



PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632
Phone 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667
Email info@naturalistjourneys.com

Tallgrass Prairie Nature Tour: Kansas Biodiversity

April 28 – May 3, 2013

Trip Report

Ed and Sil Pembleton, guides, with 6 participants: Bob, Charlie, Charlotte, Ed, Ginger, and Jo.

Sunday, April 28 Arrivals, Dyck Arboretum, Swarm of Yellow-Headed Blackbirds

Most of us had arrived the evening before and there were no flight delays so we actually got an early start on our trip to our first stop for a light picnic lunch at the Dyck Arboretum in Hesston. Spring has had challenges in pushing winter aside, and today was the first to actually “feel like spring,” with balmy temperatures and light winds. Prairie plants have not begun their growth, but arriving migrants such as Brown Thrashers were mixing with lingering “winter” birds, including a small flock of Harris’s Sparrows—a Midwest specialty and lifer for some participants. A leg-stretching walk took us out onto the restored prairie with its unique interpretative quotations.



We drove on toward Great Bend, with a U turn required by the spectacular sight of a swarm of Yellow-headed Blackbirds bathing and feeding in small pools at the end of a crop field. In Great Bend we checked into our hotel and enjoyed our welcome dinner at the Page restaurant just a short walk across the parking lot. This convenient location gave a few extra minutes to sleep before tomorrow morning’s very early departure for a viewing blind on a Greater Prairie Chicken lek.



As an option to early bedtimes, a few of us went in search of shorebirds and any early evening owls that we might find at Cheyenne Bottoms. Management pools at the Bottoms were dry, except for a few small areas of standing water in the canals, so the numbers of shorebirds is limited. Our hopes to find a Barn Owl were adjusted when we found a Great Horned Owl perched on a power pole.

Monday, April 29 An Intense Dance, a day full of birds at Quivira National Wildlife Refuge

We were up and departed the motel more than an hour before sunrise, to pick up our guide at the Kansas Wetlands Education Center on our way to the viewing blind near Claflin. Arriving at the blind, a specially constructed trailer, we soon heard the haunting call of a male Greater Prairie Chicken as he walked through the prairie grasses to the lek. We all strained to see the bird in the low light levels of pre-dawn, and soon he was spotted on the north side of the lek. Although he was alone, this was an energetic bird that called, cackled, danced, strutted and

jumped, doing all his best moves to attract and impress female

birds. Alas, his efforts at the dance ceremony were not met with success, but he thrilled us with his impressive demonstration of skills. Surely next year he will be a leader on the lek.



The “wolf whistle” of Upland Sandpipers greeted us as we left the viewing blind and we began searching for the elusive birds. Lark Sparrows were so common and so stunning that it took us quite some time to return the short distance to the van, and still we could not find an Upland Sandpiper. Then, just as we reached the pasture gate, not one but three Upland Sandpipers were spotted in the grass at the edge of the road!! Now we saw one gracing the top of a fence post like a fancy finial on a floor lamp.

We thanked our guide, Jordan, and let him off at the Kansas Wetlands Education Center. A nesting Great Horned Owl caused a brief delay in our return to Great Bend, where we were joined by a couple of our participants who elected to join us for a late breakfast instead of the early Prairie chicken dance.

Fortified by breakfast, we headed to the south entrance of Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. Lark sparrows were so numerous they seemed to rule the prairie fences and hedgerows, but along the Refuge entrance lane we soon found they had lots of Harris’s, White-throated Sparrow companions foraging on the roadsides. Bob, always carefully scrutinizing the vegetation, discovered Golden currants blooming in the fencerow.



Brewer’s Blackbirds alit and gathered gravel from the road, while Eastern Bluebirds called from the fences and Brown Thrashers gave away their concealed locations with dual syllabled mumblings. Then almost magically, we heard the clear distinctive “Bob-White!!!” arise from the field east of us. We searched but could not find this once common bird. A Baltimore Oriole drew our attention as we searched for the resident Red-headed Woodpeckers in the dead trees near headquarters. With little wind to this point the spring bird chorus had carried late into the day.



The wind picked up as we enjoyed a picnic lunch on the tower overlooking the Little Salt Marsh. Quivira water levels are low, but it

has more water than Cheyenne Bottoms. For dessert, we spotted a spiral of White Pelicans rotating over the pool. A rooster Ring-necked Pheasant courting a hen attracted our attention as we headed north through the refuge.



