PRAIRIE PROJECTIONS

Newsletter of the North Branch Prairie Project
August, 1990

Seed Collecting: Building on the Past

by Robyn Flakne

Volunteers scraped seedheads over wire mesh or rubbed them between their fingers. They arranged garbage cans according to their seed contents. They shoveled and turned mixes. When the perlite dust cleared, 62 Kitchen Garbage Bags (KGBs - the North Branch standard unit of measure) of processed, mixed seed emerged. Left over was an additional amount of unmixed seed, the equivalent of 20.5 KGBs. The 1989 seed mixing party on November 4, attended by 30 volunteers, was the pinnacle of the largest harvest in North Branch history. Described by Robert Lonsdorf as "plant jewels," the seeds are both the product of and the material for the Project's progress.

Finding the jewels

Much of the critical groundwork for last year's success was laid by earlier coordinators David Painter and Donna Hriljac. Over several years, David located and collected from spring flora seed sources and Donna monitored and coordinated savanna seed collection. Last year's seed collection coordinator, Bev Hansen, orchestrated the efforts that culminated in the seed mixing party. Her major challenge was that "the locations of plant populations we want were in the heads of different people. There was little written down. John Balaban and others told me about or took me to a lot of these places. I kept a log of everywhere I went, so now we have a written record of locations. We're going to put them on computer and map them. For some places we already had maps and we could key in the plant locations."

Collection of prairie seeds takes place within a 15-mile radius from North Branch sites. Because they are more rare, savanna seeds are collected up to 25 miles away. Distance limits are imposed to maintain ecotypes native to the local landscape. Plants growing in the vicinity of North Branch prairies are likely to be adapted to the conditions of those prairies.

Initially, North Branch did not collect in substantial quantities from its own prairies because they were not healthy enough to serve as seed sources. Now the majority

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The Volunteer Connection

by Jill Riddell

One measure of success for a group like the North Branch Prairie Project is in its ability to inspire others to act. Important work cannot be done alone, with few people and little resources. The ecosystems restored by volunteers at the North Branch prairies are important in and of themselves. Equally important are the many other natural area restorations that have been inspired by the North Branch Prairie Project either directly or indirectly.

Leon Halloran, steward for Bluff Spring Fen near Elgin, says, "Everything that is being done now relates back to the North Branch in some way." Recognizing that the North Branch Prairie Project is the oldest such group and that it is the prototype for the entire Volunteer Stewardship Network, this is not an unreasonable conclusion.

The paths back to the North Branch are sometimes tenuous and sometimes direct. Some restoration efforts, like Bluff Spring Fen, Wolf Road Prairie, and Poplar Creek Project, were set up by people who were directly involved with the North Branch Prairie Project as volunteers.

Other groups were set up in the model of the North Branch Prairie Project without their even realizing it by their link through the Volunteer Stewardship Network. This Nature Conservancy program recruits and trains volunteers to take responsibility for stewardship work on natural areas in Illinois.

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Richard Phalen and Ross Sweeny examine a bag of seed on Earth Day.

Prairie Project Mourns Mim Desmond

We can't return, past fires burn, each season turns in its own peculiar way.

From *A Song for Mim* by her brother, Ed Desmond
July, 1990

Mim Desmond had lived a life of full, rich seasons when she died on July 15 at the age of 38. North Branchers, whose seasons will feel her loss keenly, knew Mim as a spirited and dedicated workday regular for more than ten years, until her final illness. Before the Prairie Project began in 1977, she and her friend Steve Packard, whom she later married, visited the prairie lands around Chicago. They explored Bunker Hill together and produced the North Branch's first plant list there. Mim learned and loved numerous prairie plants and shared her enthusiasm by teaching them to new volunteers over the years. Mim's was a warm welcome indeed to the Prairie Project.

Mim touched North Branchers in many ways and has left us with happy memories: her wordplays, jokemaking and storytelling during workday sessions; her incredibly moist zucchini bread; the whimsical hand-stitched North Branch banner she inspired and worked on; the stunning quilts for prairie friends' babies; her help with plant surveys and mailings. In 1986 Mim started the Prairie Garden at North Park Village and coaxed it with some success through two very dry years.

