

A Grassroots Alliance

When it comes to attracting people to an area, western Oklahoma has what tourism experts say a region needs: abundant wildlife, breathtaking scenery and friendly people. But what it didn't have until 2002 was an organization devoted to showcasing those attributes to the world while helping local landowners preserve and enhance that natural beauty.

Enter the Oklahoma Wildlife and Prairie Heritage Alliance, a grassroots organization devoted to conserving the short and mixed-grass habitat and wildlife of western Oklahoma.

"It was basically a group of landowners coming together to talk about conservation," explains OWPHA Coordinator Trapper Heglin. "We realized we needed a combined voice."

Three years later the OWPHA has grown into an organization representing hundreds of landowners in 33 western Oklahoma counties. "We provide coordination and communication between landowners, agencies and people involved with wildlife and conservation," says Heglin. "We're sort of a liaison between all the various groups, so if a farmer wants to know about the programs available for, say, playa lakes, he comes to us and we point him in the right direction to whatever funding or programs might be available."

Heglin says the OWPHA is involved in a number of projects involving playas. "We're heavily involved in the education and information," says Heglin. "What playas are, why they're important, how they function. We try to highlight the fact there are important wetlands out here on the prairies, and that rather than just being a mud hole, they play an important role to us and wildlife."

But it's not just landowners the OWPHA is trying to educate. Outside tourists are an important part of the equation, too. It's a simple feedback loop: Good landowner conservation practices lead to good habitat. Good habitat leads to abundant wildlife. Abundant wildlife leads to tourism. Tourism brings dollars and incentive for continued conservation.

To that end, the OWPHA has been involved in the creation of the Great Plains Trail of Oklahoma, an ambitious ecotourism project consisting of a series of automobile routes designed to showcase the natural beauty of western



Sandhill cranes are one of the most unique playa visitors. Their high-pitched, trilly call can often be heard before the birds can be spotted high in the atmosphere by squinting eyes.

Oklahoma and the panhandle.

"We have a foldout map with all the routes across western Oklahoma and the panhandle," says Heglin.

"The back of the map gives information about specific sites on the loop and what you can expect to see, as well as food and lodging."

Playas are a key part of the trail. "We have one specific route called the playa lakes loop," says Heglin. "It ties in a lot of the key playa areas out there so people can come out and see a playa for themselves and view all the wildlife associated with them."

The Great Plains trail is loosely based on a similar trail system in Texas that has been wildly popular. Heglin predicts the Great Plains trail will enjoy similar success.

"We're working on getting the road signs put up now and we're starting the marketing aspect of it," says Heglin. "This has been a real grass-roots effort, and I think it's going to be a great way to showcase what we have out here."

For more information on the Oklahoma Wildlife and Prairie Heritage Alliance and the Great Plains Trail, contact Trapper Heglin at (580) 735-2322 or go online at www.owpha.org.

