

All photos by Ron Klataske

The late Larry Haverfield releases a Black-footed Ferret (BFF) on the Haverfield/Barnhardt/Blank ranch complex on December 18, 2008. It was among the first fourteen released there that day. Previously the last BFF documented in the state was in 1957.

Black-tailed Prairie Dog colonies are somewhat like wetlands in shortgrass prairies. They are magnets for a diverse array of other wildlife species. To restore critically endangered Black-footed Ferrets, we need to support and allow landowners to conserve prairie dogs on their land.

A VISION FOR SHORTGRASS PRAIRIE WILDLIFE

Significant strides in conservation of many, if not most, wildlife species take considerable time. The crucial step is often restoration and/or protection of vital habitat by landowners or land managers. Prospects for success are greatly enhanced when there is a high level of public support and supportive public policies. When public and private support are paired with heroic landowners and dedicated individuals, it seems a winning formula should fall into place. In one notable instance in Kansas, in the absence of supportive policies, it was more like climbing Mount Everest than “falling in place.”

For some wildlife species, even those in greatest need of conservation, success often requires decades or generations of determination by a few incredibly dedicated individuals. Fortunately, in many cases, other partners who share their values are similarly valiant in their involvement and support for our collective natural heritage.

As a principal participant and observer of wildlife conservation during the past 50 years, I have never experienced or seen anything more impressive than the resilience and dedication of landowners Larry Haverfield and Gordon Barnhardt. They were heroic by any measure. What made it even more impressive was the calm commitment they maintained while they encountered a continuous storm of opposition created by the Kansas Farm Bureau and Logan County Commissioners for a decade or more starting in 2005.

Conservation initiatives are much more challenging—and often blocked—when there are powerful special interest groups and individual opponents hell-bent on

blocking any meaningful conservation. Why? Well, in some cases when an organization is involved, it appears they are trying to create mythical dragons that they will slay. I recall an early Saturday morning Farm Bureau radio commentary that espoused the idea that the three greatest threats to farming were the Clean Water Act, federal wetlands protection and the Endangered Species Act. That propaganda hasn't changed during the intervening thirty years.

I grew up on a diversified farm in the 1950s and 60s, and continue to manage land designed for our cattle operation and wildlife. Hunting, fishing and the pleasure of seeing wildlife were important to many of my friends. I remember the first deer and, fifteen years later, the first Wild Turkey I saw in Kansas. Most people in rural communities were, and still are, interested in and supportive of wildlife.

But I also recall an individual referring to various kinds of wildlife with the question, "What good are they?" That philosophy has become a banner for a few organizations. They portray programs designed to recover threatened and endangered species—including Lesser Prairie Chickens and Black-footed Ferrets—as threats to farmers and ranchers. After hearing this philosophy over the radio, reading it in publications and having it presented at annual conventions, it isn't surprising that many rural landowners and tenants fear for impairment of their ongoing agricultural operations. As in political rhetoric, once claims are made it is difficult for the source to admit that they are exaggerations, and difficult for conservationists to reassure people that *the sky isn't falling* and protection of imperiled wildlife isn't going to result in imminent disaster.

Unfortunately, it now appears that the division is getting deeper and wider like a crevasse in an iceberg. The activism of some individuals, but more frequently organizations, against any meaningful protections or management opportunities for various wildlife species led a friend to describe them as "*extinctionists*." They are the opposite of "*conservationists*."

The divisiveness prevalent today on this and many issues wasn't so prevalent in 1973 when Congress passed the Endangered Species Act, or in 1975 when the Kansas Legislature enacted the Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Act. Maybe, just maybe, individuals who can find more common ground will emerge within

the leadership of their organizations. It is more reassuring, and the fruits are more lasting, if there is agreement, rather than one side prevailing over the other.

