

# Jackie Augustine to be AOK's Executive Director

in January 2021

The Editor Interviews Jackie about her background and plans



*Jackie Augustine holding a lesser prairie-chicken in western Kansas (Gove County). In order for Jackie and her students to identify individuals and record their behavior, each bird is given a unique combination of colored leg bands and tail colors.*

Audubon of Kansas is pleased to announce that Dr. Jackie Augustine has accepted the Executive Director position. She will start in January 2021. We asked her the following questions to introduce herself.

**You're coming to us from Western Ohio. Tell us about your previous connections with Kansas and the Great Plains, and what drew you back here.**

The road between my hometown, Two Rivers, Wisconsin, and Kansas was a winding path, but the journey was guided by a passion for wildlife in general, and birds specifically.

I grew up about 5 blocks from Lake Michigan. My family went camping 'up north' often, and I was an active Girl Scout. When I would go to my grandma's house, I would read *The Readers Digest Guide to North American Wildlife*. My parents like to tell the story of when I was 8 years old, my grandma saw an unusual bird at her bird feeder. Mom called me over, "Look at this cool bird, Jackie!" I ran over and stated, "That's a Yellow-headed Blackbird." Then, I took that *Readers Digest Guide* off the shelf, and opened it to the correct page and showed them. When I was 8, I didn't seek birds or anything out, but appreciated what came to me. I also had a pet Monarch for a while. Grandma ran it over with the mower, and I kept it in an ice cream pail, fed it flowers, and 'exercised' it. But I didn't really get hooked on birds and birding until college.

Being from a small town, I looked for a college in a small town that offered a zoology degree. I somehow found Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Once there, I became an active member of the Student Naturalist Club, volunteering every weekend at a local nature center. Members of the club told me to take ornithology my sophomore year with Doc Osborne before he retired, so I did. I remember one morning in spring, and every place we stopped, we heard a Song Sparrow. With its challenging song to learn and bold barring across its belly, I thought it was impressive (for a sparrow). Imagine my surprise when I returned to my dorm later that day, and spotted a Song Sparrow singing directly outside my dorm window. As I watched students walk past that bird, not noticing its presence, I knew that I was hooked. I wondered

how many other species were out there if I only learned how to look.

I spent the next 6-8 years adding birds to my life list. I received my Masters at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee studying how food abundance and individual condition affects breeding in Tree Swallows. The field station was a great place to bird because it had old growth forest, a bog, prairie, and lake habitats within a short distance. I could count 100 species in a day. I then moved to Kansas to obtain my PhD in Biology from Kansas State. Under Brett Sandercock's supervision, I studied the breeding behavior of the Greater Prairie-Chicken. On weekends, I would go birding around Tuttle Lake near Manhattan, or spend a day at Cheyenne Bottoms or Quivira studying shorebirds. During this time, I fell in love with grasslands, Kansas, and a man from Salina.

I am excited to return to Kansas because when I am in a prairie, I feel more connected to nature than anywhere else. Kansas has so much wildlife to inspire us: male Prairie-Chickens dancing to catch a female's eye, cranes migrating overhead by the hundreds, flocks of Swainson's Hawks swirling around the smoke of a dying prairie fire looking for an easy meal, the first call in the spring of an Upland Sandpiper or Common Poorwill, and the list goes on . . . Besides wildlife, the picturesque sunsets, the dark sky, and the waves of blowing native grass are as calming as a spring thunderstorm is thrilling.



*A male Lesser Prairie-Chicken courts a robotic female. The carpeting prevents the robot from getting caught in the grass.*

**Tell us a bit about your work with Prairie-Chickens. What were the issues your research addressed, what are the challenges faced by the species, and what are some interesting things you learned?**



