



The PRAIRIE PROMOTER

Igniting Relationships with the Land

Spring 2024

Fire Season

Learn how the timing and frequency of fires can stabilize or destabilize an ecosystem.



Plus

The art of fire

The transformative power of land stewardship

The Prairie Enthusiasts' first owned property



Another Prairie Island Protected in Wisconsin's Largest Archipelago

By Jim Rogala

The Prairie Enthusiasts seek to protect as many prairie remnants as possible, especially when they are part of a larger complex. In the Driftless Area, these complexes are often a series of noncontiguous bluff prairies on south- to west-facing slopes that are sometimes called archipelagos. The Wisconsin DNR has identified Rush Creek State Natural Area as a high-priority protection area, in part because of the extensive bluff prairies found along the Mississippi River. A little further south along the river, the Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC), owns and manages Sugar Creek Bluff, another State Natural Area with high-quality bluff prairies. Between these two properties are a series of privately-owned bluff prairies above Ferryville, WI.

In December we celebrated the news that The Prairie Enthusiasts acquired an 11-acre property with a high-

quality 3-acre bluff prairie remnant in this archipelago—now known as Marowski Bluff Prairie. This project was made possible with the help of the Wisconsin DNR's Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program, the Natural Resources Foundation and MVC.

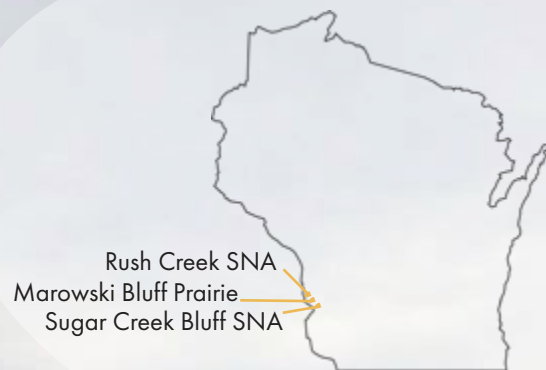
None of this would have been possible without the generosity of the landowner, Dr. Marowski. An extremely busy cardiologist from the Milwaukee area, Dr. Marowski treasured his visits to the Driftless Area often over the years, enjoying natural areas and trout fishing. These visits led to an interest in acquiring property in the region, especially one with a picturesque view of the Mississippi River. After finding and purchasing his 11 acres, Dr. Marowski recognized that the bluff prairie was of high conservation value, and he very generously decided to find a way to protect it. To pursue this, he first contacted MVC, and in June of 2022, MVC's Conservation Manager Chris Kirkpatrick contacted our Coulee Region Chapter to see if we were interested in protecting the property. After doing a visit with Chris, we saw the site as a perfect way for the chapter to become a partner with MVC and the DNR in protecting and stewarding one of the bluff prairies within this important archipelago.

Stewardship of the prairie began in earnest in July of 2022. Working with Dr. Marowski, Coulee Region Chapter volunteers cut sumac in early July and August in 2022 and 2023. Through a private lands grant, the State Natural Areas crew helped us remove cedars and large trees on the prairie. Now the chapter will continue restoration by removing trees and brush that have encroached upon the open prairie. The chapter plans to look for additional grant funding to hire contractors to do some tasks but will schedule workdays for volunteers to contribute to the restoration efforts.

"I believe that The Prairie Enthusiasts have the best expertise and commitment to preserve and manage this land," Dr. Marowski observed, and in another incredible act of generosity he established a land management endowment to assure an ongoing source of funding for our stewardship activities now and into the future.

Marowski Bluff Prairie contains a high-quality prairie with a full complement of bluff prairie plants such as dwarf blazing star, silky and aromatic aster, hoary puccoon, short green milkweed, leadplant and prairie dropseed. "I'm very happy to save this unique piece of land as it represents not only disappearing habitat but also the very character and uniqueness of the Driftless Area," Dr. Marowski enthused. "The strategic location of the land between Rush Creek State Natural Area and Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area facilitates migration of many species of animals between both areas". That was evident in our sighting of a black rat snake crossing the road by the site during one of our visits. The site's position within the large archipelago also provides potential for exchange of plant genetics across the otherwise isolated bluff prairies.

With gratitude for Dr. Marowski and our partners, The Prairie Enthusiasts is pleased to announce that Marowski Bluff Prairie is now open to the public (for uses allowed within the Village of Ferryville). Learn more on our website, and stay tuned to the Events Calendar on The Prairie Enthusiasts website for field trips and workday opportunities soon! ■



The PRAIRIE PROMOTER

CONTENTS
Spring 2024, VOL 37, NO. 1

2 Another Prairie Island
Protected...



6 President's Message

8 Thomas Wet Prairie

The first property owned by The Prairie Enthusiasts has now received decades of stewardship, making it lush with biodiversity. *Photo by Kurt Lufka of Jim Sime patrolling a burn at Thomas Wet Prairie.*

7 Executive Director's
Message

9 Unique Volunteer
Opportunity

12 Let Them Be (poem)



13 Spring Into Nature
Podcasts

22 Volunteer Profile:
Ralph Henry

14 Stability Part One

Prescribed fire can function as a stabilizer or a destructive disturbance depending on how we use it.



24 Positive Changes on
Pleasant Bluff

Dedicated landowners and volunteers are transforming this steep bluff from a brush-choked ecosystem, to a diverse prairie. *Photo by Paul Richards.*



27 2024 Conference
Recap

39 Prairie Enthusiasts
Remembered

40 Welcome New
Members

The Prairie Enthusiasts

10 A Journey of Love and Respect

WL Nettelhorst is a stone sculptor, prairie steward and vegetable gardener. He lives on the eastside of Winnebago. Through the federal CRP program in 2000, he created 25 acres of native prairie grasses and forbs and planted 20,000 trees. *Prairie Spirit* is his first environmental sculpture.



20 Capturing The Life of The Land

"For me walking the land is kind of the most fundamental act in the relationship to the land... if the land is the medium this is the simplest, most direct art," says photographer and land steward, Kevin Lair.



30 Chapter Events & Updates

Chapters had a busy 2023. Prairie Enthusiasts like Michaela Rosenthal engaged in educational events and burns. *Photo by an unknown burn crew member with The Nature Conservancy.*



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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Southwest Wisconsin – Jack Kussmaul
St. Croix Valley – Evanne Hunt

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Cover photo of Eastern tiger swallowtail butterflies by Gary Shackelford, winner of The Prairie Enthusiasts 2024 Photo Contest.



The accreditation seal is awarded to land trusts meeting the highest national standards for excellence and conservation permanence.



President's Message

On a More Positive Note

Jim Rogala, President

My last President's Message was a bit of a downer. I talked about frustrations we as individuals might have while trying to make a difference in prairie conservation. I offered up methods of dealing with that frustration, one method being to concentrate on successes. As Board President, along with Board members and chapter leadership, I also keep a keen eye on the state of the organization. In this message, I will highlight an organizational success that was a pleasant surprise for me.

In the 2023 spring issue of *The Prairie Promoter*, my message was "Getting the Right Mix." I was referring to having a larger team of professional staff to supplement our hard-working volunteers. My message ended with the reality that we need to have increased financial giving to build and maintain the Chapter Support staff needed to provide the services we desire. This growth was clearly laid out in the Board's strategy planning, which included rather lofty goals for revenue and support staff.

Thanks to the incredible generosity of our donors, we had a successful 2023 that allowed for growth in our staff. We now have staff assigned to provide a full range of services and have started to make progress in areas such as: writing management plans; protection project oversight; grants program; recognition of our donors; outreach communications; financial records; easement monitoring oversight; burn program oversight; and donor (member) reporting.

These and other tasks were primarily performed in the distant past by volunteers but now the burden on our volunteers has been relieved somewhat. This allows our volunteers to concentrate on other tasks, with land management, protection opportunities and education being their focus.

I realize that building on this success will only be possible with continued generosity from our donors. However, what we accomplished together last year gives me optimism that The Prairie Enthusiasts can sustain a great Chapter Support team that allows the organization to further our mission of land protection, land management, and education. Fundraising is not always the most exciting thing we do, but it is what fuels our mission and will continue to be critical to building a thriving, successful conservation organization. Many thanks to all who gave to help make our shared vision a reality. ■



Chapter Support Team at a day of service in honor of Indigenous Peoples' Day, collecting seed at Mounds View Grassland.
Photo by Rich Henderson



People enjoying Weaver Dunes SNA
Photo by Dan Winkler.



Executive Director's Message

Taking the Long View

Debra Behrens, Executive Director

I live in an enviable area. The trill of grasshopper sparrows will soon be returning to prairies. Insects will emerge from plant stems and small tunnels in the soil. And The Prairie Enthusiasts will be igniting fires, clearing the way for new life to emerge.

I'm often struck by the beauty of this interplay, seeing people caring for nature in the places you live and the abundance of biodiversity that results from your care. Further, that this beauty only exists because of decades of passion and hard work from our dedicated volunteer land stewards.

Fire-dependent ecosystems like prairies and savannas developed alongside humans, and they require our care in perpetuity. The high-quality remnants we enjoy today exist because Indigenous People cared for them for thousands of years. They persist because early members of The Prairie Enthusiasts sought out and saved them decades ago. And they continue to thrive because our community has committed to steward and protect them by controlling brush, setting fires and sowing seeds over many years.

Reflecting on the positive impact people have had on these rare and increasingly threatened remnants gives me hope for what we can still do today. Our mission to save these ecosystems can feel daunting given the challenges and pressures we face, but I believe that the actions we take now and over the next 10-15 years will define what is possible for those who will carry on this work when we're gone.

Degraded land adjacent to our protected remnants may one day become thriving ecosystems again. Islands of rich biodiversity, like our newly protected Marowski Bluff Prairie, may one day be expanded to form landscape-scale habitats (see pg 2, *Another Prairie Island Protected*). Remnants that would otherwise be lost may still be saved.

What is possible applies to the geographic boundaries of our community, too. Earlier this year, our Northwest Illinois Chapter expanded its region to include Whiteside County. For years, chapter members have been connecting with dedicated land stewards in the region and helping with land stewardship. I'm excited to see how The Prairie Enthusiasts community will develop in Whiteside County and how many more acres of habitat may yet be saved.

As I contemplate our goals for this upcoming year (ambitious as ever!), I hold reverence for our community's leaders, past and present. Your enthusiasm and devotion to our mission created pathways for achievements that couldn't have been imagined at the time. I hope that all our community members feel a spark of possibility with every action you take to protect and restore fire-dependent ecosystems. I'm looking forward to all we will accomplish together! ■

Thomas Wet Prairie

Where We Became a Land Trust

Photos and Story by Kristin Westad



For decades, the Thomas family let cattle spend summers in the wet prairie. Far from the barn, and too squishy for easy walking, cattle didn't graze the land very hard. The Thomas family is a bunch of nature lovers. They never installed drain tile or treated the pasture with herbicide. Their gentle approach to farming sustained more than 200 native plant species on this little bit of land.

