

Prairie Wind

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Land Aquisition Update

By Mark Lyle, Friends Board President

October 2, 2009, was an important date for the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. Just one year earlier on September 23, 2008, our Friends group, along with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF), purchased 830 acres of land within the Refuge borders. Of particular importance was a large tract of land containing an original oak savanna which has all but disappeared from the American landscape.

Jointly, the Friends and INHF committed up \$2.7M for the land. At the auction, the final price was \$2.71M. Now the challenge becomes to work with the federal government to allocate \$2.71M to the Fish and Wildlife Service so they can purchase the land from our organizations.

The first step of the process is to gain awareness of the need at the federal level. It is an on-going process which began with earlier private conversations and continued on October 2nd with a public meeting held at the Refuge. Attending the meeting were former Congressman Neal Smith and representatives from Congressman Boswell's and Senator Harkin's offices. State, county and local officials also attended the briefing, in addition to other Prairie Learning Center Friends.

After reviewing the concept, programs and support the Friends provided to the Refuge, Mark Ackelson, INHF and Stan Kuhn, Friends Board Member discussed the action, scope and timeframe of the request for funding.

In general, attendees understood how and to what magnitude the Friends have supported the Refuge and, if reimbursed by the Fish and Wildlife Service, what could be done with those same funds for other projects and for other parcels of land within the Refuge boundaries which may become available in the future.

I ask that anything you can do to communicate this vital need to your federal representatives be done as soon as possible. As I said, October 2 was a good day, but our group needs to keep the ball rolling. Please forward any comments or questions to me:

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Public Use Intern



My name is Bruce T. Stiles and I am from Waterloo, Iowa. As a visitor service intern, I hope to be able to give the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge visitors a greater appreciation for Iowa's prairie remnants. I want people to become passionate about tallgrass prairies, like I am.

I started to save money when I was just a boy to be able to buy my grandmother's pasture, where I loved to play. I knew that when my aunt owned it she would destroy it. I wanted to have the money to buy it away from my aunt. My grandmother loved the prairie flowers on our farm and also played among them as a girl, but none of us knew what a prairie was. In 1986, one hundred years after my great grandfather bought the prairie, it was mine. My goal was to restore the twenty acre prairie to the condition my grandmother knew in the early 1890's.

In 1973, I graduated from the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) with a B.A. in General Biology. I wanted to work for the National Park Service, but I did not get a job with my degree. Natural History Interpretation and prairie restoration and reconstruction became my hobby. I led prairie nature walks for the Sierra Club, the Iowa Prairie Network, UNI, and many other organizations. Dr. Daryl Smith of UNI often has his class burn my prairie. I became the caretaker of the Bennington Township Cemetery, which has retained its original prairie vegetation. I have enjoyed giving many prairie talks at this cemetery. Sometimes for my prairie talks, I dress up like a mid-19th Century Iowa farmer.

In 2006 my daughters started going to UNI. I thought I could too. I have now taken all the needed classes for a minor in Natural History Interpretation. I would bet I am the oldest intern the refuge has had.

Fall Biology Intern



My name is Ryan Jaehrling, and I am Karen Viste-Sparkman's newest biology intern for this fall. I currently live in Ames and am attending Iowa State University. Other than this internship all I have left is my thesis. I will be graduating this fall with a master's degree in Public Administration. Along with the normal intern activities, I will be writing a grant to help fund a project on the refuge.

I came to Neal Smith NWR seeking hands-on experience in conservation. This is a field I care very much about and am seeking a career in. Other than biological experience, I have been hoping to learn about the issues facing our native landscapes. I am currently half-way through the internship and have learned many plant and animal species. I'm hoping to start learning Latin names as well. After being in college for several years, it has been refreshing to be learning information that is useful in a practical sense, rather than just theoretical. I am thankful for experiences I have had here at the refuge and am hoping to still learn more before my internship ends.

Partner School Update

By Hallie Rasmussen, Park Ranger



Fall has arrived once again and that means the refuge is buzzing with the high energy of school children. This is officially the first season we are piloting our partner school program and the schedule is full through December. Recently we have made a shift in our environmental education program where we have asked teachers to begin leading the Project Bluestem Curriculum on their own at the Prairie Learning Center as it was first designed to do. This offers the opportunity for visitor services staff to focus energy on the new partner school program by conducting on-site and off-site programs with those schools.

One of the goals of the partner school program is to get all grades to visit the refuge at least once a year. In time it would be ideal if each grade could come out three times a year giving them the opportunity to see the prairie change through the seasons. This concept of having students visit the refuge year after year allows for the development not just of awareness or knowledge of the site, but hopefully a personal connection that will ultimately lead to behavior change. Most students visit once during their entire school career, (which is great for exposure) but offering them the opportunity to come out at all grade levels builds a stronger bond and sense of place to the prairie.

Volunteer Appreciation Social

By Al Murray, Park Ranger

The volunteers and staff at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge will come together on Saturday, November 7, to recognize the many contributions of the volunteers during 2009. The event will begin at 11:30 with appetizers. Lunch will be served at noon followed by the recognition program.

Volunteers are critical to the continued success of the refuge. They typically contribute over 16,000 hours! They are an essential part of the workforce and support the staff in many ways. Bookstore volunteers greet and welcome visitors while providing needed information to help them plan their visit. Many volunteers spend hours assisting the biologist by working in the greenhouse, planting seedlings, monitoring and fighting invasive species, collecting seed and processing seed in the seed lab. The Volunteer Appreciation Social gives staff members an opportunity to recognize the contributions of the volunteers and say thank you. This year's event will also afford Nancy Gilbertson, Refuge Manager for the last 11 years, an opportunity to say goodbye to old friends as she prepares to retire in December.

Calling All Carpenters (or at least one)!

We are looking for someone who can build a custom bookcase for the bookstore. There are some small areas that need bookshelves of specific dimensions. The refuge would provide all materials, but we need your skills! If you are interested please contact Cheryl Groom at 515-994-3411 or Cheryl_groom@fws.gov.



New LMRD Intern



As we shift into this autumn season a new intern can be found working at Neal Smith NWR in the Prairie Learning Center or out on the prairie itself. His name is Paul Frater and he works as the land management, research, and demonstration intern.

Paul hails from Wisconsin originally. He grew up in the northeast part of the state right along Lake Michigan and went to school at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. There he received an undergraduate degree in Biology and Environmental Education. During school Paul participated in all sorts of great experiences including working as a park ranger in Rocky Mountain National Park and as an avian technician in West Virginia. Last summer he attended a field ecology course in Greenland

where he worked as part of a team who rappelled down cliffs and banded Peregrine falcons.

Last March Paul started a hike on the Appalachian Trail – a footpath extending from northern Georgia to Maine. He intended to hike the entire length with his mother, but after she encountered an unfortunate injury with her knee, they both came home. Although they did not complete the entire trail they still hiked 75% of it and had a lot of what Paul calls, “nostalgic moments.”

Aside from hiking hundreds and hundreds of miles or working on the prairie, Paul enjoys hunting, fishing, canoeing, snowshoeing, camping, biking, reading, writing, photography, playing violin, guitar, mandolin, harmonica, and hand flute, spending time with family, learning, dreaming, reminiscing, and trying to remember if he has any other hobbies and how to do the ones he can remember. “I enjoy just about any sort of outdoor activity as well as anything that inspires the mind,” says Paul.

After walking through the eastern forests all summer, Paul says that he is excited to work on the prairie. He states, “I’ve had an affinity towards prairie ever since coming home after working in Colorado one summer. I can remember looking out of the window of a Greyhound bus just east of Denver. A yellow sea of flowers spread out as far as I could see and basked in the golden evening sun. I didn’t know then what they were except for beautiful, and even though I worked in the mountains all summer that was the only scene that actually took my breath away.” So far Paul has created several brochures on various natural history topics at the refuge. He has also helped out with research as well as some special outreach events.

While in central Iowa this autumn, Paul is staying with nearby residents Don and Dorothy Faidley near Colfax. He often bikes to work in the morning and apologizes if he causes any traffic jams. He looks forward to the rest of his time here at the refuge learning prairie plants and helping to, as he says, “plant seeds of prairie awareness so that others can enjoy this place as much as I do.”

