
A Prairie Rendezvous



SPRING VOL. 17, NO. 1, 2015
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An Appeal for Informed Skepticism about Grazing Prairies

by John White

Many prairie enthusiasts are caught up with the excitement of “bringing home the buffalo” at The Nature Conservancy’s Nachusa Grasslands Nature Preserve in northern Illinois, and some people welcome the event without question. Here I present a differing view.

Tall-grass prairie east of the Mississippi River is ecologically distinct from Great Plains grasslands. The American Bison was never a “keystone species” in Illinois. Pasturage can quickly damage a midwestern prairie.

Some background

In the summer of 1965, I rescued plants along a railroad and established one of the earliest prairie restorations in existence.



Left: Niawathe Prairie before patch-burn grazing with an abundance of coneflowers.
Right: The same scene after two years of patch-burn grazing, with a solitary coneflower in bloom.

I first inspected what would eventually become Nachusa Grasslands on September 23, 1975, while formulating methods for the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory. The hillsides were grazed so hard,

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Douglas County Happenings

Prairie stewardship in the Douglas County area has taken on a new energy in recent weeks. This new interest is in large part the result of GPF taking ownership of the approximately 20 acre Burnett tract. Although this property is located one mile north of Douglas County it is only about a mile and a half from Villa Grove and is more “local” to people of Douglas County (such as Villa Grove, Tuscola and Camargo) than it is to the people of Champaign County.

The tract includes some remnant prairie plant survivors from the original prairie. It offers a good location to re-establish the rich array of local native prairie plants either from transplants or from gathered seed. These plants will be grown from seed collected by volunteers from local prairie



Fig. 1. Stewardship network volunteers threshing and cleaning seed collected from Greater Douglas County.

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A Prairie Rendezvous

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Editor: Jim Fay**Assistant Editor:** Jamie Ellis

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, Urbana, IL 61803. 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)

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VACANT (2017)

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

GPF Committees

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

Membership & Volunteerism: VACANT

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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

What are you passionate about? What strong feelings of enthusiasm or excitement do you have for a thing or activity or place or person? These are the things you do without prompting or encouragement. These are the things that fill your thoughts and time with a sense of joy. These are the things that you do without any expectation of compensation or that you readily spend your own money to do.

I am happy to report that there are many GPF members who feel passionate about land conservation and stewardship. They show this by sending their hard earned money so that GPF can buy land and take of what we have. The wildflowers, trees, butterflies, and birds are important to me, and I am so thankful they are important to you as well.

GPF is in the midst of raising money to buy more land! When 92 acres of forested land adjacent to Warbler Woods Nature Preserve came on the market last summer, it wasn't a very hard decision for the Board to say, "Let's buy it!" We worked very hard to raise money to buy the 141-acre Embarras Ridges Land and Water Reserve in 2012, and we were very fortunate to receive Warbler Woods in 2014. When we close on this property in May, there will be over 400 acres of forest we will protect and manage in perpetuity for the benefit of plants, wildlife, and you.

We have a new Board member! Carol Steinman joined the Board in January. Carol retired from a career at Parkland College, and she has been an important volunteer for East Central Illinois Master Naturalists. I am very happy that Carol is part of our leadership team because there's a lot to do this year. We are still looking for Board members. Are you ready to lead?

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(AN APPEAL FOR INFORMED SKEPTICISM...)

they looked like a bluegrass lawn except where experimental plots kept cattle out.

My introduction to grazing in the western tall-grass prairie began on October 26, 1980 – when, as an ecologist for the national office of The Nature Conservancy, I arrived at an Oklahoma ranch. In miles of searching, I could not find typical prairie flowers in any numbers except where cattle were fenced out: a little-used corral and a cemetery. This ranch later became The Nature Conservancy's 30,000-acre Tallgrass Prairie Preserve.

I have devoted most of the last 14 months to studying scientific and historical literature about grasslands and grazing animals.

Recent remarks

Within the past year, three Ph.D. conservation biologists – each with decades of experience in research, protection, and management of Illinois prairies – brought up the subject of bison grazing with me.

The first biologist asserted that putting bison at Nachusa Grasslands was “unnecessary and at worst a form of entertainment.” And later: “I actually wish this wasn't happening.” The second biologist exclaimed “It's stupid!” and said no more.

