



# THE DOCENT NEWS

Of The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve Docent Program



The Nature Conservancy  
SAVING THE LAST GREAT PLACES ON EARTH

MARCH 2007

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

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## FUTURE EVENTS

—Dennis Bires

Here is what is happening for docents in the near future:

- ▷ Saturday, March 31st: 2nd day of New Docent Training. See related article in this issue.
- ▷ Thursday, April 19th: Trail Maintenance Day, 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Meet at the trailhead near the Visitors Center. Bring work gloves, hand clippers, and a shovel, if you have them. Bring lunch too.
- ▷ Saturday, May 12th: Prairie Road Crew, Cookout, and Hike, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. We will pick up roadside trash until noon, then break for a cookout on the back lawn of the bunkhouse, and then depart around 1:00 for a hike on a part of the Preserve that is not open to the general public. This is not to be missed, even if you cannot make it for all three parts.
- ▷ Late September or early October, date to be announced: Our inaugural Fall Field Day. It will be a wildflower walk, or a bird-watching walk, or some other interesting opportunity to spend informal time with other docents in the field. Keep an eye on The Docent News for details.

- ▷ Late October, date to be announced: Docent Recognition Luncheon, 1:00 p.m. at the Ecological Research Station on the Preserve. We will announce details of a pre-Luncheon walk on the Study Trail or the Prairie Earth Trail or both for the purpose of working up an appetite.

## PRAIRIE ROAD CREW DAY

—Dennis Bires

Many thanks to the March 10 Prairie Road Crew, who took advantage of 72-degree weather to fill two dozen large garbage bags with roadside refuse from the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. In addition to the following docents, we had two non-docent friends of The Nature Conservancy helping out. Thank you:

- Nancy Irby
- Wayne Middleton
- Rebecca Renfro
- Jan Henkle
- Van Vives
- Dave Dolcater
- Marian Bires
- Dennis Bires

## RED CEDAR UPDATE

—Van Vives

Terry Bidwell, an Oklahoma State University researcher and authority on the Eastern red cedar, presents us with a challenge, "If you ever take a drink of water, or have any interest in wildlife or the rural economy, you'd better be concerned about cedars." The disregard of Kansans concerning the detrimental effects of the red cedar encroachment are causing numerous problems for the future of Kansas.

The red cedar is the only evergreen native to the state of Kansas. In the distant past fires started by lightning or by the Native Americans kept the cedars restricted to areas such as rocky bluffs. When Europeans moved west they fought the fires, which were a natural part of the grasslands. To make things worse, the government encouraged the planting of cedars for windbreaks and wildlife habitats. Cedar saplings were distributed throughout the state. Songbirds do their job of distributing the cedar berries, especially along fence lines.



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Ray Aslin, the Kansas state forester said, "We're in the midst of a red cedar population explosion in Kansas." Why are people concerned about the spread of the cedars? What harm can they cause?

Any area subject to water shortages from the lack of adequate rainfall must start dealing with the cedars. The thick canopy of the larger cedars can stop 65-percent of a rainfall from reaching the topsoil or aquifer. The juniper, a family member of the cedar, is causing problems in Texas. A study has shown that a 15-ft. juniper can consume 35 gallons of water a day. Bidwell said that Oklahoma City will see problems if they do not curb the growth of the cedars. They get their water from the Canton Reservoir and that watershed is increasingly covered with red cedar.

Cedars growing near springs and ponds can cause a drying up of those water sources. Don Queal, a tree harvester said, "I can show you springs that went from dry to really flowing after we cut about 95-percent of the cedars. We finished one Saturday, and the water was flowing the next Saturday. It happens that quick."

Cedars harm rangelands. Little or no grass grows beneath the canopies because the root system of the cedars are shallow, leaving only white, straw-like growth. This straw-like growth is very poor cattle feed.

Red cedars also hurt populations of certain animal species, such as the lesser prairie chicken. Prairie birds do not tolerate vertical structures, whether its trees or man-made structures. Predators use them as perches while waiting for victims.

Ted Alexander, a rancher, contends that it is simple to stop the encroachment. Once the tree is cut below the lowest living branch, or burned every few years, the trees will die.

## ATTEND NEW DOCENT TRAINING

—Dennis Bires

On the second day of this year's New Docent Training, Saturday, March 31, trainees will be traveling to various points on the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve for a clinic on ecosystem restoration presented by Science Director Bob Hamilton or Preserve Director Harvey Payne. Many of us remember this as a most enjoyable and interesting part of our own New Docent Training. Any docents who would like to experience this aspect of train-

ing again are welcome to come along for the ride, and a refresher course.

