



**THE PRAIRIE FALCON<sup>©</sup> - Nov. 1998**  
**NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY**  
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**PROGRAM PREVIEW**

**HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS:  
A PERSONAL CHRONICLE OF EXTINCT AMERICAN BIRDS**

**CHRISTOPHER COKINOS**

**7:30 PM, WED., NOVEMBER 18**

**THROCKMORTON 1014, KSU CAMPUS**

Using slides, seldom-heard audio recordings and a rare archival film, Christopher Cokinos will discuss the histories—natural and unnatural—of six extinct North American birds: the Carolina Parakeet, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the Heath Hen, the Passenger Pigeon, the Labrador Duck and the Great Auk. Does the Ivory-bill still hold on? Why does Kansas have a special place in



the history of the Carolina Parakeet? What did Colonial Boston servants think of the Heath Hen? Reading selections from his manuscript about these birds, Christopher also will have something to say about how we can redefine the word “hope” in these challenging times. Christopher Cokinos’s book, *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*, will appear from Tarcher-Putnam, an imprint of

Penguin-Putnam, in the year 2000—the centennial year of the shooting of the last known wild Passenger Pigeon.

*Before each program we invite our speakers to join us for an informal dinner and discussion. Feel free to join us this month at the Mt. Everest Restaurant, in the Days Inn on Tuttle Creek Blvd. at 5:45 PM. The program will commence at 7:30 PM on Wednesday, Nov. 18. Refreshments are served after the meeting, please bring your own cup. All meetings are open to the public.*

**Field Trips**

**Sat., Nov. 14 — Beginning Birdwatching Walk**—Join us this Saturday and every second Saturday at 8 AM in the Ackert/Durland parking lot on the KSU campus. We will carpool to a local birding hotspot, and should return by about 11 AM. Birders of every age and interest level are welcomed; children are especially encouraged to attend. Call Patricia Yeager (776-9593) for more information.



## IRRADIATION FOR FOOD SAFETY

The use of irradiation on food has caused controversy, but studies of its effectiveness and safety convinced the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to approve the process for produce, poultry, and red meat. The US Department of Agriculture soon will publish regulations for irradiating red meat. Some of the studies showing that irradiation effectively eliminates bacteria were done by meat scientists at Kansas State University (KSU). Foodborne pathogenic bacteria have become major health hazards. Records from the Centers for Disease Control indicate that they kill at least 9,000 people and cause illness in about 80 million more per year in the US. Irradiation also can kill insects on imported produce and extend shelf life.



These benefits have not convinced critics, who think that irradiation is dangerous and should be used as a last resort. They want the meat industry to rely on other methods to eliminate contamination at the farm, in slaughterhouses, and in processing plants. In fact, control of contamination at all these stages has been implemented, including steam pasteurization, which has been developed mainly through research at KSU. However, completely eliminating all bacteria probably is impossible at most stages, and they can be reintroduced later.

Irradiation is one additional step to help ensure safe food for consumers and is gaining their acceptance. A 1998 survey showed that 80 percent of US consumers are willing to buy irradiated food, if it is labeled and control of bacteria is mentioned. Another study at KSU showed that providing information about the process increased consumers' willingness to buy irradiated meat.

The discussion about irradiation has included several points that are not true or have been exaggerated.

1. *Irradiated foods are radioactive.* The cobalt irradiation used passes through products and leaves no radioactivity.

2. *Irradiation destroys vitamins.* This usually does not occur at the doses used to stop spoilage or kill insects on produce. Irradiation can reduce the thiamine content of pork, but this meat is a minor source of thiamine in most diets.

3. *Irradiation creates toxic by-products.* The FDA has evaluated many toxicity studies and concluded that this is not true.

4. *Producers and processors will be careless, because they will assume that irradiation can clean up any mistakes.* The food industry knows that irradiation, like other methods, cannot kill all harmful bacteria. It is part of an extensive program to reduce contamination or fills a gap in control measures.

5. *The country will be full of irradiation facilities and radioactive waste.* Estimates indicate that six to 12 facilities could handle all the beef consumed in the US, and just a few more would be needed for pork, lamb, poultry, and produce. Only small quantities of cobalt are used in each facility, and its radioactivity can be recharged several times before it must be discarded. Although any nuclear waste is hazardous, cobalt does not dissolve in water, and its radioactivity dissipates fairly fast.

Evidence so far indicates that the benefits of irradiation outweigh the risks. However, long-term studies are lacking of the effects (if any) of irradiated food on humans. Irradiated produce has been on the market for several years. Some stores have noticed an increased demand for it, because consumers appreciate the improved quality and shelf life. The meat industry is proceeding more cautiously and watching consumer reactions before investing in this expensive technology.

*Sources: Eating Well, Oct. 1998 and KSU reports.*

— Eileen Schofield Barkley

**SANCTUARY DEDICATION**

**T**he Michel-Ross Audubon Preserve, the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society's natural area on Stag Hill, will be formally dedicated at 1:30 PM Sunday, November 8. A sign honoring the donors of this twenty acre parcel will be unveiled. Local dignitaries have been invited, and Audubon members as well as the general public are cordially invited to participate in this public recognition of our gratitude to the generous donors of this new preserve.

Parking is available at the Elks Lodge, 2605 Stag Hill Road. The ceremony will take place across the road and just uphill.

To help make the area look its best on this day, a cleanup is scheduled for 9:30 am the same day. Bring a trash bag and gloves, and meet at the Elks Lodge parking lot. We'll pick up litter and remove rubble which has been dumped near the old WPA damsite. If you have a pickup truck, you are encouraged to bring it. Afterwards, we'll engage in a brainstorming session to find ways to raise funds for the ongoing upkeep of the area. Please share in this important effort to preserve a little bit of wildness in Manhattan, Kansas.

— *Paul Weidhaas*

**THE SKY BEYOND**

**T**hree meteors, only three. That's what streaked across the sky when I watched expectantly for a possible meteor storm last month.

It didn't happen. At least not for me. Hoogy and Carol Hoogheem saw about a baker's dozen of meteors—not quite a storm, but far better than I did. I guess it pays to stay out later than I could. I got sleepy.

While disappointed in the lack of meteors, I was consoled by the calls of Killdeer and Barred Owls—and the howls of coyotes—as I peered through my telescope at nebulae in Sagittarius. More on the wonders of Sagittarius in a few months.

This month is a much better bet for meteors—the Leonids. Oh, you'll see them, unless it's cloudy. The only question for the next two years is how many.

Catch them between about 1 a.m. and dawn on the mornings of November 17 and November 18. If you can, you might want to camp out the night of the 16th and set an alarm to wake you at 12:30 a.m. November 17. Then, camp out again the night of the 17th and set that alarm—again!—to wake you at 12:30 a.m. on the 18th.

While Asia is favored as the location best suited for viewing a possible meteor storm, it can happen anywhere. So be

ready. Conditions are right this year and next. According to Joe Rao, writing in *Sky & Telescope*, Earth is positioned where the meteor stream is “behind the comet and outside its orbit.” Which comet? Comet Tempel-Tuttle, with which the Leonids are associated. Two great storm years—1833 and 1966—took place under similar orbital circumstances. Accounts of the 1833 meteor storm compared the streaking lights in the sky to a blizzard.

Fireballs are a possibility too.

If you took your binoculars to the bright “star” I told you about last month—the one now high in the southern sky—you know it's Jupiter. Far to the left of Jupiter is the golden disk of Saturn. If you have a spotting scope try looking at both of them. Can you see Saturn's rings? Can you spy red bands on Jupiter?

Don't be fooled by a bright star beneath Jupiter in the southern sky. (Planets tend not to twinkle.) The star is called Fomalhaut—which derives from the Arabic for “Fish's Mouth,” according to Richard Hinckley Allen in his book *Star Names: Their Lore and Meaning*. The name is appropriate since Fomalhaut—the lone bright star of the dim autumn south—shines in the faint constellation Piscis Austrinus—“The Southern Fish.”

You can still swim in the last of the summer Milky Way, which is setting in the west. There are more stars there than you can imagine. Scan above the southwestern and western horizon at 7 or 8 p.m. Do see any “clusters” of stars? (You can look at star charts in *Sky & Telescope* and *Astronomy* magazines to help locate and identify them.) You may see several, until the summer Milky Way spills beneath the horizon.

What might spill throughout the sky on two mornings in November 1998? History in the form of hundreds of meteors? Perhaps.

— *Chris Cokinos*

**CBC VOLUNTEERS NEEDED**

**T**he 50th Annual Manhattan Christmas Bird Census is coming up on Saturday, Dec. 19, 1998. If you don't feel like counting birds in the cold, we can still use your help. Carla Bishop is recruiting volunteers who could help with the chili dinner which also serves as the count compilation event that evening. If there are any cooks who want to share their talent with tired and hungry bird counters, contact Carla Bishop at 532-1859 or 539-5129 to sign up. I guarantee you that your efforts will be highly appreciated!

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## WHAT'S AT STAKE

**T**hank You: Too often we fail to note the hard work of our volunteers. So I'd like to take a moment to thank my Conservation Committee Co-Chair, Janet Throne, who has worked diligently over the past several months on the Colbert Hills golf course issue and other local concerns. Janet is a member of the Environment Subcommittee of the County Road and Bridges Committee, a Konza Prairie docent, and a devoted attendee of local government meetings. She has spoken eloquently on behalf of the Audubon cause: to protect birds and their habitats. Recently she provided information to local officials on how cell-phone towers are implicated in bird kills. Janet, we're glad you and Jim arrived in Manhattan! Thank you.

More notes of appreciation will appear in future columns.

But: We can't do it alone. While I concentrate on state and federal issues (and some local matters), and Janet works hard on area concerns, we keep wondering...aren't there some Auduboners out there who could spare one evening or afternoon a month? All we need are a couple of folks willing to help out by attending city or county meetings of the commissions or the planning boards. **YOU WOULD NOT HAVE TO SPEAK IN PUBLIC IF YOU DIDN'T WANT TO!** Simply being there and reporting to the chapter board would be very helpful. Call Janet or me if you can do this "for the birds." Growth issues are getting very hot right now—we need you.

Good News: Bill Penny has withdrawn his "preapplication" to dredge sand from the Kaw River near Frank's Island—where this year endangered Least Terns set up a very successful nest. The word is that Mr. Penny wants to move off the river and begin using open sand pit mining—sites that later can be reclaimed for wildlife. The fight over dredging in the river has never been about setting economic interests against environmental interests. Leaving sections of the river alone—for terns, for fish, even for canoeists—does not have to harm the economy. In fact, nature-based recreation annually pumps billions (that's right, billions) into the national economy.

Our chapter wrote a letter in support of a Riley County application for a federal grant that would help fund a canoe launch at the newly dedicated Fairmont Park; if you want more accurate information about the canoe launch than a recent letter-writer to the Mercury provided, please let me know or call Monty Wedel with Riley County.

More Good News: Brazil has renewed its ban on logging mahogany in the Amazon rainforest. The U.S. still needs to ban all imports of mahogany and other old-growth wood products, according to the Rainforest Action Network. We remain the single biggest importer of mahogany. So don't buy any! Spread the word: don't buy any! And write the White House and our Senators to ask them to back a ban on mahogany importation.

— Chris Cokinos

## GREAT PLAINS NATURE PHOTOGRAPHERS

**T**he third meeting of the Great Plains Nature Photographers will be held on Saturday, November 21, in Emporia KS. Renowned nature photographer Boyd Norton will be the featured speaker; he has published 13 books, and his photo essays have appeared in magazines such as National Geographic, Audubon, Smithsonian Magazine, and Time. He will have a tough act to follow after George Lepp's presentations at the last meeting in Wichita, but he promises to educate as well as entertain the members of this group.

There will also be a print competition, and two slide competitions (one for Flora and one for Fauna), so dig out your best photos and get them ready for these events. Registration and other information can be obtained from:

Larry Rosenkoetter  
204 W. Columbus  
Lindsborg KS 67456  
phone 785-227-3294



“Wyoming tips down as you head northeast; the highest ground – the Laramie Plains – is on the Colorado border. Up where I live, the Big Horn River leaks into difficult, arid terrain. In the basin where it’s dammed, sandhill cranes gather and, with delicate legwork, slice through the stilled water. I was driving by with a rancher one morning when he commented that cranes are “old fashioned.” When I asked why, he said, “Because they mate for life.” Then he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye, as if to say he really did believe in such things but also understood why we break our own rules.” – *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Gretel Ehrlich, Penguin Books, 1985

**O**ld fashioned. Indeed, that is a good description of sandhill cranes. Not just because of their legendary fidelity to their mates, but because they are also among the oldest species of bird on the planet. And because they still provide a migration spectacle that rivals the old days of passenger pigeons, Eskimo curlews, and other long-lost tribes of Aves. Old fashioned. Perfect adjective.



The sandhill cranes are moving across Kansas this month, on their way from remote arctic marshes to the reddish plains of the Llano Estacado of west Texas and eastern New Mexico. Hopefully they will find some water in the playa lakes there, even though this has been one of the driest summers on record in west Texas. Some will stop in Kansas on the way, and you can see them and appreciate them at the central Kansas refuges of Quivira and Cheyenne Bottoms. You can appreciate their migratory abilities even more when you understand where some of these birds have been. Five sandhill cranes were fitted with radio transmitters when they were captured along the Platte River by federal wildlife workers last March. These transmitters have a battery life of 1.25 years, and their signals are received by orbiting satellites, enabling researchers to pinpoint the location of the cranes within a radius of a kilometer or so. Tracking the birds after they left the Platte in April, the researchers were pleased and surprised that two of their cranes traveled to eastern Siberia. Over the International Date Line, a few degrees south of the Arctic Circle, these birds hopefully raised a chick or two and are now bringing those youngsters back, across Alaska, across Canada, across the Dakotas and Nebraska and Kansas and Oklahoma to the Llano Estacado

of west Texas.

Old fashioned birds fitted with new fangled technology, they are revising our book of knowledge about their species. You can look for transmitters on the legs of the cranes are Quivira this month, but if you don’t find those needles in that haystack, you can track the position of these birds at the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center website (<http://www.npwr.usgs.gov/perm/cranemov/cranemov.htm>), which is linked from the online version of this newsletter. Some of you may recall that the Kansas Audubon Council and the Audubon chapters in Kansas lost a disappointing battle in 1993 when the Kansas Dept. of Wildlife and Parks initiated a crane hunting season in Kansas. But the birds may have won in the long run, because our arguments about the research objectives for this population resulted in revision of those objectives, and a hefty increase in research interest and funding for studies such as this. Stay tuned next spring to see if the marked birds survive the winter and the hunting seasons to go back to the Platte, and then perhaps back to Siberia.

Other birds, perhaps even more old fashioned than the cranes, move across the state in November. You may not think that loons are a bird you can see in Kansas (at least not in months where the legislature is not in session), but three or four species of loons will probably be found somewhere in the state this month. Common loons are just about a certainty on deeper bodies of water, and my kids and I have found one or two at Pottawatomie State Fishing Lake #2 on most of our Thanksgiving outings in the past few years. Red-throated, Pacific, and yellow-billed loons are remotely possible as well, so take your field guides, your telescopes, and a warm drink out to your local lake this month and see how many loons you spot. This can be frustrating, since loons tend to spend a lot more time underwater than above water, but it is worth the effort when one of these surreal birds surfaces a few yards away, or takes off with what Bent calls “perfectly steady and rapid wingbeats,” knifing through the air with an aerial grace that seems impossible for such a heavy-bodied beast.

So break a rule or two and take an old fashioned perambulation with your binoculars this month. Get a glimpse of why many Kansas birdwatchers think that November is one of the best birding months in the state.

— *Dave Rintoul*

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## TREE OF THE MONTH — BLACKJACK OAK

**B**lackjack oak (*Quercus marilandica*) is also called the barren oak. This tree is adapted to conserve moisture and to eliminate competition for that moisture. Most of the blackjack oaks have stiff, lower branches that curve towards the ground, forming a skirt around the tree. This leafy skirt shades the ground beneath the tree, and as a result, the ground directly underneath the branches is rather barren.

As a tree grows larger, its upper branches shade out the lower branches. These dead branches “self-prune” in most types of trees. The barren oak is an exception to this. The dead branches stay strong for decades. These branches form a barricade that, in some instances, I’ve been unable to squeeze through, ... and I’ve either given up or returned with a saw. In other words, a tree hugger has to be persistent if he wants to hug a blackjack oak, and perhaps it’s advantageous to have a split personality, and to carry a smoke-belching chain saw.

This tree is distinguished by its stubbornness. Its branches are stubborn, and its leaves are stubborn. The leaves are wedge-shaped, and they are leathery in texture and thickness. These leaves persist, and long after they’ve turned a dull brown, they continue to cling to their twig, and they shade the soil beneath them, even in the depth of winter. This shade might tend to prevent the soil from drying out, especially during a mild winter.

Perhaps such an effect might be very slight. A very small advantage is sometimes what makes the difference. Next time you see a ravine dropping down a slope, from north to south, notice whether the trees are dramatically taller on one side of the ravine. Almost invariably, the tallest trees are on the west side of the ravine, because the hot, afternoon sun burns less moisture from that side of the ravine.

Well this really isn’t what I wanted to write about. What means the most to me about this oak is that it can be used as a nature blind after a modest amount of ‘improvement’ with store bought tools. The first job is to remove a limb or two in the barricade around the base of the tree. This can be done most easily with a saw that folds up and fits in your pocket. Don’t let yourself enjoy this excessively, even if your saw is new. Leave the branches that aren’t in the way, and leave some stubs that you can use when you climb the tree.

If the tree divides into two trunks, truncate the small one about twenty feet above the ground. You may need a long

saw, so go ahead and buy one. You might want to use a level for a guide when you’re marking the cut. Follow through with that last cut, making the surface level. Nail 2x4s between the truncated trunk and the nearby, full sized trunk. Install a plank on top of the level cut, driving the nails through the board into the 2x4s, and then trimming the edges of the board flush with the 2x4s. Well, that’s enough home improvement.

Sit on your new seat on the trunk, and lean backwards until your shoulders touch the other trunk. Feel the bark that is broken into rough blocks that you can feel through your shirt. The tree sways as the wind blows, pulling at the nails, and squeaking softly. The squirrels have stopped chattering, and each slight rustle seems louder, and meaningful.

A doe steps in the leaves from the northern red oaks at the bottom of the ravine. She nudges away leaves with her nose, finding acorns. These acorns taste bitter, but they’re smaller than those of the bur oak, and they fit in her mouth. The light begins to fade; can she still find more acorns? A dark shape moves in a strange fashion, weaving back and forth, and the doe is alarmed. She leaps and bounds away, disappearing at once in twilight shadow.

The dark shape is a raccoon. He’s frightened by the commotion that he himself caused, and he leaps and gathers himself in like a hunchback, and leaps again. He climbs a nearby oak. The last rays of light backlight him, outlining his bristling hair. He clings to the smooth bark of the northern red oak. He’s intensely alive ... so very much alive. The leaves of the blackjack oak rustle softly.

Now begin the descent from the oak, clinging to the ancient, black stubs that are somewhat weakened by age. Everything is mysterious when twilight fades, and each nerve in your body becomes completely alive. As you search for the stub with your right foot, the doe snorts, expelling breath through her nose with an exhalation. You cling to the stubs with your hands, as if frozen by the sound. You are alive, ... although awkwardly alive. You finally unlock your fingers. As you break a small twig, the doe bounds away, and you listen to the beating of your own heart.

As time goes by, you’ll add expensive fixtures to your tree house such as someplace to rest your feet. Eventually you will become comfortable. Before you saw wood in your sleep, attach a safety harness that goes around your waist and around the tree trunk. If you fall off your perch, at least you’ll wake up dangling in the harness, and that’s an improvement



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over being dead. Listen to the sounds around you, ... perhaps the singing of the nuthatch as she walks down toward you, ... closer and closer, peering this way and that. Yes, that barren oak ... it has an inappropriate name. In the right light ... the starlight, it has a certain stateliness. Like most things that are only superficially unattractive, it's beautiful.

—Thomas D. Morgan

### A RESTORATION JOURNAL

**A** guy I know makes bows like the Indians did. Carved out of Osage Orange, laminated for strength on the bowed-out side with pounded strands of dried sinew layered on with hide glue. When I take one in my hands, unstrung, it feels like a staff, simple, strong, not necessarily straight, a few gnarls and wavers. Strung and taut and sighted along its length into the blueness of the sky, it becomes another being. Any unevenness has been tensed out. The bow from each end into the center arcs smoothly like strong rib bones, symmetrical, vibrant, relaxed and tense at once, settled into an equanimity of its own, but waiting also, for something more than itself.

To me, being part of this restoration project for the nature area of the Northeast Community park is in one sense a challenge of design and raw materials and in another sense, similar to the bow, I feel drawn and set to a usefulness. This project is important to me, as well as the prairie's re-creation and the wildlife to come, for what I need.

A few years ago Jamie and Kirk and I were going down to Matfield Green on weekends to do volunteer work for the Land Institute's sustainable community project. We would meet with other helpers and interns and work, cook, eat, hike and talk and philosophize into the night. We would get up the next morning, sit in the sun and drink leadplant tea, and after awhile get some more work done. I remember lying at night on the wood floor of the dark, quiet Institute house, before sleep, with a smile on my face, feeling satisfied, happy. I use this place as a guidepost in my life, about directions I'm trying to go and the experience I need in my life. Idealization aside, a lot of what I need was happening there for a moment in timework toward some common good goal, people coming together to do the work, sharing stories, sharing difficult tasks, me learning my place in the world. The "real work" as Gary Snyder has talked about. And why do I keep this experience as a guide? Because it's such a small, barely visible part of my life. Lately, it seems like I spend my life rushing, sliding, trying to get a grip, isolated and uninspired. Like my friend Atanas' grandmother says, "Your eyes are open but your heart is asleep." So, my involvement in this

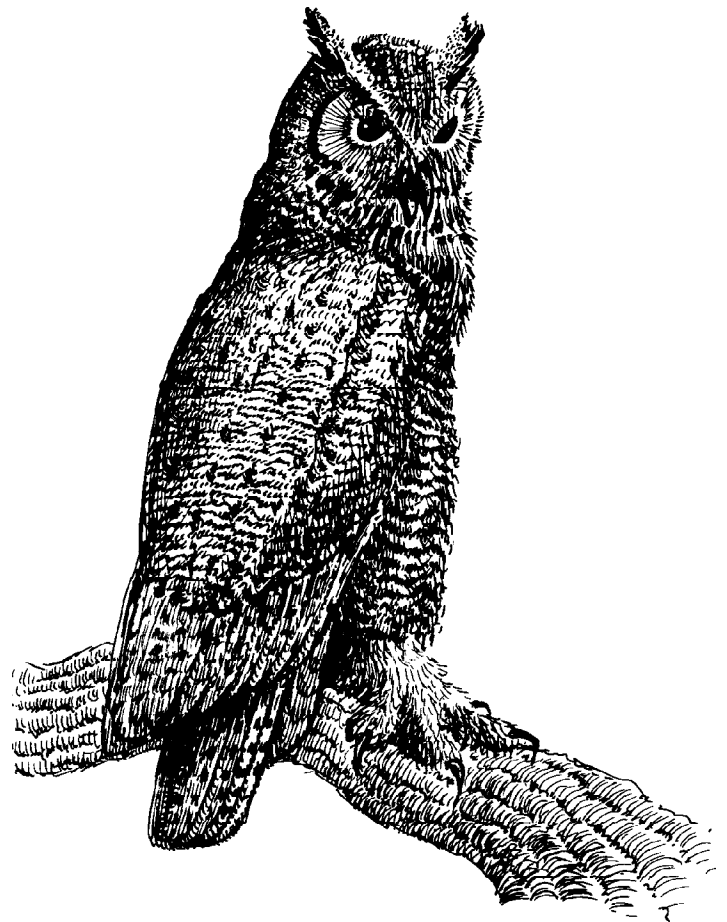
park project is getting that guidepost in sight again, it's the only direction that I know to go. I feel some passion there, it feels right. In some way the restoration of soil and the soul are connected.

The land for the Northeast Community park has been purchased.

The concept of a nature area within the park has been approved by the city commission but there is no money from the city in the park budget to do anything. So we figured we could get the people and money together and do it ourselves. We have grants and generous gifts coming in. Wal-Mart just sent us a check for 7200 dollars to help get the arboretum started. Thank you Susan Rush, the Green Team leader at Wal-Mart, who led that effort. The folks that I mentioned in the last article are gathering information to take to the park board as a presentation to get permission to actually start work on the nature park, so it's all looking very positive for good things to happen.

We are looking for a couple of people to take on an environmental education site acquisition project- a lot of work. Call Leann (494-2556) or Wayne (776-6253).

— Wayne Corn



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Introductory memberships are available for \$20 per year; after that a basic membership is available for \$35 annually. When you join the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, you automatically become a member of the National Audubon Society and receive the bimonthly Audubon magazine, in addition to the *PRAIRIE FALCON*. New membership applications may be sent to NFHAS at the address below; make checks payable to the National Audubon Society. Renewals of membership are handled by the National Audubon Society and should not be sent to NFHAS. Questions about membership can be answered by calling a toll-free number, 1-800-274-4201, or by electronic mail to Betsy Hax at the National Audubon Society (bhax@audubon.org).

Nonmembers may subscribe to the *PRAIRIE FALCON* newsletter for \$10 per year. Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, and mail to: Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan KS 66505-1932.

### RARE BIRD ALERT HOTLINES

**Kansas (statewide): 316-229-2777**

**Kansas City Area (incl. W. MO): 785-342-2473**

**Nebraska (statewide): 402-292-5325**

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(\* - Kansas Audubon Council representatives)

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Information about progress of a particular piece of legislation can be obtained by calling the following numbers: In Topeka - 800-432-3924; in Washington - 202-225-1772; Audubon Action Line - 800-659-2622, or get the latest on the WWW at <http://www.audubon.org/campaign/aa/>