



A Future for Kansas Wildlife

by **Ken Brunson**
wildlife diversity coordinator, Pratt

photos by **Mike Blair**
associate editor/photographer, Pratt

Wildlife species with critical habitat and management needs will benefit from the State Wildlife Grants program and Kansas Comprehensive Wildlife Management Plan.

It was 1936 when concerned hunters, conservationists and politicians successfully lobbied for the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, or Pittman/Robertson Act, to be passed by Congress and signed by President Roosevelt. The Act stipulated

that the excise taxes on sporting arms and ammunition be applied back to the states for wildlife restoration programs. The states were required to provide a 25 percent match. Since that milestone in wildlife management, more than \$4 billion has been

raised for wildlife programs. That's in addition to the billions of hunter dollars provided through license, stamp and permit sales. The truth is nearly all of today's major wildlife programs were and are funded by hunters.

So what's the problem? We'll there's a couple. For one, our population has become increasingly urban in the last 20 years and as that shift has taken place, the percent of our population who hunt has steadily declined. While there are fewer hunters today, they spend more, and they're still providing the bulk of wildlife management funding. But what will happen in 20 years? If the number of hunters continues to decline, additional funding sources will be necessary just to maintain programs. And what about programs for species that aren't hunted, or threatened and endangered species? How will state agencies pay for those management programs? It's time for others to chip in.

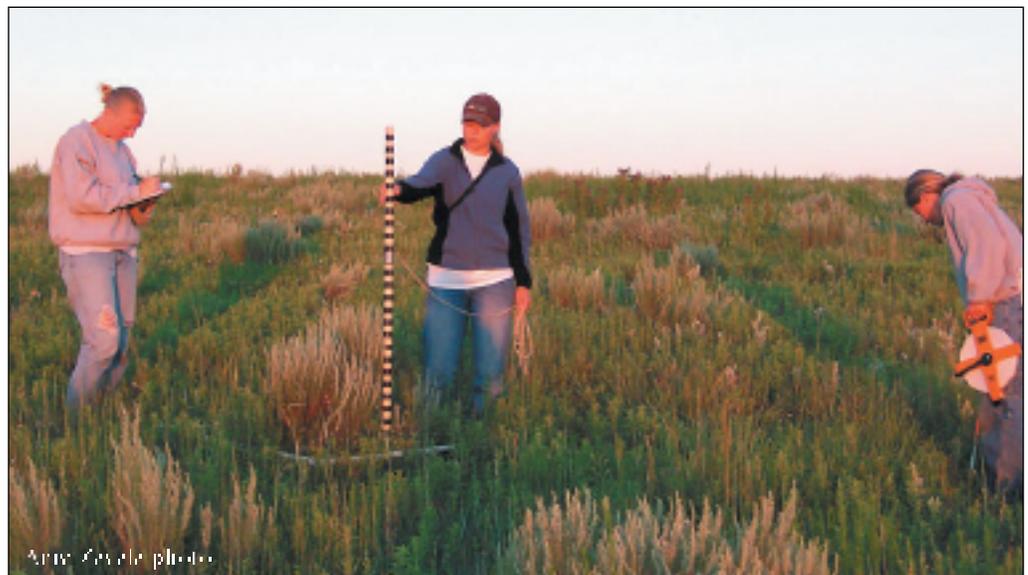
Fortunately, a new program called State Wildlife Grants, or SWG, is currently in place. Conservationists crafted SWG to provide funds to complement the longstanding programs for sport fish and game. Called "nongame" at one time, the "other" species have benefited from habitat programs funded through Pittman/Robertson Act. But there is a critical need to fund specific programs for these species.

