

Discover the

Minnesota Prairie Landowner Network

Summer 2022

Photo: Prairie in Douglas County, by Phil Doll.

Helping the Land Be What It Wants to Be
The Promised Land
Finding Peace on the Prairie

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Helping the Land Be What It Wants to Be



*By Rob and Deb
McWilliams,
Prairie Landowners,
Fillmore County*

As perhaps many landowners have asked themselves over the years (usually as we are battling brush on a slope with poor footing or in adverse weather conditions), “Why do I do this?”. That’s a good question that perhaps only a landowner can answer. Our story goes back to 2006 when my wife and I decided to purchase recreational land outside of the city we lived in, but close enough where we could frequently visit. As we lived in the bluff country of southeast Minnesota, we thought land near water and some of the bicycle trails would be ideal. We looked for about a year at several different parcels that came up for sale, and eventually jumped on the opportunity of a wooded acreage with a stream running through it. There was an old barn with a cracked foundation sitting on the property, and any house was long since buried. Knowing virtually nothing of Minnesota ecology, we thought



Illinois tick-trefoil blooms on a bluff.

Photo by Rob McWilliams.

the property was nonetheless satisfactory and purchased it.

Doing some late-night internet exploration, I learned about the Driftless Area and why it is a unique aspect of our Minnesota landscape. I read of the woodland stewardship program of the Department of Natural Resources. Eager to learn more about the land we had purchased, I arranged for a site visit with the DNR. As our goal at the time was management for hunting and recreation, they brought a woodland expert, a prairie expert, and a water



Wild geranium blooming in the forest understory. Photo by Rob McWilliams.

expert. We walked the land together, finding that there was a steep bluff that I had not previously seen behind an overgrowth of boxelder trees. We saw evidence of remnant prairie plants in an open area at the top of the bluff, along with evidence of old open grown oak trees, crowded by overgrowth of hardwoods and red cedar. Nonetheless, our eyes had been opened and we began to see what this area could become.

We then met with various vendors including Jesse Bennett of Driftless Land Stewardship, LLC and Mitch Gilbert, a forester near Lanesboro. These are passionate naturalists who have figured out a way to turn their passion into a business, sharing their knowledge and expertise

with those of us who know far less. Early on, with visions of an “Up North” type escape we had delusions of planting aspen and birch along with pine. Over time, however, we began to appreciate the beauty of the driftless region itself and ecosystems that belong there.

Since that time, I’ve learned to walk through a landscape and identify the plants, look at the shape of the tree canopy, and try to envision what the land “wants to be”. In a wooded area at the top of our bluff we have open grown oaks, and the ground is littered by wood betony, spotted St. John’s wort, and hoary puccoon, along with rare plants such as tuberous Indian plantain, a Minnesota Threatened species. Although

this area was initially heavily invaded by buckthorn, our use of goats, hand cutting, and fire on an annual basis have greatly cleared this out and allowed other native plant species to flourish as well. Our savanna species are coming back slowly, but surely, as we restore the natural forces of grazing and fire that shaped the land in the past.

We cleared south-facing bluff prairie of trees early on but didn't realize the profound ability of hardwoods to resprout. It has taken 15 years of cutting, stump treating, burning, and goat grazing to get our 100' bluff to the point where it is dominated by native forbs and grass. In an open area on top of the bluff, where the DNR staff initially found remnant prairie, we had a wild parsnip problem. It took us about five or six years of hand pulling thousands of stems (wearing long sleeves and pants in the heat of July) to try to diminish this invasive species. Over time, we have won that battle but have since seen invasions of reed canary and garlic mustard in other areas. Microinvasions of Queen Anne's lace and Japanese hedge parsley have been caught quickly before establishment. Buckthorn and

honeysuckle of course were already there in large numbers, and the combination of burning followed by goats and herbicide injection of whatever was left has begun to help control it. We both work full time and live 45 minutes from our land and cabin, so we can't manage it as often or as constantly as we would like. However, it is a labor of love, and we always learn something as a reward for our efforts. I feel like we're making progress, but, of course, we will never be done. There is deep satisfaction in seeing the change in the landscape that we have nudged towards restoration. Some knowledge can be a bad thing, often I've sat in a deer stand and focused much more on the proliferation of buckthorn resprouts rather than whether or not a buck was headed in my direction. Nonetheless, I'd like to think we've made our mark on the land for the better, in a small way following the footsteps of my personal hero Aldo Leopold. According to him in A Sand County Almanac, "The oldest task in human history is to live on a piece of land without spoiling it". If we can do that, I will be proud of our efforts.

