

A pocket prairie guide. [Supplement, Vol. 18, No. 4] [August 1994]

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❧ A Pocket ❧

Prairie Guide





Prairies



Almost gone; never forgotten

Imagine great expanses of tall grass flowing into broad fields dotted with oaks and dappled with wildflowers. These were Wisconsin's prairies, in the drier, warmer southern and southwestern regions. To the north and east lay the forest; yet to come was the settler's plow.

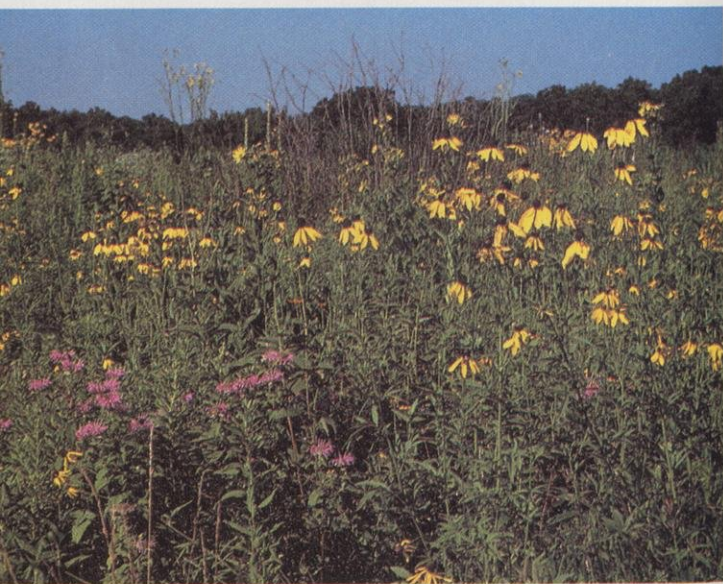
When European settlement did come in the 1830s, it so altered the prairie landscape that within a few decades the

tales told of grasses higher than a horse's eye seemed to be just that — tales, not truth.

Today only scattered remnants of tallgrass prairie and oak savanna remain in Wisconsin. What's left is well worth your attention, for within those remaining acres lie a story of natural history unlike any other.

Plan to visit a Wisconsin prairie soon. A listing of prairie sites begins on page 12.

A prairie in bloom.



DNR PHOTO

Not all prairies are alike

All prairies are mostly grass, with few or no trees. But not all prairies are alike. Moisture and soil type determine the mixture of species that make up a prairie community.

Wisconsin's prairies fall into three basic types. Combinations exist where two different types meet.

Wet

Lots of water, deep clay silt loam or peat soil, poor drainage



Marsh Milkweed

Switchgrass

Dry

Little water, dry shallow soil over sand or limestone. Dry prairies on steep slopes are also called "goat prairies."



Purple Coneflower

Little Bluestem

Big Bluestem

Cup Plant

Mesic

Some water, medium-deep silt or sandy loam soil, good drainage

Approximate acres of prairie/savanna in Wisconsin

1830 – 7,500,000

1994 – 13,500



Prairie plants



Dry and windy — that's prairie weather. When the Rocky Mountains began to rise 30 million years ago, the moisture from the humid western winds could no longer reach North America's interior. Most trees couldn't grow well, but certain grasses and flowers adapted to the

drier, hotter climate.

Leaves of prairie plants tend to be long and narrow, to prevent overheating. Some plants have divided leaves, or broad leaves held stiffly upright, to expose less surface to the sun. Fleshy, hairy leaves and sticky sap help hold in moisture.



ROBERT QUEEN

Prairie Dock



DNR PHOTO

Needlegrass

The Grasses

Grasses grow from the base of the stem, not the tip.

Sedges are grass-like plants

with triangular stems that are frequently found in wet prairies called sedge meadows.

