

BRUSH PILES

NORTH BRANCH RESTORATION PROJECT WINTER 2003-04

FIRE IN THE SNOW

by Nancy Freehafer

I was late, but because snow had fallen in the night, I knew I would be able to find the workgroup. With freezing hands and feet, I walked quickly across the bridge and along the river. Footprints led up the little path past Apollo's Grove. There I slowed down to admire the colors and shapes—brown, grey and purple trunks, pale gold grasses and seed heads capped with snow. Up ahead, a wisp of smoke was rising, and among the trees a person was moving.

It was Jane. She was trying to ignite a pile of brush that was taller than she was. Further away, I could see two other piles already burning. Several volunteers were tending one of them, cutting and adding more brush. Jane was having trouble getting this pile to start because the wood was green, and the recent snow didn't help. So I joined her, finding dry branches to keep the base of the fire burning strongly.

Finally, with a whoosh, the heat intensified and roared; the flame burned outward and upward, an orange tongue rising above the brush. We stood back, marveling at the surge of color, heat, power. Now the pile would burn, no matter how green. Jane moved on to light another brushpile and asked me to check on the one that was.

That fire had already burned down but was still hot. I cleaned up the edges, throwing and pushing partially burnt branches into the center. Every once in awhile the fire made little popping sounds like someone hitting the key of a marimba, or long whistles, music made by gases as they escaped. Forgetting the cold, I now worked without my coat—bending, lifting, pulling, pushing.

I looked through the open woodland toward where the other volunteers were working: sawing and dragging wood, feeding the fire—little beings framed by ancient oaks in the snow. I started thinking about how people have burned fires in the snow for thousands of years—for warmth and cooking, to tell stories, for rituals and festivals.

Soon it was time for the bagel break. I had liked working alone, watching the other volunteers from a distance, but now I looked forward to joining them. As I got closer, I could see a small tree festooned with backpacks and discarded coats. Closer still, the

anonymous workers in sweatshirts, jackets, vests, hats, scarves emerged as individuals, old and new friends. We stood drinking water, toasting and eating bagels, telling stories.

But even in the particularity of that moment, when I looked into the fire or into the snowy landscape and trees overhead, the feeling of timelessness persisted. I kept thinking that despite our modern tools, theories and knowledge, we are still small beings on the face of the earth and in the universe, beings that are linked to uncountable ages of human culture through our sense of awe toward the snowy landscape, and through the companionship of common work around the fire.

SEED PROCESSING DAY

Sixty-five plus people came to help with the annual seed processing gala at Emily Oaks on November 22. We processed seed of 177 native species that were then put into eleven different kinds of mixes.

These mixes will be apportioned amongst the North Branch stewards to distribute in prairie and woodland areas that are being restored to health.

A number of parents brought children, and students came from St. Ignatius HS and Truman College. There were some brand new faces and there were friends from the very early days of the North Branch. In short, a great day was had by all!

WINTER SOLSTICE BONFIRE

Sunday, December 21, 2:00 - 4:00 pm

Celebrate the solstice with music, a bonfire, and friends at Somme Woods. On the darkest day of year, when the sun sets at its earliest this fall, come gather round a warm fire with a few friends and reflect on things past and things yet to be. We will have spiced cider, hot chocolate, and some treats to tempt your palate. This annual event — jointly sponsored by the North Branch, the Forest Preserve District, and Friends of Northbrook Forest Preserves — is a peaceful and sweet celebration. Neither snow nor cold ever stops this event (rain? maybe). Everyone welcome. For more information call Linda Masters at 847.509.0431.

NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS DAY RESULTS

The Miami Woods Forest Preserve in Morton Grove benefited from the work by 42 volunteers during National Public Lands day on Saturday September 20th. Local folks from 7 to 70 harvested seed and cleared invasive buckthorn brush to restore flowers and grasses to the woods between the bike trail and river. Removal of the heavy buckthorn shade will allow patches of sunlight to stimulate native plants to provide beauty and habitat for native creatures such as butterflies, birds and frogs.

Volunteers were cheered by the presence of Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin and his staff who joined in picking seeds and cutting brush throughout the morning. Commissioner Suffredin noted that, "volunteer efforts like this are essential to restoring the forest preserves and can really boost what can be accomplished by limited county resources".

