

George  
Miksich  
Sutton  
AVIAN RESEARCH CENTER



*The*

**SUTTON**

**NEWSLETTER**

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*“finding cooperative conservation solutions for birds and  
the natural world through science and education”*

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*Volume 42, Summer 2014*

***Wildfires and***

***Prescribed Burns***



Molly Sparks

Cover photography by Steve Sherrod

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# FIRE!

by Steve K. Sherrod and Don H. Wolfe

Steve Sherrod



Steve Sherrod

**Top:** The Attwater's prairie-chicken property under a controlled burn conducted by the Chloeta Prescribed Fire Company (Above).



Dan Reinking

**Above:** Crews created fire breaks at the Sutton Center during the wildfire. **Below:** Local fire companies come to the aid of the Sutton Center.



Dan Reinking

The Sutton Research Center has been at the same location atop the south end of Circle Mountain for 30 years now. Our 40 acre grounds are comprised of and surrounded by post oak-blackjack oak forest typical for the Cross-timbers region. It is surprising how much fire fuel, such as vegetation litter and dead wood, can build up from annual growth and attrition in this habitat.

We have been trying unsuccessfully to conduct a prescribed (intentional) burn of the GMSARC headquarters property for about 10 years in order to reduce wildfire danger from the surrounding hazards that continuously build. Awaiting the right conditions to burn safely in a forested area interspersed with wooden buildings includes achieving the right RH (relative humidity) as well as the right wind conditions. This means winds at the right speed from the right direction to push the fire according to plan, but not high winds that result in fire out of control. It also includes cutting fire breaks of adequate width through the leaves and other ground litter in order to be able to stop burns as they progress. Of course, these conditions must all be present, along with a trained crew that can keep the fire under control.

Finally, our scheduled date (March 19) to conduct a prescribed burn on our headquarters property was near, with reasonable conditions forecasted. The Chloeta Prescribed Fire Company had already visited our site and cut firebreaks through our property in order to control the fire that they would light, and they had a crew of a dozen experienced firefighters who would conduct the burn. As bad luck would have it, a new neighbor near our property accidentally started a fire on March 18 in extremely high wind conditions. This fire was out of control almost immediately, racing up the hill toward our 8,000 sq ft cedar administration building and avian barn as well as along the base of the hill to the west.

Six different local fire companies (Bartlesville, Ochelata, Ramona, Airport Road, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Washington County) helped save the Sutton Center from being destroyed. We are all thankful to the brave and hard working people who responded immediately in our time of need.

This wildfire reduced the area that had to be burned the next day under much more reasonable conditions (less wind but adequate humidity) by the Chloeta Prescribed Fire Company. In addition, the Chloeta fire crew also burned much of the 77 acres 10 miles away where the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken facility construction is starting. About 1/3 of that property did not burn owing to increased RH on the burn day. Overall, the burns were successful, and we now feel that the Sutton Center's headquarter property is much safer from wildfire, and following the controlled burn, the vegetation at the breeding facility property is now growing lushly.

by Don H. Wolfe and Lena C. Larsson

## Listing of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken

As reported in the Winter 2013 Sutton Newsletter, the 2013 range-wide, aerial surveys for Lesser Prairie-Chickens indicated a 50% drop from the 2012 surveys. We do not yet know if this was a single-year anomaly, a result of the surveying techniques or efforts, or a strong indication that the Lesser Prairie-Chicken is on the brink of extinction. But, we do know that the population has declined dramatically over the past couple of decades, and without equally dramatic conservation efforts, the long-term outlook is bleak. On 27 March 2014, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced that Lesser Prairie-Chickens will be protected as "Threatened" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), with the caveat that a special rule under section 4(d) of the ESA will limit regulatory impacts on landowners and businesses from this listing (see the ruling at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest>). Now, the USFWS is facing legal battles on both sides, with environmental groups filing legal action that the special rule does not provide adequate protection, and with state wildlife agencies and private industry claiming that the threatened status is unnecessary due to conservation plans that are already being implemented and that wind energy, solar energy, and oil and gas development would be severely curtailed.