*Jackie's decoy Prairie-Chickens—four-wheeled Galliforms*

Most prairie-chicken researchers are focused on answering questions related to the survival of the species. They ask questions like, “What types of habitats are prairie-chickens using for nesting and brood rearing? Which cattle stocking rate enhances prairie-chicken survival?” The questions I ask are more basic and connected with gaining intrinsic knowledge about the species. My research can be summarized with the question, “What makes some male prairie-chickens sexy and others unsuccessful at attracting a female?” For my doctorate, I focused only on Greater Prairie-Chickens and discovered that male mating success increased with more testosterone and more intense display and aggressive behavior. After getting my doctorate, I had a temporary position in southwestern Minnesota where I studied hybrids between Greater Prairie-Chickens and Sharp-tailed Grouse. After I landed the position at Ohio State Lima in 2009, I tried to just study Greater Prairie-Chickens again, but I was hooked on hybrid zones. I have spent the last 6 years in western Kansas studying the Greater/Lesser Prairie-Chicken hybrid zone in Gove and Trego Counties. I most recently studied whether males can tell the difference between females of their own species and the other species (and if they care). I utilized robotic taxidermy mounts on a custom 4-wheel drive chassis to study this question. I have had graduate students that studied 1) whether Greater Prairie-Chickens can identify individuals by their booms, 2) how color of the fleshy parts of male prairie chickens (air sac in the throat and comb above the eye) influences male sexiness, and 3) how they can stomp their feet so fast during the beginning of their display.

Although I am organically attracted to prairie-chicken behavior, I know that both greater and lesser prairie-chicken numbers are declining throughout much of their range. In the last 150 years, both species have lost vast portions of their ranges when prairie was converted to cropland, and the fragmentation of the remaining habitat with roads and power

infrastructure. Currently, woody encroachment, annual burning with intensive early season stocking, industrial power infrastructure, and climate change are huge threats to their future persistence. AOK gives me an avenue to do something to save these fascinating birds that have given me so much enjoyment over the years.

**You have had considerable success energizing the local or regional Audubon groups in Ohio during your time there. Can you tell us a little about the situation on the ground as you found it, what you did to organize and motivate those groups, and what innovations you see as transplantable to Kansas and AOK as a coordinating center and facilitator for our various regional Audubon groups?**

Ohio is where I became passionate about National Audubon Society’s mission to “protect birds and the places they need... using science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation.” I first became involved in my local chapter, Tri-Moraine Audubon Society. I have coordinated speakers to attend our monthly meetings (September-May) for nearly 10 years. Additionally, I have served on the Board, helped develop their strategic plan, led the revision of the constitution, and coordinated other events. I am most proud of my work with South Science Technology Magnet, a public school in Lima, OH. This school serves a diverse student body that is 60% minority, mostly black. I worked with teachers to develop a curriculum where students learned which native plants are hosts to particular native caterpillars. I applied for and was awarded a Burke grant from National Audubon to fund the planting of a native plant school garden. Students planted the native host plants that they studied.

My work with the local chapter led to my involvement with the statewide Council of Ohio Audubon Chapters (COAC). This organization had been inactive, and one of Ohio’s chapters was trying to reinvigorate it. They organized several meetings with all the chapters in the state, and hired an administrator to help with its organization. After being involved a short time, I could see that the organization was struggling, spending money at an alarming rate, and lacked leadership. I volunteered to join the Board, and recruited others to serve with me. The Board appointed me President. In a year, I was able to pass a balanced budget, draft bylaws and get them approved, hold in-person and virtual meetings, draft volunteers to do the duties of the administrator, and garner chapter support. I am proud that 10 chapters are actively involved and have supported COAC financially (2 of those at the \$500 sustaining membership level).

One of the best things that COAC has done was to have monthly membership calls. These calls connect chapters



throughout the state, provide a venue for celebrating successes to inspire other chapters, and act as a sounding board to discuss organizational matters (how to re-write bylaws, insurance suggestions, etc.). This very simple idea would help support those members in struggling chapters and help successful chapters increase their impact.

As President of COAC, I am also a resource for chapters. I can supply a presentation, connect chapters with presenters on specific topics, refer chapters to resources from National Audubon, or provide advocacy or strategic planning training. I hope to continue to be a resource for Audubon chapters in Kansas.

**You gave up a tenured academic position to accept the Executive Directorship of AOK. That is a big step. What drew you to AOK? How do you see this executive leadership position as giving you more scope to use your experience, talents, and skills?**

While an Associate Professor at Ohio State Lima, I was given several administrative positions including Biology Program Coordinator, and Honors Program Coordinator. I was also on many committees, such as the Executive Committee, Strategic Planning, hiring committees, and Budget and Space. All of these experiences helped me value and develop skills in leading by consensus, strategic thinking, and financial planning.

AOK is currently at a critical juncture. We must continue Ron Klataske's accomplishments over the last 21 years protecting the wildlife of Kansas through environmental advocacy and on-the-ground habitat conservation. At the same time, AOK must also reach out and develop new leaders to take on current and future environmental challenges. I know I have the skills to lead AOK through this transition.

