

# Council Grove Wildlife Area News



Area News – Spring 2015

## New Cooperative Project Completed to Enhance Access to the Neosho River

Getting spring fever? Are you anxious to get outside and explore outdoor Kansas? The completion of a recent cooperative project should make that a little easier along the Neosho River within the Council Grove Wildlife Area. The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism and the Morris County Road Department have recently completed a cooperative project to enhance access to the largest tributary of Council Grove Lake. The two government entities have worked together to complete a plan to develop a graveled road leading south of the tiny community of Kelso, along the west right-of-way of Kelso Road, just north of the Neosho River bridge. At the end of the road, beneath the bridge, is a graveled parking area that provides easy access to the river for fishing or enhances access for hunting, and canoeing or kayaking.



New road leading from the Kelso Church to the Neosho River.



New parking area beneath the Neosho River bridge.

For those interested in paddling (currently low lake levels may restrict some access), the project enhances access to nearly 2 miles of river above an existing boat ramp near Gilmore Creek. Those seeking even a longer trip could travel another 1 mile past the ramp to the lake, then travel north a quarter mile to a recently enhanced landing near the dead-end of M Avenue. For the more adventuresome, an additional option would be to paddle 1.5 miles further along the south edge of the lake to the Corps of Engineers boat ramp in Canning Creek Cove Park.



Fishing, hunting, and canoeing access to the Neosho River has been enhanced.

The Kansas Dept. of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism would like to sincerely thank the Morris County Road Department for their significant contributions toward completion of this project!

## **Council Grove Lake – 2015 Fishing Outlook**

District Fisheries Biologist, Craig Johnson, has provided the following information to assist anglers when planning upcoming fishing trips. Information is provided based upon his annual population sampling.

**White crappie- Fair** Fish sampling efforts during October 2014 produced the lowest crappie catch of the last 5 years. Crappie production has been down the last several years with the drought and low water conditions. With low production during recent spawns there are few small crappie coming up to take the place of the larger fish. Anglers reported good catches of quality sized crappie during the winter months. While the numbers of crappie may be down during 2015, the fish that are available are of sizes that are very desirable to anglers.



**Saugeye- Good** Anglers should expect good saugeye fishing during 2015. The 2014 fall sample showed an increase in density and an increase in numbers of larger fish. 97% of the sampled saugeye exceeded the 15-inch minimum length limit so anglers won't have to sort through many fish to find keepers.



**White bass- Fair** The persistent droughty conditions have resulted in a drop of white bass numbers. The 2014 fall test netting sample resulted in the lowest catch rate for white bass for the last five years. Nearly 50% of the white bass sampled were between 12 and 15-inches so the fish that are present are the older and larger fish. Anglers should expect fewer white bass than last year but the fish that are caught will be quality fish.



**Wiper- Good** Wiper were first stocked in to Council Grove Reservoir in 2008. Fish exceeded the 18 inch minimum length limit by the fall of 2010. The last stocking of wiper occurred in 2012 and no wiper were requested for stocking in 2013, 2014 or 2015. Wiper catch rate obtained during fall test netting samples remained stable during 2013 and 2014. Sampled wipers ranged in length from 16 inches to over 21.5 inches. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the gill net sampled wipers exceeded the 18-inch minimum length limit. Anglers should expect good wiper fishing during 2015 with the chance at fish over 22 inches.



**Channel catfish- Fair** Channel catfish density increased in the 2014 sample, but remains below average for the lake. Roughly half of the channel catfish sampled during October 2014 were in the 16.4 to 24 inch size range. Anglers should expect Fair fishing for channel catfish during 2015. Very Good to Excellent catfish action can develop during times of inflow as the fish concentrate to feed in the creeks and other areas with current. A break from the drought and the low water conditions would not only benefit the channel catfish but also all sportfish populations.



