

Bluffviews

A quarterly newsletter by Clifftop

April, 2016

Vol. 6, No. 2

It's Never Too Late

By Joann Fricke

Much like our Guestviews' author, I came to conservation late in life. For nearly 31 years, I lived in a small A-frame house on a little over an acre outside of Waterloo. Before that, I lived in Valmeyer. Neither of these places qualified as "city" living, yet I commuted to the city every day and didn't have the time nor inclination to think about conservation. When I first took an interest in flower gardening, I remember asking the mom of one of my son's friends what those beautiful flowers were growing beside her house. "Impatiens," she answered. At the time, if flowers weren't geraniums or the orange daylilies you see along roadways, I didn't know them. My, how things have changed!

Nine years ago, we moved to our bluff house on 40 acres with hill prairies, limestone glades and forest. Soon after, we learned about conservation practices—eliminating bush honeysuckle and other invasive species. We really got serious when I retired in 2009 and could be found in the woods for a few hours several days a week, pulling, spraying or cutting and herbicide treating honeysuckle stumps.

I know you have all read it here before, but my favorite stewardship activity continues to be prescribed burning. There is nothing like a good fire to get the juices flowing. There I am, at right, on a recent burn, lighting the fire. If you don't want to eat too much smoke, that is the best job. The benefits of controlled burning are many—thatch reduction, invasive removal, basic cleanup, to name a few. I've had newbies ask me how many years it takes for a prairie or woodland to recover from a fire, and my answer is always, "Not years, just weeks!" This is especially true of a spring burn when you can see the grasses and forbs poking their little green heads out of the ground soon after the smoke has cleared.

The hoary puccoon, pictured at left, popped up on a prairie burned last fall, but it might not have been visible at all if the fire had not taken place and the grass thatch removed.

The point I am trying to make is that anyone, no matter what age, can make a difference in the world of conservation. There is always some small job that you can do when you have the time and inclination.



Photo courtesy Debbie Newman



Photo courtesy Joann Fricke

From Smokey Bear Comic Books to CLIFFhanger Burn Crew

By Kay Courtney



Photo courtesy Kay Courtney

See the slightly older lady totally filling out her yellow Nomex fire-retardant suit in between two younger ladies (my daughters) similarly outfitted, with the world going up in flames behind them while they smile for the camera? That's me, and I am going to tell you how I went from being a little, woods-loving, Smokey Bear fan kid to that lady.

My childhood was happily spent in the Signal Hill area- a beautiful, mostly wooded area perched on the bluffs overlooking East St. Louis and St. Louis. Our bluffs weren't the awesome stone cliff bluffs of Monroe County, but steep, wooded, high hills. I didn't know what it was called at that time, but I grew up below a hill prairie. I used to love to climb to the top and look out over the cities in the Mississippi River Valley below me. I loved sitting in the rustling grass, which I now believe must have been mostly little bluestem and other shorter warm season grasses.

The hill fell away to steep cliffs which we called "the clay hill," but I know now it was not clay, but loess-blown in from what was left after the glaciers retreated. It was perfect for digging caves (our parents warned us to never go in them because they could collapse on us, "Yeah, sure Mom."), making intricate steps up the cliffs, etc. The Pueblo Indian cliff dwellers had nothing on us!

I loved those bluffs. I loved the woods and creeks around my house and spent much of my time running through them with my friends and our dogs and later riding my horse (see photo below, right, and notice the loess cliff behind the horse) on the trails through them. I always loved and needed country around me.

I remember listening from my bedroom window to the sounds of nature- nighttime sounds of frogs, owls, whip-poor-wills, katydids, crickets, the creek rushing after a heavy rain and the spring birds' songs. We called the tufted titmice "peter birds" because of their call...peter, peter, peter. I knew I would always need to live in the country.

The next fifty years (compressed) –

As I grew up, my father impressed on me that I couldn't be a cowboy, but would have to go to college to be able to have a job, so I could support my passion for horses! So I went to college and became a teacher (the last thing I thought I would ever do, but the classes were easy). I actually really loved teaching, I think partly because I never really grew up and was just a bigger, older kid myself!

