

Accidental Fire Reignites Land Management Plan for Palisades

June 13 2022 3:23 PM



EAST ALTON – The National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRRECsm) staff and land management partners visited the Palisades Nature Preserve near Grafton recently to gain a better understanding of how the Nov. 19, 2021, wildfire affected the preserves' rare hill prairies.

“Fire is a natural and necessary step in restoring and keeping a prairie healthy,” said Habitat Senior Project Assistant Phil Rathz. “Fire, when utilized by professionals, has many benefits including killing off invasive plant species, recycling nutrients faster, removing excess thatch that suppresses plant growth, and stopping trees from growing and taking over the prairie area.”

Hill prairies develop on south-facing steep slopes where summer sun, dry winds and periodic fires keep forest species from growing. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) states there are approximately 90 sites with good-quality hill prairies statewide.

The Palisade Preserve hill prairies are important for many reasons, including:

Being remnant prairies, meaning they are undeveloped and show what the landscape would have looked like along the bluffs of the Mississippi River, pre-European settlement.

Habitat to state-threatened timber rattlesnakes, bats, and endemic species, such as the prickly pear cactus.

Native prairies are now exceedingly rare in Illinois. About 60 percent, or 22 million acres, of Illinois was once prairie and now only 2,500 acres remain. Hill prairies are even more rare, with only approximately 600 acres remaining in the state.

Unplowed/undisturbed prairies, even small ones, are known as biodiversity hotspots. Recent studies have shown that small, less than five-acre hill prairies have anywhere from 40 to 75 species of native bees and even more pollinators, such as butterflies, beetles and other insects.

“The (November) fire crept up the bluff-face, benefiting the hill prairies since vegetation growing on the side can stagnate the air flow and interfere with prairie health,” said Debbie Newman, Natural Areas Preservation Specialist with INPC. “The best hill prairies do not have vegetation growing on the sides of the bluffs.”

The partner organizations, such as the Great Rivers Land Trust, Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC) and IDNR also met to determine the next steps for proper land management of the prairies and surrounding areas within the Palisades Preserve.

This summer, the NGRREC Habitat Strike Team will focus on removing invasive bush honeysuckle from the degraded hill prairie sites and follow-up in the burned area in the fall after native plants go dormant to spot-treat honeysuckle in expanded hill prairie areas.

In the late fall, there are plans to aerial spray the area, once the native tree leaves have dropped and native herbaceous plants are dormant, but honeysuckle leaves are still green.

In the winter, the Habitat Strike Team will complete a follow-up burn to further suppress invasive honeysuckle encroaching on the hill prairies.

“The work being done is imperative since some of these prairies are very degraded and will need to take priority,” Habitat Senior Project Assistant Dylan Smith said. “The ultimate goal will be to connect a few of the hill prairies together, creating a more expansive and unified ecosystem, as it was in the past.”

The Palisades Preserve is owned by the Lewis and Clark Community College Foundation and is managed by NGRREC in partnership with Great Rivers Land Trust. Adjacent land is managed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, a partner of NGRREC’s.



For more information on the work being done by the Habitat Strike Team visit <http://www.ngrrrec.org/HST/> or contact Shew at jshew@lc.edu or (618) 468-2843.

National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC?)

Founded in 2002 as a collaborative partnership between the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Lewis and Clark Community College, NGRREC is dedicated to the study of great river systems and the communities that use them. The center aspires to be a leader in scholarly research, education, and outreach related to the interconnectedness of large rivers, their floodplains, watersheds, and their associated communities. To learn more about NGRREC, visit www.ngrrrec.org.