Susan Addington & Liz Koch
Fred & Mary Koch Foundation
Bob Gress - Great Plains Nature Center

YUM:
SUMMER DRINKS

In Her Shoes:
patrick goebel
At the Great Plains Nature Center in the heart of Wichita, children jostle for position as they gaze wide-eyed at largemouth bass, bluegill and other water creatures in the center’s 2,200-gallon aquarium.

About 120 miles to the west, at Cheyenne Bottoms near Great Bend, bird enthusiasts of all ages pile into a van to tour the 41,000-acre wetlands habitat considered crucial to the survival of migrating waterfowl.

And at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Chase County, tourists from around the world hike along 41 miles of trails, mesmerized by waves of lush green grassland growing deep in the heart of the Flint Hills.

All three are sources of pride for Kansans who treasure the great outdoors. But they hold special significance for a Wichita family many know better for its vast industrial holdings than for its rich support of environmental stewardship. The Koch family, through the Fred and Mary Koch Foundation, has given more than $2.8 million to environmental projects in Kansas since it was founded in 1953.

Among the most visible and significant projects are the Koch Wetlands Exhibit at Cheyenne Bottoms, Koch Habitat Hall at the Great Plains Nature Center and the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

“The Koch family has a strong, longtime connection with the land, beginning with the purchase of Flint Hills ranchland in 1941,” says Susan Addington, community relations manager for the Fred and Mary Koch Foundation. “When you’re raised in Kansas and you’re raised around the land, it becomes a key piece of who you are. There’s a natural connection.”

Largely due to substantial contributions by the Fred and Mary Koch Foundation, Kansans and nature lovers from around the globe are better able to appreciate and understand the state’s wildlife, wetlands and grasslands. Anyone who hasn’t visited one of the three signature projects supported by the foundation is missing out not only on a recreational adventure but also on a chance to embrace a part of Kansas’ historical and environmental legacy.

Here’s a look at each destination with helpful information on what there is to see and do, the best time to visit, travel tips and websites.
GREAT PLAINS NATURE CENTER

You couldn’t blame a kid for wishing the Nature Center with its trails, ponds and fields of wildflowers was his own backyard. The two miles of paved walking trails sit within Chisholm Creek Park and give visitors a closeup view of 125 species of wildflowers, 18 species of trees and shrubs, 20 kinds of mammals, 160 species of birds, 21 types of reptiles and amphibians and 13 species of fish.

“One of the foundation’s first significant environmental projects was the Great Plains Nature Center,” says Liz Koch, president and a director of the Fred and Mary Koch Foundation. “After the center opened in 2000, I was so taken by it. It’s engaging and accessible by all ages, and child friendly. Great Plains Nature Center is a special oasis in the heart of the city.”

For those who watch wildlife, every day is different, says Bob Gress, the center’s director. “You can’t miss the turtles that come up under the boardwalk. They’re a hit with the kids. Many people see muskrat, wild turkeys, deer. Beaver are fairly active. And we have snakes — but no venomous ones!”

That’s what you’ll see in the outdoor portion of the Nature Center, which is open from dawn till dusk. Inside, Koch Habitat Hall gives visitors all sorts of hands-on ways to get acquainted with nature.

“There’s lots of buttons to push and sounds to hear, not to mention the native fish in the aquarium and the wildlife observatory,” Gress says.

One more big plus about Koch Habitat Hall: It’s air-conditioned, which summertime visitors will surely appreciate.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: Go right at sunrise or just before sunset for the best chance to see wild critters. Koch Habitat Hall and the indoor portion of the Nature Center are open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Admission is free.

ADDRESS, PHONE: 6232 E. 29th St. North, Wichita, 316-683-5499
WEBSITE: www.gpnc.org
FRED AND MARY KOCH FOUNDATION SUPPORT: A $300,000 grant in 1998 created Koch Habitat Hall. In 2007, a $50,000 grant was provided for upgrades to the exhibits and educational programming.

Great Plains Nature Center

A male goldfinch surveys his surroundings.

One of the many wildflowers in bloom near Great Plains Nature Center.

