

Council Grove Wildlife Area News



Area News – Fall 2017

2017/2018 Hunting Outlook:

Habitat conditions overall are similar to those found last year and are again improved over those found in 2015. Unfortunately, however, for the third year in a row, lake flooding impacted some area habitats. Flooding came early this year when initial heavy rains fell in late March. Flooding peaked in mid-April when lake levels reached 6.4' above conservation elevation, and generally persisted to a lesser degree into early July. Some area woodlands adjacent to the lake were impacted yet again and understory vegetation in those woodland environments remains negatively impacted. Although those habitats remain diminished, they are improved as compared to those present two years ago. Although spring crop planting was delayed by wet conditions, area producers were able to plant nearly all fields. Timely precipitation throughout much of the summer encouraged strong plant growth. Area crop and native grass fields responded to timely precipitation to produce abundant yields and robust vegetative conditions. Like last year, hunters should expect to find many area habitats to contain tall and dense plant communities.



Upland Birds: The fall hunting outlook for quail on the wildlife area is fair. Hunters should see quail numbers that are similar to decreased as compared to last fall. Although many wildlife area habitats were significantly impacted by floods in 2015, fair quail numbers remain and hunters have reported finding some birds the past two seasons. For the third year in a row we experienced a winter without prolonged periods of extreme cold, or snow or ice coverage, enhancing winter survival. Breeding populations this spring were slightly higher than average as measured during a survey route that was established near the wildlife area in 2003. Although breeding populations benefited from the mild winter, production appears to be limited this year. Few quail broods were witnessed along a survey route completed within the county, and while conducting management activities on the wildlife area. Many area habitats that were impacted from the significant flooding that occurred in 2015 have responded favorably, developing into desirable annual plant communities that will provide good food and cover conditions for quail and other wildlife this fall and winter. Timely precipitation through most of July and August produced robust habitat conditions. Hunters should expect to find many area habitats to contain tall and dense vegetation. Hunters that utilize dogs should be aware that cockleburrs are abundant along some field edges again this year. The wildlife area lies outside the primary range of ring-necked pheasant. Hunters occasionally encounter pheasants on the area, but numbers are low.



Northern Bobwhite.

Waterfowl: The fall hunting outlook for waterfowl on the area is fair. Waterfowl populations are reported to remain strong following another good production year within breeding habitats to the north. Habitat conditions here however are not nearly as strong as those experienced in 2013. Abundant precipitation in March, flooding into early July, and timely precipitation throughout much of the summer kept lake levels full through August. Food producing vegetation could not become established on lake fringes because of the flood and full lake levels. As such, few food resources will be available for waterfowl along lake edges this season. September was warm and dry and lake levels have been declining into the fall season. Currently hunters have adequate opportunity to conceal themselves for a hunt, but if lake levels continue to decline, concealment may be more problematic later in the season and boat access to the lake from wildlife area ramps may become more difficult. Weather will undoubtedly play a part (as it always does) in determining the extent of waterfowl use this year as well. Many years see waterfowl numbers achieve an early peak in late October, followed later by a more significant peak in mid-December. Hunters are encouraged to visit the area website to view weekly waterfowl population and habitat condition updates.



Drake wigeon.

Deer: The fall hunting outlook for deer on the area is fair. Although area deer numbers were believed to be negatively influenced by the 2012 EHD outbreak and habitat degradation following the 2015 flood, habitat conditions have largely been favorable in 2016 and 2017. Although some woodland habitats were again impacted by flooding in 2016 and 2017, overall, habitat conditions are improved as compared to those found two years ago. Woodland habitat management efforts continue, enhancing food and cover conditions for deer and other woodland wildlife species. Like last year, improved woodland habitat conditions and robust native grass and cropland habitats that benefited from timely precipitation during much of the summer, will provide attractive habitat for deer, particularly as weather conditions deteriorate later this winter. With improved food and cover conditions the past two years, the wildlife area appears to be attracting more deer and contributing to improved deer health. Deer sightings (particularly does and fawns) were more abundant this year and reports of a few nice bucks have also been received.



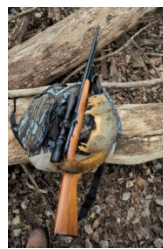
White-tailed Deer.

