

## KANSAS TALLGRASS PRAIRIE 2023



# TRIP REPORT

WRITTEN BY DR. RYAN KLATASKE  
WITH ED AND SIL PEMBLETON



# WHERE WE WENT



**2 Guide Ryan Klataske with participants at Mushroom Rock State Park**

**Cover photo: A group of new prairie enthusiasts, along with local guides, at the end of their journey**

**Participants: John, Joan, Merrill, Cheryl, Ron, Dori Brenda, James, Lynn, Callie, and Steve**

## *Day 1*

GREAT PLAINS NATURE CENTER  
AND AN INTRODUCTION TO THE  
PRAIRIES OF KANSAS

## *Day 2*

DYCK ARBORETUM OF THE  
PLAINS, CHEYENNE BOTTOMS,  
AND CORONADO HEIGHTS

## *Day 3*

LINDSBORG, THE HÖGLUND  
DUGOUT, THE LAND INSTITUTE,  
MUSHROOM ROCK STATE PARK

## *Day 4*

MAXWELL WILDLIFE REFUGE AND  
KONZA PRAIRIE BIOLOGICAL  
STATION

## *Day 5*

MT. MITCHELL HERITAGE PRAIRIE,  
THE FLINT HILLS DISCOVERY  
CENTER, AND THE KLATASKE  
RANCH

## *Day 6*

NATIVE STONE SCENIC BYWAY,  
SANTA FE TRAIL, AND THE  
TALLGRASS PRAIRIE NATIONAL  
PRESERVE

## *Day 7*

COTTONWOOD FALLS, PIONEER  
BLUFFS, AND MATFIELD GREEN

# A WORD FROM THE GUIDES

Thank you to all the participants from across the country who joined us on the 2023 tour of Kansas and the last remaining intact tract of tallgrass prairie in North America. This is truly a remarkable and endangered landscape, and it was our sincere pleasure to share it with you. Please spread the word that the prairie and biodiversity it supports is something special--something worth visiting, experiencing, and protecting.

**3 Ryan Klataske with  
Sil and Ed Pembleton  
on their final tour for  
Natural Journeys.  
Thanks to the  
Pembletons for their  
inspiration, wisdom,  
and passion for the  
prairie.**



# OUR KANSAS JOURNEY

---

On the last night of our journey through Kansas, we sat together around a long wooden table in a secluded dining room of the historic Grand Central Hotel and Grill in Cottonwood Falls, a charming small town with limestone buildings and a marvelous 1800s courthouse at the end of main street. The Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, part of the National Park Service, is located nearby. This vast sweeping landscape of perennial grassland is part of the last remaining intact tract of native tallgrass prairie in North America. At the end of our meal, we all took turns sharing what we learned or loved about our weeklong adventure, and for some, what surprised us about Kansas and the prairie.

One of the travelers, Brenda, asked to begin by offering a well-deserved tribute to Ed and Sil Pembleton, for whom this was their final trip as guides for Naturalist Journeys. The Pembletons care so much about a bunch of grass, Brenda joked, noting that most people would probably say just “mow it!” But as she and others pointed out, these seasoned naturalists and educators take pride and care about the prairie, helping visitors see it differently—as much more than just grass. “It’s true,” someone else added enthusiastically, “the Flint Hills are wonderful!” It might not yet be widely known just how wonderful and endangered the Flint Hills and tallgrass prairie are, but as we learned from the characters we met around the state, there are many people here in Kansas who want to protect them. “It was also nice to be around people and organizations that want to save stuff,” Brenda added, reflecting on the theme of conservation that reverberated throughout our visits and conversations with locals.

Ed responded that he was glad that now the Flint Hills have a fan club. From my perspective, as someone who has known the Pembletons for all my life, it’s clear that they have a fan club too. I’m proud to be a life-long member and honored to take over this tour for them next year.