Despite an eleven year struggle with brain cancer, Mim's life was rich and productive. Prairie was only part of it. She was generous-hearted, a giving person who believed in working to bring about a better world. Trained as a nurse and midwife, she used her skills in teaching and helping friends. She worked with HERS, a referral agency for responsible abortion and other women's health services that she co-founded in 1974. She tutored Vietnamese women as a volunteer and, in the months before her final surgery, worked for the American Friends Service Committee.

Mim was completely, refreshingly Mim to all who knew her. She was unconventional and uncompromising in her values. She was fresh of spirit, vital with humor, simple of life and manner, with a passionate love of music and of nature's beauty. She was a craftswoman who created beauty through needlework and the art of baking. A close friend said: "Mim's eyes caught the beauty in everything. She saw beauty in things that I never would have thought to consider beautiful."

Following a memorial service on July 29, family and friends of Mim planted savanna seed- some of it from the garden she and Steve tended - in an oak grove at Somme Prairie Grove. The grove, now in the initial stage of restoration, will be dedicated to Mim.

Susanne Masi

Mim Desmond and her nephew, Eliot.

The Seed Sharing Agreement

by Karen Holland

Many prairie and savanna grasses and forbs were not present when restoration began on North Branch Prairie Project sites. Seed had to be collected from sites in Cook and Lake Counties. Today the North Branch has an organized, effective, seed gathering operation. Although the quantity of seed collected varies annually, thus limiting the size of the area which can be restored the following year, the number of prairie and savanna species present at North Branch sites is increasing.

New restoration groups face twin problems of a lack of seed on site and a dwindling number of seed sources due to development. As the oldest and most experienced restoration group belonging to the Volunteer Stewardship Network, The North Branch Prairie Project is in a position to share a limited amount of seed if the local ecotype of the new site is the same.

Groups must identify their needs before seed collecting time. In return for seed, receiving groups will be asked to sign a Seed Sharing Agreement. This agreement will be an affirmation of the receiving group's commitment to responsible restoration management. The commitment must include protection of the site and long-term planning, including controlled burning.

In the future, as more sites are restored, the number of seed sources will begin to increase and seed will be available for even more prairie and savanna restoration projects.

◆ Thank You

The North Branch Prairie Project wishes to thank the Forest Preserve District of Cook County for generously providing us with tools and supplies for our restoration work..

Seeds, *from page 1*

of seed is collected on North Branch sites, and seed from other sites enriches the species list and genetic diversity. It is fortunate that North Branch sites are becoming seed sources, because development is eliminating many of the sites used for seed collecting in the past. Those that remain are often delicate areas, especially the savanna sites where it is impractical to take large groups. Last year, volunteers like Hollis Baker and Susie Kanno helped Bev collect on weekdays from these areas. This year Bev hopes to establish a core crew to become familiar with these sites and collect from them on weekdays. During regular Sunday workdays, large groups of volunteers can concentrate on working the North Branch sites.

Spreading the wealth

Some plants flower in spring and produce mature seeds in summer, for example savanna forbs such as bloodroot, white trout lily and toothwort. Bev found that these seeds "didn't want to dry" and could be thrown immediately onto the savannas to benefit from summer rains.

Most of the collecting, however, takes place over a six-week period in autumn, when the majority of prairie seeds ripen. Workdays focus on seed collecting and cleaning. Volunteers learn to recognize prairie plants without their summer colors. Robert Lonsdorf observed, "You don't know a plant until you collect and plant its seeds." Bev has started a collection of dry specimens so she can show her crew their quarry.

Seed collected last autumn was kept separate according to species, dried in brown paper bags and stored. It was mixed into garbage cans at the mixing party. Each can received species suited to one of 16 habitats ranging from dry prairie to wet closed savanna. With a tape recorder, Jane Balaban recorded the species in each mix. Perlite was added to the mixes to help seed spreaders see which areas they have planted in the field.

Seeds from Somme Prairie Nature Preserve were kept separate because it is an Illinois nature preserve. By law its seed can only be returned to the preserve. Twenty-five percent of the seed was given to the new 800-acre Poplar Creek prairie and savanna restoration in return for Poplar Creek volunteer labor donated to the seed collecting effort. Seed was also given to restoration projects at North Park Village, Emily Oaks Nature Center, Northeastern Illinois University and Fermilab Prairie.

