





my Love letter to the

KANSAS TRAILS

BY KRISTI MAYO

The beavers started gnawing at dusk, and the scraping of determined teeth on wood echoed across the water. I sat, shivering on a log, as coyote yips joined the evening chorus of prairie sounds. Then, a human silhouette appeared on a ridge against the twilight sky, with a familiar motion of legs and carriage of arms in the distance.

At the 2005 Rockin' K Trail Run, my husband, Rick, was one of the stragglers to finish the 50-mile race after dark. We were both ultrarunning newbies. Lack of training and experience had kept him out late, and lack of preparation meant he had no headlamp. Realizing he'd be trekking the last few miles in the dark, I fished a pocked-sized halogen

Maglite out of my glovebox and hiked to meet him. If and when he got to me, I expected exhaustion and maybe a little dejection—most definitely regret. Instead, he came sloshing through the beaver water with wide, bloodshot eyes and childlike joy. “Did you hear the coyotes?”

He'd spent the day fueling on Mountain Dew and M&Ms. But this sport, and these trails, agreed with him.

At the finish line, we would find the people agreeable as well. The founding race directors, Stacy and Phil Sheridan, received Rick with the warmth and wisdom of the best trail mom and dad. You know the type—they're infinitely concerned with making sure you get enough to eat and

are warm enough by the fire, while they gently offer a few hints that might make your next ultra journey a little less harrowing. But mostly, they want you to know you're valued, an integral part of the family and welcome to come back any time. You only just met, but the next time Stacy sees you, she'll greet you with a hug.

SEEKING SHELTER

Since 1999, this has been the morning routine on the first Saturday in April: a family reunion of sorts gathers at a windblown, hilltop shelter overlooking the lake in Kanopolis State Park. Race organizers and runners huddle inside just before dawn, welcoming old friends and making introductions to newcomers. Someone

A runner traverses one of the water crossings at the Rockin' K in 2024.

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ABOVE: Todd Nott won the inaugural Rockin' K, and has returned 14 more times, always finishing on the podium.

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usually stokes a fire in the shelter's stone fireplace. This year, race director Elden Galano—who took over the duties after Phil and Stacy retired from their post in 2013—gives the pre-race briefing (“Follow the pink flags. Water crossings are about waist-deep this year.”) and then sends the runners down the hill toward the gathering light on the eastern horizon.

As the sun rises, runners get their first glimpse of the Smoky Hills. On the ridges, you can see for miles in either

direction, and the land folds over on itself. Fog settles into the low areas, with the smoky haze giving the region its name. The golds of the winter grass and reds of the sandstone are adorned with splashes of early spring green. The trail weaves through thorny sandhill plum thickets, which inevitably leave a mark or two on bare legs. Outcrops of sandstone have been pulverized into long stretches of shifting, sandy trail. Mostly, the trail winds through grassland, and as the day progresses, the pressure of wind and sun is inescapable.

The Gate 6 aid station, about 13 miles into the 26-mile loop, offers moderate respite from the elements. Tents and pop-up canopies don't do well

in these windswept parts of Kansas, so there usually isn't much physical shelter to be offered. But volunteers do their best to keep a supply of warm food on cold days, ice on the hot days, and the usual aid station fare of potato chips and Peanut M&Ms. The propane tanks, stoves and sundry aid supplies get packed a quarter-mile off-road over ranchland with help from Wendy Bowles with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks at Kanopolis State Park. If runners get into trouble out on course, she's ready with her four-wheeler to zip out and check on them. She has been a part of the race since it began, and she knows these trails better than anyone. “They're my trails, and you are

my people to take care of,” she told me.

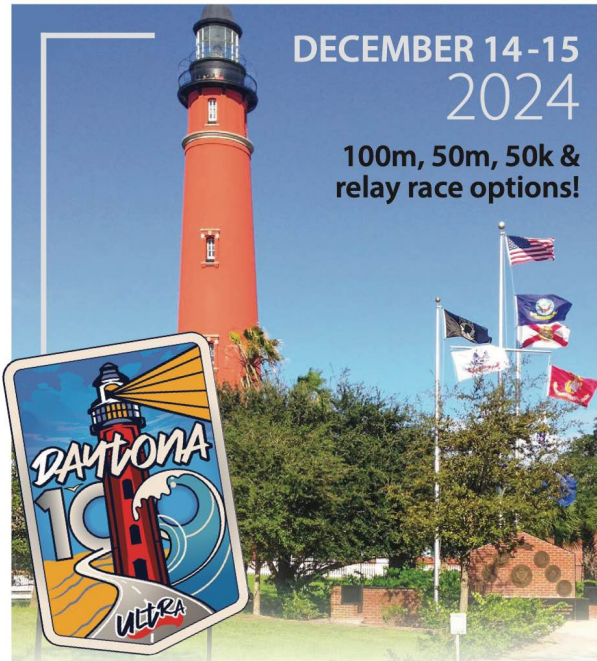
FOUNDATION OF STEWARDSHIP

Wendy's title, conservation worker, only hints at her day-to-day job in the park. Of course, there's the wildlife to keep an eye on: nesting bald eagles and an unusual white-faced doe, two rare species of fern and the Regal Fritillary butterfly, a species of concern due to habitat loss, plus a population of Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes, likely introduced but persisting in the park since

RIGHT: A slice of the Rockin' K course in 2024.

