

# Profile of a Great Wildlife Research Scientist, Conservationist and Sportsman: **ROBERT J. ROBEL**



**A**lthough Robert “Bob” Robel, professor emeritus of biology, has been officially retired for several years, he still maintains an office in the KSU Division of Biology and he continues to help other faculty members with their research.

Most recently, he provided leadership in research that has benefited both Greater and Lesser Prairie-chicken populations by identifying man-made

structures that repel females from nesting, such as wind turbines, center pivot irrigation systems and even fences. In the past few years he also advised one of the big wind energy companies to move the proposed location for a major industrial windpower development proposed in the Kansas Flint Hills from their first three choices to

an area with less of an impact on Prairie-chickens.

“They wanted to avoid adverse impacts on Prairie-chicken populations,” Robel said. “They had three sites down in south central Kansas, great sites – probably better wind sites – but that’s a company that has an environmental conscience.”

Robel has a longtime passion for wildlife, and anatomy. When he was in sixth grade he began working with a taxidermist and later bought the business from his retiring mentor when he was a sophomore in high school. He owned and operated it throughout his undergraduate years, putting himself through college at Michigan State University.

Although Robel was accepted in medical school when he was a senior in high school, he switched from premed to wildlife ecology in his junior year of college because he felt he would be confined to an office if he became a doctor.

During his undergraduate years, he mounted 80-100 deer shoulder-mounts per year in addition to preserving other aspects of the animals. His interest in taxidermy remains today. He still has a pair of 60-year-old leather moccasins and



**Bob Robel and Anice, 2010 at Glendye Estate in Scotland, returning from driven pheasant shooting.**

a pair of velvety deer-hide leather gloves, made by his company. Step into his Division of Biology office and it's like stepping into a natural history museum, with its array of animals displayed on its walls.

After working for the Michigan State University museum, where he collected and harvested specimens for scientific research and educational display, Robel knew he wanted to continue his education. While he was still an undergraduate, he sought out advisers and had funding lined up at the University of Idaho and Utah State University, for his master's and doctoral degrees, respectively. In 1961, he was hired as an assistant professor in Kansas State University's department of zoology — before the merger that created the Division of Biology.

On a Fulbright Scholarship, Robel traveled to the United Kingdom to study Black Grouse in 1967. While there, he was asked to help with a long-term study on Red Deer, a close cousin to North America Elk. The celebrated “Monarch of the Glen,” the Red Deer stag is a Scottish icon. It is the largest land mammal in Britain and is widespread throughout Scotland.

Dr. Robel developed a management plan for increasing Red Deer numbers by culling female deer that were not capable of producing healthy offspring.

“We decided to maximize production by taking the nonproductive individuals out of the population,” Robel said. “We developed a technique where we could determine whether or not a female deer was going to have a calf that survived to adulthood, when she was only one and a half years old — before she was ever bred.”

It was through his deer management plan that he gained worldwide recognition in that field, and he was invited to speak in various countries from Russia and Australia to Singapore and Thailand. In exchange, Bob Robel asked his hosts to arrange opportunities to hunt various legal game animals and/or to see



and experience wildlife in their natural habitats throughout the world.

Like several of the most prominent sportsmen-conservationists that provided vital leadership in the first half of the twentieth century, Dr. Robel's dual passions for conservation and hunting have fueled his lifelong dedication to both. His grounding in this tradition has advanced the conservation movement, environmental protection and wildlife management in the second half of that century and now the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Dr. Robel's lecture travels allowed him to pursue Mid-Asian Ibex in the Kyrgyz Republic, Roebucks in Siberia, and Chamois in the Caucasus Mountains of Russia, as well as wild boar, Mouflon Sheep, and huge forest (Red Deer) stags and Fallow Deer in Austria. He has hunted Elk in New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming; and pursued Mule Deer and White-tailed Deer across the U.S. Farther north on the continent Bob has stalked Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep, Stone's Sheep and Dall's Sheep in British Columbia, Alberta and the Yukon Territory, as well as Mountain Goats, Grizzly Bears and Black Bears. Bob and Anice, his wife of 47 years, have made an annual tradition of traveling to Scotland for driven pheasant and grouse shooting,

and stag stalking in the Highlands.

