

NATURAL LAND INSTITUTE

Conserving Land
in Northern Illinois

Notes from the Field

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Photo: Laura Helmich



Butterfly weed (foreground) and Lead plant grow in the McCleary Prairie, summer 2021.



Photo: Kim Johnson

Collecting seeds in the McCleary Prairie at Burr Oak Valley Nature Preserve (2021)

A Prairie Legacy

By Laura Helmich

Do you ever wonder if any of the things you do today will still be important to people decades from now? Will the trees we plant survive to provide shade for future generations? Will those generations know or care about who planted that tree in the first place? Will the lawns and gardens that we so painstakingly plant and care for still be around after we are gone?

In the mid 80's, back when I was just a little kid playing in the sandbox and chasing butterflies in my mom's garden, a woman named Judy McCleary started a small garden. She felt it was important to conserve native plants and ecology, an objective that is just as important to us today as it was to her back then. Her small one acre prairie garden was part of a larger parcel of land that was donated to NLI in 2013 by McCleary Industries,

Inc. That parcel became part of our Burr Oak Valley Nature Preserve (purchased with donations from Judy and Eugene McCleary and McCleary Industries, Inc.), and we still refer to that tiny corner of the property as 'the McCleary Prairie.'

One of my primary duties as the Stewardship Technician with NLI has been to collect native seed for use in our restoration efforts. The McCleary Prairie has been an invaluable source of seed for a large number of species. I am very thankful that Judy took the time to plant and nurture this beautiful piece of land.

The newspaper article (see next page) from the 80s that highlighted her efforts starts with a question: "Judy McCleary, how does your prairie grow?" Well, now seed from her garden grows quite well, and all over Winnebago County!



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320 S. Third Street, Rockford, Illinois 61104 • Phone: 815/964-6666
E-mail: info@naturalland.org • www.NaturalLand.org

Prairie garden finally taking root in Roscoe

By SALLY NIELSEN
Register Star correspondent

ROS COE — Judy McCleary. How does your prairie grow?

Well, after three years of struggle, McCleary, of Roscoe's Ledges area, can say that this year, she has been satisfied with the progress of her one acre, hand-sown native Illinois prairie garden.

Planted, ironically enough, at the far end of a corn field, and strewn with rocks, the regenerated prairie garden does not grow cocklebells and pretty maids all in a row.

Rather it boasts many plants with far more poetic names such as 6-foot tall Indian grass and turkey foot blue grasses, wild asters, compass plants, thimbleweed, ox-eye daisy, tick-trefoil, rattlesnake master and purple coneflower.

The list goes on and on, just as colorfully as the prairie itself must have been when early 19th-century settlers first saw it.

All of these seeds and also some unwanted and unwelcome things like foxtail, grow in McCleary's special garden.

Why plant a prairie? McCleary has asked herself that question several times as she fussed over her unconventional garden. She is an avid advocate of preserving the environment, but she is not a botanist. So she has had to do a lot of research and make uncertain decision and find the rare seeds she needed to plant. It takes a lot of patience, she says.

But she does get a lot of support from many people who are part of what seems to be a growing fascination with and dedication to the long lost prairie ecology of Illinois. Doug and Dottie Wade, who own the Windrif Prairie Shop in Oregon, which stocks plants and seeds which are or were native to the area, were one source of help for McCleary. Dottie Wade said a great deal of interest in planting prairie gardens has been seen in the past two or three years.

"People may want to save the time and energy involved in mowing land at the back of their rural lots," so they look into planting prairie plants," Dottie Wade said. There are about 100 different kinds of prairie seeds and plants available in the Wade shop.

McCleary planted a prairie because she believes that there is a need to conserve and encourage the plants and ecology which was once native to the Illinois area. "We have to keep up a seed bank. We can't plant everything in beans and corn. If there were to be a blight, what would we have to fall back on?" she said.

There are many prairie plants still growing along roadsides and in the fields in the area, but constant mowing and the use of weed killers threatens their existence. Prairie enthusiasts would like to see county and state road caretakers burn, not mow, roadsides, as burning encourages prairie plants.

McCleary would like to see farmers leave corners and edges of their fields alone to encourage prairie growth.

Then there's the sheer beauty and the historical aspects of the prairie issue, McCleary points out. "There are reports that when settlers came here, they wrote home that a man who was sitting on his horse couldn't see over the grasses," she said.

The pioneers made trails through it, just like the animals and the Indians did. The invention of the steel John Deere plow that broke up the tough but fertile sod changed all that into the farmland we have today.

