

Iowa Prairie Network Newsletter

Winter 2023

Prairie Works

by Tim Youngquist

A month sitting alone in a combine provides ample opportunity for reflection. I've come to realize something I knew, but didn't really *know*: the wildlife we share the state with is missing something. Traversing the land in a giant mechanized robot on our family's farm in west central Iowa has provided me with a different perspective than I get the other eleven months out of the year. There are peaceful sunrises, storybook clouds, and dazzling sunsets. I have seen burrowing owls, woodcocks, red foxes, and minks and more moving through the crop while I sit my climate-controlled cab.



Prairie Strips on the Youngquist farm

Most of harvest is spent with seemingly endless driving back and forth, punctuated by the action of unloading-on-the-go into a grain cart without missing a step in the harvest dance.

We have not adopted auto-steer technology, so attention to detail is required, but much of it is the same, hour after hour, day after day.

A reprieve from the monotony is granted and the excitement starts building: a field is nearly complete and there are only a few rows of corn left.

Like the last row of hair to be clipped, the fresh cut of the field is as satisfying as you'd imagine. As the combine noisily lumbers toward the last hundred feet of crop, any remaining wildlife begin scampering out, away from the corn and away from vulnerability under the clear sky. My Swedish ancestors would take joy in the clean, orderly look of a freshly cut field – like the joy a mother gets when she rubs her hand over her child's freshly buzzed hair.

Everything is uniform, not a blade of corn standing. There's something else there though, hidden in the satisfaction, a different sort of feeling. In a typical cornfield, cottontail rabbits or a few pheasants emerge, seeking refuge in a grassed waterway or the increasingly rare fenceline. Clearly, any type of cover is preferable to a bare field, but most of our state's waterways, fencelines and ditches were long ago seeded to a monoculture of non-native smooth brome.

While brome provides cover from the swooping hawks or roving coyotes, it offers little in the way of a home or food source. Watching these critters take flight dims the feeling of satisfaction a little. This is the home of the wildlife – shouldn't it be wilder? The wildlife we share the state with is missing something.

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In my off-farm job as the farmer liaison for the STRIPS (Science-based Trials of Rowcrops Integrated with Prairie Strips) program at Iowa State University, I am privileged to work with a wonderful diversity of experts. When I related this story to a colleague, he assured me that there are not many species of wildlife that make their homes in the corn, so I am not actually de-homing too many things.

But wasn't that my point exactly? Most of the land that is now in corn and soybean production was once prairie. Iowa has the notorious distinction of being known as the most altered state in the nation. How much wildlife have we de-homed statewide? In less than 200 years, what once covered 85% of the state's total land area has been converted to raise two cash crops: corn and soybeans.



Prairie strip in Nebraska

To the prairie conservationist, this is a story we know by heart. But what if we added an addendum to that refrain: Iowa is the most altered state in the nation, *for now.*

I firmly believe that prairie is uniquely well-suited to help solve many of the unintended negative consequences caused by modern agriculture while causing the least amount of disruption to the farmer and/or landowner.

The wildlife we share the state with isn't just missing something, it's missing prairie.

Across the upper Midwest, in the fields where we have collaborated with farmers, landowners, and a variety of other diverse stakeholders to strategically integrate prairie, the landscape is thriving with wildlife and plant diversity. Hours spent in the field by a small army of STRIPS researchers at ISU and beyond have proven this.

The STRIPS program has a pile of peer-reviewed scientific papers, available for free at our website:

www.prairiestrips.org.

Going beyond science, I have seen this firsthand at my family's farm: as I harvested the corn adjacent to East Otter Creek and the buffer strip seeded by one of Iowa's most knowledgeable prairie experts, Jon Judson, half a dozen white tail deer skipped lazily through the tall grasses and forbs ahead of my combine.

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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 currently has one opening, and 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).