A mallard hen and her ducklings paddle by a bullfrog near Great Plains Nature Center.
GREAT PLAINS NATURE CENTER

You couldn’t blame a kid for wishing the Nature Center with its trails, ponds and fields of wildflowers was his own backyard. The two miles of paved walking trails sit within Chisholm Creek Park and give visitors a closeup view of 125 species of wildflowers, 38 species of trees and shrubs, 20 kinds of mammals, 160 species of birds, 21 types of reptiles and amphibians and 13 species of fish.

“One of the foundation’s first significant environmental projects was the Great Plains Nature Center,” says Liz Koch, president and a director of the Fred and Mary Koch Foundation. “After the center opened in 2000, I was so taken by it. It’s engaging and accessible by all ages, and child-friendly. Great Plains Nature Center is a special oasis in the heart of the city.”

For those who watch wildlife, every day is different, says Bob Gress, the center’s director. “You can’t miss the turtles that come up under the boardwalk. They’re a hit with the kids. Many people see muskrat, wild turkeys, deer. Beaver are fairly active. And we have snakes — but no venomous ones!”

That’s what you’ll see in the outdoor portion of the Nature Center, which is open from dawn till dusk. Inside, Koch Habitat Hall gives visitors all sorts of hands-on ways to get acquainted with nature.

“There’s lots of buttons to push and sounds to hear, not to mention the native fish in the aquarium and the wildlife observatory,” Gress says.

One more big plus about Koch Habitat Hall: It’s air-conditioned, which summertime visitors will surely appreciate.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: Go right at sunrise or just before sunset for the best chance to see wild critters. Koch Habitat Hall and the indoor portion of the Nature Center are open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Admission is free.


WEBSITE: www.gpnc.org

FRED AND MARY KOCH FOUNDATION SUPPORT: A $300,000 grant in 1998 created Koch Habitat Hall. In 2007, a $50,000 grant was provided for upgrades to the exhibits and educational programming.

A male goldfinch surveys his surroundings.

A mallard hen and her ducklings paddle by a bullfrog near Great Plains Nature Center.

One of the many wildflowers in bloom near Great Plains Nature Center.
cover story

amphibians. Wonders includes more than 500 species of amphibians, reptiles, an Eastern screech owl -- as well as a lot of mounted specimens."

The center is climate-controlled, he notes. But for those who want to explore the Bottoms, the center gives van tours around the 41,000-acre “land sink” near Great Bend in central Kansas. Take the 30-minute basic tour or opt for the more extensive 90-minute tour, in which your guide will identify birds and seek out different species, Wolf says.

It’s important to call or email to make reservations for bus tours and to sign up for the butterfly events.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: Mid April to mid May is an active time of year for birds flying north to their breeding grounds, while late July to November is the busiest period for migrating fowl headed south for the winter. Year-round, visitors who want to see the most variety of birds and wildlife should show up very early in the morning or in the final 90 minutes before dusk.

HOW TO GET THERE: From Wichita, take I-235 north to K-96 west. Just before Great Bend, take K-156 north about 2 miles. Watch for Cheyenne Bottoms signs.


FRED AND MARY KOCH FOUNDATION SUPPORT: In 2009, the foundation awarded a $500,000 grant to create the 2,000-square-foot Koch Wetlands Exhibit inside the Kansas Wetlands Education Center at Cheyenne Bottoms.

TALLGRASS PRAIRIE NATIONAL PRESERVE

From any number of vantage points along the preserve’s hiking trails, a visitor will see rolling acres of green grasslands under blue skies that connect in a horizon miles away. The effect is both humbling and grandly euphoric.

Bus tours leave each day at 11 a.m. and, when staff is available, tours also begin at 1 and 3 p.m. It’s best for visitors to make a reservation for bus tours. But anyone can enjoy on foot a self-guided tour of the historic 1883 ranch house, the limestone barn and the one-room schoolhouse nearby.

The 41 miles of hiking trails are open 24 hours a day. That subtle world of natural wonders includes more than 500 species of plants, 31 species of mammals, 150 kinds of birds and 39 species of reptiles and amphibians.

