



DIVISION OF AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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Woodward ranch designated Important Bird Area

WOODWARD, Okla.— Oklahoma’s Audubon Council has selected the Selman Ranch near Buffalo, as the state’s first Important Bird Area. The designation indicates an area with unusual importance for birds.



Sue Selman, a fourth-generation rancher, held a weekend birding festival, “Boots, Buckets and Chickens,” on her ranch April 4-6, to allow Audubon members and other birders a special opportunity to appreciate birding at the Selman Ranch. Habitat there supports a long list of bird species including the Least tern, an endangered species—as well as the Lesser Prairie-chicken, a species of concern presently under consideration for listing as threatened or endangered.

Dwayne Elmore, assistant professor in the natural resource ecology and management department, and a wildlife biologist at Oklahoma State University, lauds the efforts Selman is making on her property.

“Sue Selman is somewhat unique in that she has taken the idea of conservation to the next level,” Elmore said.

The weekend event featured early dawn viewing of a Lesser Prairie-chicken “lek” or breeding ground, through the use of blinds Selman provided. For a

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number of state birders and several international birders at the ranch for the weekend, the viewing was a first.

Birders were also given buckets of fence-marking material they used to mark fences where LPC have been known to strike fences. The marking effort comes from research that shows mortality rates decrease for the LPC in areas where fences are tagged with short pieces of vinyl siding.

Groups were also guided to the Salt Springs shoreline area of the Cimarron River on the Selman Ranch where they observed Snowy plovers. Least terns have not yet arrived to the ranch from their South American winter home.

Selman has grazing leases, raises meat lambs and operates a hunting business on the 14,000-acre ranch. Geographically, the ranch is situated where East meets West, providing nesting and habitat for a wide range of both Eastern and Western bird species and wildlife.

Selman said she has realized for years how important the land is for wildlife. And she has had hunters from all over the world reinforce her views of the rugged prairie landscape where the Rio Grande turkey, Whitetail and Mule deer, bobcats, badgers and a multitude of other wildlife reside in the mixed-grass and creek bottoms along the Buffalo Creek and the salt flats of the Cimarron River.

"Hunters have a huge conservation impact really," Selman said. In many ways she credits hunters for helping her understand the importance of conservation. She believes an IBA designation adds meaning to conservation efforts in all of Northwest Oklahoma.

"I hope that it will open the eyes of other local people about the value of their land," Selman said. "To see the land through someone else's eyes," Selman said, "that is what I wish I could share with my neighbors."

The Selman Ranch protects a population of Lesser Prairie-chickens, Least terns and Snowy plovers and a host of grassland birds. Winter on the ranch sees waterfowl, shorebirds, swans, owls and other migrating species, as well as an occasional Golden or Bald eagle.

Elmore said the Selman Ranch is almost entirely intact as a native plant community and is in excellent condition with proper stocking rates. He said the ranch also has expansive salt flats that are a stopover for shorebirds, and least tern nest there. Little bluestem, big bluestem, Indiangrass, many forbs, sand plum and sand sage, all vital to wildlife, are also in abundance on the prairie land there because of Selman's conservation efforts, Elmore said.

"We need more people like that," Elmore said. "Ranchers in general want to do the right thing with their land. They want to be good stewards. But they are not trained in ecology, so it is our job to help them make appropriate decisions," Elmore said.

He said ranchers like Selman can also help Extension specialists who are not able to be out on the land every day by spreading the word about Extension-based efforts that are working for her on her ranch. Elmore said other ranchers do watch to see what is effective on a neighbor's place.

Several OSU NREM research projects involving sand plums are being conducted for the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at the Selman Ranch.

Oklahoma's Audubon Council, in partnership with BirdLife International, made the Selman Ranch IBA declaration as part of their global effort to identify a network of sites that provide critical habitat for birds. The IBA Program recognizes that habitat loss and fragmentation are the most serious threats facing populations of birds across America and around the world.

Through joint efforts of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, Audubon and BirdLife International, as well as other partners, sites are identified as places that are critical to birds during some part of their life cycle—breeding, wintering, feeding, migrating—in hopes of minimizing effects of rapid habitat loss through destruction and degradation, in order to slow the precipitous decline of bird populations. The Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge near Jett, Okla., has also recently been designated as an IBA in the state.

An IBA site must support: a species of conservation concern including threatened and endangered species; restricted-range species that are 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.

While four criteria are listed for qualification as an IBA, meeting any one of the criteria will serve as consideration for qualification.

The Selman Ranch Web site, <http://www.selmanranch.com>, includes ranch history as well as information about hunting, wildlife viewing, birding and photography opportunities offered on this special Southern Great Plains ranch.

Cutline information:

A Snowy plover, a small shorebird in decline largely from changes in wetland habitat, feeding on the Selman Ranch Salt Springs area of the Cimarron River in April, during the Oklahoma Audubon “Boots, Buckets and Chicken” event. (Photo by Sue Selman)

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