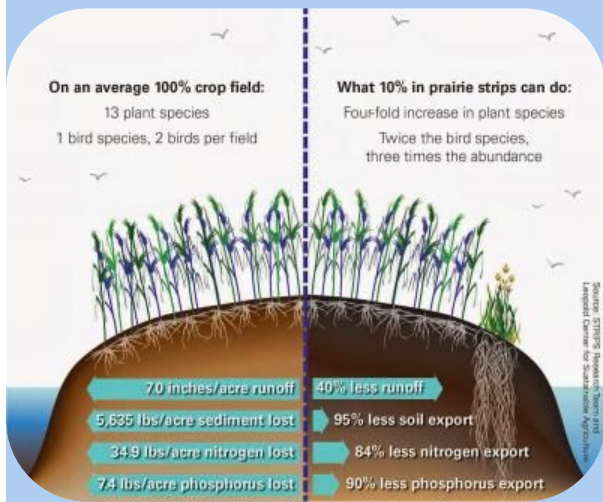
Contact us at (IowaPrairieNetworkOrg@Gmail.Com)

"There was something about the prairie for me—it wasn't where I had come from, but when I moved there it just took me in and I knew I couldn't ever stop living under that big sky." - Pam Houston

Prairie Works *(Continued from page 2)*

Dozens of pheasants were flushed from the corn throughout the day, dark eyed juncos and countless others flitted in and out of the grasses continuously. In a landscape so many of us are conditioned to believe nothing can thrive, I've seen what the addition of a strip of prairie can create: a community that literally hums with life.

Placing prairie anywhere in the landscape, whether in a crop field or in your front yard, can produce a suite of environmental benefits for wildlife and beyond. Prairie strips are intended to help keep topsoil in place and filter surface water runoff. Strategically integrating prairie into fields also just makes good business sense. Back on my farm, a steep clay hillside that produced poor yields for years was converted to a prairie strip and is awash in plants, including prairie phlox (*Phlox Pilosa*) three years after seeding. Phlox! Again, thanks Jon. What was ill-suited as a cash crop field is one of the nicest prairie reconstructions I have ever seen. That steep clay hillside has welcomed back native grasses, legumes, forbs, and sedges with an undeniable ease and grace, while also increasing our net profit on those acres. These types of land use change are within reach for anyone who is a farmer, farmland owner, or someone who will inherit farmland someday.



Prairie strips by the numbers

The United States Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program offers cost-share programs for putting prairie back on the agricultural landscape. Practices like CP43 (prairie strips) allows prairie to be flexibly and strategically placed amongst rowcrops.

Research at Iowa State University has proven that putting even a small amount of prairie in a field can produce disproportionate benefits: converting 10% of a crop field into prairie can reduce the amount of sediment lost by 95% and reduce nitrogen and phosphorus export by 70 and 77 percent, respectively.

Bird abundance is doubled, and pollinator abundance is tripled.

Again, these are claims backed by piles of peer-reviewed scientific papers that the STRIPS team has published.

Since their addition in the 2018 Farm Bill, prairie strips have been seeded on nearly 20,000 acres across 14 states. The vast majority of these acres are in Iowa and Illinois. I am privileged to work with farmers and farmland owners all over the state, helping use prairie to help them solve problems on their farms.

I'm not trying to oversell these small parcels of prairie. Math is math. One acre of prairie is less than 100 acres of prairie. These small parcels may not have size on their side, but after a decade of doing this job, I have seen firsthand the benefits that can come from adding prairie to your life.

Prairie strips can be a powerful entry point for someone who has little experience with Iowa's biology or ecology. Many of the people I have worked with stated that their prairie strips have become their favorite place on the farm. One even poignantly declared, "The prairie is where I go on the farm when I'm having a bad day."

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"The sea, the woods, the mountains, all suffer in comparison with the prairie...The prairie has a stronger hold upon the senses." -Albert Pike

Prairie Works *(Continued from page 3)*

Beyond the financial and ecological benefits, anyone who has spent time in a prairie can tell you: prairie is good for the soul.

