

April 2004

THE DOCENT NEWS



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Prairie Docents Roll Up Sleeves, Plan Hike to Western Wall - Dennis Bires

Many thanks go out to the seventeen volunteers who turned out for the inaugural Prairie Road Crew Day of 2004 on February 28th. Remarkably, we collected a total of 38 garbage bags of litter, a record, and still finished in time for a late lunch. The most fascinating item found, by Rebecca Bush, was a dozen or so deflated balloons tied together with cascades of ribbon. She concluded that they must have soared up from New Orleans, having departed on Fat Tuesday earlier that week.

Our next work day will be an Oil Field Cleanup, on Saturday, April 24th. Come at 10:00 a.m., bring a lunch, and we'll finish up around 3:00 p.m.

We'll drive to a number of pumping jacks in the Bison Loop area and remove any trash in the vicinity. Many of these rigs have bits of discarded metal around them,

along with the usual snack and beverage litter.

We've learned to coexist with oil production on the Preserve, since, as most of you know, the Nature Conservancy acquired only the surface rights to the Barnard Ranch. The Osage Nation owns the mineral rights, and continues to extract oil from over 100 wells. But it's important to assure that the areas around the pumping units are safe for bison and other wildlife, and are litter-free.

Our last spring workday will be on Saturday, May 15th. The turnout and reaction to last May's waterfall hike was so gratifying that we've planned another special docent activity. From 10:00 a.m. until noon, there'll be a Prairie Road Crew. The work always goes quickly on the second road cleanup of the year, as the winter litter accumulation was removed in February, and the adopt-a-mile program is active again.

At noon that day, we'll break for a cookout at or near the headquarters. All food and beverages will be provided.

Then at about 1:30, we'll drive to our hike location. The hike will last until about 4:00. This year we'll explore the Western Wall unit of the Osage Wildlife Management Area. This pristinely wild area of almost 6,000 acres borders the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve to the east. It was part of the original Barnard Ranch, and was purchased by the Nature Conservancy along with most of the land that now makes up the Preserve. Because the Western Wall is mostly woodland, and was not essential to the Conservancy's plans for prairie ecosystem restoration, the decision was made to transfer it to the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, assuring that the area would remain undeveloped. When combined with the Preserve's 39,000 acres, this state land contributes to a contiguous tract of over 45,000 protected acres.

And protected it certainly has been. For over a decade after the acquisition, the Wildlife Department strictly limited entry to the Western Wall unit. Only in the last couple
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of years has the state made access more widely available. And any sense of mystery and awe generated during the closed years is fully justified. On the portion of the unit that is not wooded, it is possible to gaze westward over the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, with nothing but rolling prairie receding for miles and miles and miles. And the Western Wall itself, a sheer rocky bluff of impressive height, rising to the west, strikes one as a well-kept secret hidden in its forested setting.

This one is not to be missed. For cookout planning purposes, please let Dennis Bires know you'll be coming on May 15. Phone: (918) 341-3908. Email: dennisbires@lycos.com. No need to call in for oilfield cleanup on April 24th.



Exterior Decorating? - Van Vives

One of the prettiest and unique bird nests in the Nature Room collection is that of the Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher. An eight-year-old girl, who found it on the path along the creek, brought the nest to us. The nest is about two inches in diameter and the bird is about four inches in length. The

gnatcatcher is one of the Old World warblers and makes its nest in the treetops.

What are unique about the nest are the blue-green pieces of lichen that the gnatcatcher has incorporated in the outer wall of the nest.



The lichen decorating the exterior is common to all Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher's nests. One has to marvel at the ability of this small bird to firmly attach the lichen to the straw nest, and the fact that the need to decorate its nest is passed on from generation to generation.



Bison calf at the TGP

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What's Blooming? - Van Vives

Blooming wild flowers are still scarce at the TGP. Most of the ones in bloom are the small ones. As of April 15th the following are blooming.

