

Council Grove Wildlife Area News



Area News – Fall 2016

2016/2017 Hunting Outlook:

Habitat conditions overall are improved as compared to last year. Unfortunately however, for the second year in a row, lake flooding impacted area habitats during the growing season and disrupted some nesting efforts within lower elevation habitats on the wildlife area. Fortunately, the 8' flood that occurred in late May of this year was not as significant as the flood of 2015 which reached 12.6' above conservation elevation. This year's flood also only persisted for approximately 2 weeks while in comparison the 2015 flood persisted for over 2 months. Some area woodlands adjacent to the lake were impacted yet again and understory vegetation in many woodland environments remains negatively impacted. Although those habitats remain diminished, they are improved as compared to those present one year ago. Some early spring planted crops were lost to this year's flood, but waters were evacuated soon enough in the growing season to allow area producers to replant most fields. Although June was warm and relatively dry, timely precipitation throughout the remainder of the summer encouraged strong plant growth. Area crop and native grass fields responded to the abundance of precipitation to produce record yields and robust vegetative conditions. Hunters should expect to find many area habitats to contain tall and dense plant communities.



The favored fall season is upon us.

Although habitat conditions have again been impacted by spring flooding, area habitats overall are improved as compared to last year.

Upland Birds: The fall hunting outlook for quail on the wildlife area is fair. Hunters should see quail numbers that are similar or slightly increased as compared to last fall. Although many wildlife area habitats were significantly impacted by floods last year, several hunters reported finding some birds last season. For the second year in a row we experienced a winter without prolonged periods of extreme cold, or snow or ice coverage, enhancing winter survival. Breeding populations this spring were the second 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. Hot and dry conditions during the month of June may have negatively impacted quail production to a degree, but observations of several broods this summer support the claim that fair production occurred again this year. As a result of a strong carry over population from last year and fair production from this year, many landowners in Morris County have again reported seeing improved quail numbers. Many area habitats that were impacted from the significant flooding that occurred in 2015 have responded favorably, developing into desirable annual plant communities that will provide good food and cover conditions for quail and other wildlife this fall and winter. Timely precipitation throughout July and August produced robust habitat conditions. Hunters should expect to find many area habitats to contain tall and dense vegetation. Hunters that utilize dogs should be aware that cockleburs are abundant along some field edges again 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.



Northern Bobwhite.

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, flooding into early June, and timely precipitation throughout much of the summer have kept lake levels full. Food producing vegetation could not become established on lake fringes because of the flood and full lake levels. As such, few food resources will be available for waterfowl this season. With full lake levels, hunters have adequate opportunity to conceal themselves for a hunt, and boat access from wildlife area ramps remains good. 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 pintail.

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. As expected, hunter reports from 2015 were less desirable as significant lake flooding impacted woodland and cropland habitats on the wildlife area and diminished the ability of the property to hold animals. Hunters reported seeing fewer deer but sightings of some quality bucks still occurred. Although some woodland habitats were again impacted by flooding in 2016, overall habitat conditions are improved as compared to those found a year ago. Improved woodland habitat conditions and robust native grass and cropland habitats that benefited from timely precipitation during much of the summer, will provide attractive habitat for deer, particularly as weather conditions deteriorate later this winter. Although deer sightings and deer sign appeared less frequently this year, antlerless deer and fawns were still 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.

Turkey: The fall hunting outlook for turkey on the area is fair. Turkey production on the wildlife area in 2015 was impacted by significant flooding throughout much of that summer. Few broods were observed in 2015 on the wildlife area. Some production did occur however on nearby private lands and provided fair opportunity for turkey hunters this past spring. Although habitats were degraded and some nesting was likely lost in lower elevation habitats adjacent to the lake again this spring, overall habitat conditions are improved this year and some broods were observed on the wildlife area this summer. Timely precipitation that occurred in late summer has produced robust conditions in area cropland and native grass habitats, and has improved understory vegetation in many flood impacted woodland habitats. Those improved conditions will help to provide attractive habitat for wintering turkeys and enhance nesting opportunities for birds next spring. Prior to the poor production experienced in 2015, turkey populations benefited from good production dating back to at least 2012. Populations of adult birds remain at a solid level, but because production was limited in 2015, hunters may find fewer 2 year old birds next spring.



