

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY  
KANSAS  
2021 YEAR IN REVIEW



The Nature  
Conservancy



## FROM THE STATE DIRECTOR

This letter is a frank confession, an emotional plea, and an expression of deep gratitude. I remember first hearing a scientific presentation about climate change. It was 1989. Denver. I don't recall the venue, the speaker, or the audience's reaction. I do recall thinking *this sounds like a serious threat to the wildlife, the habitats, the outdoor traditions, and perhaps the family and way of life I love*. I felt betrayed and angry, as though someone should have known, should have told me a long time before then.

But I went home to Kansas, to the security of my family and a gentle and familiar landscape. Back to my prized conservation job. Shortly, I mostly forgot about climate change and probably even doubted it at first. Except that there were "global warming zealots" who wouldn't allow the issue to die. Over time, they grew more numerous and louder in the scientific community. These were people I knew and respected. They were hard-core scientists, natural-born skeptics, credible and honest people. And they were right. How could I have gone back to my beloved Kansas and forgotten what I'd first heard in 1989?

My dad told me once, "there's no time to fix a mistake like right now." The threat climate change poses to my way of life and the future for my children, to wild places and wild species, demanded action three decades ago. We've squandered many of those opportunities, but I'm confident that it's not too late. It might not be evident at first, but the contents of this report, and those from Nature Conservancy offices around the globe, reflect the urgency of climate change and the power we—all of us—have to change our course.

The Nature Conservancy continues to apply the best available science and trusting private landowner partnerships to conserve and restore essential landscapes and waters for nature and people. We also manage a network of Nature Conservancy-owned lands to protect critical natural assets, support research, and provide people access to wild places. These will always be priorities, and your support for this work is our most powerful hope and encouragement.

But we are also investing more in energy, agriculture, and even policy that will stem the spewing of carbon into the earth's ultra-thin atmosphere—which protects us in more ways than even I understand. I can promise that what you see from us in next year's annual report will reflect an even greater investment in this realm.

We—I—should have taken action to thwart climate change much sooner. The threat now bears down hard on us. But there's no time to fix a mistake like right now.

Yours in conservation,



Rob Manes  
Kansas Director



**194,235**

new total of acres protected  
by The Nature  
Conservancy in Kansas



**277**

hours spent scouting & treating  
invasive old world bluestems at  
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve



**4**

TNC preserves in Kansas  
with Motus receivers  
to track migrating animals

**3**

conservation easements  
along the Blue River  
transferred to TNC

**649**

acres added to  
Smoky Valley Ranch  
in western Kansas



**2320**

House Bill in Kansas Legislature  
that would enable C-PACE  
financing for renewable energy

**\$17.5**

million to be raised  
for conservation in Kansas  
through the Generations campaign



**1,168**

pounds of native prairie seed  
used to restore 110 acres at  
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve

**193**

acres of mixed-grass prairie  
protected with a conservation  
easement in the Red Hills

**87.5%**

of all land in  
Kansas  
is agricultural



**25**

fields enrolled in an on-farm trial  
to reduce water use in  
Rattlesnake Creek watershed



**60,000+**

visitors to TNC  
nature preserves  
in Kansas

## FROM THE BOARD CHAIR

Another year has passed, and as we emerge from isolation, I hope you will be pleased to learn that the work of The Nature Conservancy continued in Kansas uninterrupted. Our meetings may have been virtual, but 2021 brought steady progress and new possibilities.

We saw legislation introduced at the Kansas statehouse that would help businesses and farmers finance clean and efficient energy. We secured important inholdings at Smoky Valley Ranch and brought international attention to Cheyenne Bottoms. We begin a new chapter of our work in the Red Hills, and Terrace Lane Farm offers an opportunity to help farmers cope with climate change.

I have always felt that agriculture and conservation need not be at odds—they are two sides of the same coin. I'm proud of our work advancing soil health and healthy streams, and I hope it continues to grow.

With this report, we publicly announce the most-ambitious capital fundraising campaign we've ever undertaken in Kansas. I hope you will join me in recognizing that TNC's work is vital and contribute to the Generations campaign. No matter what obstacles appear in our path, TNC keeps advancing. I've been a member of The Nature Conservancy for 20 years and have served on the Kansas board of trustees since 2014. I can say the team of staff members and trustee leadership right now are the strongest they've ever been.

As I bring my four years as chair of the board to a close, I am pleased to welcome Bill Lyons, who takes over in January. Bill is a highly-experienced business executive and recognized non-profit leader from Kansas City. He's joined by Kelly Callen, of Wichita, as vice-chair. I look forward to their terms. And, may I say what an absolute pleasure it has been to serve our cause as chair of the board of trustees. It has been one of the joys of my life, and I thank you all for your support.