## Film of the extinct Heath Hen discovered



A century ago, there were four types of prairie-chickens that could be found in North America: The Greater Prairie-Chicken of the Central Plains, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken of the High Plains, the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken of the Texas Coastal Plains, and the Heath Hen of the northeast USA. Today, the Greater Prairie-Chicken, although the population has been drastically reduced, still thrives in remaining tall-grass prairie, with harvestable populations in Kansas, Nebraska, South and North Dakota, and Minnesota. As noted previously, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken is now listed as threatened under the ESA, and the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken is critically endangered; its future is dependent upon both reclamation of coastal plains and intensive captive propagation efforts. The fourth prairie-chicken, the Heath Hen, is extinct. "Booming Ben" was the last known Heath Hen in 1929, displaying by himself until

he vanished in 1932. In 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game rediscovered and restored a short silent video of Heath Hens that was taken nearly 100 years ago at Martha's Vineyard, a large island off the coast of Massachusetts where the last Heath Hens were protected in a state preserve. While over the years various discussions have been made about releasing Greater Prairie-Chickens into portions of former Heath Hen range, the real Heath Hen is gone and largely forgotten, except for a handful of museum specimens and now, this short video, well worth finding the time to view: <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/03/07/long-extinct-heath-hen-comes-life-archival-film/X9zKEdB6dvH71Pt6rB2tFL/story.html>

## Gunnison Sage-Grouse Listing

A final ESA listing decision on the Gunnison Sage-Grouse was planned to be made by 12 May 2014 by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This decision has now been postponed until 12 November 2014. Gunnison Sage-Grouse occur only in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah, and the entire population is estimated to be less than 5000 individuals. Additional information is available at: <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/>

# Against the odds: The successes and setbacks

The fate of Bald Eagles and other wildlife is in our hands.

by Dan L. Reinking

## A response to a conservation emergency

Oklahoma's Bald Eagle population is soaring thanks to decades of legal protections and a nationally recognized restoration program. Because of its status as our national symbol, the Bald Eagle became a high profile addition to the endangered species list in the late 1960s when only a few hundred pairs remained nesting in the lower 48 states, primarily in Florida. By the early 1980s, the Sutton Center was established near Bartlesville with a bold vision of expanding the range and population of Bald Eagles during their fragile recovery from the era of pesticide-induced declines.



Eagle head puppets were used to feed young chicks to prevent them from becoming dependent on humans.

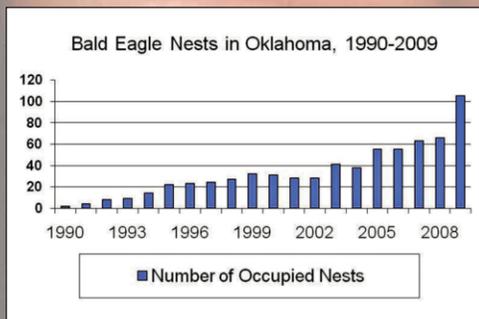
In close cooperation with the ODWC and many other state, federal, and private partners, including the (then) Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission, the Sutton Center's eagle conservation plan involved collecting eagle eggs from nests in Florida where the population was the largest in the lower 48. This resulted in nesting pairs laying second clutches to replace the collected eggs, thereby minimizing the impact on the Florida population. Eggs were brought back to Oklahoma in specially designed portable incubators and were hatched using both incubating chickens and artificial incubation. Young chicks were cared for with a variety of measures in place including one-way glass, eagle head puppets used for feeding the chicks, and costumes worn by caretakers to prevent the young birds from recognizing and becoming dependent on humans.

After several months of care, eagles were released at selected locations through a lengthy and carefully controlled process known as hacking. This step was fundamental to success, because young eagles become fixed on the area where they initially take flight, and will return to that vicinity when they become mature at age four or five and are ready to establish their own nesting territories. Between 1984 and 1992, the Sutton Center raised and released 275 eagles in five southeastern states, including 90 in Oklahoma where no Bald Eagles were nesting at the time. These birds formed the nucleus of what today is a thriving nesting population of eagles in Oklahoma, numbering over 120 pairs and far exceeding the initial goal of establishing 10 nesting pairs in the state.

