

The PRAIRIE PROMOTER

Grassroots Conservation in Action

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The
Prairie
Enthusiasts



Finding Prairie by Giving Back

By Brooke McEwen

It's morning on the eve of my birthday. My husband and I are heading to Lulu Lake Preserve to spend time on the prairie. The bus stops and billboards give way to gas stations and fast food chains, strip malls and snow-dusted fields. Deep in the Milwaukee exurbs we could be anywhere. I turn into a subdivision and down a private lane, parking our car next to an electrical tower. Prairie? Here?

For most of the 13 years we've known each other, my husband John and I have hiked: to hanging gardens in red rock canyons, through spruce-fir forests and high mountain passes, and past bubbling creeks and bigleaf maples. These dramatic, far-flung places mesmerized me. They hyperstimulated my senses, and I craved that newness — until I didn't. Bewildered, I realized I had sought out these places without building relationships with places closer to home. And so began the work of sensitizing myself to Midwestern natural communities.

Again we hiked, this time under sun-dappled oak canopies and up and down glacial hills. We crossed prairies in companionship with grasshoppers, wasps and bees. At an oak savanna fragment I noticed jack-in-the-pulpit for the first time. I'm still unsure which amazed and horrified me more: the plant itself or that I couldn't name it. That feeling returned when I discovered that more than one species of maple existed (or maybe I remembered this fact from seventh grade biology but had taken it for granted for years). I suddenly began not only to see the differences and similarities of the lacy Japanese maple, the deep-notched silver and broad-lobed sugar, but also to marvel at them.



Brooke is proud to say that she can now recognize jack-in-the-pulpit. (Photo by Rob Baller)

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Our Mission

The Prairie Enthusiasts seek to ensure the perpetuation and recovery of prairie, oak savanna and other associated ecosystems of the Upper Midwest through protection, management, restoration and education. In doing so, we strive to work openly and cooperatively with private landowners and other private and public conservation groups.

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On the Cover: December at Dower Prairie
(Photo by Steve Hubner and Mary Zimmerman)



President's Message – The Challenges of Diversity

Scott Fulton, President

After our first-ever online conference, I'm struck anew by the breadth of knowledge, experience and perspective we have in TPE. Because many people at the conference were joining us for the first time, this seems like a good opportunity to reflect on the importance and challenges of diversity.

As a group, we all support maintaining and enhancing biodiversity in natural communities. The fire-dependent ecosystems we focus on are themselves a diverse array of habitats arranged in a complex mosaic on the landscape. Those natural communities in turn are home to some of the most locally diverse sets of species of plants, insects, birds, mammals, herptiles and microbes on Earth. Protecting this biodiversity is a big part of what brings us together as an organization.

Diversity in the human community can often be harder to accept.

One layer of this is the diversity of opinions on and experiences with technical issues. For example, most TPE members are proponents and practitioners of prescribed burning as a land management tool. However, we also have strong voices pointing out the potential negative impacts of burning on some insects, including endangered species. Even with known cases (such as the regal fritillary butterfly), developing a scientifically based recommendation for to how to proceed can take years. We've had many lively and emotional debates on this topic, and these will no doubt continue. I think this has been generally healthy, with one result being that more site stewards use practices such as refugia to protect insect populations while still effectively using fire.

Through our new Landowner Services program, we've also begun to see a greater diversity in people's relationship with the land. Most of TPE's members are interested in restoring and protecting habitat for its own sake, but those who see land as part of the way they make their living are increasingly entering into the dialogue. Learning to listen to and understand each other can be challenging. One example is a growing interest in the use of grazing as an element in land management. Many TPE members are aware of the negative historical impact of overgrazing on grassland natural communities. However, herbivores have been part of the disturbance pattern that built and maintained these communities over thousands of years. Considerable scientific research is being directed at how and where to use grazing on these landscapes in a more positive way. Finding solutions that both provide ecological benefits and help develop a diverse and sustainable economy for our region is increasingly important.

Because of the diversity in our locally based, grassroots context, TPE as an organization has been hesitant to adopt "official positions" on most things. This includes not endorsing specific technical practices in the highly complex, rapidly evolving field of land management. It also includes trying to be as politically inclusive as we can. While we generally avoid intensive advocacy work, we do try to offer education and opportunities for the exchange of views and let our members decide how to implement what they learn in their local area.

The key to navigating these issues of human diversity is to see that bringing different knowledge, experiences and perspectives to our community has real value and creates resilience — like biodiversity in a natural community. However, we must also acknowledge that embracing diversity brings change and potential discomfort. It is vitally important that we focus on building and maintaining our relationships with each other through reciprocity, mutual respect and our shared value of caring for the land.

Let me know what you think at president@theprairieenthusiasts.org.

Editor's Notes – Prairie On...line!

Grace Vosen, Editor

The best part of editing your articles is getting to read about the sites you love and the work you put into caring for them. Prairies are TPE's reason for existence; they're both our work and the motivation for our work. They repay us with endless delightful sights, sounds and smells. Nothing compares to the feeling of community we share when we visit the prairie with our fellow enthusiasts.

And we keep coming back. As you explore this issue, you'll learn about TPE members who have devoted decades to stewarding the land. You'll also discover the voices of new leaders emerging in the organization, who plan to do the same. They are the rule and not the exception. But what happens when we can't work together on the land?

From a polar vortex to the need for continued social distancing, we've had to find creative ways to keep the fire of prairie enthusiasm burning this winter. This is where the "online" comes in. I know I was skeptical at first about talking to my friends from a tiny rectangle on their computer screens. Now, though, I look forward to spending time

with them in whatever way is safest. While it's definitely not a substitute for restoring prairies together, it gets me through hard times and gives me the energy to carry (or prairie) on.

Over the winter, I helped several chapters with their first-ever virtual meetings. Many decided to use this as a learning opportunity. Guest experts from much farther away can now join us at the click of a button to share their knowledge and experience. We also had the largest-ever audience at our annual conference, which was held online this year and consisted of four days of learning and networking.

Our sites still need our help, of course. But I learned this winter that our connections with one another and with the prairie don't disappear when we head indoors.



Executive Director's Message

Debra Behrens, Executive Director

Before making Viroqua my full-time home, I was working with an affordable housing developer in the Twin Cities. What we did there was not about housing but about the importance of home in our lives. We wanted to help people experience the sense of belonging that's only possible with home as a foundation. The last thing I expected was to find a connection to this concept in my work with TPE.

As with so many "aha moments", I'm wondering why it took so long for this lightbulb to come on. I often talk about how leaving our rural home in the Driftless to return to work in the city each week became a wrenching experience. I've reflected on how our little patch of land here and the surrounding landscape wrapped itself around my soul and would not let me go. This became our home, and it hurt my spirit to leave it.

At our virtual conference in February, Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer talked with us about our connection to the land and "reciprocal restoration" — the idea that restoring land and culture brings renewal to both. I knew this to be true from my own experience. But, as Kimmerer gently reminded us, the lands we steward and speak so glowingly of our connection with are in fact the homelands of Indian Nations that continue to be excluded. I had not felt the weight of this until I heard it reflected in the light of home: land as home, and the visceral pain of homesickness caused by being forcibly removed from it.

The work of conservation exposes us to what Aldo Leopold described as a "world of wounds." Many Rivers Chapter member Henry Panowitsch has spoken eloquently about the loss of sound from Minnesota's rural landscape. Climate change and development have brought insects and birds to the brink. Our seasonal rhythms are changing in ways we can no longer predict or keep pace with, even as ecologists are watching closely. We are all at risk of losing our home.

Still, there are signs of spring. I wonder if, as the threat of this loss becomes more palpable, it will melt our hearts and expose us to the need for renewal. As we fill our feeders to welcome home the first birds of spring, can we also consider the people who loved these lands and called them home? Their spiritual connections to these places are still alive in stories, traditions and a few surviving remnant memories. What can we do to welcome them home? And what renewal will be possible when we do?



When we visited Vernon County, Wis. for the first time, I cried. For more than a decade the man on whose property we stayed had painstakingly restored more than 80 acres. This man, himself a marvel, had installed logs in the Kickapoo for the turtles. He'd built a beaver dam analog with the hope of enticing beavers to return. I cried when he showed us this labor of love and introduced me to spiderwort, common yarrow and prairie blazing star. I cried because, through his efforts there and some before-and-after photographs, I could see the erosion of the Kickapoo's banks and the garlic mustard on the side of county roads. I could see the infiltration of reed canary grass from flood after flood in a place where he'd planted native seed year after year. John and I saw his love of the land, and it fed our own.