Brad Bradley  
Chair, Kansas Board of Trustees

**The mission of The Nature Conservancy  
is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.**

For more than 30 years, we've worked in Kansas to do just that. We've protected 194,235 acres across the state, including five preserves that are open to the public. Find a place we protect near you at [nature.org/kspreserves](https://www.nature.org/kspreserves).

# Fighting for a Stronghold



Lesser prairie-chicken © Harland Schuster

What do birds, bees, and beef all have in common? They each have a role to play in a healthy prairie. Let's start with the beef.

“Prairie ecosystems need natural disturbances. Without things like grazing animals and periodic fire, prairies can become choked out and even turn into forests,” says Matt Bain, The Nature Conservancy’s western Kansas conservation manager.

For centuries, large herds of bison and elk roamed the prairie in places we now know by their state names: Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and more. Today, cattle are the primary animals feasting on the prairie plants, and private landowners are guiding many of the natural processes. Grazing lands provide food for people, secure clean water and wildlife habitat, and store carbon deep in the soil.

Now on to the birds. Lesser prairie-chickens are icons of the western Kansas prairie, requiring large tracts of contiguous grassland in an area where only around 20% of the native prairie remains. Known as an indicator species, the presence of lots of prairie-chickens indicates the prairie is in good shape. But in western Kansas, with even what prairie is there, not all of it is suitable habitat. All of this means that lesser prairie-chickens are in a serious decline.

In May 2021, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service proposed listing two distinct population segments under the Endangered Species Act: the northern population of birds in Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and across the northeast Texas Panhandle would be listed as threatened, and the southern population in New Mexico and the southwest Texas Panhandle would be listed as endangered. A final decision is expected next year.



Gray copper butterfly on showy milkweed © Chris Helzer/TNC

And the bees? It's not just bees; there are also butterflies, bats, the wind, and more, all filling the role of pollinator. Prairies need pollinators, and pollinators need prairies. Hundreds of different plant species make up prairie grasslands. Many are grasses, but there are also wildflowers and sedges. And nearly all of these plants require pollination. In return, prairie plants provide pollinators with food sources and habitat.

At TNC’s Smoky Valley Ranch in Logan County, Kansas, the

birds, bees, and beef are all getting some extra attention. When TNC purchased Smoky Valley Ranch in 1999, the large shortgrass prairie ranch was owned by fourteen different families and on the verge of being broken up.

“This part of the state had already lost 80% of the native prairie. The Nature Conservancy knew this ranch needed come under conservation management,” explains Bain.

At that time, several parcels had already been carved out of the interior of the ranch. But it was still the largest private land acquisition for conservation in the state’s history. In recent years, TNC has been able to purchase those inholdings, and their restoration is now underway with a focus on bringing in pollinators. This year, TNC reseeded 240 acres with a plant seed mix curated to attract monarch butterflies and other pollinators. The seeds were chosen to ensure multiple species of wildflowers would bloom in spring, summer, and fall to give pollinators the best chances of successful breeding. Enough seed for another 580 acres will be delivered in early December. In addition to Smoky Valley Ranch, TNC teamed up with Fort Hays State University, NRCS’s Plant Materials Center, the National Fish &

*Continued on next page..*

### Fighting for a Stronghold continued

Wildlife Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, and more partners to restore pollinator habitat throughout the High Plains.

Now that Smoky Valley Ranch is more than 18,500 acres, including the portion designated as Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park, attention turns to building a true stronghold for lesser prairie-chickens. Smoky Valley Ranch has long been identified as a partial stronghold for lesser prairie-chickens in western Kansas. A stronghold for the species is defined as 25,000 to 50,000 acres of high-quality habitat that is likely to be maintained in perpetuity. There's nowhere else that compares in this part of the state.

“Developing a stronghold can't be done with Smoky Valley Ranch alone,” warns Bain. “Out here, it is ranchers who are stewarding these last wild places and conserving wildlife. TNC has worked in partnership with private

landowners for decades to conserve important places using voluntary conservation programs.”

Some of the tools to reach critical habitat acreage thresholds are available now, like conservation easements. More than 3,600 acres within just a few miles of Smoky Valley Ranch are protected with easements and long-term conservation plans. But, for now, other tools remain out of reach. And that's where the beef comes back in.

“The only way we are going to achieve lasting, meaningful conservation for the lesser prairie-chicken is if we make it easier for the ranching community,” proposes Bain. “They need to be supported so that they don't have to make a choice between wildlife habitat or forage for their cattle. We know that they can have both, but they need the right incentives. And those incentives must move beyond replacement costs. They have

to outcompete the economic pressures of alternative land uses.”