In the late 1980s, the Southwest Wisconsin Prairie Enthusiasts purchased 13.6 acres from the Thomas family. A supportive couple funded the entire acquisition and chose to shine the light on the land rather than themselves. Before then, Prairie Enthusiast volunteers had explored, documented and managed prairie remnants, but they hadn't acquired any land for permanent protection. At Thomas Wet Prairie, The Prairie Enthusiasts became a landowner for the first time.

Some visitors think the preserve's name is not quite right. Is it a wet prairie? Lake sedge dominates more space than cordgrass. Prairie lovers have identified 16 members of the sedge family growing there. Sedge wrens and frogs are loud reminders that the place is at

Bright pink Joe-pye weed in full display at Thomas Wet Prairie.

least as much sedge meadow as it is prairie. It is lush. Cowbane, tall meadow rue, Joe-pye-weed and sawtooth sunflower load it up. In the most dazzling spots, the blazing star, mountain mint, Culver's-root and Canada anemone help each other create a frenzy of color and nectar. I'm particularly fond of the fenny spots where swamp lousewort, bottle gentian, wild indigo and monkeyflower keep each other company.

Thomas Wet sits in the floodplain of the Fennimore Fork of the Blue River, which the Wisconsin DNR calls Castle Rock Creek. Curlicue oxbows show where the stream has meandered over time. Some years, water stands in the remnant all summer. Other years, it only has flashes of wetness framed by solid weeks or months when I can walk without getting muddy. Between sedge hummocks and sunflower stems, thousands of crayfish chimneys rise out of the mud. I rarely see living crayfish, but often see shells left on the ground after someone has eaten the tender parts.

Thomas Wet Prairie never had the heavy brush that dims many of our prairie remnants. In addition to one big open-grown bur oak, it has a few little patches of mature willow and hazel. Reed canary grass is the biggest drag on Thomas Wet's native plants. To weaken its grip, volunteers use lots of fire with a little interseeding and some careful herbicide treatment. Each year, volunteers burn half of the preserve while the reed canary grass shows a lot of green foliage. That is usually in May. This approach throws reed canary's energy into the wind and removes the leaf litter that it uses to smother its neighbors. It provides a chance for the prairie plants to come up for air and sun. We haven't evicted reed canary grass—not even close. We've seen natives like cordgrass and blazing star and old-field thistle expand their populations.

When I started serving as site steward for Thomas Wet Prairie, it had two dense clones of cattails and some scattered little patches. I removed most of the small patches myself and brought in a crew to treat the dense clones. I prefer working with a sharp hoe so I can listen to the birds and breathe clean air. The professionals felled the cattails quickly with brush cutters. We treated the

stumps with imazapyr two years in a row. In the third year, a trivial scattering of cattails remained. Lake sedge, ditch stonecrop and boneset now live where there was a dense clone. Not wanting to completely eliminate the genus, I protect a few cattails around small pools of open water.

I often feel thankful for the many people who have taken care of Thomas Wet Prairie over the years. It's a refuge for crayfish and louseworts and the folks who love them. ■

Kristin has been a site steward of Thomas Wet Prairie for nine years. Through the stewardship of Kristin and other volunteers, this property is an abundant ecosystem. Visit and enjoy its lush diversity this spring; just 1.5 hours from Madison, WI, near Muscoda. Visit our website for details and directions at ThePrairieEnthusiasts.org



Blazing star and Culver's root at Thomas Wet Prairie

Unique Volunteer Opportunity

The Prairie Enthusiasts Seek Monitors

By Nate Lee

The Prairie Enthusiasts has taken on responsibility for protecting important natural sites and their conservation values in perpetuity. Each year we monitor our preserves and the conservation easements we hold with private properties.

Site Monitoring is a unique volunteer opportunity that allows you to experience our sites at a personal level, usually spending time alone exploring the land at your own pace. Your main goal as a Site Monitor is to hike the property each year and take photos of your visit to track how the land evolves over time and note evidence of damage, improper use, and/or encroachment by neighbors. You will be trained on software to easily track your visit and report anything you discover during your hike. This program offers a truly special experience and allows you to connect with our protected sites.

We are always looking for new volunteers who might be interested in becoming Site Monitors, either now or in the future.

We are currently in need of Site Monitors within these chapters:

- Coulee Region
- Empire-Sauk
- Northwest Illinois
- Prairie Bluff

If you are interested in this position, or have more questions, please contact us at Info@ThePrairieEnthusiasts.org. We look forward to hearing from you! ■



A Journey of Love and Respect The Prairie House Studio: Prairie and Prairie Spirit

Story and Creation by WL Nettelhorst

My connection to prairie, Earth, and bison is deep and palpable. My father, Louis Nettelhorst, gave me nature. Dad was the Scoutmaster for Troop 17 in Park Ridge, Illinois. He was a vegetable gardener and also grew beautiful roses (Chicago Peace was a favorite). My brother and I earned nearly every Nature merit badge. He'd point out a bird and we identified it. To this day (I'm 77), if I see a bird, I have a guess as to what it is (often correct). With his guidance my brother and I earned Eagle Scout. Our sister was a member of Camp Fire Girls with all the same guidance and encouragement. This is the foundation of my love of nature, flowers, birds, and gardening. And prairie!

I had a home on Lake Winnebago when, in 1985, I had the opportunity to buy the farm acreage behind us. So many things intersected—the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the possibility of creating a 3/4-acre pond and the possibility of retiring to Fond du Lac. The property was accepted into the CRP, and the first 10 years' requirement was planting Timothy and Brome grasses, which feels like a big mistake now. The renewal

contract offered cost sharing on planting trees and/or three plantings of prairie grasses and forbs. My deep nature love kicked in, and I asked myself, "Is it possible that I could walk in a field of flowers? To stand and turn 360 degrees and see only prairie flowers?" That dream finally happened in July of 2017. While looking for seed, I got connected with Connie Ramthun, my "Prairie Lady." Her guidance, assistance, and mentoring has everything to do with the realization of a dream.

In 2000 we burned, killed, let grow up, and killed again the CRP grasses. Connie used soil maps and created bags of soil-area-specific native Wisconsin wildflowers—39 kinds of wildflowers! The Wisconsin DNR had done the initial burn and came back with a drill planter for the three grasses and three forbs required by CRP. Connie created a planting map, provided hardwood saw dust and instructions. My wife Pam and I used utility marker flags to break the area into one-eighth-acre sections. Three of my friends from Chicago came up for a weekend of planting and feasting. Fred and Liz Barnett mixed the seed with 5-gallon buckets of sawdust. Each group of buckets had specific positions to

be used. I delivered the buckets with my tractor from the barn to the sections with two buckets in each corner. My friend Jeff Dengler and Pam hand-cast the seed. It wasn't work; it was shared love and joy, and the possibility of what was to come.

Jeff is an artist. He comes to The Prairie House Studio and our home and stays four days at a time several times a year, and we create art together. Jeff is a painter and I am a stone sculptor. Jeff talks art history and we talk philosophy and consciousness-journey. Pam and Jeff talk foods and meals, flower gardening, plants and plantings. We saunter the winding path through the prairie and talk about the 23 years of the prairie—what we have observed, where it is going, and mostly how dear it is to the three of us.

One of these times, in 2020, after listening to me complain about the invasive willow and red-twig dogwood, Jeff did a colored pencil sketch entitled "Build a Bison Fest." Bison are so significant to and are the image of, native prairies. Nothing speaks louder about the North American original prairie, the history, and it's people (the stewards), than the American Bison. The recent PBS film "The American Buffalo" by Ken Burns captures the bison's and prairie's story. I experienced a lot of sadness and heartache while taking in the four hours of this show. Ken Burns brought to reality how, sadly, our country's history, as wonderful as it is in some ways, is not the glamorous myths I learned growing up—Cowboys and Indians, Buffalo Bill, conquering the plains, agriculture, the railroad, taming the West, civilization and progress. Young and innocent, I drank it all in. However, a lifetime of experience and consciousness-growth later, "The American Buffalo" shines a bright light on the shadow side of our history. Ken Burns collected the realities and sad truths that I have learned over the years.

I have a dear artist friend, Laurie Haussmann Whitehawk, who is a descendant of the Winnebago Nation. The original homeland of her Nation is where The Prairie House Studio Prairie is. She has visited and blessed me with two of her paintings. I know that I am blessed and privileged to live here. One of Laurie's paintings (which was part of an international show in Spain) was of Bison. She has shared with me a banned

book, called *A Century of Dishonor*, about the forced journey of her people from Wisconsin to a location in the parched Dakotas. Only one of the two paddle boats full of her people ever showed up, and then not being able to farm the parched soil, they trekked to Kansas to be taken in by another Nation.

From my father, to Laurie, to a friend bringing me to Fond du Lac, to Connie, to sand sculptures with my kids, to stone sculpting with Zimbabwe sculptors, to art with Jeff—this is my journey of creating and meeting *Prairie Spirit*.

Prairie Spirit is a full size (6'H x 8'6"L x 4'W) sculpture of a male American Bison. It is created completely from the materials found in the Prairie House Studio Prairie,



Jeff Dengler's sketch that helped inspire the creation of *Prairie Spirit*.

with the exception of a wooden sawhorse for the base. The architecture is willow, dogwood, and grapevine from the Prairie (aggressive species, although native). Prairie Dock leaves are the majority of his skin, and at least 10 different dried prairie flowers form the coat. There is no glue or chicken wire. The woven willow switches and singular straps hold all the dried parts together. It took two years from Jeff's sketch until I started collecting materials in September of 2022. Then he came to life toward the end of December and was completed the 12th of January, just in time to be submitted to the 2023 Wisconsin Visual Artists (WVA) Perspectives show at Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts in Fond du Lac, WI. He received 2nd Place, among about 900 entries. He is currently

one of 60 juried entries in the Wisconsin Artists Biennial 2024 and will be on display at the Museum of Wisconsin Art (MOWA) in West Bend, WI. from Feb 3 until April.

What I want you to know is that *Prairie Spirit* is a presence to be experienced. It is most accurate to say *Prairie Spirit* came through me rather than "I" created this sculpture. He has three names/titles. As I was working on him, he was *Bison* to me. He really raised my awareness of how much I and others say "Buffalo." Then, that day in December when he came to life, as I entered the studio and was confronted with him, I shouted in awe, "You Beast!" From that point forward he was *The Beast*. If you get the chance to encounter him, you'll know what I am saying—a very friendly Beast. And then, on the morning of the WVA Perspectives art show, a voice—and I suspect his voice—spoke in me: *Prairie Spirit*.

You might notice that his head is cocked just a

little bit, and kind of looking at me while eating grasses. I created the structure of the head using grapevine. Suzanne Anderson, a willow weaver who showed me how to use willow, told me grapevine is sticky. That's how I got the shaping. Well, grapevine also has a mind of it's own, not unlike *The Beast*. No matter how much attaching and pulling I did, his head kept turning. Clearly this is how he wanted to be. Who am I to say no to *The Beast*!