Two years later, after a hike together at Kettle Moraine, I sat Googling answers to the riddles of alien seedpods and fluff we noticed in the dry, rustling grasses. In my desperate searching and inability to find the words, to reclaim the language, I happened upon TPE's website. And that happy discovery led to our first workday.

There is in fact prairie at Lulu Lake Preserve, or maybe the technical term is oak opening (I have so much to learn). The 95-acre kettle lake is home to rare fish, mussels and plants I have yet to name. Walter Mirk and Dick Bautz lead us up and down the glacial hills, pulling sleds of tools over the hard ground to a worksite off the western shore.

It has been several years since this area was last cleared, and for the first time in my life I'm hacking away at buckthorn with a brush cutter. I feel afraid that I'll take down an oak sapling or some rare native species. Walter and Dick give instructions and latitude, and they assure me that eradicating buckthorn is a good thing. That's fantastic, because I'm having the time of my life. I grip the shaft, give the cutter some gas and feed the blade into the yellow-orange wood.

I did not grow up in the great outdoors, but I did spend time outside. In my immediate family, nature was treated with high-handed reverence. It was an inspiration, but also something to fear and certainly leave alone. I credit my grandmother, who grew up in an apartment above a Chicago

coal yard, as the entry point to my natural wonder. She and I would gather acorns on our walks together and wear their caps on our fingertips, like berets.

My family lived in Indianapolis. At one season in our lives, we moved from an older neighborhood to a subdivision. On an empty lot several houses down was a patch of prairie that captivated my grandmother during her summer visit. On our walks, she pointed out black-eyed Susan and purple coneflower. She told me the legend of Queen Anne's lace.

But neighbors watched us through their windows, and she became so conscious of their judgments — real or perceived — that we no longer loitered at the prairie except at night. I remember the clandestine snipping and laughing, my six-year-old self feeling bad and afraid of damaging someone's property or the plants themselves. The wild blooms we cut on those outings loosened up our stuffy kitchen.

I didn't know then how much prairies would mean to me now. Taking care of them, for me, is a small way of enlarging and preserving my grandmother's legacy.

We work on the buckthorn for hours. Slowly, amazingly, a giant oak emerges from the thicket with a little more room to breathe. While gathering the last felled thickets and applying herbicide, Walter tells John and me the difference between enjoying nature and loving nature. It's reciprocity. We can't help but smile as we drag equipment back to the vehicles. We

are humbled by the goals, collective experience, community and reciprocity of TPE, right down to the Christmas cookies that fellow TPE member Alice Mirk baked for us volunteers. We eat them on the way home. No doubt we will be back again for another workday.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer describes feeling stunned after surveying her ecology class to gauge "their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land." She found that "the median response was 'none.'" I totally would have been one of those students, but today I can imagine — I can see for myself — that beneficial relationships between humans and natural communities can, and do, exist. And I can, and do, contribute to them.



Brooke and her husband John Shusterich hiking in the Kettle Moraine. (Photo by Brooke McEwen)

Prairie Poetry – Life's Venture

By Jon Rigden

The journey begins as a seed,
Set free by the dry, harsh winter wind,
Blown by chance and time,
Dodging the gaping jaws of fate,
To land on fertile ground.

Send us your prairie verse!
Email communications@theprairieenthusiasts.org.



The wait begins. (Photo by Amy Chamberlin)

Eldred in Hall of Fame

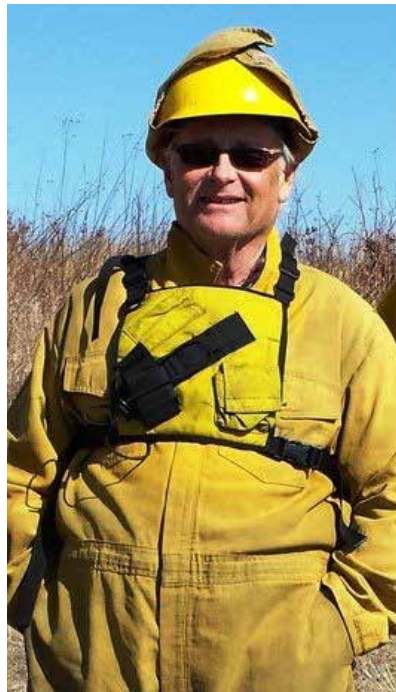
By Martha Querin-Schultz

We in the Southwest Chapter are excited to share this news from the President of the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame: Gary Eldred has been selected as a WCHF inductee!

Eldred, one of the founding members of TPE, is a tireless champion for prairies. For nearly 50 years, he has passionately advocated for their preservation. During that time, he has conducted surveys of eleven counties in Wisconsin and three in Iowa. This often means driving down every road in a county looking for prairie remnants. Eldred has even gone door-to-door to educate private landowners about prairie remnants and pique their interest in saving this rare ecosystem. His motivation comes from a deep commitment to Aldo Leopold's principle of ecological conscience: saving all the parts.

The Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame Foundation brings together more than 35 of Wisconsin's conservation organizations. According to their website, the Foundation "was established to encourage the growth and practice of a conservation ethic as a legacy for the people of the state." The Hall of Fame is located in Stevens Point, Wis. Its inductees "have significantly contributed to conservation programs, projects, public understanding, and conservation ethics within the state of Wisconsin and the nation."

Eldred is the only inductee to the WCHF for 2021. The three 2020 inductees will also be honored, because last year's ceremony was cancelled.



Congrats, Gary! (Photo by Steve Querin-Schultz)

All four events will be free and held online Saturday, April 24. For a detailed schedule, visit wchf.org and navigate to "Induction Ceremony." Each induction will be about an hour long and will include words from special guests as well as presentations by the inductees. You can send a congratulations message to an inductee by emailing wchfame@gmail.com.

Wisconsin is lucky to have dedicated and passionate volunteers like Eldred speaking up for its prairies. Be sure to congratulate him!

Thanks for Years of Service

By John Day

The Northwest Illinois Prairie Enthusiasts have been involved in the restoration of hundreds of acres of Illinois tallgrass prairie, from Gramercy Park at East Dubuque to Lone Tree Farm near Stockton. NIPE has provided land management services, including site preparation, seed harvesting, seed mixing and invasive species management. And of course, we've been a long-time member of the local burn co-op.

The success of these activities could not have been achieved were it not for the efforts and dedication of land manager Ed Strenski. Strenski is the personification of the term “prairie enthusiast”, charging into each phase of every project with the fervor of a football player making a goal line stand. So it is with sadness that we officially announce Strenski's retirement at the end of last year. The lands he managed are a rich tribute to his efforts and the work of the many volunteers whom he directed in a wide range of projects.

Like many of us in Northwest Illinois, Strenski was once a Chicagoan. He left the Chicago area with his wife Karin after a successful career in construction management and relocated to Jo Daviess County. Once here, he quickly developed an interest in local conservation efforts — especially prairie restoration. That led to his involvement with NIPE as a volunteer.

In the fifteen years that Strenski has been with NIPE, he has been a volunteer, Vice President, President and Land Manager. It was in this last role that he found his calling and made a huge impact in conservation. Strenski was instrumental not only in the success of such NIPE projects as Hanley Savanna and Elmoville Prairie, but also Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation's Gateway Park, Casper Bluff and Wapello Land and Water Reserve restorations.

His most important legacy, however, is the time and effort he put into working with young people. Strenski took on the responsibility of working with kids from the Northwest Academy in Hanover and introducing them to conservation. These kids learned the fundamentals of working the land as well as skills in decision making, responsibility and leadership.

Strenski leaves behind a great legacy in the form of prairies and fond memories. Take some time, perhaps on NIPE's Facebook page, to wish him good luck and a happy retirement.



Ed at a recent NIPE burn. (Photo by Jim Richards)

SPECIAL FEATURE

The Challenges and Rewards of Studying Prairies

Prairie Vegetation Surveys in Southern Minnesota

By Ainsley Peterson, Kyle Barnes and Dr. Matthew Kaproth

In 2019, I began a thesis project as a member of Dr. Matthew Kaproth's lab at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I knew that I wanted to work with prairies in southern Minnesota and help add some important information to the understanding of prairie vegetation in the region. Dr. Kaproth, myself and two undergraduates in the lab (Kyle Barnes and Patrick Carver, also MNSU students) were prepared for a busy summer in the prairie.

