



A Retrospective of Twenty Years for AOK

“Twenty Years of Struggle and Accomplishment: Ron Klataske and Audubon of Kansas”—
by **Dick Seaton**, Chairman of AOK from 2001 to 2006

Over the past year, Audubon of Kansas has been celebrating twenty years of active environmental advocacy in the Great Plains. Two members of the Board of Trustees who were there at the beginning share their reflections on some high points in that history.

When Ron Klataske decided to start a free-standing Kansas Audubon organization in 1999, he brought to it 28+ years’ experience with National Audubon and a lot of mid-western friends who were like-minded environmentalists.

But AOK was a shoestring operation at the start. We used the existing charter of the Kansas Audubon Council and renamed it Audubon of Kansas. Bill Browning was our first chair, and Ron our sole employee.

Rather quickly though, AOK received a large gift of land and endowment funds from Harold and Lucille Hutton of Nebraska. Over time, Ron has parlayed his grant skills into about one million dollars additional funding for improvements at the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary in northern Nebraska.

Here in Kansas, AOK has been especially active in advocating for the environment, both at the legislature and in state and federal agencies. Here are some of the highlights:

- *Ron has fought off repeated efforts to dilute or eliminate laws which encourage conservation easements and protect non-game and endangered species.
- *He has served for years on USDA’s state technical committee, advising NRCS and FSA on Kansas conservation programs.
- *He has worked tirelessly with the Kansas Department of Transportation to reduce roadside mowing and spraying on its 150,000 acres of right-of-way, in order to encourage native wildflowers and grasses.

*AOK helped facilitate the “Heart of the Flint Hills” project initiated by Governor Sebelius and enlarged by Governor Brownback, to keep industrial scale windpower facilities out of the Flint Hills.

*AOK filed a friend of the court brief with our Kansas Supreme Court in *Zimmerman v. Wabaunsee County Commissioners*, advocating in favor of the county’s prohibition on large scale wind complexes. The court upheld the ban in 2011.

*We have fought strenuously for restoration of the water rights of Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, which hosts a number of threatened and endangered birds such as Whooping Cranes, as well as thousands of Sandhill Cranes, each year.

*Ron has publicized many warnings about the dangers of Old World Bluestems, invasive species that kill native plants and encourages erosion.

*He has advocated for years that the Sandhill Crane hunting season be reduced and limited to certain hours in order to protect Whooping Cranes, which migrate with them.

Today, AOK manages the Hutton Sanctuary and the Achterberg “Wildlife Friendly Demonstration Farm” in Lincoln County. It is also the owner of Mt. Mitchell, an historic park and sanctuary in Wabaunsee County, which we acquired by legislative action from the Kansas Historical Society in 2006, and helped expand in 2007.

We encourage other owners who want to preserve their land to consider adding it to our “archipelago of sanctuaries.”

Ron Klataske has been recognized over the years for his environmental accomplishments. A few of his awards are:

- *The John K. Strickler Award from the Kansas Association of Conservation and Environmental Education.
- *The Conservation Professional Award from the Nebraska Wildlife Federation.
- *The President’s Award from the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Ron retires from the executive position on December 31, 2020 and will be succeeded by Jackie Augustine. He has had quite a career, and his passion for the natural world will continue to inform and inspire AOK for years to come.

“Ron K, the Hutton story, and the Prairie Dog Wars”—reminiscence by **Bob McElroy**, a.k.a.

“Prairie Doc;” Chairman of AOK from 2006 to 2012

It was about 1990 when I received a call from the office of the Regional Director of the National Audubon Society asking if I would put together a group of my friends so he could show slides of what the National Audubon Society was doing regarding the environment and especially wildlife. Thus it was that Ron Klataske showed up at my home for an evening discussion and slide show about wildlife. During the course of the evening he casually mentioned that on his farm north of Manhattan he had many coveys of quail and we would be welcome to come and hunt. Several of my friends were avid quail hunters and that offer was immediately accepted and acted on. That hunt still stands out in my memory, Ron had quail all right; some of his coveys when flushed sounded like B-29s taking off, they were so large; the dogs were on continuous point.

