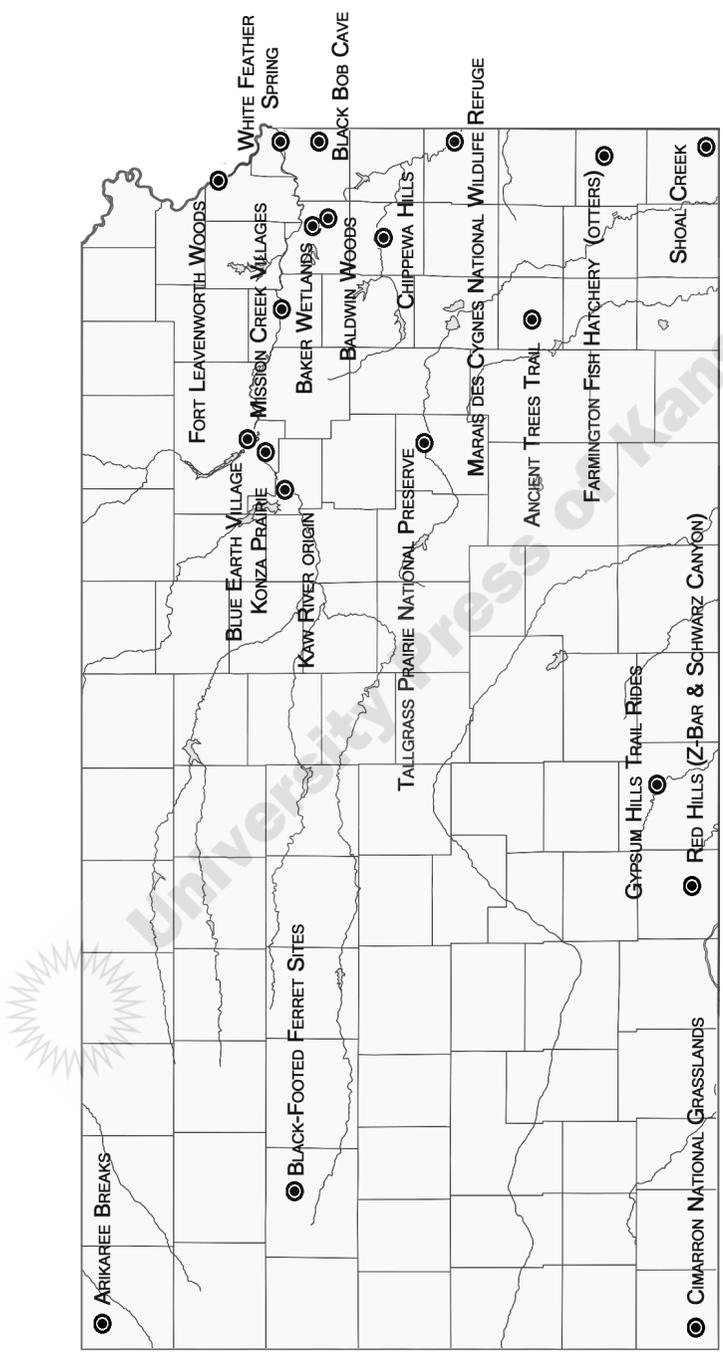


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Prologue

It was like something that fell from outer space. Rising up forty feet above an otherwise featureless prairie near modern Cawker City—better known today for its gigantic ball of twine—a mysterious artesian well called Waconda Spring bubbled up from deep underground. The sea-green water filled a perfectly circular pool fifty feet across set in a gray limestone mound on the north bank of the Solomon River. It looked like a volcanic crater. Generations of plains Indians trekked to the spring for ceremonies. In later years, curiosity seekers fished up beads, arrow points, French and Spanish medallions, and human bones. A deep-sea diver, hired in 1908 to ascertain its depth, failed to find the bottom (though geologists from the University of Kansas using sonar later pinpointed it at thirty-five meters).