Leading up to the field season, we had worked with TPE, The Nature Conservancy and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to find prairies to survey. That summer (June and July, with a smaller follow-up in August), we surveyed 31 remnant and restored prairies. We used a timed-meander method to create master lists of all the plants we encountered on each site. These lists would join other data we collected during and after the field season in our final data analysis.

We also wanted to review several other potentially critical variables, including management type and history, invasive and native plant species, time of year, phylogenetic distance and data from TNC's Resilient Land Mapping Tool (<https://maps.tnc.org/resilientland>). One of our major goals was to document any potential variables that could indicate a high-quality prairie restoration and elucidate the steps that led to reaching that state. We wanted to use our data to help southern Minnesota's land managers make the best use of their resources for higher-quality results.

Our own results were extremely interesting. We found greater numbers of native plant species in the August sur-



*Glynn Prairie State Natural Area before a summer rain.
(Photo by Ainsley Peterson)*

veys that year than during the June and July surveys. The study indicated that a single survey isn't enough to detail the diversity of a prairie and that the timing of surveys is also important. Based on these results, I recommend that future surveys happen at least twice during a single growing season to catch a more representative view of diversity on the prairies.

We also found that the restored prairies had significantly more native species than remnant prairies — and that, of the management histories we analyzed, prescribed burn frequency was particularly important as it correlated positively with phylogenetic diversity. This means that we saw an increase in diversity when the number of burns on a site increased. We didn't find a similar pattern for either mechanical or chemical management, which was surprising to us.

The data from the Resilient Land Mapping Tool showed significant differences between restored and remnant prairies. Specifically, we saw that restored prairie sites scored much higher than remnant prairies in terms of their resilience to stresses and change, landscape diversity and level of connectedness to other natural areas.

As we work to publish these results and share them with others, we're hopeful that our project will be useful for prairie enthusiasts and land managers in southern Minnesota. We're extremely grateful for the kind support of TPE and the many Midwesterners who love prairies.



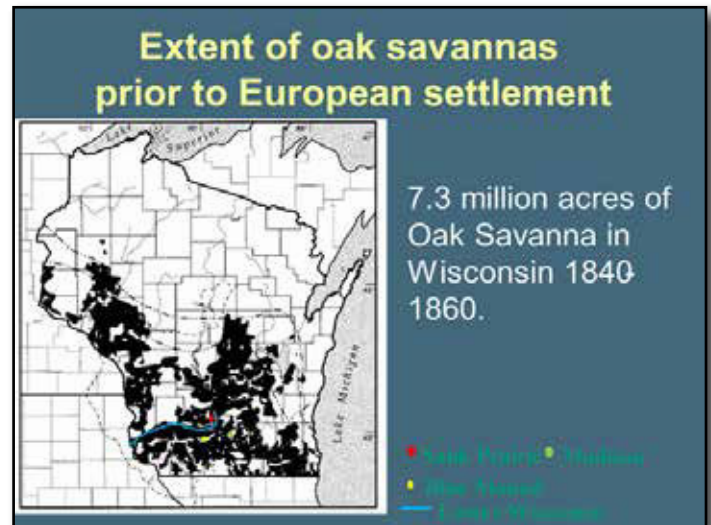
*A storm approaches a private prairie near Dodge Center, Minn.
(Photo by Ainsley Peterson)*

Intelligent Tinkering for the Sauk Prairie

By Jeb Barzen

The first recorded descriptions of the Lower Wisconsin River, including the Sauk Prairie, came from Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet in June 1673. They described the Wisconsin River as being “full of islands covered with vines. On the banks one sees fertile land, diversified with woods, prairies, and hills. There are oak, walnut and basswood trees; and another kind, whose branches are armed with long thorns. We saw there neither feathered game nor fish, but many deer, and a large number of cattle.” From this brief but enticing paragraph, we recognize the heterogeneity of ecosystems found within the Lower Wisconsin River between what is now Portage and Prairie du Chien, Wis. Though absent from all subsequent accounts of the Wisconsin River Valley, the mention of “cattle” likely refers to bison that may have still been present east of the Mississippi River in the mid-1600s.

A century later, in 1766, Jonathan Carver traversed the same route from Portage to Prairie du Chien. He described visiting the “village of the Saukies” in what is now Prairie du Sac and Sauk City. Carver then traveled to the tallest prominence that he could see from the village (now called Blue Mound) and, looking back the way he came, said: “For many miles nothing was to be seen but lesser mountains, which appeared at a distance like haycocks, they being free from trees. Only a few groves of hickory, and stunted oaks, covered some of the vallies [sic].” In this observation, Carver is describing the eastern extent of the Driftless Area and the southern end of the Sauk Prairie — and it is not as varied as described by Marquette and Joliet. Of course, Carver is

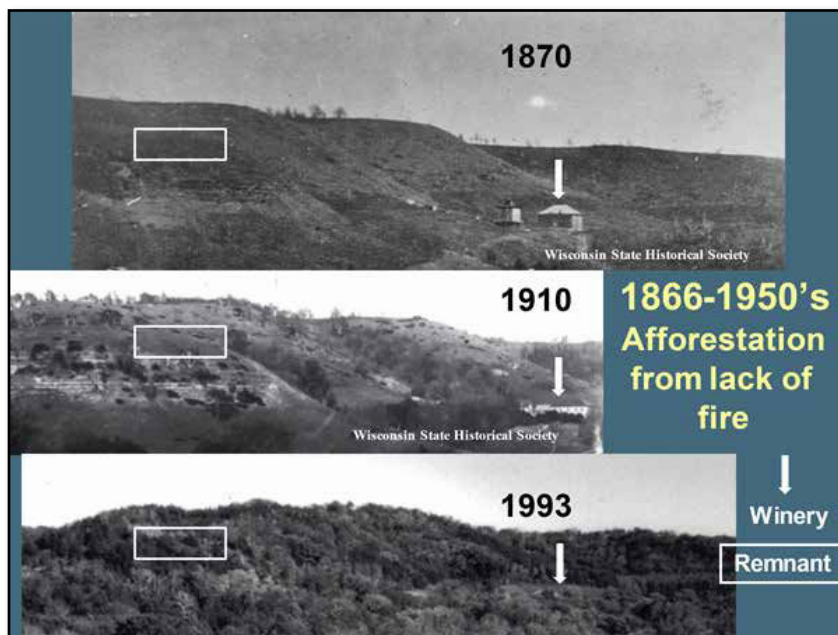


A map of oak savanna ecosystems in Wisconsin compiled from General Land Office records with locations of “the village of the Saukies” and Blue Mounds as described by Jonathan Carver. (Map and data from *Vegetation of Wisconsin* by John Curtis; dots and Wisconsin River added by Jeb Barzen)

describing a specific 15-mile stretch of landscape and not the entire 200-mile reach of the lower Wisconsin River.

By the 1830’s, the wild land that these travelers described had been taken from Native American residents by the U.S. government and was being distributed to European settlers. As part of that transition, surveyors from the General Land Office mapped a grid on the newly acquired lands. They recorded, among other things, the existing vegetation. From these notes, ecologists have created vegetation maps reflecting the ecosystems that occurred there in the early 1800s. Robert W. Finley and others have mapped the pre-settlement vegetation for all of Wisconsin using these data. On a more detailed scale, GLO records were used by Ken Lange in 1990 to map pre-settlement vegetation for Sauk County.

At the time of European settlement, according to Lange, the Sauk Prairie was approximately 14,000 acres and was surrounded by oak openings (otherwise known as oak savanna). Also adjacent to the Sauk Prairie were oak forests and numerous wetland communities, such as hardwood swamp, tamarack swamp, fen, sedge meadow, wet prairie, emergent wetland and sand dunes along the Wisconsin River. Collectively, these ecosystems likely



Rapid change in prairie cover near the current Wollersheim Winery and Distillery in Roxbury Township, Dane County, Wis. over 123 years. (Text and bottom photo by Jeb Barzen)

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elevated the overall diversity of the Sauk Prairie even though they were not located within it.

Herman Lueders, a German botanist and immigrant to Prairie du Sac Township, described the vegetation of the Sauk Prairie as it disappeared over the last half of the 1800s. A portion of his work described 730 native and non-native plant species found in the township, many native to the Sauk Prairie. Some of the described species are only known in Sauk County from this survey, as vegetation composition was changing rapidly during this time.