How does one begin to plant a prairie? First of all, McCleary let the plot of ground lie fallow for a year-and-a-half in order to rid it of farming chemicals.

"Then we rolled it down and I broadcast the seeds," she said. After a year,



Judy McCleary tends some of her grasses in a regenerated prairie area near her home in the Roscoe Ledges. (Sally Nielsen photo)

she planted more seeds and began the process of fighting foxtail and other unwanted, non-prairie plants. She found, through a cautious program, that burning off the garden does rid it of the unwanted plants and that the prairie plants thrive.

Seeds for a prairie may be obtained from special catalogues or from shops like the Wade's, but a good guidebook to wildflowers and weeds and a pleasant fall walk along a railroad or in an old abandoned (and unmowed) cemetery can yield many prairie plant seeds.

This is what the education committee of the Rockton Historical Society recently did in preparation for the planting of a prairie garden at the Stephen Mack Middle School later this year.

Prairie experts say that railroad track areas are especially good because fires struck from sparks from passing trains keep the plants coming back.

The vast prairies of Illinois were nourished by the wild fires set by lightning or by Indians, who set the fires in order to drive out the abundant game which lived among the grasses.

McCleary's prairie garden showed many signs of this kind of animal and plant and insect ecology this year.

"This year, a prairie lark made its nest here, among the grasses," she said. Gopher holes and snake holes, brilliant butterflies and mouse nests can also be seen among the grasses.

Insects and small animals are plentiful in a prairie. "Don't plant a prairie if you can't stand insects," McCleary said.

Dottie Wade said that it takes about three years to get a prairie garden going. "The original prairies were made up of plants whose roots matted the ground," McCleary pointed out. Prairie plants are all perennials, thus a complex system of insects, birds and plants is needed to make a thriving prairie or prairie garden.

A Look Back... A Story About How Judy McCleary Started Her Prairie

From the *Rockford Register Star*,
circa mid-1980's

Photo: Kim Johnson



The McCleary Prairie and restored oak savanna

Burr Oak Valley now a Nature Preserve

The Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, at their May 11th 2021 meeting, dedicated 98.93 acres of the Natural Land Institute's Burr Oak Valley Preserve as an Illinois State Nature Preserve and Nature Preserve Buffer. The qualifying features for dedication as a nature preserve are 4 state-listed plant species and 1 federally listed insect. A grade C dry dolomite prairie is also a significant feature. The main purpose

for the Commission establishing the Burr Oak Valley Nature Preserve is to protect the high-quality dry dolomite prairie and its inhabitants as there are only as many as 140 acres of such habitat left in the state of Illinois.

Photo: Jessie Crow-Mermel



The remnant dolomite prairie in fall

Summer Stewardship Staff Stories

AmeriCorps Members and Rockford Promise Interns

Summer Macheel

AmeriCorps Member

My experience with NLI has been extremely positive. I enjoy learning versatile skills that are applicable to someone just getting into this field. My favorite aspect of this position would have to be plant identification. I love annoying anyone I hike with now with my plant knowledge! Laura has done a fantastic job tolerating me asking what every plant I see is, but Butterfly weed has to be my favorite. The vibrant orange stands out and I am guilty of checking every one I come across for Monarch caterpillars. This summer, volunteering for NLI has given me many stories to share with everyone back home in Milwaukee. I have trapped painted turtles, learned how to ID animal tracks, caught frogs, surveyed snakes, collected seed, and even helped build a shelf in the shop. However, my favorite experience would have to be when I helped collect the seed pods of bloodroot and took a bunch of pictures of mushrooms in the process. I loved exploring the preserves and feeling like I was on a mission to look for specific plants. Every preserve has something new I look forward to seeing and I even enjoy being outdoors and getting sunburned on hot miserable days.

Photo: Summer Macheel



Black Swallowtail

Courtney Abate, *AmeriCorps Member*

Throughout my short amount of time here at NLI I have had many significant experiences. One has been seed collection/cleaning. I am not an expert of course, but after Laura Helmich shared some of her knowledge and experience with me, I feel confident to



Summer Macheel (R) is pictured here with Camila Rivera (L) and Courtney Abate above the office in the barn at Nygren Wetland Preserve.

