

Kansas' Tallgrass Prairie | Sept. 19 – 27, 2021

Trip Report | by Ed & Sil Pembleton



With guides Ed and Sil Pembleton, and participants: Carol, Dan, Donna, Hannah, Julie, Kat, Katheryn, Merrill, Roy, Tad, and Yvonne.



Sun., Sep. 19

Arrival in Wichita, KS. | Welcome Dinner

By 2 pm, everyone but Tad and Hannah gathered at the hotel, so we headed out to the nearby Pawnee Prairie Park for our first adventure. As if to give us a reminder that Kansas's weather can be variable, temperatures soared into the low 90s, but south winds provided a compensating breeze. The shady trails along Cowskin Creek offered additional relief and a few birds—most notably a very loud and persistently calling Carolina Wren. Blue Jays and Red-bellied Woodpeckers added a few rough notes, but the passing American Crows offered no comments. We introduced everyone to Big Bluestem, Indian Grass and Switch Grass, the “big three” tall grasses and found examples that were still blooming. Trees along the creek were a mix of planted fencerows and riparian woods, which presented an opportunity to “read” the landscape and try to discern how humans had influenced its ecological history. We returned to the Double Tree to freshen up before our welcome dinner, and then met up with Tad and Hannah just before departing to Hangar One for dinner in their Cockpit private dining room. They celebrate Wichita's slogan of the “Air Capitol of the World” with aviation decorations, historical videos and a menu to match. The décor and theme were an immediate hit, especially with our pilot, Roy, who recognized the planes from his flying experiences.



Introductions around the room credited Merrill for getting the group to go on a trip to—wait for it—KANSAS! Most all participants had traveled with her before and trust her judgment, so everyone is excited about the prospects of the coming discoveries. Still, like previous participants who have traveled the world, their friends asked, “You’re going *where?*” so they are just a bit taken aback that they are in Kansas. The food and service were great from the appetizers to the full meal and we returned early to the hotel to prepare for our morning departure.

Mon., Sep. 20

Dyck Arboretum | Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Management Area

We departed early and headed north to the Dyck Arboretum in Hesston. Both the temperature and wind increased all morning. With its emphasis on native vegetation, the arboretum exposed everyone to a variety of prairie grasses and wildflowers that might otherwise take days to find. Participants were immediately attracted to sunflowers and grasses, and discovered a whole new set of plant friends. Near the pond Sil and Hannah investigated a very sweet smelling grass-like plant that had few other clues to its identity. The arboretum’s education director dug into the question and it turned out to be Sweet Flag (*Acorus calamus*). Likely due to late summer loss of insects, the expected treat of Mississippi Kites did not happen. The wind increased again as we made our way to Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area, where the plan was to have a picnic lunch in the shelter at the Kansas Wetland Education Center before our wetland tour. Our timing was perfect! About a mile from the center, a traffic control flagger stopped us because they were paving the road and traffic was one lane only. More importantly, the paving machine was blocking the driveway, so there was no way to gain access. Plan B emerged—go to our hotel in Great Bend and use their indoor recreation area without wind for our picnic. Great Plan B!

We returned to the Wetlands Education Center and Curtis Wolf, the director, led us through the Bottoms searching for wetland birds and mammals. High winds kept most birds grounded and difficult to find in the lee of the dikes or hidden in the cattails. Large rafts of American White Pelicans formed snowy islands as they crowded into the far side of the central pool, while sporadic flights of White-face Ibis crossed the horizon at high speed. Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, and a few Mallards fed in quiet waters behind cattail clumps, while Canada Geese rode white-capped waves out in the pools. Baird’s Sandpipers were the most numerous small shorebird—a usual situation at the Bottoms. American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts and Greater Yellowlegs walked elegantly along the mudflats, and a White-rumped Sandpiper made its initial appearance on our

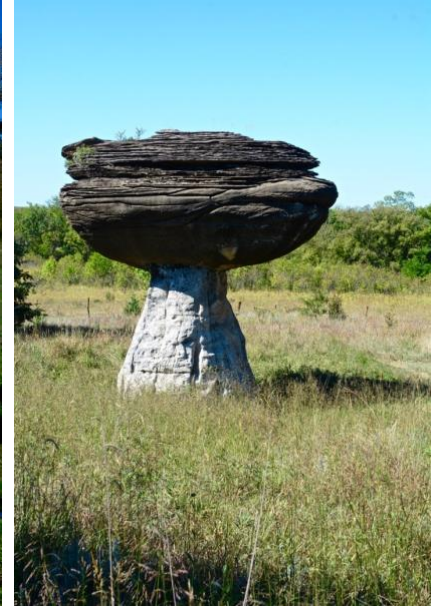


checklist for this trip. Franklin's, Ring-billed Gulls and an occasional Black Tern blew across the pools and Double-crested Cormorants fed in quiet coves. We were all excited when the first Northern Harrier, a large female, came coursing across the marsh deftly dealing with cross winds as she hovered, dove and left with her dinner. Curtis stayed with us until the last minute when we had to end our birding and return to Great Bend for our own dinner.