DARRYL R. BEERS

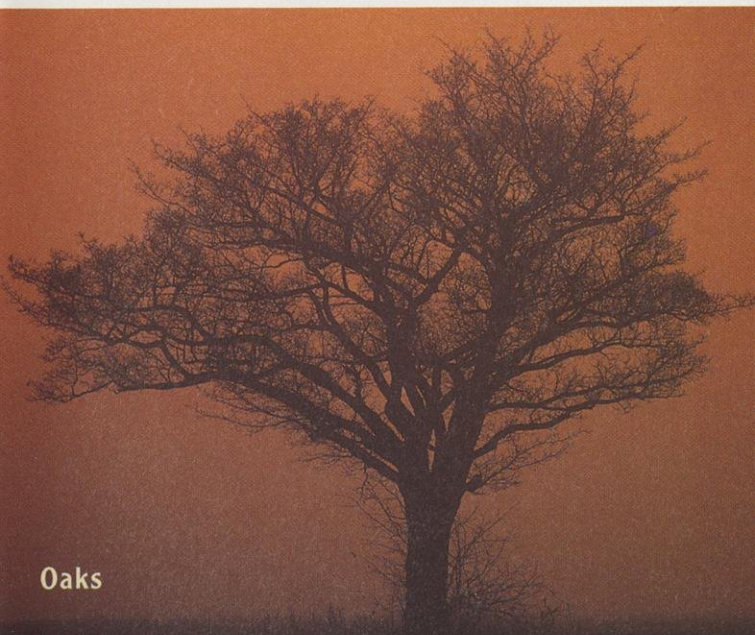
The Forbs

Prairie wildflowers are called forbs. Their colorful blooms attract bees, butterflies and other pollinating insects. To get enough sunlight, forbs tend to match the height of the grasses: Look for low-growing forbs in the spring, when grasses are still short. Summer and fall forbs are much taller.



SCOTT NEILSEN

Purple Coneflower



Oaks

In places where grasslands neared the forest edge, oak trees spread out across the prairie. Settlers called these parklike grasslands “oak openings”; today they are known as oak savannas.

A prairie oak’s shade creates a microclimate underneath its boughs, allowing prairie plant species with broader leaves to thrive in the cooler, more even temperatures and moister soils.



Roots and fire



When you look at a prairie above ground, you're only seeing a third of what's there. Most prairie plants have about

burns the dried, dead tops of the plants without damaging the roots and clears the surface of litter. After a spring fire, the soil warms up faster and more rain reaches the soil, so shoots begin to grow sooner.

Nutrients, includ-



Fire doesn't harm the roots of prairie plants.

two-thirds of their mass below ground in deep roots and rootstocks, which produce buds for the next year's growth.

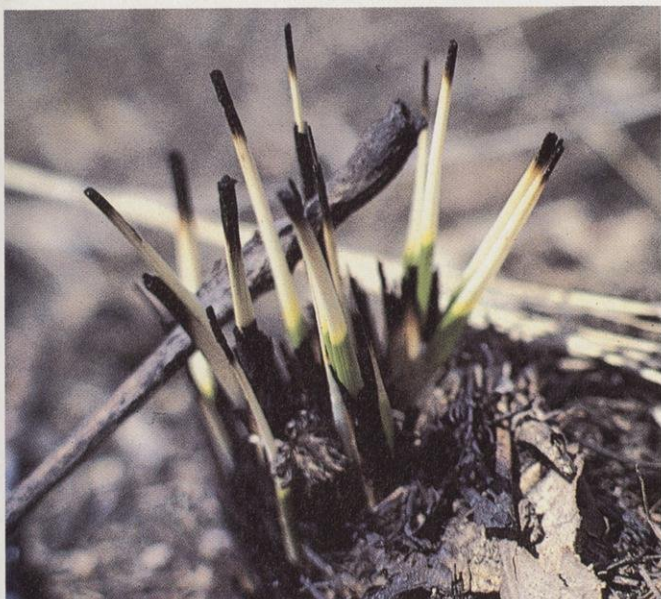
Most prairie species are perennials — the tops die back in winter, but the rootstocks survive and sprout again in spring.

Fire renews a prairie. Without it, invading trees and shrubs gradually turn grasslands into woodlands — the fate of many of Wisconsin's oak savannas.