Photo: Courtney Abate



Rusty Patched bumble bee on Wild bergamot

continue working in seed collection and cleaning in the future. I have enjoyed all of my experiences working for NLI, but I think the experience that stood out the most to me was turtle trapping. I loved how hands-on I could be while learning about and documenting the turtles at Nygren Wetland Preserve. Pecatonica Woodlands has to be my favorite preserve. I find that the diversity of wetland species and habitat is fascinating to learn about. I think my biggest challenge this summer was the heat. Since I'm from the Northeast, I am not used to being outside exposed to the heat every day. I managed to learn what works for me so that I could still enjoy my time despite the heat. As far as plants go, the Compass plant was the most interesting to learn about this summer because it has a visible adaptation to the brutal prairie heat. Nearly every leaf of this plant is oriented North/South facing, as to protect itself from the burning sun. I think that my favorite part about going to work every day is the excitement of seeing little hidden critters and fun new things while I'm working in the field. I really enjoy seeing the Monarch caterpillars hiding within the milkweed flowers and the Rusty Patched bumble bee drinking from the Monarda fistulosa (Wild bergamot).



Courtney Abate removes a turtle trap from the wetland

Photo: Jill Kenney



Monarch caterpillar on swamp milkweed

Camila Rivera

Rockford Promise Intern

My favorite memory from NLI was the field day orientation. I was late for the orientation so the AmeriCorps members came out to get me and we rode on the gator to meet with the rest of the group. In a matter of minutes, we were lost and encountered a large snapping turtle guarding her nest. The funny part? The road was too narrow to just turn around, so we had to get across one way or another. Let's just say I know why they're called snapping turtles now.

I have two favorite perseveres, Lost Flora Fen and Pecatonica Woodlands. I enjoy being at Lost Flora Fen because of the small stream and



Camila Rivera

the arrowhead plants, which happen to be my favorite plants. Pecatonica Woodlands is also a favorite because it's a beautiful remnant, and I encountered a snake that was resting between the grass stalks.

The most interesting species that I have learned about this summer is the Blanding's turtle, which is native to northern Illinois and an endangered species. The turtle is fascinating because it's difficult to find in the wild. Luckily during the summer I was able to see and hold a Blanding's turtle. It was truly a special experience to learn about this turtle.

Kasey Aucutt, *Rockford Promise Intern*

A significant learning experience has been familiarizing myself with the different prairie plants. I did not know many plants before the internship and now I can identify quite a few. A stand out memory has been going to a site near Mississippi Palisades State Park and looking at a prairie there. Seeing the river was awesome and the terrain is fairly different. Also, we got to

NLI Partners with Rockford Promise for Future Conservation Leaders

NLI is partnering with **Rockford Promise** which provides promising scholars from underserved school districts full-tuition college scholarships. Rockford Promise also supports those Scholars with robust community mentorships, strong academic advising and meaningful social connections to ensure they earn their degrees and jumpstart successful careers.

With support from our donors, NLI is providing 2 paid summer internships this year to encourage the Scholars to pursue degrees in Natural Resources disciplines, from ecology to environmental engineering, botany to environmental advocacy. We are also beginning to work with our network of business supporters to provide mentoring and potential jobs for the future. If you or your business is interested in supporting this program in the future or working with NLI to provide mentoring and potential internships in your environmental field of work, please call Kerry Leigh at 815/964-6666.

see a variety of cool mushrooms.

My favorite preserve is Burr Oak Valley because it has tons of beautiful prairie plants. It is fun to walk around and examine the diverse plant life there. The most interesting species for me has been the White wild indigo because it stands out against other plants. It has a very beautiful color and an interesting shape. Another plant I like is the Hoary vervain because it is one I was not familiar with. It will be a challenge remembering the names of all the plants. When I learn a lot of them in a short time, sometimes I forget the names.

Seed collecting is my favorite part of the internship because it allows me to explore an area more and look for the necessary seed. The things I am learning through the internship will hopefully help me in my future career.



Kasey Aucutt collecting seeds

Thank you for ensuring a sustainable future for NLI’s preserves

Thank you to our donors who are getting our **Lands Owned Stewardship Endowment Fund** up and running! This fund was started by two of our board members in 2019 as we acknowledged that we needed a sustainable preserve stewardship fund to care for the land that we own including the new addition to Lost Flora Fen on Raccoon Creek. NLI has

more than 3,000 acres that need ongoing stewardship. Invasive species, unpredictable rainfall, flooding, drought and temperature fluctuations are stressing our preserves. Our goal for the fund is two million dollars by 2025. Thank you also to the Brubaker Charitable Trust, which has committed funds over a 5-year period and to the Hamill Family Foundation for their 3 year gift.

Land Stewardship Community Service Days Schedule

Call or email staff or the site steward for more information and to confirm participation. Work for as long as your schedule allows or for the whole time listed. Wear sturdy boots and dress for the weather in layers. Dates and times subject to change.