#### **4 The Flint Hills at Konza Prairie Biological Station**

As someone who grew up around prairie, wildlife, and rivers in the Plains, along with many people who, like Ed and Sil, want to conserve our natural ecosystems and native species, this region and my home state of Kansas has always been special to me. But it wasn't until I returned to Kansas after years of traveling elsewhere around the globe that I felt so passionate about helping others learn this too. As the poet, T.S. Elliot once said:

**We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.**

## NATURALIST JOURNEYS

These lines often remind me of the way that I've come to see Kansas as worth exploring, conserving, and sharing with others. Sometimes, I might not even see what others see, or what others find special when visiting the prairie, and that, too, is a joy for me. Like the moment, for example, when I noticed John-- who lives amongst tall buildings rather than tall grass in an East Coast city-- standing broadly and looking up at the bright blue sky near Cheyenne Bottoms, with clouds like an oil painting and a horizon that stretches on as far as you can see. "This, right here, is why I came to Kansas," he told me, and we both quietly admired the scene.

For future guests, I hope that you, too, come find what moves you about prairie. Kansas is probably not what you imagine, and I want to help you see it --and our world's last remaining tallgrass prairie--in a new way.



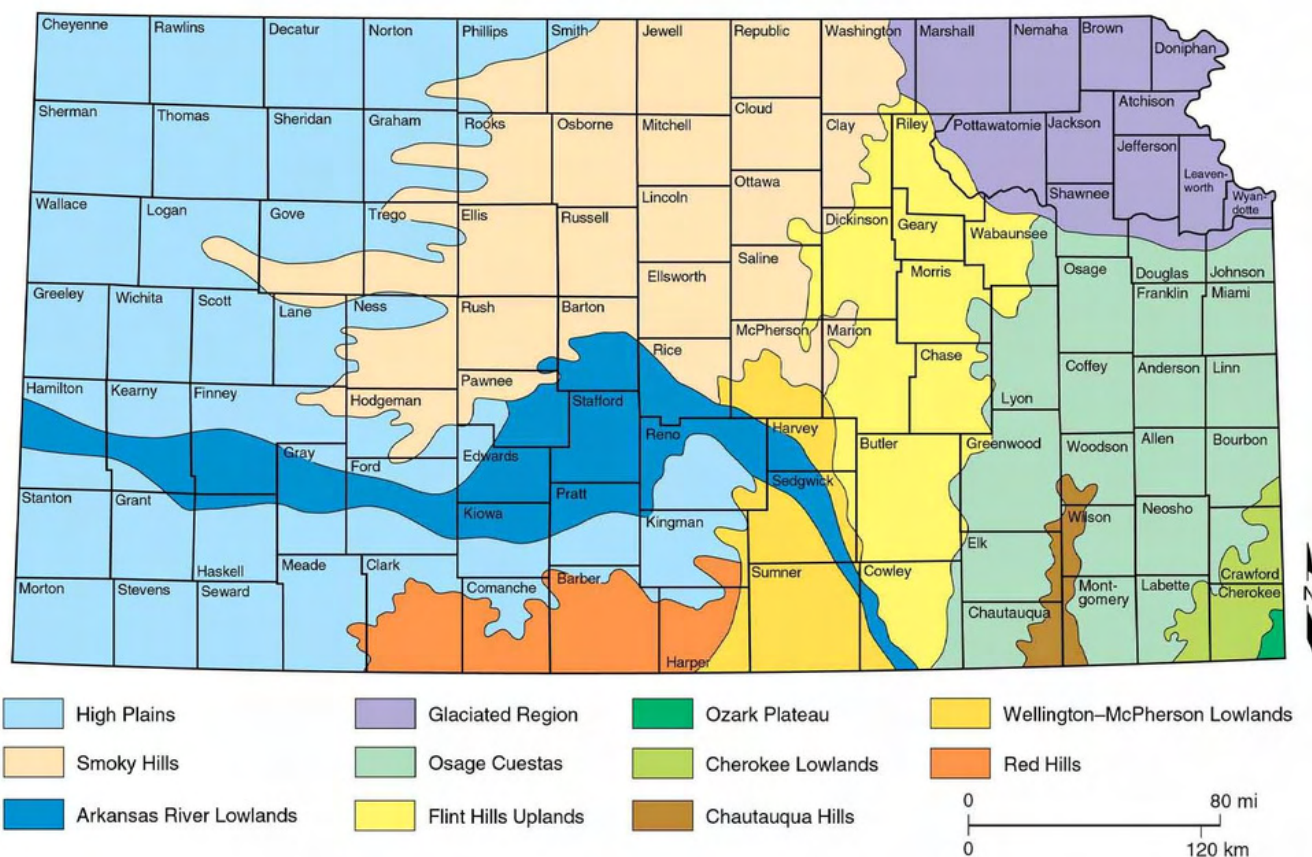
**5 Big skies await in Kansas, Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve**



# ECOREGIONS AND SPECIES SEEN

This tour focused on the tallgrass prairie of the Kansas Flint Hills, along with the mixed-grass prairie of the Smoky Hills. See our Naturalist Journeys' Species List for all names of birds, mammals, and reptiles seen.

Generalized Physiographic Map of Kansas



Kansas Geological Survey  
The University of Kansas  
1930 Constant Avenue  
Lawrence, Kansas 66047

## DAY 1: GREAT PLAINS NATURE CENTER AND AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRAIRIES OF KANSAS

---

On the first day of our trip, we loaded up in two comfortable white vans with big windows and set off for the Great Plains Nature Center in Wichita. This urban education center and nature preserve provides an ideal introduction to the prairies of Kansas—the tallgrass prairie, mixed-grass prairie, and shortgrass prairie. As we walked in, we stopped along the sidewalk to admire a stand of prairie plants and wildflowers in their beautiful fall colors, opening and examining dried seed pods, throwing milkweed seeds to the wind, discussing evolution, and identifying various grass species next to towering compass plants.

We then hiked around the center's network of family-friendly walking trails that weave through marshes, grassland, and woodland habitat, looking for birds and enjoying the changing landscape. There were ducks, geese, and herons in the water, which was noticeably low due to the ongoing drought, blackbirds around the marshes, and Mockingbirds, Brown Thrashers, and Kingbirds fluttering along the meadows. We also saw deer, rabbits, and squirrels, as well as a Garter Snake lounging on the trail.

That evening, we ate dinner together in what looked like the inside of airplane, a nod to the avian history and economy in Wichita. We also formally introduced ourselves and shared motivations for visiting and exploring Kansas. We compiled our first bird list of the trip and began what became an almost-nightly group effort to rate onion rings. We were off to a great start and anxious to hit the road in the morning.



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS

**"As to scenery (giving my own thought and feeling), while I know the standard claim is that Yosemite, Niagara Falls, the Upper Yellowstone and the like afford the greatest natural shows, I am not so sure but the prairies and plains, while less stunning at first sight, last longer, fill the esthetic sense fuller, precede all the rest, and make North America's characteristic landscape."**

**-Walt Whitman, Specimen Days (1879)**



**6 Guide Ed Pembleton teaching about wildflowers and prairie plants**

## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**7 Butterfly on thistle, by Ron Gangnon**



**8 Ed throwing milkweed seeds to the wind, by Brenda Richmond**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**9 Who is taller? Ed or the Compass plant?**



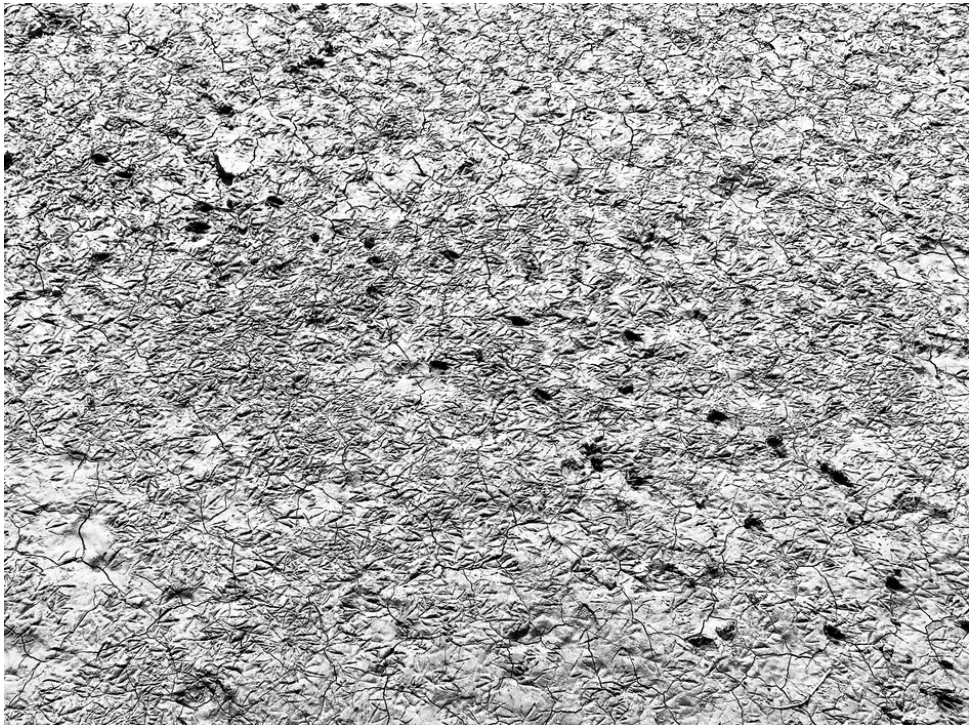
**10 Boardwalk through marsh at Great Plains Nature Center**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**11 Garter snake crossing**



