**KANSAS**

**STATE REPORT**

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**Arkansas River Named National Water Trail**

A portion of the Arkansas River in Kansas has been designated a National Water Trail by the National Park Service. It is an honor shared by the Kansas River – the first such trail named in the state.

The Arkansas River National Water Trail is 192 miles long, begins in Great Bend and ends at the Kansas-Oklahoma border southeast of Arkansas City. It runs through widely varied prairie and woodland habitats and passes a number of cities along its course. Although the Arkansas River enters Kansas at the Colorado border west of Syracuse, it is frequently dry in the western part of the state.

Most streams and rivers in Kansas are privately owned, but the Arkansas River, Kansas River and the Missouri River are “navigable waters,” and are open to the public between the ordinary high water marks on each bank. Landowner permission is needed from adjacent landowners to access the rivers through private land. However, there are currently 22 public access points along the Arkansas River in partnership with cities, counties and private landowners, providing access for recreational paddling, fishing and wildlife viewing opportunities.

**WAFWA Kansas Land Acquisition Protects Lesser Prairie Chicken Habitat**

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) finalized the purchase of approximately 30,000 acres of high-quality lesser prairie chicken habitat in southwest Kansas. The permanent protection and long-term conservation of lesser prairie-chicken habitat is an important goal of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Range-wide Conservation Plan. Funding for this acquisition comes from the voluntary contributions of industry partners that are enrolled in the range-wide plan.

The Sunview Ranch (formerly Tate Ranch) is in the sand sagebrush ecoregion, which covers portions of Kansas, Colorado and Oklahoma and once contained the highest density of lesser prairie chickens in the country. The dominant vegetation on rangelands in the region is sand sagebrush, which is a native shrub typically associated with deep sandy soils in dune landscapes. Livestock grazing is the primary land use on rangeland throughout the sand sagebrush region, and through grazing leases, it will continue to be used as a management tool on the Sunview Ranch.

“This property is one of the largest remaining contiguous tracts of sand sagebrush prairie in the region,” said Jim Pitman, Conservation Delivery Director for WAFWA. “Conserving this property in perpetuity ensures that it will remain a working ranch and continue to provide habitat for the lesser prairie chicken in the portion of its range where the population has declined the most.”

**Zebra Mussels Found In Hillsdale Reservoir**

The presence of invasive zebra mussels has been confirmed in Hillsdale Reservoir in Miami County. The population appears to be low density at this time.

Hillsdale Reservoir and Bull Creek from the reservoir south to the Marais des Cygnes River will be added to the list of ANS-designated waters in Kansas, and notices will be posted at various locations around the reservoir. Hillsdale is the twenty-sixth lake in Kansas to be infested with zebra mussels.

**Commission Stops Commercial Hunting Guides On Public Land**

At its June 23, 2016 meeting, the Kansas Wildlife, Parks and Tourism Commission voted to revoke KAR115-8-24, which allowed commercial guiding of hunters on lands owned and managed by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT). The regulation also required guides to acquire a free permit specific to the wildlife area they planned to guide on.

The result of this revocation, effective August 1, 2016, means that commercial guiding of hunters is not allowed on land owned or leased by KDWPT, including federal land the department leases around reservoirs and private land enrolled in the Walk-In Hunting Access program. While commercial guiding of anglers on state fishing lakes, which are owned by KDWPT, is still prohibited, this change does not impact commercial fishing guides operating on federal reservoirs.

***Kansas Wildlife & Parks* Magazine Earns National Award**

*Kansas Wildlife & Parks* magazine, a bi-monthly publication of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) that has been in print for more than 70 years, recently gained national recognition for its special anniversary deer issue published in November 2015. Staff of the 48-page, full-color magazine made a bold decision to focus the entire content of the November/December issue on Kansas’ 50 years of deer hunting, bringing in more than 20 contributing writers and photographers to commemorate the golden anniversary. On July 14, managing editor, Nadia Reimer, accepted a first place award in the category of One Time Publications from the Association of Conservation Information, Inc. (ACI) in Stateline, Nevada on behalf of the magazine.

Special KDWPT guest writers for the anniversary issue included early big game program leaders and retired wildlife biologists, Lee Queal and Bill Peabody; assistant secretary, Keith Sexson; big game project leader, Lloyd Fox; district wildlife biologists, Steven Adams, Tyler Warner, Justin Harbit, and Charlie Swank; wildlife research biologist, Matt Peek; wildlife disease coordinator, Shane Hesting; Public Lands managers, Alex Lyon, Kent Hensley, and Rob Riggin; and Law Enforcement director, Kevin Jones; as well as, Sterling College faculty member, Dr. Jonathan Conard.

**Tuttle Creek Blue Catfish Tagged For Research**

A blue catfish tagging project should help biologists learn more about blue cats in Tuttle Creek Reservoir near Manhattan. Biologists collected blue cats with an electrofishing boat, tagging all those longer than 14 inches.

