

# Kansas Tall Grass Prairies | Trip Report

Sept. 14-22, 2019 | Written by Ed Pembleton



With Guides Ed and Sil Pembleton & Sharon Gunther, and participants Cindy, Don, Ellen, Jean, Joe, Kathy, Linda, Lynette, and Phillip





## **Sat., Sept. 14 Arrival in Kansas | Great Plains Nature Center**

Following a summer of ample rains, Kansas greeted us still dressed in green (rather than the usual fall tans), but gaily decorated with yellows of the sunflower clan. We had all gathered at our hotel before 2 p.m., when we headed to the Great Plains Nature Center in northeast Wichita for an introduction to the larger setting for prairies. Even before getting to the nature center, we stopped and investigated the “secret of the cottonwood,” a prominent tree along streams and wetlands here. A “pollinator party” was concluding and one of the naturalists introduced us to the “Tootsie Roll®

aroma” of Maximilian sunflowers before we got into the building. Apparently having more than bright yellow petals helps draw more pollinator attention. The center itself was an inspiration of exhibits and information about the habitats and forces that make the area a unique and dynamic system.

The day was sunny, with light breezes that brought relief from the unusual fall temperatures in the upper 80’s. Bird migration had stalled due to continuous winds from the south for the last week. Canada Geese and Mallards patrolled the waters while Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets stalked the pond edges at the nature center. Great-tailed and Common Grackles swaggered across parking lots fringed with small gatherings of Ring-billed Gulls.

After we enjoyed a delicious welcome dinner and exited to the parking lot, we benefitted from the stalled migration when we spotted hundreds of Chimney Swifts and Purple Martins circling in front of a glorious Kansas sunset. Wichita is known for fall accumulations of migrating Purple Martins, but this was a new addition to the bird list for our tour.

## **Sun., Sept. 15 Hesston | Dyck Arboretum**

We headed north to Hesston and the Dyck Arboretum for an introduction to the native plants found in the tall and mixed grass prairies of central Kansas. The Annual and Maximilian Sunflowers stood up and out from the crowd of yellow blossoms. Some specimens of prairie grasses, Big & Little Bluestem, and Indian Grass caught our attention because they were still blooming. Our attention was soon diverted skyward where lingering Mississippi Kites swept back and forth across the horizon. Then Brown Thrashers foraging under the shrubs brought our focus back to the ground. Recent emigrants to Kansas, Eurasian Collared-Doves “cooed” from all corners of the arboretum and clearly outnumbered the Mourning Doves in this neighborhood.



After a tasty lunch, the entertainment of a band, and singing at the cafe across the street, we headed to Quivira National Wildlife Refuge to explore the unique saline wetlands. Rising temperatures were offset by increased south winds that stirred the Little Salt Marsh waters and provided ideal feeding conditions for our first sightings of American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Wilson's Snipe, American White Pelicans, and Double-crested Cormorants. As we headed toward the north end of the refuge, a large flock of 20-30 male Ring-necked Pheasants flew across the road, providing life birds for some and a thrill for all. Near water control structures we spotted flights of Tree, Barn, and Cliff Swallows voraciously feeding in preparation for their migratory flights. Small roadside wetlands hosted mixed flocks of Northern Shovelers, Gadwall, Northern Pintails, Mallards, and Blue-winged Teal. As we watched waterfowl on one of the wetlands, a Cooper's Hawk flew from its perch in a small grove of trees and appeared to be carrying its latest meal as it disappeared into the distance.

An immature Bald Eagle maintained its perch as we passed on our way to the wildlife drive. Along the sheltered shorelines of the wildlife drive though the Big Salt Marsh, we found Least and Baird's Sandpipers, Killdeer, Greater Yellowlegs and Long-billed Dowitchers.

Exiting the wildlife drive, we turned northwest toward the town of Great Bend, but were soon halted by seven Scissor-tailed Flycatchers gracing the power lines at a four-way intersection. Fortunately, there was no traffic on these sand roads, and we enjoyed an extended look. Again—these were life birds for several and an awe-inspiring site for all. We had no more than resumed our travels, when a small flock of Wood Ducks on a secluded pond brought us to another, but briefer, halt. We proceeded on toward our dinner and lodging in Great Bend with Red-tailed Hawks topping many of the power poles and fence posts.

## **Mon., Sept. 16 Kansas Wetlands Education Center | Owl Prowl**

After breakfast we drove out to the Kansas Wetlands Education center on the edge of Cheyenne Bottoms, a 20,000-acre wetland owned and managed by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism. There we met our guides for the day; Curtis Wolf, Direct of the Wetlands Education Center, and Rob Penner, Cheyenne Bottoms & Avian Programs Manager for the Kansas Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. TNC has purchased and developed approximately 8,000 acres of adjacent lands to increase the diversity of wetland habitat available for migrating shore birds and waterfowl.