Location	Schedule	Staff/Site Steward
Burr Oak Valley Nature Preserve	First Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. — 1:00 p.m. Every Thursday, 9:00 a.m. — Noon	Staff: Tyler Pellegrini 815/970-5012 tpellegrini@naturalland.org Site Steward: Position Open
Howard D. Colman Dells Nature Preserve	Days Vary 9:00 a.m — 3:00 p.m. Ask to be added to email notifications.	Site Steward: Chris Reisetter reisetterc@gmail.com 815/985-7208
Silver Creek Woods Preserve	Third Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. — 1:00 p.m. 815/520-6916	Site Steward: Dion Faith, DocFaith68@yahoo.com
Nygren Wetland Preserve	Every Wednesday, 9:00 a.m. — 3:00 p.m.	Staff: Tyler Pellegrini Site Steward: Position Open
William & Gayle Keefer Nature Reserve	Every other Tuesday through Fall: Aug. 24, Sep. 7, etc., 4:00 — 7:00 p.m.	Staff: Laura Helmich 712/301-1208 lhelmich@naturalland.org Site Steward: Position Open



Helping our pollinator friends by planting native plants is something any homeowner can do. Rebecca Olson, pictured here, and her husband Scott, are the newest Conservation@Home recipients. They have native plants blooming from early spring until late fall, with a constantly changing landscape, right outside their door. Read the full story by NLI Trustee, Mark Luthin at: <https://www.naturalland.org/a-real-natural-treat/>

Stewardship Wish List

- Listed in order of priority
- Backup cameras for vehicles
 - Roof rack for truck
 - Rubber boots and waders (Looking for smaller sizes)
 - ATV/UTV
 - Boomless Sprayer for UTV
 - Pull Behind Mower for ATV/UTV
 - Box Blade for 3 Point
 - Tractor Canopy
 - Air compressor for truck
 - 500 Gallon Water Tank (Baffled or Leg Tank)
 - Industrial Shelving (Pallet Rack or Metal Shelving)
 - Cutting Torch
 - Stick Welder
 - Snow Plow for UTV
 - Volunteer(s) for Mechanical Maintenance on a Periodic Basis
 - 4x4 Pickup Truck
 - Tractor 100Hp
 - Mini to Mid-Size Excavator

Join or renew your membership.

You can play a part in protecting nature with
your annual or monthly membership gift.

Visit: www.naturalland.org/membership today.

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Notes from the Field 🌸 Summer, 2021

Upcoming Events



Fall Prairie Harvest Day *Collecting Seeds is Fun!*

NLI will hold *Fall Prairie Harvest Day*, on **Sat., Oct. 2, 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.** at **Nygren Wetland Preserve**, 3190

W. Rockton Road, Rockton Ill. Individuals of all ages, families, and groups are invited to collect seeds from native prairie wildflowers and grasses. The seeds will be used in future plantings at NLI preserves. **Registration is requested by Fri., Oct. 1 for this FREE event at <https://www.naturalland.org/event/fall-prairie-harvest-day-4/> or call 815/964-6666.**

This is a fun community service activity for all kinds of groups – Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, 4-H Clubs, homeschool groups, corporate/employee teams, service clubs, and church groups.

Volunteers will learn how to collect seeds and identify the plants while experiencing all kinds of wildlife during their time in the prairie. Everyone should dress for the weather; wear long sleeves, pants and sturdy shoes. Gloves are recommended. Tools will be provided. Snacks and water will be available.

Photo: Camila Rivera



Blue vervain (the lavender flower) likes moist habitats.



OAKtober Hike

October is Oak Awareness month in Illinois and we invite you to celebrate with us by going on a guided walking tour at **1:30 p.m. on Sat., Oct. 30.** Hikers will be led by NLI staff and

volunteers through the rolling hills and oak savannas of **Burr Oak Valley Nature Preserve** and will talk about the ongoing restoration work, the importance of an oak habitat, and explain why this special natural area was designated an Illinois State Nature Preserve and Nature Preserve Buffer this year.

Location/Parking: **Burr Oak Valley Nature Preserve** is located on Elevator Road in Roscoe across from **Cross and Crown Lutheran Church**, 7404 Elevator Rd., Roscoe, IL 61073. Limited

parking on site. Additional parking available at the church. Hikers should wear long sleeves, pants and sturdy shoes. Moderate to difficult level hiking.

Please register for this event by Fri., Oct. 29 at <https://www.naturalland.org/event/oaktober-hike-2021/>

Cost: Free for NLI members. \$5 for non-members, \$10 for non-member families. Admission for non-members includes a 6 month introductory membership to NLI.