

Discover the

Minnesota

Prairie Landowner Network

Summer 2023

Lac qui Parle County prairie, by Liz Beery.

**New Ownership = New
Vision: Pollinator Habitat**

The Promised Land Year Two

Surprise

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New Ownership = New Vision: Pollinator Habitat

By Wendy Johnson

Never underestimate a woman, especially when she's on her tractor. The first time I climbed up and drove the orange 35 HP Kubota, pulling a brush hog rotary mower, I knew I'd fallen in love. The roar of the engine and the thwacking of the blades as they cut sapling cherries and aspens encroaching on the open field was music to my muffled ears. Occasionally, I'd stop the tractor on a ridge, turn off the ignition, and remove my ear protection to listen to the passing of a chirping goldfinch or admire the golden sweeping hills beneath the blue sky of the Driftless Region. As I continued maneuvering the tractor along the sloping field, an occasional vole darted away through the grass below. A pair of white-tailed deer watched me from a safe distance at the far edge of the hardwood forest. I knew from that day on that this was my happy place, and I would do everything within my power and imagination to preserve and restore the land to a vibrant, diverse prairie habitat.



Photo by Wendy Johnson

The land was previously owned by my late partner, Jim Tittle. It is a 100-acre parcel in Hay Creek Township just south of Red Wing, Minnesota. In the 1980s, Jim's father put 58 acres of "the Farm" in the new (but now familiar) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Jim and his father had managed the land as permanent wildlife habitat under the same program for over 30 years. To prevent further erosion from cultivation, it was planted in brome and Kentucky bluegrass, and the primary management practice has been to "keep the trees off." Jim was happy with that and content to let Mother Nature take her



Photos by Wendy Johnson

time repopulating the fields otherwise.

When Jim passed away in 2020, he gave me the land, and with the new ownership came my new vision and the energy to make it a reality. When the contract was up for renewal in 2022, I decided to be intentional about restoring the land. The brome and bluegrass have done a great job of preventing erosion but at the cost of crowding out other native species that might have eventually self-seeded. Only the most competitive species, such as Canadian goldenrod and swamp milkweed, have a foothold. And now, unfortunately, aggressive stands of sumac, aspens, and black locust are spreading, along with Queen Anne's lace and wild parsnip.

Unlike the rest of the fields,

there is one small area where a wide variety of native species have self-seeded and outcompeted the original CRP planting. Its south-facing slope consists of heavy clay. It gets too hot and dry in the summer for the brome and Kentucky bluegrass to thrive, so exposed soils allow for these other wildflowers and grasses to seed. Here, clumps of big bluestem grow along with whorled milkweed, stiff goldenrod, white arrow leaf aster, and woodland sunflower. It is also a favorite area of the badgers who like to dig large holes through the clay and into the warm earth. This is what I'd like to see more of the fields to look like—full of variety in form and color throughout the seasons—to provide more habitat for a greater variety of creatures, including invertebrates, the foundation of

the food chain.

In Spring 2023 under a new contract, I will begin implementing a designated Permanent Pollinator Habitat reconstruction on 17 acres of the CRP land with guidance from prairie consultant Stephen Thomforde and help from my friends, neighbors, and family. This is the kind of undertaking that changes lives. It deepens our connection to nature and each other as we work to improve the ecosystem for every living being.

As a filmmaker, I'll also document the process of reconstruction so that other people can see the transformation from season to season. I've partnered with a small team of Minnesota-based filmmakers to film each stage of the process and explore the themes of history, community, and land stewardship. Over the next three years, I'll be sharing photos and video clips of the process as well.

By the end of this project, I want to see the greater community's eyes open to the possibilities of conservation and restoration. I want them to appreciate how much an area of

restored land, large or small, can make an impact on the health of both humans and nature. I want to see other landowners inspired to take advantage of the CRP program, to see this little story and say to themselves, I could do that—and DO it! Never underestimate anyone willing to work for what we love. We can make a difference one at a time together, and this project will be a living example for others to follow.

If you'd like more information about the film or to be involved in this project as a volunteer, please contact me at 612-930-9786, wendyjohanson2016@gmail.com, or on Instagram @WendyJohnsonPrairieFilm.

The Promised Land Year Two

By Lee Carlson,

Restoring land to what it may have looked like two hundred years ago has proven to be quite an adventure. The twenty-four acres of the Promised Land now undergoing restoration at Balaton, Minnesota was planted late fall of 2020. Summer of 2021 provided the initial growing season. Spring and summer growing season of 2022 provided basis for observations found below:

Significant research and life experiences predate the project. Challenges and excitement generated starting with acquisition of the land, seed selection, planting, and now maintaining has been special. Attempts have been made to document the near daily visits. This not only helps remind one of changes overtime but possibly support others in their restoration efforts.

To summarize, the first year growing season, planned and unplanned occurrences generated many questions. Let's take a look...

A whopper of a mistake on the first few acres was the excessive seeding rate. The question/concern was not only the cost, but would it create an irreversible unnatural cosmetic change to the restoration? The answer continues to unfold, but one unplanned positive is the density of stand has permitted natives to outcompete the early flush of annuals and slow the Canada thistle friends. Observation: Super seeding might prove a useful strategy when attempting a smaller restoration with a known thistle infestation. There will be more to come on this topic.

