



THE DOCENT NEWS

Of The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve Docent Program



SEPTEMBER 2006

For the Volunteers and Supporters of the Oklahoma Chapter of The Nature Conservancy

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NEW PAGE-LAYOUT

—Andrew Donovan-Shead

As you can see, I have redesigned the layout of the newsletter. Until now, THE DOCENT NEWS was typeset using a word-processor; I used Open Office. One problem with using a word-processor is that it is sometimes difficult to make the text and pictures stay fixed in one place. Microsoft Word is notorious for ignoring the operator and making uncommanded changes to the format of the document; Open Office is much more compliant. In an effort to use as much of the page as possible and to have more control over the placement of pictures, I thought to try Scribus, the open-source page-layout desk-top publishing software; the result is before your eyes.

If you are curious to know more about Scribus, you can read a Wikipedia article on-line at this Internet address:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scribus>.

See this on-line article to satisfy any curiosity about Open Office:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_office.

The newsletter is set in the DejaVu family of fonts that I chose as being more readable as well as elegant to the eye.

Open source software is usually free of charge, though contributions of money and expertise are welcome to the various projects that maintain and develop the programs.



Wax Goldenweed
by Van Vives

I use the Ubuntu distribution of the Debian GNU-Linux computer Operating System, which is appropriate since UBUNTU is a word from the Bantu languages of Southern Africa that means, in rough translation, "humanity towards others". You can find out more about the ideology of Ubuntu at this address on the Internet:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_%28ideology%29.

For more information on the Ubuntu Operating System, see the article at this address:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_%28Linux_distribution%29.



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DOCENT RECOGNITION DINNER

—Dennis Bires

The 2006 Docent Recognition Dinner will be held on the afternoon of Saturday, October 28, at 1:00 p.m., at the Ecological Research Station at the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. Our banquet will be a midday meal this year, so we can all drive home in daylight. We'll honor those who've earned their initial Docent pin, as well as those who've reached higher summits of service. And as always the annual dinner is a great time to catch up with volunteers we see only occasionally when we share a shift, on a work day, or at Docent Reorientation.

This year's banquet will include a couple of new features, in addition to our usual delicious repast. First, without going into detail, there will be a brief special entertainment following the dinner and awards. You'll have to be there to find out what it is.

And beforehand, we will have an optional trail walk beginning at 11:00 a.m. Meet at the trail head, and we'll stroll the Study Trail and parts of the Prairie Earth Trail. This is not a "hike," but a leisurely enjoyment of the prairie at one of its most glorious seasons. If you've never been surrounded by the tall grass at its tallest—in the fall—you'll have to take advantage of this opportunity. Grey weather and a drizzle of rain would only make it more striking, so bring appropriate gear and footwear. And after an hour or so on the open prairie, a hot dinner will be welcome.

Watch your email for a special invitation to this year's Docent Recognition Dinner, and mark your calendar for Saturday, October 28.

FLOWERS ENJOYING THE DROUGHT

—Van Vives

A visitor to the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve this month said, "I can't believe how many flowers are blooming in this hot, dry weather." So one has to assume that the plants in bloom like the extreme weather that we have been

having. Surprisingly, there is considerable green on the prairie. If you investigate the green you will find that it is Broomweed, which is about to bloom. This is plant that likes hot, dry weather.

There is abundant Snow-on-the-mountain in bloom, EUPHORBIA MARGINATA, especially along the roadside. If one looks up this a plant in reference books it says that it prospers in pastures, roadsides, and waste areas, especially over limestone. It is native to southern Mexico and Central America.

In midsummer a gas pipeline was put in on the south side from the entrance to the east. There is no trouble determining where that



line went in today. Just follow the line of Buffalo Bur and its yellow blooms. The Buffalo Bur enjoys highly disturbed areas, and digging a trench and filling it up is just like heaven for the plant.

There is another yellow flower blooming and it has very distinct leaves, which are alternate. Each leaf has distinct teeth on the margins and each tooth is tipped with a short bristle. This plant is the Wax Goldenweed, HAPLOPAPPUS CILIATUS. It enjoys dry, open, sandy to rocky, disturbed sites and waste areas.

Curly-top Gumweed, GRINDELIA SQUARROSA, is also seen along the roadside and ditches. This is another plant that likes disturbed sites, prairies, and waste areas. These hot days are not a good time to touch and inspect the plant



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because of the sticky resin it exudes.

There are several other wildflowers in bloom: Patridge Pea, Blue Sage, Large-flowered Gaura, Leavenworth Eryngo, Thistle, Goldenrod, and Horse Nettle.



Buffalo Bur Along Pipe-line by Van Vives

Despite the lack of rain and high temperatures there are still beauty spots on the prairie.

PRAIRIE PRESERVE PHOTOGRAPHS

—Van Vives

The Tallgrass Prairie will be represented at the Botanical Gardens in Cleveland, Ohio. They contacted me to get permission to use my photos in a study project on prairies. The photos will be in an information packet targeted for children. I asked them to not only mention The Tallgrass Prairie, but also The Nature Conservancy.

Field of Large Flowered Gaura by Van Vives



Recently I was contacted by Texas Knives & Collectibles. They are doing a limited series of Texas knives honoring the Monarch butterfly,

which is the Texas State Insect. They want to use one of my photos of the Monarch butterfly for the insert. I gave them my OK if they mention The Nature Conservancy. See the picture of the insert.

Two of my photos will be in a new Oklahoma Social Studies textbook. Again I asked them to refer to The Nature Conservancy. These are some of the ways I draw attention to the work of The Nature Conservancy and spread the word about preservation of our natural beauties.

