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THE DOCENT NEWS

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CHANGING OF THE GUARD

—Andrew Donovan-Shead

Change is inevitable, from which *The Docent News* is not immune. Kim Hagan has resigned from her rôle as editor to have more time to pursue other things. We will miss her skill. She did an excellent job, particularly with the page-layout, as you have seen. Page-layout it is a tricky affair that requires balance to give the proper feel to a publication; Kim achieved an artistic elegance and simplicity that is *The Docent News*. Also, she gave us color, which is very important for the pictures coming from the prairie; now we can see what Van Vives is talking about when he reports on what is blooming, or know the Purple Emperor seen by John Fisher—a sighting that would be a big surprise in this part of the world.

With the going of Kim there is the coming of Andrew. I volunteered to assume the editor's mantle. My page-layout tends to be spartan and utilitarian, so I won't be making any radical changes to the look and feel of the newsletter. Behind the scenes I caused a bloodless revolution. I have ported the Microsoft Word template to Open Office, the open-source office suite that is free to anyone who cares to

download a copy from the Internet at www.openoffice.org; versions exist for both Windows and Linux operating systems; naturally, I am typesetting this on a Linux enabled computer system. Only other major change is my replacement of the fonts with open-source versions that are free to distribute; luckily, I found a free replacement for the Slipstream font that Kim used for the main title, it is called *Barbatrik* from Ray Larabie's web-site www.larabiefonts.com. Well, so much for the technical details. As usual the color edition will be distributed via email in Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF), and the print-edition will be distributed in boring monochrome via the postal service. If you didn't receive this electronically, I encourage you to do so to save paper, postage, and the fuel needed for delivery. If you can't see color or have difficulty with your vision, you can use Adobe Reader to enlarge the image on your computer screen for easier reading and admiration of the shapely fonts.

You are welcome to submit articles about the Tallgrass Prairie or other preserves for publication. Send them to me at my address, awd-s@cloistral.net, in a plain-text email with any pictures attached as separate

files; indicate in the text where you want each picture to appear. We will work together to make your story look and sound good.

BEGINNER'S BIRDING WORKSHOP

Jim Thayer will conduct a beginner's introduction to bird identification later in Spring. Exact date and time will be announced closer to the event. Those of you with a novice interest in birds should make an effort to attend. I speak from experience when I say that Jim is a very good instructor who will explain about the kind of optical equipment needed, what to do and when to do it. A good book that will help you prepare to get the most out of this is *Sibley's Birding Basics*; copies are available in the gift shop or you can get one from your local bookseller.

CHRISTMAS BIRD-COUNT

—John Fisher

The annual Christmas Bird-count at the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve will happen on Saturday, 1 January 2005. It is open to anyone who wants to participate. No previous experience is necessary.

If you definitely plan to attend then please send an email to Don

Wolfe letting him know who you are and when you expect to arrive; doing so will help Don plan the event. Don's email address is dwolfe@ou.edu. Email is preferred, but you can speak with him by telephone at 918-336-7778 if necessary. A \$5 fee is levied on each participant, money that goes to the National Audubon Society to defray expenses of compiling and publishing the results.

Groups will depart from the Headquarters compound at 7, 8, and 9 o'clock in the morning. If you haven't made prior arrangement with Don and wake up on Saturday morning feeling frisky, then just appear at one of these appointed hours, you will be assigned to a group.

Area of the count is about 15 miles in diameter. Car routes and walking routes are available, so if you aren't fit enough to walk, you can still participate in a car. Some of the counting activity will take place off the preserve on public and private lands; this is another reason to make prior arrangement because, depending on where you come from, it will be better for you to go direct to your designated area than to drive 25 miles to HQ and then another 25 miles to do the counting.

Make sure you dress appropriately. If you are walking, it is a significant hike. Bring a packed lunch with enough water to drink.

