

# SMOKY VALLEY RANCH

## HIKING TRAILS

### GENERAL INFORMATION

The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. When the Conservancy purchased Smoky Valley Ranch in 1999, it was the largest land acquisition for conservation in state history. This 17,290-acre prairie supports tremendous plant and wildlife diversity while continuing its long history as a working cattle and bison ranch. In western Kansas, about 80% of the native prairie has been converted to some other use. Demonstrating that healthy wildlife populations and successful ranching operations go hand-in-hand is critical to retaining the 20% of the prairie that's left.

Made up of expansive grasslands and chalk bluffs overlooking the Smoky Hill River, Smoky Valley Ranch is home to prairie-chickens, pronghorn, mule and white-tail deer, ferruginous hawks, burrowing owls, golden eagles and swift fox. On the majority of the ranch, the Conservancy is gradually improving plant community conditions, increasing habitat for wildlife and forage for cattle. Black-tailed prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets, one of North America's most endangered mammals, can be found in a small, interior portion of the ranch.

Smoky Valley Ranch also provides many examples of how human and natural histories are so deeply interwoven they are inseparable. The public is invited to experience this prairie, its history, its conservation and the scenic vistas through the use of hiking and horse trails on the western edge of the ranch.



### TRAIL USER GUIDELINES

Smoky Valley Ranch is a large working ranch, most of which is leased for cattle grazing to local ranchers, and is privately-owned by The Nature Conservancy. The Nature Conservancy is not in any way responsible for your safety while you are on the trail.

Thank you for abiding by the following trail user guidelines:

- Trail hours: daylight only. Plan your hike to be off trail by sunset.
- Stay on the trail. Please do not leave the trail corridor or take shortcuts.
- No bicycles or motorized vehicles.
- No firearms.
- No camping or campfires.
- No smoking or alcoholic beverages.
- Keep dogs leashed.
- Leave nothing but footprints. Please do not litter.
- **Take nothing but pictures. Collecting of anything from the ground is not allowed.**

There is no restroom or water provided. There are rattlesnakes in this area, so wear boots and watch where you walk, especially in the early morning and late evening. Note the two trees to the west of the trailhead—a good trailhead landmark that can be seen from any high point along the trail. Your cell phone coverage on the trails might be weak and spotty.

The trail surface is natural, meaning grass and dirt.

**Signage is still being developed with the use of temporary markers in some places.**

#### Short Loop (1.0 mile)

The short loop traverses a counterclockwise loop to the south of the trailhead. At about 1/2 mile in, the long and short routes divide, with the short loop returning to the trailhead. The short loop hike is relatively easy and takes about 20 minutes.

#### Long Loop (5.5 miles)

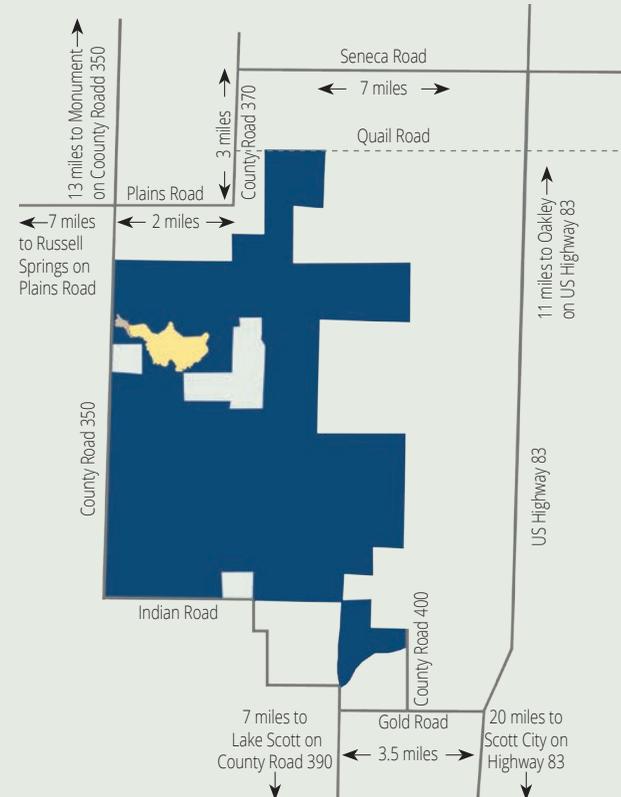
The long loop and short loop share the same counterclockwise route for approximately the first 1/2 mile then diverge. The two routes merge again at about 1/4 mile from the end. Milestone markers are at one mile intervals. The long loop lies mostly to the east and south of the trailhead.