The third one refused to write a letter to support putting bison in another Illinois preserve because, to put it mildly, he did not think it was a good idea.

In contrast, a Nature Conservancy biologist recently stated, “We know that bison will be good for the prairie” at Nachusa. The Conservancy proclaims “the prairie will come alive” as the bison herd grows and can “roam free”; such hyperbole is not well informed. A Conservancy biologist recalls the Nachusa prairie as “dingy” in 1993, but I haven't forgotten the splendor of one flower-clad knob that was out of reach of cattle in 1975.

Grazing is neither all bad nor all good.

On the positive side:

- For the sake of the species, we need more American Bison herds in their natural habitat.
- Bison capture the public's imagination and elicit support for protecting and restoring prairie.

- Aside from bison, we need to manage some places for native grassland species that cannot live in the tall grass of an ungrazed prairie.
- At least in theory, bison grazing may help keep grasses from crowding out other plants after cropland is seeded with prairie.
- Judicious management with limited, periodic grazing (or mowing) may (or may not), in some cases, help maintain the desired species diversity in a prairie.
- The vegetation, soil, and water at Nachusa Grasslands should not be any more degraded by bison than it once was by cattle.
- The Nature Conservancy and Illinois Nature Preserves Commission can monitor the impacts of pasturage at Nachusa and make adjustments.

Next to plowing, grazing has destroyed more Illinois prairie than anything else. Pasturage has, however, kept some patches of dry prairie from growing up with brush. Those pastures provide refuge for certain grazing-tolerant plants and insects – but even there, the soil and vegetation show severe damage from livestock.

If a tall-grass prairie is grazed very much, highly palatable plants such as many legumes and Compass Plant die out: that's why range scientists and ranchers call them *decreasers*. Grazing is far more damaging east of the Mississippi River than on the Great Plains.

On the rich soil and in the humid climate of Illinois, a pastured prairie can be quickly converted to an impoverished turf of Kentucky Bluegrass, Smooth Brome, and other invasive alien grasses.

Patch-burn grazing

Grazers prefer fresh grass growing on recently burned areas. In a patch-burn grazing system, different parts of a pasture are burned from year to year; the intent is to vary the vegetative growth and improve habitat for certain birds. The method was developed at the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, which was long overgrazed and repeatedly aerial-sprayed with broadleaf herbicides. Research findings derived from there are not so applicable to Illinois prairies.

The weediness and low diversity of most western tall-grass prairie pastures are disquieting. When National Geographic produced a program

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(GREATER DOUGLAS COUNTY AREA...)

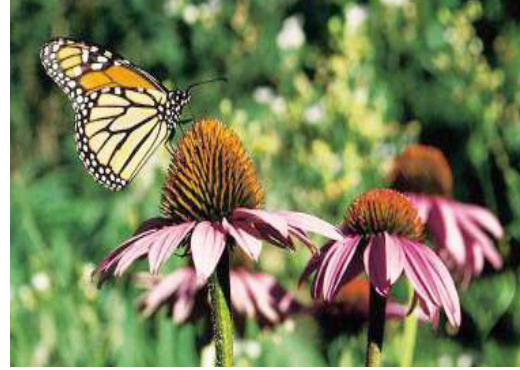
rie remnants such as streambanks, roadsides and railroad right-of-ways.

The early efforts to explore and document the local prairie ecology and collect seed has already resulted in some interesting discoveries. See “Local ‘Incognitos’” on page 5.

Coincidentally, the administration of the Walnut Point State Park in eastern Douglas County has begun efforts to restore the remnant prairies in that Park, including a tract from the University that has been ignored and let deteriorate for decades. The exotic non-local, non-prairie plants will be removed and replaced with local prairie plants.

The extremely popular interest in monarch butterflies that is sweeping the country is alive and well in Douglas County. This interest in prairie pollinator friendly plants has certainly been cultivated by Tuscola residents Cindy and Kirby Pringle, producers of the documentary film “Plight of the Monarchs.” See “The Pringles: Friends of the Monarch” below.