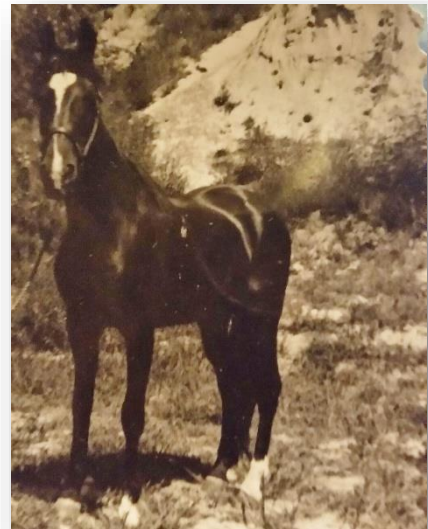


Photo courtesy Kay Courtney

I married a fellow horse lover cowboy, and we soon discovered that we needed more acreage for our horses, and land was too expensive in St. Clair County. Monroe County was not yet discovered as the great get-away-from-the-city place that it is now, and land was cheap.

We found our beautiful, secluded forty acres and paid less for it than a small car costs nowadays. We settled in and spent the next forty years having a great time raising three lovely daughters and riding, showing, training, and raising horses. Wonderful years. We came to love Monroe County, its land, and its people.

We loved our little farm, which was mostly hilly and wooded with Horse Creek running through it. We tried to take good care of our pastures and hayfields and thought we were taking good care of our woods by leaving them alone.

(Bush honeysuckle hadn't invaded yet in those times!) We sold some timber a few times, selectively marked by a state forester, but mostly just enjoyed our woods and trails to ride through on our horses.

Later, as my obsession with horses and then tennis began requiring less of my time, and I retired from teaching, I felt that I could get deeper into another passion of mine- nature. I saw an article in the local newspaper about the upcoming Master Naturalist program coming in the fall of 2008 offered by the Monroe County University of Illinois Extension Service. That sounded "right up my alley," so I signed up. What a mind-boggling, lifestyle-changing move that proved to be! I had always thought I was pretty savvy about the natural world, but I came to learn that what I knew had barely scratched the surface!

In twelve weeks during beautiful fall weather, an assortment of wonderfully qualified, interesting instructors crammed our heads full of so much information on botany, zoology, grasslands, forests, wetlands, ecological concepts, geology, hydrology, much more, and the human dimensions related to all of these. We went to universities for lectures and on so many amazing field trips. I can't say enough about the quality of this program! Try it- you'll like it!

In the process of becoming a MN, I met Carl and Pen DauBach who took us up the two hundred plus steps of the Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve and to their place to learn about hill prairies and prairie plants. Debbie Newman and Marty Kemper (who I loved to hike with through forests because when we would be huffing and puffing through challenging terrain, they would stop, bend over and pluck some interesting tiny plant and explain about it, while we caught our breath☺) taught us so much about the forests and grasslands of our area. So many knowledgeable people crammed our brains full of so much nature knowledge. It was awesome!

I graduated, received my pin and was ready to use my new knowledge and inspiration to help my favorite place, Monroe County, "God's Country," with whatever needed doing to help preserve its many natural attributes.

Enter Carl and Pen DauBach and Clifftop. I already knew I loved the bluffs with their hill prairies and rocky cliffs, and here were kindred souls already up and running with a growing group (Clifftop) with the same passion for preserving them! That would become my MN niche.

We had learned of the importance of fire (controlled, of course) in defending the hill prairies and upland



One of Kay's proudest moments—winning at the Missouri State Fair
Photo courtesy Kay Courtney



Kay leading a little future horsewoman on a ride. Photo courtesy Kay Courtney.

forests from the alien as well as native invasive plants that are always trying to take over these areas, so I was welcomed into becoming a "CLIFFhanger" or Clifftop volunteer. What fun, not to mention hard work, it is spending a day on the bluffs and woods with a bunch of nice, dedicated, like-minded souls!

I had planted my own personal prairie on a few acres of our hayfield in 1999 and had read about the importance of burning to its health. I had held my own "uncontrolled burns" with help from a willing friend or relative annually with good results, so I was ready to go to Carl's burn schooling sessions, jump into a yellow Nomex suit and "burn, baby, burn!"

Doing a prescribed burn such as Clifftop and IDNR do requires so much advanced planning and preparation, the right weather conditions, and lots of willing, trained people spending many hours to pull off a successful burn. The prairie burns are quick, intensely hot, and awe inspiring. The woods burns are usually slow, smoky, and need hours of tending. The results of both are so beneficial.

So that is how I went from being a childhood fan of Smokey Bear (I didn't want to burn out all of Smokey's little animal friends and their forests) to being on a CLIFFhanger burn crew. Naturalists now know there is a place for fire in nature when it is properly used. It is just very tricky to control where human beings have dotted the landscape

with their dwellings. Lots of help is needed to save our beautiful natural areas. Just leaving them alone isn't enough. So if you love the wilder, natural part of our beautiful area, join Clifftop and help preserve it for now and for future generations. You'll be glad you did!

Check our website for more information on these upcoming events:



Saturday June 25th, 10 am – noon, Field Trip: **Radio Tracking Copperhead Snakes for Science & Conservation.** Private lands near the Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve.

Saturday July 30th, 10 am – 2 pm, Field Trip: **Dragonflies.** Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve.



Saturday August 13th, 8 – 11 pm, Field Trip: **Starry Night.** Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve.

Pollinator Habitat Grant Received

By Susan Rick

Monroe County Extension & 4-H Education Foundation has been awarded a grant by the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation under its K-12 Pollinator Schools Pilot program. The 4-H Educational Foundation will use the \$11,000 award to install a pollinator habitat at their Baebler Educational Farm facility, located just south of Waterloo. Vera Baebler donated the 102-acre property to 4-H Foundation in 2014 for the express purpose of providing Monroe County's young people with an outdoor educational and recreational center.

"Part of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation's mission is to protect wildlife habitat for the people of Illinois" said Jolie Krasinski, Natural Areas Program Director for ICECF. "Though smaller than the natural area lands purchased with Foundation grants to date, these projects will provide needed habitat for native pollinators and serve as learning laboratories for K-12 students." She added that, similar to the Foundation's land acquisition grant program, a goal of the Pollinator program is to support native habitat that is accessible to the public."

"Through this pilot program, the Foundation awarded nine grants to support the installation of pollinator habitat at locations throughout the state. The grantees are schools and non-profit organizations that provide environmental education to K-12 students," Krasinski said.

Susan Rick, coordinator for the Baebler Farm and member of the Extension & 4-H Foundation's Board, said they are very excited to receive the support from ICECF for the pollinator habitat and look forward to incorporating the habitat into educational programs offered at the farm.

Rick noted that plans for the habitat are quite ambitious, adding, "While it will require a lot of work to install and maintain, we feel we are up to the challenge. It is a worthy cause to provide an important habitat for pollinators and demonstrate the roles they play in nature through the outdoor classroom. The Pollinator Habitat will be approximately 3/10 of an acre in size, and will include a variety of Illinois native shrubs, flowers, and grasses, small water features, interpretive materials, and benches. We hope the local community will support our program and come out and enjoy learning about pollinators."

If you are interested in getting involved or would like to volunteer please contact the Extension office at 939-3434. Also please watch for "Pollinator Celebrations" to be held at the Baebler Farm during this summer and fall.

Having been on the receiving end of grant money several times from ICECF, it is Clifftop's great pleasure to congratulate the Monroe County Extension and 4-H Education Foundation on the award of this grant to establish a pollinator habitat at the Baebler Educational Farm. We wish you much success!



Local 4-H club members helped to spread mulch around the sign at the Baebler Educational Farm. Photo courtesy Kate Meurer





Over 6,000 trees have been planted at Baebler Educational Farm.

Photos courtesy Joann Fricke

White Rock Nature Preserve Stewardship Update

By Carl DauBach

Two conservation contractors will be working on site for the remainder of the year.

Mike Fries will be culling invasive species, largely bush honeysuckle, on 160 or so acres on the eastern side of the preserve. We are paying for his services with the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation's Challenge Grant revenue, a 3 to 1 matching funds grant, which many of you helped Clifftop secure through your kind donations to this special program in 2014.

Kevin Slaven is conducting a Forest Stand Improvement (FSI) on 115 acres on the western side of the preserve. The FSI is designed to open the forest canopy to more sunlight to foster improving oak and hickory regeneration. He will be felling or girdling unwanted middle-story trees, such as sugar maple and elm, which are over-shading the forest floor. Kevin's work is funded by our Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentive Program cost-share contract.

Both contractors' efforts are in-line with scientifically-based forestry best management practices, so don't be alarmed if you see messy piles of slash or a few downed trees.