In part because our new docent class has a record number of more than thirty trainees, we'll be dispensing with the rented vans we used for these prairie tours in prior years. We'll caravan by car to the various stops on the Preserve, and we would like to encourage existing docents to become part of that caravan, especially as drivers. It will be an opportunity to begin to get acquainted with two or three of our new docent prospects, and they are sure to pepper you with questions about your experience as a docent. You can play an important, though informal, part in our training process, while enjoying an interesting day in the field.

The Preserve tours begin at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday, March 31. A second set of tours begins at 1:45 p.m. Whether you join a morning or afternoon tour, be sure to pack a lunch and join the new class at noon at the picnic tables outside the Ecological Research Station, or inside if the weather is inclement. This is important because at 1:00 p.m. our web master George Pierson will take advantage of the new wireless internet capacity at the Research Station to instruct docent prospects on the procedure for signing up for shifts at the Visitors Center. As you know, every trainee must initially serve an apprentice shift with an experienced docent, and it would be great if every new docent could sign up on the spot to serve a shift with a docent he or she has already met.

So don't miss this opportunity for an interesting and fun day that will get our new volunteers off to a good start. And thank you in advance.

## WEED OR WILDFLOWER?

—Van Vives

Is it a weed or is it a wildflower? The answer to that question may depend upon several things. Are you a member of the Audubon Society or the Weed Science Society of America (WSSA) or a member of the Chamber of Commerce of Weed, CA. One definition given by the WSSA is that weeds are plants that interfere with man's activities or his welfare. Characteristics of weeds are that they grow where they are not wanted; they reduce yields and qualities of crop and forage species; they poison livestock and man directly or as allergens; they clog lakes, ditches, and



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other drainage ways; and they reduce the availability of fish and wildlife. It is reported that weeds exceed the losses caused by any agricultural pests. No wonder herbicides are used so universally—even at the expense of destroying non-weed species that get in the way.

The WSSA lists 1,775 species of weeds. Here are a few that may surprise us: Chrysanthemum, Sunflowers, Larkspur, Verbena, Vervain, Yarrow, Portulaca, Prairie rose, Multiflora Rose, Honeysuckle, Nasturtium, Mallow, Delphinium.

Most of the noxious weeds in North America are not native to the country, but have come from other parts of the world. As transportation to America from Europe and the Far East became easier, especially transportation of agricultural products, the contamination with weed seeds became more common. The fertile soil of this country provided ideal growing conditions and the weeds spread rapidly to all parts of the continent.

Some weedy plants adapted to harsh conditions and thrive today in areas that are highly disturbed. This often took place at the expense of the “desirable” plants. The adaptation of the more aggressive weeds to some herbicides produced strains that are immune or partially immune to the killing chemicals.

So, does that plant annoy you? Is it getting in your way? Then it’s a WEED!

## DOCENT REORIENTATION

—Andrew Donovan-Shead

We convened the 2007 Docent Reorientation meeting in the Ecological Research Station of the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, at 9:00 a.m., Saturday, March 3rd. Anita Springer brought the meeting to order and relinquished the floor to Dennis Bires. Dennis welcomed forty-one docents and asked that we each introduce ourselves to the meeting, round-robin.

Dennis announced the recent death of docent Irma Jean.

Dennis distributed the remaining docent awards to those docents present who had yet to receive theirs.

Dennis reported that, this year, a strong effort at recruiting enrolled twenty-two new docents for training. Dennis recognized the good work of Betty & David Turner in the

Bartlesville area, Anita Springer in Pawhuska, Pat Janes & Iris McPherson in Stillwater, and Barb Bates. Advertising in the Good News seemed to provide significant help in generating interest among prospective new docents.

Dennis recognized Iris McPherson’s efforts to collate and publish the visitor summary. To that end, please be sure to ask visitors to sign the visitor’s log.

Dennis passed out survey forms to those docents who hadn’t completed them already. Preliminary results of the survey reveal a strong desire to know what research is being performed on the preserve, so that the information can be shared with visitors. Another area of interest is patch-burning and its effect on the preserve; more on this below.

Dennis said that he would like to see more docents take an interest in the organizational activities of the docent program. Contact Dennis if you think you can help.

Betty Turner said that the docent program has been going long enough to have a history. Please share any stories you have about docents past and present with Betty.