## **Chase State Fishing Lake – A Prairie Jewel To Satisfy Your Outdoor Craving**

Just a half hour drive south of Council Grove is Chase State Fishing Lake. This blue jewel of public water, set amidst gorgeous tallgrass prairie, provides ample opportunity to explore outdoor Kansas. Located between the Flint Hills communities of Cottonwood Falls and Elmdale, Chase State Fishing Lake and Wildlife Area provides scenic outdoor experiences within a nearly 110 acre lake and 385 acre public land complex.



Scenic views of Chase State Fishing Lake.

Like to fish, hunt, camp, hike, or just soak up the Flint Hills environment? Chase State Fishing Lake can provide. Anglers can find good numbers of channel catfish, crappie, bluegill, saugeye, white bass, largemouth bass, and spotted bass. A boat ramp, courtesy dock, fishing piers, and mowed shoreline provide ample opportunity to access the water for any fishermen. Hunters can find opportunities to hunt prairie chicken, small game, waterfowl, & more.



Successful crappie and catfish anglers at Chase State Fishing Lake.

Visitors hoping to capture a taste of the Flint Hills can hike onto adjacent hilltops and immerse themselves in diverse prairie plant communities, among historic buffalo wallows, all while enjoying spectacular views of the lake and surrounding countryside. A scenic waterfall can be found at the end of a short hike, along the mowed path across the lake dam, at the end of the lake spillway. For those that like to camp, primitive facilities are provided and include a vault toilet, shelter house, picnic tables, and fire-rings. Take an hour, or spend a day, and explore the outdoor offerings at Chase State Fishing Lake!



Scenic waterfall at Chase State Fishing Lake.

### **What's Being Done to Improve Fishing in Kansas?**

Ever wonder how the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism works to develop or improve fishing in the sunflower state? Craig Johnson, District Fisheries Biologist for the El Dorado District has developed a number of short videos highlighting the work done by fisheries biologists to improve fishing throughout Kansas. His most recent video entitled "Underwater in Kansas: An Anglers Dream" provides a unique underwater perspective of schooling fish that can entice any angler to wet a line. Other video topics highlight recent work to enhance fish habitat and sample sport fish populations. Ever wonder how fisheries biologists do that? See it for yourself as each video is only several minutes in length, but provide a fantastic summary of the work done by biologists to enhance fishing opportunities in our state. They are a must see for anyone with an interest in fishing in Kansas. Check out all of the videos at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCA7nV8A8XuVEGVRAhIULitA>



### **Morel Mushroom Hunting Tips**

Spring is morel mushroom time! Increasingly more visitors to the wildlife area are seeking this delicious member of our Kansas flora. The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) reminds hunters of a few tips for a legal, safe and fun mushroom hunt:

Hunters should do their research prior to consuming any mushrooms as some forms found in Kansas can be toxic.



Stick to state parks and wildlife areas. Walk-In Hunting Access (WIHA) areas are not open for mushroom hunting. These lands are private property and accessing them for anything other than hunting game during the identified access period is trespass unless hunters have the appropriate landowner permission.

Be prepared to walk. The use of motorized vehicles on public lands is restricted to maintained roads only, so if your mushroom honey-hole is off the beaten-path, strap on those hiking boots.

Be aware of your surroundings. Public lands are open for many types of hunting and fishing activities. This time of year, mushroom hunters can expect to encounter turkey hunters and anglers looking to lure in white bass and crappie. There's plenty of space for everyone, so when in doubt, move to another spot.

Enjoy your harvest. Mushrooms found on KDWPT public lands may only be harvested for personal consumption and selling mushrooms harvested from KDWPT-managed lands is against state law (see K.A.R. 15-8-20). You've worked hard for your harvest, so enjoy the fruits of your labor and heat up a frying pan.

## Prescribed Burning – The Goals of a Habitat Manager

The spring burning season is well underway. The importance of spring burning as a land management tool is apparent throughout the Flint Hills during the month of April. Recent estimates from the spring of 2014 indicate that land managers in the region utilized fire extensively. In Morris County, nearly 63,000 acres were estimated burned. In nearby Chase County over 186,000 acres were estimated burned, while Butler County approached 95,000 acres. Ranchers in the region utilize burning to improve grass production and grazing for livestock ultimately improving their bottom line. What about those responsible for managing lands for public recreation such as lands managed by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism (KDWPT)? Does KDWPT use fire for the same reasons as the rancher? Although some commonality exists, there are differences. Here's why.