Since Lueders, some surveys have categorized the vegetation found in remnant portions of the Sauk Prairie. These include Lange's descriptions of Sauk County vegetation; a survey of the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant, which includes the northern half of the former Sauk Prairie; and various unpublished surveys of TPE's Moely, Schluckebier, and Gasser Prairies. Plant records from the University of Wisconsin herbarium have also been helpful in describing the vegetation of the Sauk Prairie. However, no survey has been completed of the prairie in its entirety.

The varied historical observations, plant surveys and herbarium records can be combined to produce a list of plant species that were found on the Sauk Prairie. This list, in turn, can be used as a guideline to identify species that are desirable for restoration efforts. A species that still exists on local remnants can be restored to other areas from seed. In other cases, re-establishing a species may require restoration of the hydrological conditions that supported them.

The list may also help us understand why species formerly native to the Sauk Prairie are no longer present. Rattlesnake-master, for example, was noted by Lueders but

is currently absent from remnants within the Sauk Prairie. It likely occurred on the more mesic portions of the Sauk Prairie, all of which were converted to agriculture.

In total, 417 plant species were identified through this process as being native to the Sauk Prairie. (A table of these species and sources used to determine nativity is available upon request.) This extraordinary diversity of plant life in the relatively small Sauk Prairie is likely due in part to large-scale changes in grazing patterns, fire frequency and land use over the last several centuries. The varied descriptions of the Sauk Prairie from a time when native prairie was flourishing to the present day elucidate the natural history of this ecosystem, which should inform our future approaches to restoration.

The prairie landscape that Carver described while looking back to the village of the Saukies in 1766 was largely oak openings by 1845 (see photo). Fire frequency had already likely decreased by this time. Greater fire suppression over the next century allowed this trend in afforestation to continue. For example, trees noted in GLO records from bluffs located close to the Lower Wisconsin River valley were smaller (i.e., younger) than trees in the bluffs located farther from the edge of the valley. This pattern of stratified age grouping of native trees suggests recent colonization by those species, likely through fire suppression. In combination, these historical observations and data suggest that a hyper-diverse landscape existed in the mid-1800s. It is that diverse landscape that we seek to restore, and it is that diverse landscape that offers us the greatest source of remaining parts that intelligent tinkers can use in future restoration efforts.

Is It Worth the Effort?

Dr. Mark Leach spoke about this crucial question at a Zoom meeting of the Chippewa Savannas Chapter in January. He presented research findings from two of the chapter's restoration projects. You can watch a recording of this talk by visiting the chapter's Facebook group, "The Chippewa Savannas Prairie Enthusiasts." You can also go directly to the link below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch/g-45wnCrlaj>



Blue Sky Photography

By Rob Baller

A few years ago, I was invited to help make brochures for wildflower identification. In preparation, I experimented with a technique yielding herbarium-like portraits that would look good in a trifold.

My camera is a point-and-shoot compact and can be operated with one hand. I found that if I was willing to cut a stem, I could hold the flower over my head and capture it with my camera in the other hand. This technique provided fine illumination and sharp focus against a pleasing blue field. It also eliminated habitat, but I accepted this as a trade-off.

I keep my camera on spot metering, auto focus, and the widest angle lens for maximum focal depth. The spot meter lets me pinpoint and control exposure better than average metering. I hold the plant perpendicular to my lens so all parts are equidistant and likely to be in focus.

When the victims are too large to fit in my photo frame at arm's length, I use a selfie stick with a piece of metal conduit on it. The plant goes into the conduit, and I hoist it farther away. With really tall cases like cup-plant, I do the same with a bigger conduit on my tripod and lay myself in the grass, shooting upward (see photo).

Since my photos are solely for plant ID, I purposely leave my thumb and/or finger in most images for scale. They can be cropped out later.

If you'd like to try this "blue sky method" yourself, I have some tips to share. First, pay close attention to what parts of the leaves, stems, hairs and petals are lit or backlit. Rotate yourself or the plant overhead to find the lighting you want before you lift any camera. My preferred time of day is a couple of hours after sunrise because it offers the maximum hemisphere to play with, and it usually has the least distracting clouds. Afternoons tend to fill with clouds and get windy.

When shooting woodland plants, always have your sunny place chosen before you cut the stem. You may have to run out of the woods and into the sun before the stem wilts. Sometimes you have just a minute, and then it's over. Never cut a rare plant; photograph it in situ and back away.

I have not found blue sky images on websites or in books or herbaria, and I thought maybe I was the first despite how simple and attractive the results are. When I sent a few samples to Professor Lytton Musselman at Old Dominion University in Virginia, he replied something like: "Exemplary specimens! I've been using that technique for years. My publisher loves it when I do that."



Blue sky bottle gentian. (Photo by Rob Baller)



Moss and the hand of Rob. (Photo by Rob Baller)



Sometimes insects join the fun. (Photo by Rob Baller)



A boneset plant gets the tripod treatment. (Photo by Rob Baller)

Book Review – A Kinship with Ash

By Chuck Wemstrom

Here's a suggestion for the perfect book to start the new year: "A Kinship with Ash", Heather Swan's first book of poetry. It's a book filled with wonderful poems about nature and being outside. But it is not escapism. Swan is fearless in combatting the ecological problems of our age.

We first fell in love with Swan's work when we read "Where Honeybees Thrive", a collection of nature essays focusing on her work with bees. Swan grew up in the far northwest corner of Illinois, just outside Galena, and so it's easy to think of her as one of our own. Her mother is Stephanie O'Shaughnessy, a fantastic local potter. Her late father, Keith Davies, was a painter.

Like her mother, Swan lives for art, because art reflects and creates beauty. Even as a child, she loved the outdoors. She remembers in the poem "Pesticide I: Liberty": "how our / ankles were crusted with mud from the creek / where we caught frogs and crawdads, / for sport, and let them go?" But childhood ends with the realization that "we were doomed all along. Before we learned of the real poisons / lurking all around us."

But there is still hope. In "Pesticide V: Vespers," after a description of how the world is being slowly destroyed, she ends with these words, words that don't make things right but inspire, instill hope: "But here. / On a mat of branches / And sand, quiet as monastics / in a chapel, two cranes / stand perfectly still."

And there are simple moments of beauty. In "Bowl", Heather talks about how her mother can take a simple handful of clay, turn it on a wheel, fire it in a kiln, add glaze and create beauty.

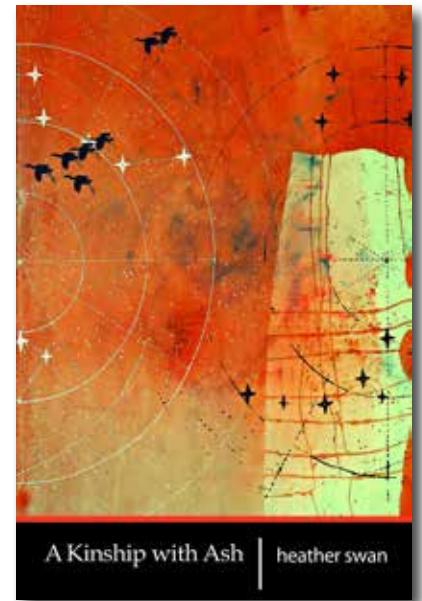
Throughout the book, the poems wrestle with a bleak reality of surviving on hope, love, mercy and — of course — beauty. But at this point there is no clear winner. Early in the book, "Disintegration" adopts the voice of a radio commentator: "imagine Florida was a thumb / shrinking

slowly to the size / of a little finger The edges / will change... the edges will no longer be edges. They will be submerged."

In the next page, while looking outside her window, Swan anticipates that little things can make a difference. It is in the littlest things that she is willing to place her trust. She describes how a wren lands on a fiddlehead fern just to rest for a moment and bends but doesn't break the fern's green spine. The bird leaves after a moment or two, and the fern rights itself. Swan ends with these words: "If only it could always / be like this: / the burden of one / never breaking another."

In "Where Honeybees Thrive", Swan concluded that she still had a question: "how can we instill joy, pleasure, or wonder in this bleak historical moment?" She wants to know how to tell the truth and at the same time invite people to find beauty and happiness in life. She believes that to connect with people and the world, we will need that special joy, pleasure and wonder.

