

The Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary – A Sanctuary for Wildlife & People!

An aerial view of the northern part of the Niobrara Sanctuary including a portion of the spectacularly scenic river, bottomland forests and wet meadows, woodlands extending up the hillsides, Rock Creek canyon, and upland prairies to the south.

Creation of a Wildlife Sanctuary: 1980 to 2011

Article and Photos by **Ron Klataske**

***I** t was a surprising development!*

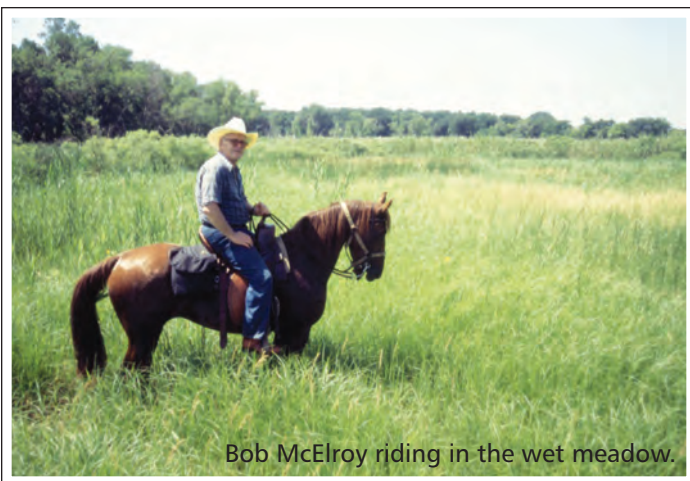
I would never have wagered a bet that in 2002 the Audubon of Kansas Board of Trustees would accept stewardship responsibility for nearly 5,000 acres to create a wildlife sanctuary in northern Nebraska. When one reflects on the AOK mission and the conservation initiatives under the overarching banner of “*Taking Pride in Prairies*,” however it is in alignment with the stars in this conservation universe.

It is a spectacular property. The upland prairies are part of the Nebraska Sandhills, streams in two deep canyons bring a constant flow of clear spring water, and the northern edge of the property includes several miles of the Niobrara River – a nationally designated scenic river. Trustees immediately took pride in stewardship of what soon became the **Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary**. It is now a prominent part of AOK’s Great Plains Conservation Partnership Program – a partnership extending beyond state boundaries, dedicated to collaboration, and leadership designed to advance conservation of grassland birds, other wildlife and native prairie landscapes.



Sharp-tailed Grouse

Beginning in the spring of 1980, I had the honor of working closely with landowners along a 76-mile stretch of Niobrara to advance a proposal to win Congressional designation of the Niobrara River as a national scenic river. As West-Central Regional Vice President of the National Audubon Society, I developed the plan to seek national scenic river designation for this most spectacular stretch of the Niobrara as an alternative to a



Bob McElroy riding in the wet meadow.

US Bureau of Reclamation proposal to dam and divert the river. The massive \$205-million O'Neill Reclamation Project/Norden Dam would have taken 30,000 acres of private land, inundated 19 miles and ruined the river downstream with drastically reduced flows.

I first visited Harold Hutton one evening in October 1980. My good friend from Kansas, Bill Browning, was with me on that trip. We brought two of my horses and rode the remarkable bluffs bordering the river valley – with the most memorable experiences riding in view of herds of Bison in the Fort Niobrara Refuge wilderness area, and through Ponderosa Pine breaks with rancher Franklin Eglehoff. We camped on his land next to the river and were up before sunrise to travel fifty miles downstream to join Tony Arrowsmith first and then meet with other landowners. The Arrowsmith family owns land directly across the river from the Hutton property and have kept that remarkably scenic vista pristine and intact.

From that first meeting, Harold worked with me, and later others in pursuit of an entity that would accept the responsibility of managing this property in perpetuity. Over a period of two decades Harold detailed his vision for the land; his preference was for it to become an “Audubon sanctuary;” and, he expressed his management philosophies on many occasions. Several organizations, and two entities of Nebraska state government, were considered. Most importantly, Harold did not want any of the land to be sold in the future, and most organizations and agencies will not accept land with strings attached.

Following Harold's death, Lucille requested that Audubon of Kansas consider the responsibility of accepting title and stewardship responsibility, subject to life-estate privileges for Lucille. AOK's Board of Trustees including members from Nebraska, as well as Kansas and Missouri, *accepted*. Dudley Alexander, the former trust officer for Boatman's National Bank of Kansas City, who made possible the purchase

of the 10,894-acre Z-Bar Ranch to become the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, was a leading advocate for board acceptance of the Hutton property.

Within a month, Bob McElroy trailered two Tennessee Walkers to the property and we rode and photographed the prairies, river breaks and wet meadows – where numerous Bobolinks rose to declare their nesting territories. As a reflection of Bob's keen interest in the sanctuary, Strider, his beautiful black gelding, has been back on the sanctuary every year since 2002!

**Fulfillment of our obligations
has been a labor of love for the land
and for Harold's vision.**

However, it hasn't been easy at times. AOK had to take our cause to a district court trial in 2008 to establish our authority to terminate heavy grazing and establish new grazing leases and stocking rates designed to improve rangeland conditions and provide near-optimal nesting and brood habitat for prairie grouse and other grassland birds. Prior to our initiative to make changes, the vegetation was clipped so short in all grazed grassland units that it was difficult to hide a golf ball the following spring at the beginning of the nesting season.

With the leadership of Charles Wright, a distinguished Nebraska attorney who served as a Trustee and that of Dick Seaton, also an attorney, the litigation was favorably resolved. As part of our planning, Dr. Robert J. Robel, nationally recognized as an authority on grassland grouse, prepared a comprehensive report on habitat and management “Needs to Enhance Prairie Grouse Populations...” and it is one of our guiding lights for management. A comprehensive vegetative survey, with management recommendations, was also prepared by Dr. James Stubbendieck, Professor of Grassland Ecology at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

Our stewardship plan is to incorporate biodiversity as a measure of rangeland health. Grasslands throughout the world serve as both rangeland for livestock and as reservoirs of biodiversity. Greater plant diversity has been shown to positively impact total above-ground productivity and the stability of production in grasslands. Despite its importance, biodiversity is not included in many standard systems for assessing rangeland health.

As prescribed, all of the “pastures” were rested in 2009 and a dramatic response occurred by the summer of 2010. One of the rewards was an opportunity to see broods of Sharp-tailed Grouse along the roads. Although a vast exaggeration, an operator of a spray rig treating a field in preparation for planting of a wildlife food plot said he must have flushed “two thousand grouse!”



Long-billed Curlews

Sufficient height and density of vegetation is critical for nesting prairie grouse. Brood habitat must also provide chicks an invertebrate food source and concealment from predators, plus loafing areas and be generally open enough to permit travel. The best brood habitats are heterogeneous grasslands consisting of grasses and forbs with vegetation height from 8 to 20 inches. Forbs consisting of 25 to 60 percent of the canopy cover provide a significant share of the invertebrate food sources needed, along with seeds, fruits and greens at other times of the year. A few low-profile shrubs help to provide shade and year-round protection from the elements. On a landscape scale, sustainable prairie grouse populations require expansive areas of relatively treeless prairie with little human disturbance.

Neighbors have commented that they are seeing more birds now. To our delight it seems at times that Western Meadowlarks are everywhere, as they should be in these prairies. They are joined by an abundance of Grasshopper Sparrows, Lark Sparrows and Upland Sandpipers during the nesting season. The traffic stopper along the unimproved road within the sanctuary, however, has been the annual presence of a breeding pair of Long-billed Curlews. Three adults watched over two fluffy young along that road during a very special field trip in June 2010.

Bobolinks nest in the wet meadows along the river. Although the meadows are utilized for hay harvesting, we do not allow any mowing prior to the middle of July. Bobolinks arrive in mid May and need a couple months to nest and raise young to fledging. Tragically for this species, many hay fields all across the Midwest are cut in June while the young are still in the nests; territorial males can be seen singing on perches within fields as noisy swathers cut and windrow the vegetation.

