



What is prairie?

- Prairie is a native ecosystem dominated by grasses and flowering plants. Other than occasional bur oaks and scattered shrubby thickets, few woody plants are found there.
- Prairies may be found on dry uplands, wet lowlands, and on soils intermediate between wet and dry.
- Before European settlement, Wisconsin's prairies were prevented from transitioning to a forest environment by frequent fires resulting from lightning strikes and intentional burns by Native Americans.

Where can we find native prairie ecosystems?

- Historically, native prairie ecosystems were found in the southern and western parts of Wisconsin. 'Remnant' prairies continue to survive in these regions on slopes that were too steep or rocky to plow, or in very wet areas that were never tilled and drained.
- The 50,000 acre Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area in southwestern Dane and southeastern Iowa Counties is a hotbed for remnant prairie due to the abundance of steep and rocky terrain. In this region, the public can visit remnant prairie on properties owned by The Nature Conservancy and The Prairie Enthusiasts.

When is a good time to view native prairie ecosystems?

- Native prairie ecosystems can be viewed year-round:
 - A few flowers can bloom as early as mid- to late March. Controlled burns and prairie plantings may be done in spring. Grassland birds arrive between March and May.
 - Summer represents the height of wildflower season on the prairie. Grassland birds are nesting, and butterflies abound as they gather nectar from the many flowers.
 - Fall brings the warm colors and fuzzy textures of seeding grasses and flowering sunflowers and goldenrods. Some controlled burns and plantings are done.
 - Winter brings northern bird visitors, such as shrikes, and opportunities for cross-country skiing on rolling hills.
- Each visit to a prairie ecosystem is a completely different experience because plants grow and flower at different times throughout the growing season.

Why is it important to manage and protect remnant prairies?

- Prairie is a component of Wisconsin's original wilderness – it's our natural heritage.
- Wisconsin's native prairies are home to more than 400 species of plants and animals, most of which are restricted to prairie habitats. Wildlife includes grassland birds, mammals, snakes, lizards, and insects.
- In Wisconsin's grasslands, 64 plants, 20 birds, 3 mammals, 17 reptiles/amphibians, and numerous invertebrates are listed as endangered, threatened or special concern.

The Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area is a cooperative project of 9 partner groups representing the private, state and federal sectors. Goals of the partnership include: 1) Provide and maintain viable prairie, savanna, grassland, and aquatic habitat, for the many plants and animals that depend on these habitats for their survival; 2) Maintain an economically viable rural and agricultural landscape; 3) Provide and encourage traditional recreational opportunities which are compatible with the conservation goals; and 4) Integrate best applied science through the use of continued monitoring and adaptive management. For more information, contact Katie Abbott, Project Coordinator, at (608)935-2791 ext. 134, or at katie.abbott@rcdnet.net.



- Less than one-tenth of 1% of Wisconsin's original prairies remains intact.
- Prairies provide several important ecosystem functions, including stabilizing soil to prevent erosion, providing cover for wildlife, allowing water to absorb into the soils which aids in recharging groundwater, and sequestering carbon. One acre of prairie sequesters 1.6 tons of carbon per year through underground storage in extensive root systems.

How can we protect Wisconsin's native prairies?

- Many groups, including The Prairie Enthusiasts, The Nature Conservancy, and the WI DNR are working to protect and conserve Wisconsin's native prairies.
- The public can volunteer with these groups to help with prairie seed collection and planting, invasive species control, tree and brush removal, and prescribed burning. They can also make donations to support land acquisition and management efforts.
- Landowners can manage remnants and plant new prairie on their properties. Conservation groups can provide guidance and sometimes assistance in managing privately-owned prairies. Landowners may also be able to sell or donate a conservation easement to protect habitat from development.

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