1. Rose Vervain, *Glandularia canadensis*.



2. Violet Wood Sorrel, *Oxalis violacea*.



3. False Garlic, *Nothoscordum bivalve*



4. Wild Strawberry, *Fragaria virginiana*



5. Arrow-leaved Violet, *Viola sagittata*



The cool weather and the fact that the trail area was burned off last month has retarded the blooming time of the wild flowers.



Bison Update - Bob Hamilton

The first bison calf spotted was seen on March 28th. We expect about 600 calves this spring.



Spring Holidays Busy at TGP - Dennis Bires

Experienced docents know that among the busiest times at the Visitors Center at the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve are two spring holiday weekends. The first is Mother's Day, the weekend of May 8-9 this year, and the second is Memorial Day, the weekend of May 29-31. Lots of families find these holidays to be a good time to take a drive to Osage County, and they are generally rewarded with beautiful weather, abundant wildflowers and a fresh crop of red calves in the Preserve bison herd.

Often it's all one or two docents can do to keep up with the visitor traffic on these weekends. Any volunteers who are free on any of those days ought to consider signing up, so that ideally we'll have three docents on duty. With three docents it is much easier to show folks through the ranch bunkhouse and chat with people on the porch while a colleague handles sales.

And docents who serve on those spring holiday weekends are generally rewarded with beautiful weather, abundant wildflowers, and a fresh crop of red calves.



CALL OF THE WILD, PRAIRIE STYLE

- Steve Forsythe

Getting up from a sound sleep at 4 a.m. is not something I do with relish. In my younger days I actually anticipated arising this early, or earlier, to go duck hunting or perhaps fishing, but that was then and this is now.

However, I had convinced Maureen that we should go to the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve and listen for prairie chickens so we headed out. She had never heard the critters, and for me it had last been when I was in school at K-State in the late sixties.

Unfortunately, since then the population of greater prairie chickens has become seriously reduced, perhaps by as much as 90 percent!

Fortunately the March morning was clear and fairly warm, although quite windy when we arrived at the spot recommended by Bob Hamilton. As Maureen will tell you that I am prone to do, we arrived a bit earlier than necessary. In fact, we were there at 5 a.m. (CST) with sunrise, when the chickens are supposed to begin booming, not to occur for about an hour and a half. So, there we sat, just listening to the prairie and looking at some magnificent stars. For about an hour all we heard was the wind moving around our vehicle and rustling last year's vegetation. Then we heard some trucks coming up the road, long before we saw

their lights. As light gradually appeared in the east we heard a few blackbirds as they appeared out of the vegetation. Still we heard no chickens. Finally, I assumed I had somehow come to the wrong place, or worse, that I was at the correct place, but there were no chickens. So, I slowly moved our vehicle towards the top of the rise and there suddenly off to our right I saw a movement and thought it was a chicken. I immediately stopped the vehicle and as we lowered the windows we could hear the booming that I describe as a musical version of "How, How Are Youoooo?" I knew immediately what it was. Sure enough, with our binoculars we could see at least four male prairie chickens going through the ritual with each other, to include jumping up and around. It was spectacular. Not wishing to be anymore invasive than perhaps we already had, we did our best to back away from the rise and go elsewhere.

Well, it was mission accomplished and the whole experience was superb, including just being on the prairie for the transition from night to day. I hold out hope that the wonderful management of the TGP and perhaps any influences on management of neighboring prairies will improve the plight of the greater prairie chicken. It will indeed be tragic if "How, How are Youooo" is only known by the

few of us fortunate to have heard it on-site, or, as a very poor second, from some recording device.



An Eagle's Foot Plant?

- Van Vives

Bob Hamilton brought an interesting looking grass root system into the Nature Room. It looks very much like the talon of a bird of prey. I tried to identify it, but could not. If anyone has the answer to what plant it is we would like to know.



I sent this picture to Mike Palmer, the OSU botanist, while he was in Spain giving a course. He thought it very interesting, but his specialty is not grasses and he did not have reference books at hand. He wondered if the "nail" parts were growing against a rock formation, causing them to grow downward instead of upward.

The specimen is still in the Nature Room and attracts the attention of many visitors.