In the summer of 2009 we left a portion of the wet meadow unmowed as part of a plant study conducted by UNL graduate students Barbara Kagima and Jonathan Soper. One of their discoveries was an abundance of Nodding Lady's Tresses Orchid (*Spiranthes cernua*), a late-summer orchid. These meadows have a rich diversity of native plants, but controlling smooth brome and other non-native invasive grasses is a challenge. We are working to eliminate brome grass within the sanctuary.

Deciduous woodlands include stands of stately Cottonwoods along the river, and mixed forests including Bur Oak, Basswood and Ironwood extend along the north-facing slopes and into the



Western Meadowlark

canyons of Rock Creek and Willow Creek. These habitats host nesting Ovenbirds, American Redstarts, Black and White Warblers and attract many other neotropical migrants. Wild Turkeys, originally of the Merriman race with Eastern birds downstream, strut and display in the wet meadows all along the edge of the woodlands.

Wetlands provide another dimension to the bottomlands near the river, where Canada Geese and Yellowthroats add their voices to the chorus of Leopard Frogs. John Schukman of Leavenworth Kansas coordinates the Breeding Bird Surveys. He added a Virginia Rail to the list last June, in the wetland just east of the homestead house where Harold Hutton lived as a child. Bald Eagles are present in every month and

are most often seen along the river's edge. Whooping Cranes and Sandhill Cranes sometimes make migratory stops here, especially in October, where they roost and loaf on sandbars in shallow reaches of the braided Niobrara, similar to the Platte River. The US Fish and Wildlife Service proposed designation of this stretch of river as Critical Habitat for Whooping Cranes in the 1970s, but that official recognition was withdrawn because of the political conflict caused by the proposed Norden Dam.

To our shared delight, John Sanford, a volunteer working at the sanctuary, watched three River Otters playing in a backwater along the river's edge. Beavers are doing well, building new lodges and any dams will provide improved conditions for Topminnows and Wood Ducks. Hopefully the Beavers will contribute to control the trees encroaching within



the river and on the upper reaches of Willow Creek – where we want to restore the “open canopy” character of the prairie stream. Porcupines have often been observed browsing on clover in the meadows as if they were Woodchucks, or clinging high up to the trunks of trees like sloths. White-tailed Jackrabbits occur in the upland prairies, and Ord's Kangaroo Rats are common in the sandy terrain and can be seen darting across the grassed-over road during nighttime drives.

Bobcats and Badgers along with more abundant Coyotes are the principle mammalian predators, but on the night of May 8, 2010 Lana Micheel's trail camera captured a remarkable photograph of a Mountain Lion on her land just a half mile from the sanctuary. Lana grew up on a family farm nearby and is the sanctuary's part time On-site Coordinator. The following

November, with two guests from Alabama I viewed a clear set of tracks crossing a sand draw. The presence of this magnificent native cat is welcome, on the sanctuary at least, as a part of the region's wildlife heritage. The area has an abundance of wild prey, and we haven't heard of any livestock losses. A network of trail cameras on the sanctuary indicated a dramatic reduction in the Raccoon population coinciding with the cat's presence. From the standpoint of ground nesting birds, that could be a highly desirable development – potentially a benefit of a Mountain Lion's presence for even six months. Raccoons are notorious nest predators.

An abundance of White-tailed Deer and a few Mule Deer occur on the sanctuary. Recently Elk have occupied the hills just north of the river and the bugling of bull Elk could be heard across the valley in the evening last October. With most Great Plains landscapes converted to intensive agricultural development, this place is increasingly blessed with the presence of wildlife reminiscent of the last enclaves of wilderness abundance highlighted by artist/naturalist writer Ernest Thompson Seton.