Bain suggests some changes to federal conservation programs, like allowing ranchers to access both the Conservation Reserve Program and Environmental Quality Incentive Program on the same piece of land, will be necessary. But just as Smoky Valley Ranch can't make a stronghold on its own, neither can we rely on only federal programs. TNC recently announced a five-state grassland conservation initiative that comprises the same five states where lesser prairie-chickens live. Through the Southern High Plains Initiative, TNC is working with partners to conserve a network of lands and waters across state boundaries that will boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity, and support sustainable agricultural communities. ●



Ken Brunson © Laura Rose Clawson/TNC; Robert Penner with Bird Conservancy of the Rockies executive director Tammy VerCauteren and board member D. Jean Tate © Heather Johnson; Connor Champney © Justin Roemer/TNC

## CONGRATULATIONS TO THE AWARD WINNERS!

### Ken Brunson

Conservation Champion Award

Presented by:  
Kansas Natural Resources Conference

Ken Brunson, TNC's Red Hills project coordinator, received the Kansas Conservation Champion Award at the 2021 Kansas Natural Resources Conference. Each year, the Conservation Champion Award honors exemplary service and perseverance dedicated to advancing the field of conservation in the state of Kansas. Ken began his career with the Kansas Fish and Game Commission (later to become the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks). He worked tirelessly as one of the state's top conservation professionals for 48 years. Ken retired from TNC earlier this year after leading our work in the Red Hills for a decade. Ken is considered a Kansas herpetological expert, and he has done extensive work exploring and documenting bat utilization in many Red Hills caves. Ken's expertise and dedication to protecting the biological diversity of Kansas are apparent to all who have worked with him, and his drive and determination never waned.

### Robert Penner

Richard G. Levad Award

Presented By:  
Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

Robert Penner, TNC's avian conservation manager, received the 2021 Richard G. Levad Award from the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies. The memorial award is presented each year to a person who has provided distinguished service to the ornithological community. Among a long list of avian-related activities, Robert oversees the management of TNC's Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve, a site of hemispheric importance to shorebirds. He is chair of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network-USA Committee and serves in various leadership roles on the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network Hemispheric Council, the US Shorebird Conservation Plan Partnership, and the global Midcontinent Shorebird Conservation Initiative. Robert is a driving force in shorebird conservation across the world. He brings people together to find solutions to some of the biggest challenges facing birds today, all from the middle of Kansas.

### Connor Champney

Hedges Conservation Award

Presented By:  
Emporia Community Foundation

Connor Champney was completing his fourth internship with TNC when he received the Lance Hedges Conservation Award in 2021. The scholarship, named in memory of TNC's former director of conservation, is available only to interns and other student employees of TNC in Kansas. Lance knew that empowering the next generation of conservationists wasn't just good for the student but critical for the future of organizations like TNC. Connor embodies this idea, writing in his application: “my academic performance was average before I received the TNC grassland conservation internship for the first time in 2019. My internship with TNC lit a fire beneath me and truly allowed me to see the importance of learning, and it also caused me to look at everything in my life and in my future differently.” Connor completed his bachelor of science degree at Fort Hays State University and is studying grassland birds at Smoky Valley Ranch for his master's program.



Cow at Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park © Laura Rose Clawson/TNC

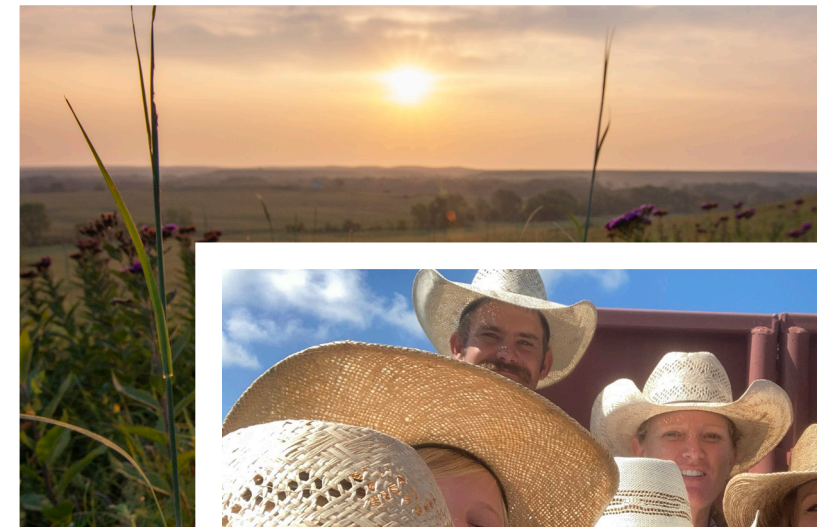
# Beyond Protected

Bill Browning says it's a calling to protect the prairie.

"It fell on me to be the protector of the prairie, flora, and fauna. That is my purpose," says the Flint Hills rancher. "I spent most of my summers as a child with my grandfather. Throughout those months, we would visit and inspect his herds of cattle. While examining calves and yearlings, I also saw wildflowers and grasses, many of which my grandfather could name. I developed a sense of how the prairie should look."

Bill and Jennifer Browning have a 6,900-acre ranch in Greenwood and Chase counties. They began working with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on conservation in the 1990s. After the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area was established in 2010, the Brownings granted a conservation easement on much of the ranch. This voluntary agreement means that the Brownings' piece of tallgrass prairie is forever protected from being destroyed.