One such monarch friendly flower garden currently under development on the Villa Grove Methodist Church property. It is a “neighborhood wildflower garden” because it is a product of prairie wildflowers local residents are donating from their urban landscape flower gardens. It will not only provide valuable habitat for butterflies, bees



and birds but allow people to come to appreciate the ever-changing beauty and diversity throughout the year of this kind of prairie ecology.

The Villa Grove Methodist Church has also hosted and perhaps will continue to host prairie stewardship programs and seed cleaning sessions at its New Life Center.

Walnut Point State Park is implementing a project to establish a neighborhood wildflower garden in the Park. Local area residents are invited to share native prairie wildflowers from their gardens. This neighborhood garden will be well defined and removed from the remnant prairie restoration efforts. However, those prairie remnant restoration efforts will also include finding and gathering seed from other local prairie remnants and establishing those pollinator friendly wildflowers throughout the Park.

The Pringles: Friends of the Monarch

Kirby and Cindy Pringle of Tuscola are in the process of starting two environmental education organizations, Roadsides for Wildlife and Save the Monarch Butterfly. Kirby is a former features and nature writer for the Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette, while Cindy is a photographer. The two have been full-time photographers and partners in their business, Dogtown Artworks, since 2008.

The Pringles have been raising and releasing monarch butterflies in an effort to help boost the population since 2000, when the couple lived near Pesotum in rural Champaign County. The couple put in a one-half acre reconstructed prairie on their property. The two were amazed at the diversity of wildlife the small parcel attracted, including the monarch butterfly. But through the years the Pringles noticed fewer and fewer monarchs, especially during the migration season in mid-September. This was especially noticeable after 2006. As a result, they wanted to educate people about the

dwindling monarch population and what could be done to reverse the trend. Their third book, *The Butterfly That Would Not Fly*, was a result of that effort.

While taking photographs for the book, the Pringles decided to film their butterfly subjects and made a well-received documentary film, “Plight of the Monarch,” released in the spring of 2013. The two have traveled the Midwest giving presentations about the monarch and showing the film.

Roadsides for Wildlife (www.roadsidesforwildlife.org) and Save the Monarch Butterfly (www.gotmilkweed.org) are result of the Pringles’ passion for monarch butterflies. The purpose of the two organizations is to educate farmers, landowners and backyard gardeners of the benefits of roadside prairies and backyard prairie gardens. Kirby is still working on the websites, but hopes to have them completed soon.

Native Plant Sale 2015— Volunteer Opportunities

Wow, it's cold outside, but that doesn't stop us from thinking of spring. And thinking about the Grand Prairie Friends Annual Native Plant Sale. Mark your calendars for Saturday May 9, 2015 from 8:00 AM to 1:00 PM inside Lincoln Square downtown Urbana.

Yes, the plant sale goes on under a different model! GPF is buying seedlings from a nursery, but we will need volunteers to re-pot seedlings into larger pots.

Plants are set to be delivered April 1, and we'll gather on Thursday evenings from 6:30 to 8:00 PM after that date—April 2, 9, 16, 23, 30 and May 7 in the Natural Resources Study Annex (NRSA) Greenhouse, 1910 S. Griffith Dr., Champaign. This greenhouse is south of St. Mary's Road and west of First Street to the southwest of Assembly Hall.

On Friday May 8 from 5:00 to 7:00 PM we'll move plants from the greenhouse to Lincoln Square to get ready for the big sale on Saturday morning.

GPF needs all the help it can muster. If you like to get your hands dirty, come out and help transplant in the greenhouse. We'll need strong hands and backs as well as a few people with trucks on May 8 to move plants. Volunteers are vital on the day of the sale to help customers, to answer questions about native plants, to promote GPF, and to serve as cashiers.



Fig. 1. Customers queue up to pay for plants as volunteers help check them out at the 2014 Native Plant Sale.

(PRESIDENT'S REPORT...)

GPF sincerely thanks Mr. Ralph Burnett for the donation of 20 acres of land in Crittenden Township in far southern Champaign County not far from Villa Grove. The prominent natural feature is about 1000 feet of the Embarras River that flows through this property. GPF is working to protect the property as Land and Water Reserve. Look for a notice of a grand opening ceremony for later this year.

