



## A Dickcissel's Life on the Prairie

Story and Photos By Dr. Bridget Sousa, graduate student, University of Kentucky at Lexington

If you've been out much on the prairie, you've probably seen a Dickcissel and heard its "dick-dick-cissel" song. I have been studying Dickcissels' behavior and natural history on Konza for three years.

Each year I trap males on their territories and use unique combinations of colored leg bands to tell individuals apart. While they are not known for strong site fidelity, a few males have returned to the same territory every year of my study. So if you're in R20A or 2A, you can probably find a male Dickcissel with colored leg bands

While each year has brought new discoveries and challenges, this year has by far been the most exciting! First, we had a hailstorm. Then another hailstorm. And a tornado. We residents of the stone ranch house became intimately familiar with the inside of the janitor's closet. Fortunately, these storms occurred before most Dickcissels had begun nesting. All five nests that were active then failed. Four were destroyed by hail and the fifth was abandoned by the female. Nevertheless, the birds quickly started re-nesting. Of 163 nests monitored so far this year, 44 have fledged young (27%). This is slightly lower than last year's success rate (31%), but still higher than the fledging rate in 2006 (21%).

The major focus of my work is on sexual selection. Dickcissel males may be monogamous or polygynous. Most males on Konza are either unmated or monogamous. However, a single male may attract up to five females at once, and in productive years bigamy is not uncommon. Male Dickcissels have bright yellow breasts and black bibs, and devote a significant portion of their day to singing from conspicuous perches like fence posts, and weather stations. So one might suspect that these ornaments would be important to females and thus predict how many females a male attracts or how many nests are built in his territory. Not so, at least to date. The brightness of their yellow plumage, size of their bibs, and the rate of their songs don't appear to be important in determining either of these factors.

So why are males so bright and why do they sing so much? The answer may lie in the fact that Dickcissels are not models of fidelity. Paternity analysis of nests of ten males from 2007 (28 nests and 59 chicks) showed that 17 chicks (29%) from nine nests (32%) were not fathered by the territorial male. Males with more black on their chests and slower song rates were less likely to have extra-pair young in their nests. I am still analyzing plumage brightness and song quality (frequency range, trill rate, etc.), which may play a role in determining whether males lose paternity. These analyses may help resolve why faster singers are less successful; for instance, faster singers might produce lower quality songs or spend less time guarding their

mates from other males. While my results seem to raise more questions than they answer, that's half the fun of research! I plan to return once more next summer to finish my study of these fascinating birds. **TGG**



Male Dickcissel



## Konza Quest

Join KONZA QUEST, every Friday, 3:30pm-5:00pm. Meet Valerie and Annie at the Education Center by 3:30pm. You may call or just show up! We will trek to somewhere on Konza Prairie and explore interesting habitats. Sometimes we walk, sometimes we drive, but it's always an adventure. Bring binoculars, a camera, a journal, if you wish.

Initiated in January 2008 for Docents, KONZA QUEST is a chance to explore parts of Konza Prairie you may not have been to before, have fun and camaraderie with fellow docents, and learn more natural history of the site from each other. **TGG**



**Anne Humburg, Annie Baker, Clyde Ferguson, Karen Hummel on N4A, May 23, 2008.**



**Extensive remodeling work was done on the barn this summer.**



**Major improvements include a conference center with new bathrooms.**

## The Docent Committee

The primary purpose of the docent committee is to act as a liaison between the KEEP program and the docents. The committee also gives to the Environmental Educator their ideas and suggestions for topics for the in-service training programs and many of the other activities in which the docents participate.

All docents are encouraged to make suggestions and comments, or voice their concerns regarding the docent program by contacting any of the committee members. Members of the committee for 2008 are: Clyde Ferguson, Nancy Calhoun, Earl Allen, Susie Johnson, Bob Davis, Miles McKee, Gordon Cunningham, and Chod Hedinger (Committee Chairperson). **TGG**

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## SPOTLIGHT! on Ann Murphy

By Annie Baker

Ann Murphy grew up in the Flint Hills and chose a career in Education. Naturally she was drawn to Konza Prairie's Docent Program and graduated in 2005. Each year since graduating, Ann has guided more than 10 groups and was awarded Docent of the Year in 2007. Ann also serves as Friends of Konza Prairie Programs and Hospitality Committee Chair.