"Conservation easements are one of the best tools we have to protect native prairie in the Flint Hills," says Tony Capizzo, The Nature Conservancy's Flint Hills Initiative manager. "Easements prevent the land from conversion and development, but once the easement is in place, there are still conservation challenges that remain. Invasive species, trees, and other woody plants quickly spread, and most conservation easements don't address the management of native plant communities and wildlife habitat."



That's why TNC created the Conservation Easement Stewardship Initiative. Through this program, TNC provides support to landowners who have already taken the first step of protecting their prairie with a conservation easement. Shelly Wiggam leads the work, providing science-based conservation planning and on-the-ground technical assistance.

"This year, we helped fourteen different ranches with management," reports Wiggam. "Every ranch and pasture is unique. For some, it's planning out how to manage invasive species or improve wildlife habitat. For others, it's getting out and assessing the plant cover and forage to re-calculate livestock stocking rates. We also help with prescribed burning and coordinating management changes with neighbors. Other times, we connect landowners to programs that offer financial assistance."

It's this support that helps ranchers move from protected status to truly managed with conservation in mind.

"The experience of watching a specific landscape for more than seven decades has given me an acute sensitivity to degradations of our own prairie," says Browning. "Sometimes holding up the hurricane of invasive species like sericea lespedeza and old world bluestems has seemed a bit lonely and unappreciated. Knowing that TNC has an interest in my success has been energizing."

LEFT: Bill & Jennifer Browning with grandchildren Carson and Gabby, photo courtesy the family; Rancher Caleb Dodge sorting calves © Shelly Wiggam/TNC; Bill Browning conducting a prescribed burn © Shelly Wiggam/TNC

RIGHT: Sunset at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve © Chris Helzer/TNC; Flint Hills family & neighbors working cattle © Caleb Dodge; Old world bluestem, a dangerously invasive plant in the Flint Hills © Chris Helzer/TNC

# A VISION FOR the **Future** of **Farming**

Agriculture is the world’s largest industry, employing more than a billion people worldwide and generating more than \$2.4 trillion globally. Not only are farmers and ranchers a collective economic engine, but they also produce the food, fuel, and fiber needed to sustain humankind. They are stewards of the land and remain among the greatest allies for conservation.

At the same time, agriculture’s footprint on the planet is significant. Crops and pastureland account for 87.5% of all land in Kansas. This extensive coverage has profound impacts on wildlife habitat, biodiversity, and water resources. But the incredible scale of agriculture in Kansas also provides excellent opportunities to increase sustainable agriculture practices.

Thanks to one generous family, The Nature Conservancy now owns Terrace Lane Farm, a 1,008-acre farm in Dickinson County, Kansas. Terrace

Lane Farm will be a place to share best practices for soil health, water quality, and agricultural resiliency with other farmers. TNC will also use a portion of the farm to research new strategies in regenerative farming and

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“My dad would be more than pleased. I wish he were here to see how his life’s work will be continued.”

.....

ranching.

“It is a good feeling to know the land will be utilized in a productive and healthy manner. My dad would be more than pleased,” said Bobbie Pray, who used to own the farm. “I wish he were here to see how his life’s work will be continued.”

TNC will closely monitor farm activity to ensure results: increasing soil carbon, reducing water pollution, and flourishing

wildlife populations. The lessons we learn at Terrace Lane Farm will help other farms, too.

“We will share our results with others so that they can see how these strategies could be used on their farms,” says Heidi Mehl, director of water and agriculture programs. “Farmers and ranchers listen most to their neighbors and peers when considering changes to their operations. We will invite them to Terrace Lane Farm to see things like cover crops and buffer strips in action and learn from each other.”

TNC is developing a management plan for the farm and has assembled an advisory committee that includes Kansas farmers and ranchers, scientists, and trustees. TNC’s global managing director for food and freshwater systems, Michael Doane, will also serve on the committee. Terrace Lane Farm is not open to the public, but field days will be announced next year.



**HEALTHY SOIL** .....



**SUSTAINABLE GRAZING** .....



**LEARNING EXCHANGES** .....

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT C-PACE

House Bill 2320 to enact the commercial property assessed clean energy (C-PACE) act was introduced in the Kansas Legislature in February 2021. It will carry over to the 2022 legislative session for consideration. Here's what you need to know about the proposed legislation.

## C-PACE stands for Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy.

C-PACE enables private investment in energy efficiency and clean energy upgrades for commercial buildings. C-PACE financing also has many agricultural applications and can be used for improvements that conserve water and make properties more resilient to drought and floods. A lender finances 100% of the upgrade by assessing a lien on the property, much like a property tax, which allows for extended-term financing at low interest rates with no down payment. This type of financing is only accessible if the local municipality first passes a C-PACE ordinance opting-in to the program.