Turkey: The fall hunting outlook for turkey on the area is fair. Although still locally common, turkey numbers have declined recently on the wildlife area as a result of diminished production following significant flooding in 2015 and “modest at best” production in 2016 and 2017. Although habitats were degraded and some nesting was likely avoided in lower elevation habitats adjacent to the lake again this spring, overall habitat conditions are improved again this year as compared to two years ago. Turkey broods have still been observed in recent years, but observations appear to be less frequent and extensive. Timely precipitation that occurred much of this summer has produced robust conditions in area cropland and native grass habitats, and has continued to improve understory vegetation in many woodland habitats impacted from the 2015 flood. Those improved conditions will help to provide attractive habitat for wintering turkeys and enhance nesting opportunities for birds next spring. Prior to declines in turkey production beginning in 2015, turkey populations benefited from good production dating back to at least 2012. As such, turkey hunters are likely to find that area flocks contain a greater proportion of experienced adult birds which may make hunting more difficult.



Successful youth spring turkey hunter.

Small Game: Opportunities to hunt fox squirrel and cottontail exist. Of the two, fox squirrel, typically provide greater opportunity. With much of the area wooded and with hunting interest in squirrels' low, the area can provide some attractive hunting during some years. Squirrel populations appear to be rebounding following a decline that resulted from significant long-term flooding in 2015. Although floods impacted some woodland environments again in 2016 and 2017, squirrel numbers appear to have benefited from last year's mild winter and excellent hard mast (walnuts and acorns) production. Some area archery deer hunters have reported improved squirrel numbers. Cottontail populations are often not strong, but can provide some opportunity in upland areas away from flood zones.



Successful squirrel hunt.

Furbearers & Coyotes: The area is open to the hunting and trapping of furbearers. In most years, good opportunity to harvest beaver and raccoon exists. Coyote and bobcat populations are generally fair, providing some opportunity. Good numbers of young coyotes were observed on the wildlife area this summer suggesting that predator hunting opportunities may be enhanced this year. Reduced flooding and improved food and cover conditions throughout the wildlife area should enhance hunting and trapping opportunities for these species this season.



Kansas Coyote.

Management Actions Produce Management Results

Each year staff evaluate grassland habitats in an effort to monitor condition and suitability for area wildlife. Managers pay particular attention to important characteristics like plant diversity (how many different species of plants are in the stand), plant composition and prevalence (how many plants are annual, perennial, & woody types), insect and seed abundance (how much wildlife food is being produced), thatch levels (how much residual plant material and bare ground is present), and presence of noxious or invasive plants (plants that may negatively influence wildlife use). Managers often seek to produce habitats that are diverse not only in plant species and types, but also in structure. Such diverse plant communities often better serve the habitat needs of wildlife by providing them with differing food and cover options to meet changing needs throughout the year. When staff note that a habitat is in need of a change, they may prescribe a management action to alter or influence future plant communities or structure to better accommodate the needs of area wildlife species into the future.

To illustrate, several habitats received management actions this spring and summer at the Council Grove Wildlife Area. Evaluations revealed that habitat needs often varied between tracts. To meet differing habitat needs, differing management actions were employed in the hopes of stimulating or producing the desired change. Some common management actions and the desired habitat result are discussed below. Improved habitat characteristics are the goal of such work which in turn can enhance wildlife utilization and the constituent experience.



This grassland habitat was becoming dominated by woody shrubs. Annual and perennial grasses were becoming less prevalent, decreasing the value of the habitat for many wildlife species including quail. Management actions to include burning and mowing were prescribed to decrease the abundance of shrubs and to stimulate more native grasses and annual plants. A prescribed burn was completed on April 11. This burn harmed the woody shrubs by removing leaves and stems that had begun to develop. Some woody regrowth occurred following the burn. That regrowth was later mowed on May 15 to further harm those shrubs. A proportion of the tract was not mowed to continue to allow some shrub growth and that type of valued wildlife cover. The burn and mowing treatments within other portions of the tract stimulated the growth of perennial and annual plants improving food and cover conditions for area wildlife. A diverse mix of annual, perennial, and woody plant types remain, providing quail friendly habitat well into the future.



A habitat area dominated by smooth brome. Smooth brome is a non-native grass that can be invasive and is often not valued by wildlife because it can become dominant and not allow other plants to exist within the stand. Without plant and structural diversity, stands of smooth brome are less likely to meet year-round habitat needs of most wildlife species. Smooth brome is often targeted for management actions in an effort to reduce prevalence and enhance plant diversity.



A management action to include burning was prescribed within this tract. A primary goal of this burn was to decrease the abundance of smooth brome and to stimulate more native grasses and annual plants. A prescribed burn was completed on April 13. This burn harmed the smooth brome because it had already developed significant green growth. After the smooth brome was harmed, other plants that were suppressed in the stand were given a competitive advantage and became more dominant. Some native grasses were included in those stimulated because, unlike the smooth brome, they were just beginning to initiate growth at the time of the burn. Smooth brome was also harmed enough in some locations to create bare soil conditions which stimulated the development of many annual plants which are often valued for their seed (wildlife food) producing abilities. Broad-leaved plants and wildflowers also became more prevalent, enhancing insect abundance and improving the quantity of this important food source for young quail and turkeys. Plant and structural diversity was enhanced by this action. Food and cover conditions were improved, and habitat values for species like quail, turkey, and deer were enhanced.



This tract was removed from agricultural production and planted to native grasses in 2008. The stand is well established, but is dominated by several native grass species. Plant diversity is minimal. A summer burn was prescribed to diminish the stature and vigor of the native grasses, ultimately reducing competition and removing thatch layers so that other plants can germinate and compete within the stand. Diverse plant communities are a key to healthy and productive habitats.



The tract was burned on August 1. As the left photo illustrates, a complete burn resulted even though plants were green at the time of the fire. Abundant thatch which remained within the stand from previous growing seasons is what fueled the fire. Although not as intense as a spring burn, summer fires can still be utilized to meet many management objectives. The photo on the right was taken on September 14. It shows that although those plants were significantly altered during the growing season, they did regrow and will provide some wildlife cover through the fall and winter. More importantly however the picture illustrates that bare soil areas between grass clumps are now more prevalent. Sunlight will be more likely to reach those bare areas next spring stimulating the growth of different types of plants which will be more likely to compete within the stand because the vigor and competitive advantage of the native grasses has been reduced. The timing of this burn also helped to diminish the stature and seed producing abilities of sericea lespedeza, a noxious weed which poses a significant threat to grassland systems in the region. With greater plant diversity and a reduced threat from noxious weeds, this tract will provide greater food and cover values in the future.

Welcome New Assistant Manager

Area staff are pleased to announce the recent hiring of Mr. Tyler Burt as our new Assistant Public Lands Manager. Tyler will be primarily assisting with management responsibilities at El Dorado Wildlife Area and Butler State Fishing Lake, but will also be available to assist with special projects at Council Grove Wildlife Area and Chase State Fishing Lake. Tyler brings a solid reputation as a passionate and dedicated employee with a diverse skill set and interests including public relation and communication abilities, biological expertise, leadership and supervisory abilities, land management experience, equipment operation and maintenance skills, facility and infrastructure management and maintenance abilities, law enforcement proficiency, community involvement, technological experience, and youth program involvement. Tyler is stationed at the El Dorado Wildlife Area office which is located just east of Hwy. 177 along NE 20th Street. He can be contacted at #316/322-7513 or tyler.burt@ks.gov.

Tyler grew up in Great Bend, KS, where he graduated from Great Bend High School in 2003. After one year at Butler Community College playing college sports, Tyler transferred to Kansas State University where he obtained his Bachelor's degree in Park Management and Conservation in 2008. While attending Kansas State University, he met his wife Shala and they married in the Fall of 2008. Tyler has been employed with the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism for 9 years, previously in the Parks Division at El Dorado State Park. While working for the department, Tyler was actively involved in the management of park lands and public use areas, employee training, youth hunts, and special event coordination. In 2013, Tyler and Shala welcomed twin girls, Taylor and Sophie, who are now 4. Tyler enjoys spending time participating in outdoor activities including hunting and fishing with his friends and family, camping with family, participating in running events with his wife and friends, and teaching his daughters various outdoor activities. Welcome Tyler!



Tyler Burt with wife Shala and twin daughters Taylor and Sophie.



Tyler passing on our outdoor traditions.

Butler State Fishing Lake Added to Areas of Responsibility

Beginning in late August of this year, Butler State Fishing Lake (SFL), located in southeast Butler County, became an area of additional management responsibility. Butler State Fishing Lake and Wildlife Area provides scenic outdoor experiences within a nearly 120-acre lake and 200-acre public land complex. Noted for its quail hunting, largemouth bass fishing, and summer wildflower viewing opportunities, Butler SFL can help to satisfy year-round outdoor recreation interests. Recently hired Assistant Manager, Tyler Burt (please see above article) will have direct responsibility for the property. Plans are currently being developed to enhance the visitor experience by improving shoreline angler access, area roadways, restrooms, shelters, signage, and courtesy docks. Habitat management efforts will continue to incorporate periodic prescribed burns and greater emphasis will be placed on control of noxious and invasive plant species. Plans are also currently being developed to remove woody vegetation from the lake dam. With the addition of Butler SFL, staff are now responsible for the management of 4 properties within 3 counties of the Flint Hills region, including Council Grove and El Dorado Wildlife Areas and Chase State Fishing Lake. Outdoor recreation opportunities abound within these nearly 6,500 acres of public lands!

Welcome new NWTF Forestry Specialist

The National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) and KDWPT are pleased to announce that Dan Moser was hired as an NWTF Forestry Specialist this past spring. Dan will be working with KDWPT managers throughout eastern Kansas to develop and implement woodland habitat enhancement plans. He will be responsible for developing or overseeing woodland inventories and management plans and will assist with educating natural resource professionals and the public of issues facing forest resources in Kansas.

Dan will be based in Council Grove, sharing space at the wildlife area office. He was raised in Logan Utah and from a young age knew that hunting, fishing, hiking and just being in the woods would be his life. This passion directed him to the University of Montana where he earned a B.S. in Natural Resource Conservation with an emphasis in forest management. He's worked several years traveling around the western U.S. as a consulting forester instituting forest management, timber management, stewardship and conservation programs. His professional objectives are to work in collaboration with the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism to assist in advancing timber management programs. Dan can be reached at #785/559-0054 or dmoser@nwtf.net. Welcome Dan!



New NWTF Forestry Specialist, Dan Moser

Why all the ATV tracks?

Nearly every fall I'm asked, "why are there ATV tracks through all of the fields?" The answer is a simple one. ATV's have become an essential public land management tool. They are utilized extensively by staff to conduct annual habitat reviews and to implement management actions designed to conserve and enhance area habitats. ATV tracks are often still evident each fall after late summer noxious weed treatment efforts have been completed. Each year, area staff may spend as many as 70–100 hours utilizing an ATV to spot spray noxious weed species such as Johnsongrass and sericea lespedeza, or other invasive plants such as crown vetch or woody vegetation. Habitats are often thoroughly reviewed in a grid like pattern from an ATV to ensure that area habitats receive appropriate treatments to remove such harmful plant species. Ultimately their use improves staff efficiency and effectiveness, allowing us to better manage more acres, enhancing wildlife use, and your outdoor recreation experience.



ATV tracks are often evident within area grasslands after KDWPT staff utilize such equipment to treat noxious and invasive plants.

Forest Habitat Enhancement Project Completed

Dense, closed-canopy forest stands are becoming more prevalent in many watersheds in eastern Kansas and within the forested areas of the Flint Hills. Less desirable tree species such as hackberry, osage orange and american elm have started taking over the forests in this region. This leads to a decrease of under-story plant diversity and subsequent forest productivity. Undesirable tree species also encroach into riparian habitats where hardwood trees and shrubs are more desirable for wildlife species.

A project designed to improve forest health and related habitat benefits was recently completed at the Council Grove Wildlife Area. Several areas formerly in agricultural production have been allowed to return to forest cover through natural stocking means. By doing so, managers have widened the corridor between active agricultural areas and stream banks enhancing wildlife habitat corridors, stream bank stabilization, and herbicide and sediment filtration. Treatment areas had naturally regenerated into a dense stand composed primarily of american sycamore with some scattered bur oak and black walnut. Average tree spacing prior to treatment was considered very dense with spacing estimated at 3X3 feet or 4,840 trees per acre. The average height of trees within the stand was 11 Feet with an average diameter of 2 inches at breast height (DBH). In collaboration with the KDWPT manager a pre-commercial thinning (PCT) was conducted; the trees were hand thinned to an approximate spacing of 10X10 feet or 436 trees per acre. Small pockets within the treatment area were left untreated to retain dense wildlife cover, often valued by some woodland wildlife species. This treatment will reduce competition among the remaining trees, facilitating healthy growth while also promoting light availability to the ground to stimulate enhanced grass and shrub growth.



Left - Dense stands of sycamore dominated one corridor area prior to treatment. Trees were heavily stocked, competing significantly with one another for sunlight, moisture, and nutrients. Growth was restricted and vegetation was often not present at ground level because sunlight could not penetrate the tree canopy. Dominant and desirable trees were marked with flagging and remaining trees were planned to be removed. Center - NWTf Forestry Specialist, Dan Moser utilizes a chainsaw to conduct a thinning operation designed to improve tree health and enhance plant diversity within the treatment area. Right - Much of the treatment area was significantly thinned, reducing competition among remaining trees. This should stimulate healthy tree growth, and improve sunlight penetration to the forest floor, encouraging diverse plant and shrub communities in the future, ultimately enhancing wildlife habitat values, and the recreation experience for our visitors.

Area Visitors are Reminded that Trapping Takes Place

Occasionally I am asked whether trapping takes place on the wildlife area. Often the question comes from a dog owner that may utilize the area for hunting, training, or exercise. **Area visitors should be aware that trapping is allowed on the wildlife area and does occur.** Signs located at area information kiosks do announce that public trapping (in addition to hunting and fishing) takes place. Dog owners wishing to learn more about traps should consult the annual hunting and fur-harvesting regulation summary. Within pages 36 and 37 of the 2017 summary are detailed descriptions and illustrations of several trap types and instructions showing how to release a dog from a land trap. Those not familiar with fur-harvesting should know that it is a regulated activity, with the KDWPT responsible for stipulating certain species of take, prescribed seasons, license and education requirements, equipment restrictions, and tending and inspection requirements. Except for the coyote (trapping is allowed year-round for this species), trapping seasons begin in November and may conclude in February or March depending upon the species sought. Like hunters, trappers pay license fees which are utilized to help manage our public lands, and trappers can help to maintain healthy wildlife populations. Responsible trapping has a place on our public lands.

Fall Outdoor Youth Event a Success!

The Council Grove 14th Annual Outdoor Youth Event was conducted on Saturday, October 28th at Council Grove Lake. Fifty-two youngsters (and 8 adults) from 10 Kansas communities attended this year, and appeared to enjoy a nice crisp fall afternoon afield. This special event provided participants with a free opportunity to enhance shotgun and archery shooting and hunting safety skills, ultimately encouraging them to spend additional time in Kansas great outdoors! Since inception, this event has served nearly 650 participants! The event is part of KDWPT's "Pass It On" Program, designed to recruit and retain Kansas hunters, particularly youngsters.

The afternoon began with a hearty lunch provided by the Flint Hills Chapter of Quail and Upland Wildlife Federation (QUWF), followed by a brief orientation of the event. Participants were then divided into four groups and allowed to visit each of the four different stations for nearly one hour. Designed to provide as much hands-on instruction as possible, visitors to each station received a brief orientation by a skilled instructor, then jumped right in to actual shotgun, archery, and hunting safety skills development training. Two of the stations provided students with opportunities to learn fun wing-shooting techniques with youth model 20 gauge shotguns and flying clay targets. A third station provided opportunities to develop or enhance their skills at shooting youth compound archery equipment at life-sized Kansas game animal targets. The final station provided students with opportunities to enhance their hunting safety skills by completing several field exercises.



Archery Station



Shotgun Station



Hunting Safety Skills Station

Event organizers were pleased with how all of the kids conducted themselves during the event. All participants were responsible, improved their shooting and safety skills, and most importantly had fun! All participants were awarded door prizes, provided by the Bill Young Foundation, Dennis DeLay, and Farmers and Drovers Bank, to encourage them to take what they had learned one step further and do some hunting this fall. Two lucky attendees also won new firearms including a youth model 20 gauge shotgun and a .22 rifle, donated by the Chisholm Trail Chapter of Safari Club International.

Gear and supplies, including shotguns, shells, bows, arrows, targets, and eye and ear protection were provided by KDWPT's Pass It On, Hunter Education, and Archery in the Schools Programs. These programs are designed to reverse the declining trend of hunting participation in Kansas. These programs encourage youth to spend time afield by introducing them to shooting sports and hunting. Their goal is to ensure that every youngster, or person that has an interest in hunting, is provided with an opportunity to experience this treasured pastime.

Area Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) staff would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for their assistance with this successful event:

Organizations: Flint Hills Chapter of Quail and Upland Wildlife Federation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bill Young Foundation, Chisholm Trail Chapter of Safari Club International, Farmers and Drovers Bank, and KDWPT's "Pass It On", Hunter Education, and Archery in the Schools Programs.

Individuals: Mike Miller, Wayne Doyle, Tyler Burt, Jake Spear, Dan Moser, Gary Kepley, Dennis DeLay, Allan Cashman, Steve White, Steve Crichton, Mary K Myers, James Masters, Matt Cook, Mieko Alley, Chris Myers, Chris Grant, Sean Honer, Faron Adams, Brian Chase, Daryl Finch, Phil Taunton, Sheyanne Masters, Leland Viar and numerous parents.



A scenic winter view of Council Grove Lake.

Would you like more information about the Council Grove Wildlife Area?

Please contact:

Brent Konen – Area Manager
Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism
1130 Lake Road
Council Grove, KS 66846
#620/767-5900
brent.konen@ks.gov
www.ksoutdoors.com

