



FROM LEFT: Sunset, eastern phoebe nesting, yellow-headed blackbird among cattails, American goldfinch

The weekend has something for everyone.

“The festival provides novices the chance to see birds they may not even have known existed ... and experienced birders can connect with each other and practice skills,” says Curtis Wolf, manager of the Kansas Wetlands Education Center. “Many birders leave with additions to their ‘life list,’ personal lists of the different species of birds that they’ve seen, often reflecting a lifetime of appreciating nature.”

Wings & Wetlands is about the earth as well as the birds in the sky. “The learning process and workshops foster understanding and appreciation not only of the diverse species that migrate through Kansas, but the impact of environmental change on habitats and the complexities of wetland management,” says Mike Rader, wildlife education coordinator with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks.

Because the festival is designed to promote interaction among participants, they share meals, take guided tours in small groups and attend interactive workshops where some entertaining rituals have developed. “There are bird-call contests at dinner Saturday night and, of course, bird-related prizes,” says Whelan. “It is, in many respects, a hoot.”

Wolf says, “It’s a social experience as much as a birding experience. People share their interests with others, making friendships in the process.”

Wings & Wetlands began as a collaboration of the Great Bend Convention and Visitors Bureau, under

the direction of Cris Collier, with Kansas Wildlife and Parks and the Nature Conservancy. The biennial event will occur from April 29 to May 1, 2011, and will be the seventh festival. (Miss this one and you’ll have to wait until 2013.)

For many nature enthusiasts, it made sense to call attention to a remarkable resource. “Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge have been designated as wetlands of international importance. Our festival participants leave having experienced some of the most phenomenal birding in the United States ... right here in the heart of Kansas,” says Collier.

Along the way, participants uncover affinities for particular species. “I found I really like cormorants,” says Whelan. “They look like loons but smaller, and they inflate their lungs with air, dive down to the bottom to feed, then deflate and pop up like rubber duckies. It makes me laugh to watch them.”

Cormorants do sound fun. And they could be your favorite, too. But remember the white pelicans—the swooping, awkwardly graceful, droopy-gulleted, too-big-to-fly birds? Did you know they feed in flocks when migrating, working as a team in shallow water to crowd the fish against a shoreline or surround schools of fish so they can gulp them down? Those pelicans are worth a look.

You’ll have to visit the wetlands to make a more informed choice. But you don’t have to leave Kansas.

Lawrence writer Susan Kraus has a special affinity for sandhill cranes and thinks migrations are magical.



Blue-winged teal pair



PHOTOGRAPHS: (CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT) RUTH ANN SCHWART, COURTESY OF THE KANSAS DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE TRAVEL & TOURISM DIVISION, SCHWART, SCHWART, SCHWART, GREAT BEND CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU, KANSAS DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE TRAVEL & TOURISM DIVISION

KANSAS WETLANDS EDUCATION CENTER

The Kansas Wetlands Education Center, opened in 2009, is a branch of the Sternberg Museum of Natural History. Located by Cheyenne Bottoms, 10 miles north of Great Bend, the center features interpretive exhibits and videos that track the history of the wetlands and the diverse species—animal and plant—that inhabit them. WETLANDSCENTER.COM



WETLANDS & WILDLIFE NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAY

This 77-mile byway covers wetlands and more: historic settings, museums, native limestone buildings, tunnels, bridges, Santa Fe Trail history, longhorn cattle, a winery ... all in a scenic drive. KANSASWETLANDSANDWILDLIFESCENICBYWAY.COM