**12 Footprints in the mud**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**13 Wildflowers at Great Plains Nature Center**



**14 Walk in the woods at Great Plains Nature Center**

## DAY 2: DYCK ARBORETUM OF THE PLAINS, CHEYENNE BOTTOMS, AND CORONADO HEIGHTS

---

The next morning, we visited the Dyck Arboretum of the Plains, located in Hesston and affiliated with the local college. The mission of this prairie and native plant-focused arboretum is to cultivate “transformative relationships between people and the land,” and there is a pleasant trail that loops around a small lake. Red-eared sliders relaxed on logs in the pond and we shared in the enjoyment of an ideally cool, sunny morning.

On our drive to Cheyenne Bottoms, a Ramsar site and “wetland of international importance,” forming part of one of the most important inland wetlands in North America, we passed by fields of amber sorghum and other crops while discussing Kansas agriculture, changes in the landscape, and the loss of prairie, as well as current environmental and conservation issues including conflicts over water, aquifer depletion, drought, habitat loss, invasive species, and the decline in native species. We gathered for a cheerful picnic lunch under a shelter at the Kansas Wetlands Education center near Cheyenne Bottoms, where we began our visit by touring educational exhibits and watching a short film about the wetland, which provides a vital stopover for migratory birds in the Central Flyway.

The site manager, Curtis Wolf, led us on a tour of the Bottoms, where we saw a diversity of birdlife including Blue-winged Teal, Shovelers, Gadwall, Wigeons, and Coots, as well Grebes diving down amongst the vegetation in the marsh. Baird’s and Least Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers, Wilson’s Snipes, and Greater Yellowlegs pranced nearby. We also stopped to observe the many gulls, cormorants, pelicans, and egrets, and watched hawks flying above the marsh. Stunning flocks of White-faced Ibis, which look like some sort of bird out of the tropics, were especially eye-catching. At the end of our



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS

tour, we sat to watch the activity of nearby prairie dog town, a keystone species of the prairie and once much more abundant across the Plains. These small mammals, who live in a network of underground burrows, survive in limited numbers across a significantly reduced range, continue to provide food and habitat for prairie species including golden eagles, ferruginous hawks, reptiles and amphibians, swift foxes, badgers, and even one of North America's most endangered mammals—the black-footed ferret.

That evening, after checking into our cozy Swedish inn and eating dinner together in Lindsborg, a charming small town with Swedish heritage in an area with interesting histories of Indigenous people, European immigration, and agriculture, we ventured out to Coronado Heights to watch a stunning sunset over the surrounding pastoral valley. This prominent sandstone bluff, topped with a New Deal WPA-built "castle," is believed to be one of the eastern-most points where the Spanish conquistador and explorer, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, visited during his journey through this region in the 16th century.



**15 Identifying plants at Dyck Arboretum**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**16 Brenda and Sil with Big Bluestem**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**17 Dröm Sött Inn in Lindsborg**



**18 Downtown Lindsborg, a charming town with Swedish heritage**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**19 Birdwatching at Cheyenne Bottoms**



**20 Cattle egret at Cheyenne Bottoms, by Ed Pembleton**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**21 View from Coronado Heights**



**22 Sunset at Coronado Heights, by Ronald Gangnon**

## **DAY 3: LINDSBORG, THE HÖGLUND DUGOUT, THE LAND INSTITUTE, AND MUSHROOM ROCK STATE PARK**

---

The next morning, we met downstairs in our Swedish inn for a homemade breakfast by the warm and welcoming staff. After breakfast, featuring a wide assortment of food including eggs and casseroles, fruit, muffins, Swedish-style pancakes, pickles, and fish, we took a short walk to a historic “dugout” on the outskirts of town. This underground rock shelter was once covered with a wagon to provide shelter for a young family of Swedish settlers in the mid-1800s. The woman who lived there even birthed multiple kids in the humble earthen abode.

Next, we visited the Land Institute, a nearby research center to learn about their ongoing efforts to develop perennial agricultural crops and promote a more ecologically oriented approach to farming—using the prairie ecosystem as a model for food production. Despite some much-needed rain, their staff provided us with an informative tour of their fields and greenhouses. We also spotted our first osprey and gathered, just as the rain let down, for a picnic lunch at a nearby park.

That afternoon, some of us visited Mushroom Rock State Park located on the Prairie Trail Scenic Byway to explore its unusual geological formations that look like large mushrooms rising from the prairie. These unique rocks, called concretions, are remnants of sand and sediment from the time when Kansas was submerged under a Cretaceous sea. Others stayed behind in Lindsborg to stroll the many shops and galleries on Main Street.

That evening, we enjoyed a memorable meal with top-notch food and service at the Renaissance Cafe, a hidden gem located in an old school gym in the tiny town of Assaria. With dim lighting and an enchanting ambience, we enjoyed intimate conversations and got to know each other better while dining at several small tables in our own secluded section of the restaurant.



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**23 Cozy one-bedroom home**



**23 Learning about The Land Institute**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**24 Touring the greenhouses at The Land Institute**



**25 Joan and John at Mushroom Rock State Park**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**26 Group photo at Mushroom Rock State Park**



**27 Formed from erosion a long time ago**

## DAY 4: MAXWELL WILDLIFE REFUGE AND KONZA PRAIRIE BIOLOGICAL STATION

---

The next morning was warm and sunny—the perfect weather for a wagon ride into the mixed-grass prairie at Maxwell Wildlife Refuge. Out into the pasture amongst wildflowers, we stopped to admire a herd of American Bison surrounding us in all directions. From our open-air wagon, the sight and sounds of bison, including calves—many only a few feet away—were mesmerizing. This refuge, one of the few places in the state with bison and elk herds, is in Smoky Hills southeast of Lindsborg.

We returned to Lindsborg for a picnic lunch in a shady park, where we explored the tall oaks and historic buildings, including a towering flour mill built just before the turn of the twentieth century. Throughout our journey together, picnic lunches in parks were incredibly pleasant gatherings, where many folks could walk and bird amongst the shade trees. We also had another opportunity to visit shops and met renowned National Geographic photographer, Jim Richardson, in his gallery.

That afternoon, we set off for a hike at Konza Prairie Biological Station, located to the east in the tallgrass prairie of the Flint Hills. Some chose a short walk through the forest along a creek where they encountered Downy, Red-bellied, and Red-headed Woodpeckers, Summer Tanagers, and other birds. Others hiked the 2.5 miles loop that climbs up a particularly steep hill with a scenic vista, often in view of bison, where the trail proceeds along a ridge and descends through a valley into the gallery forest.

This was a warm afternoon, and after our vigorous hike and leisurely strolls at the Konza, we returned to nearby Manhattan, a friendly college town where we would spend the next two nights.



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS

We dined that evening in a dimly lit historic hotel lounge—now a cool cocktail bar—in downtown Manhattan. The early 20th century vibe, combined with good food and warm hospitality, make this a uniquely comfortable place. Gathered around a long table, we shared a family-style meal of meatloaf with a perfectly spicy sauce—a Kansas country classic with a twist, made with local grass-fed and grass-finished beef, and served alongside locally grown salad, roasted squash, and zesty potatoes. A homemade honey cake received rave reviews and, like many Kansas grandmothers have often demanded, our plates were clean, and we were ready to “hit the hay.”