I have many other things to report and not enough room to write them: a great team working to make the native plant sale a success; we'll be hiring summer interns soon; stewardship activities are progressing well as Embarras Ridges; working with Champaign Surplus to recruit new volunteers for workdays this summer; many thanks to friends joining as Life Members; and more.

GPF is at a critical point in its history. We have stepped up to become an important part of the land conservation team in east-central Illinois, but we face some challenges. How do we take care of 500 acres of land scattered at 10 sites across east-central Illinois?

How do we raise the money needed to do this? Do we move from an all-volunteer organization to mostly volunteer by hiring staff? Is this person a land steward or administrative assistant or executive director? How do we continue being effective as a conservation organization?

If you have thoughts or ideas to answer these questions and the motivation to carry them out, then give me a call.

James.ellis72@gmail.com
217-649-7230

The Native Plant Sale is GPF's biggest fundraiser of the year. This event provides money to carry out our conservation mission and to hire summer interns. Tell your friends!

If you have any questions please contact Jamie Ellis (244-5695 or james.ellis72@gmail.com). Diane Wilhite and Rob Stanton will be coordinating set-up at Lincoln Square (robert.l.stanton@gmail.com) and Ed Wilhite will be coordinating volunteer cashiers (dianeed@sbcglobal.net). Special thanks to Beth Wohlge-muth as well who will coordinate advertising.

(AN APPEAL FOR INFORMED SKEPTICISM...)

about the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Oklahoma, the film crew was so disappointed by the depauperate flora that they resorted to preserves in Missouri to showcase prairie flowers.

Don Kurz has evaluated and protected tallgrass prairies for three decades. In 2010 he issued an indictment, "Is Patch-Burn Grazing Damaging Missouri's Native Prairie?" When I saw Don's before/after photos of devastated prairies – I was so heartsick, I could not pick up his paper again for days. Others felt the same.

Patch-burn grazing with cattle in Missouri has *irreparably* damaged Niawathe Prairie Natural Area and Taberville Prairie National Natural Landmark. Those rare, prized, *irreplaceable* prairies escaped early destruction despite great odds, and they were saved with great effort and expense. Now because of "conservation grazing," their high quality vegetation – the *very reason* for their preservation – is beyond recovery.

Also in Missouri, Prairie State Park (which has not been patch-burn grazed) has about 130 bison on 2,000 acres. The herd congregated and severely grazed flower-rich Regal Prairie, a State Natural Area.

Ecology of the early Illinois prairie

The Nature Conservancy's science blog says of Nachusa, "Bison were once abundant here, of course." However, bison fossils, archaeological remains, and historical documents all indicate that bison were not common in Illinois until the 1600s. Hunting pressures are thought to have kept bison scarce and largely absent east of the Mississippi until the number of Native Americans plummeted because of European diseases.

Increased hunting in the 1700s all but eliminated bison from Illinois by 1800. The first scientific expedition across northern Illinois and southwestern Wisconsin, in June of 1823, encountered no bison, no elk, and one deer in nine days and 228 miles. The expedition's report emphasized this "extreme scarcity of game" despite "the abundance of fine grass" and attributed it to Indians who "hunt without reserve."

The same scientists saw Upland Sandpipers, which nest in knee-high or shorter grass with bare ground where their chicks can feed. Their preferred habitat may have been pristine prairie covered with low-growing, clumpy Northern Dropseed

grass, but an 1876 report about northern Illinois described this bird as most abundant in "half wild prairies" – in other words, pastures with their herbage half eaten away.

The American Bison was never a "key-stone species" in the Illinois prairie.

Now that there are no longer pastures on every farm, the Upland Sandpiper is rare and deserves conservation efforts. But grazing or mowing for this species is not compatible with maintaining natural prairie vegetation on the same piece of ground.

Eastern tall-grass prairie is exceedingly sensitive to pasturage, and this sensitivity is *telling*: it suggests that large grazing animals did *not* have a significant influence on the development of the Illinois prairie over the millennia. A more tenable hypothesis: *Fire* – not *grazing* – shaped the prairie.

What next?

Our prairies are vanishingly rare fragments. We need to take care of what's left and restore more.

A decade ago, a conservationist told me that grazing would be the "next big thing" in managing Illinois prairies. I am dismayed that his prediction may prove true.