Swan's poems are an attempt to describe our world but not sink into a pool of despair, to find hope in the living world and place faith in its creatures.



Cover of "A Kinship with Ash".



Heather's mother at the wheel. (Photo by Heather Swan)

The Entangled Prairie

By Jon Rigden

Merlin Sheldrake's "Entangled Life" is a fascinating book about the role fungi play on the stage of life. He tells the story of the fungus kingdom, without which all of our ecosystems would collapse. According to Sheldrake, fungi are ubiquitous and promiscuous, forming relationships with each other and crossing barriers to interact with other kingdoms.

The vast majority of plants, including those on the prairie, depend on fungi for the uptake of nutrients and water. But fungi go mostly unnoticed and unappreciated. They live in a subterranean world, only becoming noticeable when they project gaudy displays of mushrooms (the fruiting bodies of the network, which form spores for dispersal). These displays delight us all, especially when they appear in fancy patterns like fairy rings. But they are usually ephemeral, appearing overnight and then quickly vanishing. The network, however, remains and continues to be vital to the health of our prairies.

Fungi have been around for a long time — possibly as long as 2.4 billion years. Over this time, many relationships have developed between fungi and other organisms. One of the best known is the relationship between fungi and green algae in lichens. Sheldrake points out that there are a wide variety of combinations of different fungi and algae in this symbiotic relationship, forming many different lichens. Recently, it has been found that other microscopic partners such as cyanobacteria have joined the dance. This ancient partnership has thrived through millions of years, and different species have adapted to a wide range of sometimes hostile conditions.

One common species, the elegant sunburst lichen, was brought to the International Space Station and left exposed to the extremes of outer space for 18 months. When it was brought back to earth, it thrived as if nothing had happened! This widespread lichen grows on rocks and is common on rocky bluff prairie remnants (see photo).

Lichens can be used to estimate the minimum number of years a rock face has been exposed. For example, the elegant sunburst is known to grow about half a millimeter per year. The diameter of the one in the photo is about 40 mm, so the rock has been exposed at least 80 years — but probably a lot longer! Other lichens, such as the yellow map lichen, grow more slowly and can be used to date older rock



Elegant sunburst lichen
at Zoerb Prairie.
(Photo by Jon Rigden)



Great Plains lady's-
tresses, a partial
mycoheterotroph.
(Photo by Jon Rigden)

faces. Lichens also bring gorgeous color to the prairie all year long. If you're interested in lichens, bring a 10x loupe to look at their incredible beauty under magnification. Perhaps

more important than the biology of fungi, says Sheldrake, is their ecology or the relationships they form with other parts of the ecosystem. He says it's becoming increasingly clear that an individual organism out of the context of its community can be a very different entity than when it's mixed in with its neighbors.

In fact, the lines between individual organisms seem to blur as more is learned about the interactions that take place in the tangle of life. From the microscopic to macroscopic, life intertwines to form a complex whole. The boundaries between individuals can even vary by time of year and conditions. At times it is quid, at others quo. Who is benefitting by how much, and at what time? Many of these details are still unknown.

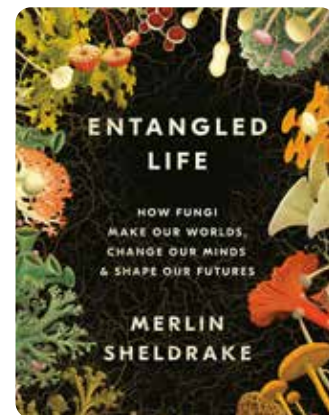
Sheldrake points out that fungal or mycorrhizal networks are vast and ever-present beneath the surface of ecosystems. They criss-cross with each other, forming connections with the roots of their companion plants. Through this network, resources are shuttled back and forth. The most common patterns involve the movement of nutrients and water from fungus to plant and sugars from plant to fungus. These networks also conduct electrical signals, opening up the intriguing possibility of a sort of network nervous system — a truly mind-boggling concept!

Most of the time, these interactions are mutually beneficial. However, some plants are "all take and no give", according to Sheldrake. These mycoheterotrophs tap into the fungal network and extract all they need to thrive, including carbohydrates from other photosynthesizing plants. An example of a mycoheterotroph is the Indian-pipe, usually found in woods but occasionally on prairies. Orchids are also partial mycoheterotrophs. Most orchids are completely dependent upon fungi early in their lives. Later, as they become more proficient at photosynthesis, they contribute a portion of the carbohydrates they make back to the fungal partner.

Other prairie plants tap into the fungal network indirectly by invading the roots of plants that have mycorrhizal relationships with fungi. Examples of these hemiparasitic plants include bastard toadflax, Indian paintbrush, and wood-betony.

Of course, we'd all be in trouble if the fungi were just composing and not decomposing as well. In a fascinating part of the book, Sheldrake explains that until the end of the Carboniferous period (290-360 million years ago), plant matter from wood-producing plants accumulated on the forest floor. This un-rotted material eventually robbed the atmosphere of so much carbon dioxide that it plunged the earth into a period of global cooling. Only when the white rot fungus developed the enzymes needed to break down lignin did decay of wood begin to occur. Now, all ecosystems depend on this ability of fungi to break down dead plant material for recycling into new life.

Hats off to the fungi that form the foundation of our living world! And while we're at it, let's toast to yeast, a fungus that causes bread to rise and ferments sugars into tasty champagne.



Cover of "Entangled Life."

Online Conference a Success!

By Scott Fulton

When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit over a year ago, TPE (like all other businesses and organizations) needed to figure out how to continue our work under a new and challenging set of circumstances. Even a few months in, it still seemed like February 2021 was way off in the future. Surely this crisis would be behind us by then! The Minnesota Driftless Chapter was well along with preparing a normal, in-person conference in Winona, Minn. Then the summer surge of cases began, and it became apparent that we needed to make other plans.

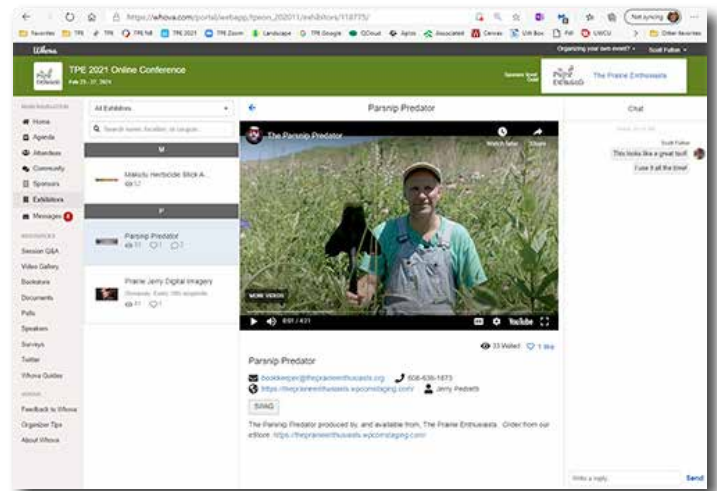
In July, the TPE Board approved moving the conference to an online format. This is when the fun began. The first challenge was to find the appropriate technology and support service for the conference. With some advice from other local conservation groups (particularly Katie Beilfuss at the Wisconsin Wetlands Association), we did our research and selected a platform called Whova. In late August, I met Diane Hills and Grace Vosen outdoors for a brainstorm session. We selected a theme (“Inspired by Fire”) and began to work on the program.

We discussed including art as one focus of the conference to complement our usual science and management sessions. Diane in particular was excited about balancing the mind and the hands with the heart. Following our theme, we also decided to bring the perspectives of First Nations peoples into the conference. Shortly thereafter, we formed a team of volunteers and staff to bring the conference to life.

Evanne Hunt took a critical volunteer role of learning, setting up and managing the Whova technology. It was Evanne who loaded all the conference content into the system. She also put together a training session on TPE’s Nation-Builder platform and worked with Jerry Pedretti to manage conference registrations. Grace Vosen took on the huge staff responsibility of coordinating all conference-related communications and working with speakers to get their presentations pre-recorded. Grace also moderated many of the live sessions during the event. Glenn Heins, a new member of TPE, ended up becoming our lead “test attendee” as well as a tech support resource during the conference. Debra Behrens, who joined our staff when the project was already well underway, took on the coordination of publicity, sponsors and exhibitors. Debra also led a discussion session on the future of TPE.