Is dormant seeding effective? I remain convinced that fall dormant seeding remains the method of choice in most situations. Having said that, the additional forbs and grasses I introduced late fall of 2021 have yet to have to appear. Natives operate on their own schedules, so I haven't given up yet.

My thoughts on second year weed competition are the following: The nasty patches of common ragweed, barnyard weed, and other aggressive annuals have been reduced to about five percent of the seeded surface area through year two. Experts assure me the trend to less annual competition will continue. However, less optimism exists on the growing infestation of Canada thistles. T

The early strategy had been to mix glyphosate with 2,4d and spot spray carefully. While effective, I have shifted chemical use to a product called Transline. I think (hope) it may have a more systemic action on slowing patch expansion. While a time-consuming process, I have learned that spraying directly down from the top of the plant greatly reduces collateral damage. It really hurts when a nice little native gets blasted with chemicals. By the way, I have not seen any new patches in all of December.

Another huge topic is control of invasive species. In my case, I face invasion from all sides. The project is rimmed with fence lines, roadway ditches, and canary grass infested wetlands.

All restorations seem to have a signature group of “bad guys” The Promised Land is no different. Thistles, brome, canary grass, and crowned vetch are the primary nemesis. Grabbing onto the adage “as the twig is bent so grows the tree” I have committed to five years of intensive interactive management of invasive species.



Photo by Lee Carlson

Blue Vervain

(Verbena hastata)

The multi-faceted approach will also include fire, and mechanical haying. The goal's end game is to provide natives the best opportunity to establish and then out-compete competitors. Addition of cool-season natives will be used as time and resources provide. The long-term goal is to provide the land the best chance possible to ultimately "manage itself".



Additional observations were not included to changes in quality and quantity of prairie related insects, birds, and animals. The project is off to such an exciting start and its only year two.

Please feel free to contact me on questions or answers. I never seem to tire of "prairie talk". Good luck to you on your project in 2023.

Photo by Lee Carlson
Joe-pye Weed
(*Eutrochium maculatum*)

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

Be sure to be checking the Facebook group for events happening in your area this summer!

Surprise

By Alex Blondeau

It was a gray afternoon in April when I fell through the looking glass. I was in the midst of a cross country run along a ridge on the north side of Fergus Falls, MN. I stopped for a moment just to fiddle with my shoe but would stand into a whole new world. Nestled in the tan matted grass at my feet was a small lavender flower. It glistened with moisture which clung to delicate fuzzy hairs that covered its entire surface. Nothing about this made sense.

There were still patches of snow on the ground. The land all around me was dormant. None of the plants had so much as growing leaves, let alone flowers! Yet here before me was this stunning little flower pushing its way out of the rocky hillside. This small mystery was the doorway through which I would walk into a new understanding of the land upon which I was born.



Photo by Alex Blondeau

This particular flower is not the same one from my story but is nevertheless a part of it. Since that first experience, I have gone on to propagate hundreds of pasque flowers, many of which I have planted on the hillsides of our own prairie reconstruction. This was among the first to bloom three years after being planted as a seedling.

I spent most of my adolescence and young adulthood trying to get away from Otter Tail County. I longed for the rugged shoreline of Lake Superior or the alpine regions of the Rocky Mountains. By contrast, home meant land thoroughly cultivated by human activity. I loved wild places

because they were largely free of all the things that make our lives easy and safe. They could be harsh, but within those dramatic landscapes hid entire communities of life that were suffused with a diversity and beauty that happened spontaneously, unbound by boxes and grids.

By training, I am an artist and theologian. I spend a great deal of time thinking about what it means to be human. Somewhat counter-intuitively, I've come to see an essential part of being human involves getting in touch with the reality that lies beyond our "thinking." All too easily our thinking becomes like the cage we build around a wild animal. We take something that is unpredictable, beautiful, free and place it within the safe confines of our thoughts. Almost every aspect of human culture is an outward manifestation of this, from our language to the way we build our cities, even at times to the practices we use in our restoration work. Understandably, we're trying to get a handle on things. The trouble is when our thinking becomes like a pair of reading glasses that we staple to our heads. We may solve a problem,

but not all of life happens within two feet of our noses.

These places and moments that break open our settled understandings and stimulate a sense of wonder are—to use a theological term—holy. I do not wish to conjure an image of holiness as a well-known religious building or ceremony. I am pointing to holiness as surprise! The surprising connotation in the word holy is often missed, but it runs deep in the history of use and shows itself in a somewhat amusing way every time we exclaim "Holy [smokes, mackerel, moly, etc.]" The experience of surprise as holiness is the unexpected discovery of our connection to a reality that is greater than we had thought.

People fall in love with prairie for many reasons. Some people love it because it is habitat for animals that they enjoy hunting. Others love prairie because of the role it plays in a healthy ecology. I love prairie because it surprised me. At the most fundamental level my discovery of the prairie has been a reconnection with wonder. It does the same thing for me as a clear view of the Milky Way, or perhaps being enveloped within

the umbra of a solar eclipse. It throws me out of the tyranny of my to-do list and into the unexpected joy of being alive.

