



The Bluestem Banner

Tallgrass Ontario

Winter 2002/03

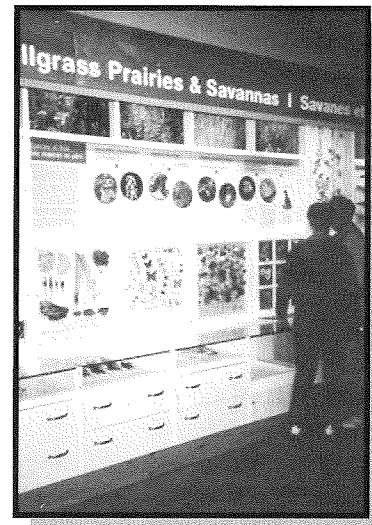
Volume 4, Issue 1

ROM Opens Tallgrass Exhibit

The Hands-on Biodiversity gallery at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) has a new exhibit about Ontario tallgrass prairies designed to educate the public about this endangered ecosystem. The exhibit is filled with ROM specimens from the life science collections, images, tabletop displays and thematic drawers on a variety of tallgrass prairie issues and stories. The gallery also focuses on restoration and conservation efforts in Ontario, emphasising four areas including the Walpole Island First Nation.

The “kick-off” launch was held on April 5th, 2002. Several members of Tallgrass Ontario were in attendance along with representatives from Walpole Island First Nation, Environment Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and the ROM. The exhibit was funded by a generous \$170,000 grant from the OMNR from Ontario Parks’ Species at Risk program.

- Cathy Quinlan, President
Tallgrass Ontario



ROM Exhibit. Photo: C. Quinlan

Mowing the Prairie

If anyone would have told me that I would one day be involved in tallgrass prairie, I would have considered them completely bonkers. Well, here on June 27th, I find myself on a 60 inch tractor mower, roaring up and down between rows of big bluestem, little bluestem and other grasses on the Ridgetown College campus.

The plants on either side dwarf me as I cut the path between the different stands. In a few areas the clumps of native grasses have been mowed short since spring, to keep a neat edge to the plot, and this time have grown between 20-40 cm in just a week! This is due in most part to the terrifically warm temperatures and recent rainfall.

How did I get here? I

reminisce as I bounce across the rough ground. Several years ago, a notice came regarding the formulation of a tallgrass group in Ontario, which I promptly replied to, thinking it would be good for the Ridgetown College (I am on staff) to be involved in some naturalization things. Lindsay Rodger appeared shortly

... continued on page 2

Mowing the Prairie continued

afterwards, and a liaison between the College (or more precisely, the JJ Neilson Arboretum) and the now Tallgrass Ontario was developed. There were meetings, discussions, more meetings, conferences, and still more meetings - but I digress.

About 1995, a stand of prairie grasses, both native and cultivars, were installed at the campus as part of a study on bio-mass and longevity over winter. That study ended, and the grasses were left to stand alone, without a caretaker, after 1997 when the scientist was transferred to the Thunder Bay area. Half of the stand was removed by eager sprayers anxious to reclaim valuable plots for their researcher



bosses (sounds vaguely like the original settlement stories I've heard) and the cultivars removed at the request of the scientist owning the 'pedigree'.

Many questions have arisen regarding this slightly unkempt stand of native grasses in the midst of manicured agricultural research plots, but the decision to preserve them has prevailed. However, someone needed to take ownership - make it look like

someone actually cared - so here I am, getting out into the sunshine, developing allergies (or something), and mowing the prairie.

There are some research possibilities for this stand, including

reproduction and fire management studies, which have assisted in prolonging its life. The mowing of the edges and alleys between the sections makes it palatable within the rather neat-looking, squared-off, weed-free, straight-rowed neighbouring plots. As yet no chemicals have invaded this area, however, a few management suggestions have been made by native plant people to help control the weeds.

Once something tangible happens along these lines, maybe some real natural areas can be developed for some really good intensive studies. We could use seed from the forbs nursery plot, and that area behind the Mushroom Facility needs attention ... maybe I'll get to that after (ouch) lunch.

- Ken Nentwig, Ridgeway College

Tallgrass goes to Rural Expo 2002

The 2002 Rural Expo, more commonly known as the International Plowing Match, was held in Glencoe this past September and Tallgrass Ontario was there. This farm show of all farm shows was held just outside of Glencoe in the deep south of Middlesex County, it was a perfect opportunity to educate farmers, rural landowners and rurally-minded urban folks about tallgrass prairie and savanna.

Lee McLean, Tallgrass Board member and local fella, arranged a nice spot in the Education Tent and did a great job mounting our poster display. Several Tallgrass Ontario members helped out by staffing the display for a day or two. Despite the heat and humidity, thousands of

people passed our display and we exhausted our supply of factsheets and brochures.

Larry McGill, of the Rural Expo Planning Committee, went the extra distance and planted a prairie demonstration garden just outside the tent on Education Alley. Mathis Natvick of Orford Ridges Nursery supplied the plants. The garden thrived through the drought and was a valuable tactile display.



Based on discussions with visitors, there is a lot of interest

from the community in retiring land to native species. Many are looking for a non-forest option, and prairie seems to fit the bill. Who knows, some visitors may go home and discover those odd-looking plants at the back of their property are actually part of a unique and endangered ecosystem.

Thanks to all those who helped out at the show. Next year the Plowing Match moves north to Renfrew, but we look forward to its return to southern Ontario in a few years.

- Cathy Quinlan,
Tallgrass Ontario

Tallgrass and Gravestones at Russ' Creek

Russ' Creek, a farming community originally settled in the 1830s, was named for Jonathan Russ, an early surveyor and resident, whose wife is buried here. At first, it appears that little remains to mark the rich history of this vanished agrarian settlement, located in the 7th concession of Haldimand Township. The remaining cemetery markers reflect many pioneer designs, and seem at home with the tall grasses and wildflowers poking through the encircling wire fence. However, these very special grasses and rare prairie species continue to survive here only because this sacred land was never cultivated.

