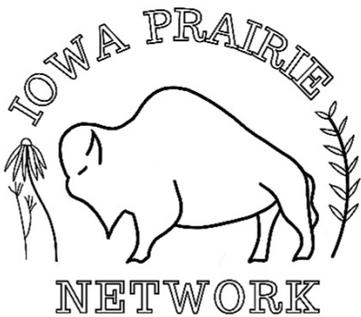


Iowa Prairie Network Newsletter Fall 2022



Maxwell Prairie Hike

article and photos by Kelly Vieau



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On Saturday, July 30, IPN members and prairie enthusiasts from all over Iowa and Nebraska came together to learn about Maxwell Prairie, a remnant prairie in Clarke County, Iowa. Led by Dr. Tom Rosburg, around 40 attendees got a one-time-only opportunity to visit this special place, learn about its history, and see what makes this prairie unique.

Steve and Carmen Maxwell, the former landowners, were excited to show attendees their prairie passion project. The couple purchased the land in 1992 and have been restoring the prairie since 2002. The prairie remnant was discovered and separately surveyed around 2011 with the help of the Clarke County Reservoir Commission and their Natural Resources Conservation Service partnership. Maxwell Prairie was purchased by the Clarke County Reservoir Commission in 2015, with a protective covenant put in place for the remnant. Steve and Carmen continue to work on the prairie remnant by volunteering their time to the Clarke County Reservoir Commission.

According to Dr. Rosburg's findings, the Maxwell Prairie remnant grows on a sloped hillside made up of mystic and caleb soils. These ancient soils are both formed in alluvial sediments derived from glaciers. However, unlike the rich, black, fertile soil Iowa is known for, these series of soils are a combination of average-to-poor draining and generally low in nutrients. "Microplants", as Dr. Rosburg called them, covered the steepest part of the hill. These short, mature plants, like bracted plantain (*Plantago aristate*) and field/blood milkwort (*Polygala sanguinea*) have developed strategies for survival in these harsh types of soil, most notably their tendency to prioritize reproduction over biomass growth. As the group made their way

up the hillside, they were greeted with other blooms typical to the soil type and region like hairy hawkweed (*Hieracium longipilum*), butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), flowering spurge (*Euphorbia corollata*), Baldwin's ironweed (*Vernonia baldwinii*), and rosinweed (*Silphium integrifolium*).

Thank you, sincerely, to Tom Rosburg, Steve and Carmen Maxwell, and the Clarke County Reservoir Commission for allowing IPN to gather in and explore this prairie remnant. It was a perfect summer morning in the prairie!



Butterfly Milkweed



Hairy Hawkweed

Untethered

article by Aric Ping



Ground Plum
photo by Corinne Bulat

Last year's beige, shriveled ground plum fruits lay piled on a catstep like a papery mound of miniature Chinese lanterns. One loess step above, their plump, young, purpling siblings dangle heavy, tethered taught to the mother plant. Mom's compound gray-green leaflets stand four inches above the ground, protective, fanned out over her offspring like a nightjar wing-shielding her chicks. Her babies will fledge soon. Autumn senescence readies to cut the cord. Once freed, this year's fruit will tumble downslope, doggy pile onto their older siblings, and join an eternal family reunion held in the catstep's timeless still life fruit bowl.

I'm sitting next to the old plums, reclining, taking in September's color. No other month holds both summer's vivid emerald fire and the soft edged amber-gold glow of early fall. The tawny rouge matrix of Loess Hills prairie is sprinkled with purple asters and gold sunflowers. The farmed Pigeon Creek valley

below is a dull green, yellowing at the tips. Topsoil dust and Omaha smog scatter the dipping late day sunshine into a greasy, horizontal rainbow to the west.

Sliding a hand beneath the mother plant's wing, I pluck a purple plum, blow off the loess, break the skin with my teeth. The difference between bitter and sweet all depends on the timing. The fruits of *Astragalus crassicaarpus* taste like snow peas when they're summer-green; strange, fibrous string beans when they're autumn-maroon. Thousands of fruits lay untouched around me, making the hillside look like it has chicken pox.

My molars work the ground plum into a pulp and I wonder why this plentiful prairie food goes ignored. For half a dozen years I've noticed the fruits piling up. I'd heard that rodents cache the seeds, and maybe they do, somewhere, but apparently not the prairies I visit. Why? Each plant produces a dozen or more sweet, walnut-sized fruits every year and their appearance is greeted with indifference. Mammals don't badger them. Invertebrates don't bug them. And fungi? Spore me. Nature abhors a vacuum, they say, but there's one right here, sucking ground plums.

The scent of concentrated cattle manure grabs my attention, wafting aloft on afternoon thermals alongside a wake of black winged turkey vultures. The neighbors are running liquified cattle excrement through their central pivot irrigation system onto the valley ground below. The nitrogen and phosphorus rich slurry fertilizes their cornfield. The runoff is a feast for Pigeon Creek's algae populations. The creek eventually empties into the Missouri, the drinking water source for my family and most others in the Council Bluffs-Omaha metro.