He does have a smile and an inviting yet intensely strong look to me. I feel a deep soul connection. The people who see and encounter him stop and often back up a bit. He almost requires that you take him in and acknowledge his presence. It's as though you have run into a real Bison accidentally. There is often awe, and then questions and comments. If I am there, conversations happen: how he was made, how long it took, what kinds of prairie flowers and plants, and the story of The Prairie House Studio Prairie itself. One 8-year-old girl said to her mother, as she crawled under him, "Even dead things can be beautiful."

My heart just leaps with joy when experiencing the light that goes on inside adults and children as they hear about *Prairie Spirit* and the prairie he came from, the prairie that I love so much. ■



Let Them Be

Poem and Photo by Patricia Kemmerick

While hiking in the woods
I discovered wildflowers
So delicate and lovely
Small and enchanting
If only we let them be
The world would realize
How special they are
The moments of happiness they bring
To those who
Come upon them
Who stop and pause long enough
To realize that beauty
Can be found in small things
In out of way places
That wildflowers are here
Because Someone cared enough
To let them be



Spring into Nature Podcasts

By Jessica Bizub, Chair of the Education Committee

Most days, I listen to 1-3 podcast episodes. They're a convenient way to learn more about the world while completing everyday tasks like washing dishes and driving. Podcasts are (still) booming: in 2023, 31% of Americans 12 and older said they had listened to a podcast in the last week (Edison Research, "The Infinite Dial 2023"), and as of January 2024, Apple Podcasts hosted over 2 million podcasts. Within that vast ocean of content are some gems Prairie Enthusiasts might enjoy. Here are my current favorites:



Good Fire, Amy Cardinal Christianson and Matthew Kristoff

This podcast explores the ecological benefits and cultural aspects of intentionally lit fires around the world, with an emphasis on discussing issues faced by Indigenous Peoples in maintaining cultural fire practices.



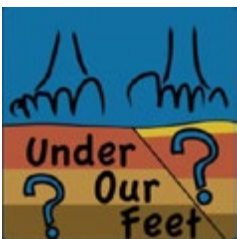
In Defense of Plants, Matt Candeias

All about flora, *In Defense of Plants* focuses on our fascinating botanical world with detail and enthusiasm. Topics include the relationship between oaks, gall wasps and ants; floral mimicry; orchids; the importance of old growth grasslands; and microbe-plant relationships.



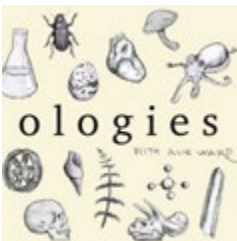
Minnesota DNR Prairie Pod, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

Focused on tall grass prairies, the *Minnesota DNR Prairie Pod* provides a wealth of information, including starting a prairie from scratch, monitoring progress, the reptiles of prairies, wetlands, and the ecosystem benefits of grasslands.



Under Our Feet, Rudy Molinek

Season 1 dives into Wisconsin's geologic history from the earliest mountain-building events through current research on inland freshwaters. Rudy's engaging storytelling vibe and guest experts bring the unseen world under our feet to vivid life.



Honorable Mention: Ologies, Allie Ward

Technically more a science podcast than a nature podcast, *Ologies* is my all-time favorite and deserves a mention here. Allie's curiosity is infectious as she interviews experts on all things imaginable, including clouds, lightning, laughter, squids, crow funerals, and the seasons.

All are available wherever you get your podcasts (Apple, Spotify, Castro, Overcast, etc.). ■

Stability Part One: Why I Recommend Frequent Dormant Season Burning

Story and Photos by Dan Carter

Prairie and Oak Ecosystems Depend on Stability

A central organizing concept of my ecological education was that prairie and oak ecosystems are “disturbance dependent.” This view emphasizes that we stop these ecosystems from becoming something else and deemphasizes that they are something in and of themselves—old growth. Disturbance-centric thinking remains prominent in prairie and oak ecosystem science and management. For example, under the heading “Managing Prairies” the Minnesota DNR website¹ states:

“Prairie is a ‘disturbance-driven’ ecosystem: plants and animals have adapted to withstand and even thrive with regular disturbance—fire, grazing, and periodic droughts. Each disturbance favors different plants and animals, so it is important to include a variety of disturbance types, timing, and frequency.”

The advice to mix things up sounds reasonable, disturbances do favor different plants and animals, and certain events or conditions must occur to prevent oak and prairie ecosystems from becoming something else.

The problem is that disturbance² can simplify ecosystems and promote species that are not conservation priorities at the expense of the old growth that we would like to conserve or emulate. Given what we know about historical structure, composition, and the individual ecologies of the species that comprise old-growth prairie and oak ecosystems, I believe that the prevailing view about how these ecosystems sustain themselves—disturbance—is wrong. Instead, stability should be a central organizing idea guiding our stewardship.

Centering management around a core principle of stability does not mean doing less. Indigenous Peoples’ use of dormant season fire and its interaction with landscape, climate, and biota was the lattice over which our prairie and oak ecosystems came together over thousands of years. Managing for stability means keeping this in mind and building an understanding of how it governs ecological processes. In this article I will discuss prescribed fire, and how it can function as a stabilizer or a destructive disturbance depending on how we use it. I intend to discuss other management practices in turn.

*A burned portion of Black Earth Rettenmund prairie in spring. This prairie is divided into three burn units, two of which are burned in the dormant season each year on a rotating basis. Low intensity is evident from the un-combusted little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) in the lower right.*





Frequent Dormant Season Fire is Stabilizing; Infrequent, Intense, and Growing Season Fire is Destabilizing

First, recognize that critical areas of fire ecology in Midwestern prairie and oak ecosystems are forgotten, understudied or not studied through the posing of questions and collection of data that informs our mission. Synthesis of what we do know is also in short supply. What follows is my earnest attempt using applicable science, cases of success and failure, and historical information to explain why I often advocate for very frequent³ dormant season burning. This topic is also difficult to flatten into a linear narrative, such are the ecological relationships. Many threads could be drawn from this that merit their own separate discussions.

I don't refer to prescribed fire as a tool. A Pulaski is a tool. Fire is an integral part of Upper Midwestern prairie and oak ecosystems. Fire is their primary stabilizing agent and was probably the greatest single consumer of their plant production in the past (Wendt et al. 2023⁴). The more frequently contemporary Midwestern prairie and oak ecosystems burn in the dormant season, the more they retain historical or old-growth composition over time (Towne and Owensby 1984,⁵ seasonality of fire; Milbauer and Leach 2007,⁶ Bowles and Jones 2013,⁷ and Alstad et al. 2016,⁸ frequency of burns mostly in early spring or fall). See my article in the 2023 fall issue of *The Prairie Promoter*⁹ for a discussion specifically about how fire exclusion and altered fire seasonality have affected prairie grass species composition. With enough dormant season fire and other appropriate management, incredibly diverse and complex examples of prairie and

oak ecosystems have recovered and persist. The Prairie Enthusiasts' Black Earth-Rettenmund Prairie and Sugar River Savanna are excellent examples. Unfortunately, few places are managed this way. We need more demonstrative examples for science and inspiration.¹⁰ Sites burned too infrequently lose old-growth-associated composition and structure—conservative¹¹ plant species and the fauna they support, so do sites that receive too many growing season fires. Hopefully, what follows provides insights into how lack of fire and growing season fire can be destabilizing.

Most historical accounts describe ignitions preceding Indigenous Peoples' displacement as anthropogenic, autumnal,¹² and frequent over large areas (Stewart 2002¹³; Wilhelm and Rericha 2007,¹⁴ 2012¹⁵; McLain et al. 2021¹⁶). Wilhelm and Rericha refer to this as the "ancient, culturally mediated rhythm," and it prevented smothering thatch and litter accumulation, reduced fire intensity (especially duration), and minimized growing season nutrient availability. Fire in the dormant season is not unlike frost to prairie or oak ecosystems, something that in its proper season falls within the parameters that governed their original formation and subsequent evolution. Fidelity to that seasonal rhythm is not anachronistic; it is important for the restoration and maintenance of prairie and oak ecosystems. It has served us well as the climate has changed dramatically over the last several decades, and it will probably continue to do so if we allow it.

There is disagreement between historical accounts and scientific estimates of fire frequency based on fire scars (e.g., Allen et al. 2011¹⁷), which typically estimate fire-return intervals of several years to a decade. The fire



A fire-starved remnant prairie that persisted long enough to be protected because haying prevented build-up of smothering thatch and removed nutrients.



A close-up showing the deep accumulation of thatch in the fire-starved remnant prairie. It would be difficult to burn at this point without producing high fire intensity, particularly long duration of burning near the soil surface.

regimes that best-maintain prairie and oak ecosystems on the contemporary landscape lend strong support to the historical accounts. Fire scar studies capture fire events sufficiently intense to scar oaks on landscape positions where trees historically occurred—not prairies. Very frequent or annual fires in oak woodlands have low intensity due to reduced fuel loads and may fail to scar oak trees and subsequently be detected in the fire scar record (McEwan et al. 2006,¹⁸ Knapp et al. 2017¹⁹). Climate change and other anthropogenic changes at scales ranging from local to global may also necessitate that we burn differently, regardless of historical frequency. We should strive to do what works, regardless which estimates of historical frequency are right.

The benign removal of litter and thatch that would otherwise smother and weaken the sod of native graminoids and forbs typical of prairies and oak ecosystems is among the most important stabilizing roles of fire. When prairie fire is too infrequent, thatch accumulation thins the herbaceous vegetation and “prairie understory” species fade while composition shifts in favor of taller species and those with longer-elongating rhizomes that can grow up through the debris (e.g., Weaver 1952²⁰). A similar phenomenon occurs in remnant oak woodlands, which support continuous grassy/sedgy, often forb-rich herbaceous vegetation. Without removal of oak leaf litter by fire or another agent like wind (as on convex topography and windswept slopes), many woodland herbaceous species are smothered. Midland shooting star (*Primula meadia*) is an example from both prairies and woodlands that is diminished in this way. When searching for remnant woodland vegetation at long fire-starved sites, I’ve

learned to seek topography that is subject to removal of fallen leaf litter by wind. Perhaps because this is such a plain mechanism, direct smothering effects of leaf litter are under-researched in woodland ecosystems (but see Sydes and Grime 1981,²¹ Vander Yacht et al. 2020²²). Once the herbaceous sod in a prairie, savanna, or woodland is thinned and degraded, it becomes more vulnerable to invasion and woody encroachment.

Thatch and leaf litter don’t only smother. Increased fuel loads lead to greater fire intensity as fire burns down through accumulated debris. This can injure herbaceous species whose regenerating buds are held at or above the soil surface, species like little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) and cause greater harm to certain invertebrates overwintering at or just below the soil surface (e.g., Dana 1991²³). Intense fire can injure mature, healthy oak trees and lead to abrupt changes in canopy closure. In relatively nutrient poor oak and pine ecosystems, long periods without fire can lead to duff development (an organic layer below the leaf litter), and when trees proliferate roots in the duff, fire can subsequently consume those roots with lethal results (Carpenter et al. 2021²⁴).

Frequent prairie fires can reduce nitrogen availability (e.g., Ojima et al. 1993²⁵) through volatilization, and the same may be true in woodlands where fire is frequent and consumes primarily fine fuels. Frequent fire may also contribute higher carbon to nitrogen ratios in oak litter, which can then immobilize more nitrogen and reduce nitrogen availability (Hernández and Hobbie 2008²⁶), but it does not necessarily lead to nutrient losses from the ecosystem



Excessive leaf litter accumulation in an oak woodland.