My goal at ISU and on my own farm is to find opportunities to add more habitat to the landscape, to keep the best in the world topsoil in place and to clean our surface water that seems to be getting worse each year. Farmers know the areas that are problems annually: wet spots, dry spots, rocky spots, steep hillsides, and shaded field edges. Since prairie once covered 85% of Iowa's land mass, with a little stewardship, it's going to thrive in all those spots.

Our state's environmental issues can seem daunting, but we know exactly what to do to make improvements. This essay is not intended as an indictment of, or excuse for, farming. We can look in the mirror and know that we can do better. If you are a farmer or farmland owner looking to get started with conservation here are my simple suggestions.

Farmland owners that attend prairie conferences and prairie walks, talk with your tenant about adding some prairie to the farm, you are more powerful than you believe, and they are more receptive to talking than you may realize.

Farmers, look at your fields and specifically the spots that are continuously problematic and consider whether prairie would be better suited in those areas. Farmers and farmland owners should seek out field days to see prairie strips in action and talk with others who have already had experience with integrating prairie into their operations.

I will be hosting field days all over the state throughout 2024. Come join me! I am not hard to find.

**The 2024
Iowa Prairie
Conference
is Coming!**

**When:
August 16-18
2024**

**Where:
Iowa
Lakeside Lab**

Milford, IA

Featuring

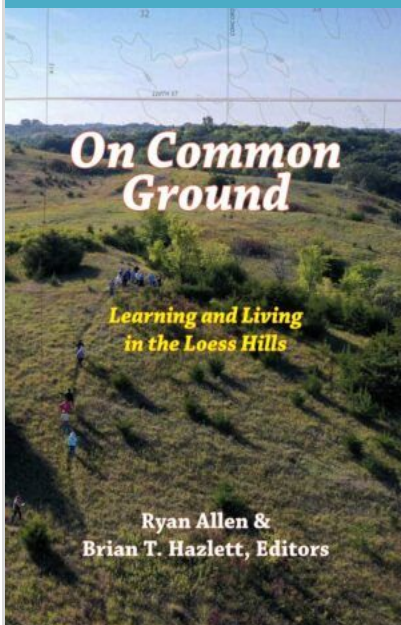
**Educational
Sessions**

Guided Hikes

**Boat ride on
Iowa's Great
Lakes!**

Book Review: *On Common Ground*

by Leesa McNeil



For most of my life, I lived in it, and never knew it! The Loess Hills! *On Common Ground* brings the hills and commensurate prairie to life from many different perspectives.

If you have never visited the Hills, after this read a visit will be on your bucket list. *On Common Ground* reminds us all why wherever it is we call home needs to be respected, cherished and protected.

The read compels us to think about what is native and non-native and to take "attentive care" to wherever it is we call home. Both interesting and inspirational -- I recommend this book to all prairie enthusiasts!

"...Boundless and beautiful / For which the speech of England has no name-- / The Prairies...Fitting floor / For this magnificent temple of the sky..." -William Cullen Bryant

Featured IPN Connection

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



Drake Prairie Rescue receives external funding to conduct prairie management on private land using Drake students as interns. The program has provided hands-on experience in prairie ecology for over 300 students and helped save prairies on over 65 sites across Iowa.

Are you interested in an Iowa Prairie Network prairie walk near you?!

Reach out to an IPN Board member in your region and we would be happy to help plan an event!

Find regions and board members in the About Us tab on the website!

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

Contact IowaPrairieNetworkOrg@gmail.com



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 or give an additional gift with PayPal

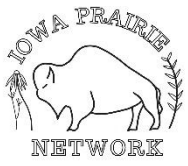
Don't forget to **RENEW** your membership! www.iowaprairienetwork.org. **Thank you!**

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.

33rd Annual IPN Winter Seminar

Saturday, February 24th, 9:45-5:00 PM
Ames High School
“Prairies: Growing and Changing”

Featured topics:
Climate Change and Prairies
Old Growth Prairies
Southeastern US Grasslands
Invasive Species



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



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