National public lands day is a multi-agency annual event organized locally by the North Branch Restoration Project and Friends of Morton Grove Forest Preserves and sponsored by Commissioner Suffredin, whose staff helped promote the event.



Commissioner Suffredin chatting with volunteers Judy Pollock and Jane Balaban

ANNUAL NBRP POTLUCK

Saturday, January 17, 6:00-10:30 pm

This potluck is renowned for the sumptuous food, warm greetings, friendly singing, and congratulatory awards. Please bring a dish to share (and a musical instrument if you play one) and partake of all these with your fellow NBRP volunteers at the Edgebrook Community Center, 6100 N. Central (located on Chicago's northwest side). To help with the potluck, call Nancy Freehafer at 773.342.6665.



SKOKIE LAGOONS WORKDAYS

Saturdays - Dec 13, Jan 10, Feb 14

10:00 am - 1:00 pm. Meet at the Tower Road parking lot (east of the lagoon bridge - not the boat launch). For late arrivals, there will be a sign with directions to the work site in the picnic field adjacent to the parking lot. Come dressed for the weather. We will provide waders, gloves and tools when appropriate. For more information contact Jerry Garden at 773.545.4632 or jerrygarden@sprynet.com.

BUFFALO GROVE PRAIRIE WORKDAYS

Sundays - Dec 7, Jan 11, Feb 15

9:00 am - Noon. Work on Sundays at this piece of virgin prairie located on Hastings Road. It is off Lake-Cook about a mile west of Milwaukee (watch for Hastings on the north after passing over the railroad overpass). Turn north on Hastings, then right into the second parking lot. The prairie is under the Com Ed power lines. Call Bev Hansen at 847.272.6211 for more information.

If you would like to receive Brushpiles electronically, we will email you a ".pdf" file that can be read and printed by the free program Adobe Acrobat Reader (download from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>). Just send a message to publications@northbranchrestoration.org and we will put you on the email list.

NBRP Workday Schedule – Winter 2003-04

December

6	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Somme Woods
7	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Somme Prairie Grove
13	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Watersmeet Prairie Grove
14	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Harms Woods
		1:00 – 4:00	Harms Woods
20	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Somme Woods
21	Sunday	2:00 – 4:00	Somme Woods Winter Solstice
27	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Somme Prairie Grove
28	Sunday	9:00 – 2:00	Somme Prairie Nature Preserve

January

3	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Somme Woods
4	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Harms Flatwoods
10	Saturday	9:00 – 2:00	Somme Prairie Nature Preserve
11	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Harms Woods
		1:00 – 4:00	Harms Woods
17	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Wayside Woods Prairie/Linne RR Prairie
17	Saturday	1:00 – 4:00	Somme Woods
18	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Watersmeet Prairie Grove
24	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Harms Flatwoods
25	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Miami Woods
31	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Somme Prairie Grove
31	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Watersmeet Prairie Grove

February

1	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Somme Prairie Grove
7	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Linne North
8	Sunday	9:00 – 2:00	Somme Prairie Nature Preserve
14	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Somme Prairie Grove
15	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Harms Flatwoods
21	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Watersmeet Prairie Grove
22	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Wayside/Railroad Prairie
28	Saturday	9:00 – noon	Harms Flatwoods
28	Saturday	1:00 – 4:00	Somme Woods
29	Sunday	9:00 – noon	Harms Woods
		1:00 – 4:00	Harms Woods

DIRECTIONS:

Air Station Prairie, Glenview – From the Edens expressway; go west on Willow Road, past Waukegan Road and over the RR overpass. Turn south at the new traffic signals for Patriot Blvd. (The new main road through the redeveloped Naval Air Station). Turn east on Compass to the gate at the south end of the prairie. Patriot Blvd. is also accessible from the south via Lake Ave.

Bunker Hill Savanna/Oxbow, Chicago – Off Caldwell between Devon and Touhy; entrance located just opposite Tonty Street. For Bunker Hill Meet in first section of parking lot; for Oxbow, follow road until it turns north, then park along the west side.

Harms Flatwoods, Glenview – Meet at the Forest Preserve Grove parking lot on the west side of Harms Road, directly west of Old Orchard Road.

Harms Woods, Glenview – Meet at the Forest Preserve Grove parking lot on the west side of Harms Road, just south of Glenview Road.