With Rob Baller and Andy Sleger, I set up an online burn crew training (the second one since the pandemic hit a year ago). Jim Rogala and Stephen Winter put together the science track and student poster sessions as well as a “Prairie 101” track. Dan Carter, Diane Hills and I organized the restoration practice session. Diane and Jerry Newman assembled an amazing arts program, recruiting a talented group of artist exhibitors and workshop instructors to complement the ever-popular photo and haiku contests.

In all, 831 people participated, over three times the number we’ve ever had in the past. This included nearly 200 students and faculty who joined us via special registration with the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. We also had over 200 other students and non-members join us from across the US and as far away as Germany! We welcome all these attendees



The Whova online platform provided a rich experience for attendees and included many ways to connect with the presenters and each other.

as new members of TPE.

When the conference opened on February 23, the team held its collective breath and we crossed our fingers. There were some technical glitches and connection issues, which is to be expected, but overall the technology served us well. In addition to the recorded talks, live sessions and exhibits, the platform enabled a great deal of attendee networking and input. Participants made active use of the session Q&A and chat areas, the community forum, and the private message function.

The conference closed on February 27 with an inspiring and thought-provoking address by Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer. Dr. Kimmerer spoke about how and why we should consider integrating scientific and indigenous worldviews to restore the human relationship to land. This was followed by a panel discussion, moderated by Debra Behrens, between Dr. Kimmerer, Dr. Curt Meine and me on forming new relationships between our organization and our First Nations neighbors.

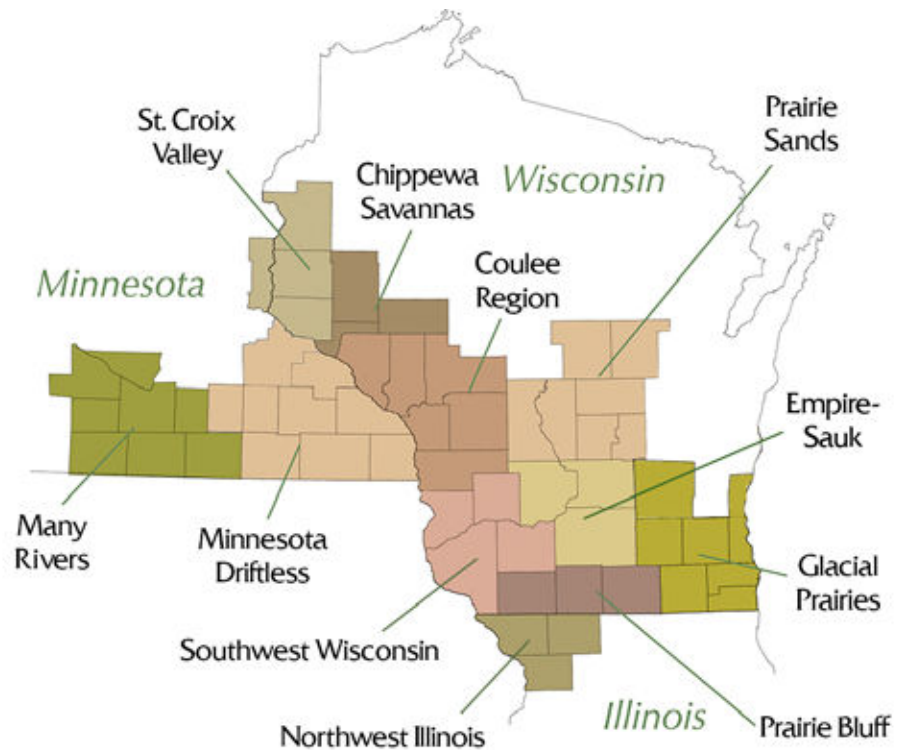
Several awards were presented at the conference closing. We announced Gary Eldred’s induction into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame, and Stephen Winter was named by the TPE Board as the 2021 Prairie Enthusiast of the Year. A Special Staff Achievement Award was given to Ed Strenski of the Northwest Illinois Prairie Enthusiasts on the occasion of his retirement. Chapter Volunteer of the Year awards were presented to Angela Smith of the Minnesota Driftless Chapter; Jacob Valentine, Susan Eisele and Ross Shrago of the Empire-Sauk Chapter; and Gary Kleppe of the Prairie Bluff Chapter.

We all miss getting together in person. Assuming it is safe by then, we’ll almost certainly hold a more traditional conference in 2022. However, because of the success of this event and the advantages of going virtual (especially in terms of accessibility), we’re also thinking about how to continue this new tradition of connecting online. Please let us know your thoughts.

As the conference committee chair and TPE president, I want to express my sincerest thanks to everyone who made this event possible: the organizing team, speakers, presenters, exhibitors, sponsors and all who attended. It was a challenge for all of us, but together we made the 2021 TPE Online Conference a huge success!

Continued on Page 27

Chapter Updates



Coulee Region

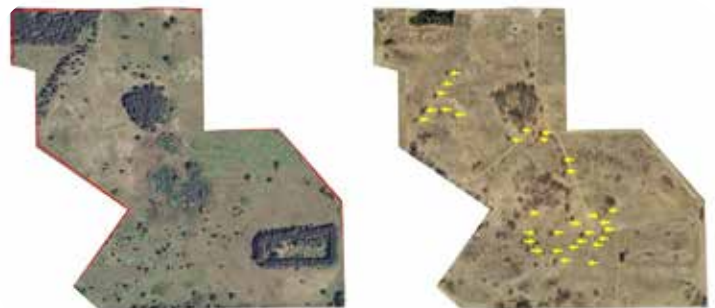
Prioritizing Perch Trees at Holland Sand Prairie

Jim Rogala

At a Friends of the Holland Sand Prairie meeting not that long ago, we started talking about removing “perch trees.” A professional landscaper at the meeting said he never heard of that species, and our response was that it is any tree! In this case, we were talking about lone trees established long ago that now have clusters of smaller trees and brush established under them. Some of that is a result of shading, but we surmise that most of it is related to bird droppings containing seeds. To halt this growth of trees and brush, we need to remove these trees where birds perch.

A generally accepted approach to management is to work on the least degraded areas first and then move onto the more degraded areas. The partnership of organizations at Holland Sand Prairie affords us the luxury of tackling some rather degraded areas, and therefore we have undertaken some larger projects. For example, there were two large pine plantations on the property. Most of those pines have been removed, but (as you might imagine) this action released a ton of suppressed woody growth. There are additional large projects such as sumac clones and large areas of invasive shrubs; we continue to work on all of those.

Some work on the lone perch trees has occurred in the past specifically to reduce seed sources for invasive species like non-native elms. Recently, we’ve put an emphasis on removing the perch trees and their accompanying cluster to increase the openness in high-quality areas of this 61-acre



Management at Holland Sand Prairie. The map on the left shows the pine plantations that were removed; one is shaped like a rectangle and one looks like the number seven. On the right, the yellow arrows point to perch trees removed in 2020. (Map by Jim Rogala)

remnant. We leave most of the cut brush in place, but the trees are limbed off. The limbs go into burn piles, and we haul the logs out to be sold as firewood by another Friends group. All burn piles are built in highly-degraded areas.

When this is completed, we hope there are never perch trees on this prairie again because of our active effort to keep new trees from maturing. It’s satisfying to see how much more open this site is now than when it was first protected in 2004, especially for those of us who know how much work it was!

Zooming in the Coulee Region

Jim Rogala

Members of our chapter are dispersed across a large six-county region in the heart of the rugged terrain of the Driftless Area. We also have quite a few members who have land in those six counties but live elsewhere in Wisconsin or even in other states. As you might imagine, getting together for in-person meetings is difficult! As awful as the pandemic has been for getting together, it has also forced us to consider virtual meetings.

We held our first Zoom meeting on December 15; about 10 people attended. The meeting had no formal agenda, but there were several goals. First, we wanted to see how many folks would attend. Second, we wanted to see if members could actually use the technology (we, like most chapters, are up in our years). And third, it gave us some time to discuss management techniques for tasks we were performing at the time of the meeting (the conditions in December were perfect for cutting and treating woody invasive species). As it turned out, several members who had never been to a meeting before participated. The meeting provided us an opportunity to get to know some new folks. We plan to have more virtual meetings in the future.

We've always used a combination of in-person gatherings such as meetings, field trips and workdays to communicate and learn from each other, but virtual meetings are worth considering as another option — even after we return to some normalcy after the pandemic. We hope to see more members' faces on our computer screens at future meetings.