We knew that the southwest wind, a feature of the Great Plains, could benefit us and cause shorebirds to feed in sheltered places close to the road. Single birds like Baird's Sandpiper dashed from spot to spot. Wilson's Phalaropes fed in the shallows and skipped their spinning routines to avoid being beached by the wind.



Then we found clusters of birds concentrated in sheltered edges of the pools. Northern Shovelers foraging among the shorebirds looked like bay-bound barges surrounded by skiffs.



Having heard a report, we searched for Burrowing Owls in a small prairie dog town on the northeast corner of the refuge. Prairie dogs were up and active and the pups of the year were more curious than cautious.



We returned to the wildlife drive, without an owl sighting, and found an American Bittern hunkered down in a pool just north of the road. We turned toward Great Bend and dinner and encountered Wild Turkeys dashing for cover on our approach.

A late dinner at Playa Azul got good reviews from all, including one guest who was pleasantly surprised to find such good Mexican food this far from his home in New Mexico.

Tuesday, April 30 Mushroom Rocks, Scissor-tails, Homesteaders & a bit of Sweden in Kansas

After a leisurely breakfast we checked out and departed for Cheyenne Bottoms and the Kansas Wetlands Education Center. Willets, a half dozen Black-necked Stilts, a small flock of American Avocets and Long-billed Dowitchers treated us to some fine views as they probed the water for their breakfast.



Now we returned to the Kansas Wetlands Education Center, and everyone was impressed with the center's exhibitory and the wealth of information about the history and importance of this great wetland.



After an obligatory stop in the gift shop, we headed to Mushroom Rocks state park where Bob and Jo engaged in a botanical bonanza as we all explored the rocks and watched birds.

We all gathered for a group photo in the shade of one of the rocks and then explored the west end of the park and discovered that Clay-colored Sparrows are the dominating sparrow species. A pair of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers escaped notice by almost everyone,

but we knew that they would become more common as we move east.



After a picnic lunch under the cottonwood trees at Kanopolis Reservoir we headed to Lindsborg, aka Little Sweden, USA. Just west of town a single Scissor-tailed flycatcher adorning a fence required a U-turn so everyone could enjoy his beauty.



We checked into the Swedish Country Inn early and spent a bit of time exploring this charming town. The coffee lovers found two good shops and we discovered that the Swedish Crown Restaurant has gotten good reviews since reopening the first of the year. It was dinner on your own night, and the local reviews were so good that we all decided the Crown would be our diner for the evening. The food lived up to the local reviews.

After dinner we took an optional adventure to the Hougland Dugout and a sunset trip up to Coronado Heights. The Dugout, now only a rock-lined pit, was covered by the Hougland's wagon and served as a winter residence for the family. Everyone agreed that it took lots of fortitude to spend the winter in such cramped, cold quarters.



Chipping Sparrows greeted us as we turned past a well-tended graveyard toward the Heights. It appeared that the cool weather has delayed the flying insects and consequently we did not see the expected Common nighthawks gracing the evening skies. Still, Coronado Heights with its WPA structures offered more inspiring views, a wonderful sunset, and calling Bob White Quail.

Wednesday, May 1 Bison & Elk at Maxwell and the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve



After an excellent Swedish breakfast we bird watched our way east toward Maxwell Game Reserve, spotting Red-tailed Hawks, Clay-colored Sparrows and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. As we turned onto the road into Maxwell we were greeted with two surprises. The first was a “Road Closed” sign, which we decided to skirt and find out if it was for real—it’s not quite closed. The second was a young bull elk standing on the hillside!! For our first time, the elk are out of the woods and visible on the prairie. We

would later see the herd of cows too.

After being flagged around the construction site where the new “buffalo guard” was being installed, we stopped to look at some



large Bison bulls and Ginger managed to spot a Common Nighthawk sleeping on a branch.



Our tour guide and driver took us to one of the range pastures where the bison, and this time the elk, were attracted out into the open by a small feeding of “range cubes,” compressed and sweetened vegetable pellets. The bison cows were nervous and

very protective, positioning themselves between their young russet colored calves and us. The bulls were less wary, but never looked friendly either. Just as soon as the range cubes were consumed, the bison headed to the far brushy wooded corner of the preserve. Our guide said that is where they go during stormy, wet weather—a prediction that proved accurate.