A man who experienced nature in the late 19th Century, Seton was also a naturalist who was ahead of his time, particularly in regard to his views about predators and conservation. "Of all the beasts that roam America's woods, the Cougar is the...hunter without peer," he wrote. "Built with the maximum power, speed and endurance that can be jammed into his 150 pounds of lithe and splendid beasthood, his daily routine is a march of stirring athletic events that not another creature –

Bush Morning-glory



in America, at least – can hope to equal." He was deeply concerned for the future of the North American prairie, and was an advocate for parks for endangered animals

Our management is designed to restore and preserve, to the extent feasible, the natural character and "wilderness values" of this modest piece of land, while also including a compatible – even complementary – level of livestock grazing, along with nature-based and rural-life experiential visitation. Great Plains grasslands evolved with the ecological influence of grazing, and modest grazing often has positive effects on species richness and diversity. Most importantly because we want wildlife management to be incorporated with the most positive attributes of traditional ranching, we do not

currently plan to shift to Bison. Grazing fees help us pay the property taxes, a \$28,000 contribution we elected to maintain but could have avoided. Everyone depends on local and state governmental services.

With considerable Audubon investment and as part of the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), a pipeline watering system and fifteen livestock tanks were installed throughout the sanctuary in 2011. The livestock watering system, combined with installation of some new sections of fence to limit livestock access, is designed to keep cattle out of the two major spring-fed streams – thereby improving water quality, aquatic and riparian habitat. In 2008 fisheries biologist Larry Pape and range ecologist Dr. Pat Reece conducted a thorough survey of the fish species present and discovered a resource worthy of special management strategies. Major portions of the Willow Creek canyon, including the steep sandy walls will seldom be subject to grazing. The new fences are "wildlife friendly," with the bottom of three strands of wire barbless and elevated 16 inches off the ground. Grazing distribution within grassland units will be more easily managed.

Soon after the livestock tanks were installed, I anticipated that they would become death traps, and we discovered that an excessive number of birds and other small animals had perished. Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Soil Conservationist LaCaylla Ritter found designs for wildlife escape ladders. They are used in Montana to benefit Greater Sage Grouse, and also in western Nebraska by the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory. Lana Micheel had ladders made at a cost of less than \$20 each by a local handyman, and she installed them.



Lana Micheel installing wildlife escape ladders.



A fire management *Dream Team* in Bassett.

It is conceivable that tens of thousands of birds are drowned in tanks in the Great Plains each year. With that experience in mind, I took this concern to the U.S.D.A. State Technical Committee meeting in Kansas – and NRCS adopted the practice of requiring wildlife escape ramps in tanks that are cost-shared with EQIP funding.

The most demanding management challenge has been control of invasive cedar trees on grasslands, hillsides and within the deciduous woodlands. With an absence of fire, Red Cedars began taking over parts of this landscape forty years ago and the rate has accelerated. With cost-share assistance from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, cedars have been cleared from 2,500 acres of grassland. And, in March of 2011 a controlled burn was used to send countless small cedars to a fiery death and reinvigorate the upland prairies and wet meadows on 2,000 acres of the sanctuary.

In a landscape where prescribed burning is not yet a common management practice, this burn was made possible by the involvement of the Fire Learning Network, a fire management and training certification program supported by federal agencies and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Jeremy D. Bailey brought together thirty-five participants and all the needed equipment. Thirteen fire ecology students from the University of Idaho drove seventeen hours each way to participate in this and other planned fires during their spring break. Audubon of Kansas sponsored their lodging at the Bassett Lodge and we coordinated with other community leaders to have the entire crew stay in town to provide added economic benefits to the city. Everything worked out beautifully, but drier surface and warmer weather conditions would have resulted in torching thousands more larger cedars.

Preparation for the prescribed burn was demanding and required significant investment. Nebraska's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) prescribed-burn specialist Doug

Whisenhunt, of North Platte, developed the burn plan. Safety considerations were highest priority. It included clearing a 200-foot-wide fireguards through dense stands of 20-foot-high cedars on steep slopes and down through the deep Rock Creek canyon, and mowing of several miles of fire lines in the more open country.

A flock of Mountain Bluebirds foraged among the shrubs in the blackened landscape the morning after the fire. Then, a carpet of vibrant green covered these hills by June. The benefits became apparent. It was the first controlled burn of this size in the county, but hopefully not the last.