In 1767, William Johnson, Britain's Superintendent of Indian Affairs who once paid the Iroquois a bounty on the scalps of French children, became the first European to see the spring. The explorer Zebulon Pike, following advice from Pawnees at Guide Rock village, detoured from his unsuccessful trip to climb the peak named for him and toured the spring in 1806. Following Kansas statehood, Cawker City Mineral Company extracted salt from the mineral basin. A bottling company distributed the medicinal water "Waconda Flier" nationally, winning a medal at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. In the first years of the twentieth century, a series of resort hotels and a sanatorium were built so patients could bathe in pure Waconda water and drink the briny solution as a "mild and gentle laxative but a sure laxative."

Wild landmarks infused with personal and cultural meaning like Waconda Spring have always been rare. Natural places you can fall in love with, places of passion, of pilgrimage—I have always just called them wild places. Undisturbed remnants of ancient ecosystems, habitats for rare or threatened species, pristine stretches of river, unusual geologic features, exclamations of topography—wild places aren't merely beautiful landscapes; they possess a totemic lure, a power or presence that attracts people, sometimes across generational and cultural chasms

spanning centuries. As modest as Waconda Spring or as continental as Antarctica, the power of a wild place doesn't derive from sheer scale or visual grandeur, nor does it translate necessarily into tourism dollars.

Today, the Waconda Spring site is located in Glen Elder State Park. Steeped in Native American, pioneer, and geological lore, the spring seems like the perfect focal point for a park celebrating natural Kansas. But don't look for it if you visit Glen Elder, not unless you plan to scuba dive. Despite a desperate battle in the 1950s and early 1960s, the Waconda Spring was buried under the waters of a reservoir in 1965, sacrificed to mitigate flooding a hundred miles downstream in the Kansas River valley. In keeping with the all-things-wild-and-beautiful-must-be-destroyed theme, the builders of Glen Elder dam bulldozed ruins from the sanatorium into the sacred spring just before the waters of Waconda Lake buried it forever.

Let's be honest. Kansas is not known for its wild places. The state seems to have an inferiority complex of landscape, always trying to be something it isn't. The most prominent natural feature on the state seal isn't a tallgrass prairie or a cottonwood forest, it's a *mountain range*. Since the last wild bison sought refuge on the back of a nickel, the public image of natural Kansas has progressed from great American desert, to dust bowl, to flyover country, to coffee table book of sunflower fields, fenced buffalo herds, and rainbows above winter wheat—a placeless farm-country landscape. Or so it would seem.

While attending graduate school at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, I once stood on the south side of US Highway 40 and watched the intentional destruction of a biologically diverse half section of virgin tallgrass locally referred to as the Elkins Prairie. The site provided habitat for two federally threatened plant species—Meade's milkweed and western prairie fringed orchid—but more than that it was just *cool*, a virgin prairie on the outskirts of Lawrence that I could ride my bike to. Pioneers on the California and Oregon Trails probably stopped there to take on water from a small seep spring feeding Baldwin Creek. Elkins Prairie was a wild place in every sense.

Seeing the tubes of fresh black earth churning out like sausage from the discs of the tractor lit a fire in my heart for the wild places of Kansas. It crystallized a feeling I'd had growing up in the suburbs west of Kansas City, that wild Kansas was a unique crossroads of ecosystems, the place where the last lip of eastern deciduous forest dissolves into a kingdom of grasses, where rivers of birdlife flow along timeworn flight channels in May, where memories of a great biomass equal to the Serengeti still echo across the vast emptiness of the western plains.

Unlike friends who took their passion for wild places to cities like Boulder, Laramie, and Anchorage, I dug my heels in and began exploring my own backyard. With few exceptions, the places I found, or rather, that revealed themselves to me once I expunged my prejudices about Kansas, are little known to most people who have spent their whole lives in the state.

