

# Council Grove Wildlife Area News



Area News – Fall 2015

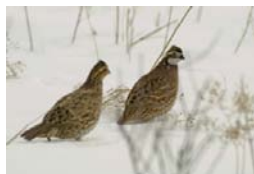
## 2015/2016 Hunting Outlook:

Hunters should be aware that abundant precipitation throughout the month of May caused significant lake flooding (12.6' above conservation elevation) that persisted until early August. Most area habitats were impacted by this significant flood event that persisted for over 2 months. It has been estimated that approximately 70-75% of the wildlife area flooded. As a result, nearly 65% of area crop fields were either lost to flooding or remained too wet to plant. Resulting natural vegetation that became established in crop fields later in August as flood waters withdrew, was often not desirable or was deemed noxious. Species such as cocklebur, johnsongrass, and bindweed were common. To control these species, area farmers were allowed to disk or spray these fields to prevent further spread. As a result, many area crop fields have little or no food or cover value for wildlife. Other area habitats including area woodlands have been impacted. Understory vegetation in many woodland environments was negatively impacted and will provide diminished habitat value. Portions of several area grassland tracts were also impacted by the flood, reducing cover values for quail and other wildlife.



**Flooding impacted recreational opportunities during much of the summer of 2015. Impacts will be felt into the fall hunting season as well because flooding degraded the quality of area habitats.**

Upland Birds: The fall hunting outlook for quail on the wildlife area is fair. Hunters should see quail numbers that are similar or slightly reduced as compared to last fall. Good food and cover conditions from last year, followed then by a winter without prolonged periods of extreme cold, or snow or ice coverage, enhanced winter survival. Breeding populations this spring were the highest recorded since a survey route was established in 2003. Prolonged cool and wet periods throughout most of the month of May appear to have occurred prior to nest hatching and most brood rearing, insuring a decent level of production this summer in suitable habitats on nearby private lands and within upland habitats away from flood zones on the wildlife area. As a result of a strong carry over population from last year and fair production from this year, many landowners in Morris County have reported seeing improved quail numbers. Unfortunately however, extensive flooding on the wildlife area likely lead to nesting losses and reduced nesting habitat availability. Quail within flood prone habitats did not likely fare as well as those using drier sites. Many area habitats will have reduced cover and food values this fall and winter as a result of the flood. As such, hunters cannot expect quail to be found in all of the same areas as in the past. Hunters that utilize dogs should be aware that cockleburs are abundant along many field edges this year. The wildlife area lies outside the primary range of ring-necked pheasant. Hunters occasionally encounter pheasants on the area, but numbers are low.



**Bobwhite pair. Female (left) & male (right).**

**Waterfowl:** The fall hunting outlook for waterfowl on the area is fair. Waterfowl populations are reported to remain strong following another good production year within breeding habitats to the north. Habitat conditions however here are not nearly as strong as those experienced in 2013. Abundant precipitation in May and flooding into early August kept lake levels full for most of the summer. Food producing vegetation could not become established on lake fringes because of the flood and late dewatering. As such, few food resources will be available for waterfowl this season. Late summer and early fall weather has been mild and dry, contributing to declining lake levels which has begun to pull water away from cover edges. Currently hunters have adequate opportunity to conceal themselves for a hunt, but if mild and dry conditions prevail later into the fall, hunters may find it more challenging to hide later this season. Weather will undoubtedly play a part (as it always does) in determining the extent of waterfowl use this year as well. Many years see waterfowl numbers achieve an early peak in late October, followed later by a more significant peak in mid-December. Hunters are encouraged to visit the area website to view weekly waterfowl population and habitat condition updates.



Drake gadwall.

**Deer:** The fall hunting outlook for deer on the area is fair. The 2012 EHD outbreak that struck many Midwestern states is believed to have had an impact in Kansas, but deer losses were not as extensive as other nearby states. Frequent and large reports of die-offs were lacking within the county and on the wildlife area in that year. Regardless, hunter reports from 2013 indicated that many hunters saw fewer deer and fewer older bucks. Reports from the 2014 season however were more optimistic as hunters reported seeing more deer including some quality bucks. Although lake flooding has impacted woodland and cropland habitats on the wildlife area and will diminish the ability of the property to hold animals, deer remain relatively common on the wildlife area. Antlerless deer and fawns were a common sight this summer, and reports of a few nice bucks have been received, suggesting that an area breeding population remains strong and will provide hunting opportunity into the future.



White-tailed buck and doe.