The cornfield is graveyard-quiet. And I can't help but wonder how long it's been since someone visited that field, fished from that creek. All those lonely ears with nothing to hear. The corn, just like my prairie ground plums, will go mostly unused as food. After harvest, roughly 80% of the kernels will be converted to ethanol or utilized as an inefficient feed for confined livestock. We've made sure no one will eat in the field, either. We've modified corn's code of life, its arrangement of A's, C's, T's, and G's, to tolerate synthetic chemical baths that kill and deter the invertebrates, fungi, mammals, and birds that would otherwise take their share of the starch-rich grass.

My hillside prairie patch isn't much busier. I'm probably the first person to have visited this spot in months. This hill has seen a steady decline in other visitors as well; dozens of species of prairie invertebrates, fungi, mammals, and birds that would otherwise be flowing through the waving bluestem and goldenrod have been squeezed out over the past century as their sea of prairie grass has evaporated into puddles, shrinking beneath the heat of progress.

Chewing yet another ground plum, I grab one of last year's forgotten fruits and shake it like a mini-maraca. I peel back the wrinkled papery skin and peer into the dry two-chambered heart. Each compartment houses a baker's dozen of black, pinhead sized seeds. I toss them to the wind, let them fall where they may. They'll probably germinate. Ground plum plants are pretty easy to establish. They readily take root on loess soils and soon begin building their very own piles of dried fruit

I take off my hat and spend a minute gathering ground plums from the quiet, lonely hillside. There are enough to feed a small army, were they to visit. My inverted hat basket quickly fills to the brim. I pick out another fruit, take a bite, and wonder, *Who eats ground plums? Who is missing from the land?*

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Find a Prairie

The IPN website now lists public prairies in all 99 Iowa counties.

<https://www.iowaprairienetw.ork.org/find-a-prairie>

Featured IPN Connection



IOWA NATIVE TREES AND SHRUBS

Iowa Native Trees and Shrubs specializes in propagating and growing native plants from locally collected seed. Most of the seeds are collected in the Des Moines River Valley. We also collect seeds in the Driftless region of NE Iowa as well as the Loess Hills of NW Iowa. Plants are grown in a patented system of root pruning containers to produce an extremely fibrous root system that ensures a healthy and vigorous plant.

Congratulations to Carman and Tom Rosberg and to Jon Judson for receiving Iowa Prairie Network's Friends of the Prairie Award.

These three individuals have shown outstanding dedication to protecting and educating about prairies in Iowa and we would like to sincerely thank them for their service. We cannot begin to tally the immense positive impacts that they have had on prairies and for people.



Join our Board or Become a Committee Member

We are looking for individuals who are passionate about our endangered prairie ecosystem to join us in our mission! Join our Board of Directors or add your special talent to a committee (Communications, Finance, Marketing, Newsletter or Membership). Contact Tabitha Panas (tpanas@pheasantsforever.org)

Membership Corner

IPN has nearly 200 members who share an enthusiasm for prairies! Join the fun today!

Name(s): _____

Address: _____ City: _____

State: _____ Zip Code: _____ County: _____

Email: _____

Phone (optional): _____ Circle one: home - work - cell

Membership Levels & Dues (check one):

- Student **Free** - please provide a valid school email address or ID
 Intern \$ 10 Family \$ 30
 Individual \$ 20 Organization.....\$100

Newsletter Options (check one):

- Prefer to receive newsletters via e-mail at the address listed above \$0
 Prefer to receive printed newsletters via mail add \$5

IPN is an IRS approved 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization

Please make checks payable to:

Iowa Prairie Network
 c/o Edward M. Sibley, Treas. 4015 Sergeant Road, Sioux City, IA 51106
The membership form can also be downloaded from our website – click "Join Us"
You can join online with PayPal

Don't forget to **RENEW** your membership! www.iowaprairienetwork.org. **Thank you!**

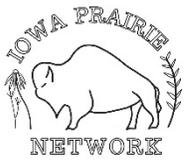
The Iowa Prairie Network is a grass-roots, volunteer organization that is dedicated to the preservation of Iowa's prairie heritage. IPN was formed in 1990 by Iowans concerned that our prairie heritage was disappearing. People needed an organization that would bring those who know about prairie together with those who wanted to learn, to form a network of advocacy for Iowa's natural heritage.

Fall 2022 Events

Please be advised: Scheduling of events is subject to change according to CDC Coronavirus guidelines. Check the IPN Calendar for continued updates. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Upcoming Events – check the IPN Calendar for details, updates and more events! www.iowaprairienetwork.org

September	9	Kauten Fen Tour – Fayette County
	10	Iowa Native Plant Society Annual Meeting – Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt, Maxwell
	12	Prairie Hike and Learn – Mt. Talbot State Preserve, Sioux City
	22	IPN Codfish Hollow Field Trip – Maquoketa
	24	INPS Mossy Glen Field Trip with Tom Rosburg – Mossy Glen State Preserve, Edgewood
	28	INHF Loess Hills Prairie Seed Harvest – Pisgah
October	TBD	Look for event information at www.iowaprairienetwork.org
November	TBD	Look for event information at www.iowaprairienetwork.org



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IPN's Mission: To Learn About, Teach About, Enjoy, and Protect Iowa's Prairie Heritage

Fall 2022

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Nodding Ladies Tresses
Photo by Corinne Bulat