferret reintroductions, and recovery of this endangered species, is the impact of Sylvatic Plague across most of the western part of the United States. Fortunately, it has not been documented anywhere within 150 miles of Quivira. Thus, within the foreseeable future, prairie dog colonies (and ferrets) would likely be secure from that threat within Quivira.

If Audubon of Kansas’ recommendations are adopted by the USFWS for the **Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment**, we envision the future of the Quivira NWR as a refuge of continuing and increasing importance for Whooping Cranes, and numerous other wetland as well as grassland **Species in Need of Conservation**, possibly including a site contributing to the recovery of Black-footed Ferrets.



Burrowing Owls. Norton County. – © David Seibel

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