

# Oklahoma's Important Bird Areas



Volume I, Issue IV  
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## *Announcing...*

### **OK's First State Important Bird Areas! The Selman Ranch, Harper County**

*and*

### **The Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge, Alfalfa County**

#### **The Selman Ranch, Harper County: A Sanctuary for the Lesser Prairie Chicken**

*Eric Beck, Oklahoma State IBA Coordinator*

The Selman Ranch was first settled in the late 1800's by J.O. Selman the great-grandfather of the current occupants Sue Selman and her two sons. The ranch has never left the family and has been placed in a trust for the protection of the property for future Selman generations. The ranch itself sits along the Cimarron River in eastern Harper County in northwestern Oklahoma just east of the town Selman (named for the family) and contains over 14,000 acres of land.

The ranch was settled for the purpose of grazing cattle on the abundant grassland in the area. Cattle have grazed there since the first days of settlement, but it has been the practice of the family to never over graze and that tradition continues and can be observed when compared to other ranch properties in the region. Large swaths of mixed grass prairie containing little bluestem, buffalo



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*Photo by Eric Beck*

#### **About the IBA Program**

The [National Audubon Society](#) in partnership with [BirdLife International](#) began this program in 2000 to recognize and conserve those sites that provide critical habitat for bird species of concern all over the world.

This effort, known as the Important Bird Areas Program, or IBA, recognizes that habitat loss and fragmentation are the most serious threats facing populations of birds across America and around the world. By working through partnerships, principally the [North American Bird Conservation Initiative](#), to identify those places that are critical to birds during some part of their life cycle (breeding, wintering, feeding, migrating) we hope to minimize the effects that habitat loss and degradation have on bird populations.

Unless we can slow the rapid destruction and degradation of habitat, populations of many birds may decline to dangerously low levels.

The IBA program is a global effort to identify areas that are most important for maintaining bird populations, and focus conservation efforts at protecting these sites.

In the U.S. the IBA program has become a key component of many bird conservation efforts, for example: [Partners in Flight](#), [North American Waterbird Conservation Plan](#), and the [U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan](#).

## The Selman Ranch *cont'd*

grass and other natives are abundant. Sandsage brush is also abundant, which is why Lesser Prairie Chickens can be found booming here in the early spring. With the increasingly encroaching wind farms in the region as well as other sources of habitat fragmentation it is necessary to identify large swaths of native prairie that will support the LPCH, the Selman Ranch is exactly this. Fence marking conducted by the Sutton Avian Research Center was performed in order to protect the prairie chickens from fence collisions, which was shown to be a significant contributor to mortality. With the Selman's continued cooperation this land will serve as foothold for the eastern limits of this critically threatened species these grasses also provide ample habitat and cover for a large population of Northern Bobwhites, a species in decline across much of its range, which speaks for the quality of the habitat.

Not only does the ranch contain large tracts of native grasses, but it is also divided by a number of spring fed streams and creeks. Sleeping Bear, Buffalo, and Sand Creeks all intersect the ranch land. Along these streams are large stands of old cottonwoods that harbor Warbling Vireos, three species of orioles, numerous sparrows, Eastern Screech-Owls and various other species throughout the year. These streams meander through the ranch and eventually flow into the Cimarron River. Other habitats on the ranch include beaver ponds and cattail marshes, as well as small mesquite stands that attract species such as Ladder-backed Woodpecker and Ash-throated Flycatchers at their north-eastern distributional limits.

The Cimarron River and its floodplain add another significant habitat type to this lands repertoire. There is a large salt flat that encompasses approximately a mile and a half of river bottom. These flats are consistently home to large breeding populations of the federally endangered Interior Least Tern and an Oklahoma Category II species the Snowy Plover. During the spring and fall migration, shorebirds are also abundant with sightings of Dunlin, Western Sandpipers, and Baird's Sandpipers. Research is being conducted on nearly the entire ranch. The Selman's continually provide support to researchers so there property is well surveyed. Most species of concern (LPCH, LETE) are being monitored and a substantial amount of habitat work is continually being performed.

## What is an Important Bird Area?

IBAs are sites that provide essential habitat (breeding, wintering, and/or migrating) for one or more species of birds. IBAs may be a few acres or thousands of acres, but usually they are discrete sites that stand out from the surrounding landscape. IBAs may include public or private lands, or both, and they may be protected or unprotected.

To qualify as an IBA, sites must satisfy at least one of the following criteria. The site must support:

- Species of conservation concern (e.g. threatened and endangered)
- Restricted-ranges species (those vulnerable because they are not widely distributed)
- Species that are vulnerable because their populations are concentrated in one general habitat type or biome
- Species, or groups of similar species (such as waterfowl or shorebirds), that are vulnerable because they occur at high densities due to their congregatory behavior

Identification of a site as an IBA indicates it's unique importance for birds. Nonetheless, some IBAs are of greater significance than others. A site may be important at the global, continental, or state level. The IBA identification process provides a data-driven means for cataloging the most important sites for birds throughout the country and the world.