Monarch Madness

By Hallie Rasmussen, Park Ranger

Butterflies danced and fluttered about as the warmth from the sun made this a perfect day for tagging monarch butterflies. On Saturday, September 12, nearly 50 people showed up to grab a net and take on the tall prairie grass to catch these magnificent creatures and tag them on their journey to Mexico. Monarchs make a remarkable migration from the northern reaches of the U.S. and Canada all the way to Mexico each year as winter once again begins to encroach. We tagged 60 butterflies and sent them on their way in hopes they will find their way to their destination many, many miles south.

Feature Exhibit in Art Gallery

By Doreen Van Ryswyk



The J.N. “Ding” Darling Art Gallery at the refuge is the temporary home of the photography of Carl Kurtz. Carl is a master photographer, naturalist, and prairie reconstructionist. He has taught natural history photography at Iowa State for 14 years and has conducted photography workshops throughout Iowa. He has also taught several adult education courses on nature photography and has presented more than 500 lectures to students and civic groups.

About 650 of Carl’s photographs have been published in 50 different regional and national publications, including books, magazines, and calendars. His work has also appeared in

advertising, cards, posters, and museum displays.

“Photography of plants and animals associated with the tallgrass prairie has been a yearly pursuit of mine for the past 35 years,” says Carl. “It began on an original prairie remnant along an old railroad on my farm. In 2004, I stopped shooting film and began using digital images. I print on an Epson 2000P pigmented inkjet printer and fine art paper. I complete the printed images with the matting and framing. The frames are constructed from wind thrown black walnut and silver maple trees from our farm.”

Carl and his wife, Linda, live on a 172-acre family farm near St. Anthony in western Marshall County in central Iowa. They have restored about 80 acres to tallgrass prairie, from which they harvest and sell prairie seed. These seeds – and the seeds of inspiration in Carl’s photography – are helping create more Iowa prairie.

His exhibit will be on display through the middle of November. Come to the refuge to see some of his amazing work.

The Land Management and Research Demonstration Program (LMRD)

By Paul Frater, LMRD Intern

Neal Smith NWR has the designation as the Land Management and Research Demonstration program home base. Our refuge is one of five nationally designated sites in the nation, and is focused on tallgrass prairie and oak savanna ecosystems. This means that the refuge is *the* place for new and influential studies involving these globally imperiled ecosystems. Researchers from around the state, region, and nation come here to study how prairies and savannas work and how land managers can help the reconstructed versions of these ecosystems work better.

The LMRD program also promotes outreach and education to people so that information about research and management techniques used here is available for use by others. This teaching helps to promote a broader understanding of tallgrass prairies and oak savannas as well as their importance and value in your area.

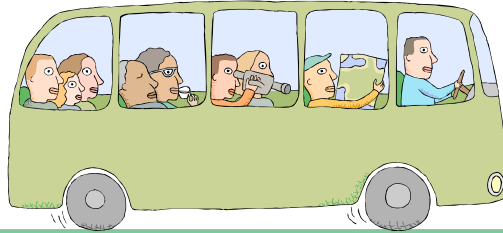
Volunteer Bus Trip

By Al Murray, Park Ranger

On Saturday, October 17, volunteers and staff from Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge will travel to Ledges State Park near Boone for this year's annual volunteer bus trip. In addition to the opportunity to hike the many trails and take in the beauty of the park, those who wish will have an opportunity to take to the water and paddle a canoe or kayak on a beautiful stretch of the Des Moines River. Seven Oaks Outfitters from Boone will be providing the canoes and kayaks as well as transportation to the drop off and pick-up sites. The bus trip and lunch are free but if you want to canoe or kayak, the fee is \$20.00 payable to Seven Oaks Outfitters.

In this area, the Des Moines River gently meanders through the countryside west of Boone. A gentle current aids paddlers as they work their way down the river. We can anticipate the river basin will be awash with the fall foliage display as well as an opportunity to see migratory and non-migratory birds who transverse the basin. Lunch will be provided and we will picnic on a sand bar. The river paddle is open to anyone regardless of experience. Ranger Al Murray, who is an avid paddler and has paddled a number of the rivers in this region, including this section, will accompany those on the paddle.