Empire-Sauk

Volunteers of the Year

Willis Brown

Our chapter has chosen three people as our Volunteers of the Year: Sue Eisele, Ross Shrago and Jacob Valentine. Sue and Ross have been active volunteers for seven years, helping with everything from prescribed burns to seed collecting and cleaning to tree and brush removal. Jacob has been active with prescribed burns and seed collecting/cleaning for three years. In addition, Jacob is the site monitor for Black Earth Rettenmund Prairie, Sugar River Savanna and Swenson Prairie.

We're grateful for all the work our volunteers put into TPE. Thanks to Sue, Ross and Jacob for going the extra mile for our prairies and savannas!

Calling All History Buffs!

Rich Henderson

We're seeking volunteers to research the cultural history of TPE's Mounds View Grassland preserve. The Empire-Sauk Chapter would like to compile a history of the preserve documenting Native American occupation, use and connection to the land as well as present-day uses and connections. We need volunteers to go through land records, historical accounts and written histories. These volunteers will draft



Old foundation at Mounds View. (Photo by Rich Henderson)

materials to be used in various outlets such as brochures, kiosks, articles, presentations and the chapter webpage.

Mounds View is also home to several European settlement homestead sites. Dating from the 1850s, these sites are still evident with building foundations (see photo), walls, wells and hand-built wagon trails. These sites are away from the more modern homesteads, having apparently been abandoned prior to 1900. We would like to have these sites and features investigated, documented and eventually posted with interpretive signage. We need volunteers to contact the Wisconsin State Historical Society and university staff to see if there's any interest in conducting professional archaeological investigation or documentation of the structures.

If you have interest, knowledge or experience in any of these fields, please contact Rich Henderson at tpe.rhenderson@tds.net or 608-845-7065.

Solar Farm Near Smith-Reiner Drumlin Prairie

Willis Brown and Gary Birch

A large solar energy complex is being proposed by Invenergy for an area between I-90 and Cambridge in Dane County. The Koshkonong Solar Energy Project area is 15,000 acres, with 5,000 acres already under a lease agreement. Some of the areas currently under lease are adjacent to the west boundary of TPE's Smith-Reiner Drumlin Prairie.

This proposal calls for planting short prairie grasses underneath the solar panels. Applied Ecological Services will conduct the planting. While this may not provide ideal prairie habitat for grassland birds, it is hoped that it will not have a negative effect on the drumlin prairie.

The steward of Smith-Reiner, Gary Birch, is in discussions with Invenergy to ensure that any solar arrays will not affect our management of the property. While creating energy from the sun is a good thing, this may not be the best neighbor for a native prairie. There will be some common goals between the solar farm and TPE's prairie, such as the reduction of woody material and planting of grasses on the land; however, there are a number of concerns. One such concern is the construction of an eight-foot fence around the solar arrays, which would make it more difficult to conduct prescribed burns and possibly have negative effects on birds.

Invenergy has submitted an engineering plan to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Office of Energy but has not yet submitted an application to the Public Service Commission. This is expected to happen in the late summer or fall of 2021. The PSC has final regulatory authority over this proposal. It will conduct public hearings before making any decisions.



Horses Rosebud and Duchess assisted with the timber harvest.
(Photo by Rich Henderson)

Oak Savanna Restoration at Mounds View Grassland

Willis Brown and Rich Henderson

A transformation is underway! When TPE acquired the Schurch-Thomson property in 2007 (the second parcel of what is now called Mounds View Grassland), the wooded areas were under a Managed Forest Law (MFL) contract that prohibited conversion to prairie, oak savanna or open woodland. A year ago, that contract expired. TPE is now in the process of restoring these imperiled ecosystems on 25 acres of the former MFL lands.

In the late summer of 2020, The Nature Conservancy generously loaned us the use of their forestry mower to remove smaller trees and brush. Andy Sleger, the land manager on staff for the Empire-Sauk Chapter, operated the mower. Active Mounds View volunteer Eric Preston sought potential contractors for a timber harvest (all walnut), and we settled on Adaptive Restoration, LLC of Mt. Horeb. They used a beautiful team of Suffolk Punch work horses to haul out the logs and have successfully marketed the walnut timber. The proceeds of the sale cover all harvest expenses and will help defray the cost of the follow-up restoration work.

Local artisans are making use of cherry burls from the harvest. Plans are in the works for a commercial third party to remove the unsold logs (cherry and smaller walnut) for use as lumber and the smaller trees and larger treetops



Open-grown oaks freed by the savanna restoration.
(Photo by Rich Henderson)

for firewood. In exchange, TPE will receive a share of the profits. The remaining slash is being piled and burned using the services of Adaptive Restoration, chapter land management staff, site stewards and many volunteers.

There are also plans to remove the stand of large pine and spruce trees near the west end of Schurch-Thomson Prairie. The newly cleared areas will be treated with a combination of selective herbicide application, mowing and frequent fire to prevent resprouting and then seeded in with savanna and prairie species.

New Signage for Moely Prairie

Amy Chamberlin

The largest remnant of the former 14,000-acre Sauk Prairie (see article elsewhere in this issue) now features an interpretive kiosk at its Fullerton Drive entrance.

The kiosk welcomes visitors to Moely Prairie in Ho-Chunk, Spanish and English and was made possible through a sizable grant from the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin's C.D. Besadny Conservation Fund. Empire-Sauk Chapter member Ron Endres also contributed generously from proceeds garnered through the sale of his hand-crafted prairie seed necklaces. All labor was donated by Moely's four-member management team.

Text highlighting the history, cultural significance and overall importance of prairie ecosystems is interspersed with more than two dozen photographs — most taken on-site by Amy Chamberlin — of the native plant and animal species inhabiting Moely's 23.5 acres. Thanks to Alpha Graphics of Middleton, the overall look of the two panels is striking and inviting.

In their grant application, team members stressed the uniqueness of Moely Prairie, which is now a conservation "island" surrounded by human development. Three Sauk Prairie area schools are located within two miles of the remnant, which is already used frequently as an environmental education and field science resource. With this in mind, the management team made the interpretive panels comprehensive enough to serve as a substitute tour guide when a volunteer cannot be present to interpret Moely's



Moely land managers put up the finished kiosk.
(Photo by Amy Chamberlin)

many wonders for students. The following words from author Robin Wall Kimmerer, who gave the closing keynote address at this year's TPE conference, also grace the kiosk:

"Restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. It is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land. Therefore, reconnecting people and the landscape is as essential as establishing proper hydrology or cleaning up contaminants. It is medicine for the earth."

Invasives Group Starting Up

Willis Brown

One of the major concerns of ecological restoration is invasive species. The Invasive Plants Association of Wisconsin has promoted the formation of Cooperative Invasive Species Management Areas (CISMAs) throughout the state. CISMAs are loosely structured groups that primarily monitor the identity, location, spread and potential treatment of invasive plant species in a given area.

Recently, the Upper Sugar River Watershed Association received a grant to initiate a CISMA for Sauk, Dane, Iowa, Lafayette and Green counties. TPE has been asked to become a member of this new CISMA. The initial meeting of potential partners was held last December. If you're interested in becoming involved, contact Willis Brown at willisbrown55@gmail.com.

Glacial Prairie

Alice Mirk

Last year was certainly interesting, and I'm happy to report that prairie enthusiasm prevailed. Even with the need for masks and social distancing, we managed to hold work days on most of our sites and put in a total of 175 hours. We worked on State Natural Areas, privately owned and protected lands, lands we own and one site where we have a conservation easement.

We were blessed with several new members who are not only young compared to our veteran team but also enthusiastic and energetic. We're so happy to have them, as it allows us to view the work we do with fresh eyes. (See the article by Brooke McEwen elsewhere in this issue.) Many of our gray-ing volunteers have often wondered who will take our places. Even Walter is optimistic! While it's sometimes difficult to keep pace with the "young 'uns", we're doing our

best.

If we can maintain our current pace, 2021 should be a year of still greater achievements. We're looking forward to a burn at Benedict Prairie, as well as other burns we help with during the burn season, if the weather gods cooperate. As the COVID threat recedes, we hope to get back to working on our school sites as well as the UW-Milwaukee at Waukesha field station. We'd also like to plan some field trips for our new members to expose them to the wonderful and varied natural landscapes we help preserve.