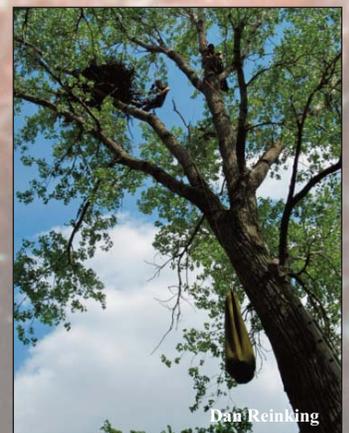
## Technology helps relate the unfortunate tale of one eagle

By 2007, Bald Eagles had increased enough nationally to be removed from the endangered species list, although they still have full legal protection

under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. It is these legal protections along with a strong conservation ethic in Oklahoma citizens that will ensure the continued presence of this majestic species in Oklahoma skies for years to come. Together with the ODWC and federal agencies, the Sutton Center, now affiliated with the Oklahoma Biological Survey in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oklahoma, is keeping a watchful eye on Oklahoma eagle populations by monitoring eagle nests through a citizen science program utilizing volunteers, and by employing modern wildlife tracking technology. Since 2010, the Sutton Center has been placing GPS transmitters on several nestling eagles



The increasing number of eagle nests in Oklahoma is a welcome trend. Although nest surveys were scaled back for several years after 2009, the number of nests is thought to well exceed 120 today.



The process of retrieving the nestling Turnpike Female eagle in 2011 to install the satellite tracker was both difficult and delicate.

# of Oklahoma's Nesting Bald Eagles

each year. With an expected working life of three to five years, they enable biologists and interested citizens to follow each young eagle's travels between leaving an Oklahoma nest as a fledgling and setting up a nesting territory up to five years later.

During the second year of this project, on April 18, 2011, a young female eagle from a nest in Noble County was given a numbered leg band and a satellite tracker.

She was dubbed the Turnpike Female for the purposes of following her in the years to come. Several months later, during the heat of the Oklahoma summer, she traveled north, as is typical of young eagles here. She passed through Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota before spending months in North Dakota.

In October, she began moving south and was back in Oklahoma by January, spending her time moving within the central Oklahoma area between Ada and Ponca

City until May, when she again went north to spend her second summer in North Dakota during 2012. She returned to Oklahoma by November, and spent much of the winter and early spring moving between Kansas and Missouri. She then traveled up the Missouri River corridor for her third summer in North Dakota in 2013.

The autumn season once again swayed her travels south, and she returned to Oklahoma by October. During November she began circling through Kansas, Missouri, and Arkansas before coming back to the Sooner State and visiting areas near Heavner and Stigler. In late December, the signal became stationary near Boynton in Muskogee County. In January, the Sutton Center contacted Lieutenant Gary Wilcox, an ODWC Muskogee County game warden, to make arrangements to search for the eagle. Not far off a county road, on the ground within a small stand of dead trees, lay the eagle. Scavengers and decay had taken a toll on the carcass, making it difficult to determine with certainty the cause of death. The presence of food in her crop, along with well developed breast muscles, ruled out starvation as a culprit. A post-mortem radiograph by Kimberly Huckabee, DVM at the Bent Arrow Veterinary Hospital and a former Sutton Center intern, revealed a few small metal flakes, which together with the eagle's proximity to a quiet country road, hint at the possibility that a gunshot may have put an end to this eagle's travels and her chances to establish her own Oklahoma nest upon reaching adulthood.

## Concerned citizens can help

Eagles face many challenges, including inclement weather, finding and capturing food, collisions with manmade objects such as power lines, wind turbines, and vehicles, and wanton illegal destruction. The dedication of biologists, game wardens, and other wildlife professionals helps to maintain Oklahoma's bounty of eagles and other wildlife. Even more important is the respect for wildlife by hunters, fishers, birdwatchers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. This includes their collective cooperation with wildlife law enforcement officers by reporting suspicious activities, all of which is essential to preventing needless and illegal losses. Oklahomans can be rightly proud of their state's painstaking contributions to restoring Bald Eagle populations as well as conserving other species, and can remain alert to assist in protecting wildlife. Your local game warden is just a phone call away.



The Bald Eagle dubbed Turnpike Female and her male sibling, wearing hoods to keep them calm, are about to be returned to their nest after installation of their satellite trackers in 2011.



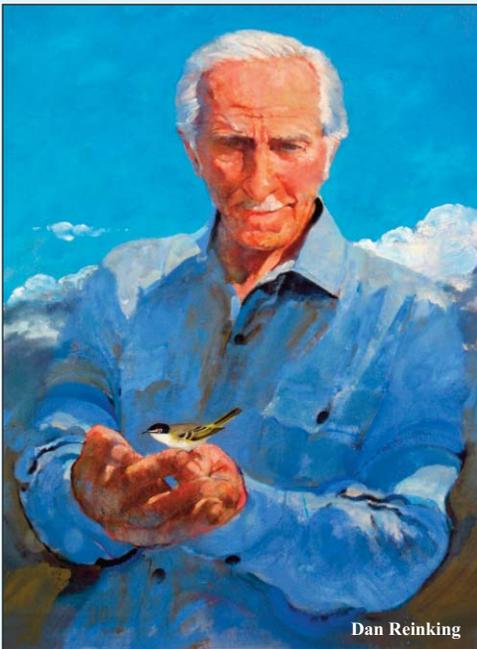
Just two and a half years after leaving her nest, the Turnpike Female eagle met an unfortunate end.



