



SUMMER 2023

KANSAS UPDATE

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Meet New State Director Ben Postlethwait

The Nature Conservancy has named Ben Postlethwait as State Director in Kansas. He brings two decades of experience in the electric utility industry and a background in biology to his role at TNC. As state director, Ben leads a team of conservation experts and support staff focused on large-scale, lasting land, water and biodiversity conservation in Kansas. We spoke with Ben about his new role and vision for TNC in Kansas.

What made you want to work at The Nature Conservancy?

Humans interact with the natural world around us every day, and the mission to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends is critical. I am excited to work in a role that allows me to focus those interactions with the landscapes and help ensure my children—and someday grandchildren—have the opportunity to experience and understand Kansas's great natural resources.

What projects are you most excited to work on?

We have big goals to protect and improve the stewardship of thousands of acres in the Flint Hills. Newer work in the Southern High Plains allows us to work across state borders in vast landscapes. I am also impressed with the innovative, science-based work of the Sustainable Rivers Program. Given my previous work in the energy sector, I look forward to facilitating collaboration between conservation agencies and the utility industry. We must address growing energy demands while protecting sensitive ecosystems and mitigating climate change impacts. TNC's Site Renewables Right tool is an award-winning way to do that.

How were you first introduced to TNC?

I remember helping as a volunteer at the Anderson County Prairies Preserve in 2013. It was a wonderful experience, and I really enjoyed working with the staff and other volunteers. I will also always cherish the memories of working with TNC and the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP) at Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park. In my previous role, I provided equipment and volunteers to help with construction at the park. During that project, I worked alongside a group of volunteers that included my wife and daughters. We will never forget the work we contributed to bring that park to life.



Ben and his family with other volunteers at Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park in 2018. © Laura Rose Clawson/TNC

How do you see TNC's work in Kansas evolving?

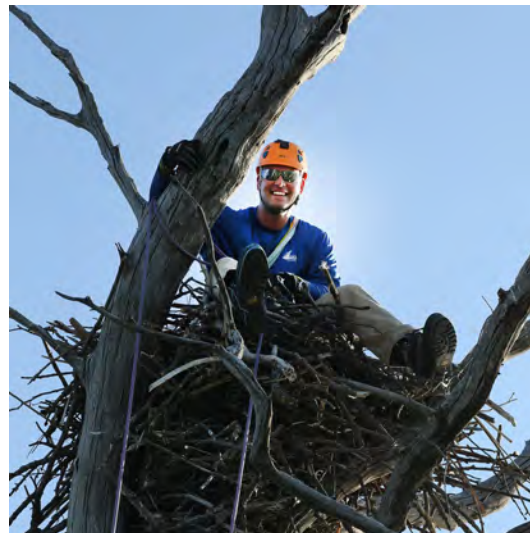
Transitioning to new leadership is always a heavy lift for an organization. At first, our staff and trustees will focus on continuing the outstanding work already underway: protecting prairies and streams; promoting regenerative agricultural practices; advancing renewable energy development while protecting ecologically sensitive areas; and engaging partners, supporters, and others in our work. As the United States transitions to more renewable energy, TNC's work to ensure that wind and solar resources in Kansas are developed responsibly and sustainably will become increasingly important.

Do you have a favorite Kansas species?

For the past several years, I had the opportunity to band bald eagle chicks as a volunteer with KDWP and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. I was able to interact with these incredible birds and even peer inside their nest to see them on their turf. They are amazing creatures and a major conservation success story, thanks to direct action to save our national symbol when it was on the brink of extinction.

What is something any Kansan can do to support TNC's mission to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends?

I have always believed that conservation depends on people experiencing nature and interacting with the natural systems around them. For some, that might be a float trip on the Kansas River or a drive along the Flint Hills Scenic Byway. For others, it may be visiting a nature center in their community. Beyond that, we are all responsible for spreading the word about the impressive conservation initiatives underway in Kansas. We should all be talking to our neighbors and coworkers. If resources allow, support conservation organizations by volunteering or making a donation. Convenient, equitable access to nature in Kansas is the key to conservation success.



Ben in a bald eagle's nest. © Mike Watkins



Ben with his wife Kacy and their two daughters. Photo courtesy Ben Postlethwait.