Successful youth spring turkey hunter.

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 however were reduced over much of the wildlife area as a result of long term flooding in 2015. Squirrels that did survive the flooding found fewer food resources to utilize last winter. Very little, if any, hard mast (walnuts and acorns) were available last winter even in areas not impacted by floods. This likely reduced populations even further. Although floods impacted some area woodlands again in 2016, impacts were not as prolonged or significant and timely precipitation during late summer has improved habitat conditions in many woodland habitats impacted by flooding in recent years. Hard mast production has been exceptional this year and should provide squirrels and other area wildlife with outstanding food resources going into this winter. Cottontail populations are often not strong, but can provide some opportunity in upland areas away from flood zones.



Successful squirrel hunt.

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. Reduced flooding and improved food and cover conditions throughout the wildlife area should enhance hunting and trapping opportunities for these species this year.



Kansas Coyote.

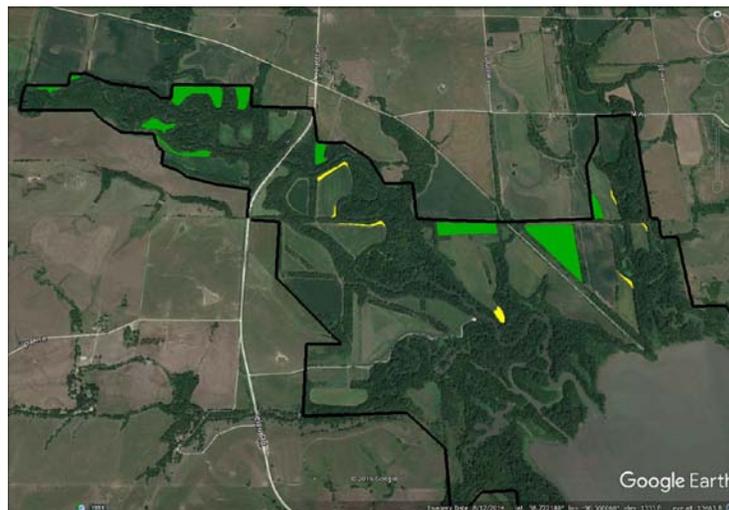
Wildlife Habitat & Water Quality – A look back after a decade of project implementation.

At many federal reservoirs, including Council Grove Lake and Council Grove Wildlife Area (CGWA), the impacts of age are becoming more apparent. Silt deposition in the lake threatens to impact flood control, water supplies, and recreation. Tree and shrub invasion threatens to impact grassland habitat and the wildlife species, such as quail, that are dependent upon it. A challenge that has faced area management staff is how to address these impacts with limited acreage and financial resources. At CGWA, projects that would provide multiple benefits, including those to enhance wildlife habitat and water quality, have received priority and were often implemented annually. Although development efforts have now ended, work has not, as maintenance efforts to include burning, mowing, and noxious weed control continue. Many of these projects have developed nicely, meeting project goals and enhancing outdoor recreation opportunities. Let's take a look back at what was done and how it has enhanced wildlife habitat and water quality at CGWA.