Indian Road Woods, Chicago – Enter at the Indian Road Forest Preserve drive, on the east side of Central Ave, just north of Indian Road (approximately ½ mile south of Caldwell). Meet in the parking area at the far east end of the drive.

Linne North – Meet at the Wayside Woods Prairie parking lot. (See below for direction.)



Miami Woods Prairie, Niles/Morton Grove – Located on the east side of Caldwell, two blocks north of Oakton. Meet in the parking lot for Miami Woods.

Sauganash Prairie Grove, Chicago – Meet at the edge of the Forest Preserve along the south side of Bryn Mawr at Kilbourn, which is south of Peterson and east of Cicero.

Somme Prairie Grove, Northbrook – From the Edens Expressway, take Dundee Road two miles west to Waukegan Road. Go north a few hundred feet on Waukegan and turn left into the unpaved parking area by the sign “Somme Woods Prairie.”

Somme Prairie Nature Preserve, Northbrook – From the Edens Expressway, take Dundee Road 2½ miles west (past Waukegan) to Western. Turn north and park in the post office parking lot.

Somme Woods, Northbrook – From the Edens Expressway, take Dundee Road two miles west and turn right into Somme Woods parking lot (just before the light at Waukegan Road).

Watersmeet Prairie Grove, Northfield – From the Edens Expressway, take Lake Avenue west to Wagner Road. Turn north on Wagner to Winnetka Road. Turn east on Winnetka for ¾ mile. Park on the north side of the street or a side street.

Wayside Woods Prairie/Linne RR Prairie, Morton Grove – Meet at Wayside Woods Prairie parking lot on Lehigh Ave, a few blocks east of Waukegan Road and just north of Dempster.

NEW LAND MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES

Our work on the North Branch got a big boost in November when the Forest Preserve District board approved a revised set of Land Management Guidelines. Forest Preserve land managers – staff and volunteers alike – had labored for nearly seven years under inefficient and counterproductive work rules.

The previous Cook County guidelines, in place until November, forbid the cutting of invasive trees larger than four inches in diameter – even in the case of alien species like black locust and silver poplar – and even if those trees were shading out a high quality natural ecosystems. Re-evaluation of the guidelines had been recommended by Commissioner Larry Suffredin, Friends of the Forest Preserves, and others. The new guidelines were assembled under the leadership of the new General Superintendent, Steve Bylina.

The improved guidelines were informed by consensus on many questions that had been reached by the Science and Land Management Teams of the Chicago Wilderness coalition. It is now more widely recognized that invasive tree species are a major threat to woods, wetlands, and prairies. When they're killing off the prairie or preventing the oaks from reproducing, they have to go. The new guidelines should also facilitate the District's burn program. Under the old rules, burn leaders needed to burn in very small patches, making a good burn season

nearly impossible. Under the new rules, larger areas will be burned at once, and more attention will be able to both the safety and effectiveness of the burns.

Congratulations to General Superintendent Bylina and everyone else who contributed to the much improved new guidelines.

YIPPEE! by Gladys Bryer and Mary Busch

There was a burn at Wayside on Wednesday morning (11/19). The burn conditions were not great; it was too humid, too cold, and a light wind mostly from the south. We were able to watch the behavior of the fire through the grasses and forbs and moving around the clumps of dogwood. It wasn't a hot fire, mostly a backfire. The fire may have kicked back some of the shrubs, but overall it wasn't a very intense fire. Most of the burn was very spotty. Somewhere around noon the sun went behind the clouds and the fires stopped. Just like that.

The Morton Grove Fire Chief was there. He was thrilled and out in the prairie taking pictures. Carol Freeman of Chicago Wilderness was also taking pictures.

The crew was excellent; it was a pleasure to be part of the team. FPD burn boss John McCabe seemed very knowledgeable about prescribed burns and about the site. Afterwards, he took some of his crew back into the prairie and showed them the various grasses, colors, dryness, etc. so that they would be able to estimate how a fire would behave with different fuels. Good teacher.

North Branch Restoration Project
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The North Branch Restoration Project is a cooperative effort involving the Nature Conservancy, the Chicago Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club. We manage the sites as volunteers for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County and other local agencies. The project works to restore and manage the few remaining woodlands and prairies along the North Branch of the Chicago River. Our goal is to restore conditions that will allow these natural wild communities to flourish as a permanent part of the metropolitan area.

www.northbranchrestoration.org