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Bob Becker, Race Director

1993. She also manages the education programs, hires volunteers, has written more than \$550,000 in grants for the park and keeps up with random maintenance, electrical and plumbing projects.

But at the heart of her work lies the trails. In the 1990s, Wendy teamed up with an equestrian group to lay out 36 miles of trails through the park for a competitive trail ride. Before that, there was less than one mile of “official” mapped trail. Eventually, Wendy got permission to open the new system of equestrian trails to the general public for hiking, biking and running. That’s when ultrarunner Phil Sheridan found them and started using them for his training runs—and eventually organized the first Rockin’ K along with his wife, Stacy, and the Kansas Ultrarunners’ Society (KUS).

Jeremy Morris wades through an icy crossing at the 2018 event.

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Wendy has watched the race evolve and return these past 26 years with satisfaction. Each time an event takes place on these trails, she finds extra motivation to make them a showpiece. She puts in full days of trimming, marking and erosion control. But she’s not alone in the work. KUS, she says, is the only organized group she works with that has a requirement for volunteerism, and Wendy knows she can call on them when she needs help. A flood in 2019 inundated the trails around Kanopolis Lake and left a mess after the water receded, but a team of volunteers—with half of those representing KUS—cleared the debris in just a few months. In addition to the hands-on assistance, KUS cash donations



have helped the park secure a tractor, a DR trimmer, an enclosed trailer and several weed eaters to help keep the trails in shape. “A lot of amazing organizations help with the park,” Wendy said, “but it’s a joy to work with the ultrarunners.”

That foundation of stewardship, the connection to the park and the community, built a truly old-school ultrarunning event. From the very beginning, founders Phil and Stacy envisioned their race as a family reunion, and that’s exactly what they created.

Conservation worker Wendy Bowles heads out to help set up the Gate 6 aid station in 2023.
 KRISTI MAYO / MILE 90 PHOTOGRAPHY

CONTRADICTORY TRUTHS

This year, I perched on a hilltop with my back to 50mph winds, waiting for the runners. Since Rick and I started photographing the race in 2014, the hilltop near the Gate 6 aid station has become a favorite spot, with a love-hate twist. It’s probably the windiest, coldest, most miserable place to position myself on course. But here, the open landscape falls away and then rises up again behind the runners, giving the viewer a sense of the two contradictory truths about prairies: they are just as barren and forlorn as they are rich and diverse. Yes, there’s the hard contrast of grass against sky extending on to infinity. But look closer and the textures and colors separate into details like grass, sedge, yucca and sumac.

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At Gate 6 aid station in 2024, long-time Kansas Ultrarunners' Society volunteer Dennis Haig (left) checks for past-due runners with park representative Wendy Bowles (right) and new park ranger Cole Zade (center).

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Recounting my memories of this place has a similar effect. First, there are the facts. After Rick's first run here in 2005, he came back as a runner four more times with me as his crew. I ran the race twice, with Rick crewing and taking pictures. And then we started our photography business and have since returned each year to capture our friends running through this familiar place.

Those are the broad strokes. Now, for the details. One year, it snowed the day before the race, with drifts deep enough to engulf a face-planted runner.

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That year, I was 8 months pregnant and ran the quarter mile from my car to the Gate 6 aid station to catch Rick and nearly passed out from the effort. A couple years later, my baby girl was strolling through grass as tall as her head on her way to meet her dad. Another year, I was the runner, coming into the aid station with my school-aged daughter striding along next to me. There's the cold plunge into a stream crossing that I thought was only a few inches of water but turned out to be thigh-deep. There was an absolutely frigid morning when runners had to break through ice above the beaver dam and snow dusted

the course like powdered sugar. One year, there were evening thunderstorms rolling across the plains, and splitting lighting that chased the remaining few runners on course.

And this year, I noticed the greetings, by name, from one runner after another, as they passed my position on the trail. There's that familiarity with those whose own history on this trail has intersected with ours. We have all moved through this place at our own pace and plucked details from its canvas to keep as our own—memories to hold close and stories to share. ▲

Rick Mayo is greeted by daughter Adrian as he finishes his fourth Rockin' K in 2009.

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