

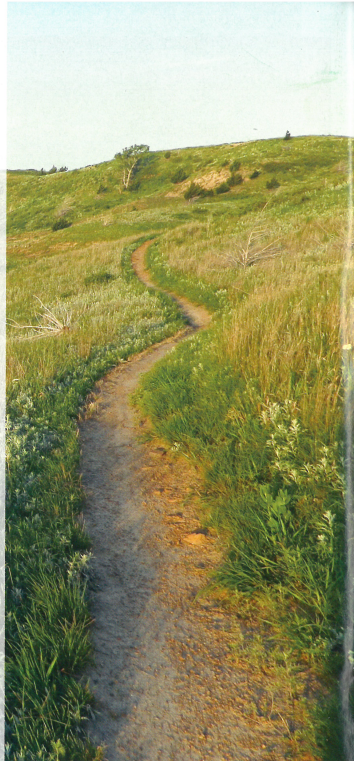
Words by Mary R. Gage

# HIKE KANSAS

As a new trail guide proves, there's never been a better time to explore the walking paths in the Sunflower State



Switchgrass Trail at Wilson Lake



Pack the water bottles and some salty snacks. Find your favorite hat and lace up your boots. Bug spray? Check. Sunscreen? Check. Walking sticks? Optional.

Get ready: It's time to roam the prairies, hills and wooded valleys of Kansas.

There's never been a better time to go hiking in the Sunflower State. Cities and counties are improving existing trails and developing new ones. Nature centers and arboretums are incorporating walking paths into their design. Trails in state parks meander through rocky ravines, along lakeshores and across rolling prairies. The Rails to Trails Conservancy has been active, overseeing the construction of several multi-use trails including the Prairie Spirit Trail, the Landon Nature Trail and the Flint Hills Nature Trail—a 117-mile route that stretches from Osawatimic in the east to Herington in the west.

The hiking trails are here, and what's more, a new book by the brother-and-sister team of Dr. Jonathan Conard and Kristin Conard, *Kansas Trail Guide* (University Press of Kansas, 2015), fills in the blanks and provides a wealth of indispensable information. With maps, GPS coordinates, trail descriptions, parking

"To me, the most important things about Kansas are the great people and places. I'm always inspired by the openness of the prairie, the sounds of wind in the cottonwood leaves, and watching the sunset across the plains."

— Jonathan Conard

and camping information, this guide is an essential companion for a day or a weekend spent exploring Kansas trails.

Every featured trail in the book has been hiked or biked, mapped, researched and photographed by the Conards, who grew up in Kansas. Kristin, a travel writer and teacher currently living in California, did most of her research in an intense summer session, hiking 5 to 7 miles several days a week. Jonathan, who teaches biology and ecology at Kansas' Sterling College, was able to cover his half of the trails at a less frantic pace.

"Between the two of us, we had this whole master list of what trails we'd like to hit," says Kristin. "We didn't do every possible option, but we mapped out about 80 to 90 of what we thought were the best options out there, and the most diverse."

For each of the trails, the Conards located camping areas, nearby restaurants and outfitters, water, restrooms and shady spots.

"We tried to give people all the information we would have wanted before we went on the trail," Jonathan says.

The book includes sections on rail-trails, family-friendly trails, historical trails, the best trails for wildlife and wildflower viewing, and the authors' overall top 10 trails in Kansas. **KSQ**



If a day hike only begins to whet your appetite for the great outdoors, it may be time to fill the backpack and spend a few days camping on the trail. Aside from breathing the fresh Kansas air and ramping up the exercise, backpacking may be the best way to catch an incredible wildlife moment, find hidden waterfalls or see a sublime sunrise over the lake.

Jonathan and Kristin Conard, authors of *Kansas Trail Guide*, provide some insight to those looking for good backpacking trails nestled among the prairies.

When asked about his favorite trails for backpacking in Kansas, Jonathan says, "There are some great opportunities for backpacking along the Elk River Trail and the George Latham Trail at Clinton Reservoir. These are both great trails with some nice backcountry sites."

Other options for Kansas backpackers include the 29-mile Perry Lake Trail near Topeka, the 15-mile trails system at Cross Timbers State Park in southeast Kansas, and the Tuttle Creek State Park trails near Manhattan. All of these offer campsites located near a variety of hiking trails.

"There's a lot of potential for increasing the number of trails that offer backcountry camping," says Jonathan. "There are many trails that would be great for backpacking if there were designated sites available."

Meanwhile, if you're yearning for the songs of crickets and the twinkle of soft starlight to lull you to sleep after a day of hiking, a nearby Kansas trail won't disappoint.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Jonathan Conard, Melissa Conard, University Press of Kansas



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# 5 OUT OF 10

For those who want to experience some of the best that outdoor Kansas has to offer, here are five of the top 10 trails from the new Kansas Trail Guide.

## SCOTT STATE PARK TRAIL

Canyons, bluffs and natural springs are the backdrop for the 7-mile trail encircling Lake Scott. Set in a scenic valley carved by Ladder Creek, the spring-fed lake has long been revered as an oasis in the western high plains of Kansas. The El Cuartelejo Indian pueblo ruins dating from the 1600s are nearby, and deer, beaver, fox and all manner of reptiles are common among the yucca and sage. Ranked as one of the top 50 state parks in the country by *National Geographic Traveler*, the park offers camping, fishing and boating, in addition to striking vistas.

