

April Thank-Yous:

- to Lynda Ochsner, DawnMarie Moe and Sharon Kappelman for assistance with the last *Link* mailing;
- to Syd Widga for donating a copier and fax machine;
- to all of our fire crew volunteers for the Griffith Prairie prescribed burn;
- to fencing volunteers Mike Huebert, Mike Stewart, Cale Jones and Joel Jorgensen; and
- to everyone who has contributed to SOAR.



Approaching Events:

**Prairie Festival
at Griffith Prairie & Farm
Friday, May 23 6pm-10pm**

DON'T MISS IT!!!

**To RSVP and for further details:
amyppri@hamilton.net or 402-694-5535**

and

**Annual Sioux County Ranch Trek Weekend
June 13-15
See prairieplains.org for details!**

PRAIRIE PLAINS LINK
is a publication of



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

Photos by Prairie Plains staff members unless noted otherwise.

Learn more and
BECOME A MEMBER
at
www.prairieplains.org



Above:
Burning at the Marie Ratzlaff Prairie Preserve.

Left, top to bottom:
Griffith Prairie prescribed burn - Looking northwest toward the river, where piles of cedars have ignited;
Burning under power lines - as quickly as possible;
Before & after shots taken from approximately the same location, a short distance north of the Center looking northwest. The first was taken on April 14, the second on April 30.

Below:
The Griffith Prairie fire crew, l-r, Tim Tunnell, Kent Pfeiffer, Cale Jones, Craig Carlson, Joel Jorgensen, Bill Whitney, Chris Helzer, Mike Bullerman (seated in front), Chris Wood, Mike Huebert, Gerry Steinauer, Jason Damm and Matt Jurak (not pictured - Amy Jones & Jan Whitney).

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF



April, 2008

Burning, Seeding, Fencing

If you're looking for us in April, just scan the horizon for smoke. So far this spring prescribed burns were successfully completed at Marie Ratzlaff Prairie Preserve, Bader Park, Griffith Prairie and on the Bush Island restoration just north of Griffith Prairie.

While not wielding the torch, Mike Bullerman has been preparing various high diversity seed mixes and planting. He sowed ten acres of upland prairie on private ground near Ft. Calhoun through the Fontenelle Nature Association, and fifteen acres of wet-mesic →



prairieplains.org
402-694-5535 ppri@hamilton.net
Aurora NE 68818-2126



ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Non-profit Org.
U. S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 21
Aurora, NE 68818-2126



There were some spectacular scenes during the burn at Griffith Prairie. This one, along the north edge by the river where cedars were piled, was captured by Chris Helzer, who led The Nature Conservancy crew that assisted with the burn.

prairie/sedge meadow on a Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) site in Burt County near the Missouri River.

May is going to be a big restoration month. We have six sites to plant in five counties - totaling 530 acres - and we'll also be providing seed for two more ten-acre projects in two additional counties. Looking ahead, we have a slate taking shape for the 2008-2009 prairie restoration cycle that includes a few hundred acres in eastern Nebraska.

If not burning or planting, we're fencing. For the past two years we have been replacing old fence on Griffith Prairie, and presently we are trying to finish the east half of the river fence. We also must fix the east fence and one other stretch near the farmstead. When completed, Jim and Liz Senn's cattle that have been grazing the south pasture will be moved to the northeast bluff pasture where they will benefit from excellent big bluestem growth and have lots of room to roam. They may be moved again to yet another unit so we can let the northeast area produce seed later in the year. Read "Why Graze?" to better understand why we consider grazing an important management tool.

Mike Huebert (left) and our apprentice, Cale Jones (right) assisted with fencing work in April, as did Mike Stewart and Joel Jorgensen.



Two of the signs described in last month's Link are now up - this one at Marie Ratzlaff Prairie Preserve, and the other at Griffith Prairie and Farm.

"Celebrating the Land and its People: Recognizing Past Stewards of Griffith Prairie and Farm" is the title of an in-progress supplement to May's *Prairie Plains Link*. Many people remember the land we call Griffith Prairie and Farm as the **Gjerloff Place** and Gjerloff's Landing - and indeed there is a rich history of the Gjerloff Family there, from 1913 to 1971. Please watch for this tribute to those who came before us - and who in many ways remain connected to this land.



Why Graze?

The role of cattle grazing in the management and restoration of native prairie is often misunderstood. This is particularly true when a relatively small prairie area has been set aside as a prairie preserve. Regardless of the size of a prairie or the economic or cultural importance of livestock, grazing has an important ecological role in management and preservation of native prairie natural diversity. Grazing can be used to reduce invasive, non-native species such as smooth brome grass and Kentucky bluegrass. It can increase the abundance of some very desirable non-grass species, such as the legume, leadplant, by preventing the tall grasses from crowding out small young seedlings. And large mammals re-distribute organic matter and plant nutrients in the ecosystem in the form of urine and dung, much to the benefit of certain other organisms.

When considering the use of grazing as a management tool, one must first define the purposes and goals of the land being managed. Our goal is to maintain and enhance the native variety of our prairies, so we need to determine the best way to graze each area - or in some cases *not* to graze. The Lincoln Creek site and The Leadership Center prairies in Aurora are small, on the edge of town, and have a walking trail running through them. Thus, they are not good places to have livestock. We instead burn the prairies regularly to remove the thatch and invigorate new growth.

Smooth brome is a problem on most of our central and eastern Nebraska properties. On these sites a fairly intensive graze in the early spring, in addition to occasional prescribed burning, can set the brome back and allow native plants to flourish most of the summer. The number of animals used (relative to the size and plant composition of each site), the length of time the cattle are on the site and the time of year the graze takes place are all important considerations. The same number of cattle will create very different effects in different seasons or on a small area versus a large area. The impact of grazing any site must be closely monitored and evaluated based on the goals established for the land. This is as true for the rancher whose livelihood depends on sustaining the best grasses as for the naturalist who values the variety of plant life or birds.

There are two other choices for prairie management. Cutting hay annually or in a rotation system where an area is cut every other year, for example, is not desirable on many prairies since it encourages brome, redtop and bluegrass. Haying has been responsible for protecting the plant community of many eastern prairie remnants, but over time it may not be sustainable. Burning is the other option, but this by itself can create another dilemma for managers. When only burned on a two- to five-year schedule, for example, a tall or mixed grass prairie in Nebraska will develop heavy thatch, which may benefit some wildlife and plants, but will overall negatively impact the prairie by favoring one group or species - the tall stature and most aggressive plants like grasses and sunflowers. Burning frequently - every year or every other year, tends to discourage or even harm some insect and wildlife species. The point is that any management that is repetitive on a prairie tends to favor a certain group of organisms. The best thing for central and eastern Nebraska prairies is to have a grazing program tied to a regular burning program that meets the goals of the land. And the more random these management tools are applied, the more variety of plant and animal species will coexist and, we hope, thrive in the absence of invasive weeds like musk thistles or brome.

Certainly, without a fundamental understanding of prairie (range) ecology - including knowledge of plants, appropriate numbers of livestock and timing - grazing can lead to an increase in invasive species such as leafy spurge (a management nightmare), musk thistle, Canada thistle and smooth brome. It can eliminate rare and more desirable prairie species and increase many common and less desirable ones (though not invasive or non-native). Sometimes grazing is employed out of convenience or desire to keep the income up, which may be contrary to the established goals and purposes of the property. Again, goals must be specific, grazing and burning must fit in with the goals, and the effects of all management actions must be evaluated against the goals each year.