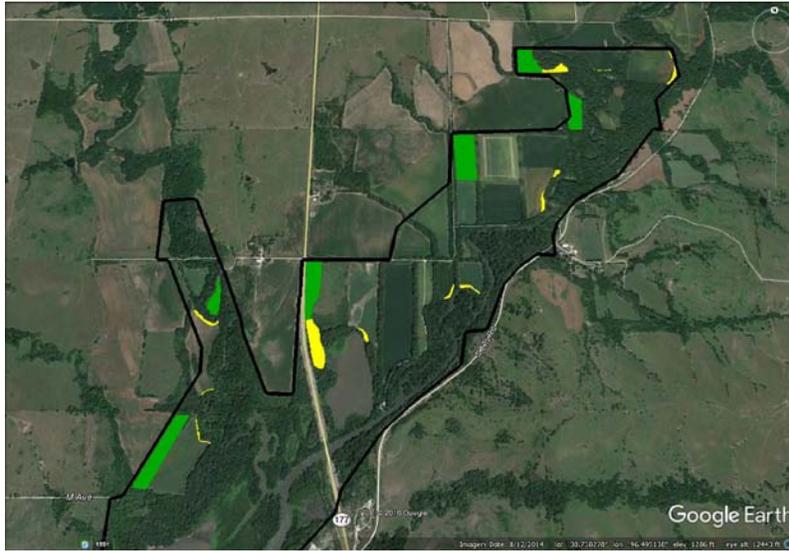


Native grass and forb planting projects like this one along the Neosho River improve wildlife habitat by creating diversity and connecting habitats together.

Beginning in 2006, and concluding in 2016, efforts were employed to create additional perennial grassland habitats. The primary challenge with developing additional grassland habitat at CGWA however, is that much of the area is frequently inundated when lake levels rise. Newly developed perennial grass stands would be lost during flood events unless they were planted in upland areas away from flood zones. Flood events occurring in 2004 and 2005 provided some indication of where new grassland habitats should be planted. Working with conservation partners such as the Quail & Upland Wildlife Federation, National Wild Turkey Federation, and the Twin Lakes Water Quality Project, 15 agricultural tracts (depicted in green) comprised of approximately 88 acres have been retired and converted to native grasses and forbs within each of the drainages entering Council Grove Lake. These planting projects were designed to enhance grassland cover availability in areas dominated by woodland and cropland habitats. As a result, plantings enhanced habitat diversity within the wildlife area, ultimately enhancing habitat for wildlife species such as quail, turkey, deer, and others, and enhanced lake water quality by filtering some run-off from adjacent agricultural lands. Projects also often served to link or connect other nearby habitat areas improving wildlife utilization and productivity.



Native grass and forb planting projects (depicted in green) and riparian area widening projects (depicted in yellow) completed since 2006 at CGWA. Projects were designed to improve wildlife habitat, increase habitat diversity, and enhance water quality and recreation opportunities.



Native grass and forb planting projects (depicted in green) and riparian area widening projects (depicted in yellow) completed since 2006 at CGWA. Projects were designed to improve wildlife habitat, increase habitat diversity, and enhance water quality and recreation opportunities.

In addition to these efforts, all agricultural fields adjacent to creeks or rivers on the CGWA were reviewed and portions of some fields were removed from production if riparian areas (zones or strips of permanent vegetation that serve to stabilize banks and filter run-off) were deemed too thin. These areas are being allowed to grow into annual grasses, forbs, and trees as nearly all of these areas are prone to flooding. A minimum of 100' of permanent vegetation has become established between the bank edge and where agricultural production begins. Approximately 9,000 feet of edge has been widened within 15 agricultural tracts (depicted in yellow) with an additional 6,570 feet having been widened within 9 retired agricultural tracts planted to native grass. The total treated area then involves approximately 15,570 feet or nearly 3 miles within 24 tracts! Again, water quality and wildlife habitat are enhanced.



This project combined a native grass planting with a tree planting (smaller trees in the foreground) adjacent to the Neosho River. The grassland now provides nesting and bedding cover for wildlife and helps to filter agricultural run-off before it enters the river then the lake. The trees will provide food and cover for wildlife but also will help to stabilize river banks discouraging erosion and improving water quality.

Although each of these projects individually is small, collectively they are significant, and have enhanced wildlife habitat and helped to reduce run-off from lands on the CGWA. These efforts would not have been possible without assistance from the partners mentioned above. Their shared mission, with that of the KDWPT, to conserve our natural resources and enhance outdoor recreation opportunities is sincerely appreciated!