A hot, quick prairie fire



Little Bluestem



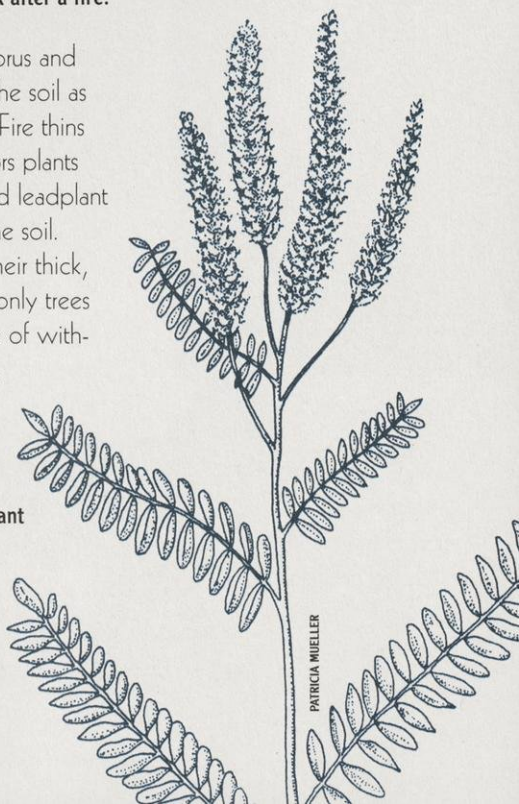
STEPHAN CARLSON

Big Bluestem one week after a fire.

ing potash, phosphorus and calcium, leach into the soil as rain falls on the ash. Fire thins out grasses, but favors plants like prairie clover and leadplant that fix nitrogen in the soil.

Bur oaks, with their thick, corky bark, are the only trees consistently capable of withstanding prairie fires.

Leadplant



Prairie residents

Bison, the prairie's most famous inhabitants, no longer roam wild across Wisconsin's grasslands as they did before the 1830s. The transformation of prairies to farmland eliminated bison habitat; hunting nearly eliminated the species.

Smaller prairie mammals requiring less space do thrive



HERBERT LANGE

Ground squirrel

on grass-land frag-ments. Starting with the smallest, look for prairie deer mice, meadow

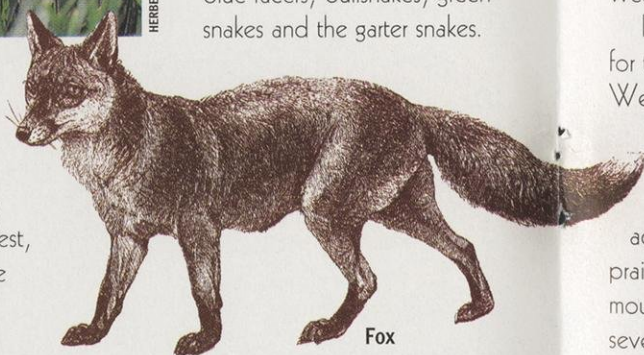
and harvest mice, moles, shrews and prairie voles.

Thirteen-lined ground squirrels and pocket gophers dig long, narrow prairie burrows. Cottontail rabbits can be spotted in prairies, along with red foxes, weasels, skunks, and less frequently, coyotes and badgers.

Ornate box turtles are among the most ancient of Wisconsin's prairie species. This endangered reptile needs loose sand on dry prairies or savannas to dig nest holes in late spring and deep hibernation burrows in fall.

Other reptiles found on dry prairies include the six-lined racerunner, timber rattlesnake, blue racer, milk snake and bullsnake.

On mesic prairies, look for blue racers, bullsnakes, green snakes and the garter snakes.



Fox



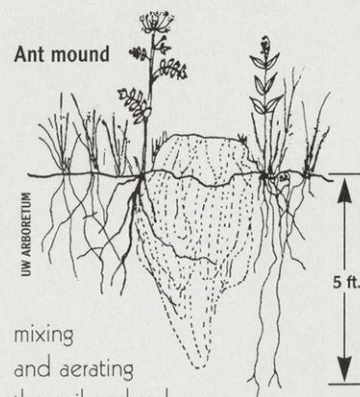
DON BLEGEN

Garter snake

Newts, tiger salamanders, toads, painted turtles and hog-nose snakes can be found on wet prairies.

In sedge meadows, listen for the leopard frog and the Western chorus frog; look for green snakes and eastern garter snakes.

There's plenty of activity below ground in a prairie. Large colonies of mound-building ants tunnel several feet into the subsoil,



mixing and aerating the soil and making it more porous. In winter the ants find shelter below the frost line.

