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Finalists Selected for Kansas Leopold Conservation Award

News release provided by Sand County Foundation

Four finalists have been selected for the prestigious 2019 Kansas Leopold Conservation Award®.

Given in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, the award recognizes those who inspire others with their dedication to land, water and wildlife resources in their care.

In Kansas, the \$10,000 award is presented annually by Sand County Foundation, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD) and Ranchland Trust of Kansas.

Ted Alexander of Sun City in Barber County was named a finalist. Native plant and wildlife diversity have flourished thanks to conservation practices implemented at Alexander Ranch. Removing thousands of acres of invasive eastern red cedar trees through cutting and prescribed burning has improved water quality in the ranch's creeks. Researchers have documented an influx of reptiles, amphibians and diverse vegetation to the ranch. Habitat for lesser prairie chickens has been restored, and the ranch's beef cattle benefit from a managed intensive rotational grazing system.

Another finalist is Vance and Louise Ehmke of Healy in Lane County. To remain profitable while conserving soil and water, these fourth-generation farmers experiment with crops like triticale. This cross between wheat and rye is popular as cattle feed and produces enough crop residue to protect fields from soil erosion. With more than 50 playas on their land, the Ehmkes are involved in research, education and outreach on playas' contribution to recharging the Ogallala aquifer. They have also enrolled hundreds of acres into conservation programs for migratory bird, butterfly and pollinator habitat.

Dwane Roth of Manhattan in Riley County also is a finalist. Roth owns Big D Farms near Holcomb in Finney County. He uses cover crops to build soil health and combat wind erosion on sandy soils. As one of Kansas' first water technology farmers, he is passionate about addressing the declining water levels, and extending the life of the Ogallala aquifer. His participation involves researching and testing new irrigation strategies and technologies that maintain crop production with reduced water usage.

The last finalist, Z Bar Ranch of Lake City in Barber County, is managed by Keith and Eva Yearout and owned by Turner Enterprises. This ranch is a self-supporting enterprise managed under a philosophy of economic sustainability and ecological sensitivity with a focus on maximizing habitat potential for native species like the lesser prairie chicken. The ranch produces enough grass forage to sustain a 1,200 head bison herd. Improvements in water infrastructure, grazing management, and prescriptive fire have allowed range and soil health to recover from decades of uneven, season-long grazing.

The Kansas Leopold Conservation Award will be presented at the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts' 75th Annual Convention in Wichita in November. The award recipient will receive \$10,000 and a crystal depicting Aldo Leopold.

"Kansas Association of Conservation Districts is excited to recognize these outstanding landowners who are committed to conservation on their land," said Dan Meyerhoff, KACD Executive Director. "We are proud to partner with Sand County Foundation and the Ranchland Trust of Kansas to give these families the recognition they deserve."

"The Ranchland Trust of Kansas would like to congratulate this year's finalists for the 2019 Leopold Award. Sharing their stewardship successes is critical to spreading the word about how sound conservation practices are good for business," said Cade Rensink, Ranchland Trust of Kansas Chairman.

"Leopold Conservation Award recipients are at the forefront of a movement by America's farmers and ranchers to simultaneously achieve economic and environmental success," said Kevin McAleese, Sand County Foundation President and Chief Executive Officer.

The first Kansas Leopold Conservation Award recipient was named in 2015. The 2018 recipient was Hoeme Family Farm and Ranch of Scott City.

The Leopold Conservation Award in Kansas is made possible thanks to the generous support of Kansas Association of Conservation Districts; Ranchland Trust of Kansas; Ducks Unlimited; Farm Credit Associations of Kansas; ITC Great Plains; Westar Energy; Clean Line Energy Partners; Kansas Department of Agriculture (Division of Conservation); Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism; Kansas Forest Service; USDA NRCS of Kansas; McDonald's; and The Nature Conservancy in Kansas.

In his influential 1949 book, "A Sand County Almanac," Leopold called for an ethical relationship between people and the land they own and manage, which he called "an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity."

Sand County Foundation presents the Leopold Conservation Award to private landowners in 20 states for extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation. For more information, visit www.leopoldconservationaward.org.

OUR MISSION

To preserve Kansas' ranching heritage and open spaces for future generations through the conservation of working landscapes.

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RTK Spotlight: Greg Wingfield

By Samantha Weishaar, RTK Associate Director

Greg Wingfield is a major donor to Ranchland Trust of Kansas (RTK). His career has been dedicated to conservation work in Kansas and Nebraska. He is from McDonald, KS, and went to Kansas State University, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in biology with a wildlife management emphasis. He has been a supporter of RTK since the organization was formed in 2003.

"It was my privilege to be working in the Flint Hills and a member of Tallgrass Legacy Alliance when RTK was being created," Wingfield said.

Mike Beam and other KLA leaders formed a land trust to offer voluntary conservation easements to KLA members and other landowners in Kansas.

"Both as an individual and a career-long conservationist, I feel a debt of gratitude for these founding members and the staff that followed," he said.

Growing up in a small, rural community in the Midwest is what led Wingfield to be interested in conservation work.

"It was natural to have a love of being outdoors in the country, hunting and fishing. Nothing held my interest like the outdoors. I was exposed to wildlife biologists and conservation programs in college and my interest quickly broadened to conservation," he said.

He started his career as a wildlife biologist focusing on nongame species. He worked for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission for 20 years with roles as the Endangered Species Program Manager and the Assistant Wildlife Division Administrator over the private lands habitat programs. His next 10 years were with The Nature Conservancy in Kansas (TNC). As Land Protection Specialist, he assisted in key TNC acquisitions, including the Smoky Valley Ranch and the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. He also helped develop TNC's conservation easement program in the Flint Hills. After leaving TNC in Kansas, he returned to Nebraska to work on the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Wingfield said, "The program's pur-

pose is to manage a portion of water in the Platte basin to advance recovery of threatened and endangered species, such as whooping cranes, found in the central Platte River Valley."

Next, he was the Director of Conservation and habitat manager for Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary on the Platte River focusing on spring staging habitat for a significant portion of the mid-continental sandhill crane population.

"During the first half of my career the hands-on experiences with wildlife were some of my favorite memories - reintroducing river otters to Nebraska waters, banding golden eagles and prairie falcons in the panhandle of Nebraska and working with endangered species on the Platte River," Wingfield said.

In 2014 Wingfield and his wife, Dina, returned to Kansas and he worked part-time for TNC, again focused on conservation easement acquisitions. He finds easement work to be the most satisfying due to its lasting effect and impact on the land, its owners and stewards.

Wingfield retired earlier this year and the couple celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary. They moved to Coyne Creek in Chase County, beginning their retirement adventure. They have two children. Their son Orion and his wife Charlie live outside Atlanta and their daughter Molly and her husband Scott live in Portland.

"I still try to do a little hunting and fishing and love to travel, mostly in the Great Plains and the West. I have a bit of an addiction to golf if it involves a day with close friends. My wife and I are savoring anything that presents itself in this beautiful and peaceful chunk of the prairie," he said.

Wingfield truly believes in the people and mission of RTK.

"Everyone that I know with RTK I consider a friend - truly sincere, outstanding people that are passionate about RTK and its work," he said. "I would encourage anyone reading this to take the first step and engage with RTK. I'd bet that first step will lead to a wonderful and fulfilling relationship."



Greg & Dina Wingfield at Coyne Creek

RTK Photography Contest Winners

By Samantha Weishaar, RTK Associate Director

Winners have been announced for the eighth annual Ranchland Trust of Kansas (RTK) photography contest, which concluded October 14.

Each summer, RTK invites amateur and professional photographers of all ages to submit photos that showcase the mission of RTK and Kansas' ranching heritage. The mission of RTK is: "To preserve Kansas' ranching heritage and open spaces for future generations through the conservation of working landscapes."

Nichole Conard of Wichita was the grand prize winner in this year's contest. Her photo titled "Herding History," was taken during the 150th Chisholm Trail Drive south of Mayfield in Sumner County. She spent the day following the herd and this was her favorite image.

"Thank you so much for choosing my photo as grand prize. This is the first contest I've ever entered, so it is an honor knowing the hard competition I was against," said Conard.



Grand Prize photo by Nichole Conard

Amy Robben of Fall River won the Fan Favorite category by receiving 570 votes on RTK's Facebook page. Her winning photo, titled "Summer Red Angus", was taken in the Flint Hills.

Robben said, "I live on a 10,000 acre cattle ranch in the Flint Hills. There are about 100 Red Angus heifers out on this pasture. This picture displays the beauty of summer in Kansas and the beauty of the livestock industry."

A record number of photographs were submitted to the contest this year. The panel of judges narrowed the selection down to a top 30 for the Fan Favorite category voting on Facebook. All other category winners were chosen by the panel of professional photographers, along with RTK



Grand Prize photo by Nichole Conard

and Wolfe's Camera representatives. The Facebook album was able to reach over 30,000 Facebook users and nearly 6,000 votes were cast for the Fan Favorite category. Thank you to all who viewed and voted for these beautiful Kansas photos.

Additional winners in each category were: Landscape - Sheryll Marks, Wellington; Livestock - Tony Ifland, Cedar; People - Mike Scheufler, Augusta; KLA Member - Marisa Rose Betts, Russell; Youth - Lily Judd, Pomona; and Honorable Mentions - Stacey Rhoades, Newton; Callahan McIver, Council Grove; and Crystal Socha, Augusta. Socha's honorable mention photograph was the first photo taken with a drone to be entered in the contest.

All winning entries can be viewed on RTK's Facebook page. Prizes, sponsored by Wolfe's Camera of Topeka, are awarded to the top 10 winning photographers. The photographs will be used, with permission of the photographers, to promote Kansas' ranching heritage and open spaces.

RTK will have photo stationery cards for sale throughout the year featuring the 10 winning photos. Printed on premium cardstock, the folded cards are blank inside and come in packs of 10 with white envelopes. The card packages can be purchased for \$20 by contacting Samantha Weishaar at 785-273-5115 or samantha@kla.org.



Youth category winning photo by Lily Judd



Honorable Mention photo taken with drone by Crystal Socha