Burr Oak Valley Cleanup

NLI staff and volunteers have been working on removing invasive non-native brush in the Oak forest at Burr Oak Valley Preserve.

Burr Oak Valley Restoration Update

by Edward Cope

Burr Oak Valley is, without a doubt, one of NLI’s most exceptional preserves. The site is a botanical marvel, a topic which I discuss frequently and fervently with anyone willing to lend me their ear. But today, I intend to shed a little light upon something I guard a bit more closely: our vision for the preserve. It’s not that this vision is a secret; rather, we’ve kept it close to the chest because our understanding of what the site needs — no, what the site deserves — has been deepening over the past several years.

In 1839, a team of surveyors walked directly along two of the preserve’s boundaries. Much of what they described was a community which we today call oak barrens, but at the time may have been described variously as “brushwood,” “scrub-oak,” “hazel ruff,” or simply “shrubbery.” This is a community sculpted by regular, low-intensity fire which promotes a diverse and robust growth of native shrubs and fire-stunted oaks. In the absence of fire, these communities disappeared from the landscape almost immediately as they transitioned into more stereotypical savannas and woodlands.

Considering the rapid rate at which they disappeared, there are very few accounts of what would have actually been growing there — save for a few precious journal entries penned by early pioneers and botanists.

And therein lies the problem: we have an incomplete picture of what Burr Oak Valley truly would have looked like historically. Our earliest management plans simply advise to reforest the site, the equivalent of a concessional shrug. As our management techniques become more advanced, however, we have found that the possibility of returning the site to its natural state is well within our grasp. Early last spring, we began reintroducing native shrubs to the site by the hundreds. In the world of ecological restoration, creating oak barrens is somewhat uncharted waters, but we believe this to be
Eventide
by Edward Cope

The rich aroma of fallen leaves, drifting gently on October breeze: piquant perfume to set the stage. The sky, muddled with sumptuous tones of gray and auburn, darkens quietly. Too dark for scopes and binoculars, in fact; luckily, they are not needed. A bolt of pure white, stark against the tawny autumn hues, circles low above the wetland. A Great Egret, no doubt, even in the waning light. It lands squarely in the center of the oxbow, as far from any shore as it can manage. The light continues to fade, and more egrets arrive. They come alone or in pairs, night after night, without exception. After a long day afield, foraging for fish and frog alike, they are grateful for this evening sanctuary.

The Sandhill Cranes come next, arriving by the tens—or, on extraordinary occasions—the hundreds. They make no secret of their approach, trumpeting sonorously as they descend. They mingle closely with the egrets as shadows stretch long across the wetland. It is a familiar association: the cranes fastidiously maintain their schedule throughout the season.

Last to arrive are the Canada Geese, undeterred by inky twilight. The strength of their numbers is unmeasurable in the darkness, save for crude estimates derived from their cacophonous honking and splashing. Their arrival, sure as a tocsin, signals our departure. There is very much a rhythm and meter to an autumn evening at Nygren Wetland Preserve: an intrinsic biological clockwork that is equal parts mesmerizing and cryptic.

Leave a Lasting Legacy.

Make a bequest by naming the Natural Land Institute a beneficiary in your estate planning. It’s an easy way to protect precious natural habitat for future generations. (For more information, and to get our tax identification number, please call 815/964-6666.)

This year marks the 16th Anniversary of the Nygren Wetland Preserve. The land for this 721-acre wildlife refuge was purchased by Natural Land Institute in 2000 using a generous gift from the estate of Carl Nygren. During the past 16 years NLI has restored the former farm fields into wetlands, woodlands and prairies with more than 25,000 volunteer hours. Restoration of this land has increased habitat for red fox, American Bald Eagles, beavers, and Great Blue Herons, and attracted river otters, Blandings Turtles, American White Pelicans, Sandhill Cranes and Whooping Cranes.

Residents of surrounding communities benefit from this restoration, as well. Preserved in perpetuity, hundreds of acres of functioning floodplain store large amounts of floodwater during periods of high rainfall.
Community Land Stewardship Days

Volunteering for Natural Land Institute provides unlimited rewards. Not only do you get to enjoy the beauty of some of our private preserves, you will gain satisfaction from doing something good for the natural community and building a legacy for future generations. You might see a rare plant or two while you’re at it. You will also build friendships and experience camaraderie with others who share your passion for enhancing wildlife habitat and conserving native species.

NLI will provide tools, gloves and water (and sometimes special snacks). Bring a sack lunch if you plan to stay through the noon hour. Wear long sleeves, pants and sturdy boots. Dress for the weather.