Ann's interest in the Flint Hills tallgrass prairie began as a child, growing up on the family farm near Paxico, Kansas. Working and playing in the hills and creeks, Ann and her five brothers and sisters developed a strong sense of place. Ann's brothers especially are advocates for preserving the Flint Hills. One is a fifth generation farmer on the home place, while another helped revive the City of Paxico by bringing businesses back to town.

From a graduating class of 10 at Paxico High School to Kansas State University, Ann received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Elementary and Adult Education. Beginning her career, Ann taught first and second grades for five years at local schools, and retired as an Education Counselor for the Army Education Center.

Ann met Pat Murphy while riding her horse in the Flint Hills, encountering the Murphy brothers working cattle in an adjoining pasture. They were married in 1966. For eleven years, Ann stayed home to raise their son and daughter on a rural residence west of Manhattan. Today, they enjoy visiting their children and four grandsons of Texas and Colorado. Ann's hobbies include genealogy and gardening, and she devotes time each week to visit their mothers in care homes. Ann often travels with Pat, an agricultural engineer. They have traveled throughout North America, including Canada and Mexico, on tours of agriculture fields and farms. She's experienced turtle farms in the Cayman Islands, Costa Rica's banana and coffee plantations, and agriculture of eastern China and Germany.

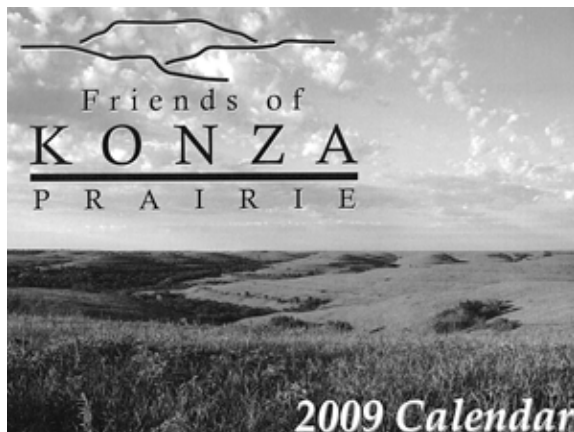
An asset to the Docent Program, Ann often volunteers once or twice a week during the busy season. She enjoys interacting with children of all ages, from those who are wholly engaged to those who would just as soon not deal with bugs or hiking uphill! No matter their attitude, she can't help but think they all take something away from their Konza Prairie experience. Ann says she learns much from the amazing docents she works alongside, and is continually impressed by their depth of knowledge. "They all have different ways of answering the question, "How do you tell a boy bison from a girl bison?", she jokes. **TGG**



**Ann Murphy**

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## FOKP Calendar for 2009



Docents, FOKP members, and staff from the Kansas State University Biology Division were given the opportunity to submit their favorite photographs taken on Konza Prairie for the 2009 FOKP calendar. Twelve people responded and submitted 60 excellent photographs. The calendar committee had a difficult job narrowing the number down to fourteen—an appropriate one for each month and one for the front and back cover.

You may purchase your new calendar out at the Konza on Visitors' Day. They will soon be available at Claflin Books & Copies and Ray's Apple Market. These will look great in your home, and they also make great gifts. **TGG**



# Tallgrass Gazette

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## **Konza Docent Calendar - Save the Date!**

**Sept 6, Sat, 9:00am** - Docent Training: Grasses, Biomass

**Sept 13, Sat, 9:00am** - Docent Training: Grasshoppers, Galls

**Sept 14, Sun, 2:00pm** - Docent Workday: Hokanson Homestead

**Sept 20, Sat, 9:00am** - Docent Training: Godwin Hill Trail

**Sept 26, Fri, 5:00pm** - Docent Graduation!

**Sept 26, Fri, 5:30pm** - Friends of Konza Prairie Annual Meeting & BBQ

**Sept 27, Sat, 8:00am-5:00pm** - Konza Prairie Biennial Visitors' Day

**Oct 19, Sun, 2:00pm** - Fall Docent Round up at Hokanson Homestead

**Nov 20, Thurs, 4:00pm** - Docent Committee Meeting

**Every Friday, 3:30pm-5:00pm** - meet at the Education Center for **KONZA QUEST**.