## HORSETHIEF CANYON TRAIL-KANOPOLIS STATE PARK

Red sandstone bluffs and rocky outcrops punctuate the rolling hills surrounding Kanopolis Lake. The 5-mile red, sandy trail jogs along the lakeshore, over and around boulders, through narrow crevices and up to scenic overlooks. Notice the rock carvings, rest for a spell in an almost-hidden red rock grotto, or shelter from the sun or a sudden rain shower in a shallow cave above the trail. Set among the sublime Smoky Hills of Kansas' central prairie region, Kanopolis State Park made *The Active Times*' list of "36 Stunning U.S. State Parks."

## SCENIC OVERLOOK TRAIL-TALLGRASS PRAIRIE NATIONAL PRESERVE

See the buffalo roam in their natural habitat on a hike at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. Tucked away in the heart of the Flint Hills, this is one of the few remaining swaths of the original tallgrass prairie that once covered the high plains. The 3.2-mile (one way) Scenic Overlook Trail crosses Windmill Pasture, stomping grounds of the bison herd, and meanders through a sea of grass to a high point overlooking the undulating hills. Take the Prairie Fire Loop Trail to the Davis Trail for a circular route back to the Visitor's Center.

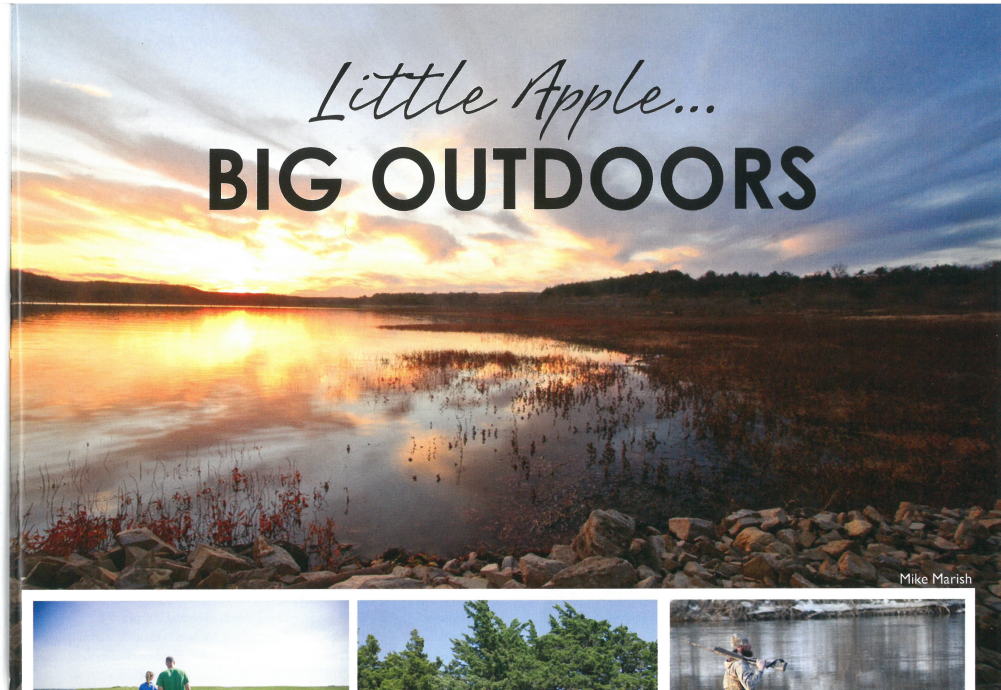
## ELK RIVER HIKING TRAIL-ELK CITY LAKE

Beginning at the west end of the dam and running along the northern shore of Elk City Lake, the rugged 15-mile Elk River Hiking Trail is a designated National Recreation Trail and has been called the best hike in Kansas by *Backpacker* magazine. Located in the eastern wooded hills region of southeast Kansas, the scenic hike offers striking vantage points overlooking the lake. Hikers clamber over rocky ridges and precarious creek crossings, through rock tunnels and chambers, and wooded glades punctuated by giant boulders and refreshing waterfalls. Camping is available close to the trail, as are several additional hiking trails in the nearby Elk City State Park.

## PRAIRIE SPIRIT TRAIL

The Prairie Spirit Trail is a 51-mile rails-to-trails path from Ottawa to Iola along the old LL&G (Lawrence, Leavenworth & Galveston) rail bed in eastern Kansas. The first completed rail-trail in Kansas, it connects to the Flint Hills Nature Trail at Ottawa, and extends south from Iola to Humboldt on the Southwind Rail Trail. Hikers can pick up detailed maps at the trailheads to select manageable segments to traverse. Restrooms, water and picnic areas are established every 5 to 8 miles, and careful planning can land the hungry hiker in a restaurant for lunch in downtown Garnett or Iola. **KSD**

PHOTOGRAPHS: Kristin Conrad



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