Some tips for docents were volunteered by Dennis and others:

- ▷ Let apprentice docents do everything, so that they can learn what to do quicker. Resist the temptation to intervene.
- ▷ Don’t bring young children with you to your shift. They get bored very quickly and can become a fractious nuisance.
- ▷ Lock both locks of the door when you leave. Lock the dead-bolt first then the doorknob; this sequence will ensure that the door is locked properly.
- ▷ Close out the credit card machine again first thing in the morning, to ensure that it is cleared for business.

Dennis announced the these events:

- ▷ The Visitor’s Center opened on March 5th.
- ▷ The Prairie Road Crew is scheduled for March 10th.
- ▷ New Docent Training is scheduled for March 24th & 31st from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. All docents who want a refresher are welcome to attend.



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- ▷ Trail maintenance is scheduled for April 19th.
- ▷ Road Crew, Cookout, and Hike is scheduled for May 12th from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m.
- ▷ A fall field day will be announced closer to the time.

David & Betty Turner have "made arrangements with Debby Krebbs of Signtech in Pawhuska to embroider shirts with the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve logo and the words TALLGRASS PRAIRIE PRESERVE DOCENT around the logo in a horseshoe shape. The logo must be all one color and the lettering must be all one color but they do not necessarily need to be the same color for both."

"...those persons interested in having a shirt can either provide their own shirt or purchase them from Signtech. It should be either a plain color polo style shirt or a denim shirt to keep them similar. The cost of the embroidery will be \$14.00 per shirt. [Signtech have indicated] that it might be possible under most circumstances to drop off a shirt on the way to the preserve and to pick it up on the way home. Arrangements for late pickup (after 5 p.m.) can be made."

"Signtech is on the old 99 highway about a block west of the new 99 highway and about a mile south of the new Sonic Drive Inn on the east side of Pawhuska. They are open by 9:00 each morning and usually arrive by 8:30. Their phone number is 918-287-9966."

"Each docent must make arrangements for their own shirts. [The Turners] do not plan to be directly involved. Neither will Ann Whitehorn be involved in this project."

"Lastly, this is an option for those who wish to participate, and certainly not a requirement for being a docent."

After David's embroidered shirt briefing, Andrew Donovan-Shead stepped forward to demonstrate how a computer-based interactive information kiosk can be made to work with minimal expense. Andrew inserted a CD into the disk drive of the Research Station computer. A proof of concept interactive slide show started automatically and was displayed to the audience via the overhead projector. In a live system, the display screen would be touch-sensitive and not require the use of a mouse or keyboard. Andrew simulated touching the active areas of the display

to change from the introductory display to an index and thence to map of the preserve linked to a video clip. Andrew back tracked to the index and then selected an animation that evolved patch-burn data through the years from 1990 until 2003. The demonstration appeared well-received by the audience.

Two suggestions were offered by docents in the audience. First, content suitable for children was desired; Andrew said that this is easily accomplished. Second, on maps, an indication of the location of the Visitor's Center was desired; Andrew said that this too is easily done. Andrew said that he sees the interactive kiosk project as collaborative and hoped that docents will take part in the effort to create content.

After Andrew, Bob Hamilton stepped forward to present a slide show with talk about the state of the preserve and restoration of its ecosystem. Bob said that the land management program is finalized. He said that heterogeneity is the root of biodiversity, promoted by the interaction between fire and grazing.

Bob said that the herd of bison is stabilized at 2,500 head. A program is underway to determine the purity of each bison's genetic heritage. Apparently, there are only two herds in the US that are free of cattle genes: one at Yellowstone National Park and one at Windcave National park. Originally, the bison were seen as providing services to the promotion of biodiversity; now, it is thought appropriate to help conserve the bison genetic heritage. The genetic screening program should help answer the question of how much introgression of cattle genes there is in the herd. As a result of this interest, the herd is now closed and has been for the last four to five years. Fortunately, the herd is now self-sustaining.

Bob reported that, last year, there were 396 prescribed burns. A plan is in progress to stretch the fire-return interval. OSU is planning to expand the Research Station, particularly the stucco house that is used as accommodation by visiting scientists.

On the Greater Flint Hills initiative, Bob said that it consists in approximately five-million acres divided into north and south areas. Brian Obermeyer is in charge of the Kansas field office and Steve Forsythe is in charge of the Oklahoma field office. Objective of the initiative is to preserve the landscape intact.



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The Nature Conservancy has been successful with conservation easements in Kansas, but has a three-year head-start over the effort in Oklahoma. Bob said that there is an increasing threat from rural development, industrial wind powered electricity generation, and from the Northwest Passage National Highway.