**Turkey:** The fall hunting outlook for turkey on the area is fair. Populations of adult birds remain at a solid level, but prolonged periods of cool wet weather in May and subsequent flooding until August negatively impacted nesting and brood rearing efforts. Relatively few young turkeys were seen this summer on the wildlife area. In addition, flooding impacted area woodland and cropland habitats which will diminish the areas ability to hold turkeys this fall and winter. Prior to the poor production experienced this year, turkey populations benefited from good production dating back to at least 2012. As a result, hunters may still find turkeys, but numbers will be fewer with a greater proportion of older birds in the population. Spring turkey hunters will likely find fewer jakes next year which in turn means fewer 2 year old birds in the spring of 2017.



Successful youth spring turkey hunter. Photo by Trent Siegle.

Small Game: Opportunities to hunt fox squirrel and cottontail exist. Of the two, fox squirrel, typically provide greater opportunity. With much of the area wooded and with hunting interest in squirrels low, the area can provide some attractive hunting during some years. Squirrel populations were likely reduced over much of the wildlife area this year however as a result of long term flooding. Squirrels that did survive the flooding will find fewer food resources to utilize this winter, perhaps reducing populations even further before next spring. Cottontail populations are often not strong, but can provide some opportunity in upland areas away from flood zones.



Successful squirrel hunter at Council Grove Wildlife Area.

Furbearers & Coyotes: The area is open to the hunting and trapping of furbearers. In most years, good opportunity to harvest beaver and raccoon exists. Coyote and bobcat populations are generally fair, providing some opportunity. A good number of young coyotes were observed on or near the wildlife area this summer suggesting that predator hunting opportunities may be enhanced this year.



Kansas Coyote.



Predator hunting continues to increase in popularity.

### **Quail Habitat Protected with Completion of Area Project!**

Have you ever heard of the word succession? If you like to hunt quail and have concern about declining quail populations, then it is a term you should be familiar with! Succession is a term used to describe a slow but gradual change or transition from one vegetation community to another. Succession is a natural process continually in motion often occurring at a faster rate as rainfall and soil productivity increase. It often describes the transition from vegetation communities dominated by annual plants (herb-like plants that complete their life cycle in one growing season), to perennial plants (those herb-like plants completing their life cycle in multiple years and coming back each year from roots), to brushy plants (woody plants such as plum and dogwood), to trees (woody plants such as cottonwood and ash). Quail are often described as an early succession species meaning that it requires a significant proportion of its habitat to be composed of annual plant communities. Because succession is always at work, quail habitats are slowly (although constantly) changing and those changes often reduce habitat values. Succession however can be slowed or reversed with management actions which in turn can enhance habitat for quail.



**An example of succession.**

**This grassland habitat is slowly changing into a woodland habitat. Without management actions such as the tree shearing captured above, the grassland would gradually transition to a wooded habitat (similar to that shown at the fringe of the grassland) and most habitat values for quail would be lost.**

A common failure of quail enthusiasts is the belief that habitat stays the same forever. Quality habitat areas that held good quail populations years ago may no longer provide birds with what they need. Subtle changes in the types of plants that exist on an area do occur and can begin to slowly decrease the value of the area to quail. These changes often go undetected to the casual observer, but can slowly decrease habitat quantity and quality unless active management is employed to maintain a productive condition. Quail have often been considered an edge and disturbance species. This means that they prefer to inhabit areas that have a lot of different plant communities close to one another. They must have nesting, brood rearing, loafing, and food cover available within a short distance. These different plant communities are maintained by instituting management practices (disturbances) such as burning, disking, grazing, tree shearing, shrub planting, and converting brome and fescue to native grass and forbs. Without management, quail habitat (grass, weeds, brush areas) eventually becomes habitat dominated by brush and trees and more suited for species such as deer and turkeys. In many eastern Kansas areas this subtle change in habitat has taken place and continues. More deer and turkey habitat is slowly being created enhancing populations of these species, while quail habitat slowly dwindles, thus causing quail numbers to decline.



**Tree shearing is a valuable management tool used to protect early succession habitats important to quail and other wildlife species. Since 2004, nearly 200 hours of mechanical tree shearing have been completed to protect such habitats.**

Because quail may be considered as a potential prey species for many types of predators, the habitat manager must provide cover to allow birds to rest safely and avoid predators when needed. This type of cover is called loafing and escape cover, and is typically provided by native shrubs or “thickets” such as plum, chokecherry, and dogwood. These thickets must be within or adjacent to other quality habitats which provide food and cover. Loafing and escape cover must provide concealment and protection from above and the side, and also allow mobility beneath. This type of cover must be well dispersed and comprise approximately 10 to 20 percent of the area throughout the habitat to always provide birds with a nearby safe haven. Thickets provide fewer benefits to quail if they are allowed to grow into trees or contain brome and fescue under stories.



