

**Charles L. Whitney
Education Center
Griffith Prairie**

Construction resumed in a big way in October. Exterior concrete work included the remainder



Above, laying out the geothermal tubing loop system that will provide the Center's heat in winter and cool in summer. Below, earthwork building up the south entrance area.

of the patio, plus a retaining wall to support the deck on the Center's north side. The wall was backfilled and grading was done to change a sheer excavation cliff into a safer stair step terrace. The deck to be constructed over the patio will be approximately 51 by 12 feet, and will allow visitors to exit the building from four upper level doors and stroll out onto the prairie, which will be accessible via a boardwalk on the deck's north and west sides.

Two more exterior projects were completed on the south side of the building. The geothermal tubing loops, which will provide heat for the Center in winter and remove heat in the summer, were buried. Water will be circulated in this loop system through two heat pump units in the building. In order to make the earth moving more efficient, we excavated fill from the pond south of the Center. This pond has been dry for a few years, mostly because it has almost completely silted in. Now it is a sculpted surface – the pond is bigger and deeper and the surrounding landscape southeast and southwest of the building is void of vegetation and ready to be planted to a flowery prairie. Earth was also moved at the south end of the Center, almost up to the entry doors, and a service roadway was graded around this area to the east kitchen door. A patio will eventually be constructed on the entry area mound.



Concrete work on retaining wall.

Another project initiated inside the Center in October was the framing of walls in the kitchen, office, storage area and restrooms. When framing is completed, the inside will be ready for heating duct work and installation of the heat pump system, electrical installation, plumbing and fire safety sprinklers – all to be in progress this winter through spring.

With the completion of these large projects and the remaining patio and deck work, the exterior and major interior contractor work is done. Smaller interior tasks will remain as we move on to insulation and drywall and all the finishing touches.



Interior framing in progress, with (left) architect Lee Schriever and Bill Whitney.



PRAIRIE PLAINS LINK
is a publication of



1307 L Street, Aurora, NE 68818
402-694-5535

Prairie Plains Resource Institute is an educational land trust incorporated in 1980 as a non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt membership organization based in Aurora, Nebraska.

MISSION:

Maintaining and restoring Nebraska ecosystems - Creating opportunities for education, research, stewardship and community development.

Link Editor & Layout
Jan Whitney

Photography by Prairie Plains staff unless noted otherwise.

Learn more and
BECOME A MEMBER at
www.prairieplains.org
and
Become a Fan on Facebook

PRAIRIE PLAINS LINK



Harvesting grass seed in the restored area of Griffith Prairie planted in 2009.

October is a critical month for Prairie Plains, as we wrap up the fall native seed harvest. Luckily, it's been a good one, especially compared to last year's spotty production following months of drought. We need every last barrel of all the species collected this year to complete next year's planting slate.

The need for prairie and wetland restoration - and the preservation of the remnants of these native ecosystems - is becoming more urgent than ever, as the rate of conversion of these lands to cropland has accelerated.

It was the mid-1970s when we first became aware of the growing movement to preserve what little remained of the once vast prairie ecosystem that flourished in a huge swath of central North America. At that time, organizations were springing up all over the Midwest, and numerous articles and books touted the cause for saving the prairie. Conferences, (most notably the North American Prairie Conference, still held every other year) brought concerned conservation biologists together from all over the continent.

Forty years later, prairies and wetlands are still being converted to cropland. And unless and until we incorporate sustainability as a cultural norm, and create a farm bill that discourages rather than rewards tearing up more prairies and wetlands, nothing will change.



High crop prices and heavily subsidized crop insurance are making it nearly impossible to leave such so-called marginal lands alone.

For our part, we will continue to do what we set out to do 34 years ago, saving and maintaining, planting and harvesting, promoting and educating. Our members' support of our endeavors is deeply appreciated.

Prairie restoration ninjas Jeff Gustafson, Mike Bullerman and Sarah Bailey amidst a small fraction of the 2013 hand-collected seed harvest.



**NEWSLETTER
October, 2013**



Habitat for the birds - and then some! We came across these handsome icons of the prairie while harvesting an area maintained by the Crane Trust, an organization devoted to the protection of habitat for whooping cranes, sandhill cranes and other migratory birds along the Big Bend Region of the Platte River Valley in Nebraska.



