



The Red Hills of Kansas are home to more than 500 native plant species. It is a focal area of the Southern High Plains Initiative. © Laura Rose Clawson/TNC

## Five States Working To Conserve Prairies

Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas & New Mexico Team Up For Grasslands

Those of us in Kansas know our prairies are so much more than just “flyover country.” This perception has led to grasslands being historically under-resourced for conservation, even though they are one of the most threatened landscapes around the world and provide critical habitat for a broad diversity of wildlife. At the intersection of five states—Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma—lies one of the largest opportunities for grassland conservation in the country: the Southern High Plains.

The Southern High Plains cover a staggering 71 million acres. Home to pronghorn, bighorn sheep, grassland birds and more, this area contains large, connected natural areas and watersheds. In addition to intact prairie grasslands, there are dramatic cliffs, canyons and

riparian corridors along rivers and streams with high conservation value.

“We’re standing on the edge of some of the most dramatic conservation opportunities I’ve seen in 22 years at TNC,” says Matt Moorhead, conservation business & partnership development advisor for TNC in Colorado.

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TNC is working with partners to conserve a network of lands and waters across state boundaries that will boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity and support sustainable agricultural communities.

“There’s a tendency to look at grasslands as a resource to be exploited and not one that needs to be protected,” says Chris Hise, associate director of conservation for TNC in Oklahoma. “We’ve seen pretty tremendous losses over the years and the time is now to circle the wagons and protect them at a scale that we haven’t done so far in the Great Plains.”

Landscapes, ecosystems and wildlife do not adhere to state boundaries. The Southern High Plains Initiative brings together TNC leaders and partners from across five states. While each state faces its own challenges and opportunities, there are common themes that play out across the landscape. For example, land protection in this area is closely connected with local economies and communities.

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Photos: Mule deer need room to roam across large, connected areas of land. © Wolfe Repass/TNC Photo Contest 2019; Cattle grazing is the predominant agricultural use of land within the Southern High Plains. © Jim Griggs  
Map: TNC scientists located focal areas for conservation within the Southern High Plains. © Carleisha Hanns/TNC

In Kansas, most of the state’s grasslands have been converted to some other use, mainly cropland.

“What we’re focused on here is the prairie that’s left,” explains Matt Bain, Western Kansas conservation manager for TNC. “That prairie fuels a multi-billion-dollar beef industry in Kansas and is critically important to ranching economies. You can’t go on conserving grasslands without partnership with ranchers.”

People who work on the land have strong connections to it, and they are vital to any successful conservation strategy. Partnerships are what will power this initiative to reach its ambitious goals. By working closely with local communities, land trusts, and

others who know and depend on the land, we can support projects already happening on the ground and link them together as part of a broader vision.

### You can’t go on conserving grasslands without partnership with ranchers.

**Matt Bain**, Western Kansas Conservation Manager

This opportunity to work together in the Southern High Plains comes at a key time in the history of land protection. The world is suffering massive ecosystem degradation, unprecedented wildlife decline and extinctions—all in the face of climate change. This has spurred a large movement for land protection.

Galen Guerrero-Murphy, land conservation program manager for TNC in Colorado sums it up: “There is palpable energy and momentum pointing toward a different future for grasslands, where we’re able to really affect conservation at the scales we need.”

## NATURE KANSAS

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TNC’s \$17.5-million *Generations* campaign for Kansas’ Land, Water and Air is nearing its goal thanks to generous donations from supporters like you.

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- Secured Terrace Lane Farm and begun preparing it to be a cutting-edge research and demonstration farm for sustainable agriculture.
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- Supported farmers in the Rattlesnake Creek watershed as they transition to more efficient water use.
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