## Each C-PACE project must be approved by the financial institutions that hold original mortgages on the property.

More than 220 mortgage lenders across the United States have consented to C-PACE assessments on commercial properties for which they hold mortgages. That number is expected to grow.

## Any qualified, private lender can provide C-PACE financing, including traditional banks.

There are more than a dozen specialty C-PACE lenders across the United States, including multiple lenders already working in the Midwest.

## C-PACE works for all communities.

C-PACE programs can be adapted to meet the unique needs of each state or community. Rural states see both large and small businesses benefitting from C-PACE, including industrial and agricultural operators.

## C-PACE is not for residential properties.

Property- assessed clean energy programs for residential homes and commercial properties are vastly different. HB2320 would only authorize commercial PACE, or C-PACE, in Kansas.

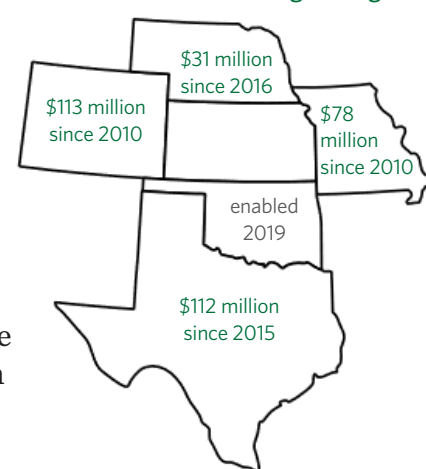
## There's bipartisan support for C-PACE.

State legislatures across the country are passing C-PACE with bipartisan backing. 36 states plus the District of Columbia have passed C-PACE.

## Kansas is an excellent market for C-PACE.

Kansas ranks 47th for energy efficiency programs and policy in the United States. C-PACE would allow business owners to finance much-needed energy and water efficiency updates and make money-saving investments in their properties. C-PACE is a valuable economic development tool that encourages businesses to invest in their communities. These projects then create jobs using the local workforce.

C-PACE Investments in Neighboring States



# Protecting a Heritage Stream

Rick Warshauer is a field biologist raised in Hawai'i, but the Red Hills of Kansas have a special place in his heart.

"I've been visiting this land since I was a toddler," the 75-year old explains. "My great-grandfather came to Comanche County before many of the larger cattle operations settled in the area. I'm now the youngest of the cousins who owned the family land."

The rolling Red Hills of mixed-grass and sand sage prairie cover nearly 2 million acres—the second largest area of native grassland in the state, after the Flint Hills—and almost all of it is operated as working cattle ranches. When the cousins found themselves without anyone in the family to take over, they knew they would have to sell. But Rick kept one small parcel, buying out his cousins, and it wasn't just for nostalgia.

"As I got older and got more involved with the Kansas Native Plant Society, I began to appreciate more and more of the natural aspects of the property," says Warshauer.

The mixed-grass prairie provides high-quality habitat for wildlife. But if you look closer,

there's another special feature Warshauer wanted to protect. The headwaters of the crystal clear Nescatunga Creek run through his property. Nescatunga Creek is one of just six pristine streams in the state to earn the designation of a Heritage Stream.

This year, Warshauer granted a conservation easement to The Nature Conservancy, ensuring his piece of the Red Hills and this irreplaceable prairie stream will be protected long after he's gone. Like most conservation easements, the agreement means the land can't be cultivated, paved, or otherwise developed but can remain in agricultural use as grazing land. Somewhat unique is the addition of a stewardship plan. Every five years, TNC will work with the current landowner to develop a plan that ensures the property is managed with natural resources in mind.

"I see a conservation easement as the best way to make sure the land gets long-term protection and long-term management that focuses on the diversity of the prairie," says Warshauer. "And The Nature Conservancy will be there to enforce it after I'm gone."



The mixed-grass prairie of Rick Warshauer's property provides high-quality habitat for wildlife © Paula Matile/TNC; Rick Warshauer surveying Nescatunga Creek © Ken Brunson/TNC; Turtle discovered during stream survey © Heidi Mehl/TNC

# ANNOUNCING A CAMPAIGN FOR Generations

**Seven generations** ago, Kansas was an endless landscape bursting with grasses and wildflowers and teeming with bison, prairie dogs, elk, and birds.

**Five generations** ago, settlers were farming a land of plenty. Drawn by nutrient-rich soils that sustained an abundance of life, they displaced the Native American tribes who had lived here for centuries and began converting the native prairie grassland to farmland.

**One generation** ago, dedicated volunteers established a Kansas chapter of The Nature Conservancy to protect our state's natural heritage. They wanted future generations to inherit a biologically rich world, and they knew that time was slipping away.

