

A Look Back, and Forward

2020 has been a year few will forget. The prolonged effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have stretched further than anyone could have predicted when stay-at-home orders were first issued in March. At ParkLands, Mother Nature added her own hurdles as storms brought heavy flooding and wind damage to our beloved Merwin Preserve.

Yet, as winter approaches and ParkLands stewards are wrapping up the last of their fall projects, 2020 has also been a year of fresh momentum. In this newsletter, we are looking back at the year that was and celebrating success only made possible through your unwavering support.

We welcomed many new volunteers this year. Volunteer workday participation was up dramatically. Volunteer Stewards took on new projects, and we welcomed a few new stewards to the team. Six new board members stepped up to fill the big shoes of those completing their maximum nine-year term. We are humbled by all who stepped up to lend a hand.

We spent much of the year improving Sweeney Woods Preserve, an important floodplain that protects known habitat of the state-threatened mudpuppy. Volunteers (plus heavier contracted work) thinned overabundant silver maple trees, freeing up the native oaks and hickories to continue establishing. Sweeney Woods is one step closer to its original, diverse ecosystem, evidenced by the 11 species of mussels surveyed there in August.

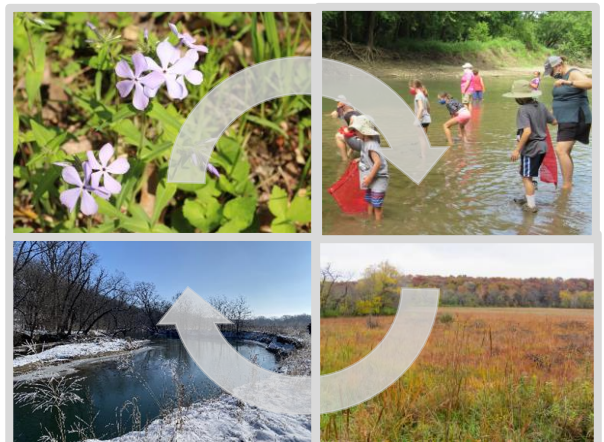
In the office (virtual office, that is) we constructed our new website that is now helping more people than ever find our preserves. Your contributions, along with many hours of work by staff and volunteers, brought this project to life. You can now find detailed directions to many of our sites,

biological information unique to each preserve, and the history of our foundation. We encourage you to visit the new website and learn more about the efforts you are supporting.

Spring planning is well underway. You'll read about some of our big plans in this newsletter such as catching up on prescribed burns, planting over 4,000 trees, and brining new educational experiences to the community. Our financial health will ultimately determine the extent to which we can deliver.

Your year-end gift of \$100 can be the gift that restores Sweeney Woods, equips a volunteer steward, funds a day of summer interns, or allows a safe prescribed burn in 2021. We are deeply grateful for your past support. It has been and will continue to be critical to the success of ParkLands.

As we enter the cooler months with continued physical distancing, remember you don't have to distance yourself from nature. Be sure to come out to ParkLands preserves for a walk or to cross-country ski this winter. What you find in the winter season just may surprise you.



Stave Winter Social

80 guests enjoyed the casual company of board members, staff, and fellow outdoor enthusiasts. Rubén Martín Blazquez dazzled on guitar, and a lucky few even left with unique nature-inspired prizes.



2020

Jan

Feb

Mar

April

June

Winter Hike

25 hikers were treated to bluebird skies at Sweeney Woods Preserve. The snow-covered trails made for excellent wildlife viewing.



Gator UTV Fund Drive

Utility vehicles are a critical tool during controlled burns, and provide year-round service to our stewards and interns. After a generous donation to kickstart the project, over \$2,000 was raised.



New Staff

Craig Lutes was hired as Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator responsible for managing outreach programs, organizing volunteers, and communicating through the various media channels.



Merwin Flooded

Merwin's signature spring show – the Virginia Bluebells – was put on hold this year as multiple flooding events made the bottomlands impassable, forcing the closure of trails.



Cancellations

COVID-19 forced modifications, including:

- May 3rd Wildflower Walk at Merwin Preserve - cancelled
- June 5th Night Event at Letcher Basin – cancelled
- July 11th Bike Ride - cancelled
- Volunteer workdays - postponed
- Staff working from home

Summer Interns

Mason Diederich and Gregory Cluskey spent the summer spraying invasives, cutting brush, and clearing trails.



Tale of Two Prairies

Our first mini-event after COVID-19 was a tour of Ridgetop Hill Prairie and Letcher Basin for board members, led by Sherrie Snyder.



Summer Fund Drive

ParkLands first general fundraiser in several years was a huge success! 110 donors raised crucial programming funds.

Storm Damage

Straight-line winds downed hundreds of trees across Merwin, causing thousands of dollars worth of maintenance costs. Trails were closed for several more weeks.

New Website

An all-new website rolled out August 1st to rave reviews. The new site features vivid imagery, one-click directions to our most popular preserves, detailed histories, and so much more. The project was made possible through a Capacity Building Grant from Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation and a momentous amount of volunteer hours.