Hunter Education – So much more than just gun safety!

Those not familiar with the Hunter Education Program of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism (KDWPT) might first perceive the nearly 45 year old program as one simply designed to teach safe gun handling. Although safety is a core principal of the program, a dedicated group of volunteer instructors also teach so much more, in hopes of instilling safe, responsible, and ethical qualities and providing a foundation of information upon which graduates of all ages can become successful hunting conservationists.



Hunting is a cherished pastime in Kansas.
It has been estimated that nearly 3 million days of hunting occur each year in the sunflower state.
Fewer than 20 hunting related incidents typically occur annually in Kansas, thanks in part to the Hunter Education Program.

The Kansas Hunter Education program was implemented by law in 1973. Its mission is to “start individuals on the hunter’s path with the highest sense of ethics, safe gun handling skills, an understanding of the hunter’s role in wildlife management, and a commitment to live up to the traditions of the hunt and the standards that society expects of hunters.” It is taught by over 1,300 volunteer instructors and has graduated approximately 500,000 hunters since inception. The program is mandated to provide at least 10 hours of coursework to include topics of hunter responsibility and ethics, hunting heritage and early firearms, firearm basics, ammunition, firearm handling and safety, marksmanship and shooting fundamentals, bow-hunting, conservation and principles of wildlife management, survival and outdoor emergencies, water safety and hypothermia, preparing for the hunt, and hunting skills.



Safe gun handling is a core principal taught in hunter education classes.
Instructors also share other valuable lessons involving ethics, responsibility, and the role hunters play in conservation.

The term conservation implies wise use, and like safety, is a central theme of the program. Students are taught the value of wisely using and respecting our renewable wildlife resources. They are taught of the value of habitat, wildlife management, and game laws. They are taught that as hunters they fund conservation efforts by paying license fees and excise taxes on sporting equipment and that those monies are utilized for wildlife management activities. They are taught that they will play a role in the future of the sport and that they have a responsibility to respect lands and landowners.

Do YOU need hunter education? Before January 1, 2005 the Kansas hunter education law required any hunter born after July 1, 1957 to have successfully completed hunter education unless hunting on one's own land. Prior to 2005, it had been argued by some that the law served as a barrier to those wishing to try hunting because it required completion prior to any actual time spent pursuing the sport. As a result, since 2005, some exceptions have been granted with the intention of maintaining safe hunting experiences while providing opportunities for those wishing to try hunting without first seeking a 10+ hour course. These exceptions allow one to try hunting, while directly supervised, to determine if it is something of interest to them before investing their time to complete the course. Currently, the following exceptions to the hunter education law exist including those hunting on one's own land; those youth age 15 and younger if directly supervised by an adult 18 or older; and lastly, those age 16 or older, possessing an apprentice hunting license and directly supervised by a licensed adult of at least 18 years of age. Apprentice hunting licenses are valid for the remainder of the calendar year and may be purchased twice. Ultimately then if you are born after July 1, 1957 and plan to hunt on land other than your own, you will eventually have to complete a hunter education program if you wish to hunt in Kansas. Although most classes are predominately comprised of youth (age 11 and above), adults of all ages, and backgrounds also attend. For those that may have completed a course in another state, Kansas does recognize certifications from other state hunter education programs.



Kansas law requires those hunters born after July 1, 1957 to complete a hunter education course. Exceptions do exist, but if you intend to hunt on land other than your own, you will eventually have to complete a hunter education program.

Is the program successful? The answer to that question can depend upon how you measure. The Kansas Hunter Education program has been attributed with the reduction of hunting related injury incidents. Recent estimates indicate that nearly 3 million days of hunting occur in Kansas each year. At the same time, ONLY 6 to 20 hunting related injury incidents are reported each year! Of course even one incident can be argued to be too many, but careful review of each incident illustrates that a violation of basic safety rules was committed. Without those violations, these incidents would not occur. Basic safety rules are of course stressed, illustrated, and practiced at each class in the hopes that they will be implemented throughout the students hunting years.