On prairie wings

Sharp-eyed raptors scan broad prairie vistas in search of mice and other prey. Red-tailed and rough-legged hawks, northern harriers,

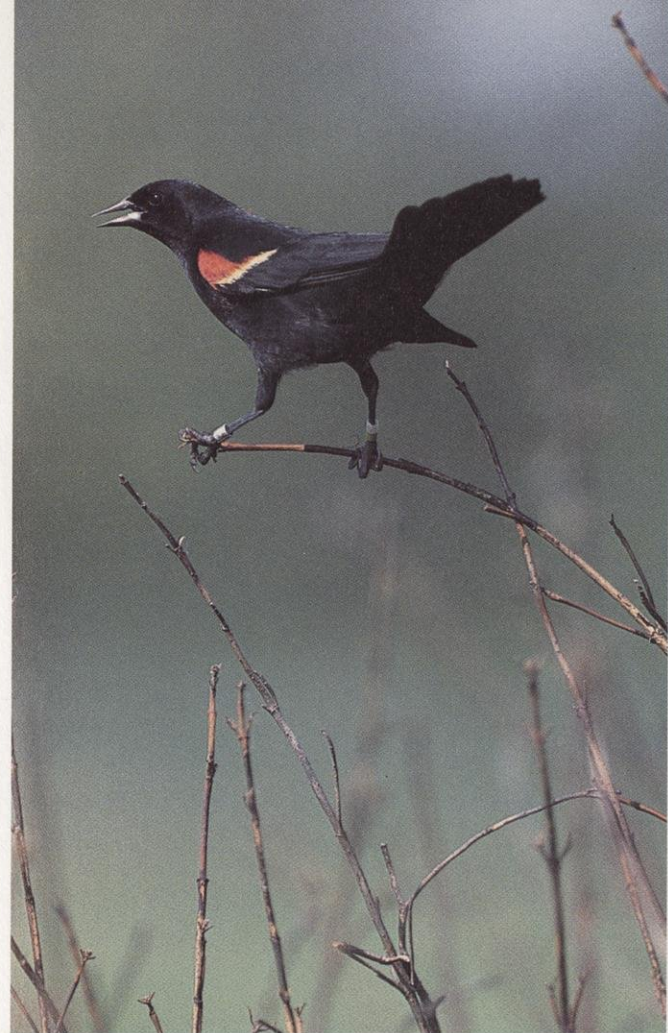
kestrels, and owls can be seen soaring above Wisconsin's grasslands.

Other grassland species prefer the mid-range between sky and soil. Eastern meadowlarks, bobolinks, dickcissels, snow buntings, vesper sparrows, marsh wrens, red-winged blackbirds, bluebirds, goldfinches and horned larks perch on tall grasses, shrub branches, fence posts and wires.

On the ground, bobwhite quail and pheasant nest in prairie grass.

In or near wet prairies, watch for sandhill cranes, blue-winged teal, and sandpipers.

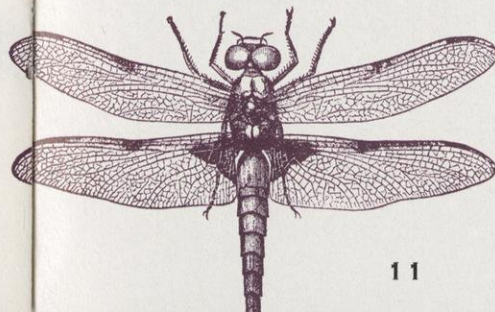
A prairie hums with insect life, from bumblebees and honeybees abuzz in search of wildflower nectar to the



Red-winged blackbird

chirping chorus of katydids, crickets and grasshoppers to the "zi-zip" of dragonflies and

damselflies in flight. Swallow-tails, monarchs, coppers, buckeyes, admirals and other butterflies add colorful grace notes to the prairie landscape.



Dragonfly





Ten Wisconsin prairies



Wisconsin's prairies are best seen on foot. Make a prairie tour

Please stay on the paths and do not pick blossoms, dig plants or gather seed.



PAUL PEETERS

Indiangrass

especially enjoyable by carrying binoculars for birdwatching, a small hand lens for a closer look at plants and insects, and a camera or sketchpad to record what you see.

To really appreciate the complexity and character of a prairie, visit it at different times of the year. Prairies change as the seasons pass, with each week revealing new surprises.

Walking paths prevent trampling of prairie plants.