Photo by Jeff Rich

## OK IBA Technical Committee

Fortunately Oklahoma's IBA project is in good hands, its Technical Committee is composed of a who's who in Oklahoma Ornithology.

Dr. Mia Revels– Northeastern OK State University

Berlin Heck– Past Director of the Little River NWR

Dr. Michael Patten– Univ. of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Biological Survey and Research Director of the Sutton Avian Research Center (GMSARC)

Dan Reinking– Senior Biologist at GMSARC

Jay Pruett– The Nature Conservancy, Director of Conservation

Chris Wilson– The Nature Conservancy, Nickel Preserve

Dr. Michael Husak– Cameron University

Dr. Doug Wood– Southeastern OK State

Dr. Donald Winslow– St. Gregory's University

Jona Tucker– The Nature Conservancy, Pontotoc Ridge Preserve

Steve Hodge– Biologist, Wichita Mtns. NWR

Mark Howery– Biologist, OK Department of Wildlife Conservation

Martin Brown– IBA Steering Committee Chair

John Kennington– Oklahoma Audubon Council Chair

Eric Beck– Oklahoma IBA Coordinator

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**If you would like to support the Oklahoma Important Bird Areas Program please visit the Oklahoma Audubon Council Website at**

**[www.okaudubon.org/support.htm](http://www.okaudubon.org/support.htm)**

**Coming next issue:  
Salt Plains NWR Profile**

## Coordinator's Statement

This is an exciting time for the Oklahoma IBA program. The volunteer work and dedication of the Technical Committee, members of the Audubon council, and the patient staff at the national office has and is paying off. I am overwhelmingly happy to announce that Oklahoma can finally say that we officially have a state recognized IBA! Yes, it's been a year and over that year many good things have happened. We have an outstanding, dedicated, and enthusiastic team of top notch ornithologists working as our Technical Committee. Our Chairman ( John Kennington), and our Steering Committee Chairman (Martin Brown) have kept their sights on the goal and have seen the program move from a dream that they themselves imagined, to a working program that is sure to pave the way for many great things. The Audubon Council has seen fit to keep supporting the program with the only amount of funding we have procured, making sure that this machine that is in motion continues on its path. Most importantly we continue to raise awareness and solicit interest from a concerned and caring public, thank you!

These are really just our baby steps, but they should be celebrated. However, there is still much to be done. In fact so much so, that there really is no end in sight. This is not a bad thing; it only means that great things are to come for the Oklahoma IBA program. Opportunities to raise public awareness, chances to identify and help to preserve Oklahoma's native heritage, and a lot of good natured fun are ahead! Please, as you read this think of what you can do to help this program continue on its path to success, be it through an in-kind contribution, help in one of our volunteer opportunities, or simply sharing in our successes, every little bit counts. Pass the word. The Oklahoma Important Bird Area Program is on the move, and it doesn't appear to be slowing!

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## OKLAHOMA IBA STEERING COMMITTEE

*Martin Brown, Chair – OK IBA Steering Committee*

The Oklahoma Important Bird Area program has made some great progress since the Steering Committee was formed a year and a half ago. 2008 has brought the announcement of the state's first Global IBA sites.

**The OK IBA program is seeking a few concerned volunteers to serve on the OK IBA Steering Committee.** Many of the original members of the Steering Committee that helped get this program off the ground are now serving as members of the Technical Committee. Unlike the Technical Committee, members of the Steering Committee do not need a scientific training or degrees, although it doesn't hurt. Following are some details about the Steering Committee.

### **Purpose**

- To ensure the cooperation and greatest degree of participation among all groups (e.g., state and federal agencies, conservation organizations) in the IBA process.
- Provide assistance and advice to the State Coordinator.

### **Functions**

- Review the goals, policies, procedures, and outcomes of the state IBA Program and make recommendations on how these can be improved.
- Assist in seeking funding for the state IBA program.
- Review the state list of IBAs in order to help determine which areas should be a priority for conservation planning and actions.
- Assist in determining the most appropriate course of action to ensure conservation of selected IBAs.
- Identify the agencies and groups that should be involved in conservation planning for a particular IBA and facilitate their participation.
- Advocate for the conservation of IBAs in the state, both as a group by issuing recommendations, and separately by promoting the IBA Program to their memberships.

### **Composition**

Open to representatives of all interested groups -- state and federal agencies, conservation organizations, land trusts and conservancies, planning commissions, private organizations, etc.

### **Requirements**

We will have a couple of meetings a year but will try to handle most of our business via email and phone. Commitment to spend sufficient time for conducting a review of IBAs, conservation plans, program policies, etc. (exact time is difficult to estimate, but could involve approx. three hours per month).

If you are interested and concerned about habitat in our state and feel you have something to offer, please contact me at 918-446-8667 or martin1420@sbcglobal.net

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