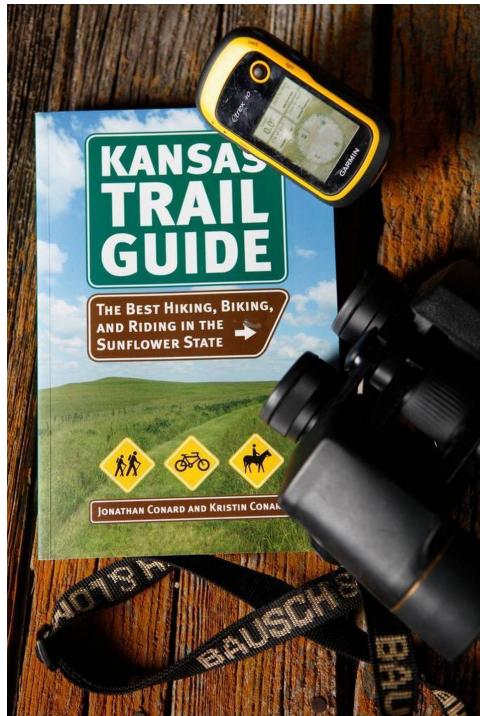


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# Book takes a fresh look at Kansas hiking, biking



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Kansas Trail Guide is the work of siblings Jonathan and Kristin Conard, and may be the best book of its kind on the market. **Bo Rader** - The Wichita Eagle

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*Kansas Trail Guide, Jonathan Conard and Kristin Conard, University Press of Kansas, 288 pages, \$24.95.*

When it's too hot to play outside, the next best thing is to research where you can go when it cools.

Siblings Jonathan and Kristin Conard have made that easier with their "Kansas Trail Guide," which covers hiking, mountain biking and horseback trails in about all corners of Kansas. It doesn't cover nearly all of the 2,000 or more miles trails, but the 80 trails selected are certainly some of the best.

Jonathan Conard got the idea for the guide when he couldn't find a book on Kansas trails that included the many improvements made over about the past decade. Raised in several central Kansas towns, he invited his sister to help with a one-year deadline to get the project finished. In that time one, or both, of the Conards traveled every inch of the trails listed.

That's especially impressive since Jonathan Conard, of Sterling, has a wife and two young daughters. Kristin Conard spends much of her time teaching at a California college.

The Conards somewhat based their book on 1999's Hiking Guide to Kansas by Catherine Hauber. The Conards were able to make improvements on Hauber's benchmark book.

Kansas Trail Guide is divided into geographical regions. Coverage of the trails gives solid details about lengths, and if it's open to bikes or horses, and if pets are allowed.

Trail descriptions are direct and easily understood. The book provides area contact information and brief mention of other nearby trails. Nearby camping areas are listed and usable information is listed about state parks that contain many of the best trails.

The Conards were wise to rely heavily on Global Positioning Systems during their research, and throughout the book. Most of the detailed maps in the book come straight from GPS readings, so accuracy is high. GPS readings are used to pinpoint attractions along the trail, and to help readers find a trail head or other access points. That can save first-timers to an area a lot of looking and worrying.

The book is made up mostly of hiking trails, which are the most common and heavily used trails in Kansas. They've also done well with reviewing a variety of biking trails ranging from easily-peddled-along an old railroad beds, like about 40 miles of the Flint Hills Nature Trail, to bike trails where novices (like me) have little business.

Kristin Conard said she let her brother, a professor at Sterling College, handle most of the trails in the central part of the state while she worked trails in the periphery. Both cover trails on federal, state, and city properties. Some good trails around obscure state fishing lakes and tiny, isolated towns should be interesting to those who've already hiked the best known trail systems in the state.

The Conards added some personal touches, offering advice on things like weather, hiking in areas open to hunting and the kinds of reptiles that might be found along trails.

They also list their 10 favorite trails in the state. They include some of the state's best known and a few that were new to me. They also listed the top trails for biking, horseback riding, and for those with an interest in family-friendly trails, trails with historical significance and others with an abundance of wildlife and wild flowers.

The book was published last year, but is now drawing more attention since recently being honored as one of the 15 Notable Books Of Kansas. That's a prestigious annual award given to books about Kansas, or written by Kansas authors. Usually only about 10 percent of all nominated are selected.

Personally, I'd like to have seen a few better photos in the book. It has some, from a variety of sources, but photos looking down a trail in the woods don't do much to draw a reader's interest. Of course, being an outdoors photographer I'm always wanting to see better images.

At \$24.95 it's not inexpensive, but it's worth it for those who want to follow the Conards' advice. Unlike some outdoors books on Kansas, this one is easily found online.

And to me, it just doesn't seem right that a book totally on Kansas, published by a company called University Press of Kansas, is printed in China.

Within a few years this books will be outdated as groups like the Kansas Trails Council and Kansas State Parks continue to add and improve trails in Kansas. Nothing the Conards can do about that.

It would be neat, though, if the Conards do an update in a few years. Their first joint production is the probably the best of its kind for Kansas, a similar second effort could be, too.

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