



THE DOCENT NEWS

Of The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve Docent Program



The Nature Conservancy
SAVING THE LAST GREAT PLACES ON EARTH

JUNE 2007

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

IN THIS EDITION

- ▶ SCENIC BYWAYS
by Jay Pruett
- ▶ FALL FIELD DAY
by Dennis Bires
- ▶ OUR FRIEND ACHILLES
by Van Vives
- ▶ BIOFUELS
by Andrew Donovan-Shead
- ▶ WHAT'S NEW ON THE PRAIRIE
by Van Vives
- ▶ MISCELLANEOUS HAPPENINGS
by Van Vives
- ▶ VISITOR'S CENTER
by Ann Whitehorn
- ▶ NO TRASH SERVICE
- ▶ BACK ISSUES
- ▶ NEWSLETTER PUBLICATION

SCENIC BYWAYS

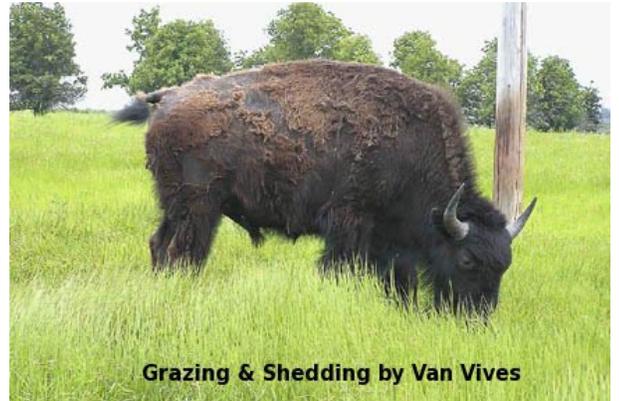
—Jay Pruett

The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve and the Black Mesa Nature Preserve have been designated as part of Oklahoma Scenic Byways by the Oklahoma Scenic Byways Council.

The 36,700-acre Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Osage County is owned by the Nature Conservancy and is one of the premiere conservancy preserves in the country. It is noted for its scenic vistas of rolling Flint Hills tallgrass prairie, dotted with 2,500 bison grazing contentedly. The preserve is included as part of the Osage Nation Heritage Trail, which runs along US Highway 60 from Bartlesville, through Pawhuska and on to Ponca City.

The 1,600-acre preserve atop Black Mesa is owned by the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department, but the land includes conservation deed restrictions created by The Nature Conservancy when it transferred the property to the state. The Nature Conservancy cooperates with the state agency in the ecological management of the preserve. The stunning visual impact of the mesa, both

from below and from the summit of the flat-topped volcanic remnant belies the unique assemblage of plants and animals that live in this dry ecosystem. Pronghorn, bighorn sheep, Texas horned lizards, red-lipped plat-



Grazing & Shedding by Van Vives

eau lizards, pinyon jays and golden eagles have all been seen here. Black Mesa is included in the Cimarron Heritage Trail of the far western state panhandle that traverses from Keyes to Kenton on US Highway 64 and then State Highway 325.

The Scenic Byways Council is composed of several federal and state agencies and community organizations, headed by the Oklahoma Department of Transportation and the University of Oklahoma Outreach. These two newly designated Oklahoma Scenic Byways join several others in the state and all are eligible for consideration as National Scenic Byways. The Byways program is an official Oklahoma Centennial Celebration project.

FALL FIELD DAY

—Dennis Bires

We, the Tallgrass Prairie Docents, will hold our inaugural Fall Field Day on Saturday, October 20, from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The idea for this event came out of the desire expressed by many at Docent Reorientation that we create another opportunity to get together as a group for informal learning and socializing.

Environmental consultant and former Nature Conservancy staff member Kim Shannon has agreed to serve as our guide for the Field Day in October. Many of us remember fondly Kim's wildflower walks which were part of New Docent Training in the late 1990s. No prairie plant was too obscure for Kim to provide the common name, the Latin



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name, and some interesting bit of information or description.

Here's the plan for October 20: From 10:00 a.m. to noon, Kim will provide fundamental information on flowering plants and grasses in the classroom at the Ecological Research Station. At noon the group will break for lunch (bring your own), to be enjoyed at the picnic tables outside the Research Sta-



Harry Wild Petunia, *Ruellia humilis*, by Van Vives

tion if the day is warm. At about 1:00 p.m., participants will caravan by car to locations on the Preserve for the afternoon wildflower walk. The Field Day will end by 4:00 p.m.