Following Ross Sweeny's dictum to "rake 'til you ache," volunteers will spread the remaining seed into North Branch prairies and savannas. Seed is introduced to areas that have been cleared of brush and burned. NBPP seeding generally takes place during fall and early winter until the ground is frozen. The remaining seeds are stored until spring. To allow them to break dormancy with spring's warmth, they are kept in a cold garage. In early spring, seeds may be broadcast or raked directly on sites or may be "wet stratified," a process of mixing seeds with moisture and storing them in a refrigerated enclosure just above freezing for about six weeks. Mixes containing legumes are further treated with a bacterial innoculant.

For Bev, 1989 was a year of learning. She kept track of the locations, blooming times, and seed maturity of various plants; arranged for storing seeds, and organized volunteers. She stresses that "seed collecting is a rewarding activity. It's not hard. You don't have to be a plant identification expert to do it, but you learn a lot. We want to develop a volunteer corps interested in collecting seeds."

Raking in the seed.

◆ Book Review: *Where the Sky Began*

by John Madson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1982

A readable, informative book for all tallgrass prairie enthusiasts.

As an introduction to the ecology of tallgrass prairies, *Where the Sky Began* is an excellent reference. John Madson guides the reader through the shaping of the prairie landscape by glaciers, the complexities of prairie plant ecosystems and the relationships of animals to prairie habitats.

The historic intrusion of humans into the tallgrass prairie is sensitively conveyed through information obtained from the diaries and reports written by missionaries, trailblazers, sodbusters and government officials. The forest oriented psyche of the early settlers gives the reader insight into the prairie's eventual demise.

A description of today's tallgrass prairie relicts is related with sad, often personal anecdotes. The reader is left with a feeling of awe for the magnificent ocean of grasses, and a feeling of envy of those who observed the tallgrass prairie before it succumbed to the plow.

Ross Sweeny receives his award.

◆ Award

On May 10, 1990 Ross Sweeny received the "Protector of the Environment/Advocate Award" from the Chicago Audubon Society for his work with the North Branch Prairie Project. Fellow North Branch volunteers attended the annual awards dinner and ceremony, which was held at Ann Sather's Restaurant, to show support for Ross's efforts as Ecological Work Group Chairman. Congratulations, Ross!

Seed Equations

by Ross Sweeny

In May, Ross Sweeny and Steve Packard unfolded a 9'3" by 7' plastic tarp.

$$9'3" \times 7' = 64.75 \text{ sq. feet}$$

Using a two-cup measuring cup, they spread seed on the tarp as if they were seeding a cleared section of ground. The amount of seed spread on the tarp by both was 2/3 (0.67) cup.

$$\frac{0.67 \text{ cup}}{64.75 \text{ sq. feet}} \times 100 = \frac{1.03 \text{ cup}}{100 \text{ sq. feet}}$$

Thus, one cup of seed will cover approximately 100 sq. feet. Then Sweeny took a large kitchen garbage bag (KGB) that was as full as possible with seed and measured how much seed the bag contained.

$$1 \text{ KGB} = 180 \text{ cups}$$

Therefore, one full KGB of seed will cover:

$$\frac{100 \text{ sq. feet}}{1 \text{ cup}} \times \frac{180 \text{ cups}}{\text{KGB}} = \frac{18{,}000 \text{ sq. feet}}{\text{KGB}}$$

18,000sq. feet is equivalent to an area 134' x 134', or 0.41 acres. In 1989, 49.5 KGBs of seed were available for planting. With 180 cups per KGB, this amounts to 8,900 cups of seed which should cover about 900,000 sq. feet of soon-to-be prairie. **In other words, 20.5 acres worth of seed!**

Earth Day 1990

by Karen Holland

With a shout of "Timber!" two volunteers toppled the buckthorn tree, then dragged it to the brush pile. The young man with protective glasses standing on top of the pile grabbed the tree and pushed it into place, then jumped on it to try and compress the pile to a manageable size for a future burn. A hundred yards away, in the savanna, volunteers raked up leaves and sticks, baring the ground. After scattering savanna seed on the area, volunteers with three-pronged rakes worked the seed into the soil.