Muskogee County game warden Lieutenant Gary Wilcox inspects the dead eagle with Sutton Center employee Jonathan Coleman.

# MISSING...

by Carla A. Potts, Lena C. Larsson, and Steve K. Sherrod



Dan Reinking



Lena Larsson

An impressive portrait of George Miksch “Doc” Sutton painted by Robert Heindel (American 1938-2005) was missing from the walls at the George Miksch Sutton Avian Research Center in Bartlesville from January 17th to April 20th of this year. This work was commissioned by Phillips Petroleum Company in the late 1970’s and generously donated to the Sutton Center to commemorate our namesake. In turn, GMSARC loaned this portrait to the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History at the University of Oklahoma in Norman as an introduction for their special exhibition about this exceptional professor.

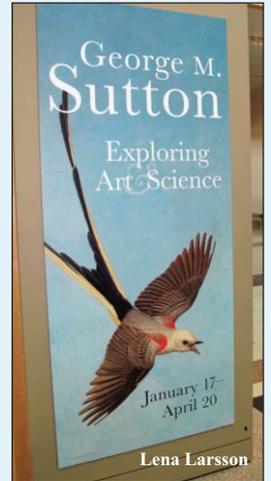
George Sutton’s love of birds began at the age of five when his parents gave him Frank Chapman’s book *Bird-Life*. At the age of 12, his first bird drawing was published, and thus began his career as a well-known artist, author, illustrator, and ornithologist.

“Doc” Sutton came to OU as a professor in 1952 and remained there for the rest of his career. “Doc” was well known for his extensive bird specimen collection and art, as well as his vast knowledge of birds. Sutton Center executive director, Steve Sherrod, a student at OU in the 1960’s, used to drop by to see “Doc” at the old bird range on Friday afternoons where the two would admire and talk about painting the peregrine that Steve had trained for falconry. Dr. Sutton was disciplined and would allow precisely 15 minutes of visiting before ushering Steve on his way. “Doc” insisted that Steve publish his first scientific paper about observations of a starling chasing and evicting a flicker from a nest hole.

Sutton was bothered by poor artistic representations of birds. He used to have his friends help catch live specimens so he could paint genuinely and stress that which he felt to be a bird’s most important quality---the fact that they are alive. His technical skill as an artist and his scientific understanding of his subject matter breathed life into his paintings. The collection displayed at the Sam Noble Museum exhibition exuded life and included a variety of paintings, ranging from King Eiders in the high Arctic to the Northern Potoo in Central America, with many paintings dating back to the early 1920’s.

Also on display were glass lantern slides that “Doc” had hand painted, along with cataloged specimens of a variety of birds including the Greater and Lesser Prairie-Chicken, Snow Goose, Gyrfalcon, and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. A treasured gift of a small paint box given to him by his friend and artist mentor Louis Agassiz Fuertes traveled with him on all his journeys.

The collection of Dr. Sutton’s artwork spans five decades of devotion in illustrating birds and their environments, and the exhibition was quite a treat for all who visited.



Lena Larsson



## 4A... **BIRD BREAK!**

- The Sandhill Crane attracts its mate by singing and DANCING.
- Since Sandhill Cranes eat almost anything, they are considered an OMNIVORE.
- Cranes MIGRATE in flocks in the thousands.
- The top of a crane’s head is CRIMSON.
- A crane and its partner mate for LIFE.
- Doodle is the Sutton Center’s SANDHILL CRANE.
- The Sandhill Crane is the only crane not on the ENDANGERED list.