Both high intensity and growing season fires have destabilized this former savanna.

(Sharenbroch 2010²⁷). Conversely, adding nitrogen destabilizes prairie composition (Koerner et al. 2016²⁸). Old-growth vegetation in fire-dependent ecosystems is comprised largely of species that rely more on year-to-year survival versus annual reproductive output or seed banks for population persistence. Old-growth vegetation also tends to be nutrient efficient and produce slower-decomposing, flammable litter. Dormant season fire sustains that vegetation by removing accumulated detritus without significant injury to established herbaceous plants. Conversely, the strategy of most weedy species is to persist in the seed bank or disperse widely and respond to available nutrients and light by growing and reproducing rapidly. The litter they produce tends to be less flammable and decompose rapidly, which promotes faster nutrient cycling and greater nutrient availability. Growing season fires cook the aboveground living tissues of conservative herbaceous plants. In addition to that direct harm, which can be substantial and lead to compositional changes related to plant growth form and regeneration strategy, it results in the hard-won nutrients present in their tissues and light intercepted by their foliage being made available. This creates an environment where soil warmth, light, and nutrient cues align to encourage the establishment of opportunistic, weedy species. Nitrogen (nitrate), for example, serves as a germination cue for raspberries (e.g., Jobidon 1993²⁹) and a variety of herbaceous weeds, particularly in combination with light (Soltani et al. 2022³⁰). Heat from fire also has more opportunity to penetrate the soil during the growing season, because the latent heat of water buffers soil temperature, and near-surface soil moisture content usually decreases as the growing season proceeds. Exposure to heat can break seed dormancy in smooth sumac (Li et al. 1999³¹), which I think is worth considering! Where late spring or summer burning has occurred and sumac is on the landscape, look for sumac seedlings. Setting the flora aside, greater direct negative impacts of growing season burning on certain fauna are well known (e.g., Harris et al. 2020³²); these magnify tensions between the use of prescribed fire and rare animal species. Dormant season burning minimizes them.

Conservation-oriented land managers often burn during the growing season to maximize injury to unwanted woody vegetation. The evidence that this makes a meaningful difference is scant. Meunier et al. (2021)³³ showed decreases in resprouts per individual (not mortality) for northern pin oak (*Quercus ellipsoidalis*) and bush honeysuckle (*Lonicera spp.*) with August burning

relative to April or June burning, but they found no similar benefit for common buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*). Hartnett and Wilson (2011)³⁴ found that spring and summer growing season burns led to increases in smooth sumac relative to fall and winter burns.

Another argument for burning during the growing season is that it can be associated with increased herbaceous plant richness and primary productivity.³⁵ These may be go-to response variables for research ecologists and agronomists, but they tell us little about ecological integrity³⁶ and can indicate ecosystem degradation. As fire-dependent ecosystems degrade their richness is a function of extirpation of the species that were originally present and colonization by opportunistic species or those associated with other ecosystem types.^{7,8} For example, widely dispersed woodland species like stickseed (*Hackelia virginiana*) can accompany woody encroachment into the prairie. Inventories of degrading sites are often packed with such species—even while the original species are hanging on by a thread. Likewise, primary productivity can increase with ecosystem degradation—even when an ecosystem undergoes profound change that impairs other ecosystem functions and resilience (De Leo and Levin 1997).³⁷ Imagine a sedge meadow that transitions to Phragmites dominance. Productivity is used as a measure of ecosystem efficiency, but the sun's energy does not just go into biomass production; it also fuels production of secondary metabolites, which are the basis for countless specialized interactions between plants, fungi, bacteria, and both invertebrate and vertebrate fauna. High quality prairie and oak ecosystem herbaceous sods are often low in stature, but that does not mean that they are thermodynamically inefficient. They are just doing different things—more interesting things if you ask me! Increased productivity aboveground may be indicative of nutrient availability destabilizing composition by causing a shift from belowground competition to aboveground competition for light (e.g., Wilson and Tilman 1993;³⁸ Goldberg et al. 2017³⁹), which favors species with opportunistic strategies.

Frequent dormant season burning can keep most woody encroachment at bay when the sod is strong, and frequent dormant season burning results in a strong sod. When they occur together, dormant season fire and high integrity herbaceous sods are stable and autocatalytic. For example, quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) has remained a minor presence at Sugar River Savanna for fifty years with near-annual burning.⁴⁰ Aspen would most

likely overwhelm a similar site in the absence of frequent fire, but the herbaceous sod there is tightly interwoven. The same is true for sumac in more degraded Flint Hills prairie in Kansas.³³ Upon cessation of frequent fire, species like aspen, smooth sumac, and gray dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*) quickly take over, if they have a toehold, and the ecosystem changes states. This isn't because fire is ineffective. It's because very frequent dormant season fire is a defining part of the autocatalytic system, and it is underutilized.

Frequent dormant season burns stabilize prairie and oak ecosystem composition, structure, and ecological processes by removing smothering debris and minimizing growing season nutrient availability without injury to conservative, old growth vegetation. Are there situations where less frequent fires, or disturbance-inducing intense or growing season fires are appropriate? I can think of examples related to specific management needs or goals. Many are applicable to degraded sites where conservation of one or a few species or the need to generate income outweigh other considerations in the short term. Those instances have merit, but such decisions should be based on an understanding of the relevant ecological processes and both direct and indirect effects. Historically, disturbance fires did occur. Some fire scars were laid down during the growing season. Lightning can ignite summer fires in drought years. Those fires may have had important effects on ecosystem structure, composition, and processes in the past, but the fire-dependent ecosystems of the past were also buffered by intact ecological landscapes free of invasive species. Remaining prairie and oak ecosystems can no longer rely on landscape ecological processes for resilience. This should give us pause when we consider deviating from the "ancient, culturally mediated rhythm" to mix things up, hit woody vegetation hard, or simply get more fire on the ground. ■

Sugar River Savanna has been managed with near-annual early spring (dormant) fire for fifty years.

Check out this article on our website's blog to see Dan Carter's information references.

Go to: ThePrairieEnthusiasts.org/Blog



Capturing the Life of the Land

Story and Photos by Kevin Lair

I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs.
- Jean Jacques Rousseau (1782)

Walking as an act of creative pursuit, philosophical inquiry, and political expression is well established in history. Rebecca Solnit highlighted walking as alignment among the body, mind, and world. Michael de Certeau asserts the walk as “a spatial acting out of the place.” A particular version of this “acting out of the place” that is practiced at the Westbrook Artists’ Site (WAS) is the “burn walk.” The walking encompasses the entire burn sequence but is driven by setting the fire line (a “fire walk”) with a drip torch. The fire lines are shaped by the conditions of the burn as they play out at each step along the way. The fire spreads into the prairie perpendicular to the walking line. The fire drips are points or dashes depending on the movement of the torch that radiate out from the fire line. The creative vision of WAS is rooted in fostering ecological diversity, education and ethical stewardship of the land. Art is pursued as close to the life of the land as possible. Essential to the prairie, the burns are a multi-faceted endeavor, and each have their own rhythm and each burn season its own character. However, I propose four defining activities: engaged observation, planning, communication, and walking. Most of the fire design is based on executing an effective burn but within that design, opportunities for formal characteristics of heat, light, shadow, shape and scale emerge. One opportunity is through the air flow created by the fire itself. Fire whirls or funnels will form with the rising, heated air and the inward rushing air can provide rotation to form the whirls giving form to the process. The prairies at the Westbrook Artists’ Site (WAS) are interspersed into various sizes and configurations. The largest covers 106 acres surrounded by forest. Topography slopes to a four-mile, curvaceous perimeter. The prairie ground is etched by numerous ravines that shed water to the Middle river. This land fosters dynamic, temperamental and rewarding burns. On a personal level, the practice of the prairie burns opened a much more rewarding understanding of wind. I realized that it could be a substance of the art and building a relationship with it. From a creative perspective, the prairie has provided this gift in which I have been enabled to explore fire as unique tool. ■





(previous page) *BurnWAS_DECII23_UXK*, digital photography. Evening burn on the large prairie.

Fire Break WAS_DEC23_0130x, digital photograph. The burn team is composed of Logan Allen, Seth Andrews, Devin Walker and Kevin Lair.

Burn WAS_NOVI23_0160x, digital photography. River field burn, Drone pilot, Logan Allen.

Burn WAS_DECII23_0110, digital photography. Evening burn on the large prairie.

Burn Map WAS_F23_010, digital composite drawing showing "fire walks" during November/December 2024 prairie burns at Westbrook Artists' Site (WAS). GPS tracking app Back Country Navigator used for data collection via Kevin Lair's iPhone 13.

Fire Whirl WAS_F23_015, digital composite drawing based on the formation of fire whirls or funnels in which the fire produces rising air and with rotation.

Volunteer Profile: Ralph Henry

Story by Rebecca Gilman and Charles Harmon



Prairie Bluff Chapter Volunteer, Ralph Henry. Shown here after bagging a trophy wild parsnip. Photo by Jerry Newman.

During the winter period of short days and long nights, we thought it would be nice to get to know our members a little better by profiling them in a question and answer format. This is the first of what we plan to be an ongoing series, in which our volunteers will be encouraged to talk about their love of prairies, what gives them hope for the future of conservation work, and, in general, what makes them tick. We hope that these volunteer profiles add to the feeling of comradeship and community that is such a precious part of being a member of The Prairie Enthusiasts.

The first volunteer up is Ralph Henry of Monroe, Wisconsin.

Writer's Note: We have added text in square brackets to provide additional context.

How did you get interested in prairie restoration?

Growing up I was more of a tree guy. My family did a lot of camping during the summer, and I enjoyed hiking on the trails in the state forests.

My prairie enthusiasm didn't start until twenty years ago, when I bought a five-acre building lot north of Monroe. The house plans stalled as we dealt with the reality of raising three children. I initially mowed some trails, planted trees, and made a garden. I wondered what the flowers were that grew back every year on the west-facing hillside. I called the DNR to see if they could send someone out to look at it with me, but they declined and suggested I ask The Prairie Enthusiasts instead. Nick Faessler and Gary Felder [both of the Prairie Bluff Chapter] came out to look at it with me. They found some prairie plants but said it was degraded and had probably been used as pasture for many years. They advised prescribed fire, which has now been done about 15 of the last 20 years.

The restoration was long and arduous. There were the usual woodies and brush, like mulberry, blackberry, cherry, buckthorn and cedars. The second year after that first burn, I had a terrible sweet clover infestation, which was solved by timed mowing. The queen Anne's lace and spotted knapweed were not so simple but are finally nearly eradicated.

I was lucky to only have a minor wild parsnip problem. However, new types of invasives seem to emerge, like St. John's wort and king devil [aka yellow hawkweed], so I have to stay vigilant! Japanese hedge parsley and bouncing bet are not far away!

What are your favorite parts of this sort of work?