1. Curtis Prairie, University of Wisconsin Arboretum, Madison, Dane County. 60 acres. Oldest prairie restoration in the state (1936). Wet, mesic, dry prairie species. (608) 263-7888.

2. Greene Prairie, University of Wisconsin Arboretum, Madison, Dane County. 40 acres. Restoration began in 1943. Wet prairie, oak opening. (608) 263-7888.

3. Chiwaukee Prairie,
Kenosha, Kenosha County.
105 acres. Wet prairie near
Lake Michigan shore. Owned
by The Nature Conservancy
(608) 251-8140.

4. Wehr Nature Center,
Franklin, Milwaukee County.
10 acres. Mesic prairie restora-
tion. (414) 425-8550.

5. Newark Road Prairie,
Beloit, Rock County. 22
acres. Wet mesic prairie.
Owned by The Nature Con-
servancy. (608) 251-8140.

6. Spring Green Prairie,
Spring Green, Sauk
County. 260 acres.
Dry prairie.
Owned by The
Nature Conser-
vancy. (608)
251-8140.

**7. Avoca River
Bottom
Prairie,**
Avoca, Iowa
County.

320 acres. Largest virgin
prairie east of the Mississippi
River. Managed by the
Department of Natural
Resources.
(608) 935-3368.

8. Crex Meadows, Grants-
burg, Burnett County. 79
acres. Sand prairie. Managed
by the Department of Natural
Resources.
(715) 463-2899.

9. Brady's Bluff Prairie,
Perrot State Park. 4 acres. Goat
prairie on bluff rising 460 feet
above the Mississippi River.
(608) 534-6409.

**10. Quincy Bluff Pre-
serve,** White Creek,
Adams County.
2,000 acres. Sedge
meadows, oak groves.
Managed by The
Nature Conservancy
and the Department of
Natural Resources.
(715) 421-7800.



Bluebird

HERBERT LANGE

Highway prairies

For decades, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation carefully left some roadsides unmowed to allow native plants to regenerate. In the 1980s, the agency adopted a policy

Besides fostering natural regeneration, DOT has been planting native species for many years. From small projects done in cooperation with local garden clubs to large landscape plantings, DOT has

planted thousands of native trees and shrubs and hundreds of pounds of native wildflowers and grasses.

The agency also conducts an inventory of roadside vegetation along state highways to identify remnants of native plant communities.

For a list of roadside prairies, write the Wisconsin

DOT Highway Maintenance Section at P.O. Box 7916, Madison, WI 53707-7916.



BARB BARZEN

Prairie Smoke

of mowing only between mid-July and the end of August to avoid disturbing the nesting habitat of many wildlife species.



Dane County

- Highway 12 (South Beltline), Madison
- Highway 19, Sun Prairie to Waunakee

La Crosse County

- Tourist Information Center #31, I-90
- Highway 157/I-90 Interchange

Marquette County

- Rest Area #81, Highway 51
- Endeavor exit, Highway 51, one mile north to D

Milwaukee County

- Hale Interchange, east end, I-894
- Zoo Interchange, I-94 and I-894
- South County Line, I-94 median

Rock County

- Highway 11 Interchange, I-90
- I-90 median, half-mile north of County M

St. Croix County

- Highway 35 Interchange, I-94

Walworth County

- Rest Area #24, Highway 12

Waukesha County

- Highway 16, Oconomowoc-Pewaukee Rd

Waushara County

- Highway 51

Winnebago County

- Highway 41/PP Interchange



Prairie seasons



Spring

Pasque flowers bloom through late snows; green shoots of junegrass and needlegrass begin poking through the previous year's litter. Violets, prairie smoke, phlox and shooting stars are among the early arrivals.

Summer

Orange butterflyweed, purple prairie clover, yellow coneflower and black-eyed susans color the prairie palette. Little bluestem, indiagrass and switchgrass wave across the landscape.

Fall

Asters and blazing star, goldenrod and bottle gentians present the year's final show. Big bluestem towers above all. Most flowers fade and die after early frosts, and the once-green grasses turn bronze, tan and gold.



Bottle Gentian



TIMOTHY SWEET

A winter prairie.

Winter

Above ground, the dead stalks and seedheads provide cover and food for small mammals and birds. Roots and rhizomes of prairie forbs and grasses rest below the surface, ready to thrive again when warmth and moisture return in spring.

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