Counting is expected to conclude at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. At 6 o'clock a meeting will convene at either the Stucco House or Research Station to review the data and eat some chili made by Bob Hamilton and Don Wolfe; bring chips, salad, or a dessert to share with others.

DOCENT RECOGNITION DINNER

—Andrew Donovan-Shead

Our docent recognition dinner was held at the Hilton Garden Suites Hotel this year for the first time at Tulsa International Airport. Not as many attended as in previous years, yet it was a comfortable number. Bob Hamilton, Scientific Director of the Tallgrass Prairie, was absent on a commitment out of State; he is a busy man who, just a few days before, I saw leaving the headquarters compound in a small convoy of all-terrain vehicles (ATV) to round-up bison. Harvey Payne took Bob's place and talked about progress of the annual in-gathering of the herd.

While I was working the gift shop on Monday, 1 November, I stood outside under the soft gray skies of a damp day, watching skeins of geese fly south for the winter; as they went I saw them jockeying for position in the formation and could hear them honking to each other. To the southwest I could also hear the cowboys using a siren to drive the bison northeast to the corrals. For a moment my mind flew with the geese

and I could look down to the right of our flight path and see the bison, small on the ground, moving away from the line of mechanized figures across the rolling prairie of russet, gold, and deep purple grasses; I could see the reflected light from still ponds of inviting water. A flight of fancy, but then I know what the ground looks like from the air; and the image and sensation was vivid enough that I might just as well have been one of the geese; it is the magic of the prairie and the wonder of nature combined with our unique ability for empathy with other creatures and the world around us—a small step on the way to being at one with the Universe, which we are except that we tend to forget it or have never known it in the first place.

Harvey said that in previous years he had been perturbed by the atmosphere of a Wild West Show surrounding the round-up. Now part of the round-up is the bison chuck-wagon that puts out a trail of some kind of cattle-cake to draw the bison towards the pens, so that this year the round-up has been less onerous for the bison and cowboys, though still a lot of work.

Harvey talked about progress in the patch-burning experiment. Someone asked how it is being perceived by the ranching community. Harvey said that ranchers are conservative folk who like to do what they know works, because they can't afford to fail. He said that ranchers are interested in what is happening, some

actively so and some with much skepticism. It seems that the experiment on the prairie is being watched closely to see how it works.

Someone asked what became of the new experiment with cattle grazing on patch-burned land. Harvey said that the results are encouraging and that some years are better than others for the cattle. If patch-burning can reduce dependence on feed supplements for cattle then ranchers can save \$100 per ton, the kind of savings that get attention in any business.

Harvey said that the Tallgrass Prairie is a real jewel in The Nature Conservancy's crown. Now with the new research station open for business, more activities will be conducted there in the lecture room. Already persons who have been interns on the prairie speak of fond memories and how much they love the place; most of these persons are spread out across the country and around the world. Harvey and Bob receive inquiries from all over the world now that the Tallgrass Prairie is such a fine repository of expertise. Harvey reiterated that as docents we are the face with whom the public interacts; he said that the most common inquiry received by preserve staff is: "Is the prairie open to visitors and, if so, will there be someone at the Visitor Center to answer questions." Harvey, once again, thanked us all for the time and effort each of us gives to the preservation of the Tallgrass Prairie.

Dennis Bires said that Monica Murray will relinquish her position as coordinator of the Docent Dinner and other activities; this position is open for anyone who would like to take up the challenge. I know Monica is a hard act to follow, but don't be shy; I am sure she will explain to her successor what to do.

David Turner had a special presentation to make to our leader, Dennis. From a brown paper sack, he produced, much as conjurer would, a hat made to look like the head of a bison. The cap fit, so Dennis wore it.

A lady asked me where I got my enamel bison pin. I told her that I got it from William Spear Designs in Juneau, Alaska. I thought you might be interested too; if so then look at this web-site: www.wmspear.com; I got a gray wolf to chase my bison.

