

May 1994

Yesterday two other faculty members and I took our visiting professor from Vienna to tour the Konza Prairie Research Area in the Flint Hills near Manhattan, Kansas.

This area, as you may know, is owned by The Nature Conservancy and maintained by the Agronomy Department of Kansas State.

It is a many thousand acres former cattle ranch (originally put together by a real estate speculator from Chicago, who made his money after the Great Fire of 1871, and whose family later lost their collective shirts and the ranch in the 1930s) in beautiful rolling hill countryside at the north end of the Flint Hills where they decline into the Kansas River valley near Manhattan.

The scientific research here is concentrated on studying how prairie fires preserve, help, and hinder the ecological systems of tall grass prairies.

Apparently, before commercial ranching which uses man-made and controlled fires, lightning-induced fires burned off the dead grasses and other debris about once every three years on average. This burning helps the annual growth of the grass in several ways (if I remember correctly: by allowing sunlight to heat the soil, by inducing some bacteria to expand the absorptive capacity of grass roots, by providing rain water better access to roots, and by beating back the competitive growth of shrubs and forest), and the basic research method at Konza is to study how every year, every other year, every fourth year, and every 20th year burnings affect the development of different aspects of the environment.

Among other things, the research operation grazes bison over much of the area, and they have also installed a public access, marked self-guided nature trail over a different part (a six mile loop).

We spent about two hours on a guided car tour of the bison area with a knowledgeable, nice, and very enthusiastic K-State ornithologist (John Zimmerman) as our guide.

We then enjoyed a picnic under a big shade tree near the original limestone ranch house.

And finally hiked the short three mile loop of the nature trail before returning to Lawrence.

In addition to the bison we saw, among other animals:

- several leaping deer,
- two wild turkeys,

- a nighthawk, and a
- red-headed woodpecker.

It was also glorious 80 degree weather and beautiful countryside to go along with all the learning!

We were all enthusiastic and at least the three natives among us promised to do it more times in the future to keep on learning.

Link to TNC web page on Konza:

<https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/places-we-protect/konza-prairie/>