



PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632  
Phone 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667  
Email [info@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:info@naturalistjourneys.com)

## **Tallgrass Prairie Fall: Splendor in the Grass**

### **September 14-20, 2014**

### **Trip Report**

Ed and Sil Pembleton, guides, with six participants: Cathy, Gay, Gary, Pete, Rich and Terry.

Sunday, September 14 Arrivals-Dyck Arboretum-an "air show," Owl Prowl

After a late lunch in Wichita, we head north to the Dyck Arboretum for an introduction to native prairie plants. Rains have been late this year, but some supplemental watering at the Arboretum has produced spectacular stands of prairie grasses and wildflowers. Northern Cardinals, calling Bobwhite Quail and Blue Jays give us a patriotic welcome.



Bees and butterflies delight our eyes with floral dances, and then suddenly we're distracted by Mississippi Kites overhead. About a half-dozen kites, all appear to be young birds, are practicing aerial maneuvers prior to an imminent migration. This is like a patriotic air show without the loud jet engines.

We head on to Great Bend for our night's lodging and welcome dinner and a good opportunity for introductions. Following dinner, six of us venture out to Cheyenne Bottoms in the dark to see if we can find some owls. Even though the campground is full, we find our first Great Horned Owl close by, as it leaves the perch where it had been sitting. We continue driving west and suddenly Pete spots our first Barn Owl that flies to the next perch west. We follow then it flies off into the dark, road-less, open spaces to the south. After a few miles and no more owls, we turn around to retrace our route and wind up surrounded by a herd of curious cows. Our return is rewarded with a second Barn Owl that is very cooperative, sitting on fence posts and giving us wonderful views. A second Great Horned Owl, or the same one making a second appearance, as we depart for a good night's sleep.



After an early breakfast and checking out of the hotel, we go back to Cheyenne Bottoms and are promptly greeted by Black-crowned Night-Herons, Great Egrets, American Bitterns and White-faced Ibis.

Working our way toward the headquarters we see large numbers of Blue-winged Teal have arrived and Yellow-headed Blackbirds enhance the mixed flocks of blackbirds getting ready to depart. Water levels are so high that there are no available mud flats for shore birds in the management pools.

We turn west on last night's road and find a Great Horned Owl perched in a tree, surrounded by three Kreider's Red-tailed Hawks that seem to ignore its presence. We head northeast across land owned by The Nature Conservancy, where we find small shallow pools hosting small crowds of shorebirds. Killdeer, Pectoral, Stilt and Least Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and Long-billed Dowitchers all compete for the limited habitat.



Clouds continue to build until the sky is totally overcast as a north wind increases and temperatures drop. This frontal system may be delivering migrating birds. We head to the Kansas Wetlands Education Center to view their exhibits about Cheyenne Bottoms and eat a picnic lunch in the new shelter.



Curtis Wolf, the manager at the center, kindly provides a map with the locations for some likely local fields and we start off in search of White-tailed Jackrabbits. We travel less than a mile when a Merlin pursuing a mixed flock of blackbirds careens across the road in front of us. Her attempt at a catch fails and she returns to a fence post near our vehicle and proceeds to preen and survey her next opportunity. She launches another attack and captures a Red-winged Blackbird that she brings back to the fence to dispatch and eat. We watch—transfixed as this aerial tiger finishes her lunch, then resume our quest for jackrabbits. Barely a mile further down the road we find a smaller, darker Merlin (very likely a male) eating his lunch. We settle for a “two Merlin lunch,” with no jackrabbit.

A tree-lined fencerow contains a whole flock of raptors. Five



Red-tails share one tree (most are light phase) and three Swainson's Hawks occupy another tree less than 200 yards away. The frontal boundary is delivering raptors. Still no jackrabbits, so we turn east towards the Smoky Hills region of Kansas and Mushroom Rocks State Park.

Wild Turkeys await us at the park border and a covey of Bobwhite Quail flush as we walk toward the nearest rock mushrooms. These Dakota sandstone formations have

served for centuries as landmarks and meeting places for

Native Americans and European explorers. These unique concretions bear the graffiti of early explorers and they continue to attract people from around the world to this small park, off the beaten path.