### Bird is the Word!

D M C R A W S G H R U M I Q T  
 E E T R Z E N U T W E E R A A  
 V C R P I I W U D E O R X Z A  
 B P K E C M O I J U R H R M Z  
 N Y A N G I S Q J T K Z Y L H  
 N V A M O N A O W Z H H O J U  
 B D A F Z P A H N C Q B Y A L  
 I V B U F C Z D W H V A L E I  
 U V S O D E W R N J X N M R F  
 A V G X Z S Y I P E P J C O E  
 E N A R C L L I H D N A S V H  
 M I G R A T E N L J G M L I C  
 F J Q G X M D H G F Y D G N W  
 G X Y S B M M Q A T Q N L M N  
 P H R M T X T O A A B G H O G

# Sutton Award 2014

by Hillary A. Parkhurst

Nine years and growing, the Sutton Award scholarship program was a great success once again! The Sutton Award is for conservation artists in Oklahoma high school grades 10-12. In addition to the artwork that is submitted, each student is also required to submit an essay that explains how his or her work communicates information about a current conservation issue.

This year, Rachel Wimpey, owner of Willowbrush Studio + Gallery, hosted our 117 entries from 20 schools statewide in her gallery space in Tulsa. For the very first time, the student art was hung and displayed for the public to view, and we are very grateful for her generosity and help in this endeavor. Willowbrush also hosted the first gallery opening for students and teachers, parents and donors to view the artwork, and over 100 attendees were present throughout the day. A special thank you to Joan and Jerry Parkhurst for providing the refreshments!

Three judges spent countless hours studying each piece and reading the corresponding essays, and we are very appreciative for their continued help with this effort. This year's judges included, David Nunneley with NatureWorks, Kris Koepsel, and Lisa Riggs, both with Riggs, Abney, Neal, Turpen, Orbison and Lewis. Koepsel also serves on the Sutton Board of Directors. Twenty students were selected to receive scholarships, and the top ten winners, along with the honorable mentions, had their pieces displayed in the NatureWorks Art Show and Sale in March.

Jean Michel Murengezi, a student at Victory Christian School, received first place for his talented work titled "Orangutan." Jean Michel has an incredible talent for working with pastels, and this captivating piece featuring a mother nestling her young was very admired. It received the "People's Choice Award" at the gallery opening and was proudly displayed at the NatureWorks Art Show and Sale this year. We congratulate Jean Michel on his achievement and look forward to seeing him succeed in the future!

The Sutton Award booth was a great attraction this year at NatureWorks. We were delighted to have such a large space and great visibility which enabled us to display all 20 award winning works of art. All of the student scholarship winners spent time at the show this year talking about their piece of art and mingling with the other artists participating in NatureWorks. This is such an incredible opportunity for our scholarship recipients!

The Sutton Center is especially grateful to its sponsors, including NatureWorks, Riggs Abney Neal Turpen Orbison & Lewis, Bama Pie Corporation and Willowbrush Studio + Gallery. If you would like to make a contribution to the Sutton Award for 2015 or would like to learn more about how your student can apply, please contact Hillary Parkhurst at [hparkhurst@riggsabney.com](mailto:hparkhurst@riggsabney.com). Be sure to visit the NatureWorks Art Show and Sale next year and see the amazing talents of Oklahoma's youth!



Hillary Parkhurst



Hillary Parkhurst



Hillary Parkhurst

Save the Date:  
August 23rd

2014

THE WILD BIRD  
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GENETIC BIRDS AND THE NATURAL

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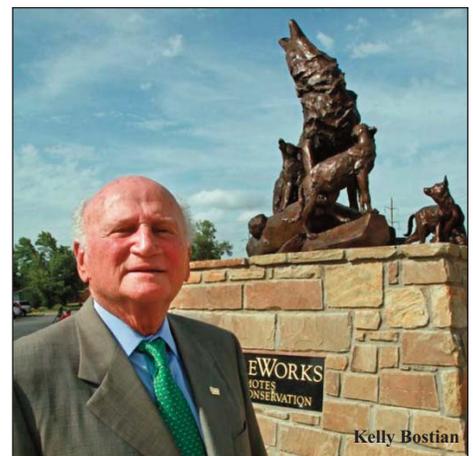
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SAVE THE DATE:  
NOVEMBER 14, 2014

SUTTON  
30TH ANNIVERSARY  
GALA  
AT THE MAYO HOTEL

FOR MORE DETAILS AND TO  
PURCHASE TICKETS,  
PLEASE CONTACT:  
HILLARY PARKHURST  
HPARKHURST@RIGGSABNEY.COM  
918.629.4591

Sutton Board member Sam Daniel is the recipient of the most recent NatureWorks Wildlife Stewardship Award!



Kelly Bostian

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