A part of the Oak Ridges Moraine, they once formed a large area known as the Rice Lake Plains. The First Nations peoples first recognized the value of these plants for hunting, for its great variety of medicinal plants and for the embodiment of their spiritual beliefs. Surveyor Aaron Greeley passed by here in 1796 and found that "the whole of the 7th concession is on what is called the Rice Lake Plains and is principally covered with oak and pine bushes, ... the soil is a light black sand and appears to be excellent wheat land..."

One of the first pioneers attracted to the plains was author Catherine Parr Trail, who wrote in 1836: "These plains were formerly famous hunting grounds of the Indians who to prevent the growth of timbers burned them year after year ... sufficient on is left to form coverts; for the deer resort hither in great herds for the sake of a peculiar tall sort of grass with

which these plains abound ... on which they become exceedingly fat..." Her descriptions of the flora is well known and forms the basis of many educational and historical studies.

Russ' Creek came to be served by a small store and post office (the Colborne Stage brought the mail), several nearby churches, a blacksmith, pump factory and a log school (1845) which was rebuilt of brick in 1878. In later years, the sandy soil had lost much of its fertility and required great amounts of manure to produce a crop.

Eventually the families moved away and the school, with only four pupils attending, closed in 1947. Vandals burned the deserted structure circa 1962, and field parties invaded the cemetery. The farms gave way to forest. It was thought, by field naturalists, that the plains were destroyed.

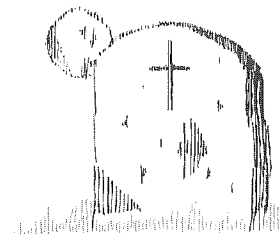
In February 2002, a proposal was presented to the municipal council of Alnwick/Haldimand, by biologist Edward Heuvel, for the creation of a protected historic site as Russ' Creek. This would consist of the already designated cemetery (1840-1950), but would include the cemetery's original two-acre

dimensions as described in a 1902 deed. The present fenced portion covers only 2/3 of an acre, and excludes many of the graveyards' rare tallgrass species, the early wagon ruts which led up to the graveyard, and at least one grave site which has been confirmed by an archeologist. It is extremely

fortunate that the owner of the remainder of the cemetery's original two acres has graciously offered to donate these to the project.

A survey of the original two acres based

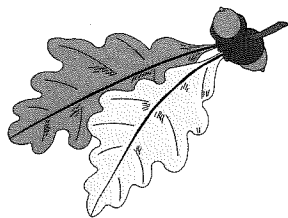
on aerial photographs has been completed, as well as a survey of the original



tallgrass prairie species. A pass-through gate, where signage would tell the historical story, would be constructed close to where the old wagon ruts begin, and a trail would lead the visitor through the tallgrass prairie, up the hill to the pioneer markers - a journey of 5000 years:

If approved by Alnwick/Haldimand Council, it is hoped that this project will be a living memorial, offering protection to the grave sites (both in and outside the present fenced area), and provide an opportunity for both the study and a local pioneer settlement and the beautiful, but now rare, prairie species that once surrounded it. For more information on Russ' Creek contact Ed Heuvel, <hallowayfarms@attcanada.net>

- Barry King. Reprinted from the OHS Bulletin, Issue 136, September 2002, published by the Ontario Historical Society. The views expressed by the contributors and advertisers are not necessarily those of the OHS.

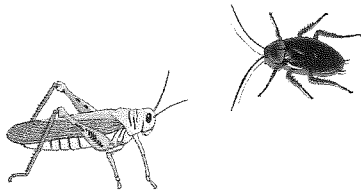


Study Finds Insects Recover from Fire

The October 2002 edition of the journal *Conservation Biology* (Vol. 16(5), contains an article titled "Compatibility of Prescribed Burning with the Conservation of Insects in Small, Isolated Prairie Reserves".

The author Ron Panzer states, "My results support the judicious use of rotational cool-season burning within small, isolated grassland sites." The author has seven seasons of work and found that all species recovered over time (less than two years).

- Chris Risley, *Ontario Parks*,
Peterborough



In Brief

- Tallgrass Ontario is now incorporated and has a **charitable number**. Your tax deductible charitable donations to Tallgrass Ontario help us to support efforts to conserve and restore tallgrass communities. Please send your gift today!
- Congratulations go out to **Don Gordon**, outgoing Program Coordinator for Tallgrass Ontario, who has taken a new position with Ducks Unlimited Canada. Tallgrass Ontario welcomes **Ric Wellwood** in his place. Ric brings years of experience in media, marketing, and fundraising.
- Look for an announcement soon about the **2003 Tallgrass Forum** to be held in Peterborough in September. The Peterborough Stewardship Committee will be hosting the event.

Readings



Ojibway Prairie Park Management Plan. Ontario Parks 2002. For a copy, contact Wheatley Provincial Park, PO Box 640, Wheatley, ON, N0P 2P0, (519) 825-4659.

2001 Web Review: Conservation Related Websites. A Review of Websites dealing with different aspects of conservation. This list was compiled by the peers at the Conservation Information Cooperative (CIC) under the supervision of Peter Mitchell and Mike Nelson.
www.cic.envsci.uoguelph.ca.

High Park: Restoring a Jewel of Toronto's Park System. Restoration Strategies for High Park Written by Joanna Kidd, LURA Consulting, Tove Christensen and Beth McEwen, Forestry, Parks and Recreation Division, City of Toronto.

Tallgrass Ontario

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