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# Newsletter

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*Photo contributed by Rhea Edge*

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## Dale E. Birkenholz Died On 26 December 2015 ParkLands Honors him and Notes His Many Contributions

By Roger C. Anderson

When I think back on my 39 years of friendship with Dale I recall a most remarkable person. Like Aldo Leopold he was one of those persons who could not live without "wild things." He loved nature and did all he could to understand and preserve the natural world and transfer these strong feelings and commitments to others. I first met him when I became a professor at Illinois State University in 1976 where he had been on the faculty since 1962. We both taught courses that were related to ecology and I needed to find field sites where could take my classes and do research. Dale helped me find them. We visited a diversity of areas including Funks Grove, Weston Cemetery Prairie and Sand Prairie Scrub Oak Nature Preserves, Breens Woods, Reavis Hill Prairie and others. I am a plant ecologist so I knew most of the plants species, but I was amazed to find someone who knew native plants as well as I did, and also could identify and knew the natural history of birds, fishes, mammals, and other animals - he was an outstanding naturalist. [baevans@ilstu.edu](mailto:baevans@ilstu.edu) to contribute.

Dale joined the ParkLands Board in 1978 and was President from 1984 to 1992 and was named an Honorary Lifetime Board Director. He first introduced me to ParkLands in 1978 when he was restoring a native prairie community on ParkLands Merwin Preserve. He recruited me and Kiwanis Club Members to help broadcast seeds of prairie forbs, which Dale and volunteers had collected locally. The native grass seed was planted with a drill and the seed was purchased from a seed grower in Kansas. The prairie was like most of the restored prairies of the era with a lot of grass and a relatively low abundance of forbs. However, it looked nice when big bluestem and Indian grass reached their maximum height and color in the fall and some of the forbs were in bloom, including stiff goldenrod, New England Aster, and other composites. The first prescribed burn that ever occurred on ParkLands' property was a burn in the southwest corner of this prairie. Our son John, who was seven years old at the time, Dale and I burned the prairie.



## Dale E. Birkenholz Tribute continued

The prairie was burned usually every other year. During one spring burn the fire got away from us. The wind speeds were very high, more than 20 miles per hour and we did not have a good fire break in some places, the humidity was low, and persons setting the fire moved too fast instead of making sure that the fire burned into the fuel, thereby effectively increasing the firebreak. Our fire equipment consisted of two pump backpacks, 3 or 4 flappers, and plastic buckets with water in which we soaked gunny sacks that we used to beat out the fire.

The fire jumped the fire break on the east side of the prairie, which was grassy field that abutted a forested area. Dale took some of the volunteers to get the fire under control as it spread eastward. I stayed near the point where the fire escaped, and with volunteers we eventually got the fire under control so no additional outbreaks occurred. About the time the fire was under control near the initial break out point Dale returned. I asked him did they get the fire under control. The answer was yes. Dale was as cool as a cucumber and let the fire spread rapidly across the field and then had the volunteers put out the fire as its intensity decreased as it moved into the woods.

Prior to the establishment of the restored prairie, ParkLands was not restoring native habitat, but rather wildlife food plots were being established for deer and pheasants, and many non-native trees and shrubs, including the invasive amur honeysuckle and autumn olive, were planted. I asked Dale why were these plantings made, and he said that they planted what they could get from the Illinois Department of Conservation Department and other sources. Dale lamented that the far northeast Corner of the Merwin Preserve was once an open field that he and others would visit in the spring in the evening or early morning to watch and listen to male woodcock peenting, a mating display. The male bird flies high in the sky and makes the peenting sound as they descend to attract females. The site quickly became a forest habitat with honeysuckle understory and non-native trees including tulip poplar, white pine, sweetgum, and river birch, a native species that grows along riverbanks and in wet areas, and the site was no longer regularly visited by woodcocks. Today, ParkLands does not do this type of planting on our properties, instead we now restore native communities and Dale helped us make this change.