Our next major stewardship joint venture, involving the expertise of the Nebraska Forest Service and NRCS, is restoration of native deciduous forests by thinning and removal of cedars. Many of the cedars will be used for posts and other products, thereby reducing our costs. Red cedar posts work reasonably well in the Sandhills where they do not rot rapidly in the ground as in heavy moist soils. One of our neighbors, Ward Harlan has made hundreds of cedar posts from selective removal of cedars within just three or four acres on the sanctuary. We have reserved some of the larger poles for construction of a horse corral. Understory cedar thickets that are nearly impermeable now will become open woodlands – where antlered Elk can run, if they cross the river and utilize this welcoming mosaic of woodlands and meadows.

Concurrently, we are creating several miles of trails for visitors through the same intriguing terrain and to places overlooking the Niobrara River valley. The first trail will be named in honor of **Wesley Sandall**, a Bassett rancher and conservationist who was instrumental in leading the 1975-1985 statewide coalition of rural and urban residents who successfully opposed construction of the dam and diversion project that would have destroyed the Niobrara River as they knew and loved it.

Additional sections of trails will enter canyons and cross expanses of prairie – while avoiding by time or space critical nesting habitat used by prairie grouse and other sensitive species. Volunteers are needed to help with establishment, improvement and maintenance of the trails. The trails will be available on various occasions for hiking and horseback riding – and on an ongoing basis for guests staying at the Hutton guesthouse and Lazy Easy Ranch guesthouse.

It is hoped that donations and lodging revenue from guests will substantially help to provide funding for sanctuary stewardship and management enhancements.

During USDA's 39th Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) enrollment in 2010, we enrolled 43 acres of previous cultivated cropland in CRP. All of it was planted into a mixture of native grasses and forbs, but 17 of the acres were planted to a diverse array of wildflowers for the specific purpose of it serving as "Pollinator Habitat." Native bees, butterflies and other pollinators will be the beneficiaries of this demonstration project. The need for pollinator habitat was identified and incorporated in the 2008 Farm Bill. The native grasses and forbs will provide year-round habitat for a variety of birds and other wildlife, and they are made even more attractive by several wild plum thickets in the fencerows surrounding the field. Four Bobwhite Quail, two pairs still together in early May, maintained their fidelity to the field as every inch was covered by the no-till drill. This 52-acre complex has been designated as the **Charles Wright Wildlife Habitat Area** in honor of Charlie's work on behalf of the sanctuary, and his earlier years of leadership on the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

One hundred and fifty acres of similar habitat were planted in 2006 within the 212-acre unit designated as the **Harold "Andy" W. Andersen Wildlife Habitat Area**. The wildflowers, legumes

and native grasses have been spectacular. This habitat has become the epicenter for Dickcissels during the nesting season, and it has been one of the areas used most consistently by Mule Deer. With a journalism career that started with a paper route, Andy became publisher of the Omaha World Herald. He also served as chairman of the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation and has been a statewide leader in many capacities – most notably in our view as a conservationist.

The Andersen unit also includes a 20-acre wildlife food plot planted to perennial legumes, two blocks of trees reminiscent of early settlements, a windmill with water tanks which we keep filled, and a 20-acre site planned for reestablishment of a Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony.

As in so many places, prairie dogs have been extirpated from Rock County in recent decades and some of the wildlife species associated with and/or dependent on the habitat or prey base they provide have disappeared as residents as well.

The Black-tailed Prairie Dog is a keystone species. Studies have demonstrated that a prairie-dog colony can double plant species richness and diversity in mixed grass prairie. The presence of prairie dogs and the habitat alterations (burrows and "grazing lawns") they create attract and benefit an array of other wildlife species. The planned colony will add to the biodiversity of the sanctuary.

Our plan is to transfer 100 prairie dogs from the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge east of Valentine. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has been a conservation partner in this proposal, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has provided a "Scientific and Educational Permit" which will allow Audubon to establish the new colony. From the beginning we planned to build a "prairie-dog fence" similar to the one we constructed in western Kansas. It discourages dispersal from the site used for the experimental reintroduction of Black-footed Ferrets, and the fence is an appropriate condition of the permit. Two years ago we established a vegetative buffer consisting of tall grasses and forbs, including Maximilian Sunflower, and it



Moving cattle on the sanctuary.

will frame the fence to further discourage dispersal. Our objective is to completely confine the prairie dogs to this field for management, monitoring and observation. It will also provide an opportunity to study and further determine the effectiveness of these two measures for use by others in other locations.

Our proposal to re-establish a prairie-dog colony on the property, even in the middle of 5,000 acres largely surrounded by a wide river and deep wooded canyons, drew the ire of a number of individuals who want to exterminate them in the adjacent county north of the river and keep them extinct in the Rock County landscape. Tragically, as tens of thousands of acres of native rangeland in the area are converted to cultivation in response to the high price of corn, boosted by ethanol production, the abundance of many more prairie species is being dramatically diminished in this general area. The loss of ranchlands and conversion of the culture of ranching to “corporate-scale” cultivation demanding high energy and water inputs and subsidies are a sad reflection of national policies.



Wildlife conservationists in Nebraska are enthusiastic that we are providing leadership for a besieged species important for conservation of other imperiled wildlife. The project is another good test of commitment! Audubon of Kansas is willing to maintain a steadfast commitment to our mission in the central Great Plains and prairies, and to our stewardship responsibilities for any land we accept as part of AOK’s sanctuary system.

If successful, the colony will likely be used by Burrowing Owls for nesting within a year or two. And, if the prairie dogs begin to multiply they will seasonally attract Ferruginous Hawks and Golden Eagles – two raptors that often specialize on these once-abundant and widespread sources of prey. Ornate Box Turtles and a variety of amphibians and reptiles routinely use prairie-dog burrows for shelter and hibernation sites.

In addition to restoring a small piece of this element of the prairie ecosystem, an observation blind is being built to provide opportunities for wildlife viewing and photography at the colony.

The colony can also be viewed in a historic framework! **Lewis and Clark** described their first “prairie-dog-town” experience fifty miles northeast of this site in September 1804. There on a high knob, west of the Missouri River and north of the Niobrara River, they captured their first prairie dog. A live prairie dog was among the specimens sent to President Thomas Jefferson from Fort Mandan in 1805.

We cannot hope to maintain all of the landscapes and wildlife splendor experienced by earlier explorers, the Native Americans before or even the first settlers to the interior of the continent. But we can pattern our actions after the advice of Aldo Leopold. Leopold wrote that *“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”*

Sharing the Sanctuary

www.niobrarasanctuary.org

The Niobrara Sanctuary is as much for people as it is for wildlife. It is a place where we hope to promote the enjoyment, and understanding of restored and protected natural ecosystems.

In addition to nearly complete remodeling and upgrading of the Hutton House to improve energy efficiency and make the residential structure more accommodating for guests, we have redesigned a large section semi-separate from the house to serve as an “Interpretive and Education Gallery.” Examples of Lucille Hutton’s paintings and other extraordinary artistic creations will be displayed, along with arrowheads, early settlement artifacts and fossils collected by Harold. Range ecologist Dr. Pat Reece found a stone axe on the slopes of Willow Creek canyon and saved it for the planned displays – displays that will, in part, give recognition to the legacy of Native Americans in the Plains. The axe was likely used by Paleo Indians, the first Americans, to cut trees and break large mammal bones.

It is only natural that we will strive to feature a range of natural history and cultural subjects reflective of life in this area. Harold was well known as a historian, having written several books on local individuals and about incidents during the frontier era, such as “Doc Middleton, Life and Legends of the Notorious Plains Outlaw,” and “Vigilante Days: Frontier Justice Along the Niobrara.” His last book, “The River That Runs,” features the Niobrara River Valley.

Harold was generous with planned gifts to conservation organizations and local community entities that provide health care and other services. While working with Harold in the 1980s he granted a substantial stock investment to the National Audubon Society. After the property was gifted to Audubon of Kansas, Lucille designated that it must be used to benefit the sanctuary. In the spirit of that directive, the National Audubon Society is financially partnering with Audubon of Kansas to make the structural and furnishing improvements to the Hutton Guesthouse and visitor center, and build wildlife viewing blinds.