We don't know how often bison came across Nachusa Grasslands in the past, but confining a herd there will result in grazing intensities probably more than a thousand times greater than ever experienced. Bison will have more impact on Nachusa in a day, a month, or a year than free-ranging bison ever had in a year, a decade, or a century.

The impacts of bison will be varied and complex. I fully expect the most obvious – and *undesired* – result to be a big increase in invasive alien grasses. I hope I am wrong – and I expect The Nature Conservancy and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission to closely monitor the vegetation and take corrective measures if I am right.

Note

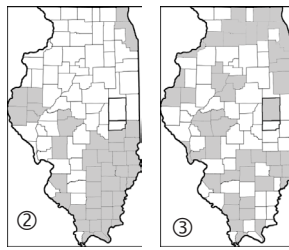
John is a former Chief Ecologist for The Nature Conservancy. Now he has a small business, Ecological Services, Urbana, Illinois. He can be reached at John.Jack.White@gmail.com.

Local "Incognitos"

Among the "incognitos" discovered in early explorations of Douglas County remnant prairies is Illinois bundle flower found in both Douglas and Champaign Counties but not documented by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service maps in either. (①) It is a widely found in non-remnant planted prairies and gardens, however.



Likewise, shrubby St. John's wort was found in Tuscola Township but is undocumented both counties. (②) Purple false foxglove was found but undocumented in Douglas County. (③)



Seed collecting and processing of these three plants offers an interesting insight about them and perhaps other prairie plants, and that deals with the size of the seed.

For example, most people would probably consider the seed of Illinois bundle flower to be rather small. And, indeed, the seeds are pretty small. The Prairie Moon nursery description lists the seed as about 4,200 seeds per ounce.

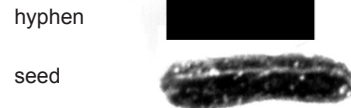


But that is huge compared to the seed of the shrubby St. John's wort. When viewed under a magnifying glass the seed has a shape something like tiny sausages. (St. John's wurst?)



There are 140,000 seeds per ounce. The seed sells for \$40 per ounce.

Here's one way to get an idea of seed size that is more appropriate in this case than comparing the seeds to a dime. A regular newsprint hyphen is about 1 mm long. Here is the size of shrubby St. John's wort seed compared to this newsprint hyphen: -



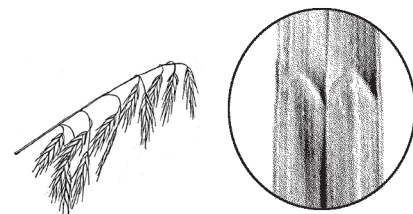
But that, in turn is huge compared to the false purple foxglove.



There is no reason to try to illustrate the size of that seed. Indeed, even with a magnifying glass it is difficult or impossible to distinguish individual seed. It would only look like fine chaff or dust. Prairie Moon lists it as 440,000 seeds per ounce. It sells for \$60 per ounce.

Another "incognito" worth mentioning is the prairie brome grass. It is called prairie brome in this area, but in most areas it is called arctic brome grass because it is indeed far more common far north of here. (④) We found it in the village of Villa Grove.

The heavy, droopy seed head of this brome is very distinctive. And like all brome grasses, this plant has the 'm' imprint on the leaf, although this trademark of brome grasses is only evident when the leaf is green.



GPF Receives Grant for Stewardship

Grand Prairie Friends is proud to announce that it will be the recipient of a grant from Columbia Sportswear worth up to \$5000!

These monies will be spent to help fund the summer internship; to create informational signs to erect at each of our preserves; and to recruit new volunteers and friends during stewardship days at some of our preserves. Lastly part of the grant includes at least \$1000 worth of Columbia products. Shirts and hats will be used as an incentive for new volunteers to come and help.

This opportunity was made possible by a partnership with  Champaign Surplus and The Grassroots Outdoor Alliance. Many of you know Champaign Surplus as a unique, independent, specialty outdoor retailer located in Champaign, Illinois.

The Grassroots Outdoor Alliance is a group of independent outdoor retailers organized to serve the needs of its members who operate over 100 independent specialty outdoor stores throughout North America.

GPF is putting together a team to implement this grant, and we look forward to working with Champaign Surplus.

