

KANSAS
STATE REPORT
July 2, 2008

Keith Sexson, Assistant Secretary for Operations
Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks
512 SE 25th Ave
Pratt, KS 67124

Unique Partnership Builds Cabins

When the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks staff first envisioned cabin rentals, they weren't sure how they'd be received. Operating on limited budgets, staff enclosed several covered picnic shelters. These "cabins" did not have electricity or running water, but they provided camping opportunities to park users who didn't have a camper or camping equipment. Basic equipment was provided to the renters and the cabins were a success.

To build on that success, Park staff would have to be very creative in finding funding sources. Park Friends Groups and individual investors got involved, and the more modern cabins were constructed at select state parks. Demand for these cabins was high during the summer. More cabins were needed to fill demand, and campers asked for even more amenities such as full kitchens, bathrooms and air conditioning. Funding for these more expensive cabins was still a barrier.

In 2005, KDWP entered into a partnership with Kansas Wildscape, a non-profit conservation organization, to help overcome that barrier. Wildscape borrowed money for construction, and cabin rental receipts was used to pay off the loans. Some of the initial cabins were prefabricated. Others were purchased as kits that were constructed on-site by park staff. But an agreement with the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC) has now provided a steady source of completed cabins.

An inmate-training program at several KDOC facilities is providing as many as six cabins a year. With more than 50 cabins now available, the demand remains steady. Reservations are accepted and most cabins are reserved on weekends throughout the summer. They are also becoming more popular in fall and winter as hunters discover them. Rental fees range from \$35 per night for the most rustic to more than \$100 per night for the deluxe, large cabins.

Prohibited Species Regulation Amended

Concern over aquatic nuisance species in Kansas continues to increase. Recent invaders include Asian carp, zebra mussels, and white perch. To combat the spread of these and other invaders, KDWP has increased education efforts to make boaters and anglers aware of the threats, but new regulations have also been implemented.

In the past two years, several species have been added to the list of those that may not be imported or possessed alive. In 2007, the white perch was added. White perch appeared in two reservoirs several years ago, perhaps inadvertently stocked with striped bass fingerlings. White perch thrived, especially in the relatively turbid waters of one reservoir, quickly becoming so numerous they threatened other desirable game species.

Inevitably, white perch showed up at several nearby lakes and in connected watersheds. To prevent anglers from spreading white perch by transporting them to other water bodies, white perch were added to the prohibited species list, making the possession of live white perch illegal.

There was some resistance from anglers since at least at one reservoir, white perch had become the live bait of choice by hybrid striped bass anglers.

In 2008, Fisheries Section staff proposed adding any grass carp other than triploid grass carp to the prohibited species list. Uncontrolled populations of grass carp threaten native fisheries, and they have proven adaptable and reproductive beyond original expectations. New culture techniques allow biologists to genetically alter fish, creating a “triploid” individual that is sterile. The new law allows only triploid grass carp to be imported or possessed in Kansas.

Black-footed Ferrets Released

Last December, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), in cooperation with local landowners and The Nature Conservancy, released 24 captive-reared black-footed ferrets on private land in Logan County. The last confirmed sighting of a black-footed ferret in Kansas was in December of 1957.

The Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks has been involved in the planning process but currently has no active involvement. However, if asked by the USFWS, KDWP biologists may assist with monitoring and surveillance efforts in the future.

The release was not without controversy since prairie dogs are considered vermin by many area ranchers. In fact, archaic laws allow some county commissions in northwest Kansas to require landowners to poison prairie dogs on their property. If the landowners don't comply, the law allows the county to arrange for extermination and bill the landowners. The issue has been debated in court several times in recent years.

Since the ferret release, the issue has been relatively quiet. Through public meetings, the USFWS assured landowners and local officials that using an experimental recovery permit, they would assume all liability for any ferrets accidentally killed. Controlling prairie dogs was a more difficult issue, but a program provides a mix of state, federal and private money to assist landowners in controlling dogs prairie on land surrounding the release sites.