Science In Action Andrew Donovan-Shead

Roy Churchwell is a graduate student in the Department of Zoology at Oklahoma State University. He expects to complete his MS degree in the spring of 2005. At our Docent Reorientation this year, Roy gave us a presentation of his investigation into the *Role of Heterogeneity in Grassland Bird Productivity at the Tallgrass Prairie*. Associated with this study are Craig Davis, Samuel Fuhlendorf, and David Engle.

Roy said that the study relates to areas under patch-burn management that are grazed by cattle only. We have evidence that a homogenous environment is detrimental to the well-being of grassland birds; a good example of this can be seen in the precipitous decline in population of prairie chickens. Roy's research is trying to discover if a return to the more diverse habitat provided by patch-burn management is helping restore bird populations.

Before European settlement, 40-percent of North America was grassland habitat. Now 99-percent of the grassland is gone, which means that there is almost nothing left for birds that thrive in such habitat. Causes of this decline are several: conversion of land to agricultural production, urban development, encroachment by forest, fragmentation of

native habitat, and poor management of rangeland.

Of these causes, rangeland management is of most interest since a change in management is likely to have a bigger effect on the populations of birds.

Patch-burning is promoted as an alternative to traditional methods of management that burn entire areas every spring and apply herbicides to eliminate forbs, creating a landscape of uniform conditions. In patch-burns, one third of an area is burned each year to create small homogenous patches that together form a larger heterogeneous landscape. It is this diverse landscape that looks promising to the cattle industry as well as to grassland birds.

Roy's research objective is to compare the reproductive success of grassland birds between areas under traditional management and those being patch burned. He does this by looking at characteristics of each nest site, which he locates by observing the behavior of bird pairs, sampling the vegetation around each nest, and estimating the visibility of each nest in the surrounding vegetation.

One measure of the quality of habitat is the size of territory maintained by the birds. Smaller territory indicates better habitat because the birds don't have to go so far

to find food. Roy has learned that territory size is large in patches burned during the current year and small in patches burned one year ago. Another measurement is the success of each nest. Roy has discovered that nest success is greater the second year after a burn whereas nest density and success are low in patches burned during the current year.

A conclusion you can draw from this information is that burning the same large area will force birds to defend a larger territory and reduce the success of any nest. Indications are that patch-burn management of prairie grasslands can provide better habitat for grassland birds.

What is good for birds is good for other creatures too because nearly half the nests are lost to predation. So, if birds decline in numbers then the things feeding on birds will decline too as their source of food diminishes.

Roy answered questions from the audience. Often one wonders how a person gets started in a particular line of work. Roy Churchwell became interested in birds at the age of 12 when he first went birding. The future is with our youngsters and the interests they develop.





TNC Oklahoma Chapter Preserve Updates

Invasive Species Initiative

On their home turf, plant and animal populations are kept in check by natural controls, like predators and food supply. However, when a species is introduced, accidentally or intentionally, into a new landscape, one not adapted to its presence, the consequences can be devastating. Invasive plants and animals sometimes spread unchecked, disrupting natural cycles, crowding out native species and costing billions in property damage and lost economic productivity.

The Nature Conservancy's Invasive Species Initiative aims to control the threat to biodiversity posed by invasive non-native plants and animals through a combination of prevention, abatement, restoration, research and outreach. The Conservancy believes that the threat of invasive species can be effectively abated by using these techniques and approaches.

In Oklahoma, most of the invasive threats to our portfolio sites are non-native plants, such as sericea lespedeza, Johnson grass, tall fescue and old-world bluestem, although animals such as feral pigs and exotic fish like carp may also be a threat. There are also native species, such as eastern red cedar that are a serious invasive problem in prairie and crosstimbers that have an altered fire regime with too few or intensive fire history. If deemed a significant ecological threat at our preserves, carefully focused actions are taken to control invasive species.