The Greater Prairie Chicken (GPC) is especially susceptible to vertical development of any kind. For example, a 350-foot tall, 1.5 MWatt wind turbine makes the land inhospitable to the GPC for up to a one mile radius from the structure. The Nature Conservancy welcomes wind power when it is sited appropriately.

Because the GPC need a broad range of terrain to prosper, protecting the bird also helps the upland sandpiper, the grasshopper sparrow, and Henslow's sparrow. Another advantage of helping the GPC increase its population count is that it is also a game bird, which for the species is a blessing in disguise; it is easier to talk about the practicalities of restoring game than it is to talk about esoteric biodiversity. Talking about improved hunting opportunities to land owners implies the possibility of a pecuniary advantage—Bob Hamilton's catch-phrase is: "If it pays, it stays."

Another issue monitored by The Nature Conservancy is the general use of broad-leaf herbicide. There is no doubt that the herbicides work as advertised. What is questionable is the need; there have been no scientific studies to discover if the eradication of broad-leaf plants is really necessary. Is the cost worth the benefit?

We took a break for fifteen minutes.

John Fisher announced the dates for various butterfly counts:

- ▷ Apr 28/29: Black Mesa
- ▷ Jun 12: Keystone Ancient Forest Preserve
- ▷ Jun 23: Nickel Family Nature & Wildlife Preserve
- ▷ Jun 30: Tallgrass Prairie Preserve

Dates for the Four Canyon and Pontotoc Ridge preserves will be announced at a later date. Anyone who is interested is welcome, both skilled and unskilled persons.

Harvey Payne stepped forward to give us a Nature Conservancy Update. He said that

the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve is almost twenty years old. Major changes have occurred in that time from the beginning when the whole project was in a precarious state of uncertainty until now when we can see the preserve on a sound financial footing. Harvey said that the preserve recaptures a special part of the American West that has almost completely vanished.

Docents are the public face of the preserve and The Nature Conservancy. Harvey said that visitors usually want to talk to someone and get help interpreting what they see.

Harvey recognized the permanent staff of the preserve, Ann Whitehorn, Tonda, Bob Hamilton, and the four cowboys. One of the five cowboys resigned so that he could take another business opportunity. Instead of hiring another cowboy, the plan is to acquire the services of a research coordinator to facilitate use of the Research Station between the various academic institutions.

Harvey said that the preserve has grown from the original 29,000 acres to its present size of 39,000 acres, of which 37,000 acres belong to the preserve with the remainder under management by The Nature Conservancy. Work is in progress to establish another 6,000 acres of conservation easements that will bring the size of the preserve to 45,000 acres total, just under half the original 100,000 acres once owned by the Chapman-Barnard ranch.

Harvey recognized the preserve's science directory, Bob Hamilton, who was involved with the original \$15-million capital campaign and is the architect of the preserve we see today.

Bison sales are good. Harvey said that free-range bison meat is now selling at a premium, a big improvement from the poor market in previous years. Sales from the annual cull provides good income to the preserve operating fund. Each year the cull is bought at live auction by the Golden Bison Co. and Gale Stevens. The decision on whether a bison stays or goes is made when the animal has reached the age of thirty months. In answer to a question about whether or not the bison live out their natural life on the preserve, Harvey responded: "It depends on when they die." Culled bison usually become gourmet dinners or hamburger.

In answer to a question from the audi-



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ence, Harvey said that the cow-to-bull ratio is eight to ten bulls for the herd.

Answering another question, Harvey said that the Visitor's Center operates from a separate budget.

We took a break for lunch. It was too cold to eat outside.

After lunch, Harvey Payne introduced Dr. James P. Ronda, the nation's foremost expert on Lewis & Clark and holder, since 1990, of the Barnard Chair of Western History at the University of Tulsa, which was endowed by James A. Chapman in honor of his friend H.G. Barnard.

Dr. Ronda likes lists and the succinct summarizing catch-phrase. He is an historian. What use is history? Although he didn't say so, it is everywhere about us. We are the sum of our histories. Our histories are the stories of our lives, the stories of how we arrived at



our present condition. Our individual history is what makes each of us an individual. Though not as succinct as the derivatives, George Santayana originally said that: "Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Life changes the environment in which it lives. Humanity is the greatest force for change alive on the planet today.

Dr. Ronda asserted, correctly, that we docents are educators. We are all storytellers. There are three stories to tell about the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve:

1. The Last Best Place story.
2. The Science story.
3. Go beyond these two stories, which is what Dr. Ronda showed us how to do in

his brief address.