Tasks may include removing invasive species, planting/collecting seeds, helping in the greenhouse, general maintenance, bird and mammal monitoring, and helping with prescribed burns.

Call one of the names listed below for more information about directions to the site and to let the Site Steward or staff person know to expect you.

Volunteers may work part or all of the designated time for each day.

What have YOU done today that will be relevant in 1000 years?

Community Land Stewardship Days Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
<th>Staff or Site Steward Call or Email Ahead</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burr Oak Valley Preserve</td>
<td>First Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. Every other Monday, 9:00 a.m. – Noon</td>
<td>Staff: Ed Cope, 815/601-4665, <a href="mailto:ecope@naturalland.org">ecope@naturalland.org</a> Site Steward: Open</td>
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<tr>
<td>Howard D. Colman Dells Nature Preserve</td>
<td>Second Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Staff: Ed Cope, 815/601-4665, <a href="mailto:ecope@naturalland.org">ecope@naturalland.org</a> Site Steward: Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver Creek Woods Preserve</td>
<td>Third Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Staff: Ed Cope, 815/601-4665, <a href="mailto:ecope@naturalland.org">ecope@naturalland.org</a> Site Steward: Dion Faith, 815/520-6916, <a href="mailto:Docfaith68@yahoo.com">Docfaith68@yahoo.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nygren Wetland Preserve</td>
<td>Every Wednesday, 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Staff: Zach Grycan, 920/912-4336</td>
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Wildlife Monitoring Schedule

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<tr>
<th>Location — Frog Monitoring</th>
<th>Days TBD - Summer, dusk</th>
<th>Staff: Ed Cope, 815/601-4665, <a href="mailto:ecope@naturalland.org">ecope@naturalland.org</a></th>
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<tr>
<td>Nygren Wetland Preserve — Butterfly Monitoring</td>
<td>Days TBD - Summer, midday</td>
<td>Staff: Ed Cope, 815/601-4665, <a href="mailto:ecope@naturalland.org">ecope@naturalland.org</a></td>
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Training Provided by Our Partner Organizations

Training — Contact Forest Preserves of Winnebago County for more information on training workshops:
Kim O’Malley, KOMalley@winnebagoforest.org • March 5, 2016, 9:00 a.m. - Noon: Calling Frog Survey. • April 30, 9:00 a.m. - Noon: Beyond the Basics Butterfly Monitoring. See www.WinnebagoForest.org for other types of monitoring workshops.

Training — Contact McHenry County Conservation District for more information on training workshops:
Denise Beck, 815/338-6223 x1229, DBeck@MCCDistrict.org • Feb. 17, 2016: Calling Frog Survey.
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the necessary first step. In conjunction with seeding low-growing, sparse grasses, our restoration units will be planted with dense clusters of hazelnuts, dogwood, and other shrubs. These thickets will hopefully provide refugia for oaks to naturally regenerate, limiting the intensity of fire which would otherwise burn through the open and grassy plantings that we are more accustomed to creating. With time and luck, we will restore a large expanse of diverse and highly productive shrubland — critical habitat which is rare on the modern landscape.

If you would like to assist in this endeavor, please consider joining us for one of our regularly scheduled volunteer work days. Or, should it better suit your inclination, consider donating a shrub for our volunteers to plant; our supplier offers them for less than $1 each.

Prioritized Stewardship Equipment Wish List

- Hammer mill for seed processing
- Utility vehicle
- Six Motorola CP200 Radios
- Trimble Nomad Ultra Rugged PDA (GPS)
- Cordless power screwdriver
- Greenhouse irrigation system upgrade
- Fifteen 8-foot lightweight plastic-top folding tables
- Flammable material storage cabinet (~60 gallon size)
- Chemical storage cabinet
- Two lawn funnels
- Thirty poly-burlap bags
- Twenty kitty litter buckets
- Riding lawn mower (approx. 42” deck)
- Five hundred 8-inch greenhouse pots
- Two greenhouse exhaust fans
- Two 50-foot extension cords
- Two extension cord reels
- Split rail fencing

NLI Uses Social Media to Reach Out to the Community

Facebook pages: Natural Land Institute, Nygren Wetland Preserve, Milan Bottoms, Silver Creek Woods Preserve

Flickr.com: Screen name: Natural Land Institute

Instagram.com: Follow us @NLI958

Prairie State Hike Application

QR Codes connect you to information. Scan this code to visit our website:
NLI’s Heritage LandKeeper Stewardship Profile

More than a hundred years ago, Vicki Stretton’s grandparents, John and Christina Handel, chose a beautiful and dramatic property to raise their family that had everything from steep sloping oak hickory forests and dramatic cliffs to grassland and low wetland areas. After Vicki inherited 35 acres of the property from her father, she and her husband Robert chose NLI to protect their gorgeous property through a perpetual conservation easement.

