



Sandhill Cranes, Snow Geese and American Wigeon on a playa by Henry Harrison

The Year that We Almost Lost Playas in Western Kansas

A. Spencer Tomb

In the early 1980s, the US Fish and Wildlife Service started to work on a national inventory of wetlands. Over half of the wetlands in the United States had been lost to agriculture or development by 1984. The task of locating wetlands for the National Wetland Inventory was given to the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) of the US Department of Agriculture. The SCS later became the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In Kansas as the first reports of the county-based wetland inventories started to appear it was obvious that playa wetlands were being underreported in western Kansas.

At that time, I was on the Board of the Kansas Wildlife Federation. I had been a botany professor at K-State for about ten years. I was asked by Kansas Fish and Game Commission wildlife biologists to help them identify obligate wetland plants in suspected playas in the Dodge City area. At that point in my career, I was working on pollen morphology and the evolution of the lettuce tribe of the sunflower family. I had never worked on wetlands. My knowledge of wetlands and wetland plants was confined to a half-dozen plants that ducks liked to eat. I spent a few days reading about wetland delineation and looking at dried specimens of wetland plants from western Kansas.

The trip to Ford County was short and sweet. I took herbarium specimens and photos of several common wetland indicator plants that were known to grow in Kansas playas. We had a short meeting and then went to four nearby playas. There was no standing water, but there was evidence that these depressions had been wet in the spring. We found several species that were obligate wetland indicator plants at all four of the playas we examined. It was obvious that these depressions should appear on the inventory as playa wetlands.

When I got back to Manhattan I contacted the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) office in Bismarck, ND and told them about the underreporting of playa wetlands in Kansas. They were not surprised because other states in the Great Plains were complaining about the underreporting of wetlands. They asked me if I was confident in my identification of these wetlands. I sent them several photos and a two page letter. The National Wildlife Federation served the Soil Conservation Service with a Freedom of Information Act request. The National Wildlife Federation made a formal complaint on the way the National Wetland Inventory was being done.



*Playa on Kiowa National Grassland
(Angela Safranek/USFS)*

A month later that summer the Soil Conservation Service assembled a state and regional team to look into playas and Billy Teels, the SCS wildlife biologist from Washington DC, came to Kansas to lead the investigation. I was invited to attend by the Kansas Fish and Game. We gathered at the Kansas Fish and Game office and I was talking to Teels when we were asked get in to — in the truck. Teels invited me into the truck with him and most of the SCS team. We drove west of Dodge City for about fifteen minutes. As we turned off the highway and started down a dirt road, we were greeted by a large number of frogs hopping out of our way. We flushed shore birds and ducks off an oval pool of water. We stopped and watched more birds flush. I pointed out several obligate wetland plant species.

As we got back in the trucks at the third playa, which was about 5 acres, some asked Teels what he thought. He looked down at his muddy boots, paused a moment and then said, “When I see frogs, shorebirds, ducks, wetland plants and water I have to think this is a wetland.”

I sent a short letter to the NWF Wetlands Office and quoted Billy Teels. A few months later playas started to appear on the revised wetland inventory maps. I will always be thankful for that timely 3.5” downpour in the early summer west of Dodge City that year.



*American Wigeon on New
Mexico playa (PLJV)*