In 1879, related Dr. Ronda, Walt Whitman took a journey by rail-road from New York to Denver across the Great Plains of middle America. Whitman is reported to have said that the Great Plains are most characteristic of all North America. The Great Plains are the common landscape. Ronda stressed the word common. The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve is important precisely because it is typical of the real west as it once was before the radical changes brought about by settlement and farming. Here on the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve is where the real west is.

Dr. Ronda enumerated what the Tallgrass Prairie is not:

1. It is NOT a museum.
2. It is NOT a zoo.
3. It is NOT a theme park.
4. It is NOT the big empty—it's the big full in actual fact.
5. It is NOT exotic. It represents what was once a vast commonplace.

Dr. Ronda reminded us that our focus should always be on what is common NOT exotic. A landscape is like a book; look at it with fresh eyes and read the story it has to tell. Interpret that story and tell it to the visitors. Everyone loves a story. Storytelling is the most commonplace human activity, a thread that ties us together, a Great Conversation stretching back into the eons of times past.

Our story of the landscape, said Dr. Ronda, is divided into three chapters:

1. The Original World, as told by the dynamics of Nature.
2. The Built World, and what it tells us about the values and attitudes of the civilization doing the building.
3. The Storied World, which is of the stories we tell about the landscape such as the Osage versus the Oilman versus the Developer.

Osage County and the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve are important because they are typical of the west as it once was for thousands of years. Nomadic tribes and the bison that sustained them, fire, wind, rain, and ice are what maintained the Great Plains in a steady state for millennia. How was the West made



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into what we see today? Five forces for change, said Dr. Ronda:

1. Nature: wind, fire, rain, ice, etc.
2. The Federal Government: with its treaties, wars, military power, exploration, mapping, rail-road development, territorial & state government, and Indian policy.
3. Ranching: An 1880s expansion occurred because of a shift in diet from pork to beef. (Why was there a shift from pork to beef?) Corporate ranching in the 1880s started a general trend in ranching towards bigness. Investment money provides capital that gives corporate ranches economies of scale and access to markets denied to smallholders. The Chapman-Barnard ranch was once a major cattle operation with a railhead at Blackland to ship fattened cattle to the meat processing plants. Chapman and Barnard were oilmen lured into ranching by the mystique of the western way of life as told by stories. Stories are a powerful influence. Stories got people to go to Greenland. Stories get people into ranching.
4. Oil: Discovery of oil triggered a flood of investment money from New York and Chicago, brought people from everywhere, and fueled a global economy. There are at least three-hundred oil wells on the preserve of which about one-hundred are still active. Everything is connected and there is a story behind what you see on the terrain. Draw the attention of visitors to the pump jacks for they are a typical and visible result of the industrialization of the West, just as bison are a typical and visible vestige of the West as it once was.
5. Rail-roads: Second only to the Federal Government, rail-roads are the ultimate connection, connecting the West to the outside world and the outside world to the West. In 1902 the Eastern Oklahoma rail-road connected to Burbank. In 1905 the Midland Valley rail-road connected Blackland that was still an official stop as late as 1966. Rail-roads brought manufactured goods and workers of all kinds into the west and transported oil and cattle to markets far away.

As docents we have an obligation to show visitors something about the common, ordin-

ary Osage county in general and the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in particular. We do that by asking and answering questions. Dr. Ronda quoted a friend of his: "Questions are the engines of intellect." Ask Questions and see with Fresh Eyes.

We received a hand-out: A LANDSCAPE INVENTORY—

"Everywhere you look you will see something connected to something else. And that something else is connected to you. And all the connections are to other things far away from Osage County and the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve."

"Ask Questions."

"See with Fresh Eyes."

1. What is it?
2. Where is it?
3. Who built it? (if it was constructed by human hands)
- 3a. If what I see was the result of what we call "natural forces", what were those forces? Remember that in the West what looks like a "natural force" can also be the result of human activity. Good example: fire.
4. When was it built?
5. What was its original purpose and appearance?
6. Has the purpose and appearance changed over time?
7. If it has changed, why?
8. How is what I see now connected to other parts of the world?

Dr. Ronda took a bow. We closed the meeting.

Dr. Ronda's was a dynamic and vivid presentation that lived up to the billing. Lucky is the student of history fortunate to experience one of his lectures, if this one was typical.

## 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



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about the various preserves in Oklahoma, but of course the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in particular.

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.

## NEWSLETTER BACK ISSUES

Back issues of the Docent Newsletter, to

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