



Soaring Mt. Mitchell: Where Raptors & Gliders Share the Skies

Don Regier with glider on Mt. Mitchell.

South of Wamego across the flat floodplain of the Kaw River and short glacial moraine abruptly rise a series of bluffs that tower two to three hundred feet above the plain and continue then south as part of the Flint Hills. Closest to the highway and one of the tallest is an imposing bluff called Mt. Mitchell, named after William Mitchell who was a leader of the Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony and Captain of its militia. They took part in some of the pre-Civil War action known as “Bleeding Kansas.” On top of the mount is a limestone monument honoring Mitchell and the Colony. The land originally owned by the Mitchell family was given to the Kansas Historical Society. With legislative approval, title to the land was passed to Audubon of Kansas, Inc. AOK manages this spectacular prairie remnant in partnership with the “Mt. Mitchell Prairie Guards,” a group dedicated to keeping local history alive. The mount has a world-class view of the Kaw Valley extending from Manhattan to the west and east to the Jeffrey Energy Center. Several bends of the river are clearly seen with the city of Wamego in the center of this vista. A lush tallgrass native pasture of

Indian grass and Big Bluestem covers the hillside and in late fall it is decorated with the bright yellow of Maximilian Sunflower and tall Goldenrod. Monarch butterflies are swarming the Goldenrod and occasional Goldfinches are flitting among the seed heads of the sunflowers. The sun is warm and with a mild wind from the north there is abundant lift for the half dozen Red-tailed Hawks patrolling the ridge. It was soaring hawks that earlier caught my eye and made me wonder if I could join them for a ride on the wind above the ridge.



Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie offers many opportunities for fun and education.

I belong to a group that enjoys radio-control flying with small airplanes. Several of us are glider enthusiasts who launch our gliders on warm afternoons in search of lift. My description of Mt. Mitchell and its slope soaring possibilities provoked several of them to give it a try. The parking lot is at the base of the mount on its southern slope. It took us some minutes to unload the gliders, assemble them and begin the long trudge up the trail to the summit. On the lee side of the hill there was virtually no breeze, but once on the summit the wind was about ten miles per hour.

A simple toss into the wind and my motorless plane began a steep upward climb of two or three hundred feet where it joined two other gliders enjoying the ample lift supplied by the gentle north breeze over the bluff. There were thermals farther out arising off the dark cultivated fields on the floodplain below. When wind encounters a steep face, as on the bluff, it rises like a wave for many feet above the bluff or obstruction and this lift is what is used both by hawks and gliders and is called slope soaring. Under the right conditions, usually in high winds on a steep mountain slope and a rigid airframe, doing what is called dynamic soaring, speeds in excess of four hundred miles an hour have been clocked. But today we are interested in only the simple pleasure of keeping our gliders aloft as long as we want, drifting back and fore across the face of the north-facing slope with an occasional steep swift dive to eye level only to begin the climb back to altitude. A large Red-tailed Hawk seems to take offense and aggressively approaches one of the gliders only to swiftly bank away after deciding the

plane was neither a threat nor edible. I make the mistake of letting my plane get too far down wind, loosing too much altitude in trying to get back into the lift it crashes into a plum bush on the back side of the hill. The glider is retrieved after a brief search, it is undamaged and soon flying again, the only injury is to my pride. Watching the gliders surfing on the wind so effortlessly is almost hypnotic and it is difficult to bring them back to earth after a glorious afternoon. We hike back down the hill aware of the beauty of the site and its potential for soaring flight; we will not be long in returning.

Robert McElroy, MD
Topeka

Audubon of Kansas is in the final phrase of purchasing a 15.5-acre addition to the Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie. Contributions of \$1,500 acquire an acre.

We strive to leave no child indoors. Children love the wonders of nature, and they are the greatest wonders of nature.



A field trip featuring prairie grasses and wildflowers at Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie.