

people category winner
photo by Sheridan Wimmer-Doyle



Securing the Seasons to Come

by **Jessy Wilkes**, Conservation Coordinator

Each season brings its own changes to the Kansas prairie. Fall is especially striking—grasses shift from green to copper, mornings come with a chill, and flocks of migrating birds fly overhead. It's a season of transition and a reminder that the choices we make today shape the seasons to come.

Since joining Ranchland Trust of Kansas this spring, I've had the chance to listen to and learn from many landowners across the state. A common theme stands out: aside from the day-to-day of their operation, many families are equally focused on what their land will look like far into the future. That theme is at the heart of RTK's mission.

Kansas working lands face pressures that make this more urgent than ever. Development and land conversion are pushing westward, breaking up the wide-open spaces that define our state. At the same time, many ranching families are preparing for generational transitions and making decisions about inheritance and succession.

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Once a ranch is sold and subdivided, the working landscape is forever altered.

Conservation easements offer another path forward. They are voluntary agreements that keep land in private hands, while permanently protecting it as working agricultural land. Easements ensure cattle can keep grazing, our beloved open, scenic views remain, and ranching heritage thrives into the future. This year, RTK closed on our 25th conservation easement that protects more than 1,000 acres of ranch land in the Smoky Hills - fulfilling more than a decade-long dream of the landowner to see their slice of one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world is protected forever.

The demand is growing. The Land Trust Alliance estimates that the number of acres protected by voluntary conservation easement in Kansas grew by 147% between 2010 and 2020, climbing from 56,588 to 136,514 acres! While significant, this only represents 0.003% of Kansas. We must continue this important work to meet the growing demand of landowners across the state and ensure more land is protected for future generations. If you are a landowner who has ever considered a voluntary conservation easement for your property, we encourage you to start the conversation with us about protecting your working lands.

And if you don't have land to conserve, your support is no less critical. Donations to RTK fuel this work, helping us meet rising landowner interest and ensuring we can respond quickly when opportunities arise.



youth category winner
photo by Hadley Gfeller

**“Together, we can keep Kansas
ranchland working, wide open, and wild.
The seasons to come depend on
what we choose to protect today.”**

livestock category winner
photo by Holly Mettling



Conserve What's Wild, Working and Worth Saving

Across Kansas, the land tells a story—of deep roots, native grasslands, generations of stewardship, and a powerful connection between people and place.

But this year, that story is at a turning point.

From rapid development to increasingly severe droughts, our working landscapes face mounting pressure. It is estimated that only 4% of the North American tall grass prairie remains, with the majority being in Kansas, and it is more vulnerable than ever.

Yet, just when bold conservation action is most needed, funding is becoming less certain.

Federal and other conservation dollars are harder to secure. Competitive grant programs are overstretched and understaffed. Also, the cost of land protection is rising due to inflation and development demand. This makes **private support from people like you not just helpful—but absolutely essential.**

Despite these challenges, Ranchland Trust of Kansas has made powerful progress this year:

- Protected **1,121** acres of working land and native prairie.
- Currently partnering with landowners to conserve over 9,700 acres.
- Educated the public about what land conservation can achieve for current and future land stewards.

- Expanded our staff to include Jessy Wilkes as conservation coordinator to increase our ability to serve landowners and others interested in conservation.

But we need your help to keep going—and growing.



By Joining Our Herd today - your donation helps us respond quickly to urgent opportunities to protect land - before it's gone. It helps us leverage limited public funding, build trust with landowners, and defend the ranching heritage of Kansas for future generations.

There's still time to shape the next chapter of this landscape—and your support writes that story.

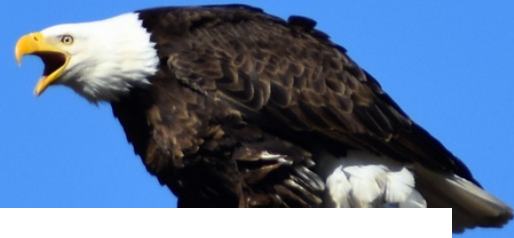
Please consider making a tax-deductible gift before year-end. Together, we can protect what's wild, working, and worth saving in Kansas.

With deep appreciation,

Dawn Hovey
Executive Director

Through the Lens of Kansas Photographers

by Samantha Weishaar, Associate Director



More than 140 photographs were entered by 40 talented photographers in this year's photography contest.

Bruce L. Hogle of Leawood was the grand prize winner in this year's contest. The winning image was taken at a controlled burn at the Flying W Ranch. Even though the image is a silhouette, the cowboys are still recognizable. You guessed it – Jim and Josh Hoy.

"Jim and Josh were doing a safety watch with several other cowboys and cowgirls. I'd known them for a few years, and when I saw them side-by-side, I was compelled to take a photo. I only got one shot then they were on the move," Hogle said.

"I thoroughly enjoyed the many times I was invited to the Flying W Ranch over the years. Josh and Jim were good guys, and always kind to me. They are sorely missed," he said.

Hogle spends much of his time in the Flint Hills every spring to photograph burning.

"I've been able to meet a few other ranchers in the Flint Hills, all of whom have helped educate

me about the importance and significance of this annual ritual."

He said this image of Jim and Josh was a once in a lifetime opportunity that he will always remember. A photography contest judge said that this image was a very significant image, especially this year to honor the cowboy legacy Jim and Josh Hoy left behind. The lucky shot was taken with a hand-held Nikon D 700.



Fan Favorite photo by Crystal Socha

Crystal Socha of Augusta won the Fan Favorite category by receiving 145 votes on RTK's Facebook page. Her photo above was taken in the Flint Hills as a cowboy moves cattle through the grassland hills in the spring.

Thank you to all the photographers, our judges, especially Kansas native and *National Geographic* photographer Jim Richardson, and all who voted on social media.

All 10 winning photos can be spotted throughout the 8 pages of this newsletter.

View full-size images on our website or Facebook page. Photography contest sponsored by L'image in Wichita.



Grand Prize photo by Bruce L. Hogle

The Value of Working Lands

by Samantha Weishaar, Associate Director

In the photos you can see the pristine protected prairie where cattle graze in Glenn and Barbara Walker's pastures located in the Smoky Hills. The Walkers are doing more than raising beef. Their pastures are a prime example of a living system that feeds communities, shelters wildlife, and protects the water. Working lands have many values.

Cattle Production & Food Security

Cattle utilize working lands through grazing, converting plants into their food source while simultaneously acting as an ecosystem management tool. Kansas ranks among the top beef-producing states, and healthy ranch lands ensure families across the nation have access to safe, sustainable food.

Water Protection

Native prairie grasses have roots that reach 10–15 feet deep, filtering rainfall. This natural filtration system provides significant advantages in protecting water resources.

Rural Economy

By ensuring the long-term viability and profitability of farms and ranches, working lands help sustain rural communities and prevent land conversion.

Wildlife Habitat

More than 500 species of wildlife, from prairie chickens to pollinators, rely on the diverse habitats that ranch lands provide.

Every acre of intact grassland is critical, yet Kansas is losing it at a rapid pace. The American Farmland Trust reports that 11 million acres of U.S. agricultural land were converted to development between 2001 and 2016—a trend that threatens ranching families and those who depend on clean water, food security, and thriving ecosystems.

Land conservation is not only about preserving beautiful views—it's about sustaining the systems that sustain us. By keeping ranch lands intact, we protect family legacies, rural economies, and the foundation of rural life in Kansas.

DID YOU KNOW?



The Smoky Hills of Kansas consist of both tallgrass and mixed-grass prairie, a transition zone. Dominant tallgrass species are found here along with shortgrass species. This region of Kansas is known as post-rock country. When wood was scarce, early farmers quarried limestone to use as fence posts.



Wilson Lake is the clearest lake in Kansas because of its surrounding landscape. The native prairies naturally filter the rainwater that flows into the lake. The lake's location in the heart of the Smoky Hills features a topography dominated by Dakota sandstone and Greenhorn limestone. This geology contributes to the lack of sedimentation and contributes to the lake's clarity. Wilson Lake is also one of the deepest lakes in Kansas.

Photos on this page taken by Bruce L. Hogle at Glenn & Barbara Walker's conservation easement near Brookville.



Spotlight

KLA member category winner
photo by Shea Baird

Carolyn Gresser: Caring for Cows, Preserving the Land

by Samantha Weishaar, Associate Director

I first met Carolyn Gresser in the summer of 2017 at a *Topeka Gives* event. Looking back, I realize that moment was more significant than I could have imagined. It left me with the feeling that this connection would grow into something special. I didn't know then the impact she would have on myself and our organization.

Since that day, Carolyn has become one of Ranchland Trust of Kansas's most generous supporters. She has a way of making you feel at ease. She is genuine, thoughtful, and deeply committed to the causes that matter to her.

Carolyn has tremendous respect for history, tradition, and the land. She has witnessed firsthand how development pressures threaten open spaces. "It not only destroys beautiful landscapes, but the unintended consequences can be devastating to the environment and the surrounding ecosystem," she says. That shared vision has fueled her incredible generosity toward RTK.

She first became a member of the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA) after the Starbuck wildfire in 2017, the largest wildfire in Kansas history, and learned about RTK through the *Kansas Stockman*.

She said, "I was blown away by the KLA community that responded to the destruction caused by that fire, and I wanted to be part of it."

Carolyn grew up with cattle, helping her father tend a small herd of registered Angus on their Rossville property. After years away, she eventually returned home and took on the pasture herself. What started with buying calves each spring grew into a cow-calf operation that continues today.

"I started with 10 pairs I bought from Spencer and Cassie Jones and then bought a bull from the Downey Ranch," she shared. "It gets me out of bed in the morning and keeps me mobile. I don't enjoy chopping ice on below-zero mornings and pray that the pump hasn't frozen, but finding a new baby calf up and nursing makes everything worth it."



Carolyn and her "girls"

Carolyn truly embodies the heart of our mission. She is someone who values the land, the stories, and the people. I am grateful every day for her friendship and support, and I feel fortunate that it grew into such a meaningful relationship.



landscape category winner
photo by Amanda Buus Thomsen

RTK live auction at KLA Convention



On the evening of Wednesday, November 19, Ranchland Trust of Kansas (RTK) will be part of the live auction at the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA) Convention in Manhattan. Items to benefit RTK are listed below:

- \$300 Gift Certificate to Zeitlow Distributing Company to be used at the McPherson location or redeemed by phone. Donated by Zeitlow Distributing Company.
- Framed canvas original print of “Roped” by Roger Landsbury of Manhattan. Donated by Kelly & Mary Lenz.
- Pair of original watercolor cowboy paintings by Deborah Herrick of Topeka. Donated by Kelly & Mary Lenz.
- Framed canvas of Little Jerusalem Badlands in Logan County taken and donated by photographer Bruce L. Hogle.
- Dinner with Kansas Secretary of Agriculture, Mike Beam. Package includes dinner for four at a mutually agreed upon location in Kansas. Dinner will take place in 2026. Donated by Secretary Beam.

If you are not able to attend, bids can be sent to samantha@kla.org or bidding can take place online. Follow RTK on social media leading up to the event for full details and pictures of each item, as well as a link to bid online.

WHY I GIVE:

“I support RTK because I believe in the mission of giving ranchers access to the voluntary tool to preserve their land for ranching in the future. RTK is valuable by giving ranchers an agriculture-focused partner they trust to work with on these projects.”

– Chelsea Good, Leawood, KS

“At Mr. Wiedemann's death in 1961, he owned nearly 40,000 acres of prime ranch land in the Flint Hills, primarily in Butler and Greenwood Counties. Mr. and Mrs. Wiedemann had a deep love of the Flint Hills and the K. T. Wiedemann Foundation is pleased to be able to support causes that seek to preserve the beauty and wildlife of Kansas.”

– Doug Pringle, Wichita, KS

“We support the mission of RTK and think this organization is a great resource for helping Kansas grasslands.”

– Mike & Pam Collinge, Hamilton, KS

“Much of the natural world has been destroyed and what hasn't been destroyed has been degraded. This has resulted in a biodiversity crisis. The importance of biodiversity to our lives cannot be overstated. RTK is an important conservation organization that is working to address this crisis with its conservation efforts.”

– Dr. Howell Johnson, Topeka, KS

“RTK is a highly trusted local organization. RTK's board, staff and supporters are the ‘Who's Who’ list of passionate people conserving the natural heritage of Kansas. Interaction with these people is a fantastic way to be tutored about conservation.”

– Rich Porter, Reading, KS



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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

OUR MISSION

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

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785-273-5115

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sunrise or sunset category winner
photo by Scott Bean



JOIN US FOR A SPECIAL

Happy Hour

NOVEMBER 19
3:45 - 4:45 PM
MANHATTAN, KS
HILTON GARDEN INN



Did you know?

1 acre = 1 football field

A regulation American football field is approximately 1.32 acres, including end zones.



- Sound Finances
- Ethical Conduct
- Responsible Governance
- Lasting Stewardship



honorable mention
photo by Chelsea Weber