The USFWS conducted a week-long spotlight survey this spring and sighted eight ferrets between to the two release sites. Another survey will be conducted next fall, specifically looking for evidence of reproduction. The experiment will continue for five years, after which it may be terminated or continued indefinitely depending upon success and cooperating landowner desires.

Big Game Equipment Regulations Amended

While the Kansas Wildlife and Parks Commissioners were considering changes to the deer regulations to accommodate statutory changes, other regulation amendments were considered. Several of those involved legal equipment for big game hunting and were brought up as a result of public comments received in recent years.

One change that was considered but not approved was a change in the minimum caliber for deer hunting. The current regulation requires a bullet of .23 inches in diameter or larger. Deer hunters have requested being allowed to use .222 and .22-250 calibers. The Commission did not approve this change and kept the .23 minimum caliber requirement.

However, muzzleloader hunters have requested the ability to use scopes on muzzleloaders during the muzzleloader-only season, which traditionally opens in September. The old regulation allowed only muzzleloaders with open or peep sights during the early season, but allowed scopes in muzzleloaders during the regular firearm season. The Commission narrowly approved the recommendation that now allows scopes on muzzleloaders during the muzzleloader-only season.

Other big game equipment changes included making crossbows legal equipment during a firearm season and relaxing the requirements on broadheads. The former regulation required a “non-barbed broadhead with all-metal cutting edges.” This prohibited the use of knapped points. The new regulation requires a cutting width of at least a seven-eighths on an inch when fully expanded.

Milford Hatchery Renovation Nearly Complete

The Milford Fish Hatchery, near Junction City, was completed in 1985. The Milford facility was unique in that it was one of the few warm-water intensive hatcheries built. However, life expectancies of such facilities are generally about 25 years, so it was time for some major renovations.

With \$1.2 million committed for the infrastructure renovation, the hatchery shut down raceway operation last July. Most of the major projects are now completed. One of the biggest jobs was replacing valves on each of the raceways – valves that were 8 feet below ground and sealed in concrete. Thirty-eight valves have been replaced. Other projects include renovating the low-pressure recirculation lines, rehabilitating the wells, modifying the aeration towers, improving stormwater drainage, development of raceway security and wildlife predation prevention plans, renovating the lift station, and installing a water-level monitoring system in the hatchery building.

The hatchery still has some major water supply projects that have yet to be completed, but it came back on line in March. Walleye eggs were hatched and hybrid striped bass were produced. Approximately 300,000 fingerling channel catfish were stocked in 12 of the 24 raceways to grow to intermediates for stocking this fall.

Lapsed Angler Promotion

In April, about 62,000 anglers who purchased Kansas fishing licenses last year but hadn't yet purchased one this year were sent post cards, reminding them to get their license. The effort was part of a partnership with Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation that includes promotional support and matching grants for the next three years.

Although Kansas saw a two percent increase in fishing license sales from 2006 to 2007, the trend has been downward for the past 10 years, while fishing opportunities have increased and improved. National data has shown that only 15 percent of anglers purchase a license every year. This marketing program targets casual, or lapsed, anglers, those who bought a license last year but haven't bought one yet this year.

Since KDWP has implemented a point-of-sale license sales system, customer databases are maintained. New SAS software makes mining and filtering the data possible.

The post cards emphasized family values associated with angling and provided convenient license purchase options to recipients. The direct mail effort will be supported by online, magazine and television advertising by RBFF.

Staff were preparing to query the license database in late May to monitor response. All aspects of the promotion will be evaluated to improve future promotions.

Cheyenne Bottoms Emerges From Record Flooding

In central Kansas, water is always an issue, especially when managing a wetland of international importance such as Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area. In fact, the area had been

nearly dry for two years prior to 2006. Heavy, well-placed rains in August that year provided enough water for good habitat and hunting opportunities that fall.

Then the rains really came, beginning in May 2007. By late summer, the entire basin was an enormous lake, covering more than 20,000 acres – levels that hadn't been seen since the 1920s. The high water prohibited access throughout the fall and completely covered vegetation. Area staff had to wait until late last winter, when water levels finally receded to assess damage to roads and facilities.