**Quality quail cover often includes shrub habitats (like this one) that provide concealment and protection from the elements and predators. Loafing and escape cover is especially attractive to quail in transitional areas such as this one where different habitat types intersect.**

Vegetation communities and thus quail habitat are not immune to succession on the wildlife area. To remain productive, area habitats must be managed. Recently, area staff reviewed shrub habitats throughout the area and enhanced the long term viability of such habitats by completing management work and reversing succession. Staff simply entered shrub habitats and removed invading trees. In doing so, they removed future seed sources limiting tree spread and eliminated shading effects from trees providing more sunlight to encourage healthy shrub growth. Without this work, succession would advance and slowly but surely trees would become dominant, and important habitat for quail and other game species would decline.



**Succession was advancing in many area shrub habitats. Tree invasion threatened the future of important loafing and escape cover for quail. Recent management efforts to remove trees and reverse succession will protect the integrity of this important component of quality quail habitat. Nearly 110 man hours of work were needed to complete the project!**

### **Area Sunflower Fields Provide More Hunting Opportunity:**

Area dove hunters are well aware of KDWPT's efforts to provide early hunting opportunities by producing and managing sunflower fields each year. Dove hunting on these fields can be very good early in the season, but most hunters quickly lose interest as dove use wanes following harvest and migration. These fields can still provide good hunting opportunities later in the hunting season, even through the fall and winter. How is that you ask? Several game species continue to utilize these fields long after the September 1 dove opener has passed.

Dove hunters that visit fields later in the season after the crowds have gone, and birds have worked back into the fields again, are often rewarded with decent opportunities. Dove season extends into late October, followed again with a week or more of opportunity in November. Although most doves have migrated through Kansas by this time, pockets of good bird numbers can remain when fall conditions have been mild and food resources are abundant. Sometimes area sunflower fields fit that bill.



Quail hunters shouldn't overlook sunflower fields either. Because fall and winter sunflower fields don't provide much cover for quail, hunters should focus on sunflower field edges, particularly when they are adjacent to quality quail cover that include grasses, broad-leaved weeds, and brush. When you can find that mix of food and cover, you will often find a covey.



Crow hunting provides yet another wing-shooting opportunity. Seasons are lengthy (4 months), bag limits are not in effect, and like quail hunting, only a hunting license is required. Bird use is often significant on these fields during the fall and winter and hunting can be enhanced with the use of decoys and calls. Hunting interest for this species is often low, providing ample opportunity to enjoy a hunt in the absence of crowds unlike what may have been experienced earlier during the dove season.



Although wet conditions this past spring limited the size and number of sunflower fields on some public lands in the region, some opportunity still exists at Council Grove and El Dorado Wildlife Areas. At Council Grove Wildlife Area, a 13 acre tract can be found near Munkers Creek. The field can be accessed from the west by walking approximately 0.25 mile east of the parking area at the south end of 850 Road. The field can be accessed from the south by walking approximately 0.25 mile north of the eastern most parking area along the north side of Munkers Creek. At El Dorado Wildlife Area, two sunflower tracts (5 & 16 acres) exist. The 5 acre sunflower field can be accessed from the north by walking 0.1 mile southwest of the parking area south of the junction of NE Ellis Road and NE 20<sup>th</sup> Street. The same field can be accessed from the south by walking 0.25 mile north of the parking area north of the junction of NE Ellis Road and NE 10<sup>th</sup> Street. The 16 acre sunflower field can be found by walking 0.35 mile southwest of the parking area that lies west of the Walnut River on NE 90<sup>th</sup> Street.

## **Fall Outdoor Youth Event a Success!**

The Council Grove 12th Annual Outdoor Youth Event was conducted on Saturday, October 24th at Council Grove Lake. Thirty-two youngsters attended this year, and appeared to enjoy a nice fall afternoon afield. This special event provided participants with a free opportunity to enhance shotgun and archery shooting and hunting safety skills, ultimately encouraging them to spend additional time in Kansas great outdoors! The event is part of KDWPT's "Pass It On" Program, designed to recruit and retain Kansas hunters, particularly youngsters.

The afternoon began with a hearty lunch provided by the Flint Hills Chapter of Quail and Upland Wildlife Federation (QUWF), followed by a brief orientation of the event. Participants were then divided into four groups and allowed to visit each of the four different stations for nearly one hour. Designed to provide as much hands-on instruction as possible, visitors to each station received a brief orientation by a certified instructor, then jumped right in to actual shotgun, archery, and hunting skills development training. Two of the stations provided students with opportunities to learn fun wing-shooting techniques with youth model 20 gauge shotguns and flying clay targets. A third station provided opportunities to develop or enhance their skills at shooting youth compound archery equipment at life-sized Kansas game animal targets. The final station provided students with opportunities to enhance their hunting safety skills by completing several field exercises.