I enjoy working outdoors and seeing the progress we make. My fellow Prairie Enthusiasts are the best people I know. They are a pleasure to work with and be a part of. I also enjoy being around the beautiful plants and wildlife.

Can you tell us about the Mile 13 Prairie?

The name of Mile 13 Prairie came from the mile marker on the Badger State Trail. However, a few years ago the DNR decided to reverse the mile markers starting with zero in Madison. So now it is Mile 27. Curiously,

they didn't change the bridge markers so it's still close to Bridge 13. Mile 27 just doesn't have the same ring to it, so I still call it "Mile 13."

The prairie is on both sides of the trail, within the DNR right of way. Tom Mitchell [Secretary of the Prairie Bluff Chapter] initially found it shortly after moving back to Monroe when he retired [in 2007]. The rails were still in then, and he took a long walk north looking for prairie remnants. The rails came out and it was converted to bicycle trail; he told me about it because he knew I did some biking.

What work have you done there so far? What species of plants are there?

The remnant was well established but invasives were making their way in. Initially, we worked on removing trees, brush and trash. There were piles of old fence wire. Over the years, we have hauled out four or five pickup loads of wire. Got most of it now!

It took a long time to get the DNR to allow prescribed fire there, but we burned it the last two springs. A few years ago, a DNR botanist, Ryan O'Connor, found a small population of a plant there that was thought to be extirpated from Wisconsin, *Pedimelum Argophyllum*, or silvery scurf pea. It is unknown whether the plant was native or if a seed was carried there by a train from western states, where it is common. It grows in the gravel right at the edge of the trail. It made seed after the fire two years ago. I planted the seeds in safer locations farther away from the trail's edge. I am hopeful but am still patiently waiting for new plants to emerge.

Another interesting plant there is a relative of the scurf pea, *Pedimelum Esculentum*, or prairie turnip. There is an excellent population of dropseed grass, coreopsis, dwarf blazing stars, Pasqueflowers, prairie smoke, panic grasses, bird's foot violet, puccoons, lots of leadplant, sunflowers and a few compass plants.

Quick! If it's possible to choose, can you tell us what are your top five favorite prairie plants—and why?

Pasqueflower—because they are first.

Compass Plant—because they stand out.

Prairie smoke—because it looks so cool.

Dwarf blazing star—because it has such a rich color.

Silvery scurf pea—because of its rarity.

You've done some specialized prairie training with the Wisconsin DNR. Can you describe that training—as well as your other sources of knowledge—and how they have helped you in your volunteer work?

95% of what I know I learned in the field from members like Tom Mitchell, Steve Huebner, John Ochsner, Chris Roberts, and Nick and Fred Faessler. Another source I refer to a lot is The University of Wisconsin "Flora of Wisconsin" website. These days, one can easily do plant ID in the field with a smartphone. I have also taken S130, S190 and a chainsaw safety class.

Last summer I took a course called Plant Communities of SW Wisconsin with DNR employees Kevin Doyle and Jared Urban. In that class, I learned some plants that were new to me, particularly some woodland and savanna species I am less familiar with.

What do you like to do when you're not tromping around on a prairie with your fellow Prairie Enthusiasts?

When I am not on the prairie, I am usually doing my work as an optometrist. I do also enjoy traveling to State and National parks, hiking, biking, and going to our cottage on Lake Michigan in Algoma, Wisconsin.

What are your hopes and dreams for the properties that you work on, and for prairies in general?

I hope that we can continue to recruit and retain like-minded people to carry on the work into the future. So many prairies have been lost to agriculture and development. I would like to see habitat loss reversed or at least stopped. ■

Silvery scurf pea by Charles Harmon.

We'd love to hear more stories about Prairie Enthusiasts connecting with the land. If you have a story to share, send us a message at Info@ThePrairieEnthusiasts.org



Positive Changes on Pleasant Bluff

Story by Eric Ressel

As I approached Pleasant Bluff, just south of Winona, MN, I asked myself if this was the same location I visited a few years earlier, since this hillside was once densely infested with an onslaught of buckthorn and encroaching eastern red cedars. Since then, the Minnesota Driftless Chapter of The Prairie Enthusiasts has contributed substantially to ecological restoration on this impressive prairie remnant. Over 18 acres along the spine of this formidable bluff, which sits above the banks of the Mississippi River, have been restored due to the diligent, hard work from folks like Gabe Erickson, who has spent countless hours traversing the steep terrain to cut and remove the cedars, eradicate invasive brush, and implement numerous prescribed burns over the years. Gabe is a restoration practitioner through his contracting business, Land Spirit Design Landscaping, and he has been the tip of the restoration spear on Pleasant Bluff, assisted by the landowners and the Minnesota Driftless chapter.

At a mid-March occasion in 2023, a diverse crew was assembled to assist Gabe with an 11-acre prescribed burn on this precipitous goat prairie. Thirty people of all ages and backgrounds, from children to seniors, joined together to conduct a safe and successful prescribed burn. Many of the participants were members of the Minnesota Driftless chapter of The Prairie Enthusiasts, but many of the participants weren't. A substantive way in which the Minnesota Driftless chapter of The Prairie Enthusiasts contributed to the burn was by loaning the

*Photo above and right of volunteers burning
by Laurie Arzaga*

chapter's prescribed burn equipment to Gabe for the day's burn.

The slope of this lofty bluff approaches 60% and is nothing short of intimidating. On this day, thanks to restoration efforts, the fuel-bed consisted primarily of native warm-season grasses and wildflowers, with some scattered pockets of shrubs. The climb up the mowed firebreak was grueling for the whole group. At the top, along the ridge overlooking the Mississippi River, Steve Winter having been designated as the burn boss by Gabe, provided the crew with an overview of why we burn such fire dependent ecosystems, and he demonstrated fire behavior on steep terrain. He also highlighted numerous safety considerations, such as tumbling rocks and tripping hazards. Steve educated the group on the importance of clear communication, being familiar with the weather and environmental conditions, such as the optimal wind direction and humidity, and being aware of the safety zones and escape routes at this particular site. Once everyone confirmed they were comfortable implementing the burn, we broke into several smaller crews that were positioned along the ridge and others down the steep firebreak on the northwestern side.

From the ridge we patiently waited for the progression of the fire from the ignition point, which was slow-going due to the calm conditions. My crew discussed strategy and stayed in contact with Steve and Gabe over the radio. We kept a careful watch as the gradually

growing flames moved diagonally down the hillside. However, with barely a breeze the fire crept ever slowly, so Steve instructed me and fellow member Bill Hovell to ignite a short strip fire directly down the slope, which allowed the flames to spread more quickly in both lateral directions in the dense Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), side-oats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), and little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*). Bill and I worked our way down the steep slope towards the county road on the lower edge of the prairie where we rendezvoused with our other crew members, whom I literally passed the torch to, so they could get some ignition experience. It was in that moment that I watched my greener-group members become less fearful, and more comfortable and excited to use fire as an ecological tool!

In the meantime, another crew worked the line along the northern edge of the burn unit as the flames continued to consume the fuel down the slope. In the heat of the moment, the landowner, Paul Richards, was able to capture some stunning drone footage. I wondered what the children, who were positioned in a safety zone at the top of the ridge, and upwind from the fire, were thinking as they watched the fire grow from a safe distance. I'm sure this experience proved to be exhilarating, educational, and memorable for them. Along with the children, I hoped our new participants and the students that attended Steve's burn school would also be inspired to continue with the restoration legacy.

Our crew continued to walk along the lower edge. We eventually met up with Gabe and his partner, and we extended the line as far east as possible. As the heat intensified above us and beside us, we ducked down into the refuge of a safety zone represented by a buckthorn thicket, which had little flammable fuel on the ground, as the flames progressed through the portions of the burn unit. I turned around and gave a gleeful smile as the sweltering flames made contact with many stems of the aggressive woody plants that are constantly trying to establish in prairies such as the one we were burning that day. We then moved again to our county road safety zone farther below, which we followed back to meet the main group. Gabe once again targeted the buckthorn as he ignited the strip of vegetation along the roadside edge, allowing the fire to burn up the slope and make contact with many buckthorn stems. We allowed the fire

“It made me proud to be a part of such an ambitious chapter of like-minded, well-educated enthusiasts who are passionate about ecological restoration and conservation education.”

to spread up the slope into a grove of old white oaks that will surely benefit from the fire with more space to stretch their limbs.

We met to start mopping up and to review the outcome of the successful burn. Most of the group members then left, but I was greatly impressed by those devoted enthusiasts who decided to stay well into the evening. Gabe and Josh Lallaman led this late-night effort, which was carefully supervised into the early morning hours, and they were able to effectively burn an additional

3-acre area. The night burn looked equally serene and intensely dramatic. To me, this illuminating scene was the perfect illustration of the power of fire.

It showed why prescribed burning promotes creation through destruction, making it an essential tool to encourage natural rejuvenation and regrowth, which helps to maintain prairies and savannas by preventing their conversion to other vegetation communities. Once again, demonstrating that fire is the ultimate management method to set back undesirable invasive vegetation, while stimulating the growth and reproduction of native grasses and wildflowers.

As I drove south to head home along the mighty river, I reflected on the progress of this goat prairie from its previous poor condition, choked by buckthorn, to a thriving, fully functional ecosystem that is driven and dependent by fire. Now this unique ecological community can thrive in the southwestern-facing sunshine, while supporting an array of rare plant and animal species. I contemplated the logistics and timeframe for completing restoration efforts on similar sites, since the majority of the goat prairies in the Driftless Area, along with associated oak savannas and woodlands, have become degraded in



part because of altered fire regimes. I thought of the historic photos portraying a landscape where trees weren't as abundant along the Mississippi River Valley. Those historic conditions were largely due to frequent landscape burning by Indigenous Peoples. As Indigenous Peoples were displaced by European Americans, Indigenous land stewardship practices like burning were also displaced. Fires were often viewed as harmful by European Americans, and woody vegetation increased greatly in the Driftless Area, including on Pleasant Bluff. With the increasing prevalence of woody vegetation, including invasive species such as buckthorn, we're witnessing a correlated decline in health of rare plant communities and an overall decrease in plant diversity.

The Pleasant Bluff prescribed burn was just one example of how dedicated members of the Minnesota Driftless chapter are eager to save ecosystems. They're tireless restoration work, outreach efforts and mentorship is also an inspiration for others. It made me proud to be a part of such an ambitious chapter of like-minded, well-educated enthusiasts who are passionate about ecological restoration and conservation education.

I want to thank the Pleasant Bluff landowners, Paul and Melissa (Missy) Richards, for their ongoing involvement and enthusiasm for the restoration and management of Pleasant Bluff. Their commitment to conservation and stewardship of the beautiful bluff prairies, woodlands, and oak savannas, on their Winona County property is exemplary. Missy summarizes the continual progress of their beloved prairie; "We have deep appreciation for all the collaborative work between The Prairie Enthusiasts volunteers, experts in the field, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Services and Land Spirit Design Landscaping. We recognize and appreciate being a part of something so much bigger than us. It gives us the opportunity to showcase the importance and impact of land restoration to our neighbors, family and friends. The ability to have a community partner with us on this journey makes Pleasant Bluff so much better." You too can follow their inspirational journey on the Richard's Instagram page (@pleasantbluff_winonamn). Since the burn last spring, with help from Gabe, the Richards have continued their brush management efforts to lessen the buckthorn pressure across additional areas on the bluff. They have also have documented dozens of native wildflowers on the bluff and often find new species. We encourage you to follow the Minnesota Driftless Chapter Facebook page to learn when additional prescribed burns and restoration events will take place.

