

Message from the Director

Whiterock Conservancy (WRC) is growing—literally and figuratively. Just like on the beautiful landscape we steward, each passing season is a demonstration of transition and growth. In the past year we have added professional staff, developed new projects, and hosted a multitude of educational events. Additionally we will be launching our new website (www.whiterockconservancy.org) in the coming weeks.



Guiding our growth is our three-part mission: dedication to conserving and protecting Iowa's natural resources, demonstration of sustainable rural land management, and connecting the public with the environment through outdoor recreation and education.

As 2009 approaches, I want to thank those of you who have become a part of the Whiterock community. Whether you supported us financially, patroned our resort, attended one of our events, volunteered your time, or simply stopped for some shade during a long bike ride, we appreciate your involvement.

With the many changes of this year, and your continued support, WRC is positioned to play a key role in creating a more sustainable Iowa of tomorrow!

-Tolif Hunt
Executive Director



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A Land in Transition: Moving from a brome grassland to functional prairie

Driving on county highways in the Iowa this spring, one could not help but notice all of the brown pastures and grasslands. The fresh green growth of perennial plants was lacking because many fields had been sprayed with herbicide in preparation for planting corn and soybeans.

It isn't hard to understand why this large-scale conversion of perennial grassland to annual cropland is taking place; landowners and farmers are responding to skyrocketing commodity prices. As a result, sensitive grassland habitat and vegetative cover is disappearing, which unnerves the conservation community.

Over the next 10 years a projected 2 million acres of land currently

enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) will be converted to row crop. This loss of grassland habitat could decimate certain bird and pollinator populations, and the resulting increases in soil erosion will damage our already fragile rivers. All of this is reason for great concern for all Iowans.

Driving along Figure Avenue through the center of Whiterock Conservancy's land (WRC), you might have seen a similar scene this spring. WRC is also converting perennial grassland to annual row crop. However, this conversion is only the first step in a program designed to restore native prairie from brome grasslands by using a transition crop to prepare the seedbed and help fund the restoration work.



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volunteer opportunities

PRESCRIBED FIRE CREW

Autumn prescribed fire season is just around the corner!

Whiterock Conservancy's prescribed fire program is part restoration, part education, part fun. Please volunteer with us this autumn, starting in early November. You'll learn the basics of prescribed fire, get acquainted with the Whiterock landscape, and help us do good work.

PRAIRIE SEED HARVEST

Help collect today so that we may plant tomorrow...

Join the land stewardship crew out on the land, collecting prairie and savanna seeds for use in restoration projects. Learn to identify grassland plant species, learn their habitats, and assist in collecting the seeds for the future. Join the collection crew on:

September 24

October 7

October 12

Contact Elizabeth to sign up for the fire crew email list and prairie seed collection forays: elizabeth@whiterockconservancy.org.



ecologist's corner

Whiterock BioBlitz 2008

Each time I walk into Whiterock valley, I generally find at least one new and amazing living thing. This spring I was able to ask myself, "what will 76 people find if they go out and walk together?" On Memorial Day weekend, participants in the first annual Whiterock BioBlitz answered this question for me— 442 different living things to be exact. On a soggy day in the middle of a very late spring, migratory songbirds were flitting through the newly leafed-out oaks, the frog orchestra was in full swing, spring ephemeral wildflowers were winding down, and folks of all ages in raingear were traipsing through Whiterock valley, binoculars and butterfly nets ready, eyes and ears peeled for signs of previously unobserved life. It was so very exciting!

The Whiterock BioBlitz, funded by a grant from the Guthrie County Community Foundation, was modeled after the first BioBlitz, an event held in 1996 in Washington DC's Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, when National Park Service employees and participants attempted to document all of the living species on the garden property in one day. For the Whiterock BioBlitz, 14 volunteer-scientists led groups of enthusiastic participants out onto the landscape during the "24-hour snapshot" of Whiterock Conservancy-managed lands. We managed to find a handful of plants, birds, mollusks, and snails that had never been

observed on the property before, the most exciting of which were probably the Northern Parula and Blackburnian Warbler, two of the most beautiful wood warblers to visit our state, in my mind. Two oak savanna remnants were also located, and have been added to the priority management area for oak savanna restoration projects that will continue this autumn and winter. Sensitive migratory songbird habitat was distinguished along two small creeks, and will be monitored next spring for other rare birds.

The Whiterock BioBlitz was a wonderful event, possible only because of the graciousness of the volunteers, the inquisitiveness of the participants, but most basically, the wild diversity in Whiterock valley. It is so simple: if we keep our eyes open, we'll continue to find new and wonderful things. Please join us next summer for the Second Annual Whiterock BioBlitz, and until then, search on your own while scheme and dream of what we may find!

-Elizabeth Hill



Christopher Zito, of Cedar Rapids, never stopped looking for invertebrates

never been observed on the property before, the most exciting of which were probably the Northern Parula and Blackburnian Warbler, two of the most beautiful wood warblers to visit our state, in my mind. Two oak savanna remnants were also located, and have been added to the priority management area for oak savanna restoration projects that will continue this autumn and winter. Sensitive migratory songbird habitat was distinguished along two small creeks, and will be monitored next spring for other rare birds.



Lunch at the Riverhouse Barn kept the crew energized and talking about all the new discoveries.

Iowa Prairie Network

On July 18-19th, the Iowa Prairie Network (IPN) spent the annual meeting and summer party touring Guthrie and Carroll county natural areas including Whiterock Conservancy with their hosts Jon Judson of Dedham and WRC's Elizabeth Hill. Dr. Thomas Rosburg of Drake University presented a lecture on western influences on Iowa prairies, and Scott Moats of The Nature Conservancy spoke on the differences be-

tween bison and cattle grazing on prairie. Beth Henning led a tour of her 15-year oak savanna and prairie restoration project and Judson took the group to two prairie remnants that he manages, one that is home to a state listed endangered species. Dinner and excitement followed at Diversity Farms outside of Dedham, when a tornado was spotted 3 miles away! Interested in prairie issues? Check out: www.iowaprairienetwork.org

News Briefs

Partners for Fish & Wildlife

WRC recently signed a Partners for Fish and Wildlife Habitat Development Agreement with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The agreement will provide \$10,000 in funding towards oak savanna restoration on portions of a 200-acre priority area on Whiterock Conservancy property. Restoration practices will include mechanically removing invasive trees and shrubs and continuing to implement prescribed fire. Partners for Fish and Wildlife, a US Fish and Wildlife Service program for private lands, provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and non-profits who are willing to protect and restore priority habitats. For information regarding restoration on your land, contact your local USFWS Private Lands Biologist: www.fws.gov/midwest/Partners/Iowa.html

ISU Students Rate Sustainability of WRC, Neighbors

In July, Whiterock Conservancy, Joe and Carroll Schultes, Beaver Creek Farm, and Wiggles LLC hosted 23 students from the Iowa State University's Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture. The Agroecosystems Analysis class, directed by Betty Wells, Gretchen Zdorkowski, and Jessica Veenstra, visited WRC and neighbors. The class' focus was to assess the sustainability of various forms of agricultural production and value-added products. Students engaged in discussions about the history and diversity of production in the WRC neighborhood and even got a little "worm therapy."

Trail Construction to Begin this Fall

Coon Rapids residents and visitors will soon have direct access to 33 miles of WRC's primitive trails from downtown, through the construction of a connector trail that will cross under Hwy 141. The new trail will be surfaced with a material called Driving Surface Aggregate (DSA). DSA is semi-permeable and has enough surface roughness to reduce water runoff velocity, yet it is not as loose as other aggregate trail surfaces. And, according to Tolif Hunt, WRC executive director and father of three, it "passes the stroller test." The material and construction methods used to install DSA are key to making DSA an environmentally responsible trail surface.

Brome to Prairie Transition

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WRC's newly established *Brome to Prairie Transition* program focuses on replanting acres dominated by smooth brome (*Bromus tectorum*) monocultures to diverse tall and mixed-grass prairies without forfeiting all profit from the land. Currently, over 2,000 acres, or nearly half of WRC-managed land is dominated by smooth brome.

This species, loved by some and despised by others, is planted both as a pasture forage and vegetative cover for CRP acres, and is also looked at as an invasive species in native plant communities. What is clear is that a smooth brome grassland is a high-input system. Smooth brome pastures require herbicides and fertilizer inputs to thrive, and when it dominates CRP, there are less pollinators and more invasive species present.

"Thanks to CRP, Iowa has thousands of

"Thanks to CRP, Iowa has thousands of grasslands acres, but of what ecological value? The time has come for Iowans to focus beyond the feat of having grasslands; we now need to consider the ecological structure of those grasslands" -Tolif Hunt

protected grassland acres, but many of these grasslands are of questionable ecological value. In fact, even the most diverse brome-dominated grassland barely resembles a native Iowa prairie in a functional sense," says Tolif Hunt, WRC executive director. In November 2008, WRC's *Brome to Prairie Transition* program will plant nearly 300 acres of land to diverse mixed-grass prairie, all the while continuing to show an economic profit from the land.