Visitors this year should note that considerable construction is under way to make the preserve even better, says Heather Brown, who heads educational programs. “Next year we’ll have nice, new restrooms instead of the port-a-johns which we use now,” she says with a laugh.

A visitor’s center will offer exhibits as well as a movie theater showing a documentary about the preserve, first opened in 1996. But the construction doesn’t get in the way of viewing the tallgrass, which once covered 140 million acres of the United States. Nearly all of it is gone now, and most of what remains survives at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: The beauty of summertime in the Flint Hills is hard to surpass, but fall has its own rewards, including cooler temperatures. Be advised that visits in 2011 could include a bit of inconvenience due to construction, which is scheduled for completion in 2012.

Admission is free.

HOW TO GET THERE: From Wichita, go northeast on I-35 to the Cassoday exit. Go north on K-177 for 25 miles to Strong City.

Go through the town and turn west on U.S. 50, traveling about 1 mile. Then go north on K-177 for 2 miles. The preserve is on the west side of the highway.


FRED AND MARY KOCH FOUNDATION SUPPORT: In 2006, the foundation contributed $1 million to The Nature Conservancy to help expand visitor education.

Wendy Wolf, the center’s manager. “We actually have about 30 species of animals on display inside -- amphibians, reptiles, an Eastern screech owl -- as well as a lot of mounted specimens.”

EXHIBITS: The Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and fund the production of a documentary film to be shown at the visitor’s center. In 2006, the foundation contributed $1 million to The Nature Conservancy to help expand visitor education.

BUT FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO EXPLORE THE BOTTOMS, THE CENTER GIVES VAN TOURS AROUND THE 41,000-ACRE “LAND SINK” NEAR GREAT BEND IN CENTRAL KANSAS. TAKE THE 30-MINUTE BASIC TOUR OR OPT FOR THE MORE EXTENSIVE 90-MINUTE TOUR, IN WHICH YOUR GUIDE WILL IDENTIFY BIRDS AND SEEK OUT DIFFERENT SPECIES, WOLF SAYS.

IT’S IMPORTANT TO CALL OR EMAIL TO MAKE RESERVATIONS FOR BUS TOURS AND TO SIGN UP FOR THE BUTTERFLY EVENTS.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: MID APRIL TO MID MAY IS AN ACTIVE TIME OF YEAR FOR BIRDS FLYING NORTH TO THEIR BREEDING GROUNDS, WHILE LATE JULY TO NOVEMBER IS THE BUSIEST PERIOD FOR MIGRATING FOWL HEADED SOUTH FOR THE WINTER. YEAR-ROUND, VISITORS WHO WANT TO SEE THE MOST VARIETY OF BIRDS AND WILDLIFE SHOULD SHOW UP VERY EARLY IN THE MORNING OR IN THE FINAL 90 MINUTES BEFORE DUSK.

HOW TO GET THERE: FROM WICHITA, TAKE I-235 NORTH TO K-96 WEST. JUST BEFORE GREAT BEND, TAKE K-156 NORTH ABOUT 2 MILES. WATCH FOR CHEYENNE BOTTOMS SIGNS.


FRED AND MARY KOCH FOUNDATION SUPPORT: IN 2009, THE FOUNDATION AWARDED A $500,000 GRANT TO CREATE THE 2,000-SQUARE-FOOT KOCH WETLANDS EXHIBIT INSIDE THE KANSAS WETLANDS EDUCATION CENTER AT CHEYENNE BOTTOMS.

BIRDS, BEAVERS AND -- BUTTERFLIES? MOST PEOPLE FAMILAR WITH CHEYENNE BOTTOMS AS THE MAIN ROUTE THROUGH THE GREAT PLAINS FOR MIGRATING WATERFOWL DON’T AUTOMATICALLY THINK OF BUTTERFLIES AS A REASON TO VISIT. BUT TWO POPULAR EVENTS THIS MONTH AND IN SEPTEMBER ARE ALL ABOUT THE WINGED WONDERS.