Prescribed burning can be an effective management tool to promote plant diversity and enhance wildlife habitat.

KDWPT wildlife areas are managed to provide habitat for wildlife and recreational opportunities for the public. Like ranchers, we have a respect for our state's prairie heritage, and use fire to change or enhance certain plant communities. We too use fire to control trees and brush and encourage grasses and forbs (broad-leaved plants). While the rancher's primary focus must be on beef production, the KDWPT must focus on wildlife production. This is of course not to say that the burning efforts of ranchers provide no habitat benefits to wildlife, or that KDWPT has no interest in working with neighboring ranchers to promote benefits to beef and wildlife, but rather it is to say that priorities are often different and so then are the methods employed to meet those different priorities.

As an example, let's consider **burn timing**. To enhance beef gains, spring burns for the rancher are often timed to promote grass production. Often those burns are conducted in mid-April in the Flint Hills. KDWPT burns may also enhance grass prevalence, but may also be conducted at different times of the growing season to meet other objectives as well. KDWPT burns may be conducted in March or July to promote forbs, in late April to discourage grasses that are undesirable for habitat purposes (smooth brome and tall fescue), or early May to late summer to discourage excessive brush. Ultimately KDWPT uses fire in an effort to enhance the number of different kinds of plants and believe that lands that are diverse are more attractive to a visiting public, and benefit many different wildlife species including game species such as greater prairie chicken, bobwhite quail, wild turkey, and white-tailed deer. Habitat areas that contain diverse plant communities often provide diverse food and cover options to meet the ever changing needs of wildlife species throughout the year.



This prescribed burn was planned to control invasive cedar trees and smooth brome, ultimately enhancing the prevalence of other plants valued by wildlife.

Next, let's look at **burn scope**. Burn scope refers to the extent of a burn, or how much plant material was consumed in the fire. Is all plant material planned to be burned or only portions? One benefit of spring burning for the rancher is the removal of dead plant material that remains from previous growing seasons. By removing the old dead vegetation with a fire, cattle can more efficiently graze new vegetation that is often more nutritious therefore improving weight gains over time. For the habitat manager, burning can provide similar benefits by improving forage availability and quality for some wildlife species such as white-tailed deer. However, for the habitat manager, land entirely without vegetation from past growing seasons is often not desirable. Residual vegetation (that which remains from previous growing seasons) is needed to provide wildlife with concealment and protection from the elements. For wildlife species that nest on the ground, residual vegetation is critical. It provides the material to construct the nest, to insulate eggs or young, and to conceal the parent and young from predators. Without cover provided by last year's plant growth, spring nesting wildlife species, including prairie chicken and quail, may refuse to nest or nesting attempts fail because they are not concealed well enough and are detected by predators. If adults fail to nest or successfully raise young, populations soon decline. When conducting a prescribed burn with wildlife in mind, the values of burn scope should be considered to insure that some residual vegetation remains within the management unit, or nearby, to provide cover for nesting and protection from the elements and predators.



This "patchy" prescribed burn will provide diverse habitat benefits later in the season. Nesting cover has been maintained by excluding fire (background) and brood-rearing cover will become established in the adjacent burned area (foreground).