I'll be thrilled for the opportunity to return to this unique and productive dry bluff prairie to work once again with our devoted chapter members and these dedicated landowners, and to observe the positive and dynamic changes to this ecological gem along the river. On behalf of the Minnesota Driftless Chapter, we hope you can come join us. ■

Nighttime prescribed burn mop-up. Photo by Joshua Lallaman.





Taking the Long View

The Heritage and Science of Prairie

2024 Conference Recap

By Sarah Barron

This year's virtual conference had over 500 attendees! More than two dozen sessions covered topics including introductory information, research and artistic expression. Prairie Enthusiasts had the opportunity to engage with one another through contests, discussion boards and Zoom Coffee Chats. We're grateful to all who participated, and we look forward to seeing you all back online February 12-15 for our 2025 conference!

Conference Haiku Contest

Finalists

Solidago means

to make whole again so I

breathe in gold, and heal.

-Esha Biswas

Right relationship

Mending vital broken threads

Can't do it alone

-Brandie Dunn

Winner

A sweet scent swaying

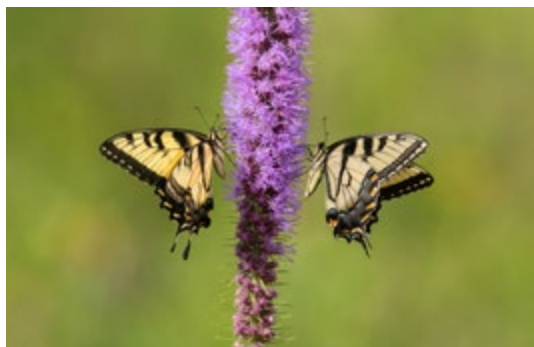
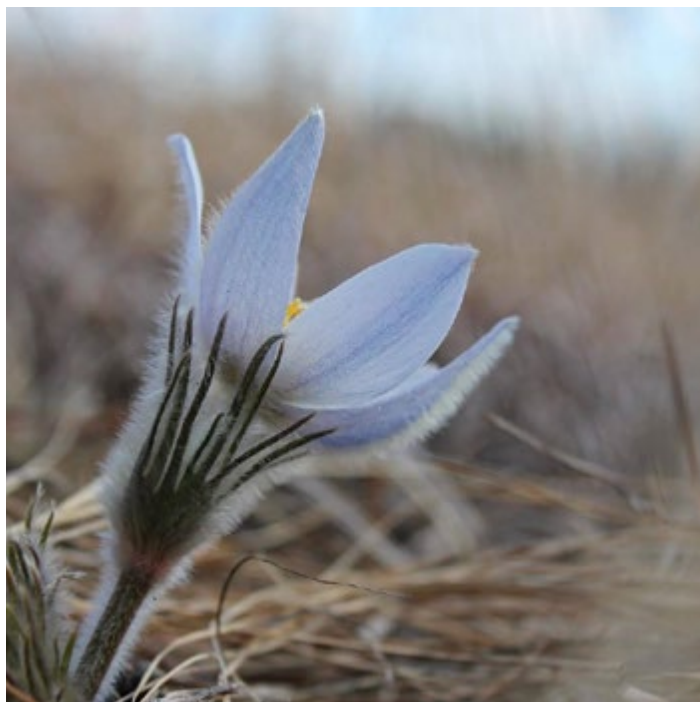
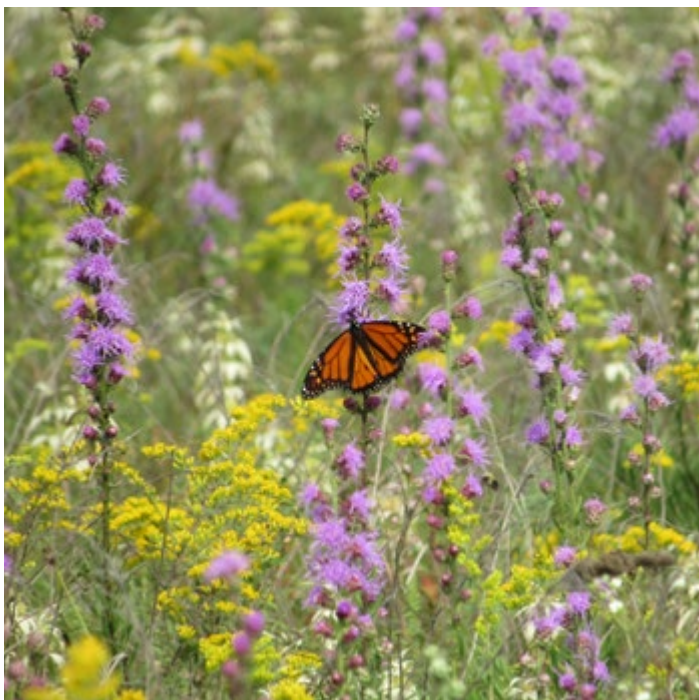
fat bees mumble and bumble

such a buzz, abuzz.

-Kathy Tate-Bradish

The Haiku winner was chosen by Illinois Poet Laureate, Ms. Angela Jackson. Ms. Jackson joined us for the conference, where she read her poetry and told tales of her connection to the land.

Conference Photo Contest Winners



Top left: Flora Category Winner, Lisa Reid
Top Right: People Category Winner, Amy Chamberlin
Middle Left: Landscape Winner, Dan Winkler
Middle Right: Seasons Winner, Addie Theis
Bottom: Fauna Winner and Overall Contest Winner, Gary Shackelford

Thank you to our sponsors who helped make this event possible!

Presenting



Platinum



Gold



Silver



Bronze

Blue Mounds Area Project (BMAP)
Door County Prairie Company

Illinois Public Media
Minnesota Pubic Radio

Prairie Moon Nursery
Wick Habitat Services LLC

Upcoming Events

Birding Field Trip Glacial Prairie Chapter

April 21 - TBD

Location: TBD

Join long-time birder Eric Howe and learn the many birds making their way back up north.



*Happy faces at the Maiden Rock Bluff SNA overlook.
Photo by AnneMarie McClellan, Chippewa Savannas Chapter*

Tiffany Train Ride Chippewa Savannas Chapter

May 18

Location: Tiffany Wildlife Area

Enjoy a ride on an open-air train to enjoy the sights and sounds of spring migration with expert birder Brian Collins.

Prairies, Savannas, Fens and Barrens

Glacial Prairie Chapter

July 29 - 10:30 AM to 12:00 PM

Location: Badertscher Preserve & Meyer Barrens

Join Prairie Enthusiasts and the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin to learn more about native ecosystems in Waukesha County.

Seed Picking & Flower Dissection

Northwest Illinois Chapter

August 24 - TBD

Location: Hanley Savanna

An event for the whole family! The chapter will provide craft supplies and seed containers so participants may take home seeds for their own prairie garden.

We're in the midst of planning additional summer field trips and events. These events will be opportunities to learn and connect with fellow Prairie Enthusiasts. Be sure to check our website often for the latest and most comprehensive list. And, sign up for our emails to get notified right away.

You can sign up by visiting ThePrairieEnthusiasts.org

Details for all these events and more can be found on our Events Calendar can be found at:

ThePrairieEnthusiasts.org/events-calendar

Chapter Updates

Many Rivers

By Jim Vonderharr

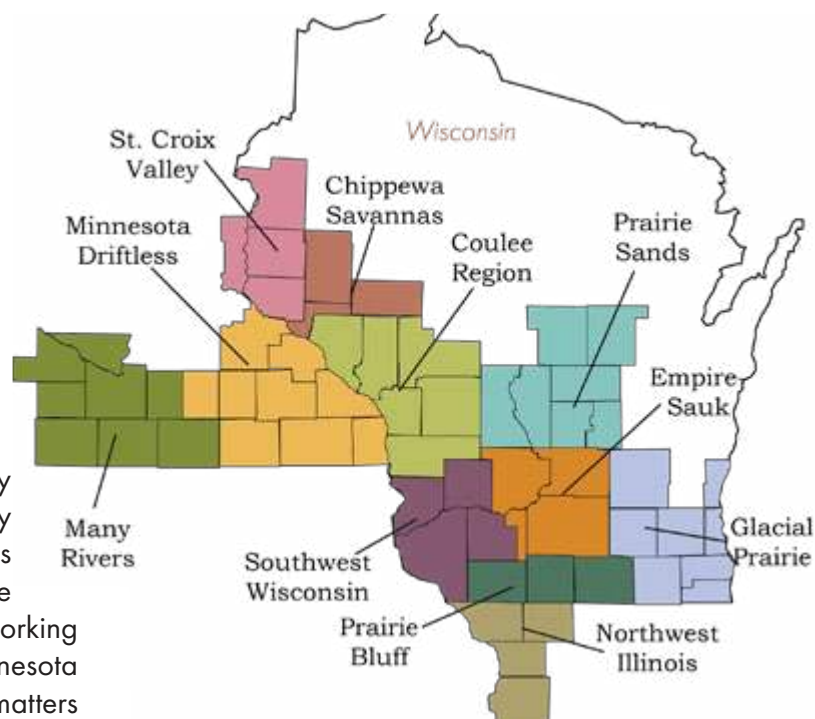
Summer in Southwest Minnesota was very dry. Once we got into fall it was either rainy, windy or sometimes both. Weather conditions prevented us from doing any burning this fall season. Instead, we have concentrated on our educational mission, working with students in the Mankato school district. A Minnesota State Senator was quoted, "Getting kids outside matters more than ever, yet crowded school days often make it difficult for students to enjoy the outdoors." Here are three examples of our chapter's work to help in that effort.

Minneopa State Park Field Day

September 25 and 26 was the second annual Minneopa State Park Field Day for Sophomore and Junior Biology students from Mankato East High School. Approximately 500 students were exposed to seminars consisting of prairie, bison, birds, fish and other topics too numerous to mention. Henry Panowitsch and Jim Vonderharr from the Many Rivers chapter served as assistants to Megan Benage (Minnesota DNR Ecologist) at the Prairie Ecosystem station. At that station alone, we connected with over 120 students.

Prairie Winds Middle School Prairie Development

We were contacted by two science teachers, Lynell Senden and Brett Riss from Prairie Winds Middle school who asked us to advise and assist them in rejuvenating a prairie project. The school was built six years ago and at that time approximately nine acres surrounding the site were planted into prairie. As is typical in many of these projects, once the planting was done it was left unattended. Of course, neglect resulted in invasives overwhelming the natives. The Many Rivers Chapter provided guidance on restoring the planting. Teachers then enlisted the help of students to start the work. Year one was devoted to removing



cottonwood saplings and mowing the left behind grassy undergrowth. A survey identified many native plants surviving from the original attempt, but more seeding will have to follow. Additional site preparation is planned for next year. As experience tells us, this will be at least a five-year process. Students and the school's Grounds Crew have been actively involved in the site preparation field work.