The Promised Land



By Lee Carlson,
Prairie Landowner,
Lyon County

In 1998, Willie Nelson sang
“Living in the Promised Land:”

*Living in the promiseland
Our dreams are made of steel
The prayer of every man
Is to know how freedom feels
There is a winding road
‘Cross the shifting sands
And room for everyone
Living in the promiseland*

Little was I to know that owning my own promised land would soon become a reality. A small stretch of the Cottonwood River, rich in grass and wildlife, came up for sale, and when auction day arrived and the gavel fell, I had purchased 93 acres of a little kid’s heaven.

My work history always contained an aspect of the Natural Sciences. This close association to the environment fostered a strong interest in becoming involved in the restoration of a complex natural community defined as a prairie. Gathering ideas along the way, I formulated a dream of some day owning and managing my

own prairie. I became aware of a land of interest that had been owned by Lyon County. I’m sure they originally used the land to mine gravel and borrow soil as needed for various construction projects. The County had been a reasonable owner but the land was left with open pits, dirt piles and soil disturbances. An opportunity existed for restoration.

With pits filled, weeds sprayed, and tillable land restored, the acres became eligible for the Conservation Reserve Program, (CRP) in 2020. With assistance



*Aster blooms on the prairie.
Photo by Lee Carlson.*

from NRCS staff, a strategy was put together to maximize environmental and recreational benefits for not only the land but also the Cottonwood River running through it.

Preparation began on the land. The primary soil preparation tool was to plant soybeans for two years. A Truax drill equipped to handle native seeds was employed during late October of 2020. A blend of native grass and forbs seed (CP-25) was purchased from Milborn Seeds in Brookings, SD. All of the activities prior and during the restoration were approved and coordinated with Lyon County NRCS staff.

First year strategic observations:

1. The project was dormant

seeded, directly into bean stubble using a Truax drill. This phase was completed late fall of 2020. Observation: Generally the resulting stand seemed better than expected. I am left believing there is merit in allowing seed to winter over, or stratify, in the soil.

2. Inexperience on my part with adjusting settings on the Truax drill resulted in several acres being “over seeded”. Observation: While the density of stand is amazing, could there be a long-term negative consequence?

3. Weeds were abundant and irritating and needed to be flail chopped twice. Observation: However, after freeze-up, the natives were still present and had enough vigor to withstand



Truax Drill used for seeding. Photo by Lee Carlson.

the pressure of the heavy weed competition. It's worth noting that mating occurred after flail chopping in some areas. It appears that the natives survived with minimal delay of growth.

4. Observation: Of the 11 grass species introduced, all were identified at some level of frequency during the first growing season. Of the 22 or so forbs planted, about 18-19 were also identified.

Questions to consider:

1. Will the forbs not observed in the first year make their presence known the second? Prairie godfathers assure me they will show up...for now I'll hold skepticism.

2. What will be the effects of the "super spreader" extra dose of seed on several areas? Will it leave a long term unnatural "corn row" effect?

3. Invasive species now have the restoration under attack from all sides. How will this best be managed? Can it be managed?

4. Can fortifying with additional

cool-season species provide a partial strategy to counter invasive species?

5. How will weeds respond the second year?

Embarking on the dream adventure of successfully recreating a prairie has now closed out its first year. First year efforts focused on effective soil preparation, seed to soil contact planting methods, maximizing diversity, and weed control. Year two will likely be spent identifying the methods, strategies and costs that were helpful or those not so much. There seems to be few shortcuts to short- and long-term management strategies. Moving forward, management will likely not rely on new ideas but simply apply those previously gathered while adapting to challenges that arise. An extremely helpful resource for my situation has been staff and publications of the Minnesota DNR. Texts, phone calls, emails and actual on-site visits by participating businesses and agencies helped settle nerves and restore the strength of the "Promised Land".

Share your upcoming prairie-related events to the MPLN Facebook group and keep an eye out for upcoming events.

Finding Peace on the Prairie



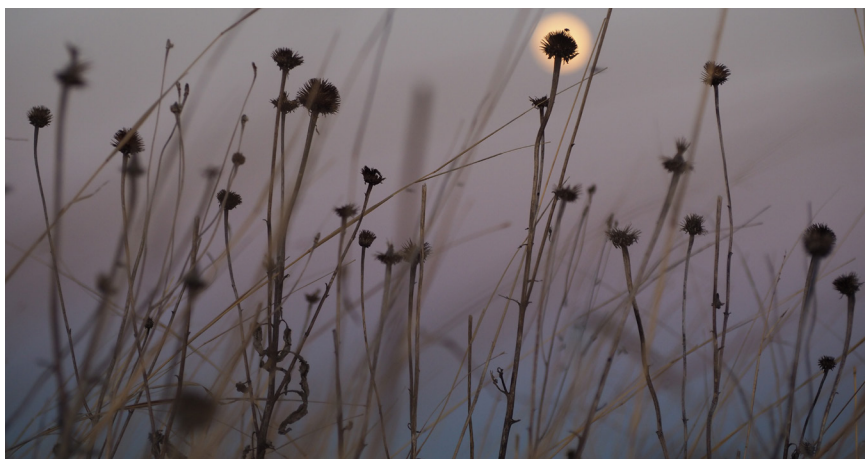
By Katelin Goebel,
Land Protection
Associate, Minnesota
Land Trust

In March of 2020, like many others, my life was suddenly put on pause due the pandemic. I had just moved to rural western Minnesota and everyday life was filled with uncertainty. Grabbing my camera, I found myself often venturing out into a place that felt familiar – the prairie.

