

Iowa Prairie Network Newsletter

Summer 2024

Iowa Prairie Conference 2024

by Leesa McNeil

The 2024 Iowa Prairie Conference (IPC) will be held August 16 through 18, 2024 at the Iowa Lakeside Laboratory, Regents Resource Center, 1838 Highway 86, Milford, Iowa. The IPC is a bi-annual conference and has been held for over twenty years at various locations around Iowa.



Field Trip at a Carl Kurtz prairie restoration from IPC, 2021

The 2024 IPC will be held on Lakeside's 147-acre campus located on scenic West Okoboji Lake on Little Millers Bay. A keynote address about Cayler State Preserve will be given by DNR Ecologist John Pearson.

Topics for additional education sessions include prairie fens, prairie and soil restoration, area archeology, prescribed burn cooperatives, and an update on the farm bill and Iowa Nature Summit.

A Friday afternoon visit to area Prairie Strips will be held prior to event registration. Attendees

will have an opportunity to participate in guided hikes/outings that showcase special and unique area fens, wetlands and prairie remnants. Saturday evening outings include a Queen II excursion to learn about restoration of shoreline, a visit to Excelsior Fen/Dugout Creek Complex and Freda Haffner Kettlehole.

Sunday outings include a birding adventure, musings by Connie Mutel author and prairie enthusiast on Iowa's Fragile Giants and Fragile Landscapes, a visit to The Prairie Flower (area native seed dealer), an Oak Savana restoration, Kirchner Prairie and a hike at Cayler Prairie.

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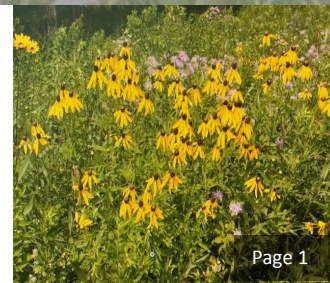
Cost to attend (includes meals and transportation to Sat/Sun hikes/outings): \$50

Virtual attendance on Saturday, August 17th: \$10

Use this link to register to attend in-person or virtually:

<https://friendsoflakesidelab.org/2024-iowa-prairie-conference/>

For detailed conference information go to: IowaPrairieNetwork.org



Welcome to northwest Iowa. I trust your travels to the 2024 Iowa Prairie Conference have been dark green blurs of checkerboard cornfields. I hope you kept your car windows rolled up - a person can only inhale so much ethanol fog, herbicide drift, and volatilized pig feces before



delirium sets in and one finds themselves doing ridiculous things like rooting for Iowa State.

Yes, it's true, there isn't much prairie on the road to Okoboji, but the lakes area and the Little Sioux river corridor are a bit of a watering hole in the Black Desert.

You'll find prairie scraps here hiding in the nooks and crannies too wet, gravelly, or steep to plow under. Huddled in their postage stamp hideouts, the wild inhabitants wait for the end times when the grass will be green and the water will be clean.

Most of these hangers-on are generalists, the disturbance adapted, the pesticide tolerant. Some long forgotten conservative holdouts from the prairie days cling to the fringes of the fringe here, too.

They are castaways on tiny, far flung island oases. Their once sweeping vistas of tawny waving grasses have since been replaced by topsoil dust devils. Their clean spring rains now spiked with dicamba. I used to frequent one such oasis. It's a narrow, steep treeless valley divided by a gravel bottomed tributary of the Little Sioux River.

The signs of progress on this site are everywhere. The flat areas above the valley were once plowed, part of the stream has been channelized to make room for hay ground, and almost all the rest has been overgrazed for more than a century. There is one portion left unutilized; an unprofitable series of hillsides too steep for cattle to climb without rappel or a tractor to till without tumbling.

These hard-to-reach prairie patches are a testament. They're a conduit to the history of this land. A guide for restoration. An inspiration in stubborn resilience. A huge pain to climb.

I remember a day when my work took me to those slopes... I sauntered along the hillsides seeking an intruder. The searching was easy. The nodding heads of invasive musk thistle are not difficult to find. Their solitary, bright pink flowers arch a few feet above the shorter prairie plants on long, thin pubescent stems. The flowers bob about in the wind, gesturing with their movements; "Yes, this is a good place to grow." they say, and later, "No, don't pluck me from the earth."