The opportunity to participate in prairie and savanna restoration activities was extended to all who attended the North Branch Prairie Project's Open House/Earth Day celebration on April 29th at Somme Prairie Grove. Tour guides conducted walks through Vestal Grove and prairie areas. Children searched for plants to match color swatches, colored prairie scenes and put prairie puzzles together. Volunteers willing to cultivate prairie and savanna plants in their own gardens were given seedlings to nurture.

After a picnic lunch, Larry Jakus delighted participants with a tale about the decrease of the prairies in Illinois due to lack of fire, human settlement and the introduction of European buckthorn. Ross Sweeny spoke about the importance of the volunteer to the survival of today's prairies and savannas. Recognition was extended to Alice Thompson for her coordination of North Branch Open House/Earth Day activities.

Richard Phalen, the Democratic candidate for president of the Cook County Board, stopped to tour the savanna with Bev Hansen. In an overture of good will, Phalen promised to listen to ideas concerning the management by the North Branch of prairie and savanna areas within Cook County.

North Branch Prairie Project's Open House/Earth Day 1990 was successful. The square yardage of cleared brushy areas increased. New people toured and learned about prairie and savanna restoration. The smiles and thank you's of participants for a satisfying, fruitful day rewarded all involved.

Adding to the brush pile.

Larry Jakus delights volunteers with a prairie story.

Future volunteer gardeners.

Tours through the prairie.

1991 Nesting Bird Survey with Jerry Sullivan

Help! The biggest thing I learned by doing a survey of nesting birds at Somme Woods this spring is that 150 acres is too much space for one person to cover. Is there anybody out there who would like to share the job with me next year?

We could divide Somme into two tracts: an east of the tracks tract and a west of the tracks tract. I'll take one side; you take the other. Four tracts, two on each side of the tracks, would be even better.

Another thing I learned this year is that you don't have to be an expert birder to conduct a nesting survey. Almost all the birds you will be seeing are common, widely recognized species. You don't need to be Roger Tory Peterson to identify song sparrows, robins, catbirds, and flickers. Also, it takes at least a month to complete the breeding cycle for most birds (larger species take even longer). So any species that is actually nesting and not just passing through will be present for several weeks--which means you'll have ample time to study it.

You will also have the benefit of what I have managed to learn so far. I will put together a cassette of the songs and calls of the birds of Somme which you can study in preparation for next year's breeding season.

Ideally, a nesting survey would begin in January or February with some twilight visits in search of nesting great horned owls. We'd want more twilight visits in late March and early April to look for displaying male woodcocks.

The bulk of the work would be done between mid-May and the end of June. During that time, you would make as many visits as you can. Early morning is the best time. You can arrive at 6 or 6:30, spend a couple of hours, and then go to your day job.

If anyone is interested, call me at 312-583-2046.

Switchgrass
Panicum virgatum

TOR

Prairie Gardner for West Lincoln Park

Steve Packard is looking for someone who can help gather seed and weed at the NBPP's oldest seed garden near Wellington and Wolcott. Call 346-8166 (days).

Volunteers, *from page 1*

When Steve Packard came to the Nature Conservancy in 1983, he proposed a volunteer network using the North Branch Prairie Project as a model. At the North Branch, he and others figured out the answers to difficult problems such as how to make the work compelling to potential volunteers. Other field offices of the Conservancy despaired of finding volunteers who could do quality stewardship work: technically demanding, dirty and muscle intensive. It seemed, on the surface, as though people would be about as willing to volunteer for stewardship work for the good of an ecological community as they would be for laying sewer pipe for the good of their human community.

The people who created the North Branch Prairie Project started off simply wanting to save some rare prairies, using their bare hands and open minds. In the process, they hit upon a fundamental formula that has made the project and others like it extraordinarily successful. A lot could be written about what the "formula" is exactly. It is clear that a big part of what makes stewardship work compelling, outside of its innate importance, is that it is an opportunity--a rare opportunity--for a person to have a direct, tangible, positive effect on his or her environment.

Since its inception, the success of the Illinois Nature Conservancy's Volunteer Stewardship Network has inspired other chapters of the Conservancy, for example in Ohio, Michigan and California, to try similar projects. The Volunteer Stewardship Network won the Conservancy's National Stewardship Award in 1989.

The North Branch Prairie Project is now both inspiring to and benefiting from a vastly larger movement of natural restoration across the United States and Canada. At the same time the North Branch was developing, so were other like-minded groups and individuals. The Society for Ecological Restoration is the result. As the North Branch feeds information and ideas into the Society, it is also learning from other groups.

The influence of the North Branch Prairie Project has expanded past the continental United States to the Virgin Islands. Through a link made with the Society for Ecological Restoration, some of the North Branch Prairie Project's organizational and ecological techniques will be adapted to restoring the semi-tropical environment of the island of St. John.

Bill Jordan, a founder of the Society of Ecological Restoration, once described the North Branch Prairie Project as "more important than Yosemite". If that is true, it is because of this: unlike Yosemite, the North Branch isn't just about rocks and trees; it is also about the relationship of people to these things.

Because of this human component, the North Branch Prairie Project has inspired many different kinds of people to get involved. For many, volunteering with the North Branch is limited to participating physically in workdays on the prairie. In the past couple of years, as the focus of work has expanded, different people have brought different skills to the Project. This has made a variety of outreach projects possible.

A 1988 lecture series held in the winter on successive Tuesday evenings at the Chicago Academy of Sciences in Lincoln Park brought a crowd that was not the same as the one coming to workdays in the suburbs on Sunday mornings. From that event came new volunteers with new talents.

The Ninth Northern Illinois Prairie Workshop was organized and sponsored by the North Branch Prairie Project, Northeastern Illinois University and The Cook County Forest Preserve District. Held April 1, 1989, it attracted close to a thousand participants for an all day Saturday event. Each new event produces new volunteers for the North Branch, the broader natural area restoration movement and the environmental movement in general.

It is important to note that the North Branch Prairie Project does not claim to have sprung directly from some mystical fountain of knowledge. It is built on the pioneering work of Dr. Robert F. Betz, Dr. John Curtis and other ecologists who planted the seeds for the North Branch with their own work.

The people in the North Branch Prairie Project are the practitioners whose efforts test the ecological theories proposed by ecologists. By restoring prairies and savannas, they are learning in practice what science has suspected; and in some cases, such as savanna restoration, they are learning what science has not suspected or predicted. In the process, the North Branch Prairie Project is inspiring people to learn and care about our native, pristine ecosystems--and inspiring questions and concerns regarding our human-inhabited ecosystems that may lead to better solutions for our planet's general environmental problems.

VOLUNTEER
The Nature Conservancy
NETWORK

The tallgrass prairie "is that surface, which, in the expressive language of the country, is called rolling, and which has been said to resemble the long, heavy swell of the ocean when its waves are subsiding to rest after the agitation of a storm."

By Judge James Hall
in *Where the Sky Began* by John Madson

Trash

by Steven D. Cook

Like the national parks, the North Branch prairies are public lands set aside for the benefit of all. However, some of the prairies' neighbors have ideas different than those of the prairie volunteers about how to benefit from them. A few of these neighbors are using the prairies as free dumping grounds.

"Because the prairies are on public land, some people think that they can do whatever they want on them, including dumping garbage," says Bev Hansen.

Bev, who lives near Somme Woods prairie near Northbrook, says the most commonly dumped materials are yard wastes, like leaves and grass clippings. But that is not all that is dumped.

"Someone is dumping kitty litter on a regular basis," Bev says. "There is a huge pile of it near Dundee Road." In addition, Bev and others have found old hubcaps, a muffler, used anti-freeze jugs and a baby buggy. "Why can't people just put these things in the garbage?" Bev asks.

The dumping problem is not limited to Somme. Preston Spinks says that neighboring residents are using Wayside Woods prairie in Morton Grove as a dumping ground. "The Forest Preserve District has twice put up signs saying dumping is prohibited and someone keeps tearing them down," Spinks says.

Spinks once discovered several large piles of yard waste and clay at the Morton Grove Prairie in the village's Prairie View Park. He identified white pine boughs in the waste and found a nearby house with a white pine tree in front where extensive yard work had been done. A log in the waste matched a tree stump in the yard. He also identified wheelbarrow tracks from the yard to the prairie. Preston informed the police, who threatened the dumper with a citation if he did not clear the trash from the prairie by the following week. The trash disappeared in a few days.