"The Pollinators" collaboration

In November, we had a formational meeting with a group of faculty members from Minnesota State University-Mankato. The goal we outlined is to "identify and develop prairie plots in Mankato, focusing initially on the MSU and School District campuses to significantly reduce the number golf-course-looking common spaces." A meeting in January of this year outlined strategies that include how to identify potential sites and other possible partners. Stay tuned, more to follow!

Other News

A combination business meeting and social gathering was held on January 5. A very nice turnout of over 50 enjoyed pizza and conversation at a local pizzeria. It was noted that the turnout included an unusually big participation of "younger" attendees. ■



Coulee Region

Story and Photo above by Justin Nooker

Chapter Update

Closing out 2023, the Coulee Region Chapter completed two prescribed burns in the Blufflands of La Crosse in November. We also joined the Friends of the Blufflands for regularly scheduled workdays twice a week in October and November. The prairies in the La Crosse Blufflands have been transitioning into higher quality remnants with our partnership and work! We had a few other workdays including some at Rogala Prairies, Brownsville Bluff and the newly acquired Marowski Bluff Prairie. Our chapter is overjoyed and so appreciative of Dr. Marowski's generosity and conservation commitment to protect this bluff prairie in perpetuity. This winter, our chapter board is planning activities and goals for the coming year. We are actively recruiting for board positions including board members at large and vice chair. If you have an interest in serving on our chapter board, please contact Justin Nooker (CouleeRegion@ThePrairieEnthusiasts.org). We are excited for our field trips and work parties for 2024, including spring burns! To stay engaged with these activities please monitor our chapter e-News (send us an email at Info@ThePrairieEnthusiasts.org to sign up), The Prairie Enthusiasts Calendar of Events online, or our Facebook page. ■

Chippewa Savannas

By Katie Hahn

Chapter Update

Spring is about new beginnings, but that doesn't mean we can't also look back to our past accomplishments! Here's what the Chippewa Savannas Chapter was up to in 2023. Over the winter, we collected seed on over 7 acres, and seeded 14 acres with forbs. In spring, we held a prescribed burn school and trained seven new apprentices. We then burned 32 acres of prairie. We held a successful (sold-out!) birding excursion into Tiffany Wildlife Area during spring migration on an open-air train ride with guides Brian Collins and Mark Leach. In the summer, members embarked on a field trip to Maiden Rock Bluff State Natural Area to enjoy the beautiful Pepin County vista (and pull some sweet clover along the way). Our members worked hard controlling unwanted vegetation at Dobbs Landing spraying 12 acres of spotted knapweed along with multiple buckthorn removal efforts and our ongoing efforts at controlling red oak stump sprouts. Our autumn field trip took us a little outside our natural range to visit the Star Prairie Seed Farm in St. Croix County to learn more about seed collection and processing from the seed farm manager, Alex Bouthilet. We held an Open House and several workdays at Dobbs Landing to finish off the fall and winter. Over the course of the year, we welcomed 15 new members and worked alongside 24 volunteers for over 90 hours. We'd love for you to join us in 2024 for all we have in store! If you don't already receive our Chapter e-newsletter, please email ThePrairieEnthusiasts.csc@gmail.com and ask to join. You may also want to join our Facebook group "The Chippewa Savannas Prairie Enthusiasts" for more pop-up and partner events! ■

Learning all we can from Alex Bouthilet at the Star Prairie Seed Farm. Photo by Julia Chapman



Northwest Illinois

20th Anniversary

By Vicky Wegner

On July 9, 2023, the Northern Illinois chapter of the Prairie Enthusiasts celebrated their 20th anniversary at Hanley Savanna near Hanover, Illinois. It was a lovely day on the prairie! Speakers Jim Rachuy, Barb Siekowski, and Leanne Martin gave a synopsis of how and when the chapter was formed and how Hanley Savanna came to be. They explained to attendees how the property is managed to encourage optimum prairie conditions, promote seed production and how seed is then used. After the brief presentation, visitors walked the well-maintained paths to observe the beautiful plants and abundant pollinators.

Collaborations

By Vicky Wegner

On an unusually warm and sunny October 1, the chapter, in conjunction with the JoDaviess Conservation Foundation (JDCF), welcomed visitors to an informational gathering about the Casper Creek Natural Cemetery (CCNC). CCNC is a natural burial site contiguous to Casper Bluff Land and Water Reserve, a JDCF property high on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. During the event, Barb Siekowski summarized the prairie management relationship between the Northwest Illinois Chapter and JDCF which includes restoration, seed production, management and stewardship. Then, Andra Olney-Larson, Operations and Sales Manager of CCNC, explained all the nuances and possibilities of a natural burial, a trend in end-of-life opportunities that is becoming more and more popular with persons interested in environmental sustainability. The site is perfect, as Casper Bluff already has mounds created by Indigenous Peoples. After the presentation, attendees walked the cemetery property, which is currently active and open for burials.

Hanley Savanna–2023 Summer Survey

By Laura Dufford

During 2023, chapter members Pam Johnson and Laura Dufford took weekly walks at Hanley Savanna to document the timing and sightings of birds, bees, butterflies and blooms. This was a very informal survey and was intended to mostly look at bumblebee species found at Hanley. Pam and Laura hoped to find and document rusty patched bumble bees.

The walks began the week of May 29 and continued through September 18. Other members joined in the walks and helped with locating bees and documenting birds on eBird. During these weeks, the group found eight species of bumble bees, with common eastern and brown-belted bumble bees being most prevalent. Unfortunately, there were no rusty patched bumble bees found.

The group did, however, document 52 species of birds. The yellow-breasted chat was the favorite, but also of interest were the sedge wrens later in the summer and a large kettle of broad-winged hawks during the last outing of the season. There were 21 species of butterflies and eight species of dragonflies documented. An exciting outcome of the project is the creation of an iNaturalist site for Hanley so the future documentation of species at Hanley can be tracked. The chapter is also increasing bird species sightings on ebird. We will continue these weekly walks in 2024. The public will be invited to share this experience once a month. More information will be shared on our Events Calendar and Facebook page as the time gets closer. We hope to have others join us as we discover and document the diverse life at Hanley Savanna.

Rutherford Refuge Seeding

Story and Photo of Jay Rutherford by Laura Dufford



In 2023, Northwest Illinois Chapter volunteers and staff provided seed from over 300 native species for the ongoing restoration of Rutherford Refuge, a recently-designated Illinois nature preserve owned by the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation. Though a portion of the site was once quarried for limestone, a majority of the property harbors savanna, hill prairie and oak-hickory woodland. There are also two creeks flowing through expansive wetlands and sedge meadow. These habitats support diverse remnant plant populations, including marbleseed (*Onosmodium bejariense*), shooting star (*Dodecatheon meadia*), yellow star grass (*Hypoxis hirsuta*), Michigan lily (*Lilium michiganense*), turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*) and swamp saxifrage (*Micranthes pensylvanica*).

Restoration work will continue at Rutherford Refuge throughout 2024. Volunteers are encouraged to join us to pick and spread seed. Stay tuned to the The Prairie Enthusiasts Events Calendar and chapter's Facebook page. ■



Glacial Prairie

By Kelly Carlson

New Leaders, New Roles

Recently, the Chapter has been focusing more energy on mentoring new leadership both in the field and behind the scenes in the region. This has led to more engagement with volunteers and greater conservation work being done.

Now, the Chapter is looking forward and is shifting towards a more active site steward model for leading future work parties. In the spring, training for potential new leaders will take place with hopes to increase capacity for leaders to be more intentional with volunteers doing conservation work.

One new site steward, Michaela Rosenthal, will be managing the Adelman-Schwartz Preserve, a small yet bright hillside prairie that is located in Walworth County. She brings professional and diverse knowledge from a background in horticultural landscape design and contracting. Michaela completed a horticulture apprenticeship in New Zealand where she immersed herself in the native plant communities and flourished in her understanding and potential. Working towards her master's in Ecological Restoration, Michaela has over 10 years of hands-on ecology experience. A birder and world traveler, she is welcoming to all natural resource management activities with the Chapter. Balancing stewardship with the Urban Ecology Center and The Prairie Enthusiasts, Michaela also now serves as the Chapter representative to the Land Management Committee.

Above: Volunteer lighting fire at UWM Waukesha Field Station.

Below: aerial photo of the same prescribed burn. Photos by Brad Wilkins.

We are hoping to inspire volunteers to be leaders and engage with conservation work in a new way. Training new leaders will help make land stewardship more sustainable throughout the region.

Heating Up

We had an active fall prescribed burn season, completing burns at sites at the UW-Milwaukee Waukesha Field Station, Pam Meyer's Oak Barrens and at Benedict Prairie. Although results were sometimes uneven given the conditions, our conservation objectives were met for each burn, and the Chapter continues to expand its burning capacity by training more crew members.

Alongside burns, the removal of invasive and non-native buckthorn and honeysuckle helped to support the threatened forked aster (*Eurybia furcata*) and other important species in Wisconsin prairies, specifically





Top: Benedict Prairie before grant work. Bottom: After grant work. Photos by Alan Eppers.

at Scuppernong Springs State Natural Area. At Pam Meyer's Oak Barrens, volunteers braved the rough terrain to support conservation and some even left with a holiday tree in tow. Volunteers enjoyed learning more about each location and their specific areas of interest, their ecological makeup and how our work benefits local flora and fauna.

Thank you to Dave Adam, Dick Bautz, Dan Carter, Alan Eppers, Alison Reinoffer, Michaela Rosenthal, Jared Toro, Bob Volonec and Tom Zagar for supporting and leading work parties and burns this fall, and thank you to our volunteers who helped make the efforts all be successful.

New Development for Benedict Prairie

With special thanks to Alan Eppers, Alice Mirk, and Duncan Schultz for their fundraising efforts, the Chapter has received a grant from the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin. The grant focused on Benedict Prairie and the work involved in completing intensive brush clearing and support for continuing efforts to maintain the landscape.

With the money received from the grant, the Chapter continues to make progress on the site through our management plans and partnership with the UW-Milwaukee Field Station (property owners). With this boost, we hope to inspire more efforts clearing brush and supporting native species.

As 2023 came to a close, the Chapter reflected

on the successes of each season and the continued support from volunteers, leadership, businesses and other organizations who have all helped to improve prairies throughout the region. We send our gratitude to everybody who helps keep our ecosystems thriving! ■

Empire-Sauk

Story by RS Baller

Empire-Sauk Chapter Celebrates Winter Solstice with Two Bonfires

Empire-Sauk chapter members and friends enjoyed two potluck bonfires this winter. The first was a Solstice bonfire held on December 21 at Rattlesnake Ridge, a nexus of preserves owned by The Prairie Enthusiasts and private lands owned by Sue Steinmann near Arena. About a dozen members showed up and enjoyed brats, cocoa, desserts and poetry read by Scott Sauer.

