



The 112-acre Olson Nature Preserve with its many different habitats is truly a model educational preserve. Located at the eastern edge of the Nebraska Sandhills, characteristic blowouts and gullies comprise the western edge of the property. A bur oak forest covers a steep escarpment that runs roughly north-south through the middle. Wetlands fill the area at the base of the oak grove, and a spring-fed creek runs along the east boundary.

Numerous educational programs and research projects have been developed by area teachers and others, as well as several special events. For more about the unique history and educational uses of ONP, see prairieplains.org; under Preserves, choose Olson Nature Preserve, then scroll down to the *Prairie Plains Journal* spotlight article about ONP.



Involving people as volunteers is another way Prairie Plains has connected people to the land. Occasionally the Ranch Trek has included a work project, such as constructing a windbreak or repairing a bridge. On other preserves group volunteer activities have included removing invasive species



such as sumac, cedar trees, and musk thistles; fencing and de-fencing; planting prairies and harvesting seed. We've even had Sullivant's milkweed shelling parties (photo, left). And many volunteers have been and will be involved in the construction work on the Center (photo above, right). We conduct all of these volunteer events with a social atmosphere that invariably involves sharing stories and food.

Learn more:

"Celebrating the Land and its People: A Personal History of Griffith Prairie & Farm"

Read about how discovering the history of the Gjerloff Family, who lived on the farm from 1913-1971, enhanced the "sense of place" of the preserve - and its educational programming - at prairieplains.org. Under publications, choose Prairie Plains newsletter, then Gjerloff Supplement June/July 2008 and Gjerloff Supplement June/July 2008 insert.



Our next plan for connecting people to the land is a culmination of thirty years of work in ecological restoration, education and community based conservation. We are working on an intern and residency program to be staged at Griffith Prairie and Farm. It is envisioned as an alternative field campus for college, graduate and post-graduate students who will come for a semester or a full year of ecological restoration work, curricular study and independent research. In the process, students will experience a large swath of the Great Plains landscape, be exposed to new ideas, tools and creative people. The geographic context will be the rural agricultural setting and culture of the entire state of Nebraska. In addition to the seed harvesting, processing and planting activities of prairie restoration, students will explore ideas pertaining to landscape-scale integration of community, agriculture and nature. They will learn the concepts and methods of protecting land, and be involved in all Prairie Plains educational activities.

Connecting People to Land through Educational Programming



Prairie Plains Resource Institute is an educational land trust. Our mission is maintaining and restoring Nebraska ecosystems - creating opportunities for education, research, stewardship and community development. In order to fulfill this mission, we have developed three major programs:

- (1) Land Preservation and Stewardship - Prairie Plains owns and maintains seven prairie preserves in Nebraska - and is also responsible for the restoration, management and educational programming for a 250-acre natural area in a local county park;
- (2) Prairie and Wetland Restoration - the "business branch" of the Institute; and
- (3) Educational Programming - including SOAR, a nature day camp for elementary students; a year-round walking tour program for local land preserves; a variety of special events, and volunteer and intern programs.

The kind of education we strive to achieve goes beyond the mere transfer of information, although certainly basic information about the land, flora and fauna is part of it. We aim for a deeper awareness and connectedness to the land that requires direct experience and interaction, and an understanding of the "people history" of a place.



Summer Orientation About Rivers (SOAR) began in 1992, the result of a year's brainstorming amongst several Aurora, Nebraska teachers and the director of Prairie Plains Resource Institute.



Its first year received substantial support from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Biodiversity Project and the Environmental Protection Agency Region VII. The program, which so far has headquartered at the Aurora Middle School, has since gained a broad base of support from the community's organizations, businesses and individuals. The fee for the program is presently \$130 per student for the five days of camp.



William S. Whitney
Executive Director
and
Jan Whitney
Education Director
SOAR Coordinator

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Mornings are spent in the field exploring natural and/or historic sites. These have included four Prairie Plains land preserves, a county park, some private lands, agricultural businesses and some local historic sites and cemeteries. Usually three or four rotating sessions are held each morning; several of these during the week include guest presenters who are specialists in various disciplines, e.g. ornithology, ichthyology, herpetology, mammalogy, entomology, botany, soils, hydrology, art, local history, writing or storytelling . . . to name just a few. These presenters may come from the community, or may be teachers, professors, artists, conservation professionals, historians, etc. from various other locations.