“To those devoid of imagination a blank place on the map is a useless waste; to others, the most valuable part.”
– Aldo Leopold

I was certainly living in a blank place on the map. Social

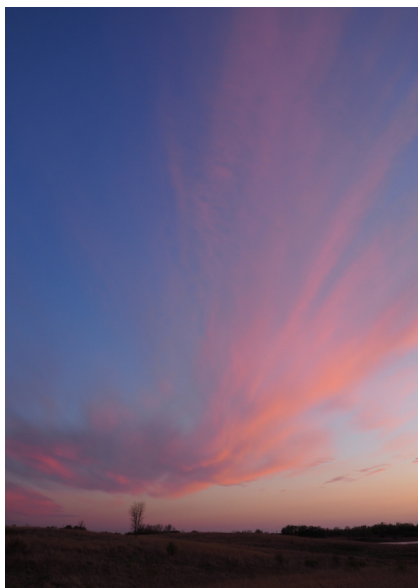
distancing was easy out here in Cyrus, Minnesota (population 288) – certainly a change of scenery from the Twin Cities where I had just moved from. I’m from a small Minnesota town and have spent several summers working daily on the prairie, though, so I’ve grown fond of these blank places. Returning to rural Minnesota felt like a type of homecoming, but being hours from friends or family at the start of a global pandemic was lonely and unfamiliar. In the midst of a landscape of tilled fields, I sought out public lands in the form of Waterfowl Production Areas and Wildlife Management Areas to explore around my new home.



The moon glows behind dried wildflowers and grasses on the prairie.

Photo by Katelin Goebel.

The pace of life certainly seemed quieter out here, and in early spring, the natural world was mostly quiet, too. In March, waterfowl are starting to migrate and can be found in wetlands, and the sharp trills of red-winged blackbirds are often carried over the wind. Once in a while, the rattle of a sandhill crane might be heard in the distance. For the most part, though, the characteristic buzz and color of the prairie is absent. Most songbirds haven't yet returned, and insects have yet to emerge. Without their fluffy seeds and green leaves, warm season grasses are reduced to tall,



Colorful sky over a Pope County prairie. Photo by Katelin Goebel.

bare spindles. Wildflowers are almost unrecognizable bearing only their naked seed heads. Still, the prairie offers a subtle beauty in its leftover golden stalks beneath ever-reaching skies, and I was determined to attempt to capture it.

I often ventured out with my camera around sunset to witness the prairie in its golden hour. As the shadows grew longer, I'd scope out a spot to watch the sunset. I usually made gangly plant silhouettes my subjects and waited patiently for the sun to outline them just right. Other times, a lone tree on the horizon held my attention. Some evenings, the backdrop was a pastel sky of lavenders, while other sunsets brought dramatic splashes of intense oranges and pinks. I watched as the shadows along the ground slowly grew longer and the dry prairie stalks seemed to drink up the golden rays of dusk. As I snapped pictures, the wind slowly died down, the last blackbird chatter faded, and stars silently appeared. I was alone out here, but I found comfort in the familiar feeling of being small under an immense sky, a sensation I often get while out on the prairie.

"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature -- the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter." – Rachel Carson

The splashes of color on the prairie will return again – the bright purples of coneflower and blazingstar, intense yellows of sunflower and goldenrod, and

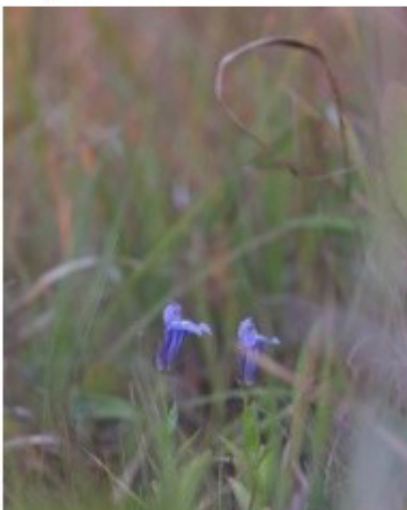
the deep greens and purples of big bluestem will reappear as they do every year. There's a kind of comfort in knowing the natural order of things continues on, even in a time that's been so challenging and uncertain. In the meantime, I look forward to noticing the subtle changes of seasons, especially the coming of spring. I know that soon after the snow melts, delicate pasque flowers will bloom, and spring will arrive again.



Kristi Link Fernholz asked a question

September 11, 2021 · 🌐

Found a new flower today. ID anyone? It was 5 inches tall. Is it a tiny Blue Lobelia? Growing in little patch of gravel.

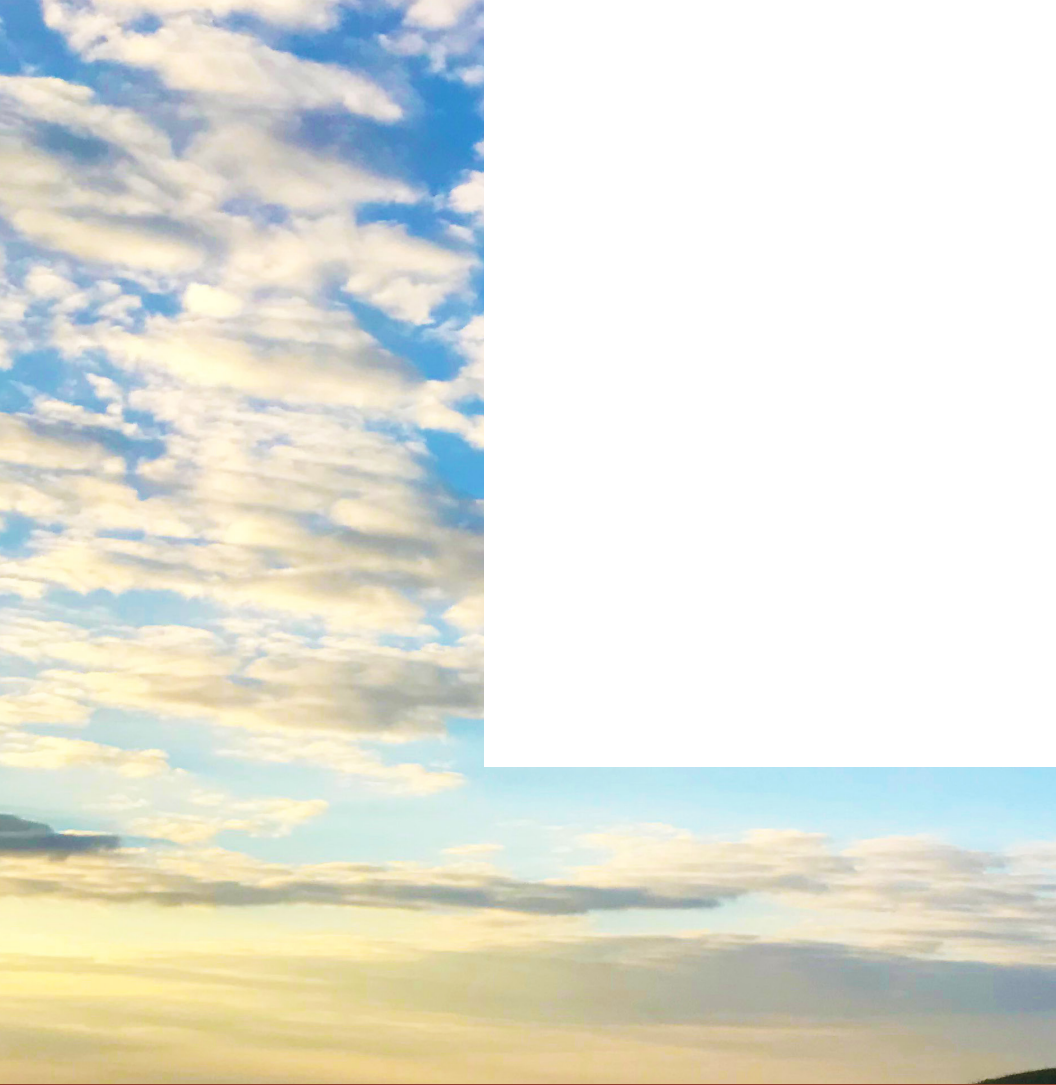


Added by admin #plantidentification #nativeprairie

👍 🤔 ❤️ 26

3 Answers

Kristi's question to the Minnesota Prairie Landowner Network Facebook group.



Historically, Minnesota had 18 million acres of prairie and oak savanna. Now less than 2 percent of native prairie and oak savanna remains, about 250,000 acres. Much of this is in private ownership. Prairie partners and professionals across the state recognized the need for a forum for landowners to connect and discuss important prairie management and conservation information with each other.

Let's talk #PrairieManagement!

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