**Today**, TNC reaches beyond the borders of our nature preserves to inspire private land conservation on a vast scale. We bring unlikely partners together to protect our streams. We promote clean energy without sacrificing the ecological integrity of our grasslands. But Kansas is changing again. The actions we take now and over the next decade will write the next chapter for future generations. Just like the group that first formed the Kansas Chapter, our current supporters know that individually and collectively they can make a difference.

**Through the *Generations* campaign, The Nature Conservancy is raising \$17.5 million to build on the previous generation of conservation successes in Kansas and double our conservation impact in just five years. Your help is critical.**

With your support, we can create a stronger, more resilient Kansas that meets the needs of both people and nature. Your gift doesn't just protect the natural world for future generations—it also makes our lives better, safer, and more prosperous today. Would you please use the included envelope to make a contribution to the *Generations* campaign today?

## LAND \$10 million

Since TNC's beginning, we have owned natural lands to protect habitat and steward these special places into the future. We also use conservation easements to provide protection while others continue to own and manage the land. From farmland to cattle ranches, conservation easements conserve the state's most sensitive wildlife and ecosystems without removing the land from agricultural production.

TNC is increasing land protection while also supporting private landowners with conservation stewardship, helping them improve the health of their land.

**Your gift will help double the acres already protected with conservation easements, secure vital in-holdings and surrounding land at preserves, and establish better conservation stewardship practices on 200,000 acres of private land.**



## WATER \$3 million

The streams of Kansas—from large rivers to small creeks—are neglected. A 2012 assessment found that 75% of streams in the state are "impaired," which means they can't be used for things like swimming, fishing, and drinking water. Four years later, the number jumped to 80%. But it doesn't have to be this way.

TNC is preserving the state's precious remaining pristine streams and forming partnerships to improve the health of other rivers and creeks. We're finding innovative ways to balance the needs of agriculture with the needs of nature in water-stressed areas. Beyond the streams, we're protecting and restoring critical wetland habitats for migratory birds.

**Your gift will ensure that Kansas's waters are repaired instead of impaired so that they can sustain us all now and long into the future.**



## AIR \$2 million

Our state is a leader in large-scale wind energy production, but Kansas is missing opportunities to develop solar sustainably and other clean energy technologies. We can find solutions in nature. Conservation agriculture, sustainable grazing, and preventing grasslands from being converted to something else are some of the most immediate opportunities in Kansas to respond to climate change.

TNC is bringing the best available science and decades of field experience to help lawmakers and industry alike reap clean and efficient energy's environmental and economic benefits.

**Your gift will support renewable energy being developed in the right places, encourage energy-efficiency legislation that boosts the economy, and keep vast amounts of carbon stored deep underground, not in the atmosphere.**



*The Generations campaign has a \$17.5 million goal: \$10 million for Land, \$3 million for Water, \$2 million for Air, and \$2.5 million for emerging opportunities. These funds will be used for strategic and capital investments but do not cover annual expenses for existing conservation programs.*

Grandfather and grandson at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and Flint Hills cattle drive © Ryan Donnell; Clinton Lake paddleboarder © Patrick Emerson/Flickr CC by 2.0; Prairie sunflowers © Jim Griggs



Jim and Susie Aber know a thing or two about kites. But these aren't the kites you'd pick up for a family picnic. Twenty years ago, the Abers developed a new technique to monitor wetland habitats using kites to fly cameras and get an actual bird's-eye view.

It all started when the Abers received a grant from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration while teaching at Emporia State University. They were researching aerial photography methods for environmental monitoring.

"This was before drones were common. Our method provided images that were clearer and with higher resolution than traditional remote sensing," explains Jim.

Their technique and the pictures they provided quickly became useful for managing Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve.

"Their photos are invaluable," says Robert Penner, avian conservation manager at The Nature Conservancy. "You can only see so much from the ground. But the Abers' photos

have shifted the way we manage the marshes at Cheyenne Bottoms. We can see exactly what's working and where."

When the research project ended, the Abers volunteered to continue monitoring the preserve multiple times each year.

"A graduate thesis is usually one to two years, and then they move on. The same is true of university faculty," says Jim. "It's rare for anything of this nature to go more than two years."

Thanks to the Abers, TNC now has twenty years of images documenting Cheyenne Bottoms, something unheard of for many ecological sites.

"We can see how the marshes are responding to things, both short and long-term," says Susie. "You can't hide anything from the aerial photography, but the kites are completely invisible to wildlife."

Cheyenne Bottoms is a 41,000-acre wetland complex in central Kansas, and it's known

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# Bird's-Eye Views



**Bird's Eye Views continued**

worldwide for its importance to migrating birds. Geography and tradition lead birds to this spot. Some fly thousands of miles without rest, fueled by a few tablespoons of body fat. When the fat reserves burn low, the birds stop to feed and rest at the marshy basins that have fed and sheltered their kind for thousands of generations.

TNC owns and manages the nearly 8,000-acre Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve adjacent to the 19,857-acre Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area maintained by the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks. Ducks Unlimited is also a critical partner that is protecting the waterfowl and shorebird habitat at Cheyenne Bottoms.