New school prairie: Tony Sigler's range judging class at Aurora High School planted about 100 seedlings from the Prairie Plains greenhouse on October 11th. The new outdoor education site was planted in April, 2012, using both seeds and seedlings. The small prairie has been slow to develop due to drought conditions, but there are signs of good things to come - and these new seedlings will give it a boost. This educational prairie area will serve Aurora range judging classes and many others for years to come.



Above, the Platte River viewed from the Chapman Bridge at Bader Park, before and after the surge from Colorado flooding. Hikers on the October 12th Bader Park tour (right) enjoyed the view of the full river, as well as riparian woodland and prairies in peak autumn colors.



Left - Over twenty high school biology students from Nebraska Christian School in Central City visited Griffith Prairie, the Prairie Plains greenhouse and seed barn on October 15th. Sarah Bailey led the tour, where students learned more about our native prairies and plant diversity, and about the prairie restoration process and why it is important to our region. Right - a plant diversity activity compared various sample sites.



SAVE THE DATE: Saturday evening, January 25th, 2014
PRAIRIE PLAINS FUNDRAISER at the UNL East Campus Union
 Local Foods Banquet, Live & Silent Auction
 Prairie Plains House Band

THANK YOU to Bill & Dianne French for donating a Swisher mower, and to Laura Rubeck for a day's work planting seedlings.

Autumn Seed Safari

For those of us who have the privilege to experience, as part of our actual jobs, wandering through prairies to hand-collect seeds from a wide variety of native plants, autumn brings a feeling of restless anticipation. Harvesting occurs throughout spring and summer, but fall is when it really gets serious. Especially in a year like this, when early rains and whatever other subtle ecological/climatic conditions result in an abundance of viable seed. We have challenging goals to meet, with hundreds of acres of high diversity prairies and wetlands on the planting slate. We aim for around 260 species of grasses, sedges and forbs, and most years achieve at least 200, the majority being hand collected.

So it is with considerable anticipation that we begin the annual ritual. The personal preparation checklist: layers of protective clothing including gloves, hat, boots and shades; water, sunscreen and field lunches; carabiner for attaching bucket to belt; and a knife and/or small pruners. Which tools are needed depends on what's being collected, e.g. milkweeds are just plucked off by hand; seed heads such as goldenrods and leadplant require a knife and flick of the wrist just below the seed-bearing structures; prairie clover spikes are stripped by hand. Next, the truck is loaded with various sizes of buckets and barrels, and we head for the field.



An easy pick: green milkweed.

At times we set out with a mission of specific species, such as compassplant, Sullivan's milkweed or Illinois bundleflower, at known locations, down to GPS points. Other times, it's a search for this & that, cruising along with eyes peeled for key species in roadside ditches or area native and restored prairies, including our own preserves and planting sites.

Collecting seed by hand triggers an ancient hunter-gatherer instinct. Once you get out there, in the wild, traipsing through tall grasses, up and down and around the hills, you're on a mini-safari. A patch of the target species suddenly appears and you score. Rather than stalking wild game or seeking out roots and berries for our personal survival, we're honing in on gems of wild DNA to capture and redistribute for the preservation of our native ecosystem.

The day may be beautiful, a chilly morning giving way to a warmer afternoon, a day when we really feel the good fortune to be where we are, doing what we do, strolling through maroon and gold bouquets, witnessing fall migrations and metamorphoses. Then there are the days when it's hot - or cold - and blowing a dirt-filled gale. The species collected may be waist high on level ground, in generous patches, and not entangled with other, less desirable plants (we have yet to experience all these advantages at once). Or, they may be on a steep slope with hidden holes to step in and hidden stumps to trip over, all mixed in with stuff (e.g. brome) that you must be careful *not* to collect, along with those nasty plants with seeds that work their way through socks, or just glom onto everything (we have all experienced all of these at once).



Sarah Bailey harvesting various species in a Platte wet meadow.



Amy Jones collecting Illinois bundleflower in a roadside ditch, her bucket filling with the little legume pods.

