

REPORT ON HER FIRST NINE MONTHS IN THE SADDLE

Dr. Jackie Augustine



Jackie at the state house after testifying for SB 279

As I am writing this letter in early October, I'm wondering how long I can still say that I'm the 'new' Executive Director. I've been in the Executive Director position for a little over nine months now, and the newness is starting to wear off, but in a good way. When I start work each day, I have a clear idea of what needs to be done, and I feel proud of what I've been able to accomplish thus far to advance **Audubon of Kansas's (AOK's) three-fold mission of advocacy, conservation, and education.**

Advocacy takes many forms, but AOK generally provides resources and support so that those with environmental concerns can be heard by local, county, and state elected officials. This year, we have worked to conserve prairie dogs, ensure that wildlife is considered when siting industrial wind turbines, commented on the listing of Lesser Prairie-Chickens under the Endangered Species Act, and filed a lawsuit that seeks to ensure that the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge has the water it needs to support wildlife. The lawsuit and Lesser Prairie-Chicken Listing are discussed elsewhere in *Prairie Wings*, so I will describe our other efforts.

In Kansas, county commissioners can lawfully eradicate prairie dogs on private land and charge the landowner for doing so, even if the landowner does not want them eradicated and prefers to enjoy the comical behavior of prairie dogs. This year, we wrote to the commissioners of two counties who ultimately decided to exercise their right to execute prairie dogs. In the future, we hope that counties allow landowners to control their prairie dog colonies through non-lethal means.

In Marshall County, an industrial wind facility was proposed, and the county failed to regulate the development despite local

landowner opposition. The issue was heard at the statehouse in association with Senate Bill 279, with many landowners in Marshall County and throughout the state providing supportive testimony. The testimony was heart-wrenching to hear and included descriptions of a family having to move because of a sensory-sensitive child being unable to tolerate the sounds the turbines produced. Another family wanted to build an aviation community surrounding a grass strip runway, but turbines surrounded the area. Marshall County residents focused on nesting Bald Eagles and prairie-chickens, species that are to be protected if industrial wind installations follow the guidelines set forth by the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks and by The Nature Conservancy's Site Wind Right guidelines. AOK provided neutral testimony because SB 279 did not explicitly include wildlife considerations when siting industrial wind turbines, but SB 279 did include provisions which would have addressed most of the landowner's complaints. The bill failed to leave the committee for consideration.

Although our work with prairie dogs and siting of industrial wind turbines was ultimately unsuccessful, we were able to build resources and connections with industry, government, and other non-profit organizations so that we increase our chances of success when the next issue arises.

AOK's **Conservation** efforts center on demonstrating how people and wildlife can coexist through our sanctuary program. The Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary shows how cattle ranching not only provides income for the landowner, but can also be a mechanism for grassland habitat management. At Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm, AOK demonstrates how

a small, but well-placed prairie buffer habitat can support wildlife including Northern Bobwhite quail. Although Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie is primarily a public park, Dickcissels, Collared Lizards, and wildflowers abound. Elsewhere in this *Prairie Wings*, you will find specific updates about conservation initiatives associated with each sanctuary.

Of the 3 components of AOK's mission, our **Environmental Education** efforts have shown the most growth. Our first initiative was getting myself, as Executive Director, to present to local community groups. Not only do attendees learn more about AOK, they also leave with helpful information about what they can do to support wildlife and wildlands. So far, I have talked to two Rotary groups, Ambucs, and two Audubon chapters, and several more talks are scheduled in the future for more Audubon chapters, libraries, and Rotarians. Secondly, AOK is reaching out to Audubon chapters in the state and connecting them with each other. We are holding a monthly virtual 'meetup' where chapters can discuss their challenges and learn what other chapters are doing. Six of the seven active chapters in Kansas have participated. Thirdly, we are building on our success with Celebration of Cranes, by adding a new festival focused on prairie-chickens (described in detail elsewhere in this issue of *Prairie Wings*). Lastly, AOK is hoping to provide a 'birdwatching backpack' to a library in every county in the state (105 counties) or possibly every library in the state (331 libraries). The backpack would include a pair of adult binoculars, two pairs of child-sized binoculars, a fold-out bird identification guide, and a handout which suggests where they could go bird watching in their county. We are currently writing grants to support this effort, and hope to do fund-raising in the spring to cover any costs that are not grant-supported.

AOK needs to ensure that we can fulfill our advocacy, conservation, and education mission for many years to come. When I became Executive Director, it was a good time to examine the business side of AOK to see if we could do anything better. In January 2021, we launched our strategic plan which is to be completed by the end of 2023. It offered many concrete suggestions for expanding AOK's impact and streamlining operations. One of the things called for in the strategic plan was management plans for each sanctuary that outlined habitat management priorities and ensured that donors' wishes were being respected. A Sanctuary Management Plan was completed in April. Finally, we carefully considered all aspects of AOK operations to see where money could be saved and where money should be invested. We determined that a physical office was no longer needed as most of our work could be accomplished virtually. We closed our office in May. One of the major investments this year was in the purchase of new software for managing donors, paid for with Grow Green donations and matching funds through the Greater Manhattan Community Foundation.

As you can see, AOK is making a difference in Kansas. We stand up for wildlife in Kansas when no other environmental organization will.

However, we could do even more if we had your help. Consider taking these steps to preserve wildlife and wildlands in Kansas:

1. Become a member of Audubon of Kansas.

When members support AOK financially, they are joining a passionate group of people dedicated to advocacy, conservation, and environmental education in Kansas. Visit audubonofkansas.org and click the 'Join AOK' link at the top, right-hand corner of the page.

2. Actively engage with Audubon of Kansas. Follow us on social media – FaceBook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Sign up to receive our monthly electronic newsletter ('Join mailing list' link in the upper right of audubonofkansas.org). Make plans to attend an event, such as the Celebration of Cranes or the Prairie-Chicken Festival. Volunteer to serve on one of our committees, such as communications, advocacy, environmental education, sanctuaries, Celebration of Cranes, or Prairie-Chicken Festival. We can find a committee that is right for you! Contact Jackie with your interest at jackie@audubonofkansas.org or 785-537-4385.

3. Make a giving plan. AOK's work never stops, so we need supporters that we can count on. Consider making a monthly gift or plan on making a yearly gift. You can even set this up electronically, so your giving is automatic. Select the 'donate' button in the upper right hand corner of our website or contact Kelley, our Director of Philanthropy, to assist you (khurst@audubonofkansas.org or 785-917-0400.) For other planned-giving options, such as a charitable gift annuity or gift of stocks or bonds, please contact me, Jackie Augustine, at jackie@audubonofkansas.org or 785-537-4385.

4. Solidify your conservation legacy by including a bequest to AOK in your will or trust. You can designate specific property, a fixed dollar amount, or a percentage of your residual estate, for the benefit of AOK. AOK is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 conservation organization incorporated in the state of Kansas with its address at PO Box 1106, Manhattan, Kansas 66505-1106. AOK's Federal Identification Number is 48-0849282. For more information, contact Kelley, our Director of Philanthropy at giving@audubonofkansas.org or 785-917-0400.