GPF Plant Sale Repotting

GPF plant sale seedlings will be re-potted into larger pots Thursday evenings from 6:30 to 8:00 PM from April 2 until May 7. It will be done in the Natural Resources Study Annex (NRSA) Greenhouse, 1910 S. Griffith Dr., Champaign. This greenhouse is south of St. Mary's Road and west of First Street to the southwest of Assembly Hall.

So Old Fashioned; So 'Today'

by Eileen Borgia'

Recently I visited Old Town San Diego State Park. A newspaper in the Wells Fargo Company museum included an inspirational poem intended for settlers to beautify their homesteads. The nineteenth century style is a bit 'old fashioned,' but the sentiment is as poignant to "Wild Ones" and "Pollinator Pocket" enthusiasts of today as it was for homesteaders.

Make Home Beautiful

Make your home beautiful – bring to it flowers;
Plant them around to bud and to bloom;
Let them give life to your loneliest hours –
Let them bring life to enliven your gloom.
Make your own world – one that never has sorrowed,
Of music, and sunshine and gold summer air;
A home world whose forehead care never has furrowed,
And whose cheek of bright beauty will ever be fair

Make your home beautiful-weave round the portal
Wreathes of Jessamine and delicate sprays,
Of red fruited woodbine with gay immortelle,
That blesses and brightens wherever it strays,
Gather the blossoms, too – one little flower,
Varied verbena, or sweet mignonette.
Still may bring bloom to your desolate bower,
Still may be something to love and to pet.

Make your home beautiful, gather the roses
That board up the sunshine with exquisite art;
Perchance they may pour as your darkness closes,
That soft summer sunshine down into your heart!
If you can do so, O make it an Eden
Of beauty and gladness! Remember 'tis wise:
'Twill teach you to long for that home you are needing,
That heaven of beauty beyond the blue skies.

Make your home beautiful; sure 'tis a duty;
Call up your little ones, teach them to walk
Hand and hand with the wandering angel of beauty:
Encourage their spirits with nature to talk.
Gather them round you and let them be learning
Lessons that drop from the delicate wings
Of the birds and the butterfly – ever returning
To Him who has made all these beautiful things.

Make home a hive where all beautiful feelings
Cluster like bees, and their honey-dew bring;
Make it a temple of holy revealings,
And love its bright angel with "shadowing wing."
Then shall it bring when afar on life's billows.
Wherever your tempest tossed children are flung,
They will long for the shade of the home weeping willow.
And sing the sweet song which their mother had sung.

The San Diego News

SUMMER 2015 INTERNSHIP

Grand Prairie Friends (GPF) seeks interested applicants for two full-time summer internship positions for summer 2015 in ecological stewardship and management of natural areas in east-central Illinois. Interns will work independently and as a team to control and remove exotic, invasive plant species from prairie and woodland natural areas using mechanical and chemical techniques.

Educational opportunities include outings in the field with natural resource professionals, scientists, and volunteers. Interns might also assist with planting native plant seedlings and collecting native plant seed. GPF owns a truck to be used for transportation to and from sites.

Applicants should be highly self-motivated and able to work with little or no direct supervision. Applicants must be willing and able to work in the field under a variety of environmental conditions. Completed college level course work in the biological and ecological sciences is preferred. Ability and willingness to operate hand and power tools including bow saws, clippers, power brush-cutter, chainsaw, etc. is also preferred. A pesticide applicator license will be required at the start of the internship. A valid automobile driver's license is required.

Successful applicants will be paid \$10.00/hr including up to \$300.00 in mileage reimbursement expenses for personal vehicle use (if needed). Position begins on or about May 16 and will continue to approximately August 31 (start and end dates are flexible).



Summer interns, Jeff Peyton and Brody Dunn, pause for a moment at Weston Prairie. Jeff and Brody put in more than 1000 hours of work at over 20 natural areas in 2014.

To ensure full consideration for the internship, applications should be received by March 15, 2015. Please send letter of application, resume, and contact information for three references to: James Ellis (james.ellis72@gmail.com) re: Grand Prairie Friends-Summer Internship. Specific questions regarding the summer internship can be directed to James Ellis (james.ellis72@gmail.com or 217.244.5695).