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Newsletter #93

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President's Corner

We're delighted to pass along big news since the last newsletter: the City of West Chicago has approved the Nature Preserve status for a portion of the prairie! As you may recall, this has been the subject of articles in several recent newsletters, and now it's finally come to pass. You can read the details below. Your support has been crucial to keeping attention on this topic. I hope you'll come out for a visit or a work day, and be one of the first to see Illinois' newest Nature Preserve – you deserve it.

Steve

Nature Preserve Status



On March 6, the City of West Chicago approved an ordinance authorizing the mayor to designate a section of the West Chicago Prairie as an Illinois Nature Preserve. This is a major milestone in an effort that has been in the works since the days of the original purchase of the preserve in 1979. Although the West Chicago Prairie is already protected at the county level, dedication as a Nature Preserve means that there will be an additional level of protection at the state level. Since the affected section is jointly owned by the City of West Chicago and the Forest Preserve District, both owners needed to approve designation. The FPD had previously provided its authorization in 2002 and during the FPD Commissioners' Meeting on March 7, Mayor Michael Fortner of West Chicago and Dewey Pierotti of the FPD signed the official designation. There are a few more signatures to be obtained, but things are moving much more quickly now. On May 2, the Illinois Nature Preserve Commission approved the designation, completing another step. Since most approvals have been obtained, the Forest Preserve District is planning a dedication ceremony later this summer.

The nature preserve will consist of about 120 acres of the highest quality areas of the site, and will be named the Truitt-Hoff Nature Preserve, in honor of Dick Truitt, who was mayor of West Chicago in the 70's and was instrumental in getting the preserve formed, and Mel Hoff, our

former president, who worked so hard to restore it. The area that will be the nature preserve is just to the south of the Prairie Path and is both east and west of the power lines. The West Loop Prairie, MacQueen Prairie, Three Oak Savanna, Lone Oak Savanna and the East and West Savannas are all included. The rest of the West Chicago Prairie Forest Preserve consists of later acquisitions made solely by the FPD, and the FPD is currently planning to obtain a slightly lower level of state protection for those remaining areas, which provide a buffer to the highest quality section.

Recent Work Projects

Much of our work for this period was brush clearing on the east side of the preserve. We hadn't worked here for quite a few years, and the dogwood needed a "hair cut", to keep it from getting out of control in this high quality area. We started the year with a bang: on January 7, we had over 40 volunteers (I lost count!) – 17 of our regulars plus many students from Wheaton-Warrenville H.S. who were looking for service hours. We followed up with smaller work days on January 21 and then February 11 and 25. Our regular volunteer brush bashers included Michael Adamski, Malcolm Boyle (3), Steve Carrow (2), Bill Dawe, Patricia Ebel (3), Linda Fisher (2), Scott (3) and Ben Hensey, Mark Hubble, Brian Jenkins, Herman Jensen, Rob Kaiser, Roger Kotecki, Hubert Morales, Monica (3) and Steve (4) Sentoff, Don Smith, and Tracey Uhren (3).

Once we get through clearing, it's time to put in the seed we collected. Due to the drought last year, we didn't have as much seed as usual and



we only had two work days this spring to rake it in. Our seeders were Bruce Blake, Malcolm Boyle, Patricia Ebelt, Tim Everding, Charles Gasparon, Scott Hensey (2), Delia Hollbach, Mark Hubble, Barbara and Paul Rosman, Steve Sentoff (2), Linda and

Erin (son) Thompson, Tracey Uhren, Tricia, Robert, Sara and Megan Waggoner and Dan Wilcox.

As a new project this year, our stewardship group worked on cleaning up our neighboring section of the Illinois Prairie Path for the Trail Cleanup day on April 22. We had a great turn out, with Malcolm Boyle, Patsy and Steve Carrow, Jill Dearmer, Herb Demmel, Kathy DiMonte, Jim Dohren, Scott Hensey, Roger Kotecki, JoAnn Monge, Monica and Steve Sentoff and Tracey Uhren showing up to collect everything from plastic bottles to old tires. Much of this trash obviously had been along the path for many years, and it was certainly satisfying to get rid of it. Special thanks to Tracey for volunteering his pickup truck so that we could get all the debris to Industrial Dr. without breaking our backs.

Last, but not least, we would like to acknowledge the help of our mid-week volunteers, who do a little bit of everything, coming out on most Wednesdays: Bill Dawe (8), Jim Dohren, Rob Kaiser (3) and Steve Sentoff (11).

(No) Burn Report

As we mentioned in the last newsletter, we were concerned about burning due to the very dry conditions on the prairie. By the time we got some rain, it was too late in the season to get the burn in. Let's hope for better conditions next year.

Paul Butler Award

In February, I got a nice surprise from the Conservation Foundation – they gave me this year's Paul Butler Award "for providing years of service to the West Chicago Prairie Stewardship Group and the Conservation Foundation". Bill Dawe, another past award winner, gave a very nice presentation of the award at their membership meeting. I'm quite honored since Mel Hoff got this same award in 1990. So now both of your presidents have gotten it.

Obviously, my contributions wouldn't have amounted to much without your efforts for the stewardship group. So thanks for your help.

A Birder's Diary

by Marilyn Bell.

