

The Disappearing Prairies of the Prairie State

By Joann Fricke

Although I've been aware of this statistic for some time, an illustration displayed in the presentation portion of a recent Zoom call brought the plight of prairies in the Prairie State alarmingly to light. 22,000,000 acres of prairie existed back when Illinois was a newly formed state, as indicated by the black areas in the exhibit below. And now, less than .01 of 1%, or 2,200 acres, remain, which can be illustrated by the period at the end of this sentence.



1810-1820

Most prairie in the flat lands of central and northern Illinois was consumed by agricultural fields and development, but here in southwest Illinois, the hill prairies of the blufflands are disappearing because of the lack of management. Eastern red cedars and other woody plant species are consuming our once plentiful hill prairies because of the suppression of fire and absence of mechanical stewardship. (See photo below.)



Photo courtesy Joann Fricke

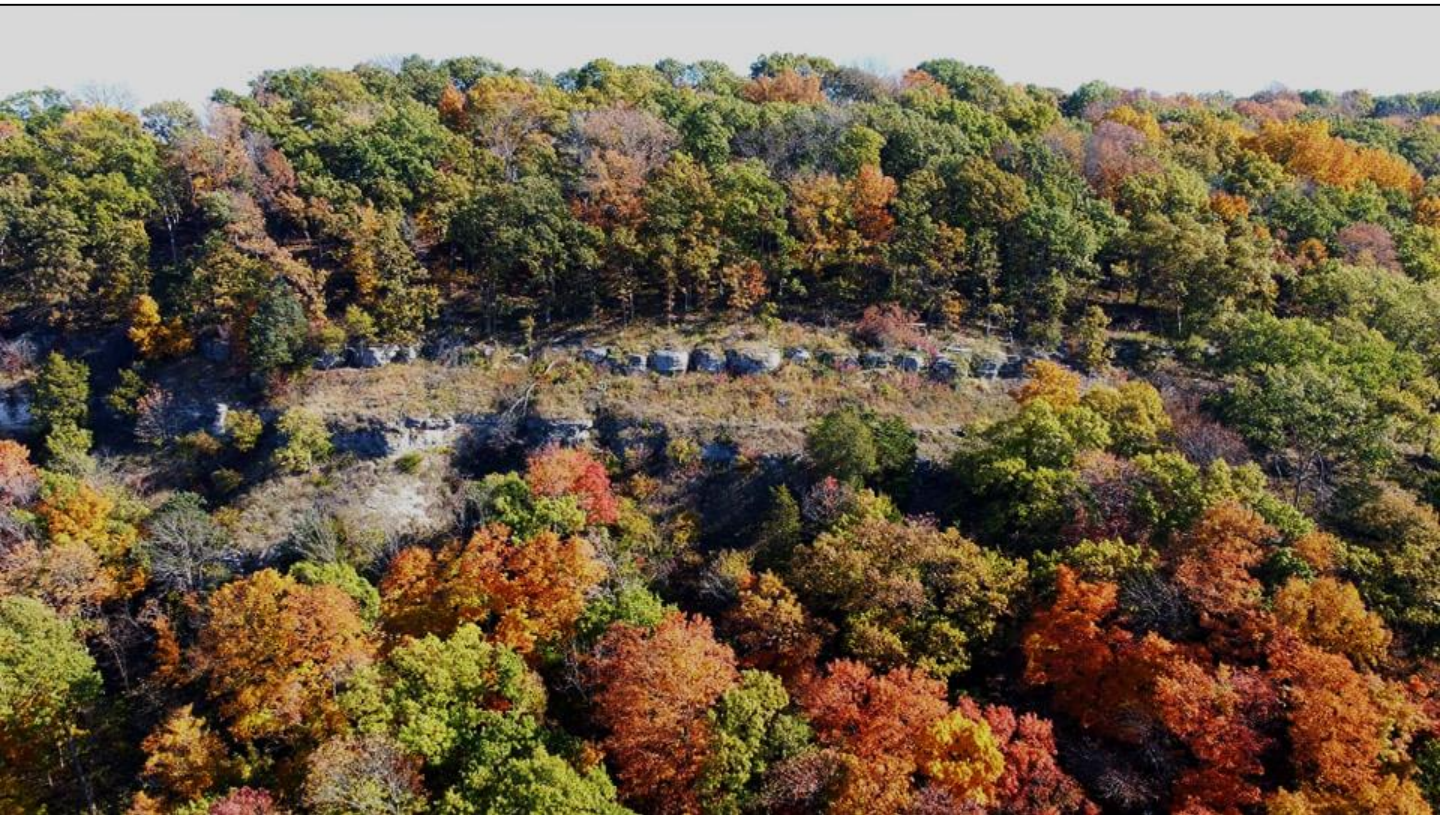
In 2015, Clifftop replaced 282 acres of former row cropped land at Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve with 12 native grasses and sedges and 41 species of native, pollinator-friendly flowers. Not only does this re-created prairie benefit our native bees and other pollinators, but it also keeps agricultural chemicals (fertilizers and herbicides) and the highly erodible soil from leaching into the groundwater of the Fogelpole Cave system beneath it.