Annual Meeting at Hazle Preserve

Departing President Jessica Chambers honored 5 exiting directors, welcomed 6 new, and handed the reins to Eric Smith. A premeeting hike explored Chinquapin Bluff's restored wetlands and hill prairie.



#OptOutside Two Preserve Challenge

Twenty people stepped up to our first Two Preserve Challenge by sharing photos from



two different Parklands preserves the day after Thanksgiving. Winners were awarded Parklands hats and other gear.

July

Volunteer Workdays

With precautions in place, workdays restarted in July and continued through November. Projects focused on removing silver maples at Sweeney Woods, clearing Chinquapin Bluff's hill prairie, cleaning Merwin's trails, and collecting prairie seeds. A crew visiting from Americorp also tackled honeysuckle at Hayes Woods and Lespedeza at Moon Preserve.

Aug

Mussel Event at Hayes Woods

30 lucky guests waded into the Mackinaw in search of freshwater mussels. 10 species were recorded, and many eyes were opened to the diversity of life hiding in the Mackinaw Valley.



Sept

Angelo Capparella Volunteer Service Award

Legendary board member Angelo Capparella was honored with a new annual volunteer service award in his name.



Oct

Baller Woods Tree Planting

286 bur oak, walnut, and pecan trees were planted into the north bottomland of Kenyon-Baller Woods.

Nov

Prescribed Burns

Prescribed burn season carried into favorable December weather, including a 50-acre prairie burn at Letcher Basin Land & Water Reserve



Dec

Upcoming Events

We waste no time jumping into 2021 with both hiking boots.

January

1

The year begins with a guided winter hike at Lexington Preserve on **January 1st**. We will explore the variety of landscapes that Lexington has to offer. Several accommodations will be in place to comply with COVID-19 guidelines, including a self-guided virtual tour option.

February

13

We'll return to the trails in **February 13th**, hopefully donning cross country skis for a guided tour of a Woodford County preserve. If the snow does not cooperate, it'll be another chance to hike a new ParkLands location.

April

22

Looking into spring, mark your calendars for **April 22nd** for a brand new major event tied to Earth Day. We are calling it the Earth Day Volunteer Challenge. Teams of volunteers will compete across several ParkLands preserves in a race to remove the most invasive plants or collect the most garbage. Stay tuned for more details!

A full list of 2021 events will be released in the coming weeks. Follow the [events page](#) of our website for details and registration.

Board Member Spotlight

Meet ParkLands board member, Treasurer, volunteer, and birding extraordinaire, Michael McKinley.

Years with ParkLands

2+

Why Volunteer?

Having only been a resident of this area for about three years, volunteering with ParkLands has been a wonderful way for me to get to know great people and great places in my new hometown. The ParkLands mission of natural lands restoration and preservation is something I believe in and personal enjoy through my hobbies of hiking and birding, and the fact that my efforts can make an impact right here in the area where I live and "play" with my family makes it even more rewarding.



Favorite ParkLands "Spot"

It's a tie between taking in the "expanse" of the restored prairie at Letcher Basin and/or sitting on a bench in the woods at Merwin and looking up at glimpses of the blue summer skies through the waving branches of the tall trees on a breezy day.

Profession

I am a Businessperson and Entrepreneur with a diverse professional background. Currently I split my time between working as the general manager for a Washington DC area Government Contractor in the National Security arena and doing work for my own consulting clients.

Putting the Woods into Baller Woods

Baller Woods, the 40 acres of undulating bluffs that still holds the title of most recent ParkLands acquisition, has received a facelift. 286 bareroot trees were planted in the 7-acre bottom land adjacent to Panther Creek in mid-October.

The planting was part of this tract's continued enrollment in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), in place since the previous ownership. An ongoing grant from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation (ICECF) also helped fund the project. The same ICECF grant funded 50% of the preserve's 2019 acquisition and one year of initial stewardship costs.

The timing of this planting proved tricky for a couple of reasons. First, the site's soil is typically wet year round making it difficult to reach with heavy equipment. Second, unsupported trees risk being smashed by heavy spring floodwater. Both issues were solved by planting larger, bareroot trees during the drier fall months.

Site prep began in August as Volunteer Stewards Andy Smoot and Chuck Croxton mowed the basin and removed trash and debris. A contractor then applied an herbicide treatment to ward off the remaining vegetation, such as the reed canary grass that dominated the area.



A stand of 286 freshly-planted trees bask in the fall colors of Baller Woods (above). A new bur oak (below), noticeably larger than saplings most used for other tree plantings.

Both the mowing and herbicide ensure a clean slate for the trees to establish unimpeded. The reed canary grass will remain an issue as vegetation returns, but, given a fresh chance, we will also likely see goldenrods, native grasses, and other trees reestablish, as well.