They are places where relatively undisturbed prairie, forest, wetland, and river ecosystems cheat death and incubate the DNA of lost wild America; where extirpated mammalian species are making comebacks; where flying squirrels leap between centuries-old trees illuminated by the unearthly green glow of foxfire; where rings marking the sites of Kansa earth lodges rise up on the prairie in March; where cold springs feed watercress pools that once held the reflections of Indian traditionalists; where soapweed canyons home to great colonies of prairie dogs are ground zero in a war over the rights of private landowners to protect wildlife and hasten the return of the most endangered mammal in North America; where the ice moon paints the Smoky Hill with memories of the buffalo wolf and the lonesome rattle of false indigo; where a single visit can trigger dreams that leave you drenched in sweat from killing bull elk with stone-tipped arrows; where the blue lid of sky forms a vacuum seal over treeless pastel hills, orange in winter, where bluestem rises.

A few are impossible to find on maps, hidden behind barbed wire on private property. Most are magnificently bereft of anything beneficial to 99.9 percent of modern America. True wildernesses, they are not, but we are all sinners. At the correct angle of light, when the south wind blows pollen carrying biological memories of the glaciers, these places are a crack between the worlds, portals to the lost buffalo wilderness, the *Last Wild Places of Kansas*.



Land Ho!

What you are about to read is not a guide book, but the early working subtitle, “A Trespasser’s Guide,” helped inspire me during the nine years it took to write and edit *The Last Wild Places of Kansas*. Does this mean I encourage you or anybody else to trespass on private property? Hardly. If you don’t believe me, skip ahead to “The Renegade Streams of Eastern Kansas” (chapter 6). Some incredible public properties appear on our itinerary—the Cimarron National Grasslands, Kansas River, Fort Leavenworth Woods, Ancient Trees Trail, Marais Des Cygnes National

Wildlife Refuge, Haskell-Baker Wetlands, and more—the list is sturdy and substantive. But Kansas has the smallest percentage of public land in America—only 2 percent of total acreage—so it's inevitable that many wild places are under private stewardship. Probably more than any other recent work on the geography of wild Kansas, this book will take you behind the barbed wire and beyond the small collection of easily accessible, well-known spots that others have covered in great detail.

But before embarking, I'd like to say a little more about trespassing, which can be as much a complicity of heart as of hoof. To the extent that you can trespass on your own preconceived notions of wild places, private versus public land rights, the ethics of accessibility, forgotten Native American history, and the existential value of America's rapidly disappearing wilderness legacy, I will ask you to climb carefully but forcefully over metaphorical strands of barbed wire that impede a better understanding of wild places in a state like Kansas. Along the way I won't gloss over the difficult and confusing issues faced by anybody trying to create a wild lands ethos and personal connection to a place that is mostly off limits to the public. Toward those ends, I hope to be not only your guide, but also your shameless enabler.

But let me also state clearly and directly that trespassing—in the literal legal sense—is against the law in Kansas. Federal, state, and local antitrespassing statutes exist to protect landowners and provide for exclusivity of use. This includes wild lands owned by private organizations like the Nature Conservancy and the Kansas Land Trust, railroads, scouting and religious organizations, Indian reservations, corporate farms and ranches, and certain restricted tracts managed by the military and universities. Whether your intent is to hike, scout for morel mushrooms, get a close-up view of a bald eagle nest, dance with prairie chickens, shoot prairie chickens, hunt for artifacts, fossils, buried treasure, or to bury treasure—do so only *after* you acquire permission from the land's owner. It doesn't matter whether you see a "no trespassing" sign or not. When in doubt, get permission. Ninety-eight percent of Kansas is privately owned, so do the math. If you suspect that guns or large dogs might be involved, get it in writing.

The era of Google Maps and GPS-enabled smartphones has radically simplified the process of finding out who owns a parcel of land. Given an address or a set of GPS coordinates, your local county appraiser's office can help out and in some cases online Geographical Information Systems provide self-service via the Internet. You might not get an email address, but it's a place to start.

There are good ways and better ways to ask for permission to explore private property. When possible, I start by sending an email that explains who I am, why I

want to visit, and a range of dates and times that could work. Whether or not the first contact is by email, phone, or a knock on the door, I almost always meet the landowner or property manager in person before my visit. When meeting for the first time, it helps if you've done your research. If you mention that you've heard that the deep pools made by glacial boulders where Little Illinois Creek runs into Illinois Creek make a great place to fish for flatheads, you might transform a skeptical stare into a welcoming handshake. Smile early, smile often. If you have cute kids, bring them with you, if not, consider borrowing some. If you have ATVs or a pit bull with a penchant for irony and gallows humor, consider leaving them at home.

There are many sound reasons why landowners wouldn't want strangers tromping across their prairies, climbing around in their caves, or gallivanting through their bottomland forests during rifle deer season. Be ready to take no for an answer, but I've found that you won't often have to. I've made lifelong friendships with people I originally met while seeking permission to explore wild places. They've given me private tours; fed me breakfast, lunch, and dinner; and sent me home with gifts of homemade wine, wild honey, rutabagas, giant turnips, watercress, and funny mismatched eggs from chickens that look far too exotic, to my chicken-challenged eyes, to live in Kansas. Never underestimate the allure of wild places. They attract an exceptional group of stewards and caretakers. Without them, this book would be an obituary.

Lay of the Land

Chapter 1, "Blackbob and the Prophet," looks at two virtually forgotten wild places on private property in the densely populated suburbs of Kansas City, a reminder that wild places can persist *anywhere*. More remarkable are the stories of two Native American traditionalist leaders associated with these places and some reasons why their histories barely register as footnotes in the larger history of Kansas.

Next we move completely across the state to far southwestern Kansas, where in chapter 2, "La Jornada," we bask in the lonely emptiness of Cimarron National Grasslands and the stories of Jedidiah Smith, George Sibley, an unconventional family of modern-day prairie dog hunters, and a rare population of high plains black bears on the largest piece of public property in the state.

The quest to reach an ancient pecan grove where James Audubon and Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce both camped leads into the heart of Kansas "Old Growth,"

the subject of chapter 3. Post oaks born before George Washington, flying squirrels, the eerie glow of foxfire, warblers, and crow-sized pileated woodpeckers—the wild places of Kansas aren't just the domain of big grass.

Ten species of mammals that once roamed Kansas were officially extirpated in the state at some point since the 1800s. One by one, chapter 4, "The Alpha and the Omega," traces the details that led to their disappearances. Much of the chronicle comes from J. R. Meade, the audacious explorer and founder of Wichita and the Kansas Academy of Sciences. But extirpation is not the same as extinction, and the triumphant return of many of these species is the subject of the remainder of the chapter. Included is a trip to far western Kansas to see firsthand how the bizarre calculus of landowner rights led to an all-out war between the Logan County Commission and Larry Haverfield, a rancher determined to reintroduce the most endangered mammal in North America back into the wild on his property.

Efforts to reintroduce the northern river otter in Kansas and the first documented evidence of a wild otter in Douglas County since the 1800s are explored in chapter 5, "Ottering."

Chapter 6, "The Renegade Streams of Eastern Kansas," follows Cherokee County attorney Chris Meek's supreme court battle to determine whether Kansans have the right to float the streams of their state. The results of the case are nothing less than shocking. Woven into the narrative is the saga of Mokohoko, the traditionalist Sac and Fox leader who refused to surrender lands along the Marais Des Cygnes, saying it "would be like putting our heads in the mouth of the great Bear's to be eaten off."

Echoes of Native American history and spirituality are still palpable in the Kansas "Badlands," which includes the Red Hills and Arikaree Breaks. Chapter 7 looks into badlands geology, Rocky Mountain oysters, Carrie Nation, the Gant-Larson ranch in Medicine Lodge, Schwarz Canyon and cave bats, the largest bison herd in Kansas, and the story of the Cheyenne's Cherry Creek encampment.

Chapter 8, "Big Springs Go-Go," takes a deep look at the relationships between family farms, private property, and wild places from a Greenwood County farm on the Verdigris River that has been inhabited for centuries.

The book culminates with chapter 9, "Bardo on the Kaw," as flooding threatens an attempt to float the entire length of the Kansas River, the best known and most accessible wild place in Kansas, and to retrace the steps of rogue eccentric Étienne de Veniard Sieur de Bourgmont, who led a remarkable expedition deep into the homeland of the Kansa in 1724. The history of the river is inseparable from the

history of the Kansa people. An encroaching wave of tragedy and chaos followed them from their Grand Village des Canzes on the Missouri; to the Blue Earth Village near Manhattan; and finally to the last settlements of Fool Chief, American Chief, and Hard Chief on Mission Creek outside of Topeka.

Lastly . . .

This book is not an academic text aimed at a small audience of aficionados and grad students—it's my love letter to the unique landscapes and eccentric characters that have enriched my life and helped mold my unwavering belief in the sanctity of wild Kansas. More than anything, I hope it inspires *you* to get up and go! You don't have to own land or grow up on a farm to have a strong connection to wild places. Get outside and hoof it, comb the backcountry, push aside the garbage and delve deep, discover your own places. If there's a prairie mound, or a pawpaw patch, or a great blue heron rookery that you've always wanted to check out, get permission and explore it. Now is the time, while you're still a kid, while your kids are still kids, while your knees still have a few chunks of good cartilage, while your artificial hip still has a few good years left on it. No excuses, OK?

Just know that to build a deep connection to wild places in a state like Kansas, you might have to cultivate a specific frame of mind, spend more time alone than you're accustomed to, read books that you can't buy on Amazon, ask open-ended questions, purify yourself, maybe pray, invest in a dorky multi-color LED headlamp and some expensive binoculars, purge your mind of prejudices. Then maybe your spot will call you. At the very least you might meet some crazy characters and discover a side of Kansas—and of yourself—that you'll never find browsing coffee table books about the Sunflower State in gift shops along I-70.

George Frazier
Lawrence, Kansas
July 26, 2015



University Press of Kansas

Author's Note

This is a work of nonfiction, reported as events happened and without embellishment. In a few cases the names of private landowners have been changed to protect their identities, but otherwise their stories are extant. Any mistakes, omissions, or inaccuracies are completely the fault of the author.



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CHAPTER ONE

Black Bob and the Prophet

After three grueling days stuck on the most intractable software bug of my professional career, I felt like a man trying to roast a turkey with a birthday candle. This much was certain: I'd caused the problem and only I could fix it. But as our customer in California lost patience, I hunkered down with `valgrind`, `callgrind`, `lint`, electric fence, `purify`, `gdb`—an arsenal of debugging weapons that programmers reach for when they're desperate. Nothing helped. At night, I dreamed of shopping for my burial plot.

I'm fortunate though, my wife, Christina, knows me. To clear my mind and set the stage for code satori (and because early August in northeast Kansas had been a hot humid mess) she thought a change of venue might help, so at sunset we drove out to Bloomington—the state park—to feel the wind from the lake and watch a free presentation on Kansas caves.

Bloomington—the town—once was an abolitionist farming community. Most of its residents simply tried to scrape enough off the land to survive winter, but a few were eccentrics and dreamers, and two years after settlement the town found its way onto the radar of pro-slavery activists.

In 1856, Bleeding Kansas struck like a panic attack. A pro-slavery Indian agent murdered town militiaman Thomas Barber near Lawrence, which made him an instant martyr for the Free State cause and subject of a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier, a famous poet in an era when famous poets attracted nutty followings like alt-country bands do today. Following the Emancipation Proclamation, freed slaves poured north, and by the end of the 1870s Bloomington had one of the largest African American farming populations in the state. In Steele Grove—one of hundreds of Kansas walnut groves that used to have names—Bloomingtonians imbibed in spirited Baptist revivals and, sometimes, in spirits. The killer tornado of 1917 thrust hard to the right at the last second, sparing the tiny village almost certain annihilation.