Tue., Sep. 21 Quivira National Wildlife Refuge

We arrived via the south entrance and started our exploration of Quivira at the "Kids Fishing Pond," where Red-headed Woodpeckers are usually found, but not today. Grasses, sedges and sunflowers draw our attention and we decided to hike across the wetland to the observation tower about a half-mile away. Along the path, cockleburs, the original Velcro®, attract our attention and attach to our clothing. At the observation tower we watched rafts of American White Pelicans, but it's a bit too windy for shorebirds to feed in the Little Salt Marsh. Raccoon tracks show that even four-legged critters skid in the mud. As we returned to the vehicles, we discovered sand burrs, another "sticky" and difficult to remove prairie plant. We drive north through the refuge and again our timing was perfect. When we got to the (now former) education building, a "de-construction" crew attacked the structure with a large backhoe. In just a few minutes the building was reduced to rubble that could be hauled away. Fortunately, they did not destroy the restroom facilities.

We continued to the wildlife drive on the Big Salt Marsh, where waterfowl (Canada Geese, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Mallard, Northern Pintail and Ruddy Ducks) had concentrated into several of the pools. American Coots and Pied-billed Grebes chugged along the edge of the cattails and two American Bitterns treated us to great views when they flushed up out of the marsh. Least, Buff-breasted and Semipalmated Sandpipers fed on the mudflats, while Long-billed Dowitchers stitched and American Avocets swished their way across the shallow waters. Great and Snowy Egrets made for a great comparison as they stood side-by-side. As we departed the refuge a small flock of Wild Turkeys foraged along the edge of a wooded swale. We traveled back south to St. John where our late lunch was enjoyed in the city park pavilion before we started back to our hotel in Great Bend. A few miles north of St. John we stopped along the roadside to scope a prairie dog town for Burrowing Owls. No owls, but a small herd of Bison some walking into sight heading



towards our location, led by a large old bull. Apparently they realized that we have not come to feed them; they lose interest and turn back. We did likewise and returned to Great Bend.

We (Sil and Ed) discovered that our intended dinner restaurant had suddenly closed due to Covid 19 and found a Thai restaurant with a private dining room that was willing to take our reservation on short notice. The food and service were both excellent. Once again—timing won. Merrill and Tad stayed the course and went out for the evening owl prowl. Recent management removed most all the trees that used to harbor Great Horned and Barn Owls along the rural road we searched. We failed to find owls, but discovered a Raccoon up in one of the few remaining trees. The evening was capped at an overlook where the lack of lights defined Cheyenne Bottoms and a full moon filled the landscape..

Wed., Sep. 22 Kansas Wetlands Educ. Center | Mushroom Rocks State Park | Hoglund Dugout | Coronado Heights

After breakfast, we departed Great Bend and returned to the Kansas Wetland Education Center to learn more about Cheyenne Bottoms and to watch their education program in action as they hosted over 200 second grade students. Action was the operative word in this education day. Students were spread out at different stations where they were engaged in interactive programs—no sitting in chairs here. Among all this activity Carol found a Green Heron that lurked in the small wetland right behind the education center. What a quiet treat among the commotion. We headed east to our next hidden gem, Mushroom Rocks State Park. These wonderful and peculiarly shaped stone mushrooms sparked lots of questions. Why are they round? Why are some softer than others? What made them erode like this? Why are some so smooth? Even the historical graffiti left impressions.

A Brown Thrasher scratched away in the underbrush and a pair of Northern Cardinals brightened edges of the brush during our picnic lunch at Kanopolis State Park. Then we moved on towards the Swedish settlement of Lindsborg. Before checking into our hotel, we stopped at the Hoglund Dugout for some insight into the first pioneer settlers living conditions. The Hoglunds arrived too late in the season to build a proper cabin, so they dug a cellar, lined it with stone and pulled their wagon over the top to serve as a cover and upper floor. None of the participants was interested in trying to live through the winter in those conditions.



After checking into the e, a Scandinavian bed and breakfast, we set out to explore this quaint and attractive small town. We gathered for dinner at the Crown and Rye to sample Swedish cuisine and agreed that the potato sausage and Swedish meatballs were two excellent choices. After a quick run to our rooms to get cameras, we drove out to Coronado Heights for the end of the day. The wind had ceased; the sky had cleared so that the sun sliding below the horizon was the perfect closing of the day. We lingered to welcome the evening and to look at constellations and the planets.

