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GRAZING ELK
Bob Gress

A Hunting and Fishing Legacy at Fort Riley



Balancing the needs of the military mission with natural resources management and the recreational interests of soldiers, families, and civilians is a challenge, but one that Fort Riley has successfully met for decades.

Fort Riley's rich military history is undeniable - the Buffalo Soldiers, the Big Red One, and the US Cavalry School. Throughout the years, the post has been home to numerous important military figures including Brevet Major General George Custer, General George Patton, and General Jonathan Wainwright. Enlistees who later became famous include icons such as Joe Louis, Earl Woods, Mickey Rooney, and Jackie Robinson. Significant national events occurred at Fort Riley, including a visit by Franklin D. Roosevelt on Easter morning 1943. Some historians

have attributed the origin of the 1918 outbreak of the Spanish Flu to Fort Riley. Even the grave of the Army's last cavalry horse, "Chief," is located near Cavalry Parade Field on Main Post.

For all its impressive military history, Fort Riley also features a well-chronicled history of providing excellent hunting and fishing opportunities for soldiers and civilians. During the last 160 years, hundreds of thousands of warriors have been trained for battle, from the mounted cavalry regiments of days past to the high-tech brigade combat teams of today. Their jobs are as serious as it

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gets. It is little wonder that when these men and women have time off, they look for quality recreational activities. Many choose to take advantage of the tremendous hunting and fishing opportunities at Fort Riley.

Fort Riley can trace its roots to the headwaters of the Kaw River. Camp Center, as the post was originally named, was located at the confluence of the Republican and Smoky Hill rivers. Although some leisurely hunting and fishing likely took place in the early years, most was probably out of necessity.

As the post became better established, government-supplied rations became

more dependable. Hunting and fishing evolved from a necessity into a form of recreation. In the late 1800s the local Fort Riley hunting club was established to provide soldiers an outlet from their daily duties. The hunting club offered various types of organized hunts, including foxhunts on Sunday mornings that began with the “blessing of the dogs” at the Main Post Chapel.

Modern game management of Fort Riley’s fish and wildlife resources began in the 1950s with the establishment of the Rod and Gun Club. The club was mostly made up of interested volunteers who coordinated organized hunts, habitat management, and social gatherings. Although they did not employ a professional biologist, they frequently sought the advice of the Kansas Fish and Game Commission as well as Kansas State University’s Department of Biology. Some of those early efforts are still visible today as tree plantings, fishing impoundments, and established food plots.



NORTHERN BOBWHITE MALE
Bob Gress

Beginning in the early 1960s, the late Dr. Robert Robel of Kansas State University initiated a series of important research projects at Fort Riley. Most notable was his analysis of preferred food of the bobwhite quail. It was one of the most important studies of the time and is still frequently cited today. In 1967 under the guidance of Kansas State’s

Dr. Harold Klaassen, the post’s Cameron Springs pond became one of the first places in the state of Kansas to provide trout fishing, with stockings from the Neosho National Fish Hatchery in Neosho, Missouri.

Management of other fishing impoundments began in earnest in the 1970s. These ranged from small farm

Conservation efforts in recent years have focused on landscape level management practices, particularly for those species that are either endangered or are declining throughout the region.

ponds to moderately sized watershed ponds to oxbow lakes carved out by the Kansas River. Several of those ponds still bear the name of the landowner who owned the property before the Army. A total of twenty-nine ponds and lakes are actively managed today.

The passing of the Sikes Act in 1960 and its subsequent amendments brought significant changes to natural resources management on Army property. This public law stipulated that professional natural resources managers prepare plans and implement provisions of the act. Limited staffing and budgets

were common at most installations in the early days, often with only a few individuals being responsible for managing hundreds of thousands of acres. Despite those difficulties, a solid foundation was created that is still paying dividends today. Most telling is the fact that on the 25 million acres managed by the Department of Defense, there are more than three hundred threatened or endangered species under its supervision.

From the mid 1970s through the mid 1990s, Fort Riley became nationally known for its upland bird hunting. During some of those years, annual harvest of bobwhite quail topped 6000 birds and hunters came from nearly every state in the nation. Fort Riley experienced a gradual decline in overall upland bird harvest in the late 1990s because of declining bird populations and decreased hunting pressure. In recent years the bobwhite harvest has been steady at around 1000 birds per year.

In 1986 an elk restocking effort was initiated by the Kansas Department of

Wildlife and Parks, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, sportsman's groups from Riley and Geary County, and Fort Riley's Directorate of Public Works environmental staff. The first release consisted of twelve elk from the Maxwell Game Preserve near McPherson, Kansas. Supplemental stockings in 1987, 1988, 1990, and 1994 released a total of forty-seven elk from Colorado, Montana, and

South Dakota. The elk herd currently consists of about 150 head that are regulated by an annual harvest through permits issued by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism.

Today, deer and turkey are by far the most sought after game species at Fort Riley. This shift in hunter focus began in the early 1990s with increased opportunities to pursue those species.



WILD TURKEY
Bob Gress

At just more than 100,000 acres - up to 66,000 of which are available for recreational use - the installation has the distinction of being the largest contiguously owned parcel of public property in Kansas. It also is one of the largest publicly owned parcels of tallgrass prairie in the nation.

One interesting note is that overall daily use by all hunters combined has remained fairly constant since the 1960s, but the pursuit has changed from upland game to big game and turkey.

Today's challenges are unlike those at any other time in the past. The military mission has changed. Security restrictions have been enacted, and environmental regulations have become increasingly complicated. All the while, overall demand for hunting and fishing opportunities on

public property has skyrocketed. This paradigm shift makes it challenging to strike a balance with military readiness while providing maximum opportunities for hunting and fishing.

Conservation efforts in recent years have focused on landscape level management practices, particularly for those species that are either endangered or are declining throughout the region. The reason for this shift is that proactive stewardship of natural resources is paramount in limiting potential conflicts between the needs of rare species and the military training mission. For the most part, Fort Riley has escaped wide scale environmental restrictions while other installations throughout the country are restricted to a point that it affects the timing and location of military training.

Non-game species flourish on post. More than four hundred bald eagles have been documented at one time using a roost along the Kansas River on the fort - considered one of the largest wintering bald eagle roosts in the

continental US. There are six streams that contain the endangered Topeka Shiner. Increasingly rare grassland birds remain fairly common at Fort Riley, a tribute to the Army's overall environmental stewardship.

Despite the challenges that lie ahead, Fort Riley continues to offer soldiers and civilians some of the most attractive hunting and fishing opportunities in the state. At just more than 100,000 acres - up to 66,000 of which are available for recreational use - the installation has the distinction of being the largest contiguously owned parcel of public property in Kansas. It also is one of the largest publicly owned parcels of tallgrass prairie in the nation.

Fort Riley has long been considered a gem by many active-duty and retired military personnel for its fantastic hunting and fishing opportunities. Many of those choose to be stationed at the prairie post or plan their retirement in the vicinity. Fort Riley is open to



GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKEN
Bob Gress

all residents and non-residents alike, but, as with all military installations, restrictions are in place to ensure that the military mission is not compromised. Accomplishment of that mission will always take precedence over any outdoor recreational activities.

Alan Hynek is the Conservation Branch Chief of Fort Riley's Directorate of Public Works. A native of Washington County, Kansas, he received his BS in Park Resource Management from Kansas State University in 1991. Alan lives near Saint George with his wife and two children.

All photographs courtesy of the photographer.