"A Future for Kansas Wildlife" is the introductory title of the State Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan, recently completed so that the department is eligible for SWG. But before we examine this plan, let's backtrack. In the 1980s, the department began addressing growing urban

constituencies by locating offices in urban areas. We started urban fisheries programs. We located more technical staff to address the majority of Kansans who lived in metropolitan areas. We started nongame programs and a Wildlife Education Service to educate a public increasingly out of touch with wildlife. During the 1990s, the department began involvement in a national effort to secure long-term funding for nongame. The funding initiative is called Teaming With Wildlife (TWW), and it isn't in place, but it is still alive. Major wildlife viewing programs were initiated in nearly every state wildlife and federal land management agency as a continual evolution of marketing to a generally wildlife-friendly public. TWW attracted support from more than 3,000 organizations nationally — the largest ever on any issue. The initial effort was called "CARA" (Conservation and Reinvestment Act) which ultimately morphed into State Wildlife Grants (SWG). Congress promised six years of

funding for SWG. So far, Congress has followed through. But the six years is up this year and the TWW effort continues, determined to get the long-term funding commitment for long-term wildlife conservation needs.

SWG grants must be matched with state funds just as the sport fish and wildlife programs require. The intent of SWG is to address the broad array of species not formerly addressed by either the fish and game programs or the endangered species act. The program's focus is on preventing species from needing to be listed. The concept of preventative conservation medicine is valid, saving money from expensive recovery efforts. Kansas has 59 species on its threatened and endangered species list. It has another 70 on the Species in Need of Conservation List. Efforts are underway to recover species on these lists so they can be ultimately de-listed. If we are successful, we can keep them off the federal lists. And just as the



To better manage wildlife, good data is necessary. Many of the first SWG-funded projects involved getting up-to-date habitat and assessment information on priority species.



Species of Greatest Conservation Need were identified and many are considered indicator species, meaning their status signals the condition of our environment.

sport fish and wildlife habitat programs benefited nongame wildlife, the SWG habitat programs will also benefit game species. Current funding for SWG in Kansas is almost \$1 million per year, but original plans and expectations are for a major annual contribution of \$6-\$7 million per year for Kansas. At this level, the program would create the substantial third leg of fish and wildlife funding support, equaling the amounts contributed through the sport fish and wildlife restoration programs for sport fish and game animals.

As part of the SWG agreement with Congress, states were required to develop plans. So plan we did. KDWP staff met, discussed, consulted, argued, wrote, and edited. At the major summit held in February of 2005, more than 70 wildlife experts refined issues and strategies for wildlife in Kansas. In all, more than 200 technical experts and 125 department Fisheries

and Wildlife Division staff participated in the planning effort. Public comment was invited and incorporated throughout the process. The final product, "A Future for Kansas Wildlife," was unveiled in last December.

Even before its final acceptance by the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service last fall, this action plan was being used. A key part of the plan is identifying Species of Greatest Conservation Need (go to the KDWP website for specifics on these 315 species). Several filters were used to select these species. They received higher rankings if they were not already receiving attention from the federal Endangered

Species Act or existing sport fish and wildlife restoration program. Through the ranking process, species that made the list were perhaps already on state sensitive species lists, but the list may also include those that appeared to be headed for trouble or those where additional status information is needed. Remember, the SWG purpose is to keep species from being listed federally. So, state listed species or those headed in that direction receive priority.

The plan also ranks habitats so that an ecosystem approach would make sense for potential projects. In a logical approach, prioritized habitats and highest ranked species receive first attention. Many of the projects deal with "indicator" species, meaning they are indicators of



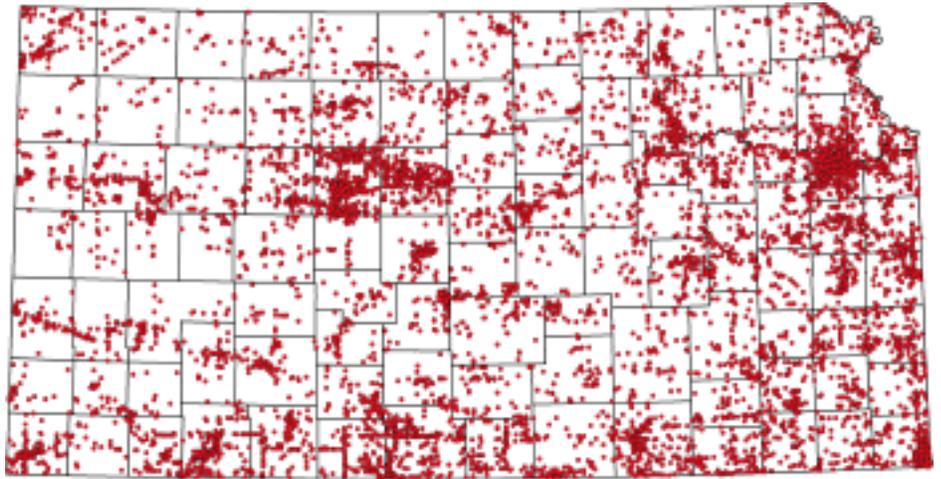
One purpose of SWG and the comprehensive wildlife conservation plan is to keep species from being listed on the federal Threatened and Endangered Species list.

quality habitat. Their disappearance may portend a more serious problem, and even an unhealthy situation for humans. In essence, by protecting these species, we also protect our quality of environment and, therefore, our quality of life.

Presented here are three highlighted SWG projects. The first is the *Kansas Herpetological Atlas*. Beginning in the fall of 2003, SWG funds allowed staff at the Sternberg Museum of Fort Hays State University to begin a comprehensive assessment of the status of Kansas amphibians, reptiles and turtles. Nearly 15,000 new records were obtained, mostly through field surveys — trapping, collecting, and observing at over 4,000 sites. These records will greatly assist in determining trend information on many species. As a result of this comprehensive status update, reconsiderations for listings of several species are expected. The tremendous success of the *Kansas Herpetological Atlas* will be a springboard for an upcoming *Kansas Mammal Atlas*.

The first order of business for wildlife management is up-to-date information, and SWG is supplying the muscle to get it done. In this manner, SWG is allowing us to identify and prevent problems before they threaten wildlife and affect humans.

A second highlighted project is the Shortgrass Prairie Bird Survey. Grassland bird species are among the most threatened. This project involved the western third of the state. Many species such as Baird's sparrow, western meadowlark, and grasshopper sparrow have shown marked declines in recent



The map shows locations where researchers documented 15,000 new records for reptile and amphibians at 4,000 sites, creating the *Kansas Herpetological Atlas*.

years. Conducted by the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, this effort established some outstanding monitoring information, providing sound data from which to judge the status of many species. This will translate into on-the-ground programs and projects to assist land managers and landowners through incentives designed to improve the status for these species.

A third featured project has been a study in the Red Hills to assess various grazing practices on ground-nesting birds. Paddock-style rotational grazing is catching on. There's also a candidate federal species, the lesser prairie chicken, in the area. We needed to know whether this intensive style of patch grazing impacts this species along with other ground nesters. The study generally found no significant differences between impacts of paddock style grazing to other management schemes, at least in the Red Hills. This gives some relief to the fear that intensifying the concentration of livestock might have negative affects on pro-

ductivity of ground nesting birds such as the lesser prairie chicken. SWG projects are making measurable strides in our knowledge base, helping us to keep common species common while delicately addressing sensitive species needs. Taking pro-active approaches based on sound science is good management.

Future generations will come to know the privileges of enjoying wildlife and wild places, and they'll know them because of the efforts of some very determined conservationists earlier in the century. These were people who saw the value wildlife add to the quality of life for Kansans, and employed reasonable approaches to keeping wildlife off of endangered species lists. We all expect it. Everyone wants it. Thankfully, we'll have it if we maintain the course and see the long-term funding through Teaming With Wildlife and State Wildlife Grants fulfilled. ♡



Some of the grassland bird species have shown declines in recent years. One SWG study looked at the effects grazing and burning had on these species.

Projects of State Wildlife Grants from the beginning in 2001

(Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program, or WCRP, projects were the predecessors SWG efforts for the first year.)