### LOCATION

Smoky Valley Ranch is located in southern Logan County, Kansas. The hiking and horse trails are located on the west side of the ranch, along County Road 350, between Plains Road and Indian Road.

#### Coordinates of the trailhead:

Lat/Long	38.8875459	-101.018183
UTM	4306232.634	324958.723



### CONTACT

For more information about The Nature Conservancy or Smoky Valley Ranch, contact

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## HIKING TRAIL POINTS OF INTEREST

- Trailhead** This working bison and cattle ranch offers public access on 1 and 5.5-mile hiking and horseback trails. Visitors are asked to sign in at the kiosk.
- Niobrara Chalk** The chalk beds were deposited during the Cretaceous Period when the Western Interior Seaway divided North America into two land masses. Fossils of swimming and flying reptiles dating back 85 million years have been found on the ranch, though ancient clams and oysters are more common.
- Livestock** Much of the Kansas prairie has been converted but using grasslands to graze livestock has kept the remaining native prairie intact. Most of the ranch is managed to simultaneously improve range conditions for wildlife and maintain beef production.
- 12-Mile Creek** The freshwater springs along the creek, likely fed by a large playa (ephemeral wetland) several miles from the ranch, were a draw for Native Americans, explorers and early settlers.
- Ancient Buffalo Kill Site** In 1895, University of Kansas researchers discovered a human-made spear point inside an ancient bison skeleton at the bottom of the ravine. Dating back more than 10,000 years, this was the first evidence that humans inhabited North America as early as the Pleistocene epoch.
- Freshwater Spring** During a recent drought, all the water on the ranch dried up except a single, spring-fed pool near this area which maintained an impressive 8-foot depth.
- Pawnee Indians and General Custer's Camp** A Pawnee Indian village was established at the confluence of 12-Mile Creek and the Smoky Hill River. Just southeast over the hill, General George Custer and 100 troops of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry made a day camp in 1867 while on a 'forced march' down the Smoky Hill River.
- Butterfield's Overland Despatch Trail** From 1864 to 1869, the Smoky Hill Springs staging station of David Butterfield's Overland Despatch Trail, located in the valley to the south, served as a stop for shelter, supplies and fresh horses along the only direct route between Atchison and Denver.



### 9. Black-tailed Prairie Dogs

The black-tailed prairie dog is considered a keystone species in the shortgrass prairie ecosystem because its burrowing and grazing create habitat conditions that many species, like burrowing owls and black-footed ferrets, depend upon. The Conservancy manages for black-tailed prairie dogs in the core interior of the ranch and takes significant steps to ensure the colonies do not negatively impact nearby ranching operations.



**10. Ecological Diversity** Smoky Valley Ranch is extremely ecologically-diverse due to the convergence of short and mixed grass prairies as well as the soils and topography that result from the Smoky Hill River. Almost all the different soils found throughout Logan County grasslands are found on the ranch.

**11. Homesteader History** Smoky Valley Ranch was homesteaded by Noah Ziegler in the 1870s and was

one of the first two deeded ranches in what was then known as St. Johns County. Old livestock wells, along with ruins of rock houses from Exoduster settlements, are scattered throughout the area.

**12. Prairie Restoration in Progress** Erosion during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s resulted in the expansion of undesirable plants like yucca and purple three-awn which thrived in the resulting bare soil. Restoration and recovery of the native prairie is still a work-in-progress on the ranch, and they rely on a grazing system that includes moderate stocking rates, rotating cattle to 'rest' pastures and controlled fire.

**13. University Research** The ranch is a one-of-a-kind venue for research of the short and mixed-grass prairie ecosystem and several Kansas universities consider the ranch a critical part of their biological research programs.

**14. Greater and Lesser Prairie-Chickens** Here, the habitat range of Lesser prairie-chickens converges with that of Greater prairie-chickens, a small overlap

found nowhere else in the world. The ranch hosts five stable chicken leks where both species perform the unique 'booming' mating ritual. The ranch is within the only area known to have hybrid Lesser/Greater prairie-chickens.



**15. Long-term Ecological Monitoring** The prairie plant community is the fundamental building block upon which all prairie species and processes rest. Small fenced-off areas and over 200 plant composition transects can be found throughout the ranch as part of long-term monitoring that ensures the Conservancy is meeting its ecological goals.



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