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Calendar of Events

<p>April 24, 2004 10:00am - 3:00pm at the preserve</p> <p>contact Dennis Bires 918-631-2443 for more information</p>		<p>Tallgrass Prairie Oilfield Cleanup Day</p> <p>Help us remove trash and harmful discarded hardware around the oil pumping units on the Preserve. Bison love to scratch themselves on the fences and other exposed parts of these installations, so we want the areas to be free of waste metal and other litter.</p> <p>Meet at Headquarters at 10:00 a.m. Bring a lunch. No need for advance notice -- just come and join us for all or part of the day.</p>
<p>May 8, 2004 9:00am - 12:00 Noon Tallgrass Prairie Visitor Center</p> <p>contact Jim Thayer (918)494-3784 for more information</p>		<p>Tallgrass Prairie Bird Identification Day</p> <p>There will be a short orientation with handouts for future reference. We will then go into the field to visit several habitats and practice the process of bird identification. The formal part of the day will be over at 12:00 noon, but Jim will be available afterwards to do some additional birding with those who are interested.</p> <p>Bring - binoculars (if you have them), food and drink for yourself.</p> <p>Contact Jim Thayer at 918-494-3784 if you plan on attending.</p>
<p>Saturday June 12th, 2004 9:00a.m.</p> <p>Contact Jim Thayer 918-494-3784</p>		<p>Tallgrass Prairie How to find and Identify Butterflies</p> <p>Jim Thayer will lead a workshop on "How to find and Identify Butterflies" on Saturday June 12th. We will begin at the visitor center at 9:00 AM. The program will start with a short discussion and handouts for future reference. Most of the time will be spent in the field taking part in the process of finding and identifying butterflies. The formal part of the program will run from 9:00 AM until 12:00 noon. Jim will be available after lunch for anyone that would like to continue.</p> <p>Please bring lunch for yourself and plenty of water, also binoculars is you have them.</p>
<p>May 15, 2004 10:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Meet at the visitors center</p> <p>Contact Dennis Bires 918.341.3908 for food planning or for more information</p>		<p>Tallgrass Prairie Road Crew, Cookout and Hike</p> <p>Saturday morning we'll drive the Preserve roads picking up any fresh trash, and then we'll reassemble at noon for a cookout at the Stucco House. Harvey Payne will serve as chef, and all food will be provided. At about 1:30 we'll leave by car for an afternoon hike in the Western Wall unit of the Osage Wildlife Management Area, immediately adjacent to the Preserve on the eastern boundary.</p>

<p>April and May, 2004</p> <p>For further information call contact Chris Wilson Nickel Preserve Director 918.456-760</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Nickel Preserve Spring Workdays and Hikes</p> <p>Spring is springing, and it may be the best time to visit the Nickel Preserve. We invite you to come and experience the area by participating in a workday or a hike. Two self-guided trails begin at the headquarters building. They are open during daylight hours 7 days a week. For more information about the preserve or events, call 918- 456-7601 or email Chris Wilson at cwilson@tnc.org. Scheduled events for the Spring are:</p> <p>Pine Planting Friday, April 23 at 9 am More than 3,000 shortleaf pine seedlings need to be planted in restoration areas. Bring lunch, gloves, snacks, and any tool that can make a small hole in gravel soils, or use one of ours.</p> <p>Full Moon Hike Tuesday, May 4, 7 pm Take in the sights, sounds, and smells of spring as twilight fades to moonlit darkness. We'll hike the savanna trail from the headquarters building for a magnificent view of the rising moon.</p> <p>Preserve Workday Saturday, May 15 at 9 am There will be something for everyone as we paint gates, collect trash, and dig weeds from wildflower beds. Bring lunch, gloves, snacks, and plenty of energy.</p> <p>Breeding Bird Count Saturday, May 23 at Time TBA This is a great time of year for birding at the preserve. Last year's count yielded more than 100 species. A cookout is planned for the day's end.</p>
<p>Saturday August 14th, 2004</p> <p>For further information call TNC Tulsa Office 918.585.1117</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Wild Brew 2004 Tulsa</p> <p>A casual event offering the opportunity to sample domestic and international beers, ales and wine from outstanding microbreweries, as well as signature dishes from Oklahoma's finest restaurants.</p>

918/585-1117 Saving the Last Great Places of Oklahoma 918/585-1117