Departing Mushroom Rocks toward Lindsborg, we are delayed by a "flock" of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. Well

worth a delayed dinner to investigate, we find 15-20 of these splendid birds in the fencerow on a gravel road and surmise this must be a pre-migration gathering.

At days end in Lindsborg, we find Chimney Swifts patrolling the skies above the Swedish Country Inn.



Tuesday, September 16 The Land Institute (Prairie as Pattern for Agriculture) & Maxwell Game Preserve



After a hearty Swedish breakfast, we depart for The Land Institute, a research facility dedicated to developing a perennial system of agriculture. Scott Seirer, who is the managing director, leads our tour and starts with an overview of their research plots from a vantage point on the edge of a remnant piece of native prairie. The big idea is to develop a system of perennial cropping that does not require annual tilling, fertilization, irrigation, or weed and pest control.



Scott shows us experimental crop plots including Kernza (a perennial hybrid, wheat-like grain), oil sunflower and milo, and then leads us into the greenhouse and research labs where high tech resources are being applied. A poster displayed in a stairwell—the only place with enough depth, shows the extent of prairie roots and provides a lasting impression.



We depart toward Maxwell Game Preserve, spotting a number of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and a Logger-headed Shrike. At Maxwell we enjoy a picnic lunch with accompanying twitter of Eastern Bluebirds prior to our appointment with the bison that roam the tallgrass.

Our tour into the bison pastures is on specially constructed trams that allow for safety around these large animals. There are a few calves with russet colored fur that indicates they were recent additions born to older cows in the herd of nearly 200 animals. The breeding season has just ended and the larger, and older



breeding bulls remain at rest out in the pasture, foregoing the range cube treats offered as enticement to come in closer to the trams.

After our bison tour we climb the observation tower to see the vistas and

then head to the adjacent McPherson County State Fishing Lake to look for woodland and aquatic bird species. Pete and Sil spot a lone gull that appears at first to be an immature Franklin's Gull, but looks a



bit different. It flies for just an instant and Pete suggests it may be a Sabine's Gull—an Arctic breeding species that is an unusual bird for Kansas. We drive to the opposite shore, employ our spotting scopes again and it swims away from us. Finally, it flies again and its distinctive triangular wing pattern confirms Pete's identification.

After a delicious dinner at the Swedish Crown Restaurant in Lindsborg, we depart to Coronado Heights, a local scenic spot to watch sunset and see the structures built by the WPA. Looking west we hear busts of cackling and clucking. We continue listening and finally agree—it is a small group of Greater Prairie Chickens roosters that have come back to their lek for some fall dancing and singing practice.



Wednesday, September 17    Prairie Heritage and the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve



We depart Lindsborg and head east to Cottonwood Falls, the seat of Chase County. This is the heart of the scenic flint hills country that was the focus of William Least Heat Moon's book, *Prairie Earth*. Our first stop is the courthouse. A beautiful and beloved landmark, it is well maintained and one of many highlights in this history conscious area with a proud ranching tradition.

After some sightseeing in town and lunch at the restored Grand Central Hotel, we turn north to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. The new exhibits at the visitor center give us an orientation to the prairie ecosystem and the history that brought this former ranch and its outstanding stone buildings into the National Park system. The magnificent old barn has been restored and still hosts a population of Barn Swallows.



A leisurely hike across the prairie from the ranch house to the Lower Fox Creek one room school gives everyone an opportunity for a close encounter prairie flora. Along the creek a Great Crested Flycatcher and a White-breasted Nuthatch grab our attention away from the butterflies and flowers. We move on to Council Grove, check into the Victorian Cottage House Inn to freshen up before enjoying a family style meal at the Trail Days Café in the historic Terwilliger House.