Clifftop also will host a call for volunteers for a couple of workdays over the next few weeks at White Rock. We plan to spread seed and plant plugs in a limestone glade complex near the northernmost Overlook Hill Prairie. The seed was collected at another hill prairie on the preserve last year. And, we'll organize at least one bush honeysuckle workday on the site before June.

Clifftop and the Salt Lick Point Committee are co-hosting another Southeastern Missouri State University (SEMO) Conservation Camp this spring. Students from SEMO's Biology Department will be doing stewardship work at White Rock and Salt Lick Point the week of 16-21 May.

There's always lots of stewardship work to do, but the great rewards – healthy woodlands, prairies and glades dotted with flowers, birdsong that lifts spirits, and occasional views of wildlife – make the efforts more than worthwhile.

Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve Update

We have some really good news...but, it comes with a big Illinois "Sigh"

Narrative by Carl DauBach, photos and plant ID by Pen DauBach

Our nearly 300 acre prairie planting done last year is doing very, very well with numerous native grass and flower species sprouting upward in the springtime sun. This year, as last, our focus is on mowing the entire tract to keep unwanted weedy plants at bay and allow the prairie plants to deeply root and outcompete the weeds. We know we'll have to mow at least once, probably in late April or early May, and we will carefully watch to see if additional mowing is required.



1



2



3



4

1. Bee balm, pale prairie and purple coneflowers, side-oats and, yes, a dandelion that's already fed some early bees.
2. Juvenile compass plant and bee balm.
3. Pale prairie coneflower, black-eyed susan & side-oats.
4. Juvenile rattlesnake master, bee balm, coreopsis, black-eyed susan.

After the first total acreage mowing this year, we will sculpt in, by mowing, our planned 4 mile, multi-looped, public trail system. Portions of the trail system course through wooded areas, which will require brush and small tree culling and slash dragging to put in the trails. We'll be making several calls for volunteers over the next few months to help with this effort.

Part of our vision for the preserve is to make our trail system accessible to all, including people with mobility challenges. Southwestern Illinois' beautiful and natural resource rich areas offer nearly

unparalleled recreational opportunities for enjoying nature, the benefits of wildlife habitat enhancement, and the simple joys of outdoor natural areas and we believe all people should be able to participate in such health-giving and joy-filled passive recreation in natural settings. A one-mile loop from the trailhead through portions of the restored prairie is designed to be especially accessible, as this section will be packed limestone gravel, and so more easily used for mobility aids, such as wheelchairs. We also plan to install a handicapped-friendly parking area, pavilion and toilet facilities. The trailhead area will be set into landscaping that will showcase the benefits of wildlife habitat based on native trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. This demonstration area also will feature interpretive information about our karst landscape, the Fogelpole Cave system underneath, and the importance of limiting pollution to the groundwater system that cave critters depend upon.

This infrastructure **is** expensive, so we applied for a U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration Recreational Trails Program grant to help cover the costs. The grant program was established in 1991, and is funded through the Federal Highway Trust Fund using motor fuel excise tax money from non-highway recreational fuel use (snowmobiles, ATVs, dirt bikes & off-highway trucks). The grant program is based on a “user-pay / user-benefit” system that shares benefits with all users of recreational trails. Program funds are allocated to states on an apportionment basis, and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) administers the grant program here in Illinois.

Recreational Trails Program grants provide recipients with federal assistance for 80% of overall project costs, with the recipient having to fund the remaining 20%. Clifftop's grant application requested just under \$185,000 in Federal funds, with Clifftop providing the remaining funds for the total project costs of \$230,000. The grant program is administered on a reimbursement basis, with the recipient providing invoices to the state, the state paying the grantee, and then being reimbursed by federal funds.

The good news is that we have just learned that our project has been authorized by the Federal Highway Administration. The not so good news – here’s that Illinois “sigh” – is that, because of Illinois' statewide budget impasse, the IDNR currently has no spending authority to formally approve the project, get us on contract, and allow the work to proceed. Clifftop Board members recently met with both Senator Luechtefeld and Representative Costello on the matter; both are supportive and promised to do what they can. We'll keep you posted; we are guardedly optimistic.

Once approved, we'll begin a local fundraising effort for this important project to make this vision of outdoor all-access recreation in a natural area an on-the-ground reality.



1. A probable seedling compass plant (bottom center), coreopsis, black-eyed Susan, side-oats and little blue stem grasses.
2. Probable seedling liatris.