MAKING OF A NATURALIST

—Van Vives

In an earlier edition of the Newsletter I wrote about Achilles Schnetzer and his friend Reto Lininger. They visited the Tallgrass Prairie in April and I spent two days with them. I told you that he is a philosophy student in



Switzerland and is a candidate for a doctor's degree. When they arrived at the prairie I found out that Achilles is blind and Reto was driving him here from Arizona, where he presented a paper on his research in human echolocation. I also told you of his love for nature and especially the prairie. There is so much more to Achilles than I divulged in that first article. We communicate by email and I have learned more about this young man. I got his permission to quote him and I think you will find him to be interesting and amazing, he said:

"I can't really tell where my deep love for



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nature comes from. But I am pretty sure that it is not just its visual beauty that started this close bond. As a child, up until about thirteen years of age, I had perfectly normal vision. Back then, I remember going through my father's library and taking out all the books on nature. It was kind of a scientific approach, if you will. I wanted to know how many different species of animals and plants there are in Switzerland. I wanted to know about habitat, ontogenesis and phylogenesis and so forth. At the same time, I would go for long, long walks into the hills and woods surrounding my little home town. This was back in the eighties and I don't know about America, but over here in Europe, this was the time when the environmentalist movement really jumpstarted. There was a lot of talk about pollution and the



dying of forests. I took this very seriously and went out and marked all the trees that I thought were suffering and probably dying from pollution. I also went around in the neighborhood to get people signing a petition against pollution and destruction of nature. Since at that time, my Dad was the mayor of the town, I had quite many people signing my little petition. To me, the ecological problems in Switzerland became especially apparent when I shifted my focus to ornithology. I guess birds are fairly good indicators of how well off or not a given ecosystem is. The decline of bird populations all across the board really scared me and made me sad."

"In philosophy, we sometimes speak of something having an intrinsic value as opposed to an extrinsic or relational value. Applied to nature, this distinction amounts to the question: Does nature have a value in itself, independent of us as human beings, who might enjoy and possibly exploit nature? Or is the value of nature entirely dependent upon an observer and user, that is, does the value of nature come from a relation to someone who can enjoy and possibly exploit nature? Is nature something we should value just because it provides us with food, pleasure and so forth? Or should we value nature because nature is something perfectly good in itself? I am very much inclined to claim that nature has an intrinsic value. This, however, is something I cannot rationally argue for. From a rational standpoint, one should rather say nature is good because it does good things for us. What good is nature—people ask—if there is no one for which it is good for?"

"In the same vein, it is very hard to convince people that I would very much support nature preserves here in Switzerland which would have no trails, no nothing, just nature as it is. But then again, one needs to be pragmatic..."

"One thing I have often wondered about is the question why I have come to favor a prairie landscape over any other form of landscape. One obvious and practical reason has to do with my blindness. As opposed to hiking in the mountains, hiking across the prairie is easy: I am not stumbling over anything, I don't need to stay on a narrow trail, I can't fall down five hundred feet or so and people don't rush me to any particular place from where you have a most extraordinary view. However, two things I learned from my visit to the prairies of New Mexico and Oklahoma: The prairies can be pretty darn thorny and there can be incredible lack of shadows. Both things are not at all times very pleasant."

"For some reason, I have always been



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magically attracted by the wide open space of the prairie. It is very hard to explain, but I just feel this strong love for the prairie as a habitat for wildlife, for the stories it has to tell us about the past when it was frontier land and before when it was the land of the bison and the Indians. Being a philosopher, maybe my love comes from the sheer vastness of the prairie which truly allows one's thoughts and perceptions to roam freely and endlessly."

"I just finished the sequel to M. Blake's famous novel *Dancing With Wolves*. It ends with the battle of Palo Duro canyon. How incredibly sad. And it reminded me of my and Reto's drive by Fort Sill this spring. The army is still there, and the Indians are still gone."

"Appenzell is a very, very, very small state in Eastern Switzerland. I think it covers barely more than 100 square kilometers, something like a patch of six miles by six miles. Very Catholic, very rural, lots of cheese. I'd say Appenzell is what people have in mind when they think of Switzerland, but have never been there. Actually, I went to a boarding school in Appenzell when I was between sixteen and nineteen years old. It was a school run by Jesuit monks, and I must admit I found it the best school I ever went to. When I first got there, I had just returned from my exchange year in the U. S., where I was at a huge high-school of a lower middle-class suburb outside Chicago—what a contrast it was."

"I have been reading quite a bit on the different types of prairies stretching all across the great plains. On our travel eastward into Oklahoma, we'll have the opportunity; to observe the short grass type slowly developing into the mixed grass type to find in the corner of the state the tall grass type. Well, from what I have been reading, in early spring the tall grass prairie will of course not yet have grown up to its name. In the Flint Hills area of Kansas, it seems that they set fire to the

prairie in early April. I have not been able to find any information as to how prairie fire is being handled in the tall grass prairie of Pawhuska. Is this something that is entirely left to nature in your prairie preserve?..."

"I don't know how much time we will have for the tallgrass prairie. I just want to make sure that we will have enough time to let the wonders and magic of the prairie entirely 'sink' deep into our bodies. At least, that's the way I look at it. The most impressive experience of nature I ever had was when I was sitting still for three hours in the middle of nowhere and with no one around somewhere in the Colorado Rockies. I was just observing, perceiving, enjoying... essentially, trying to be as one with nature."

I think you will agree with me that Achilles



Achilles Schnetzer & Friends

is a remarkable young man and a dear friend of nature. Until now I guess I have thought that vision is essential for appreciation of the wonders of nature. Not now!

NEWSLETTER PUBLICATION

Deadline for submission of articles for inclusion in the newsletter is the 10th of each month. Publication date is on the 15th. All docents, Nature Conservancy staff, and university scientists are welcome to submit articles and pictures about the various preserves in Oklahoma, but of course the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in particular.



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