Assessment of Streams on Public Lands

Streams occurring on public lands throughout Kansas were surveyed with a focus on determining the extent of exotic species. Surveys were done through private contract and by KDWP’s Environmental Services Section staff.

Volunteer Stream Monitoring

Contracted through Stream Link of the Kaw Valley Heritage Alliance, this project involved around 9,000 students and 760 adults in assessing water quality in streams.

Support

“Kansas Waters” Exhibit

WCRP funds helped the Lee Richardson Zoo at Garden City complete a great water education exhibit.

Assist with

Monarch Watch Program

This WCRP project supplied some additional support for the Monarch Watch Program, a valuable educational effort of the University of Kansas.

Sensitive Species Data Management

Cooperating with the Kansas Biological Survey, this effort incorporated new records of sensitive species into a data management program to make it easier to assess distributions and status of species.

Develop Recovery Plans

SWG supported recovery plans for additional state sensitive species, including the prairie mole cricket, peppered chub, and Henslow’s sparrow.

Apply Recovery Strategies

SWG supported work toward recovery strategies for the Arkansas River darter, snowy plover, slender walker snail and the spotted skunk.

Section-based Inventory of Shortgrass Prairie Birds

Contracted through the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, this several year project assessed the occurrence of grassland species which are showing some of the most marked declines in populations of any birds. This baseline information will be used for cooperative and incentive programs for improving the situation for these species.

Nature Center Operations and Conservation Education Services

SWG allowed for continuation and expansion of some services offered from nature centers and through the Wildlife Education Service of KDWP.

Summer Naturalist Program

Initially the WCRP program allowed for continuation of the popular Summer Naturalist Program at our state parks.

Kanopolis State Park Wildlife Viewing Development

A wildlife viewing area and trail were part of this initial WCRP project.

Support for Southeast Kansas Nature Center

This project provided some assistance for this special nature center in the southeast corner of the state.

Evaluate Ground Nesters in Red Hills Under Varying Grazing Practices

One of our highlighted projects, this effort provides valuable guidance for assessing paddock-style grazing impacts to birds such as the lesser prairie chicken.

Evaluate Freshwater Mussel Populations in Southeastern Kansas Streams

This recently completed project supplied thorough assessments for some of the states most sensitive species. This baseline information and update of status will assist in recovery projects for many sensitive species in this part of the state and which constitute a large percentage of the state's threatened and endangered species.

Develop a Non-indigenous Invasive Species Management Plan

The biggest threat to many Species of Greatest Conservation Need may be exotic species. SWG supported the development of strategies to deal with this pressing threat.



Scientists search an area for reptiles and amphibians while compiling the data for the *Kansas Herpetological Atlas*.
Suzanne Collins photo

Inventory for Natural Areas in Northeast Kansas

Using the Kansas Biological Survey, this effort identified remnant natural areas of northeast Kansas and assessed their biological communities.

Distribution and Status of Kansas Herpetofauna in Need of Information

As another featured project in this article, the Kansas Herp Atlas supplied a monumental amount of information on the distribution and occurrence of Kansas herps.

Develop State Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan

SWG helped pay for the preparation of "A Future for Kansas Wildlife," Kansas' Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan.

Statewide Survey of Sensitive Fishes and Mussels

SWG supplied funds to continue the statewide stream survey, supplying critical monitoring information for Kansas stream fish and mussel species.

Anderson County Prairie Conservation Project

This was a project that allowed The Nature Conservancy to acquire some critical property adjacent to existing tallgrass prairie owned by the organization and through willing sellers.

Aquatic GAP

This project, conducted through Kansas State University, is permitting the application of fish species observation records through critical analysis to determine existing and predicted distributions. The effort will help reveal gaps in distributions and guidance in recovery projects for sensitive species.

Detection of T-2 Producing Fusarium Species in Kansas Soybeans

Biologists are concerned about T-2 fusarium, a fungi which is toxic to birds. This effort will identify the distribution of this threat so that future actions may be developed to address it.

Instream Flow Assessment

This is a project to assess existing instream flows and determine their utility in maintaining healthy aquatic habitats.