Our chapter has provided letters of support to two organizations for grant applications. One is for a proposal to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Five Star Grant led by Waukesha County Parks and the Waukesha County Land Conservancy. Their proposal is titled, "Community-based Oak Ecosystem Recovery in the Mukwonago and Oconomowoc River Watersheds." The second letter is in support of the American Bird Conservancy's Regional Conservation Partnership Proposal to the National Resource Conservation Service. This is entitled, "Improving Oak Ecosystem Health in the Great Lakes Region." Both projects will play an important role in restoring, enhancing and managing Wisconsin's imperiled oak ecosystems at a landscape scale.

In addition, the second project will provide vital wildlife habitat for multiple species of birds with a conservation need. These include the cerulean warbler, red-headed woodpecker and Bell's vireo, which are known indicator species for habitat function and health. With these grants, we'll partner with both the Waukesha Parks system and the ABC to restore habitat for these species. Our volunteers may be busier than ever.

Our chapter may be small, but we're increasingly being recognized as an important cog in the wheel of prairie and oak savanna restoration in southeast Wisconsin. Stay tuned for a variety of opportunities for our members in the coming year.

Restoring Benedict Prairie

About 18 months ago, several prairie enthusiasts approached our chapter leadership about working on Benedict Prairie. Benedict is a small railroad prairie owned and managed by the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee Field Station. Management of the site had been curtailed for several years due to staff reduction at the university and a consequent need to prioritize management of their field station in Saukville. Our chapter signed an agreement with UW-M last year to take over manage-



Chapter volunteers working on the Karow property. L to R: John Shusterich, Brooke McEwen, Dale Karow, Michaela Rosenthal, Ava Reinholfer, Alison Reinholfer, Walter Mirk. (Photo by Alison Reinholfer)



Benedict Prairie is an old railroad right-of-way. (Photo by Alice Mirk)

ment of the prairie. A management plan was written with significant assistance and support from TPE's Landowner Services Coordinator, Dr. Dan Carter, and mutually agreed upon. Alan Eppers agreed to take on the coordination of workdays for Benedict Prairie, and a group of enthusiastic restorationists were ready to go.

This is an iconic site of about six acres, 100 feet wide and half a mile long, on what was once a right-of-way of the Kenosha-Silver Lake-Beloit branch line of the Burlington-Northwestern Railway. The right-of-way was fenced to protect it from plow and cow around 1860, and the tracks were in use until 1939. The rails were lifted for salvage in the early 1940s. The right-of-way was later sold to the Benedict family, owners of the adjacent farm. Fencing did protect

this strip so that a full variety of native species survived here. The prairie was surveyed in the 1950s by Dr. John Curtis and Dr. Hugh Ilitis. It was purchased in 1963 as the third project of the recently organized Wisconsin Chapter of the Nature Conservancy with funds donated by the Green Tree Garden Club of Milwaukee County.

An additional floristic survey of the site was conducted from 1988 to 1990. In all, 191 species representing 51 families were identified. These included purple milkweed (state endangered) and wild quinine (state threatened). This list was compared to two others compiled previously for the site. Compiling all three lists brought the total number of species recorded to 231, but a number of species appeared to have been extirpated.

The original vegetation of this strip was not entirely prairie, but it was typical of much of the rolling moraine land in that area. At the time, flat and poorly drained areas were prairie and the better-drained, coarser-soiled slopes supported savanna. The central half of the site is wet prairie along a marshy branch of the Des Plaines River. Both ends of the site rise onto moraine slopes with bur oaks and associated woodland species as well as mesic prairie flora. Thus, Benedict Prairie has a greater variety of plant species than if it were prairie alone.

The first step to reviving this site is to remove invasive brush. Our chapter purchased a brush cutter, and Alan went to work with his volunteers. So far, these volunteers have performed over 44 hours of brush cutting and chainsaw work. The work day schedule includes plans for a prescribed burn. Our chapter is determined to bring Benedict Prairie back to life so we can once again take a species inventory of this precious site. Stayed tuned for regular updates from Alan.

Northwest Illinois

Susan Lipnick

With COVID still around, our board of directors and our committees are meeting via video conferencing and conference calls when the weather doesn't allow us to meet outdoors. But work in the prairies still gets done year-round, and Zoe Pearce is settling into her role as NIPE's Land Manager.

Ed Strenski retired as land manager on December 31 (see article by John Day on page 6 of this issue). We wish him all the best!

We again plan to hold the "Native Plants Need Native

Pollinators" event at Hanley Savanna to coincide with National Pollinator Week (June 21-27). This event had to be postponed last summer due to COVID. We're pleased that Bev Paulson has agreed to be the presenter on Sunday, June 27. Our chapter webpage and Facebook page will have more information on the date and other details as they become finalized.

For other information about other NIPE goings-on, please see our chapter webpage: www.theprairieenthusiasts.org/northwest_illinois.

Prairie Sands

Ray Goehring

Like everyone, the Prairie Sands Chapter has been sheltering in place. Many of us are working on our own prairies, but as a chapter we're working on scheduling new private lands field trips and workdays for the upcoming year.

If you're a chapter member and want help with controlling invasive species, updating plant inventories or just learning about prairie management, send an email to our chapter's Communication Liaison Ray Goehring at raygoe@yahoo.com. She will help you set up a date or canvas the

rest of the chapter for management advice. Please note: our chapter does not have burn equipment or a TPE-sanctioned prescribed burn crew, but we can help you find professionals to clear woody invasive species in preparation for burning.

Dale and Beth Johnson will host a workday on their Marquette County prairie in Oxford on June 12. We'll be removing brush and pulling wild parsnip. More details will follow closer to the date.

Also, we're looking for volunteers to become the Chapter Chairperson and Communications Liaison / Facebook Administrator. Contact Ray at the above email if interested.

Southwest Wisconsin

Jack Kussmaul

After cancelling everything except work parties when COVID arrived last February, we're working to reschedule events for 2021. We hope to be able to hold a turtle workshop on June 26, and we're planning two days of private site tours later in the summer or early fall. We will also have more formal work parties once things start turning green.

We did hold two work parties at Eldred Prairie this winter, both focused on oak grubs that are threatening to crowd out everything else. The first, in November, was held to clear out the south-facing sandstone slope and allow other species to thrive. The second, on January 16, was on a steep slope in the southwest corner of the property. A healthy population of wild quinine in that area was being crowded out. We had a good turnout for both events, with the November event seeing about a half-dozen members of the UW-Platteville Reclamation Club joining forces with us.

We have formed a good relationship with the "Rec Club." We had a joint work party on the Platteville campus in

January to remove honeysuckle along Rountree Creek. This was accomplished under rather adverse conditions, because there was a wet heavy snow clinging to everything. Crawling under giant snow-covered honeysuckle bushes to get at the stems was wet and tedious work. Nevertheless, we look forward to more of these joint events in the future.

Other site stewards continue to do steady work on their properties to restore them to pre-settlement condition. These are the unsung heroes of our chapter.



Working in heavy snow with UW-Platteville Reclamation Club members. (Photo by Steve Querin-Schultz)



Dan Fisher and Jack Kussmaul at Eldred Prairie last November. (Photo by Steve Querin-Schultz)

St. Croix Valley

Evanne Hunt

Since most of the work we do outside in the winter is naturally socially distanced, we went ahead and scheduled some days at Alexander Oak Savanna. We cut down several red oaks along the south end (an old railroad bed) that were shading a large area of savanna flowers and grasses. It should make a huge difference this spring and summer.

The oaks, each about 40 years old, were incredibly heavy. We all got a good workout! Thank you to our volunteers: Harold Bend, Alex Bouthilet, Cheyenne Carlin, Katharine Grant, Wayne Huhnke, Evanne Hunt, Doug Lassen, Jerry Peterson, Dick Seebach, Fred Steffen and Jeremiah Walters.



Fred and the fire. (Photo by Evanne Hunt)



Evanne and Katharine socially distancing while cutting and stump-treating buckthorn. (Photo by Evanne Hunt)



Cheyenne tossing oak slices into the fire. (Photo by Evanne Hunt)

Welcome New Members

October 6 - February 28

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Artwork by Gary Eldred

The winner of our photo contest was Steve Hubner. See Steve's winning photo on the front of this issue. The other finalists were:



Sedge Meadow Wildflowers by Gary Shackelford



Great Spangled Fritillary on Hill's Thistle by Eric Preston



Untitled by Ben Behrens



What Pandemic? by Rob Baller



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