**Following up on the last part of that last question, you are an experienced field biologist, teacher, and researcher; you impressed the hiring committee of AOK as an excellent communicator, a very organized, detail-oriented person, with great drive and enthusiasm. What do you see as your particular strengths for moving AOK ahead into the twenty-first century?**

My first strength is my ability to connect people – whether that be connecting a chapter to a resource they need, or building a team to undertake a task. I am great at organizing teams, giving explicit goals, keeping people on track, and celebrating their successes.

Another strength of mine is focusing on the big picture and small steps at the same time. An example of this is my perspective on successful advocacy. When I am Executive Director, I will be pushing politicians and government agencies

to do more for wildlife. I know real, substantive change is difficult and takes time and persistence. Therefore, I will break up that large change into smaller goals. I will use the small goals to build support to pressure for larger changes.

**Finally, what is your assessment at this point of the strengths of AOK as an organization? What are we doing well? What could we be doing better?**

The most obvious strengths of AOK are the dedication of its Board of Directors and the diverse skills and perspectives they bring to the organization. I have been overwhelmed with the offers of support both professionally and personally. I know that I have the resources to be successful. Another strength of AOK is its recognition throughout the state for being an unwavering advocate for wildlife.

With new leadership comes a new perspective. I will push the organization to think about why AOK does what it is doing. What are we hoping to accomplish with sanctuaries? With the Celebration of Cranes? With advocacy? With a large Board? Are we accomplishing those goals? What can we change to make more of an impact?

**What activities or cooperative relationships should AOK be engaged in that have not yet been sufficiently realized, and how would you go about initiating them?**

The most obvious cooperative relationship is between AOK and the Audubon chapters in Kansas. AOK was founded with the support of chapters, but the involvement of chapters in AOK matters has waxed and waned through the years. I would like to see a stronger connection between AOK and chapters. Additionally, I would like to explore what chapters would like from AOK so that the relationship is truly cooperative and not unidirectional.



*Jackie, holding a chicken and measuring its eye.*



*Moon over the prairie and Jackie's blind for her study of Prairie-Chickens in Gove and Trego Counties*

Although AOK is independent of National Audubon, there are resources that National offers to support chapters including advocacy training, smaller and larger grants, and programming. AOK could be a way that chapters connect with National and that National connects with chapters. I have been successful in fostering such a relationship through COAC in Ohio, another state nonprofit that is not officially connected to National. I will use my contacts within the Great Lakes wing of National Audubon to connect with their counterparts in the Central Flyway region.

Finally, conservation must happen on private lands if we are to conserve the wildlife that lives in or migrates through the Great Plains. There are federal programs and other nonprofits trying to connect with wildlife-friendly landowners. AOK could collaborate on those efforts, which would perhaps lead to the expansion of our network of members throughout the state.

**In the light of that last question, your application emphasized the importance of strategic planning. At this point in your involvement with the organization, what do you envision as top priorities for AOK in the next year, the next five years, the next decade? Where should the organization be at each of those milestones?**

I am currently working with the Strategic Planning Committee to develop a strategic plan for the next 3-5 years. We already completed a brainstorming step where we gathered feedback from the Board and environmental leaders in the state. We have organized those ideas into broad categories for

discussion. In the next year, we want to 1) continue building upon AOK's past successes in advocacy and sanctuary management, 2) examine administrative procedures to determine if the organization could function more effectively, and 3) build relationships with Audubon chapters, individuals, and organizations throughout the state.

In the next five years, I want to expand in the number of Audubon chapters. This may include resurrecting inactive chapters, creating new chapters in underserved areas, or starting student chapters. Additionally, I want to expand our environmental education and outreach program with a focus on statewide initiatives, fund-raisers, or those associated with AOK's sanctuaries. Finally, I would like a robust sanctuaries program that includes adaptive management for targeted species or habitats, transparent procedures for acquiring new properties, and endowments that can support the management of the properties.

10 years from now? To quote Marcus Aurelius from my favorite movie (*Gladiator* 2000): "There was once a dream that was Rome, you could only whisper it. Anything more than a whisper and it would vanish... it was so fragile." I'm not building Rome, but I do have big dreams that I am fearful to even whisper yet, much less put them in print! Ask me about them when we meet. I will make myself available to anyone who would like to meet starting in January.