Live fire exercises conducted at many classes, reinforce classroom instruction, and provide hands-on learning opportunities of firearm basics, safe handling, and shooting fundamentals.

Success cannot only be measured in terms of safety, but also in enhanced student knowledge and character. Volunteer instructors serve as liaisons between the sporting public and the KDWPT. They share experiences, values, and lessons learned over a lifetime of participating. They share hard lessons witnessed or learned themselves in the hopes of preventing similar outcomes with students. They share personal and professional passions hoping to instill similar views. They serve as mentors, illustrating the wonder of nature, the challenge of the pursuit, and the reward of a day spent afield. Those discussions and experiences with students reinforce many mid-western values, including lessons of respect, ethics, conservation, stewardship, and the value of education and our natural resources.



Instructors share valuable insight and experiences from a lifetime of participating. They do so with the hope of developing future hunting conservationists that place high value in the qualities of stewardship, ethics, and respect.

Without the work of volunteers the Kansas Hunter Education Program would not exist. Volunteers within any organization can be described as passionate, caring, individuals with a desire to share or give back. Volunteer instructors within the Kansas program are no different. Those familiar with the program in Morris County know that we are fortunate to have two such individuals within our community that have dedicated countless hours to help meet the mission of the Hunter Education Program. Allan Cashman and Dennis DeLay have over 70 years of combined teaching experience and have certified over 2,500 students in the Council Grove area! Allan has been instructing since 1982, has taught in 50 classes, and certified over 950 students. Dennis has been instructing since inception in 1973, has taught approximately 73 classes and certified nearly 1,700 students. Clearly their dedication is an asset to the program and the area hunting community.

Do you know a hunter? Chances are that the Hunter Education Program and its corps of volunteer instructors played a brief but positive role in developing that person and their outdoor interests. I'd like to tip my blaze orange cap to those volunteers and parents that recognize the need to send future hunters down the right path, and to those students that successfully meet the challenge of becoming safe, responsible, and ethical Kansas hunters.



Meet A “Fantastic Four” – An introduction to 4 annual plants that enhance wildlife habitat values!

Many upland game bird species such as quail, pheasant, prairie chicken, and turkey often prefer to spend time in habitats rich in annual plants. Annual plants are herb-like plants that complete their life cycle in one growing season. They are often the first types of plants to colonize an area when bare soil conditions have been created (whether from a flood, disking, fire etc.). They function to cover the ground quickly and are often prolific seed producers. As such they can provide valuable food and cover sources for wildlife. They are native plants adapted to the soils and climate of this region. As such they are survivors often establishing and producing seed in spite of varied or harsh growing conditions. They provide nutritionally complete seed offering varied nutrients and energy to those wildlife species that consume them. They are ideal components of “natural” food plots often requiring little effort on our part to develop. Four of the more common and beneficial annual plant species are identified below.



Foxtail



Sunflower



Giant Ragweed



Smartweed

Annual plants were abundant this year at Council Grove Wildlife Area (CGWA). Bare soil conditions were common this spring following the 2015 flood, previous disking projects, and 2016 management projects including prescribed burning and mowing efforts. Annual plants colonized bare areas and have developed into desirable habitats, producing abundant seed after a summer of timely precipitation. These plants are a welcome addition to the CGWA landscape. They enhance plant diversity, providing different food and cover options as wildlife needs change. Hunters should be familiar with these plants. Identify them, and you are likely to find your favorite fall quarry on your next hunt!



Desirable habitat during the summer (left) and fall (right) seasons at CGWA. Sunflowers developed in portions of this field after bare soil conditions were created following a disking operation. Those sunflowers, coupled with native grass stands and shrub clumps, provide ideal year-round cover for wildlife species like quail.



