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Message from the Project Coordinator

With government budget cuts, a struggling economy, and high grain prices, it is easy for conservation to be put on the back burner. As Aldo Leopold wrote in 1943, “we fancy that industry supports us, forgetting what supports industry”. As decisions are made in the coming days and months, I hope we won’t forget that our soil, water, and ecosystems are what make southwest Wisconsin such a great place to live, work, and visit. While budget cuts are discouraging, it has been and always will be up to private landowners, not government agencies, to care for the land that will keep both ecosystems and agriculture flourishing in this area. The MRPHA partnership continues our commitment to help landowners however we can.

On a personal note, I will be on maternity leave from early May through August. There won’t be a summer newsletter, but I do plan to check e-mail periodically and return to send another newsletter in the fall. Have a great summer! Sincerely,

-Katie Abbott, MRPHA Project Coordinator

Farm and Conservation Easement Funding at Risk

It may become even more difficult for those landowners who want to sell development rights (also called easements) to local conservation groups in order to protect farmland or natural areas. This is due to several provisions in Governor Walker’s state budget proposal.

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has been a critical source of grant funding for non-profit organizations to purchase conservation and farmland easements. The proposed budget bill prohibits the purchase of development rights and easements, except for preserving logging rights or trails.

The bill also eliminates payments in lieu of taxes (PILT) to local municipalities for land purchased. This only applies to Department of Natural Resources (DNR) purchases, but sets up potential conflicts between the DNR and local communities.

While Walker’s budget does not cut funding for the Stewardship program, it still may be targeted for cuts in the Legislature’s Joint Finance Committee (JFC). This committee gets the first opportunity to amend the governor’s proposed budget – both policy and funding levels. After the JFC process, the Assembly and the Senate get an opportunity to make changes. In the mean-

time, the Stewardship program has been put on hold while DNR leadership reviews priorities under the program. This impacts some properties that were already in the pipeline for funding.

The bill also eliminates the Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE) program. PACE was designed to pay farmers to keep their land agricultural and protected from development. This reduces pressure to sell land to pay for farm upkeep or fund retirement. Farmers are able to keep their land and continue farming while getting some of the cash value out of the property.

PACE was meant to receive funding from controversial farmland conversion fees. The budget bill eliminates these fees, but instead of maintaining PACE and trying to find alternate funding, it eliminates the program altogether.

Easements can be a beneficial tool to landowners and communities because the property stays intact in private ownership and stays on the local tax rolls, while providing cash and peace-of-mind to landowners. Easements also help to maintain open space, rural character, and an agricultural economy important to many local communities.

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Check out our website!

www.militaryridgeprairie.org

for more about the partners, natural resources, and ways to get involved.

Driftless Area Land Conservancy's New Executive Director

The MRPHA partnership welcomes David Clutter as the new Executive Director for the Driftless Area Land Conservancy (DALC).

For over 18 years David has committed his professional life to protecting and stewarding natural and agricultural lands, water resources and biological diversity in Wisconsin and Illinois. During his youth and then later in life in a professional capacity he recreated and worked in the Driftless Area, falling in love with the rolling hills and farmland, the valleys and waterways and wild places of a truly special region. David is very excited to be working with DALC and looks forward to partnering with land-owners and project partners to protect and steward the



waters, lands and wildlife of the Driftless Area.

Prior to joining the Conservancy, David served as Director of Lands Programs for the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin; Program Director for The Conservancy Fund; Project Coordinator for Gathering Waters Conservancy; and Director of Land Protection for the Natural Land Institute. David has a MS in Environment and Resources from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with an emphasis on collaborative conservation, land trusts and policy/program implementation. His master's thesis focused on implementation of Wisconsin's Nonprofit Component of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

The Nature Conservancy Acquires New Property

In December, The Nature Conservancy acquired nearly 130 acres located in western Dane and eastern Iowa Counties. Reini Straubhaar sold most of his active cropland to the Conservancy while retaining his home and farm buildings on a tract of land north of Straubhaar Road in Dane County. The purchase included 70 acres of land in Dane County immediately to the north of the existing Thomson Prairie—a remnant prairie owned and managed by the Conservancy. The 60 acres in Iowa County are immediately east of the former Thronson farm, which the Conservancy purchased from the Give and Go corporation several years ago. The Conservancy will continue to lease the cropland for agricultural production until resources are

available to restore native prairie and grassland bird habitat on the site. This purchase will provide an excellent buffer to and eventual expansion of the native prairie and grassland bird habitat found on the existing Thomson Prairie.

