

# the new Territory

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A person stands in a field at night, holding up a glowing sign that says "LOVE". The sign is made of bright, glowing letters. The background is a dark night sky with stars and a faint glow from distant lights. The person is wearing a dark jacket and is standing in a field with some grass and a body of water in the background.

LOVE

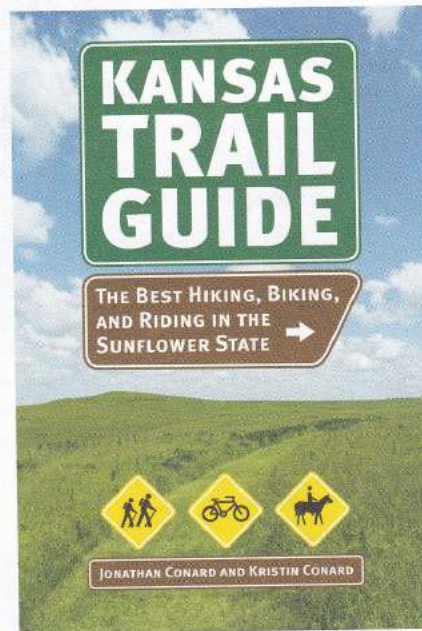
# Bridle On, My Wayward Son

Feeling disenfranchised? Get the *Kansas Trail Guide*.

As this country resettles itself around new leadership, some tired biases are resurfacing: urban vs. rural, coast vs. Midwest. As such, to own a Kansas trail guide is to rebel, to transgress the national notion of flyover country. Brother-sister pair Jonathan Conard and Kristin Conard don't posit their *Kansas Trail Guide* premise so explicitly, but its mere existence makes the case.

For the uninitiated, the book starts with a rundown of the state's 11 physiogeographic regions and top-10 lists for horseback riding, biking and hiking. Now, "to hike," by most definitions, is to rise in upward movement. But this is Kansas. Flatness is the rule. As such, many of the Conards' geological descriptions often seem hell-bent on pointing out the topographic exceptions. They highlight "roller-coaster dips and twists" for mountain bikers on the Lawrence River Trail. Elk City State Park's 15-mile Elk River Trail traverses rocky ravines, high bluffs and an ephemeral waterfall. The Hell Creek Loop of Wilson State Park's Switchgrass Mountain Bike Trail is described, charmingly, as following a "canyon rim."

But it's the vast plains that we're taught to associate with Kansas, and with that comes hope of transformative trails. The idea of a journey has long captured human imagination. Landscapes reflect the mind of the hero as he or she moves through not only space and time but also the topography of their own moral strength. Kansas answers that primal need: its promise of a big sky is a canvas for changing weather, the flat expands a speedway for high winds. As such, you, the dot on the trail map, will be vulnerable to whatever arises. Trees won't shade you. Mountains won't play guidepost. To hike, bike or ride in Kansas is to return to a more in-tune self.



Johnathan M. Conard

Kristin M. Conard

*Kansas Trail Guide: The Best Hiking, Biking, and Riding in the Sunflower State*

University Press of Kansas, 2015. 305 pages.

Getting on the ground opens a new experience, says Casey Cagle, who worked as a tour guide in North America and Australia before returning to his home of Southeast Kansas. He touts the Scenic Overlook Trail at The Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve as a must-see. "The mood of the prairie changes throughout the year," Cagle says. "Black and bare from the annual spring prairie fires to brilliant green grass afterwards, full of wildflowers. The trails



Authors Kristin and Jonathan Conard on the Southwind Rail Trail.  
COURTESY PHOTO

are open all night, so a full moon hike is also a memorable experience. For me this trail was what made me start loving Kansas.” To that end, each entry of *Kansas Trail Guide* advises on the best time of year to visit and the history of the landscape. For instance, across the stillest parts of Kansas, a hiker can see tracks from the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails. The entry for Lake Scott State Park narrates the Battle of Punished Woman’s Fork between the Northern Cheyenne and US Calvary.

The book is just one piece of a recent movement to breathe life into Midwest ecotourism. Cagle, for instance, started Prairie Earth Tours in Southeast Kansas — admittedly not a popular destination. However, “the same thing that makes [a tourism business] a challenge makes the experience better for people who do decide to make the trip,” he wrote in an email the day after running a craft beer tour around his home

in Emporia. “Anyone who has fought for a spot at the Grand Canyon’s Yavapai Point at sunset or squeezed onto a shuttle bus during peak season at Yosemite National Park knows the reality behind the travel brochures. Kansas is not set up to cater to tourism so you will not find roads lined with gift shops, tourist traps and hokey performances. What the traveler to Kansas will find is a highly personal genuine experience.”

Without billboards or gas station coupons, how’s a traveler to know where to go? *Kansas Trail Guide* is their only hope. “There wasn’t really any comprehensive information on trails that would help people understand and appreciate all that was out there,” writes Jonathan Conard from his office in Sterling College, where he teaches biology. The result of a life spent outdoors as a family and 18 months of field work, the Conard siblings’ guide is a technically perfect book for planning and executing

a trip. Organized by geographic region, the book helps hone in on the perfect trail in minutes. The layout is digestible, the pictures are great anchors for quick scanning, and the maps and directions offer helpful detail, including GPS coordinates to decimal degrees.

"I don't know of any native Kansans other than the authors of this book who have sought out every trail in Kansas," Cagle says. "I think the mere existence of the book will cause people to seek out trails to hike that they may otherwise never think to hike in Kansas."

As a handbook, *Kansas Trail Guide* makes trip-planning crystal clear. As a concept, it invites speculation. For example, take the book's section on long-distance rail trails: "What will eventually be the state's longest trail — the 117-mile Flint Hills Nature Trail — may someday (ideally) be linked with the [237-mile] Katy Trail in Missouri," the Conards write. The Katy is also slated to join with the new, 144-mile Rock Island Trail. Connecting these strips would increase cyclists' options and likely boost business along the trails. But none of these rail trails are permanent. As part of the National Trails System Act, the rail trails are banked for future transportation use, and given our president's promise to focus government spending on infrastructure, the trails could possibly come into service again. The future of recreation, likewise, rests uncomfortably in the hands of budgets, climate change and public perception of the value of wild places.

But hey. Don't you cry. There's a lot of land out there, and a lot of beauty to defend. Midwest pride starts with you getting out there, *Kansas Trail Guide* in your hand and prairie dirt underfoot. Carry on, enjoy the journey, and make sure to tell your mountain-roaming friends what they're missing. **TINA CASAGRAND, WITH STEPHANIE GRAHAM**

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## The New Midwest

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contradictions serve as a retort—proofs that the region hasn't locked into a set form, has never locked into a set form, pushes back, experiments, defies expectations."

As Athitakis himself notes, this is not a conversation to be ended, to be finalized and done with; he is writing in order to further a discussion. In so many words, he is saying, here are some things people get wrong about the Midwest and its fiction, and here are some books that better reflect the reality of the region.

While *The New Midwest* is not a comprehensive book, it is a manifold boon to any interested party's reading list. At its best, the book is an illustrative and auxiliary text to anyone seeking a better comprehension of the Midwest, its history, the ongoing cultural discourses surrounding it and, of course, the discourse surrounding the stories the region tells and the stories we tell about it. **NATHAN SINDELAR**



Mark Athitakis, author of *The New Midwest*  
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