Later, around 1999 the National Audubon Society disenfranchised the state organizations and Kansas decided to go it alone. I had several discussions with Ron about potential board members, and not long after received a call asking me to serve. Thus began an association with Audubon of Kansas that has lasted over several decades.

In 2001 AOK was the recipient of 5,000 acres of sandhill ranch land along the Niobrara River, along with a significant endowment from the estate of Harold and Lucille Hutton. The ranch has miles of lush sandhill pasture bisected by two spring fed creeks and three miles of frontage along the scenic Niobrara river.

The Huttons were part of the ranching community that years earlier had opposed the Interior Department building a dam and long canal paralleling the river from north central Nebraska in order to irrigate farmland in eastern Nebraska. At the time Ron worked as regional director for the National Audubon Association and he was very active in organizing and alerting the ranches and communities along the river to the hazards and environmental dangers such a project would produce. A coalition of ranchers, concerned citizens, and environmentalists were successful in stopping the damming project, and getting Congress to designate a section of the Niobrara a scenic river.

From this effort Ron had developed a close relationship with a number of ranchers, especially Harold Hutton. By the time

Harold and Lucille approached the end of their lives, Ron was director of Audubon of Kansas. The Huttons considered other options including both national and state environmental organizations, but in the end chose Audubon of Kansas to manage their ranch in perpetuity as a wildlife-friendly property. The fact that they chose an organization based in Kansas rather than Nebraska is a testament to the trust they developed in Ron to follow their desires for management of the ranch.

The original management of the ranch was arranged through the wording of the will and the administrators of the will who were local ranchers. This proved to be a very mixed blessing. Although it was convenient to have local management, it became clear over time that the locals had ulterior motives. Despite the request of the will that the Hutton ranch be wildlife friendly, the pastures were increasingly crowded with cows to the point that, by the end of the five-year contract, the grass had been literally eaten into the ground. Needless to say, nesting and brood habitat for Sharp-tailed Grouse and other grassland birds was devastated.

There is a general rule that for a prairie grouse to nest, there needs to be grass tall enough to hide a football. I accompanied Ron on two different occasions where we measured grass height with the use of a Robel pole. A Robel pole is a two meter pole with ten centimeter markings attached with a two meter line to another unmarked two meter pole. Ron placed a football at the base of the pole with a golf ball on the other side and recorded the height of the grass from the second pole with a camera. With hundreds of randomly selected sightings, we found only one site that had enough grass to hide even a golf ball.

When the original five year lease expired we asked the managers to vacate the ranch because of their abuse of the land. When they contested the eviction order in front of a judge, replying “we used only standard grazing practice,” Ron used what I call the dump truck attack. He took the hundreds of documented pictures and dumped the load on them in front of the court. We regained control of the ranch, and the grass has returned— along with the Sharp-tailed Grouse and the Greater Prairie Chickens.

On more than one occasion, riding my Tennessee Walking horses we were able to make wide-ranging explorations of the ranch. Quoting Ron, “You can see so much more from the back of a horse than from walking or a pickup truck.” Once when on my horse Strider he was photographing a mother raccoon in the crotch of a tree a few feet above him, I said “if she snarls you will be on the ground when Strider bolts out from under you.” But she didn’t and Strider didn’t and Ron got his picture.

Under Ron's management an extensive water tank system has been put in place so that cows can drink without going into the creek bottoms, traffic which increases erosion of the creek banks. He also arranged for the ranch to have controlled burns to manage cedar invasion. Much of this has been financed through his genius for obtaining government grants. He identified a specific area for reintroduction of Prairie Dogs. The area was fenced in hopes of keeping the Prairie Dogs on site, the grass was cut short, and introductory holes were dug. Prairie Dogs were obtained from a regional federal grassland and released to their new home. The Prairie Dogs initially thrived, deepened their holes and in time new pups were seen. But last year was a wet year, which Prairie Dogs do not like, and with the advances of Badgers the colony has fallen on hard times. Perhaps we can overcome the obstacles and restore the colony in the near future.