Deer were thought to have been extirpated in Illinois by 1910 and not present in ParkLands until the 1970's. It was a rare experience to see a deer in McLean County in the early in 1960's. Guy Fraker, a Lifetime Honorary Director made a special effort to see one, "In the fall of 1969, I went in before dawn past the bluff to the low ground on the river and sat to watch the day break and hopefully see a deer. Sitting quietly in dawn's light I shrugged in the chill and a buck snorted about 10 feet behind me. What a thrill!" By the late 1980's, it was apparent that white-tailed deer were becoming excessively abundant, even though ParkLands had stopped creating food plots for deer several years earlier. We had great difficulty getting planted tree seedlings to survive. Native wildflowers and seedlings and small saplings in our wooded areas were being decimated by excessive deer browsing pressure in winter. We know now that deer also encourage the invasive garlic mustard, which they do not eat, by reducing the abundance of native wild flowers that compete with garlic mustard. They also cause disturbed areas that encourages the spread of the invasive species. Deer are in agricultural fields from spring until late fall when the crops are harvested. They move into forested areas with winter cover and food resources and they reach high abundances. Recent aerial survey (fixed wing or helicopters) revealed deer densities of 62 deer per square mile, whereas a density of 16 to 20 deer per square mile would have the deer in balance with their resources.

In 1994, ParkLands introduced a deer hunting program designed to reduce the size of the deer, which involves only killing does. This program was instigated because of damage to ParkLands properties, farmers were complaining because of crop depredation, and there was a high number of deer vehicle collisions on roads adjacent to ParkLands. Dale was very concerned that the ParkLands membership would be opposed to the hunting program and strongly encouraged that this concern be discussed at our Annual Meeting in 1994, and that we have the membership vote on the deer reduction program. Other Board Members, were also concerned about our membership's reaction to killing deer, when our signs at the Merwin Preserve indicated that all plants and animals are protected. However, on pubic field trips, Dale and I had been pointing out the high level of deer damage to native plants. At the Annual Meeting, there was a lively discussion about the deer reduction program, and it appeared that the no votes would dominate. The final tally was 72 "yes" votes for the program and 12 "no" votes. The Board had done the right thing in allowing the membership to be involved and expressing their opinions about the deer program. Dale had help move the Board in the right direction.



*Photo contributed by Jason Shoemaker*

ParkLands was a completely volunteer organization until 2002 when we were hired our first part-time Land Steward. We now have a fulltime Land Steward, paid interns, and a part-time Administrative Director. However, we still strongly need volunteer support and Dale was one of our most important volunteers, especially before we began to hire persons to work for ParkLands. He established most of the hiking trails and maintained them by mowing the trails and cutting trees that had fallen over trails. He posted signs, built benches for public use, established bluebird houses in open areas, helped collect and clean seeds of prairie plants, and prepared the Merwin Trail Map. He worked with John Witmer from Lexington and encouraged his volunteer participation. John received an award from ParkLands for his volunteer work. Dale also led numerous public nature walks that included birds and plants. His commitment to public service continued nearly end of his life. He led the early spring flower walk as late as April of last of year.

One of Dale's greatest assets to ParkLands was his personal treatment of other people. People trusted him and enjoyed being with him. He was largely responsible for ParkLands obtaining our Bunney and Hidden Hills properties, and the largest endowment ParkLands had ever received. Dale also personally funded a large endowment for management and restoration of our properties. He was not one of the Founders of ParkLands, but was a gentle driving force for the growth and development of ParkLands. He was as close to being our own "Aldo Leopold" as anyone I know or knew.





# ParkLands Foundation Explores Lincoln's Circuit



Travel with Lincoln scholar, Guy Fraker, along the circuit that Abraham Lincoln rode in Woodford County. You will visit the Metamora courthouse and other significant Lincoln attractions, as well as three of ParkLands Foundation's properties along the Mackinaw River. Don Schmidt, retired Illinois State University Horticulturalist, will share the history and ecology of Wyatt's Ford, Letcher Basin, and Sparks' Bridge. Your trip includes transportation to and from Woodford County and refreshments. Registration deadline is 5/27. Sorry, no refunds after that date.

Julie Elzanati

1749 Sec. A     Sunday 6/12,  
12:30-5PM,  
Woodford County

\$32

## In Memory of Dale Birkenholz

By Matt Fraker

From a very early age I wanted to be Dale Birkenholz when I grew up.