They are highly critical plants. They love to cluster together, assessing fresh-dug coyote dens; "Yes, they've really outdone themselves this time." they say, or "No, this is derivative of their earlier work." I'm leading a crew, a gaggle of Grim Reapers.

Region 1

Leesa McNeil
Tabitha Panas

Region 2

Laura Miner
Caitlin Golle

Region 3

Laura Fischer Walter
Tim Youngquist
Vacant

Region 4

Tony Vorwald
Kenny Slocum

Region 5

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Cait Caughey

Region 6

Kelly Jacobs
Caitlin Schultes

Region 7

A.J. McBride
Codi Sharkey

At Large

Aric Ping
Shami Morse
Ann Wolf
Derek Miner
Pete Eyheralde

“Wildflowers don’t grow haphazardly as we are led to believe. They grow in fantastic patterns which are different to each of us you see.” - Anthony T. Hincks

We walk sidehill through the valley searching out the musk thistle, passing judgment of our own, looking to convict and evict the Eurasian forb from the remnant prairie. Our hands are galls, we remove the thistles' heads, placing them into large black plastic garbage bags. The rest of the plant is pulled from the earth, root and stem. We leave their bodies to shrivel in the sun as a warning to others. Musk thistles are notoriously tough.



While only a biennial plant, their taproot can extend over two feet into the ground. If that taproot is not severed the plant will proliferate. They might grow 6 inches high instead of 6 feet, but they'll still produce thousands of seeds, the decapitated weed regenerating from reserves in its carrot-like root.

It's a cloudless, humid, July morning. The dewey grass leaves everyone's pants heavy, sopping wet to the knees, their belts struggling. The moisture will soon soak the top of our socks and wick down into our boots, leaving our feet wet for the day.

It's early, but the sun is already unrelenting and our worksite in the valley is sheltered from any breeze that might bring relief. The birds still sing, though. Bobolinks, dickcissels, and meadowlarks chirp and babble their morning songs, greeting the new day, letting the others know whose fence post or compass plant is whose.

The pace and simplicity of this work allows your mind to wander and wonder. Your forearms may be bleeding, your back aching, and your drawers more than a little dewey, but at least there is time to think. My thoughts blast-off like a billionaire's phallic rocket ship. Why is it called musk thistle? There's no musk.

Maybe it's named after some long forgotten Ms. or Mr. Musk? Elon's ancestors? Probably. Musk thistle could survive on Mars, I think. I can imagine their pink, droopy heads nodding away in the rusty dust storms of the red planet like Yes-Men placating the egos of interplanetary one-percenters. I pluck the bright pink head off of a waist-high thistle and gaze into the corolla. I can see myself.

We are not so different, their kind and my own. Always looking for a niche to expand their footprint. Sending their taproot as deep and quick as possible into any new land, taking all that it can without regard to its neighbors. Expending all of the available resources for short-term gain. It must spread or die. The incessant drive to grow for growth's sake. That cancerous madness. I look away, breathe, take in the view of the valley, and throw the flowerhead into the garbage sack.

The morning slips past. The sun has crossed its apex, but the heat of the day keeps piling up, held by humidity. The prairie birds packed it in hours ago. Their songs have been replaced by a droning insect interlude, the swish-swash of bogged-down boots trudging through grass, and the slippery sliding sound of growing garbage bags being drug through the damp vegetation. Grasshoppers lazily spring out from under each of my steps - their desire to not be squashed barely wins out over the comfort of the shade.

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“The Great Plains were immense enough to inspire the grandest, most foolish of dreams - but they were also vast enough that no one could ever explore every corner.” - *Melanie Benjamin*

Naming Names *continued from page 2*

Turkey Vultures circle above, effortlessly riding invisible thermals toward the stratosphere, waiting for something to die. My limbs drift through the thick atmosphere as if they're underwater. Every movement is slow to gain momentum and even slower to halt. It's break time.

I drop the sack, chug some water, and straighten my back from the Quasimodoian form it had settled into. I play a game with myself to pass the time. I try to name all the plants I can see, but like my thoughts on musk thistle, soon get caught up in the "why" of their names. Some common names harken back to the Old West like buffalo pea and rattlesnake master. Others have tough names like leadplant, skullcap, and cutleaf ironplant - labels that would mislead you to believe that they'd be able to hold their ground against the tide of slow elk and rusty plows.