286 trees sounds like a lot, and it is, though the total would have been higher if traditional saplings had been used. Only three species – bur oak, walnut, and a few pecans – were used, trusting that other species such as cottonwood and sycamore will establish on their own.

According to Jason Shoemaker, finding nearly 300 larger, bareroot trees in the early fall was half the battle. But, once a supply of desired species were found, a local contractor made quick work of the with a tractor-powered spade and accompanying crew.

Up Next

Another significant CRP tree planting is scheduled for next spring, this time at Mohr Preserve near Lexington. 4,200 trees will go into the ground to bolster our existing CRP trees at the site. Swing by Mohr after your Merwin bluebell trip next spring to see the ensuing generation of historic savanna woodlands take shape.



Fire in the Basin

Douglas
Kaufman-
Dickson leads
the burn team
at Letcher Basin.

This time of year, the weather app on Jason Shoemaker's phone works overtime. It's prescribed burn season, and the ParkLands Land Steward is looking for the perfect mix of wind, temperature and moisture to check another unit off his list.

Conditions were ideal on December 9th as the burn crew – Jason, Douglas Kaufman-Dickson, Jack Pfaffmann, Dianne Feasley, George Farnsworth, Andy Smoot, Chuck Croxton, Gary Folkerts, and Craig Lutes – descended on Letcher Basin Land & Water Reserve. The prairie's easternmost 50 acres were on the docket.

To anyone who stumbled upon the scene, the series of events throughout the day might suggest organized chaos. In fact, our caravan of support vehicles created perhaps the first traffic jam in rural Woodford County history as we bumped into an unexpected group of hikers, complicated further by the keys of a crew

member being locked in a truck blocking the narrow entrance lane (whose identity will protected...). In reality, though, the burn is anything but chaos. Every move is carefully scripted, centered on the wind as our guide - too little and the fire wanders without direction, too much and the flames find unintended ground.

Time of year matters, too. Spring burns minimize bare soil being exposed, but fall burns are also effective when the conditions are right and pended burn units are stacking up. Sites with less risk of erosion, such as this block of Letcher Basin, are saved for the fall. Plus, by burning only the eastern half of Letcher Basin, we ensure adequate winter cover for wildlife protection and human appeal.

Why burn in the first place? That question was proposed to the group of elementary-aged hikers who had been caught in the traffic jam. The hand of a nine or ten-year old young lady shot up. "It actually makes the prairies healthier", she confidently explained to her classmates, "to burn off the dead material and let the living roots come back stronger next spring." The future of conservation is bright!

Prescribed fire is, in fact, *the* proven tool for prairie management. Fire clears woody brush, removes suppressing thatch, and inhibits various invasive plants that didn't adapt in the same fire-prone environment as our native flora. Without fire, prairies become woodland in the blink of an ecological eye.



After a thorough debrief, each of two teams diverged from a central point on the east border of the basin to initiate the fire break. This 15-20' strip burns slowly into the wind and serves as the head fire's backstop, preventing flames from leaping into neighboring brush. Radios buzzed with chatter from the moment we departed. Jason, typically easy-going and mild-mannered, had already warned, "I'll get bossy, but it's for your own good".

Like an interior house painter laying masking tape before turning to the roller, the fire break took time but was critical to ensure the effectiveness and safety of the burn. Once the head fire was lit, there was no stopping the tailwind-fueled wall of flames.

After one more check of radios to confirm timing, each group rounded their final corner and touched off the head fire. These flames were immediately different: intense, tall, dangerous. Raising the fire helmet's thick face shield for just a moment is enough for one to question the presence of eyebrows upon return to the truck.

The sweeping head fire brings to mind accounts from settlers who could read at night by the glow of prairie fires in the distance. Many feared flames more than disease or predatory animals. Native Americans even used intentional fires to hunt mammals and birds.

We now carried the torch of prairie preservation. So, amidst the intensity, our prescribed fire veterans continued on with steady, calm precision, just as this basin has seen for tens of thousands of years.

Then, just as quickly as it ignited, the head fire met the back burn and settled into a smoldering landscape of charred, lunar-like dust.

As we packed up to head home, tired and hungry, our heads turned to the sound of laughter. A couple of children from the school group had returned to examine the outcome of the fire. In their spring of life, frolicking along the now-deserted landscape, they were a reminder of the new energy that awaits the prairie when we return next spring.

The same girl who had amazed with her knowledge of prescribed burns earlier in the day had the right words, again. "This is my favorite place!", she exclaimed as she ran down the hill near Letcher Basin's entrance. She is not alone.



It is amazing what goes into a prescribed fire – the planning, the staff, the volunteers, the specialty equipment. When you see "manage" in our mission statement, these are the major ongoing efforts that maintain a healthy ecosystem, often sight unseen. Through work like this, your financial support makes a tangible difference in preserving our natural heritage.

The scripted game plan (top) and a bird's eye view of the execution (above). Chuck Croxton, Andy Smoot, and George Farnsworth look over the smoldering landscape (right). Aerial photo courtesy of Mary Jo Adams.



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