
A Prairie Rendezvous



FALL VOL. 16, NO. 3, 2014
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Grand Prairie Friends to Receive Embarras Ridges Stewardship Grant Funds

Grand Prairie Friends is very pleased to announce that the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation (www.illinoiscleanenergy.org) has approved a grant for ecological stewardship work at Embarras Ridges Land and Water Reserve. Money from this grant will be directed towards the care of the natural habitat at Embarras Ridges.

Embarras Ridges LWR is a 141-acre property, located about 3.5 miles south of Charleston in east-central Illinois, that harbors a large expanse of dry-mesic and mesic upland forest (~136 acres) and about 5 acres of old agricultural fields. GPF purchased the property in 2012 with generous donations from members and friends as well as grant support from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, the Grand Victoria Foundation, and the Lumpkin Family Foundation.

Most of the stewardship work that needs to be done at Embarras Ridges is vegetation management. This includes removing invasive species like autumn olive, multiflora rose, bush honeysuckle, and garlic mustard. Some native plant species like sugar maple and sassafras will be thinned on the ridge tops to open up the canopy and allow more light to reach the forest floor. This will allow a greater diversity and richness of native species to thrive. Other stewardship work includes planning and implementing prescribed fire.

Part of the grant money has already been spent to buy equipment that includes chainsaws, protective equipment, and backpack sprayers to apply herbicide. The bulk of the budget, though, *(continued on page 4)*

Champaign Park District Natural Areas Developments

Earlier this year, the Champaign Park District (CPD) made a huge leap in their expanding commitment to featuring high-quality native landscapes within their more traditional park settings. Having responded to the growing public interest in natural areas by incorporating prairie elements into some of their new and existing parks, CPD soon realized that the success of those sites would depend on knowledgeable in-house monitoring and timely maintenance.

Toward that end, CPD recently created its first full-time Natural Areas Coordinator position. It is currently held by longtime restoration enthusiast Mike Davis.

The roster of CPD parks that currently offer a prominent natural areas component is Porter Family Park (27 acres at Rising Road



Porter Family Park, a 27 acre prairie in Champaign. One of the Park District natural areas that offer an opportunity for volunteer efforts.

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A Prairie Rendezvous

P.O. Box 36 • Urbana, IL 61803-0036

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A Prairie Rendezvous is a publication of Grand Prairie Friends for the restoration community of East Central Illinois.

A Prairie Rendezvous is published quarterly. Article submissions should be sent electronically to the editor at jimfay7@gmail.com or by mail to the GPF P.O. Box 36. Member submissions are gladly welcomed.

Grand Prairie Friends is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization dedicated to natural community preservation, restoration, and education in East Central Illinois. Our stewards help coordinate volunteer workdays at native prairie, savanna, wetland, and woodland remnants. Inquiries and tax-deductible donations should be sent to the P.O. Box listed above

GPF mission is to preserve and restore natural communities in east-central Illinois and promote an understanding and appreciation of natural resources.

Stay in touch with the GPF community through the website (www.grandprairiefriends.org), facebook (www.facebook.com/grandprairiefriends) or the ecostewards e-mail list (lists.communitylists.org/listinfo.cgi/ecostewards-communitylists.org).

GPF Board of Directors (term ends)

Jamie Ellis, President (2015)

Fred Delcomyn, Treasurer (2013)

Rob Stanton (2013)

Gail Snowdon (2013)

Ansel Anderson (2014)

Terry Rathgeber (2014)

Beverly Rauchfuss (2014)

Pam Leiter (2015)

Ruth Green (2015)

Board meetings are regularly scheduled for the fourth Monday of each month (except August and December) at 5:30 PM in the I-Building (1816 S. Oak St., Champaign)

GPF Committees

For information on volunteering and getting involved with any committees, please contact the following:

Membership & Volunteerism: Brenda Molano-Flores

Stewardship: VACANT Education: VACANT

Finance: Fred Delcomyn Publicity: Derek Liebert

Land Acquisition: Dan Olson and Jim Payne

Fund Raising: Derek Liebert, Terry Rathgeber, and Jamie Ellis

Submission Deadlines

- Summer Issue (June, July, Aug.): May 1
- Fall Issue (Sept., Oct., Nov.): Aug. 1
- Winter Issue (Dec., Jan. 2014, Feb. 2014): Nov. 1
- Spring Issue (Mar., Apr., May): Feb. 1

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

by Jamie Ellis, President,
GPF Board of Directors

I hear the buzz of cicadas calling. I feel the heat and humidity on my skin. I see the bright color of yellow coneflower and tall coreopsis. I know that it's summer. And from a human perspective, it's been a good summer with good rainfall (too much at times) and tolerable temperatures.



GPF Board president Jamie Ellis converses with Don Gardner on August 1. In early August over the past ten years, Jamie has led the GPF interns and other interested members on a trip to Don's high-quality prairie restoration near Kempton. Don has worked to restore and manage about 20 acres of prairie for the past 40 years.

The **spring native plant sale** on Saturday May 10 was a smashing success. With a boost from Rob Kanter's Environmental Almanac article on monarch butterflies, our supply of milkweeds seemed to fly out the door of Lincoln Square in Urbana. Hundreds of seedlings of orange butterfly, Sullivant's, and swamp milkweed went to new homes and will provide food and nectar for the monarchs and other native critters.

Now the **sad news**: With the loss of greenhouse space and my

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Grand Prairie Friends Fall Events

GPF Annual Membership Meeting September 26, 2014

All members and friends are invited to join Grand Prairie Friends at 6:30 PM in the Urbana Civic Center (108 E Water St, Urbana, IL 61801) for the Annual Membership Meeting. This meeting is called to conduct organizational business and to elect new board members.

At 7 PM there will be a special guest speaker: Josh Engel, Research Assistant, The Field Museum. Mr. Engel will give a program entitled: Bird Conservation in the Great Lakes Region: Successes, Challenges, and Learning from the Passenger Pigeon.



How can we learn from the past to stave off future extinctions, in a world where the obstacles can seem insurmountable?

Mr. Engel will talk about passenger pigeons, extinction, and the human relationship with nature from a global perspective. He relates his own experiences in various places where he has seen both the destruction wrought by humans on natural systems as well as the attempts to save what remains.

Mr. Engel will bring his global experience to the discussion to look at what has worked—and what hasn't—to protect biodiversity around the world.

(President's Report...)

retirement as the plant sale coordinator, the future of the native plant sale is in jeopardy. I'd be happy to entertain other fund raising ideas and have someone step up to help coordinate an event.

Brody Dunn and Jeffrey Peyton are working hard pulling weeds, collecting seeds, and learning about natural areas management as the **2014 summer interns**. They have managed to make it to almost every GPF owned preserve as well as many other east-central Illinois natural areas. Read more about what they've been up to elsewhere in this issue.

One particularly exciting development is that GPF will be receiving **grant money** for stewardship activities at Embarras Ridges Land and Water Reserve!

The key part of this grant is you! Yes, we need to raise money to receive the grant. For every \$1 we raise, ICECF will grant us \$3 up to \$21,000. If we raise it all, that will be \$28,000 to spend on stewardship at ER LWR from now through 2015. Your time to help is now by sending in a check to GPF or going to the webpage to donate on-line.

I'm looking forward to our regular fall events as well as a new one. See the accompanying article for details of these events.

This event is free and open to the public. Refreshments available. Co-sponsored by Champaign County Audubon.

Embarras Ridges Land and Water Reserve Fall Campfire

At Embarras Ridges south of Charleston

October 4, 2014

3-6 PM (come early, stay late)

Join fellow GPF members to hike around the fall woods of Embarras Ridges and Warbler Woods. We'll fire up the grills and a bonfire. More details TBA.

Rattlesnake Master Run for the Prairie

November 2, 2014

Meadowbrook Park, Urbana

This 5 and 10 K fun run and walk has become a beloved event for local running enthusiasts as well as GPF members. Enjoy the Meadowbrook Park on a crisp fall morning, mingle with fellow runners, and raise awareness and funds for GPF's conservation mission.

(EMBARRAS RIDGES STEWARDSHIP GRANT)

will be spent on hiring local land steward David Mott to carry out the vegetation management work. David lives next to Embarras Ridges. He is skilled, knowledgeable, and passionate about the conservation and protection of this fine stand of forest.

To make the grant successful, we need help from members and friends. ICECF has asked that we raise new funds for this stewardship work. For every \$1 we raise right now through 2015, ICECF will grant us \$3 up to \$21,000. If we raise at least \$7000, we will be granted the full amount which means \$28,000 for stewardship at Embarras Ridges. This will make a huge difference in the long-term health and stability of this land.

You can help by mailing a check to GPF (P. O. Box 36, Urbana, IL 61803) or going on-line (grandprairiefriends.org) to make a donation.

(Champaign Park District Natural Areas)

and Windsor Road), Heritage Park (8 acres of intended prairie at 2101 W. Bradley Ave.), Scott Park (1 acre at 207 E. Springfield Ave.), and Sunset Ridge Park (5 acres at Stayley and Boulder Ridge Roads).

All of these sites have had various degrees of in-house and contracted work performed on them and have already benefitted greatly from the increased man-hours that have been devoted to them this summer.

Recent dry summers have slowed some of the establishment of seeded species at Porter and Sunset Ridge, so most of staffs' efforts have involved the removal of prevalent invasive species that are standing in the way of germination. Once the proper numbers of staff have been trained in prescribed burning, fire will become an additional tool in furthering CPD's quest for healthy prairie ecosystems.

Interns' Final Reports

Brody Dunn and Jeffrey Peyton

Jeff: My summer as an intern for Grand Prairie Friends was time very well-spent. I am a person who has been known to have some, well, difficulty making important decisions, and my choice of a career path has been no exception. My experience this summer has helped me to make that decision; I had been strongly considering a career in natural areas management, and now I am confident that this is the right field for me. For this reason alone, my internship has been an immensely valuable – and literally life-changing – experience, but that isn't the half of it.

Independent of any influence it may have had over my future plans, the work itself was enjoyable and rewarding. We made a visible and dramatic difference at our sites with the removal of invasive plants, and were able not to learn and practice a wide variety of techniques for management and control, but had numerous opportunities to actually make and implement management decisions, determining which strategies would be best with particular plants and in particular conditions. As a result I will have a variety of tools at my disposal for future natural areas work.

On the subject of tools, I was able to become familiar and comfortable with the equipment involved in taking care of natural areas. Before this summer, I had little experience with chainsaws



Brody and Jeff making a difference in the prairie...and (they tell us) in their lives.

and none with pesticide sprayers or brushcutters, but that is certainly no longer the case. With this and other equipment I am now capable, confident, and ready to continue my stewardship work.

Over the course of the internship, I came to care dearly about all the sites we worked at, but especially about the handful of remnant prairies along railroads and in cemeteries that GPF cares for. The diversity of plants at these sites is astounding, and their tenuous situation, like that of prairie remnants in Illinois in general, is cause for anxiety.

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(INTERNS FINAL REPORTS...)

More than once this summer, I've had troubled dreams of daylilies and sweet clover encroaching on valuable high-quality prairies. These sites are at as much or more risk from humans as from invasives – particularly sites without protected status, which could be mowed or sprayed down at a whim, or, for example, dug up to widen a highway. As a result of this summer's internship, I am even more conscious of the need to preserve our natural heritage.

Among the many plants we became acquainted with was the infamous wild parsnip, though unlike many interns of previous years, we managed to avoid any very extensive parsnip burns, suffering only a few small blisters. I was not so lucky with all plants, however.

I've spent my whole life to this point recklessly plunging through the brush heedless of hazards, but this year my daring has caught up with me, and I became sensitive to poison ivy for the first time, and in dramatic fashion. Since then I have been a bit more careful.

I would like to thank Jamie Ellis for supervising and coordinating the GPF summer internship and for all that he has taught us. I am also grateful to all the site stewards and other naturalists and biologists with whom we had the opportunity to work and to learn.