Concerned about a growing problem with dumping at Somme Woods Prairie, Bev drafted a letter and sent it to 20 households on the southern edge of the prairie in Northbrook. In the letter, she explained that the area in Somme where much of the dumping was occurring is one of the few remaining oak savannas in Illinois and is a threatened ecosystem.

"We wanted to increase the awareness of the neighbors of the treasure we have at Somme," Bev says.

In addition to fouling the environment, dumping in the prairie can introduce unwanted exotic vegetation. Garden plants, such as lily of the valley and day lilies, have taken over in parts of Sauganash and Miami Woods Prairies. "People dig these things out of their yards and just dump them in the prairies, where they can take root and spread," Bev says.

Preston says that with the new ban on disposing yard waste trash, dumping in the prairies can be expected to increase. However, so far, that has not happened. "I haven't seen any more dumping than usual, yet," he says.

The Nature Conservancy's Steve Packard says that dumping in the prairies is a problem that is manageable with public education. "If more people are aware of what they have in these prairies, they will respect them more."

Big Bluestem
Andropogon gerardi

TOR

Science Committee Startup

A new science committee is being formed at the North Branch Prairie Project to catalogue, coordinate, map and research prairie and savanna related projects. Volunteers are needed for the following areas of involvement:

Repositor: Help gather, catalogue, update, store, maintain and distribute past and ongoing research reports, listings, management reports and articles.

Computer operator: Map North Branch sites, seed sources, plants, weekly activities. Requires own computer.

Outreach coordinator: Initiate and stimulate additional studies and research on North Branch sites. Contact local universities and museums in order to solicit research activities.

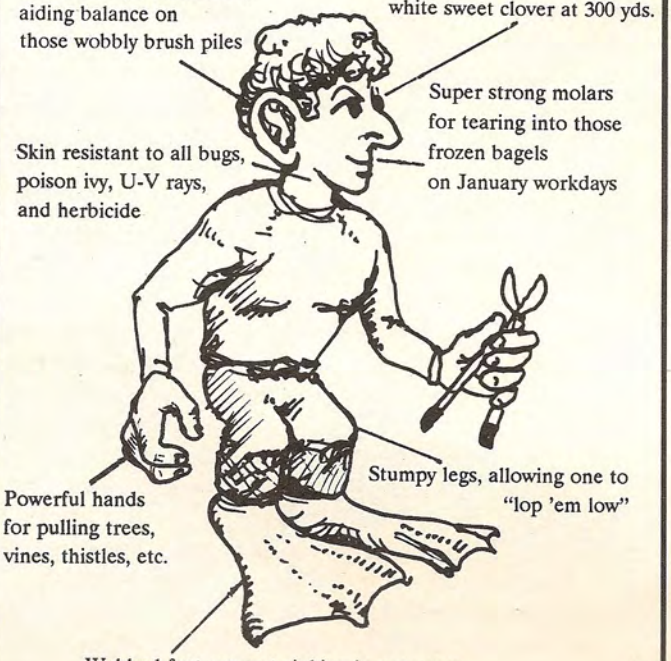
Photographer: Periodic photographing of management areas to monitor changes.

Research scientists: Conduct new studies or assist in continuing projects in the areas of mammal, bird and butterfly studies, plant inventories, rare plant monitoring, deer impact, social science issues, and soil and hydrology analysis. The topics for analysis are endless.

Co-coordinator: Monitor and orchestrate all of the above, communicate with participating volunteers and other North Branch committees, and call meetings to report progress.

Interested persons should call Tom Murphy at 312-338-3165 for further information.

The Genetically Adapted Prairie Worker of the Future



Interested in Being Published?

Prairie Projections needs writers, photographers (black and white work), and artists interested in being published in these pages.

Contributors are also needed for plant pamphlets and guides to our prairies. Call Karen Holland at 929-7658

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The North Branch Prairie Project is a cooperative effort involving The Nature Conservency, the Chicago Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club, Chicago group.

We manage these sites as volunteers for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County

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