The blue catfish population at Tuttle Creek Reservoir is still fairly young, and most of the fish being tagged measure between 16 and 22 inches. The largest fish tagged was 27 inches long and weighed 8.3 pounds.

The yellow tags have a tag number, phone number and email address printed on them. Anglers who catch tagged blue catfish are asked to report them using either the phone number or email address, or in person at the Tuttle Creek State Park Office. Biologists want to know the tag number, the general location where the fish was caught, the length of the fish, and if it was harvested or released.

As tagged fish are recaptured over time, biologists will be able to determine how well the fish are growing. The tagging study will also provide a better understanding of how far fish are swimming upstream of the lake and how many fish are migrating downstream out of the lake.

Blue cats stocked in Milford Reservoir in the 1990s are now self-sustaining and provide outstanding trophy catfish angling opportunities. Fish weighing 40-60 pounds are commonly caught.

**Renovation Begins At Neosho Wildlife Area**

An extensive renovation project at Neosho Wildlife Area in southeast Kansas began last summer. Enhancements to the aging infrastructure on the 3,246-acre waterfowl management area near St. Paul will be completed in two or three phases over a two-year period. Funding for the project will come from the federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration program, and a grant from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

Phase 1 will subdivide Pool 4 with a new levee and include new water control structures. The levee in Pool 2 will be removed and a new parking area and two new boat ramps will be constructed. The old water control structures will be replaced and new ones will be joined into the new pumping system. Rip-rap will be placed along the refuge levee and three-quarters of a mile of 24-inch pipe with butterfly valves will be installed to allow each pool to be flooded independently.

Other Phase 1 projects include installing a new pump at the confluence of Flat Rock Creek and the Neosho River. The new pump will operate on a variable frequency drive and pump 2,000 to 12,000 gallons per minute (GPM), depending on river flows and management objectives. Flows from the old 10,000 GPM pump cannot be varied.

The wildlife area was purchased by the Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Commission in 1959, and it opened to waterfowl hunters in 1962. In 2015, the wildlife area hosted 3,188 hunters, who harvested 5,432 ducks.

**Kansans Support Constitutional Right To Hunt, Fish and Trap**

Last November, Kansas voters overwhelmingly supported a proposed amendment to the state’s constitution providing people the right to hunt, fish and trap. More than 80 percent voted yes to the amendment.

he right includes the use of traditional methods and is subject to reasonable laws and regulations that promote wildlife conservation and management, and preserve the future of hunting and fishing. It also states that hunting shall be the preferred means of managing and controlling wildlife. The right does not modify any provision of law relating to trespassing, property rights or water resources.

**State Wildlife Action Plan Revision Approved**

The Kansas State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) comprehensive revision was approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on Nov. 1, 2016. The document identifies the state’s top priority species and habitats needing conservation, and it provides potential conservation actions that can address the threats these species and habitats face. Mandated by the USFWS, SWAP documents must be revised every 10 years. The state’s eligibility for receiving State Wildlife Grant (SWG) funds is dependent upon having an approved SWAP.

The revised plan considers many of the changes Kansas and its wildlife have experienced since the original plan was created. The most notable changes under the current revision were the inclusion of climate change and the development of Ecological Focus Areas, or geographically explicit areas identified as priority areas for future conservation. The plan also highlights past projects and success stories implemented through the SWG program since the original plan was developed.

**Aquatic Biodiversity Center Under Construction**

Construction of an Aquatic Biodiversity Center began last summer at Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism’s Farlington Fish Hatchery northwest of Pittsburg. The center will serve as a facility to hold, propagate and raise freshwater mussels. Because young mussels are parasitic and require a host fish to complete their lifecycle, the facility will also hold and work with many of these host fish species.

# New Habitat First Program Offers Wildlife Habitat Assistance

Habitat First is a new program developed by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism’s (KDWPT) Wildlife Division for private landowners interested in developing or enhancing wildlife habitat on their land. Under the program, district wildlife biologists will deliver the following services to interested landowners:

* + Technical assistance: planning, land management support, and habitat development tools
  + Financial assistance: cost-share and sign-on incentives for habitat improvements
  + Equipment loans: native grass drills, tree planters, fabric machines, prescribed burn equipment, and root plows
  + USDA programs: assistance with Environmental Quality Incentive Program applications benefiting wildlife, Conservation Reserve Program enrollment, and management

Standardized practices and rates make the program easy to explain and understand. Habitat management plans can be tailored to the property and to landowner preferences.

# Apply For Special Hunts Beginning July

# The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism’s Special Hunts Program offers hunting opportunities with limited access to public and private land, providing the potential for higher quality hunts and greater harvest rates. Because each hunt is open to a limited number of hunters, applications must be made online, and random drawings will determine who is selected.