Kansas has a law passed about 1901 that if as a landowner you have varmints, i.e. Prairie Dogs, on your land and your neighbors complain about them, you are obligated to exterminate them, or the county will do it for you and bill you for the cost, up to the point of putting a lien on your land. Prairie Dogs are a "keystone" animal: where they are present other wildlife will occur or even thrive. This includes Burrowing Owls, Golden Eagles, Ferruginous Hawks, Swift Foxes, Badgers, and probably an occasional rattlesnake. This list of predator neighbors may explain why Prairie Dogs have a mania about short grass prairie and keeping it short.

With this antique law always in mind Ron was contacted around 2005 by Larry and Bette Haverford of Logan county, who have a multiple thousand acre ranch 40 miles south of Oakley with a prairie dog colony complex of at least five thousand acres. Larry had learned how to range cattle and have Prairie Dogs at the same time. Incidentally, their ranch has all of the above wildlife while the surrounding countryside is fairly bare. But to county authorities, the Prairie Dogs were the problem. Using the 1903 law as a club, several members of the Logan County Board of Supervisors were on a crusade to force the Haverfords to exterminate their Prairie

Dogs. Ron was asked to help, and after he surveyed the scene concluded that the Haverford ranch was an appropriate site for the reintroduction of the Black-footed Ferret.

The Black-footed Ferret is the most endangered mammal in North America, considered extinct for a number of years until a small colony was discovered in northwestern Wyoming. These ferrets were rescued by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, which now has three or four hundred in cages awaiting reintroduction to the wild.

The agencies and other partners established an extensive captive breeding program and began releasing ferrets in suitable sites, hoping for species recovery in the wild. The USFWS was contacted by Ron and after doing their own survey, they agreed that it was appropriate to use the Haverfield/Barnhardt/Blank ranch as a first Kansas reintroduction site.

This news of the impending reintroduction of the ferrets by the USFWS was not greeted enthusiastically by the county fathers and many of the local ranchers who saw the presence of an endangered species as a threat providing a rationale for not exterminating the Prairie Dogs. The ensuing public, political and legal struggle to have the ferrets reintroduced in Logan County is beyond the scope of this article, but without the encouragement and leadership of Ron the USFWS probably would not have acted in the face of considerable negative political pressure. Another environmental organization with a large ranch and significant colony of Prairie Dogs in the county had also received ferrets, but gradually wilted under the pressure and let their effort fail, whereas the Haverfield ferret project has survived and continues to offer a promising future for Black-footed Ferrets and other wildlife.

The outcome of the "Prairie Dog Wars" is but one instance in the story of conservation successes achieved by AOK under the leadership of Ron Klataske since inception twenty-one years ago.

On inside back cover: Two bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) fight over a salmon carcass along the Chilkat River in the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve near Haines, Alaska. During late fall, bald eagles congregate along the Chilkat River to feed on salmon. This gathering of bald eagles in the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve is believed to be one of the largest gatherings of bald eagles in the world. Recently, Constantine Metal Resources Ltd. of Vancouver, British Columbia along with investment partner Dowa Metals & Mining Co.,

Ltd. of Japan have begun exploration for a potential site of a copper and zinc mine in the Klehini River/Chilkat River watersheds. Some local residents and environmental groups are concerned that a mine might threaten the area's salmon. Of particular concern is copper and other heavy metals, found in mine waste, leaching into the Klehini River and the Chilkat River further downstream. Copper and heavy metals are toxic to salmon and bald eagles.

--Dengler Images, LLC.