**28 Bison spotting at Maxwell Wildlife Refuge**

## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**29 "Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam..."**



**30 Bison in every direction**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**31 Bison calf, by Ed Pembleton**



**32 Bison on the mixed grass prairie at Maxwell Wildlife Refuge**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**33 One of many enjoyable picnic lunches**



**34 Ryan and Ed with National Geographic photographer, Jim Richardson**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**35 Konza Prairie Biological Station**



**36 Hiking the Konza Prairie Nature Trail**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**37 Looking for Red-headed woodpeckers on the Konza Prairie Nature Trail**



**38 Still smiling after our hike**



## **DAY 5: MT. MITCHELL HERITAGE PRAIRIE, THE FLINT HILLS DISCOVERY CENTER, AND THE KLATASKE RANCH**

---

It was another beautiful morning and we drove through a scenic agricultural valley along the Kansas River to Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie, a prominent hill and protected native prairie with a rich history related to Indigenous people, European settlement, and the Underground Railroad. A local botanist, Iralee Barnard (and the author of our handy “pocket guide” to wildflowers and grasses) led a small group on walk, examining plants along the trail that winds up the hill. Others set off to explore the trails or find a quiet place to sketch the pastoral scenery.

After a picnic lunch in the shady Wamego city park, we visited the historic limestone Beecher Bible and Rifle Church, where in the 1850s era of Bleeding Kansas, a period of violent guerilla warfare between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces, the famed abolitionist preacher Henry Ward Beecher organized an effort to smuggle crates of rifles hidden under bibles into the contested territory.

Back in Manhattan, we visited the Flint Hills Discovery Center, which provides wonderful exhibits and educational opportunities centered on the natural and cultural heritage of the Flint Hills. Once a burden to plow, the rocky terrain that gives the region its name helped preserve landscape, leaving one of the last remaining areas of native tallgrass prairie in the Great Plains. We informed all visitors that the center’s fantastic short film—with a sensory experience of snow, storms, and fire—was a “must see.”

After dinner at a local brewery, we travelled on scenic back roads through the hills north of town to the Klataske family ranchland. As the sun was setting,

## NATURALIST JOURNEYS

we drove along ranch roads to a prairie hilltop with stunning views and serenity in all directions. After a short walk to the edge of a bluff overlooking the valley, we shared homemade sorghum cookies—baked with a Kansas-grown grain that we often noticed on our trip in amber fields waiting for harvest. As the night sky darkened, the Milky Way became brighter above us. A Poorwill sang softly in the distance, but for some reason, the local choir of coyotes decided not to join in.



**39 Ed leads us through the wildflowers at Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**40 Botanist Iralee Barnard discusses prairie grasses and wildflowers**



**41 Walking and talking at Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**42 Exploring native prairie at Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie**



**43 Hiking trail at Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**44 Beecher Bible and Rifle Church**



**45 Fossils in the limestone walls of Beecher Bible and Rifle Church**

## **DAY 6: NATIVE STONE SCENIC BYWAY, SANTA FE TRAIL, AND THE TALLGRASS PRAIRIE NATIONAL PRESERVE**

---

The next morning, we drove through Alma along the Native Stone Scenic Byway, touring one of the most pastoral roads in the Flint Hills. After a quick stop overlooking the reservoir outside of Council Grove, we drove into town to explore before lunch at a local sandwich shop. The historic Santa Fe Trail once ran through downtown, and the rich history of this era and the region's Indigenous people are visible in the stately limestone buildings that line main street and displayed on several informational signs, statues, and historic sites. One of the downtown restaurants, located in an old building that looks straight out of a Western, is said to be the longest running restaurant west of the Mississippi River.

On our backroad journey through the countryside from Council Grove to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, we came to a halt along a gravel road to observe a gathering of Scissor-tailed flycatchers (at least 26 in total) in the adjacent fields and hedgerows. With no traffic in sight, we grabbed our binoculars and enjoyed their energetic preparations for migration.