Thur., Sep. 23

Maxwell Game Preserve | Lindsborg

Our hotel breakfast seating was the first available so that we could enjoy the traditional Swedish menu items of pickled beets, Herring, and cheese or a special Blueberry Casserole before departing for Maxwell Game Preserve. Hard-boiled eggs were delicious and turned into a fun breakfast item when we were provided with the Swedish *Aggskalare* (eggshell peeler). We hurried on out to Maxwell Game Preserve to make sure we would be on time to meet our volunteer guide. Again, timing is in our favor and we learn that our guide will be Ken Stafford, who having retired from Kansas State University, volunteers here and at Konza Prairie where he also leads tours dealing with bison. Ken is knowledgeable as well as colorful, and a real delight. On the tram as we went out to the pasture, Ken explained how they manage through annual sales to keep the number of bison below 200 head, a level that can be sustained by the 2400 acre prairie. He pointed out that for the first time in decades the agency held a prescribed summer burn and that part of the pasture that was really green with tender grass was very attractive to the bison. The burn had also revealed Santa Fe wagon ruts that had not been observed in decades. Again, what lucky timing for us?

This year Maxwell's bison herd has three fall born calves that still have their red coats. Ken explained that in situations with large predators or harsh winter conditions these calves would likely not survive the first year because fall grasses contain less nutrition and their mother's milk would not be rich enough to sustain them to a suitable weight. The bison were attracted to the tram trail for the treat of tasty "range cubes" that the feed truck has spread ahead of our arrival. The bison gathered around (largely ignoring us), continued to search for treats, fed their calves and took dust baths in the wallows they have developed in the prairie. Being safely in such proximity to these magnificent animals was a very touching experience. The elk herd here, is maintained at 40-50 head, but none of them was interested in coming out of the woodland shade to see us or get range cubes.



Ken is convinced to stay and enjoy a picnic lunch before his return to Manhattan, and rewarded us with a demonstration of the reaction of Pitcher Sage, *Salvia azurea*, flowers being stimulated like a pollinator entering the floral tube. We returned to Lindsborg and explored the downtown including the Small World Gallery, owned by National Geographic photographer, Jim Richardson and his wife Kathy. Kathy's jewelry and Jim's photographs start a lot of discussions. Yvonne, the serious photographer in our group, and Jim reminisce about the history of Nikon cameras in America. Jim was a major user and Yvonne's father was a major distributor in the U. S.

Dan, Carol, Merrill, Roy, Katheryn and Ed headed down to the Old Mill Museum for a tour of the restored Smoky Valley Roller Mill. Once an economic driving force in Lindsborg, the mill was restored to operational condition in the 1980s and is put into production on an annual basis during Millfest, the first weekend of May. Everyone gathered back at the Dröm Sött and we departed for our dinner at a small restaurant housed in an old school building in Assaria, a town of about 400 people. Even as we approached the restaurant people wondered how any restaurant could possibly exist in such a small town. After our meal, comments trended toward, "One of the best restaurant meals that I've had in years." And people understood how this restaurant survived.

Fri., Sep. 24 Cottonwood Falls | Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve

After another excellent Swedish breakfast at the Dröm Sött, we headed to Cottonwood Falls, the county seat of Chase County, which was the setting for William Least Heat Moon's book, *PrairieErth*. We approached town from a back road that provided a spectacular view of the Flint Hills from the top of the tallgrass covered plateau, before we dropped down into the valley of the Cottonwood River. Meadowlarks, Mourning Doves and American Kestrels greeted us as soon as we got into the large expanse of prairie. In Cottonwood Falls, we headed directly to the historic county courthouse, which continues to serve its daily functions with a trial in progress. Fortunately, the trial recessed for lunch, which allowed us to see the courtroom and visit the historic "iron box" jail facility behind the court. No one wanted to have the jail door closed much less stay overnight. We enjoyed the photos that gave an historic perspective of the area, as well as the view of Main Street from the tower, and the woodwork of the exquisite staircase.

Across the street we were drawn into the offices of the Symphony in the Flint Hills to see the exhibit about water in the Flint Hills. For 17 years, this remarkable organization has sponsored a Kansas City Symphony performance with approximately 7,000 attendees in a different prairie pasture each June. They are dedicated to celebrating the music, art and ecology of this special ecosystem. We migrated down the street to the Prairie Past Time Art Center and purchased a few Flint Hills crafted gifts before eating lunch at the Grand Central Hotel.



