



# the prairie falcon

Vol. 31, No.09  
MAY 2003

MAY PROGRAM:

“Kansas Amphibians:  
Are They in Decline?”  
JOE COLLINS

MAY 21, 7:30PM  
1014 THROCKMORTON

NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY, P.O. Box 1932, MANHATTAN, KS 66505-1932

## “Kansas Amphibians: Are They in Decline?”

Joe Collins

MAY 21, 7:30PM 1014 THROCKMORTON

The Kansas Amphibian Monitoring Program, sponsored by the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks, completed its fifth census year in 2002. Although temporarily discontinued, due to lack of funding, the program accumulated valuable data on the status of frogs and toads throughout our state. This information will soon be available for viewing and use on the internet.

Joe Collins will talk about amphibians and the reasons they might be in decline — or not! Joe is the author of twenty-three books, and is Adjunct Herpetologist for the Kansas Biological Survey, Herpetologist Emeritus for the Natural History Museum at The University of Kansas, Adjunct Curator of Herpetology for the Sternberg Museum of Natural History at Fort Hays State University, and Director of The Center for North American Herpetology.

*Before each program, we invite our speakers to join us for an informal dinner and discussion. Feel free to join us this month at Gold Fork at 5:45 PM. The program begins at 7:30 PM. Refreshments are served after every meeting. All meetings are open to the public.*

**FROG Field Trip: (see page 5 for more information)**  
**Saturday, May 24 - LOOK & LISTEN to the FROGS**

### Field Trips

#### BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, May 10<sup>th</sup> 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 or e-mail her at [pyky@flintheills.com](mailto:pyky@flintheills.com) for more information.

### INSIDE

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### CONTRIBUTORS:

DRU CLARKE  
PETE COHEN  
LEANN HARRELL  
THOMAS MORGAN  
PATRICIA YAEGER

### UPCOMING DATES:

- May 03 Leopold Education Workshop
- May 10 Beginning Birding,  
North American Migratory  
Bird Day
- May 21 Joe Collins, presenter  
Dinner 5:45 -Program 7:30  
1014 Throckmorton, KSU  
Corner of Claflin & Dennison
- May 24 Field Trip - Frogs & Turtles  
4PM Ackert/Durland parking  
lot on KSU campus.

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## For the Love of a River Dru Clarke

When I moved to Kansas, I was in love with a man, but not with his environment. I already missed the trees of fall in the great eastern forests, the clear hazel-colored water of the Delaware River with its squirming eels visible on the gravelly bottom, and the shore of a great ocean. Here the environment was only a stony leftover from prehistory. My longing for home was a growing crack in my heart: I needed to heal it by embracing a new place, as sorry and sere as it seemed.

Coming to know the prairie of the Flint Hills and its streams and rivers has been a continuously unfolding and enriching experience for me. I took to the muddy Big Blue and Kansas Rivers like an exotic and alien animal in search of a niche. Early voyages in leaky secondhand canoes often ended aground in shallows and uncharted sandbars, and futile attempts to paddle upstream, against the current to a launch site led to sore arms and waterlogged gear (and once, a phone call to home for help from a remote but friendly farmhouse along the river bank).

Classified as a "navigable waterway," I wondered what craft those who ordained it as such had in mind. But what marvelous things I found! Swallows nesting - Mesa Verde style - in high, near vertical mud banks; a tarnished copper bowl from a dipper lost, perhaps, by an early pioneers wagon or saddle bag, while fording the river; a broken and worn mammoth tooth; a finely worked scraper discarded or lost by a native plainsman. Even a deposit of peculiar red boulders - Sioux quartzite from the Dakotas - the mark of a long forgotten glacier - that creates a rapid of sorts in the Kansas River. Twenty - pound carp body-slammings the roiling surface; an errant red-sided garter snake, heads cocked in

amazement at the floating phenomenon (our canoe), swimming in undulating patterns from one bank to the other. Imagine it!

My favorite, and sweetest, encounter was when my sister-in-law and I in a two person kayak rounded a boomerang-shaped sandbar and floated up to - within inches - a least tern who, oblivious to our presence, persisted in doing miniature knee bends on tiny toothpick legs on the downdrift end of the bar. For more than twenty minutes in complete silence we watched that diminutive bird thoroughly engaged in its calisthenics as our kayak swung slowly in the current, anchored by its bow, before we drifted downstream. I wondered why it was doing it, but more of a question was what it was doing here, on a Kansas river?

The least tern is endangered by habitat loss and needs sandbars like this one for its very survival. Such encounters are rare and to be cherished.

Today, reflecting on these moments of challenge and joy on the river, I think of Lee Railsback, whom I would see many mornings, launching his canoe in a dawn ritual in a determined effort to extend his life by becoming one with the river. He loved it so!

Inspired by him, and lately challenged by a back weakened by a fracture, I had a small poke boat custom-made for me: one I could carry, load, and launch without having to depend on someone to help. My plan was to "do the river," as much of it as I could, and learn everything I could about it so that I could teach my students and others who would pause long enough to listen about its mysteries, its quirks, its inhabitants. My voyages have been few but happy, each taking longer than those of more fit voyageurs.

Each bar, naturally, requires a visit and yields some new treasure, washed up and out by flood water, revealed by low water periods. My hull is littered with satiny mussel shells, disarticulated bones, shards of pottery and glass, polished smooth by sand and water. The casings of smashed car batteries sometimes are so common they look like black condos for gremlins in the sand, and I leave them behind.

I shed my shirt to make a bag for my gleanings: some make it into the house to places of prominence, conversation pieces long after their discovery. As often as he can, my son brings his wife and two boys back to Kansas from that eastern shore, my first beloved home. He comes to renew his spirit and "sense of place," and by joining him, they, too, have come to love this place. How pleased I am that my child wants to return to the place he holds dear, that he wants to share it with his children.

After we stand on one of the highest of the Flint Hills in the bracing air of a prairie spring, we will go to the river and listen for geese and watch the sun glint off the smoothly moving water. The dogs will prance in the shallows, grandsons will skip stones, and a fish will jump. We'll glean leavings from the sandbars and wish for better access for our canoes. Someday, that, too, will happen. Whenever he or any of our children return, I hope they will find that the people who never left, and are still here, are taking care of things for all of us.

My first impression of it as a sere and sorry place has grown into a fierce, protective love. I found that there is room in a heart for more than one home.

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The campus of Kansas State University has the largest horse chestnut tree in Kansas. This tree will put on a showy display of its flowers in May. To enjoy this display, start on Manhattan Avenue and turn west on Vattier Street. Look for the wide-spreading tree south of Vattier Street, north of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, and east of All Faiths Chapel. It will be covered with clusters of white, fragrant blossoms. The white flowers have large, yellow markings that change to red as the flower ages. Honey bees visit the flowers with yellow markings and avoid the ones with red markings. The bees increase their efficiency at collecting nectar, and increase their efficiency at pollinating the flowers. This is the essence of a classical symbiotic relationship in which the relationship becomes tighter and tighter. It is a marriage between the tree and the bees.

In addition to the role of color in training the pollinator to avoid the older flowers that presumably have already been fertilized, there may be a role of fragrance. Some people believe that the older flowers have a different fragrance. I plan to test this with my own sense of smell, not to confirm or disprove a hypothesis, but to enjoy the fragrances. The pollen from flowers that are attractive to

insects poses little danger to allergy sufferers, since the pollen is relatively large, and this increases the desirability of sniffing an attractive flower. How wonderful it would be to be a part of such a relationship with a flower.

The honey bee is native to southern Europe where the horse chestnut is native and this insect is an important pollinator of the horse chestnut in its homeland. This relationship benefits us, because the nectar of this tree yields a wholesome, good-tasting honey. And the blossoms produce fruits with seeds that are used in alternative medicine for problems such as varicose veins.

The **horse chestnut** (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) is closely related to the **Ohio buckeye** (*Aesculus glabra*) which is present in its native setting in places such as Pillsbury Crossing at Deep Creek, south of Manhattan. Its seeds are carried downstream by floods, although the tree can't survive prolonged flooding. Large trees are found near the Big Blue River, but are located on little knolls or hills such as the knoll above the confluence of the Big Blue and Pfeil Creek, north of Manhattan.

Although some people might be less fascinated than I am, I'm fascinated by a somewhat darker subject. The nectar of a related tree, the **California buckeye** (*Aesculus californica*) is bitter-tasting. Honeybees are poisoned by it.

This bee was introduced into California in about 1830, and has had a short association with this buckeye.

Butterflies are not affected by the toxic properties of the nectar, and they pollinate the flowers. Some people believe that the Ohio buckeye's nectar may also be toxic to honey bees, although this hasn't been proven. There are other examples of poisonous nectar. Although this subject deserves more investigation, some plants might try to discourage native insects that take the nectar without pollinating the flower.

A state co-champion buckeye tree is located a few steps away from the horse chestnut tree at the corner of Vattier and Manhattan Avenue. It has a circumference of eight feet and is a co-champion, along with another Ohio buckeye in Leavenworth County. It was the undisputed champion, until a windstorm broke the top out of it in 1981. It remains a beautiful tree and is well worth visiting. On April 16<sup>th</sup>, I examined its beautiful blossoms, and saw the yellow patches that serve as nectar guides on the younger blossoms, while the blossoms that appeared to be older had reddish brown patches. I have never read anything about the color change of the nectar guides of the Ohio buckeye. But there is always more to learn about nature.

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## Northeast Park Update

### Leann Harrell

The Spring has been full of activities with the NFHAS' Northeast Park Project. I appreciate, as always, those who have donated and continue to donate their time. Tim Keane, with the Landscape Architecture Department at K-State, designed a plan for stabilizing the drainage channel created in the park. This plan was approved by Manhattan Parks and Rec Department and the first step, seeding the channel with Prairie Cord Grass, has been completed.

Once again, I am grateful to Al Alspach with Master Landscape for donating his time in a busy season to operate the necessary equipment. Irene Johnson, with Riley County Conservation District, informed me that the District Board approved the donation of no charge on using the no-till grass drill that the District makes available to rent for seeding native grass.

The necessary approval has been obtained for building the ninety-foot bridge which will connect the southern end of the park with the Linear Trail. The bridge is going to be donated by Westar Energy's Green Team with coordination by the Team's director, Brad Loveless. This Team does many good projects throughout the area and they hope to be able to schedule our bridge for this summer. This same Team donated money at an earlier time for helping to plant the Prairie Restoration in the southern third of the park.

I have been working over the last year with Brian Wyatt who offered to make his Eagle Scout Project benefit the park. This Spring he constructed two signs and located them on the east and west side of the Restored Prairie where they can be used to explain and teach about the restored prairie and woodland that is being established by our chapter in the park.

And speaking of the restored woodland, I am very grateful to Jacque Staats and Dick Oberst who took responsibility for planting trees in the park this Spring and have done a wonderful job.

Jacque rented a truck and drove to Lindsborg to pick up trees that are grown out in their nursery and donated for use in public areas. Donna Schenk-Hamlin recruited volunteers for the two Saturday workdays when the donated trees and others purchased from Kansas Forest Service were planted.

A big thanks to volunteers who helped plant around 300 trees and shrubs and watered and mulched them. In addition to Jacque and Dick, thanks to Paul Weidhaas, Madonna Stallmann, Tom Morgan, Terri Branden, Donna and Bill Schenk-Hamlin, JoAnn Hablutzel, Helen Hayes and Anna Marie.

*Leann Harrell*





I was glad that Pete Cohen expressed his opinion about outdoor cats in his Skylight column in the March newsletter. I enjoyed reading it very much. Perhaps some of my thoughts might also be interesting, although I don't find myself lined up firmly on one side or the other of the positions on this issue.

Perhaps I'll be forgiven for narrowing my focus to a very small topic: a comparison of the number of domesticated cats with the number of behaviorally similar cats. The only small or medium-sized cat that has a comparable niche to our domesticated cat is the bobcat. The margay, jaguarundi, and ocelot occupy an extremely small proportion of the land area in the United States. The lynx also occupies an insignificant proportion of the United States (and will probably be driven from its southern range by global warming).

The bobcat preys on many species of birds, and consumes bird eggs. This athletic cat is abundant in most of the United States. The number of adults varies from 0 to 38 per ten square miles. I'm not sure whether there is a 10 square mile block that has 0 domesticated cats. There are some that have more than 38.

There are nearly 1 million bobcats. In contrast, there are several million domesticated cats that are never fed by people. There are more than 30 million cats that are allowed outdoors by their affectionate owners in the United States.

Michael Parfit wrote a fantastic article in the March issue of the *National Geographic* "Hotspot: Islands of the Pacific," p. 110-125), and I would like to borrow one of his thoughtful conclusions. It is an almost integral part of the human psyche to believe "... that individual actions have little power to damage the land's wealth or beauty."

Each outdoor cat is a wonderful individual that is behaving naturally, and even deserves some degree of appreciation from us for its natural behavior. The problem is the population size of such cats. "Pets on the Prowl!" by Jennifer Bove (Missouri Conservationist, March 2003, p. 16-19) has relevant information, and can be accessed in its entirety at [www.conservation.state.mo.us/conmag/](http://www.conservation.state.mo.us/conmag/)

"Some surveys have shown that the average outdoors cat will kill approximately 200 animals per year, and some of the best hunters might exceed 1,000 kills annually. It doesn't require advanced mathematics to conclude that cats are killing millions upon millions of birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians in the U.S. This huge harvest is threatening the existence of some species of birds, according to the American Ornithologist's Union, the American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and the Cooper Ornithological Society."

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## **A "different" FIELD TRIP: Saturday May 24th at Tuttle Creek Lake**

Contact is Patricia Yeager 776-9593 or [pyky@flinthills.com](mailto:pyky@flinthills.com)



Meet at the Corps of Engineers building at the river pond area at Tuttle Creek Lake on Highway 24 at 6:30PM. We shall look and listen at the ponds for the amphibians and reptiles that Joe Collins has just taught us about at Wednesday's meeting. Then we shall proceed to Margy Stewart's home and wildlife preserve. We are welcome to camp overnight and listen to chorus frogs, Cope's gray treefrogs, plains leopard frogs and cricket frogs. This is a good opportunity to hear all four at one spot!

The stars are also splendid at Margy's place on a clear night so join us won't you.

Please bring a snack or dessert to share and the drink of your choice. If you stay overnight the birding in the morning promises to be very good too.

*Patricia Yeager*





## SKYLIGHT PETE COHEN

An AP story late in March reported that a high school freshman in suburban Richmond, Virginia — Jennifer Barlow — was running hard and effectively with a suggestion she'd seen on an astronomy website: Couldn't there be a night, or week of nights, when unnecessary lighting would be shut off, and the stars would become apparent and available to everyone? What a reminder that the sky was still there above the electric glow, a delight to behold and important to consider.

This echoes a subject I brought up through several issues here a year ago. I was reporting that a few communities had enacted dark sky regulations, along with a few state/provincial parks set aside for dark sky usage, for financial as well as for scientific and recreational advantage. I was (still am) urging more of the same. These would have year-around effect.

Jennifer has done more than urge. Thus far she's gotten the American Astronomical Society, the Astronomical League, and the International Dark Sky Assn. together to sponsor a National Dark Sky Week, which they've already initiated this year from April 1-8. You may not have noticed.

What are the chances for the future, and what might another individual contribute to these goals? Astrologers can advise by looking at the cartographical

arrangement of the stars, whether or not they can see them. Alternatively, there seem to be a number of academic and commercial publications out there, some of long standing, offering advice on how to spot trends and create them, and profit from them. As to profits, Bernard Baruch, who had many, advised buying too late and selling too soon (i.e.: expect change). That's a hopeful note when things aren't at their best. Other advice on spotting and creating trends, given generally, it seems to me, tends to get overloaded with terminology devised for the purpose, and the anecdotes that form whatever theory have to be carefully parsed for applicability to other situations.

Also, what may seem to have been a logical cause-effect progression in hindsight, may not have seemed so logical in the past looking forward, and might be the result of pure chance. A historical background is immensely useful, though, as imaginative application is essential, while change is a given and chance can't be ruled out. Now you know exactly how to figure out how it will go and how to help.

Meanwhile, remember the Great Russet Eclipse of the Moon scheduled for May 15 in our bailiwick. The Moon will somewhat return the favor with an annular eclipse of the Sun seen partially in Alaska May 30 and spreading across mid-Greenland, Iceland, and northern Scotland on the 31st.

Those events will be handy diversions from the Great Mars Watch now in progress in a sky near you. Bob Berman, in *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, tells us that not since the telescope was invented in 1608 has anyone seen our neighbor as brightly as it will become as it speeds towards us now, a million miles closer every day.

Mars' orbit brings it "near" us about every 26 months, usually about 45 million miles away. Every 15 years it gets to within 38 million miles. But by August you can reel in the tape to 34.6 million miles. By autumn it will be back to only half as bright. In compensation there's this long luminary preliminary. Right now Mars will be rising into the SE after 1 AM, the brightest spot aglowing.

Venus, still a notable gem, will be up in the east about an hour or less before sunrise. Mercury will be there, too, from late May into June, to Venus' right, but by *Sky and Telescope's* measure only about 1/100th as bright.

Saturn will pretty much depart with the twilight, and Jupiter soon after — still, while it's up there, brighter than Arcturus, in Bootes, who will be the brightest star (remember, arc off the end of the Big Dipper's handle to reach Arcturus).

Old Man Moon will be full May 15, new May 30, in order to play his different eclipse roles. Full again June 14.



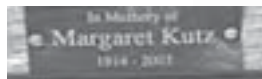
### More Pictures of work at Mortheast Park



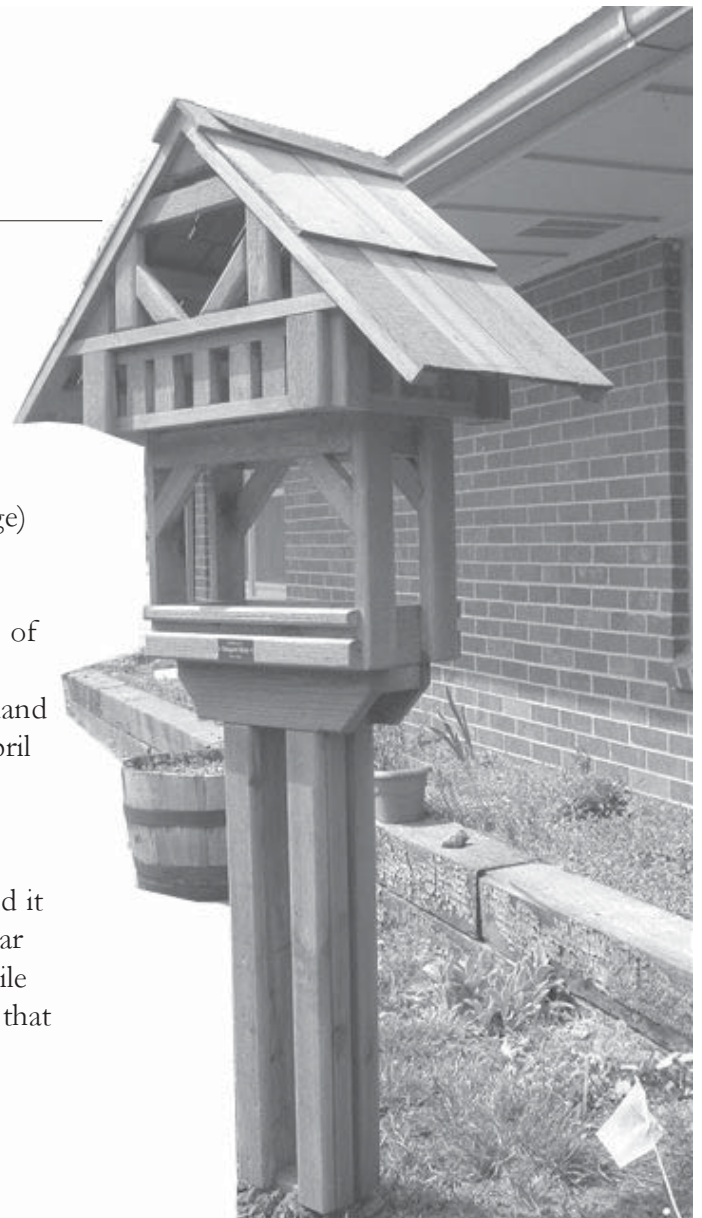
### Memorial Birdfeeder installed

A bird feeder was given to the Westy Community Care Home in Westmoreland in memory of Margaret (Marge) Kutz (1914-2003). A monetary gift was given to our Chapter in her memory.

The feeder was chosen from our chapter's store of Don Yockey feeders. Don built a special post for the feeder and went to Westmoreland and mounted it on Sunday April 13th.



A memorial plaque was placed on the feeder and it was filled with black oil sunflower seeds. If you live near Westmoreland, and want to fill the feeder once in a while I'm sure the Westy folks would appreciate it. Don says that a few of the residence at Westy hobbled over to the window to watch him and a elder man gave him the thumbs up when he finished. "That's all the thanks I need," Don said.





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**Subscription Information:**

Introductory memberships - \$20 per year; then basic membership is \$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. Membership Renewals are handled by the National Audubon Society and should not be sent to NFHAS. Questions about membership? Call toll-free, 1-800-274-4201, or email the National Audubon Society [join@audubon.org](mailto:join@audubon.org).

If you do not want to receive the national magazine, but still want to be involved in our local activities, you may subscribe to the *PRAIRIE FALCON* newsletter for \$15 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 HOTLINE:** For information on Kansas Birds, subscribe to the Kansas Bird Listserve. Send this message **<subscribe KSBIRD-L>** to this address **<listserv@ksu.edu>** and join in the discussions!

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