Welcome!

Welcome to our summer interns, fellows and seasonal employees!



Amanda Hollingsworth Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve Intern
Amanda is pursuing a biology degree with a concentration in zoology at Emporia State University. She's excited to learn about land management and working with the National Park Service this summer. Amanda hopes to work in a zoo or national park after she graduates.



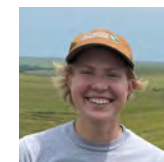
Toria Robert Flint Hills Stewardship Technician
Torია is studying animal science at Kansas State University and looks forward to learning about bison as the Flint Hills Stewardship Technician. After graduation, Toria hopes to enroll in veterinary school, also at K-State.



Brett Koehn Smoky Valley Ranch Grassland Conservation Intern
Brett is studying natural resources at Fort Hays State University. This summer, he looks forward to learning about how the team at Smoky Valley Ranch sets and works toward land management goals. After he graduates, Brett hopes to manage conservation lands.



Zander Opperman Smoky Valley Ranch Conservation Steward
Zander is pursuing a degree in ecology at Stanford University. He grew up next to Yellowstone and the park's free ranging bison. He's excited for hands-on experience in a new ecosystem and to explore how bison can be used for targeted grassland stewardship.



Emily Kovar David T. Beals III Healthy Streams for Kansas Fellow
Emily is a senior at Kansas State University, where she's studying the conservation of natural resources in relation to agriculture and watershed boundaries. She's excited to learn more about water conservation and soil health this summer.



Ryan Moon David T. Beals III Healthy Streams for Kansas Fellow
Ryan is a senior at Kansas State University, where he's studying biological and agricultural engineering. He is excited to learn more about the real-world application of conservation and environmental services. After graduation next spring, he plans to join the Peace Corps.

Congratulations!

Congratulations to Vinita Karki on completing her master of science at Fort Hays State University this spring. Vini was the 25th graduate student to work with Dr. Robert Penner, TNC's avian conservation manager. She received the Jim & Susie Abers Graduate Student Scholarship to support her research exploring the fine-scale movement of migratory birds at Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve using remote sensing technologies.

Vinita Karki (center) with Robert and Linda Penner. Photo courtesy Robert Penner.

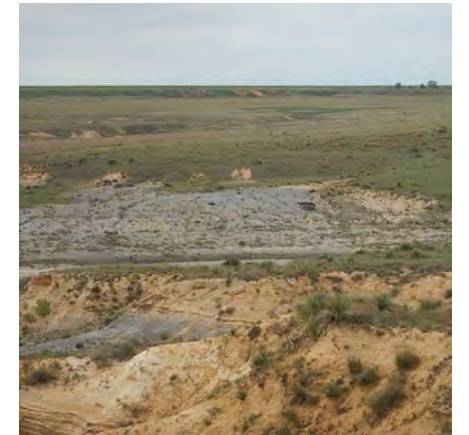


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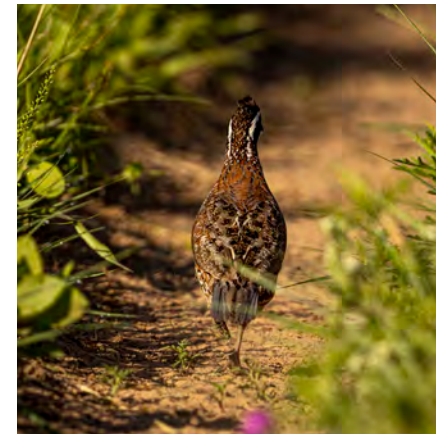
The Nature Conservancy has permanently protected 161,831 acres in Kansas, including these recent conservation easements and land acquisitions.

Chalk Bluffs and Chickens

Visitors to Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park, Monument Rocks and Castle Rock in western Kansas know that the rocky towers and canyons are spectacular sites. The area is also home to 70% of all lesser prairie-chickens in the world. TNC has protected 27,524 acres of these chalk bluffs and shortgrass prairie, including a land exchange and two conservation easements finalized this spring. In Gove County, two properties were brought under single ownership with a conservation easement. In June, another conservation easement in Logan County was completed to ensure the region remains a haven for wildlife.