Additionally, I want to thank the Grand Prairie Friends members and board for making this internship possible, as well as my fellow intern, Brody, who was a great worker, easy to get along with, and always had an extra spoon at lunchtime for when I inevitably forgot mine. This summer has been a great experience and one that I will not forget.

Brody: Wow! What a summer! I can hardly believe it's coming to a close. When Jeff and I started, we could barely tell the difference between Sweet Clover and Purple Prairie Clover, or Wild Parsnip (yuck) and Golden Alexander, but now we're out in the field making educated decisions about all the beautiful ecosystems that GPF manages.

I especially want to thank all the site stewards that Jeff and I worked with over the summer. You guys really worked us hard, but we were always rewarded with ecological knowledge. My least favorite part about the internship may have been some of the days that Jeff and I used the backpack sprayers to kill Autumn Olive and Multiflora Rose. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget the smell of Garlon.

Fortunately, it always feels worthwhile when we go back to the sites where we've sprayed and see the invasive's yellow leaves and barren branches. It's tough to say what part of the internship was my favorite. It was always lovely to walk around a good woodland with someone knowledgeable, whether it was to pull garlic mustard or nip the occasional honeysuckle.

If pressed, I'd say that my favorite part of the internship came in the later weeks, when Jeff and I learned exactly what the long-term effects of our stewardship would be. Thinning maple and cherry trees from a forest made perfect sense once we had a good grasp of how the oaks and the woodland flowers might survive because of it.

Additionally, seeing so many high-quality prairies and knowing what it was that defined their character truly made managing them and other prairies a joy. I want to give an ecstatic and enthusiastic "Thank you!" to Grand Prairie Friends for a fantastic internship experience and an unforgettable summer.

Prairie Degradation Concerns

There are growing concerns about what is happening on various area natural prairie sites. As David Monk points out, the sites are not able to look out for themselves.

Here are the concerns of some local well-known and respected observers.

David Monk

The Savoy Prairie and power-line upgrades. The Savoy Prairie on South Rt. 45 between Windsor and Curtis is undergoing

Ameren power line upgrades. Wooden poles are being replaced with steel towers. The prairie was mowed with heavy equipment in the spring to remove trees and to provide a clear view for construction.

The land involved is owned by the Illinois Dept. of Transportation and the Canadian National Railroad. The community is fortunate that DOT corridor has a given the site a prairie preservation designation supported with DOT plantings and

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signs. Red Bison is the stewardship group in charge.

Rt. 150 and the Kickapoo trail. Roadside construction on Rt. 150 between Urbana and St. Joseph is having a substantial impact on the native prairie on that corridor. Both the road and the parallel Kickapoo trail corridor are affected.

DOT is being generous in supporting the prairie preservation aspects of both corridors but the area is still losing some of the last remaining un-chemicalized and relatively undisturbed native habitat in this area.

Go visit these two sites. We all want the electricity and the roads but we would also like a little original prairie here and there.

Jamie Ellis

Prairie is almost completely gone from Illinois. Native grasses and wildflowers that once blanketed the rolling landscape have been replaced with corn, soybeans, and non-native grasses and flowers. Bits of the prairie have been protected in old cemeteries and other out of the way places. For many years, railroad corridors—many laid out when the land was covered in prairie—provided a refuge. Herbicides, invasive species, mowing, and construction activities have taken their toll on these spaces.

With multiple uses and jurisdictions as well as their linear nature, protection and management of prairie along railroad and highway corridors is difficult at best. This is not to say that the plants, soil, insects, and other biota is not important or worth saving, but speaking for Grand Prairie Friends, we haven't had the personnel or energy to put into the protection and management of these spaces. Our energy has and will continue to go where we can find permanent protection. We are saddened by the destruction of prairie along Route 150 as well as Route 45, but we will work with CCFPD and others in the future as prairie is re-planted along parts of the new Kickapoo Rail Trail.



Steel power line towers being installed in the Red Bison Prairie Corridor in Savoy.

Steve Buck

I think this photo pretty well sums up the damage to the Kickapoo Rail Trail line along Hwy. 150. It says more about an example of our reasons to be concerned than anything I could say.