TNC's approach is to keep the wetlands as they were before the area was settled. Management techniques like mowing and grazing create the same conditions that what would happen if bison herds were passing through the area.

“That’s the beauty of TNC,” says Susie. “You’re protecting and keeping the area as natural as possible, and it allows the wildlife to do what they need to do. Our photography is the best way we can give back to TNC. We hope that sharing this story will encourage other people to support TNC and understand the importance of protecting wetlands.” •



- 1 Jim and Susie Aber on a sunny day at Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve.
- 2 A tractor appears miniscule as it mows thick vegetation to create the sparse, open space preferred by shorebirds in preparation for spring rains.
- 3 Plains garter snake catching a small bullfrog.
- 4 Repeated summer rains in 2018 filled the marshes.

Page 16-17: View of Cheyenne Bottoms to the northeast. Deception Creek enters from the left. All Photos © Jim & Susie Aber

## MULTI-STATE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN TNC & USDA

The Nature Conservancy and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) entered into a five-year cooperative agreement to increase private land conservation in Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. The two organizations have a mutual interest in implementing the conservation programs authorized by federal legislation known as the Farm Bill, which is updated about every five years. The most recent Farm Bill passed with strong bipartisan support and was signed into law in late 2018.

NRCS is a federal agency that provides planning, technical, and financial assistance to landowners to conserve the natural resources on their land through programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

“This agreement opens more opportunity for collaboration that crosses state lines much in the way geo-political boundaries do not confine nature,” says Rob Manes, Kansas state director for TNC. “We’re looking forward to leveraging the staff and expertise of both organizations and ultimately getting more conservation directly on the ground.”

Kansas farmers and ranchers use NRCS programs in places like the Flint Hills where voluntary conservation easements on private land protect some of the last tallgrass prairie in the world and in western Kansas where land enrolled in CRP provides critical nesting habitat for grassland birds.

## 25 Farm Fields Sign On to Save Water

Along with groundwater from the Great Bend Prairie Aquifer and rainfall, Rattlesnake Creek is a primary water source for Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge needs water to flood the marshes that provide habitat for migrating birds at the same time that farmers need water for their crops. Farmers in the area are being asked to reduce water use, and many are stepping up to the challenge.

Twenty-five farm fields have now been enrolled in a research project to learn more about the real-world application of water-saving technology in the area around Rattlesnake Creek in Edwards, Kiowa, and Stafford counties. The three-year trial provides farmers with 50% of the expense for technological upgrades like real-time water monitoring and scheduling tools. Many have converted to a mobile-drip irrigation system which saves water compared to traditional sprinkler irrigation systems but doesn't impact crop yields. In exchange for the financial support, farmers agree to share data like water use, crop yields, energy usage.

This work is supported by the Conservation Innovation Grants program at USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Nature Conservancy's Heidi Mehl is the principle investigator, and key partners include WaterPACK, Kansas State University, and Groundwater Management District 5.



A solar-powered communication tower sends soil moisture levels to both farmers and researchers © Patrick Janssen



Motus receiver installation © Tony Capizzo/TNC

## Expanding the Motus Network

Motus Wildlife Tracking System receivers were installed at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and Smoky Valley Ranch this fall. Combined with receivers already at Cheyenne Bottoms and Konza Prairie, this makes four TNC preserves in Kansas that are equipped to track the movements of flying animals with radio telemetry. Researchers from all over the world use the Motus network to access a shared system of receivers. Some Kansas detections this year were:

- Black terns tagged in Saskatchewan passed through both Cheyenne Bottoms and Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.
- Swainson's thrush tagged in British Columbia in 2020 travelled to Costa Rica before being detected at Cheyenne Bottoms in May 2021.