© Paula Matile/TNC



Bobwhite quail © Joel Jones

Returning to Our Sandy Roots

TNC's first project in Kansas was the purchase of 80 acres of sand prairie in Harvey County in 1965. With no staff in the state, TNC transferred the property to Bethel College for scientific research and education. Almost 60 years later, TNC returned to the sand prairie of central Kansas with the purchase of 10,086 acres along the Arkansas River. Mixed-grass prairie vegetation provides quality habitat for bobwhite quail and other wildlife. The roots of the native prairie grasses stabilize the sandy dunes while interdunal wetlands provide habitat for migrating birds like sandhill and whooping cranes.

Protecting the Valley and the Stream

Stream ecology pioneer H. B. Noel Hynes famously wrote, "In every respect, the valley rules the stream" in 1970. This watershed approach to conservation continues to play out in Chase County. TNC recently acquired 637 acres of native tallgrass prairie that contains two miles of Coyne Creek, a high-quality upland prairie stream. As with all real estate, location is everything. This land connects to more than 5,200 acres already protected with conservation easements in the Coyne Creek watershed.



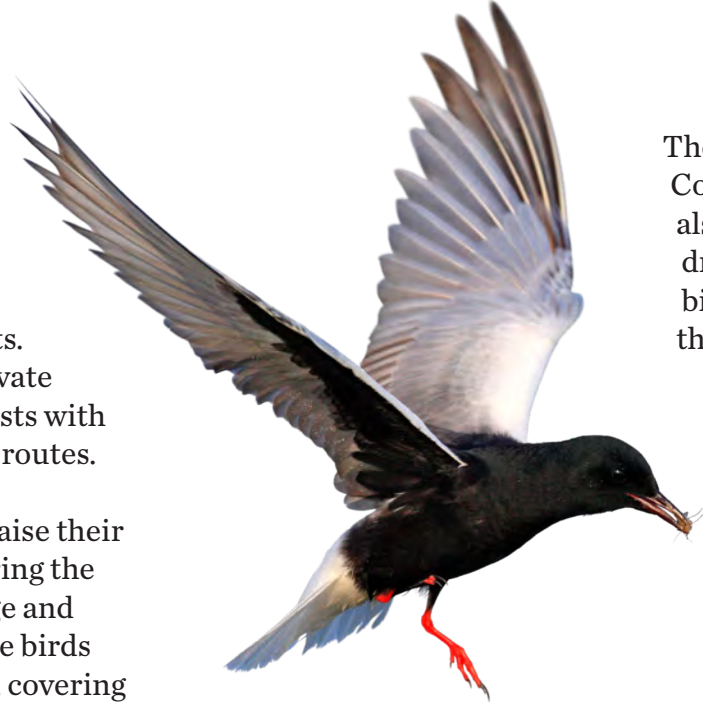
© Paula Matile/TNC

At Cheyenne Bottoms, technology takes conservation to new heights

Every year, millions of birds embark on journeys that span continents, navigating vast distances between breeding grounds and wintering habitats. These resilient travelers captivate scientists and nature enthusiasts with their extraordinary migration routes.

Many bird species breed and raise their young in northern regions during the summer. As the seasons change and resources become scarce, these birds begin their annual migrations, covering thousands of miles to reach their wintering grounds. They rely on specific stopover sites along their routes to rest and refuel before continuing their arduous journeys. Every year, tens of thousands of shorebirds and as many as 250,000 waterfowl visit the Cheyenne Bottoms wetland complex during their seasonal migrations. On The Nature Conservancy's Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve, cutting-edge technologies monitor these migrating birds more effectively than ever.

The Motus Wildlife Tracking System is an international collaborative research network that uses radio telemetry to track the movements of small flying animals fitted with nanotag transmitters. The extensive network of Motus receivers provides real-time data every time a tagged bird, bat or insect passes within range. Cheyenne Bottoms welcomed Kansas's first Motus receivers in 2020. There are now 13 receivers across the state, tracking individual birds and creating detailed pictures of their migratory routes, stopover locations and length of stay.



The Nature Conservancy has also begun using drones to monitor bird populations and their movements. The aerial perspective captured by drones offers a unique vantage point, allowing staff and researchers to survey large areas quickly, efficiently and precisely.