With Rob in one van and Curtis in the other, we began an excellent morning of birding. We quickly spotted Canada Geese, American White Pelicans, American Coot, and early migrating waterfowl: Blue & Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall and Northern Pintail. American Avocets, Black-Necked Stilts, Greater Yellowlegs, White-faced Ibis, Long-billed Dowitchers and Willets graced the shallow pools as they employed different foraging techniques. Semipalmated, Least and Baird's Sandpipers probed the pool edges. The long-

legged, pointy faced waders were well represented by Great Blue Herons, Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets. The more reclusive Black-crowned Night-Herons made appearances among the cattails and American Bitterns surprised us with sudden flights from secluded feeding stations. Forester's and Black Terns fed on the wing, while Franklin's and Ring-billed Gulls foraged from the waves.

As we passed by, swallows (Tree, Barn & Cliff) flew from under and around water control structures and bridges, while the Eastern Phoebe's hardly noticed. American Kestrel, Northern Harrier and Swainson's joined the Red-tailed Hawk on our list of raptors.

After a late picnic lunch at the Wetlands Education Center's pavilion, we explored the exhibits at the Center, followed by briefings from Rob and Curtis on their management and education work. We returned to Great Bend to refresh and have dinner at a local Mexican Restaurant. After dinner about half of the group went out for the optional "owl prowl," and were almost immediately rewarded with a Great Horned Owl, that stayed perched on a power pole so that everyone got a good look. Next, we found an immature Black-crowned Night-Heron foraging in a roadside pool. Perhaps our biggest treat was the young Coyote that came down the roadside at a leisurely pace and seemed very curious about us. We concluded the evening by going to an overlook to see a wonderfully dark night sky, and the absence of lights across the 30,000+ acre circle depression that defines Cheyenne Bottoms.

## **Tues., Sept. 17 Mushroom State Park | Lindsborg**

After a good night's sleep, we departed Great Bend at 9 a.m. and headed northeast toward Mushroom State Park, where we focused on unique erosion carved formations. Dakota sandstone caps protected the underlying softer layers that formed the "stems" of the mushrooms. Historical graffiti testifies that the small park has been a Kansas favorite since the early days of European settlement. With rising temperatures and winds, we headed for a picnic lunch at Kanopolis Reservoir.





In addition to shade for a good meal, the trees that have grown up around the area provided our first colony of Red-headed Woodpeckers and a perfect perch for an Osprey. The reservoir beach held a mixed flock of resting Franklins and Ring-billed Gulls.

It was a little early to check into our lodging, so we explored the area around the historical Smoky Valley Roller Mills, and were rewarded with a Belted Kingfisher, Eastern Phoebe, and a small flock of American Robins. After checking into the Dröm Sött (Swedish for Sweet Dreams), we explored the coffee houses and shops along the main street of the Swedish capital of Kansas. National Geographic Photographer was on assignment, but his photos were on exhibit and treated us to his special views of the Flint Hills. Dinner at the Swedish Crown Restaurant, now owned and operated by Bethany College, provided American dishes or an opportunity to try Svensk Köttbullar (traditional Swedish meatballs in gravy with dill potatoes and a side of Lingonberries).

### **Wed., Sept. 18 Maxwell Game Preserve | Coronado Heights**

Our day started with a traditional breakfast with a buffet offering boiled eggs, sweets, pickled beets, herring, and a special Swedish casserole. We departed Lindsborg to the 2400-acre Maxwell Game Preserve for a tour of the bison range—a trip of a few miles geographically, but a mental leap from “old world” to “wild west”.

Our tour guide informed us that the bison reach their maximum number, a little over 200, this time of year, and had split into two herds following the breeding season. The larger herd, including its large breeding bull, came to



the hilltop in search of the “range cubes” that the staff uses to enrich their diets and attract them to the tour route. Most of the cows have calves in spring, but one cow on a different schedule with fall births, had a very small red calf. The elk herd, with 40 to 50 members, was not about to be lured out of the shady ravines.

Following the tour through the bison pasture we too sought out the shade of the picnic area for lunch and were rewarded with a day-roosting Common Nighthawk in a tree next to our table, and an Eastern Phoebe hawking some insects.

Author and botanist, Iralee Barnard and her husband, Ken, had joined us for the bison tour and Iralee introduced us to some of the local plants that were setting seed or still blooming. We had received copies of Iralee’s, *Pocket Guide to Kansas Flint Hills Wildflowers and Grasses*, on our first day at the Great Plains Nature Center. Iralee’s book *Field Guide to the Common Grasses of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska* is the guide of choice for those wanting to learn about grasses in the central Great Plains. Having her with us gave the plants a whole new personality.

Following dinner back in Lindsborg, we took an evening trip for sunset at Coronado Heights where we could hear Northern Bobwhite calling and feeding Common Nighthawks flew through our group in pursuit of insects.

## **Thurs., Sept. 19 Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve**

After another delicious Swedish breakfast, with a special Swedish “bread pudding,” we headed for the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve under clear skies and milder temperatures. Meadowlarks (likely both Eastern and Western) punctuated the landscape as we drove through Chase County prairies. We arrived just in time for the

National Park Service’s bus tour out into the prairie, led by a ranger bursting with information about the landscape and history of this former cattle ranch. Afterwards, we returned to the charming town of Cottonwood Falls for lunch at the restored Grand Central Hotel and a visit to the historic Chase County Courthouse.