Later that afternoon, we toured the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve with National Park Service guides who discussed the history, management, and ecology of the nearly 11,000-acre preserve. Occasional clouds created artistic shadows across the sweeping landscape, and bison grazed along the trail. Some of us also explored the historic stone barn and towering ranch house, part of the site's cattle ranching heritage. After checking into and dining at the historic Grand Central Hotel and Grill in Cottonwood Falls, it was the perfect time to return to the preserve to enjoy the dark sky from the nearby one-room schoolhouse, which was built on a hill in the 1880s and has since become a popular spot for stargazing and night photography.



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**46 Along the Native Stone Scenic Byway**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**47 Backroad birding and the location of 26 Scissor-tailed flycatchers**



**48 Flycatcher, by Ronald Gangnon**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**49 Exploring Council Grove**



**50 Preparing to head west on the Santa Fe Trail**

## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**51 Observing the prairie up close at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve**



**52 Photographing the vastness**



## DAY 7: COTTONWOOD FALLS, PIONEER BLUFFS, AND MATFIELD GREEN

---

We began the next day with breakfast at a local café in Strong City, just a few miles down the road. A group of old men drinking coffee greeted us when we walked in and thanked us for visiting when they left. An assortment of Mexican and Czech-style baked goods also caught the eye of many of us.

After breakfast, we met up with Luke Koch, a local stonemason, for a captivating introduction of his craft and a tour of local buildings, many of which he has helped restore. For many of us, this interactive demonstration of skill was an unexpected highlight of the trip, as well as a unique opportunity to learn about the history, architecture, and cultural preservation of the Flint Hills. We thanked Luke and set off to explore the historic Chase County Courthouse, one of the most iconic limestone structures in the region.

To ensure that no one on the trip goes hungry, we gathered for lunch at a nearby Mexican restaurant before driving south to Pioneer Bluffs, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the ranching heritage of the Flint Hills. After touring the property, with tall trees and historic buildings, we slowed down to spend some time walking along the PrairieArt Path, a project by artist Bill McBride that provides a network of prairie paths with sculpture art and views of valley. Trains continue to use the railroad line that runs through the property, where the remnants of cattle pens still stand from the days when animals were gathered here and shipped by rail.

On the way back to town, we stopped at the Schrupf Hills Scenic Overlook along the Flint Hills National Scenic Byway, admiring the tall native grasses and wildflowers, while also acknowledging that, unfortunately, our trip was coming to end. We gathered that evening for our last dinner at the Grand Central Hotel and Grill in Cottonwoods, followed by our final tally of species

## NATURALIST JOURNEYS

seen and one more excursion to stand beneath the dark sky of the Flint Hills. The next morning, after coffee and a cheerful breakfast at a local coffeeshop, we loaded up for the airport and said our goodbyes—until next time.

For some of us, this brief introduction to the prairie ignited a fire to learn and see more, and perhaps to think differently about this state and its endangered ecosystem. “The list I want to do,” Brenda shared the night before, is now “much longer than the things I did.” Others remarked on the value of the prairie, the opportunity to experience its “enduring quality,” and their hope to see it protected. To share in this hope for the future, as John explained, you can’t just read about the prairie to understand it, you must come visit and experience it for yourself.

For those who have read about the prairie in this report, we hope you consider visiting too. The prairie is waiting.

Dr. Ryan Klataske  
Manhattan, KS  
October 2023



**53 Homemade cinnamon rolls in Strong City**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**54 Stone mason Luke Koch provides a demonstration in Cottonwood Falls**



**54 Splitting limestone**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**55 Tools of the trade**



## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



**56 Climbing the staircase at the Chase County Courthouse in Cottonwood Falls**

## NATURALIST JOURNEYS



57 Our last dinner together, and the final entry in a serious effort to rank all the onion rings on our trip

**"The Flint Hills don't take your breath away; they give you a chance to catch it."**

-Jim Hoy, author of *My Flint Hills: Observation and Reminiscences from America's Last Tallgrass Prairie* and other books on cowboy culture and the Flint Hills of Kansas

**JOIN RYAN IN 2024  
KANSAS TALLGRASS PRAIRIE  
NATURALISTJOURNEYS.COM**



All photos by Ryan Klataske unless noted in caption

Naturalist Journeys, LLC is an equal opportunity service provider and committed to the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for all in employment and program delivery.