This technology also helps to monitor areas that surveyors can't reach by foot or car. The high-quality imagery collected by drones provides detailed information about bird populations, nesting sites, feeding areas and habitat usage. Covering vast territories in a fraction of the time saves resources while increasing the accuracy and scope of bird survey data. The non-intrusive approach minimizes disturbance to bird populations while enabling accurate population assessments. Drones are also used for the day-to-day management of the preserve, checking water tanks for cattle, tracking the spread of invasive plants and identifying needs for infrastructure repairs.

By harnessing these innovative technologies, The Nature Conservancy maximizes resources and gains invaluable insights into bird behavior, migration patterns and habitat requirements. As technology advances, we expect even more incredible breakthroughs that will help meet the conservation needs of specific species.

WHAT IS CHEYENNE BOTTOMS? Cheyenne Bottoms is a natural depression in central Kansas that spans 41,000 acres and features a variety of aquatic habitats. Though some of the land in the basin is farmed, most of these wetlands are managed for conservation and wildlife habitat. TNC owns the nearly 8,000-acre Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve adjacent to the 19,998-acre Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area which is managed by the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks. Learn more at [nature.org/cheyennebottoms](https://www.nature.org/cheyennebottoms).



Show Us Your Best Shot

Grab your camera and head outside to capture the beauty of Kansas! From rolling prairie to geologic wonders, we want to see what you value most about Kansas, one frame at a time.

NEW THIS YEAR! Photos taken in Kansas and submitted to The Nature Conservancy's global photo contest will be eligible for additional prizes.

nature.org/photocontestkansas

Photos can be taken at any time but must be entered August 30-September 29. See complete rules at the contest webpage.



Highlights from the 2023 Kansas Legislative Session

Across Kansas and in the statehouse, water conservation was a pressing matter. Legislators took urgent action to increase funding to the state water plan by \$35 million. The Nature Conservancy supported this legislation and worked with lawmakers to ensure nature-based solutions and non-profit collaboration would be a priority for this new funding. Other legislative highlights included:

- Reforms to Groundwater Management Districts to require annual written reports and develop action plans in priority areas of concern.
- A new state park near Iola! Lehigh Portland State Park is 100+ acres of rugged woodlands, lively prairie, and scenic views of a spring-fed quarry lake. Trails feature more than 14 miles of rail-trail-style gravel-surfaced trails and natural-surface singletrack trails.
- House Bill 2320, enacting Commercial Property-Assessed Capital Enhancement (C-PACE) financing in Kansas, was introduced on behalf of The Nature Conservancy. It was referred to the Committee on Financial Institutions and Pensions, which plans to pursue it further in 2024.

Though Kansas's 2023 legislative session has adjourned, The Nature Conservancy continues to engage with state lawmakers so they can make informed decisions in 2024.



The Nature Conservancy works with state and federal leaders to find meaningful solutions to the issues that impact Kansas's lands and waters. Our recommendations are science-based, practical and non-partisan. Learn more about our conservation policy priorities at nature.org/kansaspolicy.

RIGHT from top: TNC staff and trustees with Governor Laura Kelly, State Senator Ronald Ryckman, State Senator Carolyn McGinn; and U.S. Representative Sharice Davids.

LEFT clockwise from top: Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park © Bruce Hogle; A storm gathers in the Flint Hills © Mark Clarke/TNC Photo Contest 2022; Greater prairie-chickens © Sean Tomlinson/TNCPhoto Contest 2019; Monarch caterpillar on milkweed ©Roxane McWilliams/TNC Photo Contest 2021





Hiking Trails in Cassoday NOW OPEN!

For the first time in 50 years, the Flint Hills Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Cassoday is open to the public. Enjoy a leisurely half-mile stroll to the South Fork Cottonwood River or hike the 2.5-mile and 4-mile trails.

Trails are open during daylight hours and are for pedestrian traffic only (except for wheelchairs). Access is limited to marked hiking trails within the fenced pasture.




Plan a visit at [nature.org/kspreserves](https://www.nature.org/kspreserves).






Flint Hills Tallgrass Prairie Preserve last fall
© Tony Capizzo/TNC



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