In 2021, we used some of the funds garnered through the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation Community Stewardship Challenge Grant to hire a contractor to improve what we now call Rattlesnake Glade (because of the favorable habitat for Eastern Timber Rattlesnakes, an Illinois State-threatened species). Eastern red cedars and some deciduous trees were felled to open the area to more sunlight, while invasive species like Asian bush honeysuckle and Tree-of-Heaven were removed. (See before and after comparison photos on next page.) A prescribed burn is planned for this area in the near future.

While some plant small pollinator gardens in their yards, I feel it is just as important to restore or re-create what originally gave the Prairie State its nickname.



White Rock's Rattlesnake Glade before contractor work, November 2020, above, and after, November 2021, below.



Maher's Woods Nature Preserve, a Gift That Keeps Giving

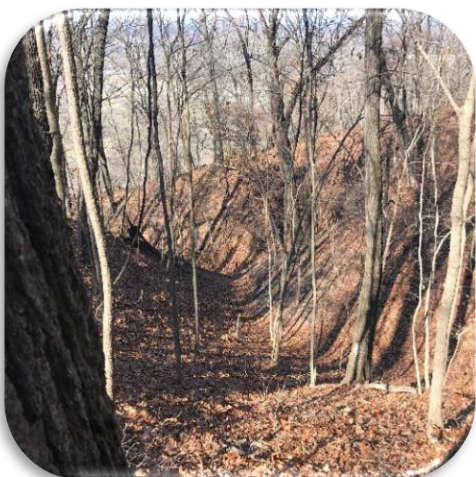
By Blaine Parada

My first time exploring the bluffs was a summer day in the mid-1990's. I remember following the steep, winding path past a half-forgotten cemetery, over fallen trees and moss-covered rocks up to a clearing full of tall grass and wildflowers. There wasn't another soul in sight and the landscape seemed to be humming and shimmering in the golden, afternoon sunlight. It was one of the most beautiful, peaceful places that I'd ever seen. Magical, even.



Some of the flowers in bloom in Maher's Woods Nature Preserve Prairie. Photo courtesy J. Fricke

Knowing how quickly things can change and be lost forever, my Mother became committed to keeping the land safe, even fighting off a corporate Goliath who tried to bully her out of the property in the early 2000's. Consequently, when the family was approached with the opportunity to put the land into the Illinois Nature Preserve program in 2020, we all embraced the idea: let's keep the bluffs safe and protected so that others will be able to experience the same wonder and reconnection with nature and themselves, away from all of the noise and static of modern life. In May of 2021, the dedication was approved and the land officially became "Maher's Woods Nature Preserve".



An example of the deep ravines on Maher's Woods NP. Photo courtesy Blaine Parada

I'd heard plenty of stories about the land growing up. My grandparents, Gertrude and Sylvester Maher, lived in original Valmeyer for most of their lives and my grandfather, by all accounts, loved hiking these bluffs. My mother, Sue Parada, who now owns the property grew up there, as well. While my siblings and I grew up in St. Louis City, Valmeyer was our weekend getaway until the flood of 1993 washed most of the village away, including our grandparents' home.



A typical rock upheaval in the Monroe County bluffs at Maher's Woods NP. Photo courtesy Blaine Parada

Nearly 30 years and countless muddy climbs later, I still feel the same profound sense of joy and discovery that I did in my early 20's. I never fail to notice something (plant, tree, birdsong, animal tracks, etc.) that I'd never noticed before and always leave with my batteries recharged. But also, a more recent thought: we are the temporary custodians of this land, following in the footsteps of those who loved it before us and hopefully doing our best to keep it safe for those who will love it after us. While we have the opportunity, let's try to leave the land in as good, if not better, shape than we found it for those to come. Let it be a gift that keeps giving.

Upcoming event...



South Georgia and Antarctica, Saturday, February 12, 1:00 pm, Monroe County Annex Building, 901 Illinois Avenue, Waterloo. Join us as Clifftop board member, Susan Rick, shares her photos and observations after 3 weeks in Antarctica. Register to attend at this link: <https://forms.gle/5uNhroKVzii7jCbGA> Guests are encouraged to wear a mask.



On December 23 Clifftop gathered 20 volunteers for a prescribed burn at Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve. What can we say about volunteers who will come out two days before Christmas to help with a burn? THANK YOU, that's what! (Photos courtesy Joann Fricke unless other wise noted.)

The crew:



Fire approaches a sinkhole pond along Kaskaskia Road. Photo courtesy Shane Kellogg

Burn boss, Jacob, left, assists volunteers in filling the drip torches so they can continue lighting.



Clifftop Board member, Laura, begins ignition along MM Road.



Mike makes sure the power poles don't catch fire.



Photo courtesy Shane Kellogg