March 4, 2006

I'm back! – I shout to the silent Prairie, but there's no response. The west end is empty to my eyes and ears, though at the midpoint a RED-TAILED HAWK sails from a power tower never looking back. But looky here in the West Savannah! Is it a conference? A social? A spring planning event? There's a DOWNY WOODPECKER and a HAIRY! Hopping through the underbrush, three WHITE-THROATED SPARROWS keep an eye on me, while above them a brilliant red NORTHERN CARDINAL thinks he can hide behind a twig. A two-note lilting song - over and over - tells me a WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH is thinking spring. Joining the group are two young AMERICAN GOLDFINCHes still in their brown winter coats. But the hands-down stars are a pair of EASTERN BLUEBIRDS, caring not that I'm close, beautiful against the winter bleakness. In the open, happy birds, spreading happiness.

March 15, 2006

Dryness prevailed last week urging the many RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS to move on to marshier climes this week, with just a few remaining. But check out Heron Pond! Rains have run off, filling the deeper area to the great joy of seventeen WOOD DUCKs, ten MALLARDs – and me.

March 29, 2006

What a great day! No, not the weather, the unexpected birds. The waters of Crowfoot Pond stir, causing me to turn back just in time to see a male HOODED MERGANSER pop up from a dive, startlingly beautiful in breeding plumage with his crest fully extended, every black and white feather prominent against the brownish flanks. The pond is deeper than I thought! Later, added elation, a clear repeated call puzzles my brain, 'til I finally look low, instead of high where I thought the sound emanated. A fluffed-out peachy breast attracts my attention and the warm brown head with long white eye-brow fixes the ID. It's a CAROLINA WREN, singing an alternate song! A new bird on the Prairie. Yes! *[Editor's note: This is number 181 on our permanent list of bird species recorded at the Prairie. Congratulations to Marilyn for her fine work!]*

April 15, 2006

Only *one* warbler. Hopeful today that these little birds were beginning to trickle through on their migration path, I'm disappointed. But it is a beautifully plumaged YELLOW-RUMPED

WARBLER and the look is pleasing. The tiny bird beyond him is too far to ID until it flashes its red crown against the morning sun - a RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET! Solitary and so energetic - I should have known. Heron Pond boasts three (imagine!) PIED-BILLED GREBES, swimming up so close it seems I can check out every feather. One dives for what seems a too-long time, but suddenly pops up again. What is flying from one telephone pole to the next, obviously agitated? Not one but, two WHITE-BREADED NUTHATCHES on a merry chase over, up, down and up again - a spring malady, I'm sure. Out over the grasses an AMERICAN KESTREL hovers, suspended in air, spying breakfast - except that two fierce AMERICAN GOLDFINCHes keep up a distracting attack. And I'm distracted as well, but with enjoyment.

April 21, 2006

What a mouth! An EASTERN MEADOWLARK perched at the top of a small tree by the parking lot, sings, giving me a profile view. His long bill is stretched wide as those beautiful notes escape. A ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW boggles my brain by sitting strangely perched on a twig and I try to make him a sparrow. What is that musical trill over and over? There. High in an oak, a beautiful PINE WARBLER, yellow breast brilliant in the sunlight, celebrates spring. Or - maybe he's celebrating his new mate, a branch or two below him. Soaring effortlessly higher and higher, a RED-TAILED HAWK suddenly drops toward the one below. Meeting each other with talons extended, the two tumble in air for a minute or two, talon to talon, 'til one decides to leave the other's territory. What entertainment! And it's all free.

May 6, 2006

Twittering, two TREE SWALLOWS perch on a parking lot sign not many feet away as we, car trunks open, prepare for the Spring Bird Count. Maybe they want to be first? AMERICAN GOLDFINCHes top the count, but beautiful and intriguing are the bright YELLOW WARBLERs, the COOPER'S HAWK, possibly nesting, the NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH with pumping tail, the trail-hopping WHITE-CROWNED SPARROWS and the EASTERN PHOEBE,

whose nest seems to be under the bridge. Gaping mouths poke up from a nest in that same spot as an AMERICAN ROBIN indulges them. It's a good day.

Aluminum Siding on the Prairie?

The Forest Preserve's wildlife ecologists are doing sampling studies, and as part of this work, they have put out "platforms" to specifically attract reptiles, amphibians, and even small mammals. These platforms are corrugated sheets of aluminum, about 3' x 4' and look like large pieces of aluminum siding. They are simply placed on the ground where the sun heats them up in the morning, and they stay warm for a short time after sun set. Therefore various critters may use them during these times for warmth either underneath them or on top as basking platforms. Snakes may even congregate nearby to hunt for other prey that use them. One of these platforms is in the West Chicago Prairie. If you see it, please keep your distance and don't disturb it. Thanks.

Bird Monitoring Assistant Wanted

Love to bird? Join Marilyn Bell, our local birder and the author of this newsletter's birding column, in a bird monitoring walk or two and see if you'd like to share some of this responsibility. Phone Marilyn at 630-821-7918.

Registration

It's time to renew our membership records, and there's a registration form included with this newsletter. Our by-laws state that anyone can be a member just by registering, so it's an easy and painless process. No dues are required for membership, but all members are encouraged to donate time, money, skills and/or equipment to further the purposes of the stewardship group. If our records show that you've participated in some activity in the last year, you will automatically be continued as a member. If your phone number or address, or any of the other information has changed, please fill out the registration form. This helps us keep our records up-to-date.