Like burn scope, **burn scale** is important to consider. Burn scale refers to the size of a burn. Is the burn planned to be 30 acres in size or 300 acres? The rancher interested in maximizing cattle gains for a yearling stocker herd may wish to burn an entire pasture, preferring to burn at the larger end of the scale. Those interested in the management of habitat for game species such as deer, turkey, quail, and even prairie chicken, may want to plan burns at the smaller end of the scale. These game species often prefer to spend much of their time in areas where different habitat types come together. They like diversity and they like it nearby. By conducting smaller burns and making them irregular in shape and size, structural diversity of the habitat is enhanced. These species then don't have to travel far to meet changing needs. As an example let's consider the changing needs of bobwhite quail and prairie chickens. Habitats chosen by adults for nesting may not be well suited for providing cover and food for young. Shortly after hatching, young game birds must begin to feed on their own. They must find habitat that is rich in insects (food) yet provides them with a canopy for concealment and protection from the weather and predators (cover). This habitat has to provide food and cover needs while also allowing them to move about within it. Therefore it is critical that some bare ground be available to allow these tiny young an opportunity to travel to carry out daily activities. Burning does just that as it removes old vegetation, encouraging bare ground within developing plant stands. For the habitat manager, burn scale is important. A goal should be to provide patches of different plant age and diversity because diverse habitats are more likely to meet the changing needs of wildlife species and a wider array of species.

Let's now consider **burn frequency**. Historical accounts indicate burning within the Great Plains prairie region occurred approximately every 3 to 7 years. Those accounts indicate that burning was often initiated by Native Americans or by lightning and occurred during many different months of the year. Prairie plants and associated wildlife species evolved under such indeterminate conditions. Diversity was maintained because fires occurred irregularly during different years and time of the year. Burn frequency within today's culture can vary widely within the Flint Hills region with some land managers completing burns annually or nearly so, while others may exclude fire entirely. The resulting vegetation can thus vary widely through the region. Habitat managers in Kansas often try to strike a balance somewhere in the middle by periodically returning fire to an area every 3 to 4 years. By doing so they insure that fire is returned frequently enough to control woody vegetation to maintain the grassland system, but infrequent enough to allow some grassland species to utilize residual vegetation to meet life history needs.



Prescribed fire may also be used as a management tool within woodlands. Although fire frequency is likely needed less than in grassland systems, fire can provide valuable habitat benefits. This woodland burn had several goals. The burn was conducted primarily to control invasive cedar trees. It was conducted under conditions that generated enough heat to damage cedars, but remained cool enough to avoid damage to most mature oak, hickory, and walnut in the stand. The burn will also harm some of the brush, encouraging adjacent prairie plant species to occur at the woodland floor, enhancing habitat for quail, deer, and turkey. The burn may also encourage young oaks to enter the stand as competition for sunlight has been reduced by removing the cedar trees.

Lastly let's discuss the value of **heterogeneity**. Heterogeneity can be defined as differing or opposite in structure or quality. More simply it can mean dissimilar, varied, or diverse. The term is an important one to the habitat manager. The value of diversity has already been shared, but of value for consideration is the importance of managing lands in ways differing from those around you. That may include how you use prescribed fire to manage your land as compared to your neighbors. If everyone manages lands the same, heterogeneity is reduced. There will be a small suite of wildlife species that do well with that type of management, but for others their habitat needs will not be met and their populations will be reduced or removed. If some manage differently, including with the use of fire, heterogeneity is enhanced and varied habitat types will exist across the landscape. A larger suite of wildlife species will be able to find what they need in those varied habitats and populations will be more likely to remain strong.



This prescribed burn illustrates the concept of heterogeneity. The burn has provided a varied habitat. This varied landscape may provide attractive habitat for prairie chickens. Nesting habitat is maintained with the presence of residual vegetation to the left, while preferred brood-rearing habitat can be found in recently burned areas to the right.

The goals of prescribed burning to a habitat manager may well be in line with those of the rancher, but may also differ. By encouraging plant diversity and providing varied vegetative structure, the KDWPT can enhance habitats on public lands for the benefit of area wildlife species and the people of Kansas.

### **Anglers and Boaters Reminded to Take Precautions to Control Aquatic Nuisance Species!**

Unfortunately more Kansas waters were recently added to the growing list of those threatened by aquatic nuisance species (ANS). ANS waters are defined as those containing Asian carp, white perch, or zebra mussels. In 2013, zebra mussels were found in Clinton and Glen Elder Reservoirs, and in Wabaunsee Lake and Lake Shawnee. In 2014, zebra mussels were found in Pomona Reservoir.