In addition to the fall-blooming wildflowers, the prairie grasses will be fully mature in October, and after the wet spring this year, the tall grasses should be quite tall. Many thanks to Kim Shannon for her willingness to lead the first Fall Field Day.

OUR FRIEND ACHILLES

—Van Vives

Do you remember Achilles Schnetzer? He is from Appenzell, Switzerland and is a graduate student in philosophy. He is very close to getting his doctorate degree. Achilles has a passion for nature and conservation and he and a friend visited the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in April of 2006. He wrote two articles for the November and December Newsletters. Achilles is blind, but that does not seem to hinder his love of nature. About November he became ill and had severe flu-like symptoms with extreme fatigue. He had a difficult time completing the second article. Achilles had to enter the hospital at that time and he is still there. A specialist in Belgium diagnosed him as having Q-fever, which is transmitted by a certain tick. Many tests later the diagnosis was an extreme case of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) complicated by a viral infection. After seven months in the hospital his insurance has expired. His family is having to turn to fund raising to pay hospital expenses.

I am sure that we all wish Achilles the very best and a rapid recovery.

BIOFUELS

—Andrew Donovan-Shead

Biofuels are enjoying a surge in popularity, as you are aware I'm sure. Ethanol produced from corn starch (maize), sugar beet, and sugar cane are three crops receiving the most attention from farmers and agricultural business corporations. All of these crops are grown in High Input Low Diversity (HILD) ecosystems, that is to say monocultures that require artificial plowing, sowing, fertilizing, harvesting, and transportation to processing centers — this is traditional large-scale farming practice.

Dr. Michael Palmer at OSU and a number of other scientists have formed a scientific interest group to investigate biofuel production using Low Input High Diversity (LIHD) agricultural systems. Of the many problems inherent in HILD, use of productive farmland and food crops to produce fuel for internal combustion engines will reduce the food products available for human beings. In contrast to HILD, LIHD systems harvest hay from meadows on marginal lands that are unfit for pro-



Verbena by Van Vives

duction of foodcrops.

Properly managed, only harvesting is required in an LIHD system. Plowing, sowing, fertilizing, and irrigating is unnecessary. A major benefit of LIHD management is that reaping actually increases the biodiversity of the land. Also, LIHD hay meadows can serve multiple uses unlike fields of maize and other crops. Biodiversity of LIHD can promote the increase of game for hunting. Other recreational pursuits are possible on hay meadows.

The benefits of LIHD seem to outweigh those of HILD by a large margin. Yet, the HILD systems are ascendent today.



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JUNE 2007

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3

Dr. Palmer and his colleagues are trying to promote LIHD by drawing on facts supported by scientific research. In particular, Oklahoma has ideal acreage to support LIHD production of biofuel feedstock, so much so that it has the potential to make Oklahoma a center of excellence in biofuel research and put currently unproductive land to work. LIHD is unknown, more or less, and Dr. Palmer and his colleagues have a significant challenge to counteract the fervor driving HILD systems.

Dr. Palmer is a very active scientist who not only conducts research and has a teaching position at Oklahoma State University, but also monitors the political situation and the effects politics has on the environment. He has started a blog where he comments on the legislative process as it affects biofuels and the environment and on other research in this new and exciting field of bioenergy.

Read for yourself what's new at this location:

<http://testone.okstate.edu/debo/blogs/index.php?blog=5&cat=20>

or go to www.google.com and enter this search term: LIHD BLOG



As the front page states:

"This blog is devoted to the promotion, development, and understanding of Low-Input, High-Diversity systems for biofuels. Frequently used acronyms: HILD — High-Input, Low-Diversity systems. These include corn (maize) as well as improved switchgrass, hybrid poplar, miscanthus, rapeseed, and many others. HILD systems require high energy and agrichemical inputs. LIHD — Low-Input, High-Diversity systems. This term was coined by the ecologist David Tilman and coauthors. These include natural and seminatural grasslands, restored prairie, spontaneous succession, and other grasslands. LIHD systems require few, if any, agrichemical inputs."

Feel free to post questions or comments. The blog is intended to provide informed comment of interest to lay persons, who should be better informed about the options we face and the directions we take as a nation.

