

# Iowa Prairie Network Newsletter

## Winter 2022

### Winter Wonderland

by Aric Ping

*Mountain Lion!* Head sideways, eyes squinting, I can just make out the tracks. Four large vertical football-shaped prints lay splayed in the snow an inch above another elliptical depression; this one larger, lying horizontal, bulging in the middle. *Cat tracks.*

Cat tracks the size of my hand. My heart races. Hair stands up on the back of my neck. Mystified, hopeful, and fearful, I follow the tracks. *Crackkk*, my feet crunch through a half-inch crust of ice, *woompf*, and compress a four-inch layer of wet snow lying underneath. I trudge forward; the rhythmic *crackk woompf*, *crackk woompf*, of my footfalls fracturing the brittle February air.

Occam's Razor slashes through my thoughts like cougar claws. These tracks were probably left by a bobcat, a badger, or maybe a squirrel with a limp. Their imprints have likely melted, deformed, and refrozen into these feline footprints. *But what if?* I ask myself that question all the time: *What if?*

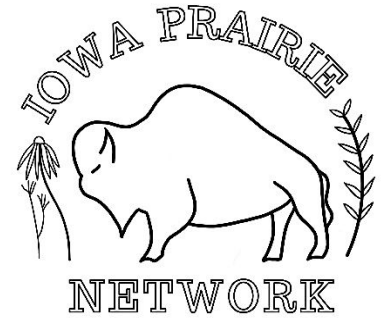
*What if that muddy sandbar cow tibia is a longhorn bison bone? What if that broken bit of clay tile in the stream is a pottery sherd? What if that unfamiliar weed on the edge of the row crop field is a rare prairie plant?* Somehow, like a lifelong Hawkeye fan, something inside me is always convinced of the potential, that this is the year, this is the moment, there's always a chance. I press on.

Winter in the prairie Midwest is always a time of what if. Plans are made for the next growing season. Big plans. Plans easily achieved with a short hop over the icy, fallen logs of reality. As a land steward, I like to walk through the cold quiet white world while thinking about those plans. In fact, that's what I'm doing here whilst stumbling across lion tracks. Winter's icy lens offers a different perspective of the land. Leafless and unobstructed, the woods seem smaller.

It makes you consider just how easy it would be to remove that 40 acres of mulberry, dogwood, and honeysuckle that're bound together with greenbrier. You start to believe you could fit the project into your backlogged workload. And if the icy sheen of refrozen snow reflects the cotton candy and sherbet sunrise just right, you'd swear you were seeing the land as it once was; seamless rose-gold waving prairie rippling in the breeze, but only if you squint. *Crackk woompf.*

*Plans.* What if the lion has plans for me? The tracks leave the prairie and enter some woods. My mind wanders as I follow, somehow bored retracing the tracks of a carnivore with jaws powerful enough to crush my trachea. Unconsciously, I start identifying trees by their bark. I know them all this time of year: mulberry, green ash, red elm, Siberian elm, ironwood, bur oak. I probably couldn't do this in the summer.

*Continued on page 2...*



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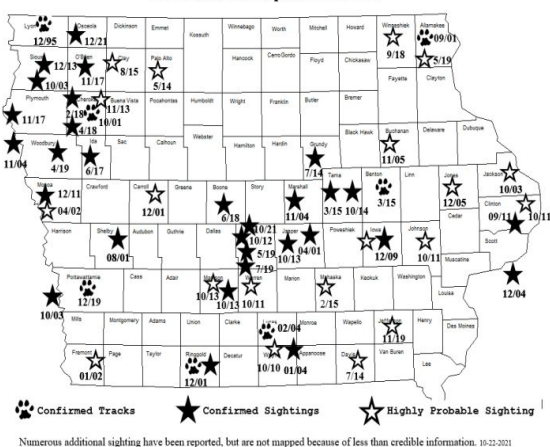
# Winter Wonderland (Continued from page 1)

My tree bark identification skills follow the colors of the seasons. They're rustier than red fallen foliage in November, as wizened and solid as the slate gray sky in February, and as green as freshly unfurled leaves in June. *Crackk woompf!*

The tracks lead me toward the crest of a ridge. I stand still, listening for lions before summiting. *Crackk!* A sudden burst of noise startles me sober. It's a scrambling, sliding, haphazard crashing sound. Adrenaline floods my veins, flushing out the thoughts of dendrophenology. *Make yourself look big! That's what you're supposed to do.* I hurriedly unzip my worn, tan winter jacket, half realizing amidst the motion that it's the same color as a winter whitetail. *Smart.*

Coat held high, breathing hard, cheeks red, body frozen still as the icy air, I listen as the lion bounds away through brush and brambles down the other side of the hill, the snow-covered ground eating the echoes. I double check that I've not wet my long johns before creeping to the crest of the ridge. There's a table-sized depression in the snow. It's littered with deer hair and burgundy blots of coagulated blood. *A kill site.*

Mountain Lion Reports 1995-2021



Confirmed & suspected mountain lion sightings in Iowa  
Data courtesy of the Iowa DNR

I step into the hard-packed bowl to investigate the scene. A gust of blustery wind rattles the icicle-laden mulberry branches above me. The cold cuts through me. A heavy lion paw, hard and cold as ice, crashes into the side of my skull. I lose my footing. *This is it.* I can see the headlines now, "*Local man dressed as deer falls prey to Puma.*"

Laying in the packed snow, I hunch my shoulders and prepare for death. The lion isn't in a hurry. *Typical cat, playing with its food.* Three heartbeats pass. Nothing happens. I sit up, look around, and wonder why my trachea remains uncrushed. There's no lion. My hand is sticky. I glance at it, covered in maroon plasma, little black seeds clinging to my fingers.