**Archery Station**



**Shotgun Station**



**Hunting Safety Skills Station**

Event organizers were pleased with how all of the kids conducted themselves during the event. All participants were responsible, improved their shooting and safety skills, and most importantly had fun! All participants were provided with firearm safety merchandise from Manufacturing Services Inc. of Wichita, and awarded door prizes, provided by the Bill Young Foundation, Dennis DeLay, and Clear Image Camo, to encourage them to take what they had learned one step further and do some hunting this fall. One lucky attendee also won a youth model .243 rifle complete with a scope, donated by the Chisholm Trail Chapter of Safari Club International.

Gear and supplies, including shotguns, shells, bows, arrows, targets, and eye and ear protection were provided by KDWPT's Pass It On, Hunter Education, and Archery in the Schools Programs. These programs are designed to reverse the declining trend of hunting participation in Kansas. These programs encourage youth to spend time afield by introducing them to shooting sports and hunting. Their goal is to ensure that every youngster, or person that has an interest in hunting, is provided with an opportunity to experience this treasured pastime.

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

**Organizations:** Flint Hills Chapter of Quail and Upland Wildlife Federation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bill Young Foundation, Chisholm Trail Chapter of Safari Club International, Adams Lumber, Manufacturing Services Inc., Clear Image Camo, and KDWPT's "Pass It On", Hunter Education, and Archery in the Schools Programs.

**Individuals:** Mike Miller, Wayne Doyle, Dave Adams, Jesse Gehrt, Amanda Alexander, Dennis DeLay, Allan Cashman, Nadia Marji, Mike Lowry, Steve Prockish, Chris Myers, Kurtis Meierhoff, Faron Adams, Chris Grant, Steve Skerce, Carol Dague, Phil Taunton, Michael Pearce, Leland Viar, and numerous parents.

## **Commission Approves Proposed Hunting and Fishing License Fees:**

The Kansas Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) Commission approved a proposal to raise fees for fishing and hunting licenses at their public meeting in Burlington on October 22, 2015. The new fees will be effective January 1, 2016. KDWPT staff have been discussing fee increases since early last spring and presented a draft proposal before the Commission at their public meeting in August.

Fee increases were deemed necessary to ensure pivotal programs important to hunters and anglers can be maintained and enhanced. Basic hunting and fishing license fees haven't increased since 2002, and the price of resident deer and turkey permits haven't increased since 1984. Inflation has increased the cost of doing business by almost 30 percent since 2002, and the uncommitted balance of the Wildlife Fee Fund was beginning to decline. License and permit revenues go into the Wildlife Fee Fund to pay for wildlife and fisheries programs, which receive no State General Fund money.

By unanimously approving the proposed increases, the Commission ensured that programs such as Walk-in Hunting Access (WIHA), Community Fisheries Assistance (CFAP), Pass It On, Fishing Impoundment and Stream Access (FISH), and Wildlife Habitat Improvement (WHIP) will continue to provide hunters and anglers with high-quality outdoor opportunities. Increased revenues will also help fund day-to-day business such as operation of four fish hatcheries, law enforcement, public lands management and private land programs.



License fees provide essential funding for land management and hunting access programs.

Beginning January 1, 2016 a resident annual hunting or fishing license will cost \$25. The current fee is \$18. However, value-added options are built into the new fee structure, including a discount for purchasing a combination hunt/fish annual license (\$45) and an early-buy combination discount (\$40) if purchased before February 1. Also included are multi-year hunting and fishing licenses that will provide savings. A five-year fishing or hunting license is priced at \$100, and a five-year combination hunting/fishing license is \$180, a savings of \$70 if those licenses were purchased individually each year.

Nonresidents will pay \$95 for an annual hunting license and \$50 for an annual fishing license.

Resident deer permits will go from \$30 to \$40; nonresidents will pay \$415 for the combination (one antlered deer/one antlerless whitetail) permit. Resident turkey permits are set at \$25 and nonresidents will pay \$50 for a fall turkey permit and \$60 for a spring turkey permit.

Lifetime hunting and fishing licenses will go from \$440 to \$500 and \$880 to \$960 for a combination.

Youth license and permit fees were not changed, and the senior lifetime hunt/fish combination license (\$40) will not change. Vendor and convenience fees of \$2.50 are added at the point of purchase.





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

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