Then there are the food plants: ground plum, western parsley, prairie turnip. None of them taste anything like their European namesakes. Indigenous peoples, of course, had different names for all of these plants long before Euroamericans decided they needed new ones. Native Americans knew the flora's medicinal and nutritional value, too. Their lives depended upon knowing which plants could be eaten, which were toxic, which could soothe a burn, which would cause the skin to blister.

They knew them all intimately, bred them, made them a part of their most important rituals and everyday life. They understood that they were a part of the same community; that their bodies would someday feed the plants that fed them. Something occurs to me then: plants have names beyond human tongues, as well. The sun language of ultraviolet.

They open their petals when the cosmic rays first shout over the morning horizon. They sadly close them again when saying goodbye at twilight. The sun is their silent shining siren, but insects call to them audibly. The minute atmospheric vibrations created by the beating of a bumble bee's wings can be detected by different prairie plants. This "hearing" stimulates the plants to produce more nectar, making them more attractive to certain insects.

More nectar means more invertebrate visitors, which means that plant has increased their likelihood of being pollinated and reproducing. The great driver of the natural world. Without eyes they see the sun. Without ears they hear the bees. What, I wonder, was their response centuries ago when they felt the earth itself shake as the hooves of bison thundered out their names?

I drag the last load of garbage bags full of decapitated musk thistle flower heads toward the truck. Like the sacks, I too, am heavy, hot, and wet. Being bedraggled and overheated, my mind has given up on naming names. There is nothing left but breath, the beat of blood, the buzzing of cicadas. Mid-slope, I look back up the valley and a strange pattern reveals itself - the slopes have stripes. They are layer cakes of grass.

Each level is holding unique species within its own specific niche of moisture, soil, and light exposure. The wet bottom layer is matted with prairie cordgrass, the next layer up is big bluestem, on top of that comes little bluestem and dropseed, then side oats grama, then blue grama in the driest layer. The tip top of the slope, the frosting, is a thin strip of porcupine grass, its sharp 4 inch needle-tipped awns blowing off like birthday candle smoke in the wind as it crests the rim of the valley. The grass' twisted airborne seeds impale the ground like javelins, waiting to corkscrew into the earth in the next rain. Seeing these sorts of fundamental patterns in person is like suddenly finishing a puzzle you hadn't realized you were working on. Of course it fits together in this way, you knew that it did, but it hadn't truly shared its identity.

It hadn't told you its name. A conference is a place full of shouted names half heard and soon fully forgotten. The prairie, though, whispers names never misremembered.

**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!**



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 Treasurer A.J. McBride P.O. Box 1624 Iowa City, IA 52244

*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.

August-September 2024 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

August	14	Ames High Prairie Walk – Ames High Prairie, Ames, 6:45-8:00 PM
	16	IPN and INPS annual meetings – Lakeshore Center, Milford 3:15-5:00 PM
	20	Doolittle Prairie Walk - Doolittle Prairie, Story County 7:00-8:30 PM
	24	Five Ridge Prairie Walk - Five Ridge Prairie, Westfield, 4:00-
September	7	Ozark Wildlife Area - Hurstville Interpretive Center, Maquoketa, 10-12 PM
	12	Ames High Prairie Walk – Ames High Prairie, Ames, 6:45-8:00 PM
	14	Prairie Hills Preserve Walk – Prairie Hills Preserve, Westfield, 4-6:30 PM
	17	Prairie Walk – Doolittle Prairie, Story City 7:00 - 8:30 PM
	21	IPN Region 7 Prairie Hike – Knoxville, IA 1:15-3:15 PM

August 9th-10th West Branch, Iowa

Take a stop by the IPN booth at this annual festival, celebrating Herbert Hoover's 150th birthday in 2024!

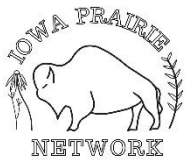
For more information on events and the Herbert Hoover Historic Site, visit <https://www.hooverdays.org>

Celebrate Iowa Prairie Heritage Week!

September 8-14th
2024

Have a story, picture, poem, or other media you'd like to see in our newsletter?

Contact
IowaPrairieNetworkOrg@gmail.com



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



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