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Review of Kansas Wildlife

Don Cunningham

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

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A catchword current among naturalists is "biodiversity," a term used to describe the variety and number of organisms present in an area. Biodiversity is one measure of the "health" of an environment, and the term itself is probably a useful one, as it can efficiently suggest environmental quality and the complex interrelationship among living things, plant and animal.

Kansas Wildlife is a paean to biodiversity, a concept Joseph Collins emphasizes in the introduction. In 130 beautifully reproduced photographs, the book celebrates the wildlife of Kansas and the central Plains, and most of the photographs are appealing, sharp, accurate renditions of unstressed, alert, naturally posed animals.

It is not, however, a field guide or a wildlife shortcourse. Restricted to 130 terrestrial vertebrates—those most easily seen by casual observers—the book suffers from a limitation common to many coffee-table wildlife books: It perpetuates, by implication, the idea that the commonly seen species are the sum of an area's wildlife and are sufficient for a healthy environment. In fairness, however, it should be acknowledged that producing a high quality photo book including all 610 wild species resident in Kansas, many of them nocturnal, would be a monumental task.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to see what system—beyond celebrating biodiversity—guides the organization of the book: birds, amphibians, mammals, and reptiles appear seemingly at random, and side-by-side comparisons are difficult. One must use the index and leaf back and forth in order to compare a red-tailed hawk (page 60) with a Cooper's hawk (page 53) or a northern harrier (page 108), for example.

For the most part, the photographers' notes about the species are informal, sometimes folksy, tidbits of information. They are pleasant enough reading (although the small type may be a problem for some readers), but many are less informative than one might wish, and some suffer from being natural history in the "easy listening" vein.

Most of the photographs are quite good; a

Kansas Wildlife. Text by Joseph T. Collins. Photographs by Bob Gress, Gerald J. Wiens, Suzanne L. Collins, and Joseph T. Collins. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991. Foreword, preface, introduction, photographs, suggested references, about the photographers, index to portraits. 127 pp. \$19.95.

few should not have made the cut, suffering from imprecise focus, lack of shadow detail, harsh, unattractive light, or subject placement on backgrounds (bluegrass lawns, for example) that are not natural Kansas habitats. The best of them are shot in natural settings with natural light. The least effective are those in which the studio set-up is too obvious; many of the reptile portraits, for example, suffer from harsh strobe lighting and contrived backgrounds, and turtles with legs and necks withdrawn are obviously unhappy animals wishing they were somewhere else.

One might wish for a wildlife book not limited to animal portraits alone. Biodiversity, after all, includes the habitat as well as the animal, and seeing more of where and how these animals live would make the point much more strong.

Nevertheless, *Kansas Wildlife* is a book that will be proudly displayed on many a Kansas coffee table, and in spite of its limitations, it deserves to be there. At \$19.95 it is cheap enough that buyers can afford to pick up a good field guide at the same time.

DON CUNNINGHAM
NEBRASKAland Magazine
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission