

On January 29th, 1861 Kansas officially became a state. Kansas Day was first celebrated on the 29th of January by a group of school children in Paola, Kansas in the year 1877. Kansas, its geography, resources, and history are still celebrated in schools across the state today! At the zoo, we tend to focus on the state's wildlife and have presented Kansas themed programs to nearly every school in town. Our state symbols do an excellent job reflecting our state from border to border.

Many may recognize the sunflower as our state flower. A sunflower crowns our state seal on the Kansas flag, and can be found growing wild or in gardens across the state. This perennial plant is native to North America and some species can grow to be taller than ten feet. Sunflowers are great to grow in your own garden as they provide habitat resources for many of our native species, including essential pollinators.

Sunflowers aren't the only plant that represents Kansas, the state tree is the cottonwood. This deciduous (sheds its leaves annually) tree features thick bark and triangular or diamond shaped leaves. The seeds of the cottonwood tree can be seen floating in a cottony type fiber and are able to travel long distances on air currents. When pioneers first arrived to Kansas, trees were few and far between, and cottonwoods were the most typical to be found, mostly alongside riverbeds. Firewood was so sparse other resources such as bison dung were collected to fuel fires.

"Oh give me a home, where the buffalo roam..." Bison, commonly referred to as Buffalo, graze on Kansas grassland and sagebrush, and grow to nearly two tons in weight. Bison played a role in the ecology of the Great Plains by grazing on native grasses, and moving soil with their hooves, which allowed plant and animal species alike to thrive. Once traveling in numerous herds, over a million bison were whittled down to only a few hundred by the late 1800's. These massive animals were hunted almost to extinction but can now be found in both conservation and commercial herds right here in Kansas.

Another highly recognizable state symbol is our state reptile, the ornate box turtle. These terrestrial (land dwelling) turtles can be found all across the state. Their namesake comes from their shell's vibrant black, brown, and yellow markings and their ability to use their hinged plastron (bottom of the shell) to close up like a box. While these turtles do well in drier habitats, the state amphibian, the barred tiger salamander, requires more water to survive and can more often be found on the eastern side of the state. This species of salamander can be recognized by their bright black and yellow tiger-like stripes. Many may confuse the salamander for a lizard, it has four legs and a long tail, but their wet

squishy skin, similar to that of a frog, lets us know these animals are true amphibians.

Kansas has an insect to represent it as well, the honey bee! While not a native Kansas species, this important pollinator provides us with honey as well as helping ensure that our crops and home gardens thrive. Without bees and other pollinators, our plants would not survive. If you happen upon a bee that's buzzing about, the best thing you can do to avoid their sting, is to simply be mindful of your surroundings and leave them alone. Keep an ear out for the faint buzzing when you're near flowers, you might catch the sound of our state bird as well.

Thousands of bird species call Kansas home, but a quick glance at the western meadowlark will tell you why it was chosen to be our state bird. A member of the blackbird family, the western meadowlark has a bright yellow chest marked with a black V. A true friend to the farmer, this bird can often be found fluttering about in fields, snatching up insects and other pests and helping distribute seeds.

From the mighty bison to the busy honey bee, the diversity of Kansas wildlife is well represented through our state symbols. The best way we can help future generations enjoy Kansas wildlife is to conserve our resources. Be mindful of water usage, grow native plants in your yard, refrain from littering, the list goes on, conservation truly starts at home. The Lee Richardson Zoo is home to our state mammal as well as several other native species, we hope you stop by for a visit soon!