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Smith: Prairie restoration efforts in southwestern Wisconsin are a bright spot for native plants, birds

Paul A. Smith, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 3:03 p.m. CT June 29, 2019



Thomson Memorial Prairie near Blue Mounds, Wis. is owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy. The site, which was never plowed, is a remnant of native dry prairie, an extremely rare ecosystem in Wisconsin. (Photo: Clint Farlinger)

BLUE MOUNDS – As the sun crested the eastern ridge, yellow morning light spread across a sprawling green landscape.

But the vista was not dominated by leafy trees, typical of Wisconsin natural areas in early June. Truth be told, there was nothing at all common about this little corner of the Badger State.

Here at [Thomson Memorial Prairie](https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/places-we-protect/thomson-memorial-prairie/) (<https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/places-we-protect/thomson-memorial-prairie/>) near Blue Mounds, a sea of shin-high native grasses shimmered into the distance.

A male bobolink teetered on top of a black cherry sapling and sang a buzzy mating call.

Minutes later, five upland sandpipers – a state-threatened species – flapped past.

As we waded west into a velvety swale and paused, surrounded by little bluestem and hairy grama grasses and serenaded by the calls of eastern meadowlarks and Henslow's sparrows, it didn't take much effort to imagine what this patch of Earth was like 200 years ago.

It's about the closest you can get to turning back the clock a couple of centuries on any chunk of ground in Wisconsin.

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A red-winged blackbird calls from atop a sign at Thomson Memorial Prairie. (Photo: Paul A. Smith)

We were surrounded by native plants and animals in a tiny wedge of dry prairie, an extremely rare native ecosystem. The soil beneath our feet had never been broken by a plow.

"It's a small miracle it's still here," said Steve Richter, director of Wisconsin conservation programs for [The Nature Conservancy](https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/wisconsin/) (<https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/wisconsin/>). "With some help, it will be here in perpetuity."

On a glorious early summer morning I was part of a group that toured Thomson, owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy, and a nearby site managed by [The Prairie Enthusiasts](https://www.theprairieenthusiasts.org/mission) (<https://www.theprairieenthusiasts.org/mission>).

Richter and I were joined by Cindy Becker of the [Driftless Area Land Conservancy](https://driftlessconservancy.org) (<https://driftlessconservancy.org>); David Sample, conservation biologist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources; Kelly VanBeek, wildlife biologist in the migratory bird program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and Kurt Waterstradt, private lands coordinator with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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A syrphid fly, a pollinator insect, visits the blossom of a bluejacket, also known as Ohio spiderwort, on a restored prairie. (Photo: Paul A. Smith)

All are involved in efforts to restore, acquire or manage prairie grasslands in southwestern Wisconsin.

The diversity of groups represented – federal and state agencies, local and national non-profits – is an indication of both the importance and difficulty of the challenges they face.

Prairies once covered about 40% of the continental U.S., according to many estimates. Only 0.1% remains of the tall grass prairies that were once prevalent in the Midwest. And in Wisconsin, which had an estimated 2.1 million acres (6% of state land area) of native prairie when European settlers arrived 150 years ago, less than 10,000 acres is left, according to a DNR report.

Prairies, in general, made excellent places to plant crops. The vast majority has been turned into farms and ranches. And some has been overtaken by forests or consumed by suburban sprawl.

The historical changes to our landscapes were compounded by all that was linked with grasslands. As the ground was plowed and native plants were replaced with row crops or other introduced species, the native insects lost host their host plants and native birds lost their nesting and brooding habitats.

The result has come into shocking focus in recent years.

A 2017 report by the U.S. Geological Survey found grassland birds were the fastest declining bird community in continental North America. Between 1970 to 2014 bobolink populations declined 60% and grasshopper sparrows dropped 68%, according to the report.

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A male bobolink perches on a black cherry sapling at Thomson Memorial Prairie, a property owned by The Nature Conservancy near Blue Mounds. (Photo: Paul A. Smith)

The wildlife declines come as arguably the most important federal support for grasslands – the Conservation Reserve Program – has taken a hit in recent years.

The program paid farmers and other landowners to idle marginal cropland and plant grassland species. It helped reduce erosion, improved water quality and provided wildlife habitat. But as crop prices increased and Congressional support for CRP dwindled, enrollment in Wisconsin dropped from about 700,000 acres in 1996 to about 200,000 acres in 2017.

Such statistics have only seemed to steel the resolve of my fellow conservationists, however.

“This is the hot spot for grassland preservation in southwestern Wisconsin,” said VanBeek, the USFWS biologist.

Due to its unique character, which includes thin soil and hilly contours that made it harder to farm, the Thomson prairie was never plowed.

It was discovered by botanists at the University of Wisconsin, who recognized the special qualities of the site. The Nature Conservancy later bought the property, which now covers 706 acres.