An extensive amount of Robel's research in Kansas has been devoted to upland gamebird species, including Prairie-chickens and Northern Bobwhites. This research has led to enhanced understanding of their behavior, habitat needs and provide management frameworks designed to maintain sustainable populations. In an effort to strengthen such research in Kansas, he helped establish the Kansas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit on KSU's campus to serve as an important collaborator for the university's ecological and wildlife scientists.

Robel has served as consultant and science adviser for several Kansas governors, energy companies and numerous committees and task forces. In the 1970s, Dr. Robel was a Project Leader in the Office of Technology Assessment of the U.S. Congress. He was in charge of evaluating techniques to enhance the recovery of oil and natural gas. He was looking at the environmental impacts of “fracking” to recover crude oil and natural gas long before the technique became widely used.

He has also served as the U.S. Olympic shooting team chairman, which is the third most popular sport for participants in the Olympics. He retains a keen interest in the shooting sports, beginning his competitive shooting activities while a high school student in Michigan. He holds numerous regional and state championship titles in skeet and rifle shooting from Michigan, Idaho and the Midwest. He currently serves as Chairman of the Kansas State Rifle Association Foundation, a tax-exempt entity that raises funds to promote legal shooting activities among youth and women in Kansas.

Robel is a member of several professional societies and wildlife conservation organizations, including being a Life Member of The Wildlife Society, an Honorary Life Member of the Kansas Wildlife Federation, an Elective

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**“Greatness is the dream of youth realized” for the remainder of one's life.**

*— adaption of an Alfred Victor Vigny quote (French poet, dramatist, and novelist, 1797-1863)*



Member of the American Ornithologists Union, and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

In 1989, he received the Centennial Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Idaho and was inducted into the school's Alumni Hall of Fame in 1997. In 2001 he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the College of Natural Resources Alumni Association at Utah State University. He has also been the recipient of the Governor's Conservationist of the Year Award, Proud Kansan Award from the Kansas Outdoor Writers Association and the Outstanding Professional Award from the Kansas Chapter of The Wildlife Society.

**The world needs dreamers and the world needs doers. But above all, the world needs dreamers who do.**

– Sarah Ban Breathnach,  
*Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy*, 1996

As just one among awards, Audubon of Kansas presented Dr. Robel with a "Greater & Lesser Prairie-chicken Lifetime Conservation Award" in 2010. He also received the Meritorious Service Award from the Grouse Research Unit in Banchory, Scotland for his work with Red Grouse, unique to the heather moors of the British Isles.

### **Fifty Years of Wildlife Biology Leadership in Kansas**

It is without a doubt that Dr. Robel has more of a lasting influence on the profession of wildlife biology, conservation and management in Kansas than any other person in the history of the state. During the past fifty-one years since he became professor of wildlife biology at Kansas State University, he has taught, advised, guided and inspired

hundreds of students who have gone on to work in this profession in Kansas--and from the eastern seaboard to Alaska. In addition to all of those who received Bachelor of Science degrees, many others have achieved masters or doctorate degrees under his leadership, and thousands more students in other majors have gained an understanding of wildlife biology and management from classes he has taught.

Robel is regarded by wildlife scientists as this continent's – and thus the world's – foremost authority on prairie grouse. In addition to devoting more than thirty years to prairie grouse research, Dr. Robel has conducted extensive research on bioenergetics of Northern Bobwhites and numerous songbirds, parasites of gamebirds and furbearers, and food habitats of White-tailed Deer in Kansas. He was involved

in a multi-year National Institute of Health evaluation of the relationship between herbicide exposure and the incidence of certain cancers in the agricultural sector of Kansas. Results of his research efforts, and those of his students, have resulted in over 250 peer-reviewed publications in professional journals.

Dr. Robel is a member of the Board of Trustees and the Executive Committee of Audubon of Kansas.

As a member of his first class of wildlife biology students, it is an honor to be one of many whose career path was so richly benefitted by his guidance and leadership.

– Ron Klataske

*Portions of this article were adapted from a feature entitled "Robel's Research Realizations" in The BULLETIN, Spring 2012, printed by the KSU Division of Biology.*