The largest part of the property is upland oak-hickory forest that nurtures rare and unique plants. Vicki’s love of the wild land was the driving force for her to protect it from future development. She and Robert want to preserve this part of the old homestead for the wildlife and the rare plants found there, and they know how important ongoing stewardship is to preserving those conservation values.

Vicki’s brother, Bill Handel, is a botanist for the Illinois Natural History Survey and has been actively helping them manage the property with controlled burns, invasive species control and planting nectar and native pollinator plant species. One of their major challenges is combating the spread of black locust trees, which contain several toxic components in its leaves, stems, bark and seeds. Although native to the Appalachian mountain slopes, in the Midwest, it invades thickets and old fields crowding out the native vegetation of prairies, oak savannas and upland forests, forming single species stands. It does this by root suckering and stump sprouting forming a common connecting root system, making it an especially challenging job.

Keep up the good work Vicki, Robert and Bill!

A Day in the Field

On a mild September morning, twenty people met in the barn at Nygren Wetland Preserve for a crash course in field botany. They would need an arsenal of vocabulary at their disposal for what was to come throughout the rest of the day, and professional botanist Paul Bollinger was well-equipped to prepare them. Operating an environmental consulting firm, Bollinger has cultivated a wealth of experience in plant identification. Sketching diagrams of flowers and leaves on an oversized note pad, he quickly familiarized the assembled group of aspiring botanists with the ins-and-outs of “keying out” plants.

Armed with a veritable lexicon of botanical terminology, everyone trekked out into the prairie in search of specimens on which to ply their new skills. From common weeds to peculiar rarities, Bollinger helped the group identify score upon score of species. He provided some immensely helpful tips and tricks for working your way through a plant key, as well as some great practical insight into the pitfalls an amateur botanist would be wise to avoid.

Next, the group headed to Harlem Hills Prairie Nature Preserve to examine some true jewels of the prairie. A number of rare and unusual species were sighted, including Rough False Foxglove, Upland White Goldenrod, and Downy Gentian. The real find of the day was Great Plains Lady’s Tresses, a late-blooming orchid with a deep, vanilla-like aroma. This represents the first population of the species ever recorded in Winnebago County — remarkable! Our knowledge of the local flora is ever-expanding, informed by professional and amateur botanist alike.
Trading Seeds: A New Partnership

On Monday, November 30, representatives from eight regional stewardship entities met in Boone County for the first annual meeting of the Northern Illinois Native Seed Network. Founded earlier this year, the Network is designed to bring together governmental and non-governmental organizations for the purpose of exchanging seed from native plants. This unprecedented collaboration, organized by NLI staff, was attended by envos from the Natural Land Institute, Forest Preserves of Winnebago County, Boone County Conservation District, Rockford Park District, Byron Forest Preserve District, McHenry County Conservation District, The Land Conservancy of McHenry County, and DeKalb County Forest Preserve District.

As people arrived at the event, tables were quickly loaded with bags of unique, unusual and often exceptional seeds. With a focus on trading rare and conservative species, this was no surprise, but the room was nonetheless filled with an air of anticipation. The bounty — collected by hand throughout the previous year — was generously divided. All parties seemingly departed with more than they brought.

Preparations are already underway for next year’s event, which will hopefully bring together an even greater number of agencies. Our collective seed resource represents an immensely valuable tool for restoration across the region, and partnerships like this allow us to utilize it to its maximum potential.

Kyte River Bottoms

Restoration activities are ongoing at NLI’s Kyte River Bottoms Land and Water Reserve. This spectacular property received clearing of invasive tree and shrub species on approximately 31 acres! A big thanks to Northern Illinois Resource Solutions who got the clearing completed and the recovery underway!

Kyte River Bottoms is a complex of upland and floodplain forest, sedge meadows and savanna. Its diverse topography is home to a variety of plants and animals including Great Blue and Green Herons, Wood Ducks, Beavers and the tiny chorus frog, Spring Peeper. Be on the lookout for volunteer opportunities to assist in restoration efforts at Kyte River Bottoms.

Spring Peepers are tiny (1 to 1 1/2 inches) chorus frogs that can be heard at Kyte River Bottoms Land and Water Reserve.

2015 Seed Report

This year saw the reinvigoration of our seed collection program. A record 261 lbs. of seed was collected from 210 species — a value of $50,940! If you’d like to be a part of this effort, please contact Ed Cope at ecope@naturalland.org. Help us break the record again next season!