But Bloomington's luck didn't last. When Clinton Reservoir was proposed, planners penciled the entire town into the flood control pool. In the 1960s the Army Corps of Engineers started buying farms, a few by force of eminent domain. Piece by piece the town was taken apart and bulldozed. Eventually Bloomington lay fallow for a decade, waiting for the Wakarusa River to back up against the massive earth-fill dam near Lawrence and deliver the extremities of the new lake to the heart of the old town.

Thus was born Bloomington—the state park—where the abolitionists and the named groves and the nineteenth-century martyrs who inspired rock star poets have been replaced by sunburned dads banging on jet ski motors, popup-trailer base camps where nobody drags themselves out of bed to fish before noon, and college kids playing Ultimate and grilling Hilary's Black Rice Burgers. We walked down to Bloomington Beach and found a half-buried bottle of Grape Malt Duck (an extinct species of near beer) that might have been dumped out of a wormhole connected to 1981. A green Chevrolet Celebrity drove by with a bumper sticker that read, "Everybody looks Republican when you're high."

When it comes to caves, I like being an outsider. I've never been caving, nor karsting, nor spelunking, and though I'd love to take an Icelandic cruise to Vatnajökull Glacier Cave if someone else paid for it, the Horton-Strahler Number is a complete mystery to me, I don't honk for hematite, and I'll never impress a woman with my knowledge of speleogenesis. But as the sun slipped beneath the horizon, I settled deeper into my chair and listened as a ranger from Clinton Lake showed slides and reminded me how little I knew about the caves of my home state.

To date, more than eight hundred caves have been discovered and explored in Kansas, and any cave hunter worth his stalactites has a decent chance of finding new ones by driving around the countryside looking for piles of junk—preferably massive ones—because piles of junk sometimes divulge sinkholes, and sinkholes sometimes divulge new caves. Sinkholes have insatiable appetites, so people feed them crushed grain silos, rusted Ford Fairlanes, storm rung windmills, bee boxes, Johnny Mathis record collections, bricks and stones from old foundations, bed-springs. Inevitably, though, the land does a little jiggle and the sinkhole returns, not much different from before. Beneath a sinkhole, bedrock is subject to slow erosion from acidic groundwaters and artesian springs. Patiently, this hydrochemical drill can bore pockets in bedrock—pockets called caves.

Kansas caves, often completely submerged by the spring that formed them, are not for the squeamish. A grown adult can rarely stand upright in all but the most

vaulted caverns. Expect bat guano, colonies of slime molds, blind spiders, hellgrammites, varieties of salamander known only from a single cave, even nesting broods of rattlesnakes.

The presentation continued with field notes scribbled on a hand-drawn map: “Enter balcony room after passing second stone terrace once you leave bathtub. Watch out for nose scraper 15 feet past last strawtite. Lots of stalactites. Punch through narrow two-foot throat hole near mud cairn. Don’t worry. Slime and muck, but plenty of good air.”

Christina nudged me, pointing out a pair of big brown bats—*Eptesicus fuscus*—dive-bombing katydids mesmerized by the lights of the projector. If either bat noticed the slides and felt a pang for some lost home, it didn’t let on. These prairie bats probably spent their days under the bridge over Rock Creek.

After the presentation ended and the crowd began to leave, a man walked up to the ranger and asked, “Have you ever been to Blackbob Cave?”

“The Blackbob Cave slide. I skipped it, didn’t I? Give me a sec,” the ranger answered, and brought up an old grainy image, probably a scanned forty-year-old Polaroid. Skinny oaks and walnuts lined a draw that panned up to a ridge in the back of the shot. Shingles weathered back to bare wood hung mutely on a few of the trees—zombie no-trespassing signs.