Decades ago, it was thought preserving the remnant properties would be sufficient to allow native plant and animal species to thrive, Richter said.

“Now we know that is not the case,” Richter said. “We need larger areas.”

Species such as the upland sandpiper and greater prairie chicken, for example, need relatively large areas of habitat.

“If you work at a scale big enough for them, you bring in so many others,” said the DNR’s Sample.

A concerted effort to do just that has taken shape in a regional initiative called the [Southwest Wisconsin Grasslands Network](https://www.driftlessgrasslands.org) (<https://www.driftlessgrasslands.org>).

Partners include a broad range of county, state and federal agencies, as well as universities and non-profit conservation groups. The list includes the DNR, USFWS, The Nature Conservancy, The Prairie Enthusiasts, Pheasants Forever, UW-Madison and the Driftless Area Land Conservancy.

The groups work in a variety of ways, including outreach and education, establishing easements and outright purchases of property.

The network's mission is to "actively support the conservation of grasslands in Southwest Wisconsin to benefit the region's wildlife, water, farms, and communities."



Flowers bloom among prairie plants at Barneveld Prairie in the Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area in southwestern Wisconsin. The property is owned by The Nature Conservancy. (Photo: Stefanie Grieve / The Nature Conservancy)

On our visit to the sites near Blue Mounds, we hiked through the grass, careful to avoid any nests, and stopped often to look and listen.

Some people may think a prairie is stark. A visit during early summer quickly proves its richness and diversity.

We heard and saw bobolinks, eastern meadowlarks, grasshopper sparrows, red-winged blackbirds, upland sandpipers and Henslow's sparrows. We also saw an American kestrel dip down into the grass and wing away with a mouse or vole in its talons.

Inspection of the plants around us revealed blossoms of spiderwort and prairie violet, as well as wood betony, golden alexander and shooting stars.

And the more you learn about native plants the more you appreciate them.

Waterstradt pointed to a prairie rose, which has roots that extend 12 to 17 feet below the surface.

"That's deeper than any tree on this property," Waterstradt said.

Prairie plants can be old growth, too. The compass plant, for example, can live 100 years.



Wild bergamot and yellow coneflower plants bloom in the Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area in southwestern Wisconsin. (Photo: Clint Farlinger)

The native plants are willing volunteers, Sample said, but need help to keep invasive species out. The chief management tool is fire.

Historical accounts tell of wild fires marching to the top of Blue Mounds ridge to the north. Now the burns come in well-controlled, prescribed doses.

Beyond botany and ecology, there's a critical social science aspect to successful prairie restoration.

The vast majority of properties in the area are in private hands, so good relationships with landowners are critical to improving the acres of grasslands. Organizers are working at the grassroots level to educate area residents about the value of the prairie ecosystems and, if they are willing, to help restore native grassland plants on their properties.

Such "community conservation" is a primary focus for Becker of the Driftless Area Land Conservancy.

She visits farmers and ranchers to get to know their interests and goals. During one recent visit, a property owner asked Becker if a bird singing nearby was a species drawn to their 200 grassland acres. When told it was, a smile of joy spread across the landowner's face, Becker said.

She calls such rewarding encounters her "PowerBars of inspiration."



A prairie phlox blooms on a restored prairie near Blue Mounds, Wis. (Photo: Paul A. Smith)

Prairie restoration can be compatible with some land uses, too.

Waterstradt told the story of the finding of a rare plant, the Eastern prairie bush clover, on a grazed area of an Iowa County farm. He presented a plan to the property owners in which the federal agency would remove brush, improving the grazing conditions for livestock as well as helping the rare clover thrive.

Contractors for projects related to prairie restoration are hired from local communities, Waterstradt said.

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Prairie restoration in Wisconsin bright spot for native plants, birds
Cindy Becker, left, of the Driftless Area Land Conservancy talks with Kelly VanBeek of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service while Steve Richter of The Nature Conservancy looks over a section of the Thomson Memorial Prairie near Blue Mounds, Wis. The property is owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy. (Photo: Paul A. Smith)

The practice helps reinforce a modern conservation tenet: to protect natural resources, it's often critical to also support a living and working landscape for human residents of the area.

Looking to the future, Sample is hopeful a new sign-up for the Conservation Reserve Program will boost the number of grassland acres in the region. Southwestern Wisconsin has been recognized for many years as one of the "best grassland conservation opportunities" in the Upper Midwest.

The work of the partners in the [Southwest Wisconsin Grasslands Network \(https://www.driftlessgrasslands.org\)](https://www.driftlessgrasslands.org), in many cases using creative measures to engage landowners in the effort, is helping change the region's potential into reality.

"It's not all rosy, but when you get out here, it's hard not to see rosiness," Sample said. "That keeps us inspired to keep working on behalf of the prairies and all the native plants and animals they represent."

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