The herd of elk (mostly cows, but hard to differentiate because the bulls had shed their antlers) were aloof and remained at a distance from the truck and tram. Like the bison, once the range cubes were consumed, they headed to a far corner of the preserve and we decided to head on north to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve ahead of any precipitation.

We arrived at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and enjoyed a picnic lunch just as the wind returned to the Flint Hills. The Federal government’s budget sequester has caused the National Preserve to cancel all tours so we led our own tours of the historic



buildings and prairie surrounding the ranch house, and then hiked the trail to the one-room Fox Creek School.

Bob and Jo struck a botanical rich spot on the prairie surrounding the old school and we scramble to identify False garlic and other new species.

We turned back south toward Cottonwood Falls, featured in William Least Heat Moon's book, ***Prairie Earth*** and home the beautiful historic Chase County Court House. Birding from a trail bridge overlooking the Cottonwood River, we spotted Great Egret, Little Green Heron, Spotted Sandpiper, Indigo Bunting and Baltimore Orioles.



We explored the main street, visited local shops and the community craft and art gallery, and then headed up to the courthouse with its stairs that turn a complete 360° spiral without a central support. The old county jail behind the courtroom was almost terrifying in its stark metal style. With an unoccupied courtroom it seemed natural to take a seat and preside from the judge's chair.



After dinner at the Grand Hotel, we returned to Lindsborg and arrived with the rain that we had avoided all day. Bison wisdom is correct.

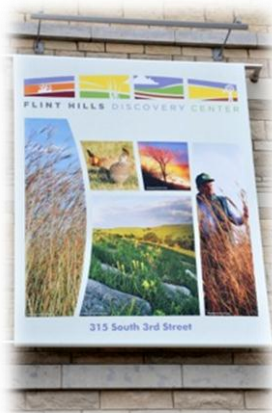
Thursday, May 2 Konza, The Flint Hills Discovery Center, Stone Fences & our Farewell Dinner

Today we headed northeast to Council Grove, home of the Santa Fe Trail, on our way to Konza Prairie near Manhattan. Rain had continued through the evening and about half way to Council Grove, the weather shifted and treated us to a late spring snow!! We stopped for coffee and sweet rolls at the historic Hays House, which has been serving guests since 1857, when it was opened by Seth Hays, Daniel Boone's grandson.



We continued north to Manhattan, with a stop at a Konza Prairie overlook with views of this 8,000 + acre research area. The view of the Flint Hills is spectacular and because of the early spring prescribed fires, we could easily see how stone outcropping prevented this land from being plowed and nearly prescribed a grazing existence. The continuing cold rain suggested that an afternoon or late evening tour at Konza would be a better option, so we called our guides, changed our

appointment and invited them to join us for lunch.



After a light lunch in Manhattan, we visited the new Flint Hills Discovery Center, which opened in April 2012. Dedicated to interpreting the largest remaining track of native tallgrass prairie in North America, the Discovery center has exhibits that explore the geology, weather, history, ecology and management of this ecosystem. An excellent “4D” movie started our exploration of the center with great photography, music, sound and other sensory surprises-the 4D effect. Supported with local and state funding this center was conceived as a way to increase appreciation of the ecosystem and to encourage sustainable management of the Flint Hills. Basically, the Flint Hills finally have a fan club.



It was late afternoon by the time we left the Discovery Center and headed to Konza for a brief leg stretching and birding hike, rather than our longer tour exploring the research areas here. From Konza we headed east to the Native Stone Scenic Byway, which featured miles of road bordered by loose laid limestone fences erected during the homestead era.



We arrived back in Council Grove at the Trail Days Café and museum for our delightful farewell dinner. The Trail Days Café is a unique effort to fund the restoration and preservation of the 1861 Terwilliger



House, and aid in protecting the history of Council Grove. The menu is themed with delicious American Indian, Early American, Old World and 20th Century selections including Kansas grown bison, elk and beef. Each item is prepared fresh which allows time to hear a few historic stories, engage in conversation, and/or explore the museum and

associated buildings. Tonight our server, cook and storyteller was working alone while his wife recuperated, so our meal is one of leisurely recounting our favorite experiences and rejoicing with friends and fellow travelers.



Friday, May 3

Departures and Safe Travels

With just a short drive to the Wichita airport we had a leisurely Swedish breakfast before packing and checking out of the hotel. Our airport arrival was perfect and we all had time to wish each other farewell and wishes to share a future adventure.