Thursday, September 18    Konza Prairie-Ecological Research & The Flint Hills Discovery Center

Last night's rain ended just before daybreak so we head north towards Konza Prairie with wisps of fog and overcast skies. Our guide, Drew Ricketts, is a doctoral candidate at Kansas State and thoroughly familiar with the amalgamation of continuous research being pursued here. As part of the federally funded Long Term Ecological Research program, Konza Prairie researchers are delving into fire, grazing, soils, moisture and a myriad of mechanisms that make the tallgrass ecosystem function.

Permanent research plots are established on a watershed basis to investigate various combinations of burn and grazing regimes. At our first stop, we enjoy bison at a distance and examine a small fenced plot that excludes them from grazing a small patch of prairie to demonstrate their





impact—particularly on the grasses. Drew explains the effects of the timing and frequency of fires on the prairie plants and shows us plots where annual burn schedules have favored grasses over flowering plants. At one point we enter a “pasture” where the grasses have reached five to six feet because the area was burned this spring, which stimulated grass growth, and not grazed this summer—now we experience tallgrass.

We return through the pastures past the headquarters to the Konza nature trail for a

hike along the creek. Fall blooming sunflowers and native thistles attract a bevy of feeding butterflies and bumblebees. Our attention shifts between Question Marks, Orange Sulfurs and calling Summer Tanagers, until hunger takes over and we go to lunch in Manhattan, with longtime conservationist and prairie advocate, Ron Klataske. Ron shares a few conservation stories and prairie insights, but work keeps him from joining us for the afternoon hike.



The Flint Hills Discovery Center delights everyone with the way it interprets the region. Using a range of techniques we gain insights from historical, ecological, geological, sociological and many other points of view.

The skies have cleared when we depart in mid-afternoon. Our trip to the top of the small ecologically diverse Mt.

Mitchell prairie is a great opportunity to discover some different wildflowers, including a perennial favorite—Willow-leaf sunflower. The pace of our hike is slowed by a Horned lizard that gives us the “evil eye” and stands its ground, protecting its territory along the trail.



We wind our way back to Council Grove using part of the Native Stone Scenic Byway that passes through Alma, “The City of Stone,” and is bordered by beautiful, historic stone fences that were originally built after the Civil War as a result of the law abolishing open range. These stacked stone fences without mortar are so appealing that they are being restored and in some cases new fences are being built.





After a hearty breakfast at the Historic Hays House, we return to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. Today we hike the Fox Creek Trail along the riparian woodland and through the tallgrass prairie in search of birds, butterflies that are feeding on the fall flowering plants. We are greeted by a flock of Eastern Bluebirds and slightly overcast skies that promise cooler temperatures for a refreshing hike.

We arrive at a portion of the prairie where the grasses stand five to six feet tall because it was burned this spring and not grazed during the summer. Butterflies are busy and especially interested in feeding on thistles that are still in bloom along the woodland edges.



After lunch in Council Grove we visit the historic Kaw Mission, that served as the home and school for boys from the nearby Kaw Indian reservation where the Native Americans known as Kaw or Kansa people were living before being removed to Indian Territory (Oklahoma). We discover a Great Spangled Fritillary depositing eggs at a rapid pace on and around violets growing in the lawn and flowerbeds around the Mission. The reconstructed Kaw House at this site provides a reference for the ruins we see later at the Allegawaho Memorial.

We travel out to the memorial near Dunlap, where the Kaw Indians have purchased ground, restored prairies, established nature trails and constructed a memorial to Allegawaho, who was their Chief when they were removed to Indian Territory. The small stream is a tranquil place. We bird a leisurely pace,

taking time to inspect a late blooming Winged Sunflower and discovering a Summer Tanager that lingers here with Black-capped Chickadees, Robins and the other usual riparian woodland species.



After a brief return to the Cottage House Inn, we depart to the Ad Astra Café in Strong City, for a delicious farewell dinner.

Saturday, September 20

One last stop and Fond Farewells.

With flights departing well after lunch, we head back to the airport in Wichita at a pace that allows us to stop and admire the beauty of the Flint Hills one last time. We even take one more group picture in Cassoday, Prairie Chicken Capital of the World!