There is no fee to participate in a special hunt, and the application process is open to residents and nonresidents. During the online application process, hunters will select hunts by species, date and category, which includes Open Hunt, Youth Hunt, or Mentored Hunt. All applicants are eligible to apply for Open Hunts, regardless of age or hunting experience. Youth Hunts require parties to include at least one youth 18 or younger, accompanied by an adult 21 or older who may not hunt. Mentored Hunts are open to both youth and novice hunters supervised by a mentor 21 or older who may also hunt. There are more than 500 individual hunting opportunities available for the 2016-2017 hunting seasons.

This year’s special hunts provide access to public and private lands that are not open to public hunting. The hunts will occur on wildlife areas, state parks, private land parcels, a national wildlife refuge, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers areas and even city- or county-owned properties. Hunts are divided by species, weapon and hunt type. Most of the hunts are for deer and upland game, but opportunities are also available for waterfowl, doves, turkey and furbearers.

# 2016 Mountain Lion Reports

Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism biologists investigated a flurry of mountain lion reports last fall. Three more mountain lion reports were confirmed in Kansas, bringing the total number of confirmed sightings for the year to four.

A hunter recently checked his trail camera on Fort Riley to find a photo of a mountain lion taken on Nov. 9. On Nov. 20, about 55 miles away, another hunter’s trail camera in Shawnee County snapped several photos of a mountain lion passing by at around 1 a.m.

Four days later and about 20 miles away, a couple of young raccoon hunters in Wabaunsee County were hunting with a single hound when it bayed “treed.” They were quite surprised when they shined their lights into the tree and found a mountain lion staring back at them. They had the presence of mind to take some video and snap a few photos for evidence, and even called a few friends and family out to see the lion for themselves. Biologists later visited the site and were able to recover a few hairs from the tree limbs. It is uncertain at this time whether sufficient material was present for DNA extraction, but if so, it can help biologists determine the animal’s sex, where it came from, where it has been, and where it may end up.

It is uncertain whether these confirmations were the result of a single or multiple cats. Young male mountain lions can wander great distances in search of a home range, and the proximity and timing of these latest sightings indicate a single lion is a possibility, but this is not a certainty. An additional sighting is still being investigated, and if confirmed, Kansas may have a record year for mountain lion sightings.

Since 2007, when the first mountain lion was confirmed in Kansas, 18 more have been added to the total. Most are presumed to be transient young male lions displaced from states north or west of Kansas. Consistent with this theory, the presence of arm barring on several of these recent confirmations is an indicator of a young (less than 3 year old) lion. A resident population, as indicated by the presence of kittens, adult females, or repeated documentations in the same vicinity, has not been observed nor confirmed.

# Wild Fire’s Impact

With a perfect storm of heavy fuel, high winds and low humidity, wild fires roared through 23 Kansas counties in early March. One of the largest burned more than 800 square miles in Clark and Comanche counties, scorching more than 80 percent of Clark County. The fires had a devastating impact to those who lived and worked in the area, destroying homes, fences, livestock feed and killing cattle.

The “Starbuck Fire” that burned Clark County was particularly fearsome because of the speed at which it spread. Witnesses estimated that it was at times charring the land at an incredible 50-60 mph. At that speed, some livestock and wildlife couldn’t get to safety.

While there isn’t an official assessment of the fire’s impact on wildlife, first-hand accounts from those who witnessed the fire’s aftermath provide insight. Reports indicate that this fire killed deer, pronghorn, coyotes, and rabbits, as well as other wildlife. Rough estimates indicate that 25 percent to 30 percent of deer inhabiting the burned area may have been killed and as much as 70 percent of the small number of pronghorn that lived in the area may have been killed. There were few reports of quail mortality, though it’s likely there will be indirect impacts due to lack of cover early in the growing season. There were reports of lesser prairie chicken mortality, but birds have since been observed on leks in burned areas.

# Bathymetric Maps Help Kansas Anglers

Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) fisheries biologists have been working on a project for the past year to build bathymetric maps of many of our smaller lakes. Anglers can use these maps to help locate fishing hotspots.

Biologists created bathymetric maps of these smaller lakes for two reasons: they help biologists manage fisheries more efficiently and they help anglers find more fish. These new maps will help anglers identify creek channels, depth changes, and in some cases, habitat cubes placed in the last few years. In other words, a little bit of studying can help anglers navigate new water quickly and efficiently.

**PLAYA PARTNERS**

The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism has partnered with Ducks Unlimited, (DU), Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams (KAWS), and the Natural Resource Conservation Service to form the Playa Initiative.

The Playa Initiative brings together DU Engineers, KDWPT biologists and individuals with playa expertise to provide technical assistance to private landowners who desire to conserve and enhance playas on their land. Conservation practices include filling pits dug years ago to keep water from flooding playas, planting grass buffers around playas to reduce siltation and allowing the playa to re-vegetate naturally.

Partners are also working with the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to promote enrolling playas in conservation easements. These easements, which last a minimum of 30 years, are designed by the landowner and the NRCS. A set rate per acre is paid to the landowner, preventing future development on the enrolled acres.