THOSE EVENTS -- A CERTIFIED BUTTERFLY COUNT ON JULY 16 AND A MONARCH TAGGING DAY ON SEPT. 24 -- ARE GOOD REASONS TO VISIT THE VAST WETLANDS NOT ONLY TO PARTICIPATE, BUT ALSO TO SET ASIDE TWO OR THREE HOURS TO APPRECIATE EVERYTHING ELSE CHEYENNE BOTTOMS OFFERS.

AMONG THEM: THE KOCH WETLANDS EXHIBIT IN THE KANSAS WETLANDS EDUCATION CENTER. “YOU DON’T HAVE TO WAIT AROUND TO SEE WILDLIFE OUT ON THE BOTTOMS,” SAYS CURTIS WOLF, THE CENTER’S MANAGER. “WE ACTUALLY HAVE ABOUT 30 SPECIES OF ANIMALS ON DISPLAY INSIDE -- AMPHIBIANS, REPTILES, AN EASTERN SCREECH OWL -- AS WELL AS A LOT OF MOUNTED SPECIMENS.”

THE CENTER IS CLIMATE-CONTROLLED, HE NOTES. BUT FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO EXPLORE THE BOTTOMS, THE CENTER GIVES VAN TOURS AROUND THE 41,000-ACRE “LAND SINK” NEAR GREAT BEND IN CENTRAL KANSAS. TAKE THE 30-MINUTE BASIC TOUR OR OPT FOR THE MORE EXTENSIVE 90-MINUTE TOUR, IN WHICH YOUR GUIDE WILL IDENTIFY BIRDS AND SEEK OUT DIFFERENT SPECIES, WOLF SAYS.

IT’S IMPORTANT TO CALL OR EMAIL TO MAKE RESERVATIONS FOR BUS TOURS AND TO SIGN UP FOR THE BUTTERFLY EVENTS.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: MID APRIL TO MID MAY IS AN ACTIVE TIME OF YEAR FOR BIRDS FLYING NORTH TO THEIR BREEDING GROUNDS, WHILE LATE JULY TO NOVEMBER IS THE BUSIEST PERIOD FOR MIGRATING FOWL HEADED SOUTH FOR THE WINTER. YEAR-ROUND, VISITORS WHO WANT TO SEE THE MOST VARIETY OF BIRDS AND WILDLIFE SHOULD SHOW UP VERY EARLY IN THE MORNING OR IN THE FINAL 90 MINUTES BEFORE DUSK.

HOW TO GET THERE: FROM WICHITA, TAKE I-235 NORTH TO K-96 WEST. JUST BEFORE GREAT BEND, TAKE K-156 NORTH ABOUT 2 MILES. WATCH FOR CHEYENNE BOTTOMS SIGNS.
CHEYENNE BOTTOMS

Birds, beesavers and—butterflies? Most people familiar with Cheyenne Bottoms as the main route through the Great Plains for migrating waterfowl don’t automatically think of butterflies as a reason to visit. But two popular events this month and in September are all about the winged wonders.

Those events—a certified butterfly count on July 16 and a monarch tagging day on Sept. 24—are good reasons to visit the vast wetlands not only to participate, but also to set aside two or three hours to appreciate everything else Cheyenne Bottoms offers.

Among them: the Koch Wetlands Exhibit in the Kansas Wetlands Education Center.

“You don’t have to wait around to see wildlife out on the Bottoms,” says Curtis Wolf, the center’s manager. “We actually have about 30 species of animals on display inside—amphibians, reptiles, an Eastern screech owl—as well as a lot of mounted specimens.”

The center is climate-controlled, he notes. But for those who want to explore the Bottoms, the center gives van tours around the 41,000-acre “land sink” near Great Bend in central Kansas. Take the 30-minute basic tour or opt for the more extensive 90-minute tour, in which your guide will identify birds and seek out different species, Wolf says.

It’s important to call or email to make reservations for bus tours and to sign up for the butterfly events.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: Mid April to mid May is an active time of year for birds flying north to their breeding grounds, while late July to November is the busiest period for migrating fowl headed south for the winter. Year-round, visitors who want to see the most variety of birds and wildlife should show up very early in the morning or in the final 90 minutes before dusk.