The second was held January 6 at Mounds View Grasslands in Iowa County. As in previous years, Rex Sohn had erected a formidable pyre months earlier. About 30 members arrived to appreciate the copious brats with sweet fixings provided by Rich and Kathy Henderson. Potluck desserts were enjoyed as we stood several feet away, rotating ourselves and gossiping while the huge logs incinerated. Special thanks to Sue, Rex, Rich and Kathy! ■



Several hearty Prairie Enthusiasts celebrated New Year's Eve Day by working at Eldred Prairie. Seen here ringing in the New Year are James Hass, Jack Kussmaul and Bob Costanza. Photo by Becky Fernette

Southwest Wisconsin

By Jack Kussmaul

Chapter Development

We are excited to have new people who have come forward to be involved in our chapter and the sites we maintain. We are especially happy to have new site stewards taking over while Gary Eldred, who has indicated that he may not live forever, is here to guide them as they work into what had been his role.

These volunteers include Steve Querin-Schultz who will become co-site steward with Gary at Borah Creek. Bob Retko is assuming the role of site steward at Iris Drive, and Becky Fernette will be managing Feist Prairie. In addition, Becky Fernette has taken on the role of Secretary. We thank Steve Querin-Schultz, who had held the position and who is grateful to Becky taking it on. We cannot leave out Kay Wienke who volunteered to become our



Kay Wienke, the new chapter board representative. Photo by Bob Retko.

Board Chapter Representative. She has plunged into this all the way and is spending time learning how the organization works. Gary Eldred will remain on the Board as Member Emeritus. We thank Gary for his continued service. He has been fully engaged since the founding of the organization, and I am not sure where the chapter would be without his leadership and inspiration over the decades.

Partnerships & Events

The snake workshop held at the refurbished Borah Creek barn on October 7 was a great success. Rebecca Kristoffel was the presenter to an audience of about 25 people. It was a bit late to find snakes on the property, but she had snakes with her which attendees took turns handling. The fact that the attendees were interested in the program is shown by the fact that Rebecca found herself constantly halting her script to answer questions.

One of our most active site stewards, Tom Hunt at Sylvan Road, has developed a wonderful and productive relationship with Trout Unlimited. Their involvement is due to their interest in a trout stream that runs through the property. There have been two joint work parties on the property devoted to removing box elder and other undesirable vegetation along the stream banks. Each work party brought out close to 30 volunteers. No other site has ever seen numbers like this. Kudos to Trout Unlimited and to Tom.

We were grateful for all of those that attended our holiday party on January 27. It was a time for our members to relax and celebrate our accomplishments in 2023. We look forward to an even more active year in 2024. This will include more work parties on more sites than in the past as well as a chainsaw class and a butterfly workshop. ■

Attendees at the snake workshop. Photo by Becky Fernette.



Prairie Sands

By Matt Dettlaff

Greetings from the Sand Country!

2023 was quiet for the Prairie Sands chapter. Besides the annual “Bogs, Frogs and Hot Dogs” event hosted by David and Shelley Hamel, we did not have much planned activity as a group. I take that as an indication folks were busy pursuing their prairie passion as solo artists or did not need help to orchestrate their habitat improvement projects. We were able to welcome a few new members to the chapter. It is good to add some new blood with fresh ideas and topics for conservation

conversation. One of those new members, Judy Klyver, is a shutterbug who shared her beautiful pics with our group so we in turn are sharing them with the larger, appreciative audience in this edition. It is nice to have folks share their knowledge, skills and talents so they can enjoy and appreciate the natural world around us.



Speaking of sharing knowledge, our own Dr. Benjamin Grady has offered his services for an upcoming Pollinators Picnic this summer. Stay tuned for more details available online at The Prairie Enthusiasts Events Calendar or in our next chapter update this summer. I know I am definitely interested to be able to identify more “beneficial bugs” that can thrive on our prairie properties.

And finally, did you know that cacti grow in Wisconsin?! Most folks envision the desert Southwest when cactus is mentioned. But thanks to our member Steve Bohacek, I now know that the Prickly Pear (*Opuntia humifusa*) grows in Wisconsin. He was kind enough to include a beautiful pic of the plants in bloom this last summer. Amazing!

Until next time, hope you are able to enjoy planning and scheming your prairie labors of love for the coming spring. ■

Prairie Bluff

By Rebecca Gilman and Charles Harmon

Chapter Update

The Prairie Bluff Chapter has hit its usual winter rhythm. This meant when it was possible to work outdoors, efforts were spent mostly clearing brush and chopping down trees. When indoor work was a better idea, we planned for next year, and maintained and repaired equipment that will be needed when spring arrives.

Chapter members also used this time to get to know some of their fellow Prairie Enthusiasts (see pg 28 *Volunteer Profile: Ralph Henry*). ■

Left: prickly pear in bloom by Steve Bohacek.

Top Right: Asters in bloom by Judy Klyver.





Above: Volunteers with a huge pile of buckthorn.

Photo by Robert Marquis.

Below: Volunteers at a winter workday.

Photo by John Lampe.

St. Croix Valley

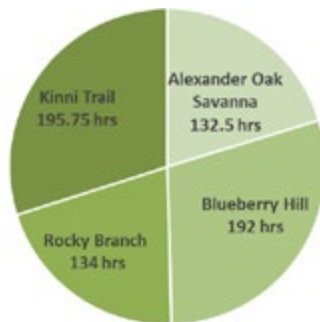
By Evanne Hunt

2023 Recap

We had another productive year! Below are some highlights.

- 654.25 volunteer hours spent managing prairies and savannas
- 21 work parties (and they are parties!)
- 2 field trips
- 3 butterfly surveys

Chapter members also contributed an additional 153.5 hours to prescribed burns on private property, for which we were paid \$1,585.



UW-River Falls Student Scholarship

Thank you to the individuals and organizations that contributed to our UW-River Falls Scholarship and Awards Program. For the

second year, our chapter created a \$1,000 scholarship for a student majoring in Conservation and Environmental Planning, with a Restoration Management emphasis. Besides encouraging students in conservation, the scholarship raises our profile in the academic community. The 2024 scholarship will be awarded in April.

Work Parties

Work parties are typically scheduled for four hours and can be viewed on the Events Calendar of The Prairie Enthusiasts website. Come for one, two, three, or all four hours. Whatever time you can volunteer is appreciated! Join us as we open the canopy of brush and trees to allow more sunlight to reach the native grasses and flowers. This important maintenance ensures the survival of our precious prairies and savannas! ■



They will take me home
the spirits,
the thunders and wind,
They will take me home.

Excerpt from unattributed Native
American song recorded in the
Bureau of American Ethnology
bulletins

Prairie Enthusiasts Remembered

Memorial gifts dedicated between
September 17, 2023 and February 19, 2024

Richard Alexander

July 18, 1929-January 12, 2024

Story and Photo by Evanne Hunt



It is with heavy heart that we report that Dick Alexander passed away on January 12, 2024. Dick's love of the outdoors included his precious oak savanna south of River Falls. Named the Alexander Oak Savanna, it is one of the largest restored dry-mesic prairie and oak savanna complexes in The St. Croix Valley Chapter's geographic area.

Dick and Joan Alexander purchased the property in 1965. They first worked with The Nature Conservancy (TNC), then in 2000 with The Prairie Enthusiasts to maintain the native savanna. In 2018, they sold the property to The Prairie Enthusiasts. Until his health deteriorated, Dick participated in the work parties and burning with both TNC and our St. Croix Valley Chapter. We appreciate all that Dick has contributed and are grateful to honor his legacy by continuing the land stewardship that he started. ■

In memory of

Richard Alexander

Remembered by Evanne Hunt

Ed Brick

Remembered by
Bonnie Weisel
Ellen Fisher

Susan Connell-Magee

Remembered by Kevin Magee

Clarence Leonard Davis

Remembered by Linda Davis

Brennan Peter DeLap

Remembered by Russel DeLap

Gary Evers

Remembered by Sue Evers

Joe Garrity

Remembered by Bonnie Garrity

Linda Lynch

Remembered by Thomas Hunt

Chris Mann

Remembered by Christopher Noll

Karen Mlinar

Remembered by Michael Mlinar

Carl August Nelson

Remembered by Joan Barnett

Patricia O'Hare

Remembered by Shelley O'Hare

Joyce Powers

Remembered by Kathy Henderson

Rachel Rambo

Remembered by Dan Rambo

Alice Roemer

Remembered by Paul Roemer

Pat Ruegger

Remembered by Peggy Marxen

Donald Shere

Remembered by Marge Shere

Mary Ward Stimpson

Remembered by Lytton Musselman

JoEllen Torresani

Remembered by John Powles

Harold & Crescent Vale

Remembered by Elaine Vale

Dr. Vijay

Remembered by Shraddha Tilloo

Bill Weege

Remembered by David Kraemer

Judith Wehrle

Remembered by Robert Wehrle



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Welcome, New Members!

September 18, 2023 to February 19, 2024

Chippewa Savannas

Tony Thompson

Coulee Region

Jack Bast
Dave Hey
Morgan Janovec
Timothy Nicholson
People's Food Co-op
Chad Vidden
George Wallner

Empire-Sauk

Connie Anderson
Michele Bacsik
Megan Berg
Paul Borowsky
Tim Carter
Andrew Coleman
Emery Crispi
Catherine Garvens
Mriil Ingram
Steve Jandl
Kate Liu

John Powles

Sauk Prairie Healthcare
Mary Ellen and Leonard
Sosnowski

Glacial Prairie

Charles Bensinger
Michelle Corbett
Thomas W. Grossman Jr.
Sam Holm
Sadee Kidd
Carol Anne Maveety
Pamela Meyer
Mariette Nowak
Caroline Petty
Dru Snavely
Amber Sohns
Clark Stamm
St. Paul's Episcopal
Church
Linda Waddell

Many Rivers

Erik Koehler
Donna Portner

Minnesota Driftless

Ann Casper and Clyde
Stutesman
Jerry Kvasnicka and Lori
Shaw
Natalie Loeffler
Ann Sigford

Prairie Bluff

Norman and Carol
Aulabaugh
Elizabeth Dean
Karen Orsinger

Prairie Sands

Judy Klyver
Douglas Rhode
Cherilyn Salzberg

Southwest Wisconsin

Cheryl and Wilbur
Austin
Sabina Walsh

St. Croix Valley

Dewayne and Gerda
Benedict
Peter Fritz
Susan Hackney
Cory Mitchell
St. Croix Valley Bird
Club
Ben Toppel

Unaffiliated

Sharon Bachmann
Lisa Bean
Laliitha Benjaram
Helene Brozowsky-
Reinsch
Laura Elsinger
Candace Fitzwater
Molly Henry
Jim Hewitt
Dennis Hogan
Elmer Klein
George Lane
Susan McAlister
Sarah McKenzie

Sidney McNatt
Melody Morrell
William Olmsted
Andrew Pirrung
Amanda Preston
Christina Rennich
Amanda Rice
Laurie Robinson
Jan Rupe
Bernard Schmidt
Joseph Stanforth
Candace Thomas
Troy Waldschmidt
Gail and Doug Willson