Fortunately, damage wasn't as severe as imagined. One pool dike was breached and roads will require some maintenance, but the infrastructure, pump stations and pumps were not severely damaged.

This spring, water levels were normal for spring migration, but the vegetation on the flooded uplands was brown and lifeless. The jury is still out on how the vegetation will come back. Staff have plenty to do to get the area back in shape for the fall hunting seasons, but things are looking better now than they have for nearly a year.

Mountain Lion Investigation

Kansas Wildlife and Parks officers are investigating the alleged killing of a mountain lion in southcentral Kansas last fall. Investigators were alerted in March.

A Barber County landowner apparently killed the cougar on his own property last November. He was cutting wood when he noticed the cat in some tall grass nearby, retrieved a firearm from his truck, and shot the animal. Investigators took possession of the pelt of the mountain lion and hope to obtain the skull. The animal had been provided to a taxidermist in Texas, and the remainder of the carcass had been disposed of. There is no outward indication the mountain lion had been in captivity, and Department personnel hope additional analyses could lead to clues indicating from where it might have originated.

The last wild mountain lion documented in Kansas was killed in Ellis County in 1904. However, mountain lions are known to occur in Colorado within 75 miles of the border of southwest Kansas, and have been documented with increasing frequency in recent years in the Panhandle of Oklahoma. Mountain lions have also been dispersing from the Black Hills of South Dakota into several Midwest states for more than a decade. In anticipation that mountain lions would appear in Kansas, the Department completed a response plan in July 2004 to guide their response to the presence of mountain lions under various scenarios. Many mountain lion sightings have been reported in recent years, but KDWP staff have never been able to confirm a presence through tracks or a carcass.

No hunting season for mountain lion is established in Kansas, and they may not be killed for mere presence. Landowners are permitted to destroy wildlife, including mountain lions, found in or near buildings on their premises or when destroying property, but may not possess such animals with intent to use unless authorized. Pending completion of ongoing investigations, the landowner who allegedly killed the mountain lion could be cited for killing and/or possession of the cat.

Kansas Sportsmen's Caucus Formed

Sportsmen have an influential ally in the Kansas Legislature since formation of the Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus on March 25. The Kansas Caucus becomes the 35th state affiliated with the National Assembly of Sportsmen's Caucuses (NASC).

The kick-off event brought together members of the caucus, other interested legislators, and members of numerous state conservation groups and outdoors industry representatives such as the National Rifle Association, the National Wild Turkey Federation, Quail Unlimited, and Pheasants Forever. In all, nearly 60 people attended the reception, including more than 20 policymakers. Outdoor writers, outfitters, and trappers who expressed an interest in the caucus attended a reception to visit with legislators about the new caucus and sportsmen's legislative issues in Kansas. Bethany Erb, state caucus manager for NASC, also attended to celebrate the caucus's first formal gathering. The following day, Erb visited the Kansas Legislature and attended lunch with several state senators.

Legislative co-chairmen of the new bipartisan caucus are House Majority Leader Ray Merrick (Stilwell) and Rep. Gary Hayzlett (Lakin). During the evening, the co-chairmen announced the formation of the caucus, its objectives for 2008, and its affiliation with NASC.

KDWP Awards Landowner Incentive Program Grants

A Department ad-hoc committee of wildlife professionals recently awarded \$409,347 in Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) grants to 13 private landowners. Projects funded include converting cropland to native grass, removing invasive plants from native mixed-grass prairie, and constructing alternative watering facilities for livestock. Collectively, these projects will improve more than 19,600 acres of habitat and benefit 14 at-risk species in Kansas, including five snakes, three fishes, three birds, two amphibians, and one mammal.

KDWP originally received \$500,000 in funding for LIP from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to aid in the protection and management of priority habitats. The \$90,653 of LIP funds left after the first application period was distributed to private landowners after an extended application period. The remaining funds were limited to efforts on private land within the mixed-grass and short-grass prairie regions west of the Flint Hills. Projects were required to contribute to the enhancement of at least one priority species or its habitat. Recipients agreed to allow authorized personnel access to project lands and to contribute a minimum of 25 percent of the project cost, either in direct funds or in-kind labor, material, or equipment.