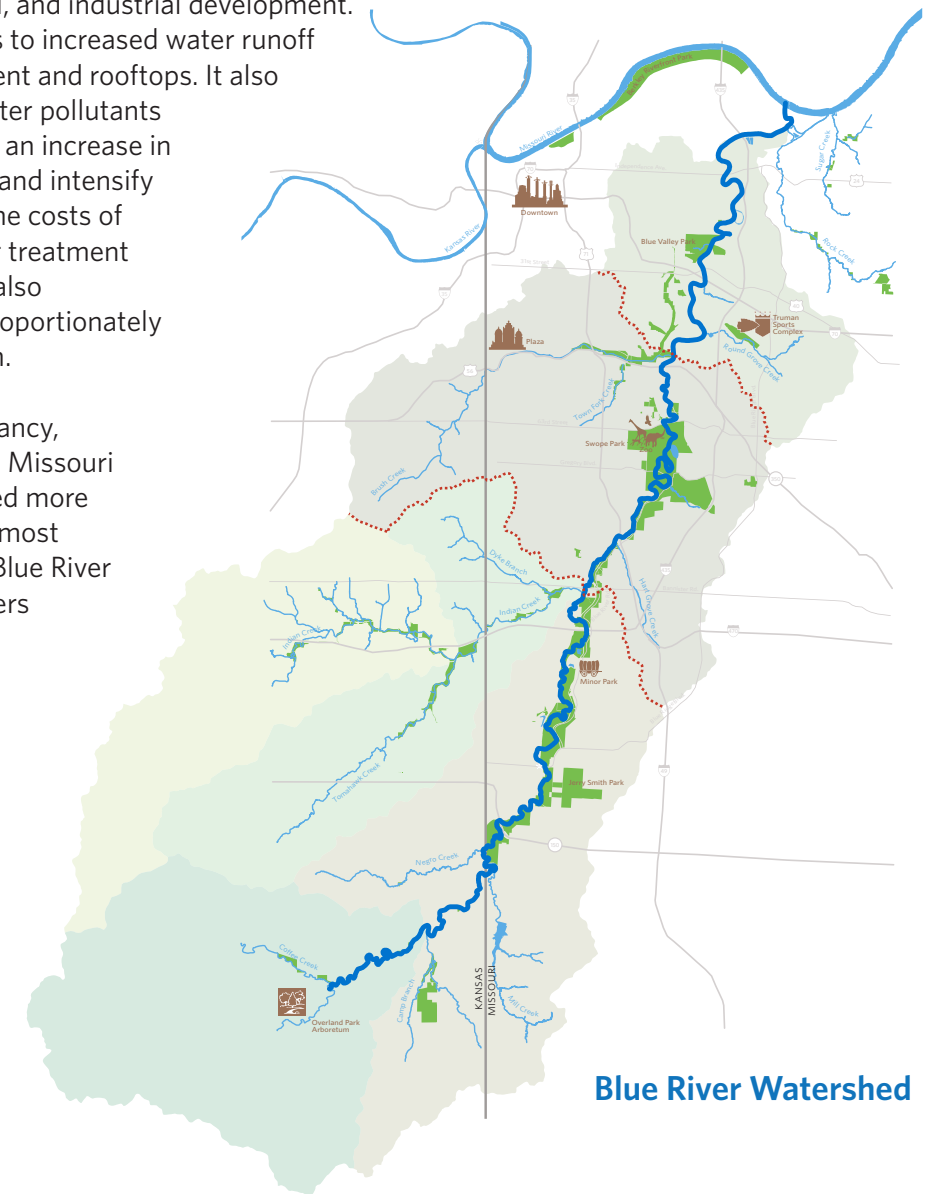
Black tern © Nick Varvel/Flickr

# Kansas City Easements Protect Blue River Headwaters

When the Blue River Land Trust's founder realized it was time to wind down, his first call was to The Nature Conservancy. The small land trust in Johnson County held three voluntary conservation easements that protect Camp Branch Creek and the headwaters of the Blue River. Like nearly all of TNC's conservation easements, these easements are perpetual, meaning they outlive any one landowner. That also means they need a strong land trust organization committed to long-term monitoring and enforcement of the easement terms. By re-assigning the easements to TNC, the Blue River Land Trust upheld its commitment to conserving this land for future generations.

Accepting the easements made sense for TNC. Located in the heart of the Kansas City metropolitan area, the Blue River flows 41 miles through five counties and twenty municipalities across both Kansas and Missouri. Population growth in Johnson County, where the Blue River originates, has increased residential, commercial, and industrial development. This conversion of natural areas leads to increased water runoff from impervious surfaces like pavement and rooftops. It also results in less natural vegetation to filter pollutants from runoff. All of this combines with an increase in wastewater to degrade water quality and intensify the impacts of floods downstream. The costs of remedying these problems, like water treatment and upgrades to infrastructure, have also increased, and those costs have disproportionately fallen to those least able to bear them.

Three years ago, The Nature Conservancy, Heartland Conservation Alliance, and Missouri Department of Conservation convened more than 150 stakeholders to identify the most pressing needs and concerns for the Blue River watershed. A subset of Kansas partners agreed to prioritize land protection and floodplains in the headwaters, particularly those most vulnerable to the impacts of rapid development. It was clear this was one of the best ways TNC could contribute to the effort. Several hundred acres in these priority areas had already been permanently protected through voluntary conservation easements, including the three Blue River Land Trust easements. TNC is now working to secure more protected areas to better defend the land along the river.



Blue River Watershed

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The Nature Conservancy’s accomplishments are only made possible by the many individuals, organizations, businesses, and foundations that make financial contributions to our conservation programs. We are honored to recognize the following donors who made contributions of \$100 or more from July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021. Everyone listed here has ties to Kansas. Some live here, others live elsewhere and prefer their gifts be used for projects in Kansas. In some cases, these contributions supported conservation in other parts of the world. We deeply appreciate every gift and regret that space constraints prevent us from listing all donors.

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