I lick the coagulated blood. It's sweet and tastes an awful lot like mulberries. A doe is standing downhill, looking at me. She turns her head sideways, squints, and sounds a self-assured snort before walking away; seemingly answering her own question of what if. The whitetail and I come to a silent agreement. Neither of us will share this embarrassing story with anyone.

I stand up in what is now obviously a deer bed covered in melted and refrozen heart-shaped hoofprints with indentations of splattered wet snow lying above them like cat toes. I take a minute to take in the view from the ridgetop. The fresh snow has smoothed the land. The white blanket erases property lines and makes the landscape feel whole. Prairie and row crop fields become indistinguishable. Roads disappear. The whole sharp-edged modern world is rounded and dulled. Winter quiets the present, it gives us a glimpse of the land's seamless and wild past, it gives us perspective on how things could be, to wonder what if?

## IPN Board of Directors

### Region 1

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### Region 7

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### At Large

Jon Judson  
Aric Ping  
Shami Morse  
Ann Wolf  
Derek Miner  
Pete Eyheralde

## Find a Prairie

The IPN website now lists public prairies in all 99 Iowa counties.  
<https://www.iowaprairienetwork.org/find-a-prairie>



## Join our Board or Become a Committee Member

Our board is currently full, but we're always looking for prairie lovers who want to help with our mission! Add your special talent to a committee (Communications, Finance, Marketing, Newsletter or Membership). Contact us at ([iowaprairienetworkorg@gmail.com](mailto:iowaprairienetworkorg@gmail.com))

"In seed time, learn. In harvest, teach. In winter, enjoy."  
— William Blake



# Fall Prairie Walk at Loess Hills Scenic Overlook

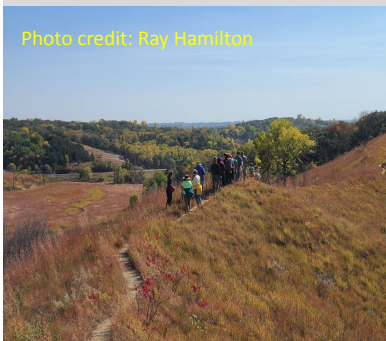
by Tabitha Panas

On Sunday, October 9th, participants gathered at the Loess Hills Scenic Overlook for a walk through the fall prairie guided by Dr. Tom Rosburg of Drake University.

Some 20 participants came out to enjoy the beautiful fall weather on the prairie, reveling in the sunshine as it drove out the chill of an October morning in Western Iowa.

Dr. Rosburg has spearheaded a floristic inventory for the site, and offered first-hand insights into the management strategies for the area and the surrounding landscape in the Loess Hills State Forest.

Photo credit: Ray Hamilton



The event also honored “Friends of the Prairie” award winners Tom & Carman Rosburg for the incredible dedication to prairie preservation, restoration, and outreach. Fellow prairie friend Jon Judson will receive his award at the IPN winter meeting.

Photo credit: Ray Hamilton



## North American Prairie Conference

**When:**  
June 25-29  
2022

**Where:**  
The Meadows  
Events Center  
Altoona, IA

**Hosted By**



Iowa  
Natural Heritage  
Foundation



# IPN Annual Membership Meeting

by Kenny Slocum

On August 6th, the Iowa Prairie Network descended upon Maquoketa for the annual meeting. These meetings rotate from region to region, allowing prairie enthusiasts from all over the state to become acquainted with some biomes slightly different from their home turf. Our annual meeting is always free and open to the public. Active IPN members in good standing are able and invited to vote for open positions on the board.

The event began with a tour of Codfish Hollow Prairie, an incredible restoration story, led by Ray Hamilton. For more than 30 years, Ray has stewarded the site through painstaking efforts to understand and nurture its unique inhabitants.

The board meeting itself enjoyed the attendance of more than 50 IPN members, most in person with a few disembodied heads coming through virtually.

After the pandemic threw off the traditional date of the winter meeting, the board discussed whether or not the later March date had any advantages over January.

Given the demographics of a room full of Iowans, the group agreed March held slightly better weather prospects going forward.

The group also appointed three new board members at the meeting. Caitlin Golle will represent region 2, Tony Vorwald in region 4, and Shami Morse as our newest at large member. Check out their bios on our website!