As WRC's *Brome to Prairie Transition* program grows, the public is welcome to visit our prairie reconstructions, volunteer on prescribed fires, harvest prairie seed for more plantings, or simply enjoy the beauty, diversity, and function of our expanding prairies. If you are interested in learning more contact Tolif (x111) or Elizabeth (x114) at (712) 684-2697.

Whiterock Conservancy took a smooth brome grassland and...

- 1) Leased the land to a local rancher to "graze down" all of the standing vegetation to prepare a no-till seedbed for conventional soybean production.
- 2) Worked with a local farmer to plant soybeans. Herbicides were used to reduce weed pressure to the crop and to prepare the seedbed for prairie reconstruction after soybean harvest. Soybean income will help fund the reconstruction.
- 3) Obtained cost-share funding to purchase a diverse prairie seed mix by enrolling the land in CRP's new State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative.
- 4) Worked with US Fish and Wildlife Service Private Lands Biologist to obtain support to purchase rare wildflower seeds for the planting.
- 5) Developed a management plan for the CRP acres, including prescribed fire and grazing as tools to create diversity and reduce the invasive species.

volunteer profile

Jason Schultes: Our Volunteer Handyman

A constant figure since the inception of Whiterock Conservancy, Jason Schultes has volunteered countless hours on a multitude of WRC projects. Mechanically inclined, Jason has repaired equipment, mowed lawns, removed invasive species, and aided in our annual prescribed burns since 1996.

Originally from Dedham, Iowa, Jason is the son of Joe and Carol Schultes, who own and manage a 200-acre organic farm in Audubon County. Currently, Jason is co-owner of ACG Builders in Coon Rapids and co-founder of Wiggles LLC, a

vermi-composting business. Even with a busy schedule, Jason happily finds time to dedicate to Whiterock Conservancy. This summer, Jason moved into WRC's Anthofer Farm House in order to remodel the interior for volunteer housing

"Jason has been a fabulous volunteer since I arrived in 2006," says Tolif Hunt. "His dedication to the organization is commendable and his volunteer spirit unmatched."

"I really enjoy being at Whiterock," says Jason. "Even if I'm not volunteering, this is where I like to spend my free time."

New Additions!

Whiterock Conservancy added three professional staff to its team in 2008.

Jeana Feazel, Resort Manager, is a recent graduate from University of Ozarks, AR, where she earned her degree in marketing. Originally from Central Illinois, Jeana brings a passion for outdoor recreation to the WRC team.



Emily Babin, Outreach & Development Coordinator, recently returned from the Peace Corps in Ghana where she served as a Natural Resource Manager. Also a transplant to Iowa, Emily is originally from Delaware.



Darwin Pierce, Farm & Lands Manager, is 5th generation to the Whiterock Valley and was formally a WRC volunteer. Darwin's experience anchors many of WRC's applied land management activities.



New hires also include Jessica Barker (Coon Rapids), housekeeping, and Bob Hoffman (Willey), grounds.



Stars Shine Bright on Four Dark Nights

Those attending the sixth annual Iowa Star Party were treated to dark skies as well as some of the best weather for star gazing. With four clear nights, amateur astronomers from all over enjoyed a weekend of spectacular star-gazing at Whiterock Conservancy.

Friday's public night brought 150 interested viewers. "We enjoy sharing our love for astronomy with others," says David Oesper, founder of the Star Party and former astronomy guide at Whiterock. Al Johnston, president of Ames Area Amateur Astronomers, describes his favorite experience as "hearing all the 'wows' from the public as they peered through telescopes."

With good reason to be in awe, the crowds saw meteors, a colorful double star, and even Andromeda Galaxy which is estimated to be 2 million

light years away. "The Andromeda Galaxy is the oldest light that can be seen by the naked eye," says Johnston.

Due to its remoteness, Whiterock Conservancy offers a prime spot for star gazing. While living in Ames, Oesper used census data to create a light dome map of Iowa that pinpoints where city lights are the brightest. The dark areas on the map indicate good viewing because of their distance from light pollution sources. On Oesper's map, Whiterock and the town of Coon Rapids were dark spots.

"You can really see the detail of the Milky Way," says Oesper. "The sheer number of stars is fantastic and that means that light pollution is very limited."



Oesper likens the sky to an extension of a park. "Just as we protect and conserve our parks, we need to preserve our night skies and protect them from light pollution. True darkness is a precious resource that we are quickly losing." He adds, "thanks to the efforts of Whiterock Conservancy, there is a glimmer of hope."

If you would like to be removed from WRC's mailing list, please send a blank email with "No Mail" in subject to whiterock@whiterockconservancy.com.



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