WHAT'S NEW ON THE PRAIRIE

—Van Vives

And the rain keeps coming down! The ponds are full and the prairie is a vibrant green with wild flowers popping up everywhere. The Big Blue Stem is already three feet tall. Let's hope the weather doesn't turn dry and very hot this year.

The highway from Bartlesville to Pawhuska is very colorful with more wildflowers in bloom than I have seen for years. There has not been so many cone flowers in bloom, showing a great recovery from the two years of Echinacea root piracy. The south end of the preserve has large yellow clusters of Coreopsis. White Yarrow is plentiful also with an occasional pink variation showing up. Spiderwort is starting to bloom along the walking trail and the Butterfly Milkweed is blooming. One can see the milkweed in three color variations—yellow or gold, orange, and a near red. Other flowers in bloom are: Wild Petunia, Carolina Larkspur, Sensitive Briar, Beardtongue, and Evening Primrose.

The bison have been in large groups and on some days one large group. They are losing their winter coat and look a bit shabby. The rutting season is well underway and the babies are old enough to enjoy a vigorous game of tag.

MISCELLANEOUS HAPPENINGS

—Van Vives

Here are some interesting people and some interesting emails that I have received.

1. One Tuesday my wife and I were working at the Gift Shop. At 4:10 p.m. we were through closing out the cash register when a young man, about 6' 8" tall opened the door and wanted to know if they could look around. We said yes and 12 college-age people walked in one by one. I was curious and asked where they were from. They said from New England. I asked what brought them to the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. Two of the group said that they had just moved to Wichita and had invited college friends from the East to visit them. They decided to give them a "grand tour" and brought them to the



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JUNE 2007

4

Preserve and the next day they were taking them to northern Kansas. Not many left empty handed, so we did quite well financially.

2. I received an email from a woman from Enid and she wanted to know where the Clematis pitcheri plants were at the Preserve. I gave her directions to the plants and she wrote later that she and her husband went to the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, but could not find the Clematis vines. I wrote her again, giving more explicit directions and she wrote back saying that they were delighted to have found the vines, but they were not blooming. She has relatives coming from California and she was hoping to show them the Clematis in bloom. Now she wants me to keep track of the vines and write her immediately they bloom. She did not seem interested in any other plant.

3. A 59 year old man wrote me to say that he had converted his family wheat farm of 100 acres to prairie grasses and wanted to know how he could make the area better for wild life. He also wanted to know how he could use the grasses after allowing the acreage to mature in 10 years.

4. I received email from a woman in New Mexico saying that she was coming to Foraker, where she was born, for a family reunion. She had seen my web site and wanted to visit the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. She wanted me to give her directions to the preserve from Foraker!

5. A teenager from Louisiana wrote me for directions from Skiatook to my Bison Ranch. He was going to visit his cousin in Skiatook this summer. He said he looked on several maps, but could not find Prairie, OK. He also wanted to know if he could buy a bison from my ranch!

6. A teacher wrote me asking if I knew of any indigenous tribes that have legends about bats. Her third graders are studying Chiroptera as a conservation study, and her 6th graders are studying about sharks and whales as endangered species. "We are adopting a whale. Can we adopt a bison?"

7. A ninth grade student wrote me that she was doing a paper on the bison for her Biology class and would I answer some questions about bison. She listed 16 questions which I answered. I haven't heard whether I got an A or B on that project.

8. A woman working at the museum at Harvard University wanted to use some of my bison pictures for a children's exhibit. She said it was so hard to find photos without people in them.

VISITOR'S CENTER

—Ann Whitehorn

Please observe the "No Tours" signs on the doors of the bunkhouse. There will also be a note on the bulletin board when tours



Spider Milkweed, *Asclepias viridis*, by Van Vives

are not to be given.

Please arrive at the Gift Shop at 9:30 a.m. on your shift day. This allows enough time to set-up for opening the doors at 10:00 o'clock.

NO TRASH SERVICE

At the Visitor's Center there is no trash service, therefore please carry away your trash for disposal at home. White plastic kitchen trash bags should be available in one of the sink-unit cupboards, to replace filled bags in the waste baskets.

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, university scientists, philosophers, and historians are welcome to submit articles and pictures about the various preserves in Oklahoma, but of course the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in particular.

NEWSLETTER BACK ISSUES

Back issues of the Docent Newsletter, to October 2006, can be found in the two green zip-binders, stored in the Perspex rack by the file cabinet in the office of the Visitor's Center.



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JUNE 2007

5

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