After lunch we walked down to see the old mill site and check for birds on the Cottonwood River. No Spotted Sandpipers in sight, but a Great Blue Heron uttered his displeasure at our interruption of his lunch.

The visitor center at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve gave everyone a broad perspective of the Flint Hills Ecosystem and the history of the Spring Hill Ranch, which is the backbone of the preserve's land holdings. After a visit to the restored historic ranch house and barn, we explored the one room Lower Fox Creek School and the diverse prairie vegetation found in its schoolyard, before hiking out into the pasture that is once again grazed by Bison after more than 150 years of occupancy by cattle. The diversity in the pasture does not come close to what we saw in the schoolyard. We find "buffalo chips" which fueled many cooking fires on the prairie. Up the hill a single bull and a couple of cows from the herd were visible at a very safe distance, but not a single Meadowlark is found. As evening approached we moved on to historic Council Grove, where they have just celebrated the 200th anniversary of their role as the last gathering place and village before embarking on the Santa Fe Trail. Our dinner at the Trail Days Café comes with a full narrative and helps support the restoration of the Terwilliger House a Santa Fe Trail period home.

Sat., Sep. 25

Konza Prairie | Flint Hills Discovery Center & Mt. Mitchell

The only breakfast restaurant in town is suddenly without help and could not open this morning. In anticipation, the proprietor provided menus last evening and then delivers our personalized orders to us at the Cottage House. We start the day with a stop at a scenic overlook that gives a "bird's eye" view of most of the 8,600 acres of the Konza Prairie Biological Station. Jointly owned by Kansas State University and The Nature Conservancy, Konza is a field research station and one of the Long Term Ecological Research Sites sponsored by the National Science Foundation. The research facilities are not open to the general public, but we are welcome to explore and bird along the very popular hiking trails along Kings Creek and up on the hill. This rich mix of riparian woodlands and tallgrass prairie soon proves to be good birding habitat. We almost immediately found Blue Jays, Red-bellied, Downy and Yellow-shafted Wood Peckers along the creek. We found a Summer Tanager just before the group split in half to follow the creek valley or ascend up the prairie slope to the top of the hill. The hoped for Red-headed woodpeckers remain a hope and all too soon we have to conclude our hike for lunch at the Tallgrass Tap House, where everyone can get a taste of the Flint Hills brewing arts.



After lunch we headed to the Flint Hills Discover Center where the fascinating exhibits that explained the ecosystem soon absorbed everyone. The multi-sensory introductory film drew rave reviews and some said they would be happy to stay and watch it again. The film's introductory music was so memorable that Kat contacted the center and sent us a link to the song. One of many memorable quotes stood out: "Because the ecosystem stays in tact, it teaches lessons, otherwise lost." The group asked to see "The Yellow Brick Road," so we headed east along the Kansas River to Wamego, which has captured the Wizard of Oz for their local promotional theme. In addition to the yellow bricks, the town has an Oz Museum, Toto's Tacos and an Oz Winery, where everyone soon converged to sample varieties such as Ruby Sippers Red, Rusted Rivets and Squished Witch. A few bottles may have left the winery but mostly we enjoyed the chocolate covered caramel pretzels that Merrill bought as a treat for everyone.

We crossed the Kaw River south of town and threaded our way through road construction to reach Mt. Mitchell and its high diversity prairie. Head-high and still blooming, Willow-leaf Sunflowers welcomed us to the trail leading to the summit. We noticed that this season among the tall grasses, Indian Grass has prospered, while Big Bluestem and Switch Grass have not grown as tall. Seed heads of Purple Coneflower and Compass Plant testify to a successful early summer growing season, but none of the usual prairie bird species such as, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Dickcissels or Eastern Meadowlarks are found.

In addition to its biological diversity, this place has a human rights history that became apparent from the summit where we viewed Dr. Mitchell's homestead, a known way-station on the Underground Railroad that ran along the Kaw River valley. We departed westward along the river valley and made a quick stop at the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church, which was founded by a group of Connecticut abolitionists inspired and supported by Henry Ward Beecher. Determined to keep Kansas a free state, their rifles were smuggled from the east in long wooden boxes marked "Beecher Bibles." We ended the day with a dinner at the historic Hays House. Built along the Santa Fe Trail by Daniel Boone's great-grandson, Seth Hays, the establishment has been a Council Grove business since 1857.

Sun., Sep. 26

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve | Allegawaho Memorial | Farewell Dinner and the Secret of the Cottonwood

Breakfast at the only available restaurant gave us an appreciation of maintaining a business in a small town. Dining also had the added attraction of our group being an attraction at the Saddlerock Café, where a single



“out-of-towner” is immediately noticed. Thirteen breakfast guests were certainly welcomed by the local clientele and appreciated by both the waitress and the owner, who came to thank us.