SOAR returns to the school in the early afternoon for lab and classroom activities. Thursday evening campers return with their families for a program showing, through music, art exhibits and the "Microbe Show" lab, what has been accomplished during the week.

Everyone looks forward to SOAR Friday, which is "River Day," where we spend the entire morning in the Platte River at Bader Park, engaged in some very wet and lively activities . . . as always, discovering and learning while having great outdoor fun.

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Several summers we have offered a "teacher shadowing" program for credit (arranged with either University of Nebraska or Hastings College), where teachers attend SOAR to gain knowledge and experience in outdoor education. A second SOAR camp was started in 1996 by several teachers who had shadowed SOAR. It is located in the Kearney area and is co-sponsored by Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. It has been a huge success and, like the Aurora pilot program, is still going strong.



Why it Works

1. A clearly stated mission: "SOAR's mission is to get local children out on the land - and in the water - to discover the great diversity of life that exists just beyond their own back yards. By using local field sites and an interdisciplinary curriculum including natural and physical science, history, art, agriculture, language arts and music, SOAR aims to create a deeper appreciation for where we live in the minds of our children." All of the program's activities are based on this mission.
2. A fully engaged core staff that enjoys outdoor education, works well together and is *willing to commit the necessary time and effort*.
3. Diverse and outstanding local field sites with easy access.
4. A highly structured format that still allows for flexibility and spontaneous moments of discovery.
5. The peer leaders: these youth are the backbone of the structure of the program, and are the reason the camp runs as smoothly as it does. A good number of them are returning to SOAR after high school to serve as volunteers or even as presenters (photo, right - a college entomology student who returned to SOAR to talk about his research on bees).
6. Careful financial management - diligence in annual fund-raising; a realistic budget.
7. Regular evaluation and modifying - with the recognition that individual satisfaction of all participants - staff, donors, presenters, volunteers, peer leaders and campers - is a measure of success.



See more of SOAR at prairieplains.org (scrapbook section).



Other Educational Programs

Prairie Plains works throughout the year to bring people to the land for a great variety of experiences. We direct a year-round walking tour program for all ages at Bader Park (including a winter bird count in December), as well as special event hikes - e.g. Wildflower Week in June on three preserves, and a Fall Festival hike in September and New Year's Day hike at Griffith Prairie (pictured above).

The majority of Prairie Plains "special events" are held at Griffith Prairie, a beautiful 390-acre loess bluffs prairie with a half-mile of Platte River frontage. This property serves as the headquarters for the Institute's prairie restoration and land stewardship activities, and is the site where the Charles L. Whitney Education Center (pictured at right), is being constructed from an historic barn moved in from four miles away in February, 2007. The preserve also includes an adjacent farmstead with buildings for seed and equipment storage. Plans are being drafted for the Center and farmstead as a campus and arboretum, to serve the needs of future interns and other expanding programs.

Prairie Plains has hosted Volkswalks (a form of non-competitive fitness walking that developed in Europe), trail rides, SOAR for All Ages (a half-day sampling of a SOAR day), spring festivals, a state range-judging contest and numerous school groups from elementary through college level - all at Griffith Prairie. These types of activities will continue and more will be added with the advantage of a completed Education Center.

The Sioux County Ranch in the northwest corner of the state is the largest Prairie Plains preserve. It features huge vistas across the headwaters of the Niobrara River and into Wyoming's Rawhide Hills to the west. It has numerous small valleys and draws, steep cliffs and buttes and lowland meadows. Because of its geology, variety of land forms and water features this ranch contains an unusual variety of native grassland flora and fauna. In addition, there are fossil beds under exploration by the University of Nebraska. The annual June "Ranch Trek" brings members and friends out to enjoy an educational tour of the 5,000-acre high plains grassland (photo, left)



and an evening barbeque with neighboring ranchers. The ranch has the potential to serve as a field biology station for college students, and future plans include a structure to house researchers, students, classroom and lab.

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