Desirable habitat during the summer (left) and fall (right) seasons at CGWA. Portions of this field (right side of each photo) were mowed to control brush. Portions to the left were not mowed. Mowing removed many broad-leaved plants like ragweed, but encouraged grassy plants like foxtail. Different cover and food characteristics developed as a result of the mowing treatment. Native perennial grass habitats in the background compliment this stand of annuals providing varied habitat characteristics to meet changing wildlife needs. Turkeys, quail, and deer are frequently observed utilizing this habitat throughout the year.



Desirable habitat during the summer (left) and fall (right) seasons at CGWA. Flooding created bare soil conditions in the middle of this native grass planting. Moist soil conditions in turn encouraged smartweeds to develop. Smartweed can provide attractive food and cover conditions for upland game birds when conditions are dry or provide waterfowl with beneficial habitat when inundated. Diverse plant communities are a key to healthy and productive habitats.



Desirable habitat during the summer (left) and fall (right) seasons at CGWA. This native grass stand was enhanced by conducting a prescribed burn this spring. Burning created bare soil conditions encouraging sunflowers to develop. Plant diversity was enhanced, improving food and cover characteristics for area wildlife.



Flooding created bare soil conditions within this CGWA habitat. Several species of annuals developed including sunflower, foxtail, and ragweed. A natural food plot developed producing abundant seed and good cover without the need for tillage, planting, herbicides and fertilizer.

Fall Outdoor Youth Event a Success!

The Council Grove 13th Annual Outdoor Youth Event was conducted on Saturday, October 29th at Council Grove Lake. Forty-one youngsters from 13 Kansas communities 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 awarded door prizes, provided by the Bill Young Foundation, Adams Lumber, and Dennis DeLay, to encourage them to take what they had learned one step further and do some hunting this fall. Two lucky attendees also won new firearms including a youth model 20 gauge shotgun and a .22 rifle, 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, and KDWPT's "Pass It On", Hunter Education, and Archery in the Schools Programs.

Individuals: Mike Miller, Wayne Doyle, Jesse Gehrt, Dave Adams, Dennis DeLay, Allan Cashman, Nadia Marji, Gary Kepley, Mieko Alley, Steve Prockish, Faron Adams, Chris Myers, Chris Grant, Kurtis Meierhoff, Steve Crichton, Dan and Maureen Martin, Phil Taunton, Gary and Patty Boling, James and Sheyanne Masters, Leland Viar, and numerous parents.

“Habitat First” Program Provides Landowners with Wildlife Habitat Management Assistance:

Want to see more wildlife on your land or improve your hunting opportunities? Want some help? The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism (KDWPT) recognizes that HABITAT is the key to doing so and has dedicated staff members, and a library of information, to help anyone with their wildlife management goals.



The “Habitat First” program has been recently unveiled to assist landowners with creating, enhancing, or restoring wildlife habitat on their lands. Wildlife Biologists can meet with you on your property to discuss your goals and review existing habitats. From those initial discussions they can help you to develop a wildlife habitat management plan and provide details about programs and partners that may provide financial assistance to help meet your goals. In addition, biologists maintain an impressive library of information on the KDWPT web site that provides wildlife habitat enthusiasts with an array of helpful information. Within that library, habitat management practices are described and illustrated and may include practices designed to enhance many types of habitats for wildlife including grazing lands, hay lands, cropland, CRP, wetlands, and riparian areas and forests. Financial assistance may also be offered for implementation of some practices! Want to learn more? Visit the KDWPT web site at www.ksoutdoors.com or contact the wildlife biologist assigned to your county for more information. Landowners in Morris, Chase, and Butler Counties can contact Jeff Rue at #316/322-7513 to learn more about how the “Habitat First” program can assist you.



The favored fall season is upon us. Get out and enjoy some time in your favorite neck of the woods!



A scenic late summer view of Council Grove Lake.

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

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