Dennis said that up on the trail, the grass is really tall, above eight feet; now is a good time to actually see some tall grass. He said that the Docent Reorientation will be held in March, in the lecture room at the research station. Also, the Visitors' Center will be closed on Sunday, 12 December 2004, reopening in March 2005.

Overall, the Docent Dinner was a relaxing affair that finished by 8:30 pm.

BISON ROUND-UP

Bob Hamilton and his crew finished the bison round-up without incident. Bob told me that it went well. On Monday, 29 November, I saw the last of the over-wintering herd making their way from the corrals to home on the range. Ann Whitehorn came in to the shop, later in the morning; during our conversation she said that this year nobody wrecked an ATV, which must be a real sign of a good year.

No MORE ADOPT-A-BISON

—John Fisher

The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve Adopt-a-Bison program is being phased out. Through the years a number of people have raised concerns about the anthropomorphism of the bison herd by having individual names given on the adoption certificates; that plus the fact that ultimately some of our surplus bison end up as bison burgers has caused concern to The Nature Conservancy marketing department about the potential for negative publicity regarding the Adopt-a-Bison program. In a nutshell, they saw a problem in using the bison as a tool to manage the Prairie while using the "adoption" of warm, fuzzy individual animals to raise money. Over the past year we've looked at a number of formats that would allow us to keep the program alive as a viable fund-raiser, but in the end the potential complications offset the benefits and it

was decided to retire the program and put it out to pasture.

I want to thank all of you that have supported the program in the past. The program has raised significant funds for bison management and preserve stewardship, as well as awareness of the magnificent prairies and their inhabitants. If anyone wishes to continue supporting the conservation efforts of The Nature Conservancy of Oklahoma, send contributions for stewardship activities directly to the Oklahoma Chapter office in Tulsa; be sure to note that your contribution is to be used in Oklahoma.



The gift shop has a small herd of bison like the pair pictured above. Cute aren't they? You can adopt these for a small fee. Better yet, you can take them home in your car; they are house-trained and docile, responding well to periodic grooming with a feather duster.

NICKEL PRESERVE BIRD-COUNT

—John Fisher

February 5th is the date for the annual winter bird-count at the J. T. Nickel Family Nature and Wildlife Preserve. We will meet at 8:00 AM at the Eagle Bluff Resort parking lot for team and area assignments. The count will last until 4:00 PM when we will gather at the preserve headquarters in Sawmill Hollow to compile the results and eat some of Chris Wilson's fine chili. Bring your own lunch. Contact Chris Wilson by email at cwilson@tnc.org or by telephone at 918-456-7601 for questions or details.



DOCENT SCHEDULE AND GIFT SHOP SALES

—Andrew Donovan-Shead

Docent scheduling is in abeyance for the winter months until after the docent reorientation meeting in March next year. For the gift-shop sales summary, I thought we should try something new, thus:

Year	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total Sales
2001	\$5,405.35	\$7,486.92	\$10,332.12	\$9,542.65	\$6,621.88	\$3,740.80	\$4,562.16	\$6,810.43	\$7,141.10	\$2,024.55	\$63,667.96
2002	\$4,845.78	\$4,552.81	\$8,774.83	\$10,696.31	\$7,107.98	\$4,055.73	\$5,378.52	\$3,719.68	\$4,569.57	\$425.27	\$54,126.48
2003	\$3,123.58	\$4,708.99	\$6,527.79	\$7,884.35	\$6,399.12	\$3,596.55	\$3,572.03	\$6,477.62	\$4,700.90	\$632.25	\$47,623.18
2004	\$3,688.18	\$5,236.16	\$5,236.16	\$6,546.62	\$6,970.60	\$4,634.00	\$4,697.43	\$4,953.85	\$3,679.65		\$45,642.65

Our sales appear to have been in decline since 2001, our best year; I wonder why it was so good. If anyone has an opinion about this then please let me know. Perhaps we should show the visitor summary in similar tabular form, by foreign and domestic, with a complete decomposition by nation at the end of each year?

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