At the conclusion of the paddle, we will return to Ledges and rejoin the hikers prior to departing for the refuge. All volunteers are encouraged to join us. We hope to see you there!



Come Grow With Us

The power of a Friends group is its members. We represent a variety of interests, talents and financial support allowing the Friends of the Prairie Learning Center to meet its mission and goals. We encourage you to renew your support or become a new Friend by completing the membership form below. Friends of the Prairie Learning Center is a nonprofit organization and all donations are tax deductible.

____ \$25 -- Big Bluestem Friend ____ \$50 -- Buffalo Buddy
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____ Other -- \$ _____

Be sure to find out if your company will match contributions.

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Mail to: Friends of The Prairie Learning Center, PO Box 399, Prairie City, Iowa 50228.

LMRD Field Research Day

By Paul Frater, LMRD Intern

“What a worthwhile experience,” and “We’d like to see something like this again,” were just a few of the comments that people had to say about the Neal Smith NWR Land Management and Research Demonstration Field Day on Saturday, September 19. People from all over central Iowa and several parties from farther away, even out of state, participated as researchers demonstrated their projects on the refuge.

Many had expressed interest in our research program, and so the idea for this first ever Research Field Day was a natural. Researchers on hand for the day represented most of the research projects currently happening on the refuge, and the excited buzz that ensued among attendees confirmed the appreciation in having the event.

And what did visitors experience on the field day? Twelve researchers from ten different research projects on the refuge demonstrated research tools and techniques, and interpreted results, not during power point presentations, but actually in the field where the rubber hits the road! Research demonstration included all sorts of studies from wildlife such as bison and butterflies to prairie and sedge meadow reconstruction strategies, soil carbon, water and hydrology, and an agro-ecosystem project happening on the refuge. Visitors were able to walk around on research sites, see and hear what is happening, and get an understanding of why the research is important in reconstructing the prairie landscape on the refuge.

Researchers also enjoyed the day. Keith Schilling from the Iowa Geological Survey of the Iowa DNR presented research about the hydrology of Neal Smith NWR at the field day. When asked about it, he said the day was a “great success; a wonderful opportunity to visit with non-scientists, and for them to learn about the research going on.”

Curious about research at the refuge? Posters interpreting some of the research are posted in the Prairie Learning Center. If you missed this year’s Research Field Day, don’t worry, after the overwhelming positive response, we will definitely do an encore next year.

Refuge Manager Gilbertson to Retire in December 2009

By Nancy Gilbertson

Rē•tīre', *v.i.*; to withdraw oneself from business, active service, or public life, especially because of advanced age.

Well, that sounds more like the definition of **dead**, which is not what I had in mind when I decided to retire. I was thinking more of sleeping late or zipping into Des Moines on a Tuesday for lunch or cleaning the house until 4 a.m., knowing I didn’t have to get up in three hours and be coherent for work. Yippy! Yes, after 30 years with the Fish and Wildlife Service I am retiring on December 31.

I want to take this final opportunity to thank the Friends of the Prairie Learning Center for being such fantastic Friends and friends. You were here before I arrived and you’ll be here after I leave, no doubt continuing your exemplary work, setting the standard for other Friends groups. While I know that you are here to advocate for the refuge, I just want you to know how much it has meant to me personally. I will be forever grateful for the support and friendship you have shown me during my tenure here. Thank you; thank you so much.



A Message from the Friends President

By Mark Lyle

I hope you have all had a good summer. Refuge activities to look forward to this fall are:

- Ding Darling Stewardship Day, October 10 – free lunch for the hardy volunteers
- Volunteer bus trip to Ledges State Park, October 17 for refuge volunteers
- Volunteer Awards Luncheon, November 7
- Immediately after the luncheon you are welcome to attend the annual meeting. If you are unable to attend, any comments/suggestions can be sent to: mdplyle@mchsi.com, or call 515-225-6139.

I hope you all feel pride in the accomplishments of the Refuge and what you have done to help this cause. Thank you for your support!

Prairie Wind

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