In 2011 I wrote an article for that year's edition of *Prairie Wings* entitled, **CONSERVATION of Prairie Dogs and Reintroduction of Black-footed Ferrets REQUIRES COURAGE**, with a subheading highlighting the fact that "*A Dedicated Attorney Along with Old and New Friends are also Helpful*." It detailed the struggle that was necessary to protect the complex of prairie dog colonies on the rangelands owned by Larry Haverfield, Gordon Barnhardt and Maxine Blank from poisoning by the Logan County Commission. These three landowners then hosted reintroduction of captive-reared Black-footed Ferrets to the shortgrass prairies of western Kansas. Their rangeland is the only location where these native mammals remain in the state, and one of the few private land reintroduction sites in the Great Plains and Intermountain West.



Following a late afternoon BFF release in October 2008, Larry Haverfield and Pete Gober, BFF project leader for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, relax in the Haverfield ranch house before a chili supper

If other landowners are receptive, it shouldn't remain the only site within our state's 52 million acres where prairie dog colonies can be managed—in cooperation with federal agencies—for conservation of those two species and many others that benefit from the unique habitat and prey created by the presence of prairie dogs. Participants should not be required to withstand strident opposition from the Kansas Farm Bureau, endure or initiate numerous court actions, and go it alone without any substantial partnership support from the state agency entrusted with responsibility for stewardship of our state's wildlife heritage.



BFF release - people & vehicles

That is why, on behalf of Audubon of Kansas, I have been advocating for several years within the Kansas State Technical Committee (STC)—which advises the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency on conservation programs authorized by the federal Farm Bill—that conservation and management to benefit imperiled species, including Black-footed Ferrets, should be authorized. Congress specified that 10 percent of the annual allocations for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) to states should be available for Wildlife Resource Concerns. If that Congressional directive were implemented in Kansas, approximately \$3 million of the \$33 million allocated for this state could have been devoted to wildlife habitat enhancement, establishment and management just during the 2020 fiscal year. In addition to developing new, and much needed, wildlife habitat initiatives of potential interest to landowners, we all need to help advertise the existing opportunities available through the EQIP.

During the past ten years, less than a third of the available funding for wildlife was utilized for that purpose in Kansas; the unused funds are then redirected to other EQIP practices—including taxpayer investments of hundreds of thousands of dollars in new or established cattle feedlots and hog facilities. Our advocacy for including practices that would allow landowners to apply for cost-share funding and collaborate with agencies to enhance management for the range of species dependent on or associated with prairie dog colonies was opposed by the KDWPT representative and The Nature Conser-

vancy representative on the STC wildlife subcommittee. In tandem with our promotion of conservation practices within EQIP to address the wide swath of imperiled species associated with prairie dog colonies, we have asked a succession of KDWPT secretaries to provide leadership and direct personnel to work with NRCS to develop the necessary standards and specifications and include appropriate EQIP practices. Prospects for more progressive and inclusive approaches to wildlife management were greatly enhanced when Governor Kelly appointed Brad Loveless to serve as KDWPT secretary. Likewise, most of the representatives of wildlife organizations on the Kansas Nongame Wildlife Advisory Council (KNWAC) are committed to conservation of imperiled species. The Kansas Farm Bureau and the Kansas Livestock Association represent agricultural interests. It is always hoped that they will recognize the importance of these conservation measures in preventing species from becoming threatened or endangered within the state, and subsequently making the challenge of recovery more difficult for all stakeholders.

During the fall 2020 meeting of the KNWAC I proposed the resolution provided below.

The resolution was shared online with members of the Council. The first response was from Kent Askren, Public Policy Director for the Kansas Farm Bureau. He suggested that the KFB cannot support the resolution, writing that they “cannot support the resolution to encourage development of EQIP practices that facilitate Black-tailed Prairie Dogs in Kansas. To reiterate, we



of commodities over all other values have altered entire landscapes. It is not unusual to travel the width of some counties and view only corn, soybeans and wheat fields.

An agrochemical company spokesperson told an audience at Kansas State University several years ago that we have to feed a world's population of 9 billion. I wonder if we can do that without destroying our natural world throughout much of the Great Plains and Midwest? In my view it is only natural that “working lands” should include places preserved for biodiversity. That is the best way to recover imperiled species and keep others from becoming endangered or extinct. Taxpayers expect their contributions to fund conservation, not just commodity production.

find this proposal out of tune with the general purposes envisioned for EQIP and the many great projects that these limited resources could be used for to improve our working lands.”

The KFB has been an adamant proponent of retaining the 1901 antiquated statutes that allow counties and township boards to force landowners to eradicate prairie dogs. The organization overlooks the basic foundation for EQIP, and overlooks much of the science related to wildlife management. The KFB represents agribusiness foremost and often overlooks the diverse interests of family farms and ranches. However, we have a responsibility to continue to try to work with them for the benefit of the natural world we share. As we go to press, most of the organizations represented on the KNWAC have not responded.

As a person with roots still planted deeply within my farm and ranch heritage, I am looking forward to a time when I can consider the Kansas Farm Bureau as a partner for conservation of biodiversity within our landscape and for wildlife on “working lands.” And, to a time when we can all consider the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism as equally committed to conservation of nongame, impaired and endangered species as they are to the protection and management of game species.

I am disappointed that many—in some places most—agricultural operations no longer leave a place for natural habitat for wild birds and beasts! Large operations, large equipment, federal crop subsidies and policies, and philosophies that promote maximum production

RESOLUTION

Whereas more than \$3 million was appropriated by Congress to fund Environmental Quality Incentive Program practices in Kansas during the current fiscal year, and Congress established in the 2018 Farm Bill that 10 percent should be available for Wildlife Resource Concern practices;

Whereas, as reported to the USDA State Technical Committee on September 16, less than 2.5 percent of the funds available were obligated for practices involving establishment, enhancement or management of wildlife habitat;

Whereas utilization of EQIP funding for Wildlife Resource Concerns has consistently been far below—usually near a third of—the funding available in Kansas, including during all years under the previous Farm Bill when 5 percent of appropriations for each state was earmarked by Congress for wildlife purposes;

Whereas KDWPT and NRCS officials have opportunities to work together, along with other stakeholders, to design and develop specifications and standards for wildlife establishment, enhancement and management practices for wildlife habitat;

Whereas numerous nongame and imperiled species of wildlife depend in various degrees on Black-tailed Prairie Dog colonies for habitat and as sources of prey;

Whereas properly managed Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony complexes are critical for recovery of federally endangered Black-footed Ferrets;

Whereas Black-tailed Prairie Dog colonies can serve other ecological and economic purposes, even if not large enough to support Black-footed Ferret populations; and

Whereas the State of Kansas adopted a Black-tailed Prairie Dog Management and Conservation Plan in 2002 with involvement of numerous conservation, agriculture, university and resource agency representatives and stakeholders;

Whereas the State of Colorado has implemented and successfully demonstrated over a period of years that, given an opportunity and the support of EQIP funding and interagency cooperation with management and control measures, many landowners are receptive to implementation of voluntary practices designed to maintain and/or enhance prairie dog colonies to benefit Black-footed Ferrets and other wildlife; and

Whereas the same source of funding is available for a similar program in Kansas which would benefit conservation of Golden Eagles, Ferruginous Hawks, Burrowing Owls, Swift Foxes, other birds and mammals, reptiles and amphibians; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, that the Kansas Nongame Wildlife Advisory Council urge the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism to collaborate with officials of the Natural Resources Conservation Service and other stakeholders to develop EQIP practices that will assist landowners with management and conservation of prairie dog colonies for the purpose of benefiting a diverse suite of dependent and/or associated wildlife species.

Recovery of Black-footed Ferrets and Conservation of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs are still dependent on a few other heroes and you.

What can you do to help? (1) Ask your state representative and senator to repeal the 120-year-old prairie dog eradication statutes (K.S.A. 80-1201 thru 80-1208). (2) Ask Brad Loveless to support EQIP practices that will benefit Black-footed Ferrets and other wildlife associated with prairie dog colonies by allowing landowners to work collaboratively with state and federal agencies, and express your appreciation. Brad's email address is: Brad.Loveless@ks.gov (3) Support organizations that express a willingness to work for conservation of imperiled species, and demand that they do.



Cattle truck bringing steers to the Haverfield working ranch.. Photo by Ron Klataske