Photo credit: Ray Hamilton



Photo credit: Kenny Slocum



# *Curing Plant Blindness with Backwards Botany* by Kenny Slocum

Anyone working in environmental education and interpretation has had a moment - ideally, several - where they felt a message land. You can almost see it, a literal flash in the eyes, when an experience goes from pass-through signal to lasting memory. For most of us, it's the reason we do the job.

Lighting that spark in younger people, especially young kids, presents definite challenges. Kids love wildlife, but getting them interested in plants takes some real work. My long-dormant, almost-unused bachelor's in psychology has started to rumble a bit with an observation I've picked up over the last few years about what young people really see when they see plants.

The term "plant blindness" refers to people's general lack of discrimination when it comes to the green, leafy things in the background of the actual interesting stuff. They see a bird or a butterfly or a bee crawling around on a plant, but if you ask them later to recall the plant it was using, most people draw a blank.

Often, naturalists combat plant blindness with a direct attack: teach people to identify a few flowers. Show them the finer details, the leaf arrangements, the petal count. Make them feel like a superhero by giving them a non-flowering organ that gives a sure-fire identification in any season.

The flash card approach. It works. However, it quickly butts up against the limitations of short-term memory, which means a person can't stay engaged with this approach very long. When it's 2nd or 3rd graders on an hour-long prairie hike, this style wears out even more quickly. But I've found there's a much easier way to cure plant blindness with kids who can't yet pronounce "echinacea."



Structure. Kids - and humans generally, for that matter - can pick up patterns quickly. Show them a wet depression, and ask them if they notice anything different about the plants. Taller, greener, "a bunch of that red thing," whatever it is they notice, they noticed it. That's a big step in the fight against plant blindness.

Pretty soon, they start looking for differences. That's another big step. They're comfortable articulating their observations; a spiky thing here, a big clump of something there, more trees, more grass, etc. It doesn't take much longer before they start hypothesizing, noticing the proximity of water or trails or roads or slope and wondering if that might not explain the structural differences.

Perhaps it's just my experience, but this is exactly backwards from how I learned about plants. For me, Identification came first, ecological context much later. Concepts like succession didn't find me until at least a decade after I could identify a dandelion.

Watching kids on field trips gamely hop around the prairie, noting the abundance of the "golden-thingie" (*Solidago sp.*) under the shade of an oak limb, I wonder if it doesn't all come back to sensation, perception, and memory. Human vision cues in on movement. When we step back from the taxonomy and feel the movement on the prairie, we bring the plants to life.

Storytelling always embeds better than rote facts, and any prairie lover knows that plants tell a story. Multiflora rose giving away a grazing history. Prairie cordgrass flagging a wet spot. Creeping charlie edging in from the fireline, likely brought in on tractor tires or hiking boots.

Too often, we save the macro-scale discussions for older audiences. But it seems that in doing so, we miss an opportunity to connect with some people who remember the "why" but not the "what."

*"A child said 'What is the grass?' fetching it to me with full hands.*

*How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he." –Walt Whitman*



## Featured IPN Connection

IPN works with a multitude of agencies and organizations to support us in our mission. We thank them for their support.



to promote economic development through the restoration and conservation of Iowa's cultural and natural resources.

Save The Date!

Iowa Prairie Network  
Winter Meeting  
February 18th, 2023

Drake University  
Virtual option available

Educational Seminars  
Roundtable Discussion  
Silent Auction

Have a story you'd like to tell in the newsletter

Contact  
IowaPrairieNetworkOrg@gmail.com

## Student Scholarships!

The Iowa Prairie Network will be providing financial scholarships to several college students that attend the North American Prairie Conference on June 25-28th, 2023 in Des Moines, Iowa. Details and applications available by January 1st, 2023 on [www.NorthAmericanPrairie.org](http://www.NorthAmericanPrairie.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](http://www.iowaprairienetwork.org). **Thank you!**

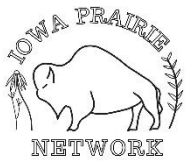
The Iowa Prairie Network is a grass-roots, volunteer organization that is dedicated to the preservation of Iowa's prairie heritage. IPN was formed in 1990 by Iowans concerned that our prairie heritage was disappearing. People needed an organization that would bring those who know about prairie together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

## Winter 2022/23 Events

**Please be advised:** Scheduling of events is subject to change. 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](http://www.iowaprairienetwork.org)

December	8 15	(INHF) Brush & Brews invasive brush removal work day - Elkhart (INHF) Brandes winter workday – Cedar Falls
January	12 13 28	Winter Workday at Breene Prairie (INHF) – Monticello Alpha Fen Winter Workday (INHF) – Waucoma Winter Work Day at Perkins Prairie Preserve (INHF) – Jefferson
February	10 18 18 24	Iowa Women in Natural Resources Conference – Fort Dodge Loess Hills Winter Workday (INHF) – Turin Iowa Prairie Network Winter Meeting - Drake University Winter Work Day at Snyder Heritage Farm (INHF) – Elkhart



**Iowa Prairie Network, Inc.**  
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[www.iowaprairienetwork.org](http://www.iowaprairienetwork.org)

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



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