A quick trip to the Chase County State Fishing Lake turned up another Belted Kingfisher, and our first Harlan’s phase Red-tailed Hawk, before we returned to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve to visit the Lower Fox Creek School, and the diverse prairie that surrounds it. We headed on north to Council Grove for dinner at the Historic Hays House, and our lodging at the Victorian style, Cottage House Hotel.

## **Fri., Sept. 20 Konza Prairie | Manhattan**

With an early breakfast that included local color at the Saddle Rock Café, we headed on north toward the 8,000-acre Konza Prairie. We stopped at the scenic overlook to get a landscape view of this area, managed for scientific research by Kansas State, and partially supported by the National Science Foundation as a long-term Ecological Research Area. Then we immersed ourselves in the prairie and the King’s Creek riparian woodlands along the Konza Nature Trail. Red-bellied woodpeckers “chinked” at us from Burr Oak trees along the path and a colony of Red-headed Woodpeckers clattered away from more distant trees. Small gatherings of Eastern Bluebirds, likely family groups, fed amongst the sumac and brushy areas.

We traveled on into Manhattan for lunch at the Tallgrass Tap House, with our guests, prairie educators and advocates, Mike and Dru Clarke. Rain clouds formed as we left our lunch spot and headed to the Flint Hills Discovery Center. The Center gave everyone a broad perspective on both the Flint Hills landscape and the people who live here. Rain was falling at an increasing rate and lightning was frequent, so we postponed our plans for going to the prairie on Mt. Mitchell and returned to Council Grove for dinner at the Hays House.





## **Sat., Sept. 21 Allegawaho Heritage Memorial Park**

We joined the Saturday morning crowd at Saddle Rock Café for breakfast and planned a revised itinerary allowing us to return and see Mt. Mitchell prairie, which was skipped due to yesterday's rain and lightning.

We started the morning at the Kaw Nation's Allegawaho Heritage Memorial Park, site of the last known Kaw village in Kansas located along Little John Creek south of Council Grove. The Kaw Nation dedicated the park in 2002 and welcomes people to enjoy the prairie heritage of the Konza or South Wind People. Tribal members return to celebrate their homeland heritage during Council Grove's Washunga Days in June. The mix of native and restored prairie and riparian woodland provide diverse habitats where we spotted an American Kestrel hunting and found our first Wild Turkeys! Both Tufted Titmouse and Black-capped Chickadees foraged on the woodland edges, while Red-bellied Woodpeckers were more often heard than seen as they chiseled into trees along the stream. Eastern Kingbirds fiercely defended their fence and power line perches, when Eastern Bluebirds ventured too close.

Back in Council Grove, we noticed Chimney Swifts circling and feeding near downtown. We arrived at the Trail Days Café, for lunch and history lessons about the Santa Fe Trail and early settlers in the region. The Café is housed in a stone building that served settlers moving west and has been lovingly restored by volunteers using proceeds from the Café operations, donations and grants.

After lunch we departed north and took the Native Stone Scenic Byway to enjoy the stone buildings and the miles of stone fences that were built (without mortar) at the end of the "open range" era. Mt. Mitchell's splendid prairie gave us evidence of glaciation and views of the Kaw (Kansas) River valley that was a right-of-way for the Underground Railroad, south of Wamego. We found tall grasses and wildflowers of many species—some that we had not seen previously. An abundance of Compass Plant testifies to the lack of cattle grazing on this property for many years. Descending to the river valley, we followed the Underground Railroad a few miles west to visit the famous Beecher Bible and Rifle Church, where a congregation member welcomed us inside to see the church as its historical artifacts and current furnishings, as it is still used every Sunday.



Our farewell dinner at the Ad Astra Café in Strong City, just south of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, was a delightful meal with plenty of time to recount our adventures and chose a favorite experience or two.

## **Sun., Sept. 22 Farewell from Kansas**

Our final day started with an early breakfast and a quick departure back to the Wichita airport. Thousands of acres of prairie stretched to the horizons for much of the trip and left everyone with a new vision of the Kansas Flint Hills.

### **Photo Credits: All photos by Ed Pembleton**

Group photo at Maxwell Game Preserve; Mitchell homestead; Goldenrod (Konza prairie trail); Avocet; Folk art flying pig; Scissor-tailed Flycatchers; Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve; Great Plains NC entrance; Group photo at Mushroom Rocks State Park; Scissor-tailed Flycatcher; Konza Nature Trail; Quivira Little Salt Marsh; Mushroom Rocks SP, providing an umbrella; American Bittern; Bison Cow at Maxwell Game Preserve; Lynn capturing the flower beauty; Group at the Konza Prairie overlook; Walking the nature trail at Konza Prairie; Entrance to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve; Bee feeding on Tall Goldenrod; Burr Oak acorn and leaves; Birding checklist at the Cottage Inn, Council Grove; Nature trail at Kaw Nation's Allegawaho Heritage Memorial Park; Birding at Cheyenne Bottoms wetlands; Sunset view, Coronado Heights.