Asian Carp



White Perch



Zebra Mussel

Why are these species a problem? ANS often become dominant within an area. They can out-compete native species for food or space and can reduce biological diversity or the assemblage of plants and animals within our native habitats. Ultimately, ANS species such as zebra mussels, asian carp, and white perch, threaten to alter aquatic habitats, of which our wildlife species depend, including those species sought by anglers in Kansas!

Regulations have recently been enacted to prevent the spread of ANS. Boaters and anglers are reminded to follow these regulations while visiting Kansas waters.

1. Livewells and bilges must be drained and drain plugs removed from all vessels being removed from waters of the state before transport on a public highway.
2. No person may possess ANY live fish upon departure from any designated ANS body of water.
3. Live baitfish may be caught and used as live bait only within the common drainage where caught. However, bluegill and green sunfish collected from non-designated ANS waters may be possessed or used as live bait anywhere in the state. Live baitfish shall not be transported and used above any upstream dam or barrier that prohibits the normal passage of fish.



For a list of ANS designated waters please refer to the 2015 Kansas Fishing Regulations Summary (page 30) or visit the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism website at [www.ksoutdoors.com](http://www.ksoutdoors.com) and click on "Fishing", then "Aquatic Nuisance Species". Other ANS designated waters near Council Grove Reservoir include Marion, Milford, Melvern, El Dorado, and John Redmond Reservoirs, Coffey County Lake, Chase State Fishing Lake, Council Grove City Lake, and Lake Wabaunsee. Streams and rivers below these Kansas lakes are also designated ANS waters.

To protect our aquatic habitats, follow these simple steps at every lake, wetland, and river, every time:

**CLEAN:** Inspect all equipment for anything attached (plants, animals, and mud) and **remove** anything that is found.

**DRAIN:** Empty all water from equipment (livewell, bilge, bait bucket, etc.) before using at a different location.

**DRY:** Dry all equipment for a minimum of 5 days before using it again. If you need to use it sooner, wash with hot (140 degree) water.



## **Annual Youth Spring Turkey Hunt a Success (AGAIN!)**

The Council Grove 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Spring Turkey Hunt was conducted on Saturday, April 4. This year's hunt sought to accommodate area youth ages 11-16. A cool spring morning did not hamper 14 eager area youngsters the morning of the hunt. By day's end, all of the participants were fortunate to see or hear wild turkeys. Seven of the participants harvested a turkey while others enjoyed encounters with their quarry but were unable to harvest. For those fortunate to harvest, the event was memorable, because six of them harvested their first wild turkey.

The primary goal of this hunt was to enhance outdoor recreation opportunities for area youngsters, and to bring together individuals with an interest in spring turkey hunting. This event was designed to pair young hunters with knowledgeable and experienced adult volunteers, in an effort to initiate or further entrench participants into the enjoyable spring pastime of wild turkey hunting.



All participants enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to receive hands-on hunting instruction, turkey hunting gear, and meals. The hunters truly appreciated the efforts of all involved and volunteers were rewarded with many thanks.

Area Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism staff would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for their assistance with another successful event:

**Organizations:** The National Wild Turkey Federation, The Flint Hills Chapter of Quail & Upland Wildlife Federation, The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism, The U.S. Army Corps Of Engineers, JD Taxidermy of Alta Vista, KS, and The Council Grove Chapter of Ducks Unlimited.

**Individuals:** Spencer Tomb, Allan Cashman, Mike Wells, Jim Evans, Tyson Powell, Dryden Powell, Josh Ehrlich, Kevin Ehrlich, Brad Richardson, Josh Patry, Jason Harris, Dean McDaniel, Trent Siegle, Charles Walker, and Don True.

Special thanks must also be extended to numerous landowners for their generosity in allowing youth to hunt turkeys on their property.

Volunteers interested in helping with next year's hunt can contact: Brent Konen – Council Grove Wildlife Area Manager, #620/767-5900.



2015 Youth Turkey Hunt Participants

photo by Trent Siegle

Would you like more information about the Council Grove Wildlife Area?

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