HOW TO GET THERE: From Wichita, take I-235 north to K-96 west. Just before Great Bend, take K-156 north about 2 miles. Watch for Cheyenne Bottoms signs.

PHONE, WEBSITE: (620) 793-3066, www.kdwr.state.ks.us/news/KDWP-Info/Locations/Wildlife-Areas/Region-3/-Cheyenne-Bottoms

FRED AND MARY KOCH FOUNDATION SUPPORT: In 2009, the foundation awarded a $500,000 grant to create the 2,000-square-foot Koch Wetlands Exhibit inside the Kansas Wetlands Education Center at Cheyenne Bottoms.

TALLGRASS PRAIRIE NATIONAL PRESERVE

From any number of vantage points along the preserve’s hiking trails, a visitor will see rolling acres of green grasslands under blue skies that connect in a horizon miles away. The effect is both humbling and grandly euphoric.

Bus tours each day at 11 a.m. and, when staff is available, tours also begin at 1 and 3 p.m. It’s best for visitors to make a reservation for bus tours. But anyone can enjoy on foot a self-guided tour of the historic 1883 ranch house, the limestone barn and the one-room schoolhouse nearby.

The 41 miles of hiking trails are open 24 hours a day. That subtle world of natural wonders includes more than 500 species of plants, 31 species of mammals, 150 kinds of birds and 39 species of reptiles and amphibians.

Visitors this year should note that considerable construction is under way to make the preserve even better, says Heather Brown, who heads educational programs. “Next year we’ll have nice, new restrooms instead of the port-a-johns which we use now,” she says with a laugh.

A visitor’s center will offer exhibits as well as a movie theater showing a documentary about the preserve, first opened in 1996. But the construction doesn’t get in the way of viewing the tallgrass, which once covered 140 million acres of the United States. Nearly all of it is gone now, and most of what remains survives at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: The beauty of summertime in the Flint Hills is hard to surpass, but fall has its own rewards, including cooler temperatures. Be advised that visits in 2011 could include a bit of inconvenience due to construction, which is scheduled for completion in 2012.

Admission is free.

HOW TO GET THERE: From Wichita, go northeast on I-35 to the Cassedy exit. Go north on K-177 for 25 miles to Strong City. Go through the town and turn west on U.S. 50, traveling about 1 mile. Then go north on K-177 for 2 miles. The preserve is on the west side of the highway.


SUNSET ON THE TALLGRASS PRAIRIE*

PLUMAS MIGRATE THROUGH CHEYENNE BOTTOMS EVERY FALL AND SPRING.

A REAR VIEW OF THE KANSAS WETLANDS EDUCATION CENTER NEAR CHEYENNE BOTTOMS.

EDUCATIONAL DISPLAYS WITHIN THE KOCH WETLANDS EXHIBIT AT THE KANSAS WETLANDS EDUCATION CENTER.
ABOUT THE FRED AND MARY KOCH FOUNDATION

Fred Chase Koch founded the oil and refining company that, after his death in 1967, was named Koch Industries in his honor. His wife, Mary Robinson Koch, an avid outdoorswoman who hunted and fished, had a lifelong interest in the arts and was herself an accomplished silversmith. Together, they created the Fred and Mary Koch Foundation in 1953, focusing its resources on Kansas programs that enhance the state’s quality of life in five areas: the arts, environmental stewardship, education, human services and help for at-risk youth.

Since its inception, the foundation has donated more than $29 million to those targeted areas, including more than $2.8 million to environmental projects. Signature projects include the Koch Wetlands Exhibit at Cheyenne Bottoms, the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and the Koch Habitat Hall at the Great Plains Nature Center in Wichita.

“We looked across Kansas and said, ‘What are some of the key areas that are unique, things we want to make sure are preserved in the future for families,’ “ says Susan Addington, the foundation’s community relations manager. “Obviously, the tallgrass and wetlands popped up as two of our treasures. They have national importance. And in a more urban area, the Great Plains Nature Center gives people a connection to the outdoors and the land in ways they might not otherwise have.”