I started watching birds sometime back when I was three to four years old. My parents embraced this weirdness; but it was a highly regarded Illinois State University Biology professor that over decades of my life mentored me in all elements of nature. As a child I watched him know and share everything he knew about birds. As a younger adult I would venture into the field with him, and at the time I was fit as hell and yet still unable to keep up with this freak of nature.

During the years of my life where I was a bit lost to say the least, together we wondered the timber that ultimately would become the Fraker Farm and I learned all of my trees and plants from him (although my pop had taught me my native wildflowers).

Birkenholz was Illinois' own personal Gandalf. He was ageless; timeless; and knew absolutely everything there was to know about everything. But for Dale knowing it was not enough. For Dale, sharing his vast amount of knowledge (which could truly never be shared in its entirety as it would short circuit any normal person's brain) was his greatest joy and his greatest gift and almost certainly his greatest talent. With a twinkled smile worthy of St. Nick, a soft voice always full of passionate but gentle inflection, body language mannerisms that were completely mesmerizing as he spoke -- in all of my life I have never met anyone like this, and I can guarantee that every else who knew him felt the same way.



Photo contributed by  
Matt Fraker





## In Memory of Dale Birkenholz continued

Of all that I learned from Dale -- and if I have anything to offer or teach the birding community or the world of nature, Dale was either responsible for it or touched upon it -- his greatest gift was teaching me (and others) how to be fluent in the language of Nature. A person can step outside and be thinking only that he or she has 15 minutes to get to work. Or a person can step outside, immediately and automatically recognize 10 different bird sounds, tell by the air what the weather will be like that day, and offhandedly and automatically note which plants are blooming, or what butterflies are flitting about the car that person is about to step into. And all of that makes the "I have 15 minutes to get to work" part the least important thing about stepping outside.

Dale passed away peacefully today (Dec. 26, 2015) at 5:30PM with his long time best friend Rhea Edge holding his hand. The picture I have here was just taken on December 19th, and in his typical super-human way, neither his body in that picture nor is upbeat mind that shared memories with me showed any sign of the illness that riddled his body.

As a child, you know that you are supposed to bury your parents some day, and I have already buried one. Mentors teach and then they go, as my veterinary mentor Don Wainscott did. But a world without Birkenholz...that's something that I've tried hard to fathom and have failed. I know how many of us will never stop hearing the timbre, passion, and inflections in Dale's voice.

Happy travels, Dale. We all know that if we really need to see you we will always be able to seek you out in the swirling savanna waters of Mother Mackinaw.

It's sort of funny to me -- I'm 48 years old, and I still want to be Dale Birkenholz when I grow up...

**This newsletter is dedicated to Dale Birkenholz. If you are interested in honoring Dale through a memorial donation please contact the ParkLands office at [ParkLandsOffice@gmail.com](mailto:ParkLandsOffice@gmail.com) or call (309) 454-3169.**

## Calendar of Events

- **APRIL 9**  
**Illinois Sustainable Living & Wellness Expo**  
9am-4pm – Illinois Wesleyan University, Shirk Center
- **APRIL 30**  
**Illinois State University Fell Arboretum Plant Sale**
- **MAY 21**  
**Wild Ones Native Plant Sale**
- **JUNE 12**  
**ParkLands EDventure**  
**Travel to Woodford County Exploring Lincoln's Circuit**  
12:30-5pm – Register through Heartland Community College
- **Volunteer Days – Chinquapin Ridge**  
**MARCH 11, APRIL 8, MAY 13, JUNE 10**  
9:30am – 2nd Friday of the month  
Contact Janice Turner for more information  
(309) 454-7012
- **Moon Walks at Letcher Basin**  
**MARCH 19** – 5pm  
**APRIL 23** – 8 pm  
**MAY 21** – 7:30 pm  
**JUNE 18** – 7pm  
Contact Janice Turner for more information  
(309) 454-7012



Come see ParkLands at the  
**Illinois Sustainable Living & Wellness Expo**

**April 9th, 9am-4pm**  
**Illinois Wesleyan University, Shirk Center**

**The event is free and open to the public!**  
**See more at <http://islwe.org/>**



ParkLands will celebrate 50 years in July 2017 – Be on the lookout for updates on our big celebration!