The Nature Conservancy also plans to use cropping and pasturing as a land management tool on several properties, including 70 acres of pasture at the south end of Thomson Prairie, 100 acres of pasture at the end of Langberry Rd, 7 acres of corn at their 2008 stream restoration site (off of Hwy K), and 7 acres of corn at their 2006 stream restoration site (Hwy K and Prairie Grove Rd).

Counting Regal Fritillary Butterflies in the MRPHA By Ruth Kearley

Do you want to contribute to conservation while enjoying nature? How about a chance to sweat on sunny, low-wind days in treeless prairie for the sake of scientific inquiry regarding a state endangered species?

Last summer, with the help of a Citizen-Based Monitoring Grant from the Wisconsin DNR to The Prairie Enthusiasts (TPE), 15 volunteers and 7 staff from three agencies started a long-term program to monitor regal fritillary presence on remnant and restored prairies in the MRPHA. The regal fritillary is listed as a Federal Species of Concern. Once widespread, it has nearly disappeared from east of the Mississippi. In Wisconsin it is listed as Endangered due to low or declining populations and is considered critically imperiled because of its vulnerability to extinction within the state. Currently there are only 3 or 4 areas where potentially viable populations still persist.

The regal fritillary is a striking orange, black and white butterfly slightly smaller than a monarch. The larvae depend on violets for food, and the adults require open prairie habitat. The monitoring program seeks to increase our understanding of how regals respond to management of prairie remnants and to creation of new habitat.



The goal of the program is for consistent, long-term monitoring on sites with known or potential regal fritillary presence. Last summer 18 sites were monitored. Sixty-two transects were established for counting observations of regal fritillaries, and 23 additional areas were monitored for the presence of the butterfly. Altogether there were 748 sightings of regal fritillaries made during 113 volunteer hours.

Because the monitoring program has only one season of data, not much can be said about the results. It will be several years before analysis of the data will start. The significance of the first season was getting an enthusiastic group of volunteers involved and getting them started! However, more volunteers are still needed.

Would you like to participate? No previous experience is required and training will be provided. We are looking for commitment over several seasons. Monitoring runs June 25-July 31 with each team making four visits to their site, spaced about a week apart. The training program starts in May and has an evening and field component. Please join us in this important endeavor! Contact Ruth Kearley (rekearley@gmail.com or 729-4050) to sign up or to learn more.

Pheasants Forever Seed Fundraiser

Pheasants Forever has a Wisconsin native seed program that offers dozens of native grasses and flowers. All seed has Midwest origins (many from Wisconsin) and can be purchased in any quantity, mixed or unmixed. All proceeds from the seed sales stay in Wisconsin and will be used to help fund more habitat work and land protection around the state. To discuss your project and receive a list of available seeds and mixes, please contact Kevin Wallenfang, PF Regional Wildlife Biologist, at kwallenfang@pheasantsforever.org or 608-798-2466.

