

PRAIRIE PLAINS LINK



October 30: We spent the final day of harvest-by-hand on rangeland just east of Deweese, collecting blue grama grass seed. It's the same farm - along the Little Blue River - where Land Steward Jeff Gustafson (pictured below) has been clearing cedars and honeylocust trees as part of an NRCS EQIP contract. It's also the farm where Jan Hubbell Whitney grew up. Thanks to landowner Jaymes Hubbell for permission to harvest seed there!



Every time we observe a newly opened-up prairie landscape following a tree-clearing project, it gives us hope that with determined action the Great Plains prairies can be reclaimed. While our recent work along the Little Blue River was a big step forward for a beautiful piece of Clay



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County, all one has to do is look south to see cedar invasion and deterioration of pastures on a huge scale. This vista is a tiny fraction of the impacted land along Nebraska's southern tier counties. Here, where irrigation is not as dominant, native prairie rangeland has traditionally been an integral part of the mixed farming and grazing economy. There is a desperate need to stop woody plant invasion, improve rangeland productivity and restore historically overgrazed land to diversity and health across this region.

Eagle Scout Project benefits Sherman Ranch

Thanks to Eagle Scout candidate Ben Olsufka, there is now a most impressive trail sign alongside the Sherman Ranch Donor sign. Ben, a resident of Marquette - just two miles from the preserve - and a sophomore at Aurora High School, developed an interest in the Sherman Ranch when his Scout Troop 911 enjoyed a campout and service project (lopping cedars) there last year. We were pleased when he asked if he could create a sign and trail markers for the preserve as his Eagle Scout Project.

Ben created a detailed map for the sign, showing all six trails that he named: Lowlands, River Ridge, Coyote Run, West Ridge, East Ridge and Farmland. Having logged 68 hours of labor (with assistance from five others, according to Eagle Scout guidelines) the sign and trail markers were installed on October 13.



ONE SQUARE METER of prairie: That's been the focus of Chris Helzer's remarkable year-long biodiversity study and photography project that began in January 2018. That square meter is located within the first Prairie Plains preserve - Lincoln Creek Prairie, on the eastern edge of Aurora - in a narrow strip of land along an oxbow of the creek. Planted in 1983, it was one of our first attempts at prairie restoration.

As Chris explains in his blog, "The Prairie Ecologist":
"My initial motivation for this project was to draw awareness and appreciation to prairie communities. Prairies suffer from a massive lack of attention and respect, and that provides a major handicap to those of us advocating for their conservation."

As the weeks and months went by, Chris became deeply moved and inspired by what he observed and photographed in his tiny plot of prairie. Not just by its incredible biodiversity, but by all the beauty revealed as each season created a different cast of characters on the little square stage. Chris and his camera have expertly captured both the biodiversity and the beauty of his mini-prairie. We're sharing just a bit of what he discovered here, with an invitation to enjoy the whole show at prairieecologist.com/square-meter-photography-project.



An Arabesque orb weaver dangles daintily from a silken thread.



Chris Helzer is The Nature Conservancy (TNC) Director of Science in Nebraska. His photos frequently appear in publications and websites of TNC, as well as in NEBRASKAland Magazine. His popular blog, "The Prairie Ecologist," can be viewed at <https://prairieecologist.com>.

Chris lives in Aurora, Nebraska. He's been an active Prairie Plains member for many years, and is a key natural history presenter for SOAR.



Frosty sunflower seed head.



Frost on Indiagrass.



Leaf mimicking plant hopper.



One of many species of bees feeding on the two sunflower species in the plot.



Butterfly milkweed seed stuck loosely to its pod.



This monarch showed up one September morning - either a migrant or local hatchling.



Pearl crescent.



A Cope's gray treefrog was a pleasant surprise!

The restored Lincoln Creek Prairie site - a bit of history:

Our first land acquisition and prairie restoration projects were on the east edge of Aurora along Lincoln Creek, an intermittent stream draining the headwaters of the intensively row-cropped Big Blue River watershed. A variety of small prairies were planted from 1980 through 1985 using locally-collected prairie grass and forb seeds, plus greenhouse seedlings. The site of Chris Helzer's Square Meter project at the south edge of the preserve was planted in May 1983. We were able to borrow a farm tractor and box scraper from a generous local farmer, Gale Christenson, which another volunteer, Mike Herman, used to scrape off the four-inch brome grass sod. The seeds and seedlings were spread around the one-acre flat and firm seed bed. Good rains brought rapid native growth with few weeds. Although the site lacks the scale, plant diversity and large animal disturbances of a big prairie, our springtime fire every two to three years has preserved the dominant plant community of tall grasses and wildflowers - from spring blue-eyed grass and prairie violet to mid-summer leadplant and late-summer stiff sunflower. It is a 36-year old working model demonstrating what every creek and river corridor, every wayside, road ditch and waterway could be in agricultural watersheds of the Plains and Midwest for purposes of biodiversity conservation, wildlife habitat and better water quality management.



Our aim in creating land preserves is to first secure viable remnants of the original grand American prairie, and to protect their biodiversity with science-based stewardship practices. Having established their protection, we then offer these lands for a broad range of educational uses and for appropriate outdoor recreation. The One Square Meter project is a unique and creative example of how our preserves can be used and enjoyed.



It was a beautiful fall morning for Mercy Dinwiddie's Doane University "History of Agriculture" class outing to Gjerloff Prairie October 18. Bill Whitney spoke to the class about prairie ecology and stewardship, and led a tour of the Education Center, greenhouse and fully loaded seed barn (photo below).

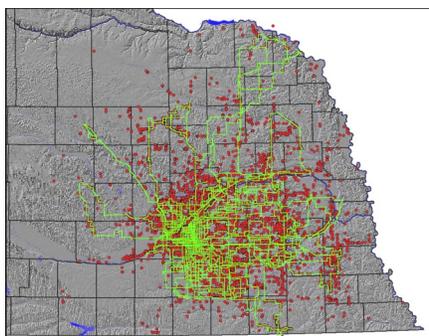


Seed barn showing a fraction of the harvest.



Looking south from over the grass seed Quonset - wagonloads of combine-harvested native grass seed; in background, the 38-acre prairie restoration planted in 2013.

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<http://www.prairieplains.org/get-involved/become-a-member.html>



2018 Collection Tracklogs & Waypoints
 The green lines show our June through October collection routes; red dots are waypoints - sets of coordinates for specific locations that identify seed sources. Our harvesting staff has logged over 18,000 miles on the road collecting seed during this same time period.

PRAIRIE PLAINS LINK
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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.

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BADER PARK HIKE
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 10
9:00 A.M.



Come on out - You never know what you might discover!