But that cave! Even through the digital distortion of the scanned slide it wasn’t merely dark, but black-hole black, a featureless oval in the vertical limestone seam below the forest, and it was enormous. A man with a cheesy grin knelt in the foreground of the photo (a mental image flashed in my mind of seventies singer Sammy Johns—“I’m gonna love you in my Chevy van and that’s alright with me”—from the cover of one of my dad’s records). A spring gushed from the cave like it might sweep him away.

The man asked the ranger if he knew where Blackbob Cave was or if it even still existed. “I’ve only been to caves back home in southeast Kansas, by the strip pits,” the ranger said, “but I think Blackbob Cave is around here somewhere. Closer to Kansas City in Johnson County. On private land.”

I’d never heard of any place like Blackbob Cave in eastern Kansas, much less in Johnson County. I suddenly felt anxious; a core belief that I’d internalized decades ago rose up and threatened to breach. I shook my head and looked out across the dark lake. The ranger had to be wrong.

I grew up in Johnson County. We lived on the outskirts of suburbia, where the city grew right up to the edge of the corn. It was safe, secure, and idyllic in so many ways. I played Little League baseball, ran cross country, watched game four of the 1980 World Series twenty-three rows back from home plate, and received a top-notch public school education that included classes in computer programming, which eventually became my career.

But I also bought a banged-up black Les Paul Custom guitar and taught myself to play, started bands, and got involved in the burgeoning Midwest punk rock scene. I discovered the literature of the road and books on environmental advocacy by Gary Snyder, Aldo Leopold, William Least-Heat Moon, Paul Gruchow, Annie Dillard, Rick Bass, and Edward Abbey. By the time adolescent rebellion became harder to ignore, Johnson County started to feel as straightlaced and banal as 1860s Bloomington was abolitionist and eccentric, especially when it came to my increasing fascination with wild places.

As Kansas Citians began migrating to the suburbs in the late 1960s, developers planted shopping centers and housing developments in cornfields that a few generations before had been buffalo pastures. Decades after the greater prairie chicken was thought to be extirpated in the county, birders located a relict population on the prairie outskirts of Johnson County Executive Airport. Prairie chickens engage in a wild mating dance each spring. Airport leaders, worried that a sex-crazed bird might bring down a jet, convinced the county to repeatedly mow the booming grounds (effectively “clear-cutting” their prairie). Nobody ever saw the prairie chickens again.

But the world felt different forty miles to the west in Lawrence, where I went to college. Like Bloomington, Lawrence was founded by abolitionists. The gorgeous Elkins Prairie flanked remnants of the California and Oregon Trails west of the city. The Wakarusa and Kansas Rivers cradled the lower reaches of Mount Oread, the limestone cuesta that the University of Kansas sat atop. It was in Lawrence—in Douglas County, not Johnson County—that my obsession with the wild places of Kansas was born. Provisioned with field guides to trees, shrubs, woody vines, prairie flowers, mushrooms, reptiles, amphibians, and birds, I set out to learn the country. I discovered spikes of turkey-clawed big bluestem poking up through the brome, mistook quail for prairie chickens and prairie chickens for pheasants, got completely covered in ticks—even in the corners of my eyes—followed red fox tracks in the snow, and once was sprayed by a skunk when I went looking, drunk, for the ruins of a nineteenth-century hermit’s camp. My friends and I screen

printed “Out of my Bog!” T-shirts to protest a road that threatened Baker Wetlands. I wrote a corny song about the ghost of a Bear Shaman.

Eventually most of those friends left Kansas for places like Boulder, Moab, Asheville, Seattle—places closer to *real* wilderness. I too was searching, but proportional to my friends’ wanderlust, I dug my heels into the rich “prairyerths” and stayed put. My pilgrimage was leading me nowhere, that is, to *here*. If I could find the lost wild essence of America in Kansas, I could find it anywhere.

In 1541, when Francisco Vasquez de Coronado became the first European to set foot in present-day Kansas, its eastern portions were dominated by the tall-grass prairie, an infinity of sky and wind stretching from the Wabash River west 750 miles to the Flint Hills. Sprinkled among the vast prairies, ancient stands of deciduous forest inhabited by black bears, cougars, red wolves, luminous fungi, and flying squirrels clung to north-facing flanks of limestone hills. Rivers like the Missouri, the Kaw, the Marais des Cygnes, the Neosho, the Verdigris and countless smaller streams were shrouded in cathedral groves of cottonwood, sycamore, and pecan. In western Kansas, clouds of bison by the tens of millions thundered across the Smoky Hill country, creating a robust economy for predators such as the grizzly bear, gray wolf, and man. The arid rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains stole taller grasses from the mix, giving rise to the shortgrass prairies of the Great Plains. In spring and fall, a great biomass of birds rested from their time-worn migrations at prairie potholes, playas, and expansive saline wetlands along the Arkansas River.

The story of the prairie and plains wilderness, of course, does not have a happy ending. As Kansas transformed itself into the breadbasket of the nation, more than 80 percent of the original tallgrass prairie was destroyed. Bears, cougars, wolves, black-footed ferrets, deer, river otter, elk, and most beaver and pronghorn antelope vanished from the state. The bison were systematically slaughtered in a holocaust of sport and gluttony. Wilderness retreated to the true West, to the public lands of the national parks, national forests, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

By the late twentieth century, Kansas had no national park, no true national forest, no lonely tracts of BLM land—in fact, little public land of any sort. At 2 percent of total acreage, Kansas ranked dead last among states in public land holdings. Most state parks, wildlife refuges, and public hunting areas were created adjacent to federal and state reservoirs. Selected for flood control, not to protect native ecosystems, sensitive species, or natural landmarks, many were just thorny brambles on the wayside of declining rural America.

It cannot be overstated that access—the lack of it—profoundly shaped the psychology of Kansas wild places. While it is true that Kansas had no pristine cathedral landscape enshrined by the National Park Service, the remaining wild places we *did* have were systemically forgotten, like a repressed memory, a wound. Lack of access came to mean nonexistence.

But I knew, or at least I wanted to believe, that this wasn't the whole story. Kansas still had the Flint Hills, the largest native tallgrass prairie left on the planet, and hundreds of relict prairies survived in the counties bordering Missouri. Kansas still had old-growth forests and wetlands frequented by whooping cranes, one of the most endangered birds in the world. Extirpated species were returning to the state. Kansas still had the vast emptiness of the western plains.

I believed that the truth about Kansas wild places was somewhere between the indifferent yawns of wilderness purists and the quaint clichés of coffee table books with pretty sunsets, little boys fishing in farm ponds, small kept herds of bison, and rainbows Photoshopped over winter wheat. I didn't want to feel like an outsider in my own state, so I made a pact with myself to seek out the last wild places of Kansas, to find the truth behind the barbed wire. When I saw that Polaroid image of Blackbob Cave nestled in its sleepy hollow, however, something snapped, exposing a prejudice that had festered inside me since I was a teenager. I was forced to consider the possibility that there might still be wild places in Johnson County.

Back home from Bloomington, I brewed jasmine tea, moved out to the back porch, lit citronella for the mosquito gods, and grabbed my laptop. The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single search (Book of Google: 6:14). How hard could it be to find a gigantic limestone cave in Johnson County, world headquarters of Garmin?

First I dug into the "Kansas Springs Inventory," an online report by the Kansas Geological Survey. A table of stream flow measurements buried in an appendix showed that even in late July the spring was a gusher. Blackbob Cave was in Johnson County—the report confirmed it—but the rest was smoke and mirrors.

I kept going, but "Blackbob" and "Cave" made useless search terms. Google thought I wanted to shop and proffered every conceivable megastore with a Blackbob Road address. I'm even privy to a teenager's perfectly preserved bulletin board post from the days before Facebook: "If my dad didn't cave and sell the Subaru I would drive myself. . . . Don't make it weird, just pick me up at the Ulta off of Blackbob."