This experience has made an addict of me Like my love for the mountains or Lake Superior, I wanted more, and the discovery of my little flower showed me that these places of wonder existed within my everyday reach! I sought them out with vigor, an experience that brought much happiness, but also sadness. For in the process of seeking out these fragments of native prairie I came to see just how rare and threatened they really were, mostly tucked away on forgotten bits of land, or on relatively small nature preserves. It has become my observance to spend a silly amount of time finding and abiding in these places.

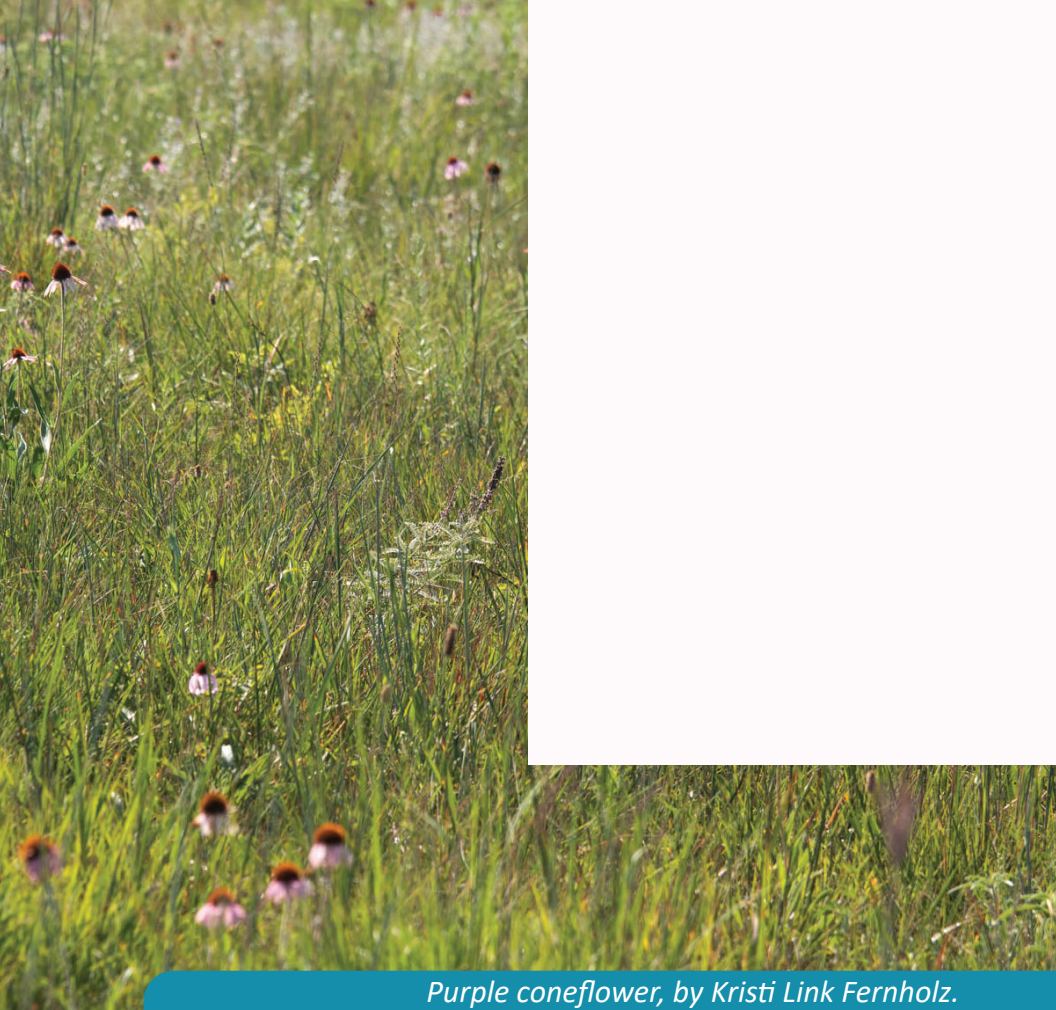
There is a ditch west of town that I cheekily refer to as “my favorite ditch.” People driving

past likely have no concept of the transfiguration that is often taking place just yards away from the discarded beer cans that line the road’s edge. Over the years I’ve watched smooth brome encroach upon the lady’s tresses and small white lady slippers that grow unnoticed here. The door is closing on these forgotten places which were the contexts of my own awakening. They are treasures of our shared natural heritage, but they seldom receive so much as a glance. Despair is easy to come by. I must remind myself that as important as my own ecological work is, the power of life that gave rise to these places persists regardless of the success or failure of my own ideas and efforts. It’s in the air, the ground, and the water. It is, as Paul Wallace says, in the “stars beneath us.” And it’s in the smile you’ll see on my face as I continue the happy futility of planting flowers and wasting time on lonely, windy hillsides.

Photo by Alex Blondeau

Northern bedstraw (*Galium boreale*) growing in my favorite ditch.





Purple coneflower, by Kristi Link Fernholz.

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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