



# the prairie falcon

VOL. 29, No. 1  
SEPTEMBER 2000

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

September is the start of a new year for NFHAS - this is the first issue of Volume #29 for the Prairie Falcon. Looking forward to new programs, some new officers, new members, new friends, and hopefully some new birds, or maybe just a new way of seeing them.

Join us again for an informal tour of the NFHAS-established BUTTERFLY GARDEN in Sojourner Truth Park – followed by an ICE CREAM SOCIAL and HERITAGE PEONY SALE. The park is located south of Fort Riley Blvd., north of Pottawatomie Ave., between Manhattan Ave. and South 10<sup>th</sup> Street.

We will meet at 7:00 PM at the Butterfly Garden located at the east end of the park. After the tour, about 7:30PM, we will gather at the Pavilion (located at the west end) for the Ice Cream Social.

There is no scheduled program. We have invited other local environmental and civic groups and hope for a chance to visit with old friends and make new ones. Bring your own bowl, spoon, and favorite accompaniment (sauce, fruit, cookies, etc.) for the ice cream.

For more information about the Heritage Peony Sale, see Paul Weidhass' article on page 5 of this issue.

## Field Trips

### BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, Sept. 9<sup>th</sup> and every second Saturday at 8 a.m. in the Ackert/Durland parking lot on the KSU campus. We will carpool to a local birding hotspot, and should return by about 11 a.m. Birders of every age and interest level are welcomed; children are especially encouraged to attend. Call Dave Rintoul, 532-6663 or e-mail him at [drintoul@ksu.edu](mailto:drintoul@ksu.edu) for more information.

**September Program:  
ICE CREAM  
SOCIAL  
Sojourner Truth Park**

## INSIDE

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## CONTRIBUTORS

PETE COHEN  
THOMAS MORGAN  
DAVE RINTOUL  
JUDY ROE  
PAUL WEIDHAAS

## UPCOMING DATES:

Sept. 9 - Sat. 8 AM  
BEGINNING BIRDING  
Ackert/Durland parking  
lot

Sept. 20 - Wed. 7:00 PM  
Ice Cream Social  
Butterfly Garden  
Heritage Peony Sale  
Sojourner Truth Park

Sept. 24 - Sat. Campout  
(call 539-1956)

Sept. 30 - DEADLINE for  
Bird Feed Order

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*"In autumn some of the sweetness of spring steals back again. There are the blessed rains, the sharp nights, the mornings smelling of wet loam and winey air as if blown from the mountains. The woods are filling up with clouds of asters. And best of all, the birds return. Few are the voices of the forest, but the robin has taken to singing again his old "Cheer up, cheery. Wake up, weary!" The grackles gather in the wet woods just as they do in March, and from the fields comes a slender, wistful whistling of the meadowlarks, of all songs I know the most poignant except the farewell whistling of the white-throated sparrow. But there is something sad about these songs, something that surely reminds us of a happiness we once knew, that is gone."*

— An Almanac for Moderns,  
Donald Culross Peattie,

1935, G.P. Putnam's Sons, Inc., New York

Peattie has struck a resonant chord here, for the summer's end is bittersweet in all of its aspects. It is the end of the breeding season, so the joy of new life gives way to the fearful realities of staying alive until the next spring. Nature's experiments are over for the year, but the data are not yet in, and it will take a hard winter's winnowing before we see who comes back next year. But it also feels like it is the right time to stop, to gather ourselves and reflect, for a new season is coming, and there are many good prospects for nature-watching in the coming months.

Some of Nature's jewels, the hummingbirds, will be visiting the state this month, and even if you haven't had your hummingbird feeder out all summer, you should clean it out and fill it up now. Our summer resident Ruby-throated Hummingbirds will be leaving, and their kinfolk from the northern states and provinces will be passing through as well. A feeder full of sugar water should help them get ready for their arduous trip, which will take them

across the Gulf of Mexico to South America for the next seven or eight months. But even as these eastern hummingbirds leave the state, they might be replaced by one or more western hummingbird species, which can wander into Kansas in the fall. In August several Calliope Hummingbirds (the smallest bird in North America and also the bird which migrates the furthest per gram of biomass) showed up at feeders in western and central Kansas. A few Rufous Hummingbirds are also to be expected across the state this month, and these pugnacious spitfires are usually obvious when they find your feeder, since they will chase all of the other hummers away!

But you might also find some of the other western species, such as Broad-tailed, Anna's, Black-chinned Hummingbirds. Even the Allen's Hummingbird, whose range maps in most field guides barely extends past the coast of California, has shown up in Kansas in the fall. Some authorities believe that the appearance of vagrant hummingbirds in the Great Plains will be even more common in the future, since winter survival of these lost birds has been enhanced by an abundance of winter hummingbird feeders in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The hypothesis is that birds passing through Kansas can stay in the southeastern US all winter, and then migrate back to the breeding grounds. If there is a genetic basis for this novel migratory pathway, the genes will be passed on to new generations, and more western hummers will wander across Kansas in coming autumns. Sounds good to me!

On a scale somewhat larger than a hummingbird, there are some other migratory spectacles in Kansas in September. Common Nighthawks from states to our north will be massing and passing through the state this month. Sometimes these congregations can be tremendous, but in recent years it seems

like this species has been declining, so predictions for this year are a bit iffy. Hopefully this trend will be reversed before we have to rename the species as the Uncommon Nighthawk. In some years large flocks of Franklin's Gulls will coincide with the nighthawk migration, and mixed flocks of gulls and nighthawks will wheel about the evening skies, snagging dragonflies and grasshoppers and cicadas from the sultry air. Incongruous as it may seem, insects are the primary food of the Franklin's Gull, and their delicate-winged passage over the prairies of Kansas is probably cause for much alarm in the arthropod realm. But this is a transient passage, and soon these gulls of summer will give ways to the fish-eating and dumpster-diving gulls of winter, so get out and enjoy them while you can.

As for songs, the Carolina Wren, the Tufted Titmouse, and the above-mentioned Robin are probably the most vocal birds at a time of year when most birds are stubbornly non-vocal. But the drone of the tree crickets, katydids, and cicadas should be sufficient background music for your outings this month, as another golden August moves toward purple, red and brown October here on the Great Plains.

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*"At one time wild rice appears to have grown naturally over a fairly large portion of North America — from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rocky mountains and from the Gulf of Mexico nearly to Hudson Bay, according to Jenks. Lacking data for some areas, he provided a map showing wild rice in more than half the states in the country and in two provinces of Canada, where it extended roughly to the fiftieth parallel. States with Indian production of wild rice included Florida, where it was harvested by the Seminole, and New York, by the Seneca."*

—Thomas Vennum, Jr., *Wild Rice and the Ojibway People* (1988), Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul MN.

The manuscript that Jenks wrote about the range of wild rice is 100 years old and is probably decomposing on some dusty shelf. In Kansas, however, we are probably slightly south of the range of the most widespread species (*Zizania palustris*). The stronghold of wild rice is in the Great Lakes region where a great number of wetlands have extensive beds of wild rice. Looking at such beds, one can imagine that such an environment existed in the beginning when mankind was young, and that when mankind is old, the environment which nurtured mankind so many eons ago will remain.

The churning hooves of a large moose will help to aerate a bed of wild rice which sometimes grows better after a moose has passed by it. The wild rice requires more life-giving oxygen than does a water lily or a cattail. The common species of wild rice is an annual that must germinate from seed every spring, and about a month later, the plant's leaves reach the surface of the water. The plant's stalk may then emerge and prepare for blossoming.

The plant's pollen is so light that it often rises up after it has been released by a vagrant breeze. The release of this pollen is sometimes accidentally encouraged by a bird as it forages for caterpillars that feed on the plant's leaves. After pollination, the female flowers turn reddish purple. In an old book (*The Backwoods of Canada: Being Letters from the Wife of an Emigrant Officer, 1836*, Charles Knight, London), Catherine Traill wrote in one of her letters that "... when the rice is in flower, it has a beautiful appearance with its broad grassy leaves and light waving spikes, garnished with pale yellow green blossoms, delicately shaded with reddish purple, from beneath which fall three elegant straw-coloured anthers, which move with every breath of air or slightest motion of the waters."

When the kernels are in the milk stage, these kernels attract red-winged blackbirds and bobolinks, (and such birds are considered pests of wild rice that is grown commercially). As the wild rice ripens, the seed head or panicle becomes brittle and each kernel disarticulates itself from the panicle in a process called shattering out, which begins at the top and moves down through the panicle. The shattering out occurs gradually during late August and early September. The rice is traditionally harvested by bending the stalks into one's canoe and gently striking the stalks to dislodge most of the fully ripened kernels. Then you may return after a few days to harvest more kernels that have fully ripened on these same stalks. Many kernels fall into the water and are eagerly consumed by wood ducks and many other birds. Some of the kernels escape even these foragers, however. The kernels sink heavy end down and the barbed awns of the kernels anchor them in the sediment. Only half of the seeds germinate the following spring. When a natural disaster prevents seed production, some seed from previous generations will be left in the sediment to bring the wild rice into the future.

The wild rice is very sensitive to purity and depth and rate of flow of water. The dams of beavers destroy wild rice by increasing water levels. However, their dams also stabilize the flow of water and benefit the wild rice that grows downstream, since the wild rice is adapted for survival in the gentle currents that are found below a beaver dam. Most of the rice beds in the United States have been destroyed by us, not by beavers. And recently, we have gained an appreciation for the wild strength of the taste of wild rice, and have begun to produce this grain in diked fields. Some of it is produced on lands rented from the Department of Natural Resources of Minnesota. A shattering-resistant variety is grown that produces 10-fold more grain that is mechanically harvested instead of falling down for the ducks (but even so, the ducks obtain as much food from this partially domesticated crop as they do from domesticated crops that are managed for ducks).

It began in 1950 when the first diked fields of wild rice were planted. In 1963, the seeds from plants that possessed shattering-resistance were saved for later use in producing more shattering-resistant plants. The major crops such as white rice, wheat, and corn, have been intensely selected by man to produce kernels that remain on the plant until being mechanically harvested instead of shattering

out. And now we use enormous amounts of land to produce such crops. By the year 2050, ninety percent of the land that is suitable for crops or grass must be used for agriculture (according to a recent analysis of the balance between our agricultural and our population). Since this is a world-wide average, it suggests that a great deal more than ninety percent must be used in Asia. White rice (*Oryza sativa*) was domesticated in Asia. It is now grown commercially in California, for example, side by side with paddies of wild rice, ... which is not very closely related to white rice although these plants do belong to related tribes within the grass family.

My father feels passionate about controlling the land around him, because of his experience in the 1930s when he helped feed his parents and sisters by plowing land with horses. I honor him, but I am not him. Instead of feeling passionate about controlling the land, I feel more passionate about reducing such control. Fighting over agricultural technology seems like a waste of time to me. Efficient farming can reduce the proportion of the planet that is controlled by us. Organic farming can slightly increase wildness with fields. It seems to me that each of us can contribute in beneficial ways, and live and let live.

Each of us has unexplainable dreams. In my dream, I'm canoeing in a bed of wild rice. The wood ducks are feeding on shattered out grain. My hand is empty, but I reach out that empty hand. I hear myself saying words paraphrased from a movie. The outlaw, Josie Wells, said it to a Comanche war chief as he offered the chief his hand to make peace. Yes, my hand is completely empty. I'm not giving you anything extra. You're not giving me anything extra. We're giving each other life. It could be easily shortened slightly by removing the discussion of beavers, so instead of - The wild rice is very sensitive to purity and depth and rate of flow of water. The dams of beavers destroy wild rice by increasing water levels. However, their dams also stabilize the flow of water and benefit the wild rice that grows downstream, since the wild rice is adapted for survival in the gentle currents that are found below a beaver dam. Most of the rice beds in the United States have been destroyed by us, not by beavers. The wild rice is very sensitive to purity and depth and rate of flow of water. Most of the rice beds in the United States have been destroyed by people in one way or another.



Old Sol draws attention to himself in the coming period. For one thing the 11-year sunspot cycle is expected to peak, and those with a telescope and the ability to project the sun's image safely onto a white filed could be able to view those unpredictably varying freckles. According to Astronomy magazine, it may be that constrictions in the solar magnetic field, below the visible surface, diverts the outflow of energy, causing relatively cooler, therefore relatively darker places to appear. This in turn could remind us of how dependent we've become on predictable electronic connections on earth, as those connections could become interrupted, in minor or significant ways.

At the same time we could be treated to extraordinary displays of the Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights. When at their fullest these are not limited to the northern sky. At least in Minnesota, I've seen them shower scintillating colors across the entire night dome. Makes it hard to go to sleep, not knowing if they might be about to become more elaborate.

Also, of course, at 12p27 CDT, on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, the sun will move across earth's equator to begin our autumn.

And while the sun is reaching an 11-year peak, Jupiter will be approaching its 12-year high for brightness. With Saturn leading the way, it'll be rising about midnight in mid-September, then be showing up about ten o'clock by mid-October. Aided eyes should have great views of its colored cloud belts and the bulged-out

oval outline caused by the centrifugal force of such a huge object (a dozen times the diameter of the earth) rotating in just 10 hours, to say nothing of the views of its four brightest moons. Besides that, Saturn's rings will be tilted to be broadly visible. These two wanderers will be adding pizzazz to Taurus, the Bull, for they'll be riding on his neck, sort of – between the V of his face and the Pleiades on his shoulder.

As to the other planets, Venus will be a low evening "star," with Mercury even lower and therefore briefer. The still plump, though waning moon will be with the Taurus crew on September 18<sup>th</sup>. The moon will be new on the 27<sup>th</sup>, then a reappearing sliver a little to the right of Mercury in the dusk of the 28<sup>th</sup>, a little above and right of Venus on the 29<sup>th</sup>. By majority vote of my sources, it will be full again on October 13<sup>th</sup>, though Astronomy claims the 12<sup>th</sup>. Since it's the Hunter's Moon and will be quite plump for several nights running, whether 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> is probably a mute point here inland and away from tides. All the while Mars glows red, in contrast to the blue-white of nearby Regulus (the bottom star of Leo's backward question mark) in the dawn sky.

Another thing soon to watch for – whenever there'll be clear air during the moonless dawns of the first ten days of October – is the zodiacal light, or "false dawn." A broad triangle of white light appearing in the east before the genuine, bona fide, certified true dawn colors begin. I learn it's the reflection of the sunlight off cosmic

dust in the plane of the zodiac and is at its best angle for us in September-October and February-March. And it takes a naked eye – binoculars, etc, can't see it. Here's another occasion, as with scanning for shooting stars or for drinking in the soothing ambience of the night, when the natural senses still can't be beat.

Speaking of soothing ambience, the southern spread of the sky is the place to scan these nights, if you want to avoid all the vibrant glitter of the Milky Way and all the bright-starred constellations that roam higher overhead. It is sort of the "South Sea" of the sky. At say about 10 PM CDT, a star chart will help you pick out the dim stars of Eridanus, the lazy river in the shape of a lazy U, flowing in from the low SE. Cetus, the whale, will be swimming spoutlessly under Pisces, the two fish of the zodiac, between Eridanus and due south. Aquarius will be tipping his ever-pouring jug for the next quarter of the sky westward, and Capricorn (sometimes depicted as all goat, but other times as a creature with goat foreparts and a fish's tail, a kind of goat-maid, instead of a mermaid) will be either hoofing or hoofing-and-swishing for the SW horizon.

The most prominent star of the "Sea" very low just W of S, will be in a constellation named the Southern Fish. Apparently early Arabs regarded this as a frog, but the star's current name, Fomalhaut, I'm told is Arabic for mouth-of-the-fish. It may look red because of low atmospheric distortion, but it burns white, 20+ light-years away.

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#### Editor's note:

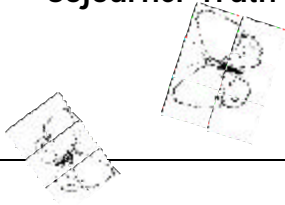
September is the beginning of our year, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all those who contributed to the Newsletter this past year – the "regulars" as well as the "one-timers." **"THANK YOU!"** for meeting the monthly deadline, month after month, and for taking the time to write such interesting articles. I look forward to reading every one of your articles in the coming year! cj

**FYI: Newsletter articles are due the 15th of month. Submit them to Cindy Jeffrey, 128 Dole Hall, KSU, or 15850 Galilee Rd, Olsburg KS 66520, or email them to cinraney@ksu.edu**



Sept. 20 - Wed. 7:00 PM  
Ice Cream Social  
Butterfly Garden  
Heritage Peony Sale

Sojourner Truth Park



## Land Preservation Committee

### A Short History of the **Michel-Ross Audubon Preserve**

The Michel-Ross Audubon Preserve has an interesting past. The level strip of land along Stagg Hill Road was a peony farm in the mid-1930s. A second plot west of the large ravine was added later. The newer plot vanished under the residences comprising the Woodland Ridge addition.

Four generations of the Hook family farmed the eight acres which comprised the Stagg Hill peony Farm. The rows in these two sizable flower beds were planted so that a horse and plow could cultivate between them.

Plants were boxed and shipped all across the country and the Caribbean. Up to ten dozen peonies were shipped per box. The packing shed, electrified by a car battery, held a cold storage room chilled by blocks of ice. It stood close to where the preserve's sign is today.

The busiest time of the year was immediately before Decoration Day, May 30<sup>th</sup>. Traffic to Sunrise Cemetery was bumper to bumper on the only road into Manhattan from Fort Riley, Highway 40 (now Stagg Hill Road), as graves were decorated with red and white peonies by loved ones.

Paul Weidhaas, chair of the Land Preservation Committee

## What is a wetland, and why are they special?

**What?** A definition provided for the Clean Water Act by the Army Corp of Engineers and the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency is land that is covered by water for long enough periods each year to change the soil character and to support plants that are adapted to living in water saturated soils. Swamps, marshes and bogs are good examples, but they also include areas that might be covered during only part of the year, such as a prairie pothole or a vernal pool.

**Why?** These areas are critical for wildlife, especially for migrating birds, and for coastal industries such as the fishing industry where coastal wetlands provide spawning grounds for fish. They provide flood control prevention, and as water filters through these areas, they help protect against erosion and clean pollutants from runoff.

The loss of wetland areas in North America is staggering. Because of this, Section 404 of the Clean Water Act has provided a mechanism for at least maintaining the acreage we have. When a wetland is filled by development, a new one must be created or restored-this is called mitigation banking. The new areas must be protected from future development as well. As urban sprawl grips the United States, even the smallest wetland areas become more precious. We just can't do without them! The Great Plains and the Midwest flyway area are particularly important. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is in the process of producing a digital wetlands database of all wetlands in the U.S. as part of the

More sites of interest:

[www.nwi.fws.gov/overview.htm](http://www.nwi.fws.gov/overview.htm)

[www.usace.army.mil/inet/functions/cw/cecwo/reg](http://www.usace.army.mil/inet/functions/cw/cecwo/reg)

[www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/1998/classwet/wetlands.htm](http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/1998/classwet/wetlands.htm)

National Wetlands Inventory. A number of other government agencies have programs involving wetlands, either to help define and classify them, or to characterize and delimit them. While all this may sound pretty dry (well, wet actually), wetlands need to be defined so that classification and protection of an area as a wetland can be backed up with scientific data. The National Audubon Society has a major campaign in place to help save and restore wetlands. For further information, go to [www.audubon.org/campaign/wetland/ecosystem.html](http://www.audubon.org/campaign/wetland/ecosystem.html).

For my part, if I want to take an out-of-towner to see birds, I inevitably head for water (unless it's prairie chicken season, of course), where I know the birds will be lingering.

Judy Roe



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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. Renewals of membership 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).

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 HOTLINE**

**Kansas (statewide): 316-229-2777**  
**Kansas City area (incl. W.MO): 785-342-2473**  
**Nebraska (statewide): 402-292-5325**

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in Washington - 202-225-1772.

Audubon Action Line - **800-659-2622**, or get the latest on WWW at <http://www.audubon.org/campaign/>

**Write** ✉ - or call ☎ (any-time)