Upcoming Events

- **Fascinating Frogs field trip: Wednesday April 27, 7:30 PM** Bring the kids to learn about frog identification and ecology; we will catch some frogs and may hear a rare species. Be prepared for possible muddy conditions and darkness; bring a headlamp or flashlight. Meet at The Nature Conservancy parking lot south of Barneveld: from 18/151 take Cty Rd K south for about 2 miles; the lot will be on your right, marked by a sign. A rain date has been set for May 4. Registration is preferred but not required. Contact Katie Abbott for more information, to register, or to check for cancellation: (608)935-2791 x134 or (608)341-6493 (cell).
- **The Nature Conservancy Work Party: Saturday May 14, 9am-12pm** Activities include brush clean-up and garlic mustard removal. Dress appropriately for outdoor, grubby work (long pants and sleeves, sturdy footwear, work gloves). Directions: About 0.2 mile east of Barneveld, turn south on Cty Rd K. Follow Cty K for 2 miles and turn into the Nature Conservancy parking lot on the right. Contact: Jim Lesniak (608-576-3310).
- **Exploring Mounds View Grassland Preserve: Saturday May 14, 1:00 to 5:00 pm** Join us to see prairie remnants, cold water streams, spring seeps, and smooth brome grasslands with a variety of birds. Be prepared for a long hike (hat, sunscreen, water, binoculars). Trip leader: Rich Henderson (608-845-7065 or tpe.rhenderson@tds.net) Directions: From Hwy 18-151 near Blue Mounds, take Cty Rd F about 5 miles south (turn right at the intersection with Cty Z to stay on F). Turn right onto Reilly Road, and proceed to the parking lot at the end of the road (past the barn).
- **Erbe Grassland & Goplin Prairie field trip: Sunday May 15, 12:00-2:00 pm** These sites are a mix of remnant prairie, old prairie pasture, and prairie plantings. Come see the restoration efforts as well as early season flowers and a variety of grassland birds. Moderate hike of 2-3 miles. Trip Leader: Erik Goplin (608-437-4879 or egoplin@mhtc.net) Directions: From US 181-151 west of Mt. Horeb, turn left on Erbe Road and follow for about 1 mile. Park at the kiosk on right side of the road (across from quarry).
- **Shooting Star Spectacular: Sunday May 22, 1:00-3:30 pm** Join this hike to see 10s of thousands of shooting stars that should be in full bloom. The hike will include extensive grassland bird habitat. Bring binoculars, a hat, and sunscreen, and be prepared for a long hike. Trip Leader: Rich Henderson (608-845-7065 or tpe.rhenderson@tds.net) Directions: From Hwy 18-151 near Blue Mounds, take Cty Rd F about 5 miles south (turn right at the intersection with Cty Z to stay on F). Turn right onto Reilly Road, and proceed to the parking lot at the end of the road (past the barn).
- **Bird Walk and More at Mounds View: Saturday June 4, 8:00-10:30 am** Come learn about grassland and savanna birds, butterflies, and dragonflies. Birds are most active in the morning, so it's worth getting up. Bring binoculars, hat, and boots for dewy grass. Directions: From Hwy 18-151 near Blue Mounds, take Cty Rd F about 5 miles south (turn right at the intersection with Cty Z to stay on F). Turn right onto Reilly Road, and proceed to the parking lot at the end of the road (past the barn). Trip Leader: Eric Preston (608-257-1513 or ericw.preston@gmail.com)
- **The Nature Conservancy Work Party: Saturday June 11, 9am-12pm** Volunteers will pull wild parsnip from a prairie remnant. To avoid parsnip burns wear long sleeves and gloves. Directions: From Hwy 18/151 near Blue Mounds, turn south on Cty F and continue for about 1.5 miles (turn right at the intersection with Cty Z to stay on F). The preserve will be on your right; park in the small lot or along the road. Contact: Jim Lesniak (608-576-3310).
- **Grassland Birding in Western Dane & Eastern Iowa Counties: Saturday June 18** Led by Dave Sample & Steve Richter. More details to come; check www.madisonaudubon.org/audubon/html/tips.htm
- **Birds & Flowers of Underwood & Schurch-Thomson Prairies: Wednesday June 29, 6-8:30 pm** See remnant prairies and 400-acres of grassland rich with birds. Evening is the ideal time to hear the rare Henslow's sparrow. Be prepared for a long hike and bring binoculars. Directions: From Hwy 18-151 near Blue Mounds take Cty Rd F about 5 miles south (turn right at the intersection with Cty Z to stay on F). Turn right onto Reilly Road, and proceed to the parking lot at the end of the road (past the barn). Contact: Rich Henderson (608-845-7065 or tpe.rhenderson@tds.net)
- **Birding at Barneveld Prairie: Saturday July 9th** Led by Dave Sample and Steve Richter. From 18/151 take County Road K south (near Barneveld) and turn right at Langberry Drive (toward Botham Vineyards). Meet at the corner of Langberry Drive and Lee Rd. Call 608-251-8140 to register.
- **Butterflies, Blooms, and Birds: Sunday July 10, 10:00am-12:30pm** Visit remnant prairie and CRP grasslands that are rich with birds, butterflies, and dragonflies; the rare Regal Fritillary should be active. Be prepared for a long hike (long pants, hat, and sunscreen) and bring binoculars. Bring food to stay for a picnic lunch afterward, beverages and treats will be provided. Contact: Rich Henderson (608-845-7065 or tpe.rhenderson@tds.net) Directions: From Hwy 18-151 near Blue Mounds, take Cty Rd F about 5 miles south (turn right at the intersection with Cty Z to stay on F). Turn right onto Reilly Road, and proceed to the parking lot at the end of the road (past the barn).



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Newsletter for owners of land within the Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area

The Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area is an area of statewide and regional importance for prairie and grassland conservation, and is a priority area for a coalition of non-profit organizations and government agencies. This partnership works together and with landowners to provide habitat for rare species and maintain an economically viable agricultural landscape.

Project Coordinator Katie Abbott helps landowners within the project area (see below) get help from these organizations to manage and protect their lands. She strives to educate and empower landowners to be stewards of the natural resources in their community. Absolutely all work involving landowners and the MRPHA partnership is completely voluntary.

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