Afterwards, we returned to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve to explore a new trail that has been developed through a bottomland prairie restoration area along Fox Creek. Prairie forbs and grasses have grown well in the rich bottomland soils. Head-high grasses and Maximilian Sunflowers, with their Tootsie Roll scented blossoms frame the trail. The three common tallgrasses (Big Bluestem, Indian and Switch) here are joined by Eastern Gamma Grass, which grows tall but is only common in ungrazed prairie with wetter and deeper soils. This is just the kind of TALLgrass that participants wanted to see. The trail coursed through the prairie and along the riparian woodland with interpretation of the presence of trees and how they are limited on the prairie. Several old and large Burr Oaks provided evidence that they were “open grown” and flourished with prairie fires that eliminated competition from other species along Fox Creek. We were startled when Wood Ducks flew up stream along Fox Creek and tickled to finally see Redheaded as well as Red-bellied Woodpeckers in the woods here. Old fences reminded us that this is a restoration and there were once pens here that held cattle ready to be loaded on trains and shipped to processing plants. As the sun intensified, gentle breezes swayed the Indian Grass into waves and kept us cool as we walked the circuit again or remained immersed in the prairie.

We proceeded to the Kaw Indian Nation’s Allegawaho Park, which memorializes their Principal Chief, Allegawaho, when they were confined to a reservation here. Remains of small stone buildings intended as “housing” but used by the Kaw as livestock can be found along the creek. Now under tribal ownership, the park has a combination of native and restored prairie, and riparian woodland with a permanent stream. In wetter years this can be an excellent place to bird—this year we heard White-breasted Nuthatch, Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers. The riparian woods bordering the creek included wonderful large, old specimens of Burr Oak, Honey Locust and Ash. Tad, a talented wood turner, gave us new insights as he pointed out particular trees and explained how they could make interesting bowls. We also discovered an interesting patch of Paw Paw trees—all the fruit had already been consumed. This species has a very limited distribution in this area, and perhaps was brought here by the Kaw.

For lunch, the group voted to return to Council Grove for pie and ice cream at the Hays House, which proved to be an excellent menu choice. Following our dessert lunch, most of the group elected to take some free time while Sil, Merrill and Ed returned to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve for another hike in the bison pasture. Starting at the one-room Fox Creek School, Merrill and Ed hiked to a point where they could safely watch the old bull grazing in solitude while about twenty cows, calves and young bulls were slowly grazing as they ascended



the hill. The wind increased to over 35 miles per hour and the mercury rose to 91°, so Ed and Merrill joined Sil and switched to an observation point on the hill behind the ranch house where we could see that the whole herd included 36 individuals plus the old bull. Back in Council Grove, we picked up the other participants at the Cottage House and proceeded to our farewell dinner at the Ad Astra restaurant in Strong City. At the conclusion of the dinner, everyone learned the secret of the cottonwood—an appropriate final story to share at the Ad Astra restaurant located on Cottonwood Street in the Cottonwood River Valley. We ended the evening with a bit of stargazing in the Fox Creek schoolyard.

Mon., Sep. 27 Pioneer Bluffs | Prairie Art Path at Matfield Green

We had time to make a couple of stops on our return to Wichita because most people drove to Kansas and the first scheduled air departure was late in the day. Our first adventure took us to the Rogler ranch homestead, which serves as the headquarters for Pioneer Bluffs, an organization dedicated to preserving the ranching heritage of the Flint Hills. The buildings, including the magnificent barn that serves as a meeting hall, were not open. We explored the grounds around the home and corral and admired the stone fence surrounding the pastures before departing to our next stop. Just north of Matfield Green, we pulled into the parking area next to a set of Timber Arches that reminded everyone of Stonehenge. It is one of installations for the Prairie Art Path, a project designed by architect / artist Bill McBride to connect people to the prairie through art. We were attracted to a pair of sculptures along the path that shift shapes as you approach and become horses when the appropriate viewing position was achieved. Then we discovered the dry stacked stone arch bridge crossing a ravine with an intermittent stream. The structure is stunning. Its simple beautiful form is reinforced by the finesse of its craftsmanship. We were disappointed that we did not have time to explore the entire four-mile path. We headed south and passed the sign advising “Matfield Green-Next Five Exists” as we approached the small village with about that many driveways. Other than the recurring wind, the road was good and we got to Wichita in time to say our good byes and grab a bit of lunch.

Photos by Ed Pembleton