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# Stories From the Land...A Profile of Volunteer Stewardship Groups in Illinois and Their Lessons Learned

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My position at The Nature Conservancy as VSN Coordinator involves supporting various volunteer stewardship groups that oversee management of high quality natural areas across the state of Illinois. These groups make up what is called the Volunteer Stewardship Network (VSN). The majority of these groups work on terrestrial sites, but they all have stories to tell and lessons to share that can benefit any volunteer program that is nature-based.

Formed in 1983 by The Nature Conservancy and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, this VSN was created to enlist volunteers to carry out vital land stewardship activities that private and governmental organizations had neither the funding nor resources to perform. Today, the Network includes over 35 volunteer groups which represent more than 5,000 volunteers helping public and private landowners maintain and restore over 260 high-quality natural habitats throughout the state of Illinois. The volunteers represent a diverse group of people who share a love for Illinois' wild places. These groups provide stewardship to the land through: prescribed fire, invasive brush control, planting trees and seeds, and monitoring to name a few. They also provide a link to the local communities in which they belong by hosting walks, tours, workshops, giving public presentations, hosting native plant sales, maintaining communication through newsletters and the web. They also have been an important constituency for critical protection issues.

There is a lot of diversity among the groups within the VSN. Some of them are their own nonprofit organizations that seek support from a public agency which owns the land they are working on such as i.e. Park Districts, Forest Preserve Districts, Conservation Districts. An example would be Peoria Wilds (a group supported by the Peoria Park District) or North Branch Restoration Project and the Poplar Creek Prairie Stewards (groups supported by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.) Other groups are a part of an agency and are supported directly by staff i.e. Chicago Park District. There are also land trusts such as the ParkLands Foundation. Each group has their own story on how they got started and what motivates them today. Within these groups, volunteer stewards have their own fascinating personal stories. I am going to highlight just a few of these groups.

## Friends of Indian Boundary Prairies

Indian Boundary Prairies is a cluster of four prairies (sundrop, gensburg-markham, paintbrush, and dropseed) located just south of Chicago. Collectively these prairies cover 300 acres. The site is located on the ancient bed of Lake Chicago which has provided these sites with an incredible diversity of species. In fact, it represents one of the best examples of high-quality grassland in Illinois and one of the best in the Midwest. These species include: 250 plant species, 900 insect species, 11 amphibian/reptiles and it is a sanctuary for butterflies. Located literally within a subdivision, the interstate highway 57 divides the prairies. The highway line actually marks an old boundary that was established years ago for the pioneers and Indians, thus giving the prairies its name...Indian Boundary Prairies. In the 1920's this area was slated for development...then the Depression

came and plans for development were abandoned. In the 1950's the prairies were discovered by Karl Bartel and Alfred Reuss while photographing wildflowers and there were also some early visits by botanists. In the 1960's, Dr. Betz, from Northeastern Illinois University while visiting his cousin in Markham, decided to take a walk in the nearby fields and discovered the prairies. He began to conduct surveys and gave a talk to the Markham Garden Club in an effort to protect them. In the 1970's the area known as Gensburg-Markham was deeded to The Nature Conservancy with management under Northeastern Illinois University. Karl Bartel retired and was replaced by Ron Panzer. In the 1980's Ron was approached by Cal Barber, a private landowner and neighbor to what is now known as Paintbrush Prairie who suggested he look at the prairie next to his home. At this time the area was starting to suffer from neglect, illegal garbage dumping, so a protection plan was initiated by The Nature Conservancy. Cal Barber started the Friends of Indian Boundary Prairies. He started a newsletter and created a logo that represented all four prairies. In the 1990's interpretive signs were developed for Sundrop and the City of Markham adopted the phrase "The Prairie Capital of the Prairie State". At this time the youth stewardship program, Mighty Acorns began visiting the site. In 2000, more land was acquired to expand Paintbrush. In 2002, five rare months were found on Gensburg-Markham prairie and a new fence was erected on Paintbrush. In 2003 interpretive signs were added to Paintbrush as well. This year (2005) marks the 20th anniversary for Friends of Indian Boundary Prairies. A 501c3 nonprofit organization, this group holds regular meetings, workdays, continues the newsletter, has an established relationship with the local schools, and has dedicated stewards for all four prairies who lead workdays. They celebrate the prairies and educate the community with an annual earth day celebration in the spring, picnic in the summer, and "sunset on sundrop" in the fall. They also sell "Friends of Indian Boundary Prairie" merchandise to help raise money for their organization.

#### Embarras Volunteers Stewards

The Embarras Volunteer Stewards were formed in 1994. The natural areas they oversee stretch over an impressive nine county area in south-east Illinois. They meet regularly at the Douglas Hart Nature Center and they host workdays, walks, and have a newsletter and website. They also have a very colorful display that they present at various venues in the local area. They also participate in the Illinois Bluebird Project (which has been gathering information statewide since 1996). Last year, they partnered with Douglas Hart Nature Center to accept a donation of herbarium cabinets from the Morton Arboretum. These cabinets are now available for the group and are open to the public for use. They are a nonprofit 501c3 organization. This status allows them to actively pursue grants. They received a grant from the IL Conservation Foundation a couple years ago (with matching funds from the VSN) to restore a native prairie remnant along the Lincoln Prairie Grass Bike Trail. The City of Charleston (who owns the trail) donated signs. They have been recording their progress of the restoration with slides and video so they can use it for educational purposes in the area schools. They also have a revolving summer internship program with Eastern Illinois University that provides the group with additional help on-the-ground and with research at sites. Larry Thorson has been a dynamic leader of the group and given his experience and patience has been considered a mentor by many. The group shares workdays and information with the neighboring Grand Prairie Friends/Prairie Grove Volunteer group based in the Champaign/Urbana area.

#### Shoal Creek Volunteers

Shoal Creek Conservation Area is owned by the City of Litchfield. It is a mecca of biodiversity...210 acres of savanna, prairie, seeps and barrens. This place is home to 700 plant species, 75 breeding birds, and 71 species of butterflies. Henry Eilers, one of the founders and long-time volunteer steward of Shoal Creek Volunteers has helped to make this place a part of the Litchfield community. This group, now a 501c3 nonprofit organization, has secured funding for various projects that have provided stewardship at the site and have helped to bring about community awareness. One of the unique features in this area is called the Rocky Bottom Barren (one of the highest quality barrens in the state as far as diversity). In the turn of the century it was a favorite picnic spot. Henry has research old photos documenting this that are fascinating. The group has also worked closely with the local rotary to build an interpretive trail with a sign and parking area for visitors, a bluebird monitoring program, and more recently they have worked with the local tourism board to create a brochure

on Shoal Creek. Henry, a native of Germany and retired from his privately-owned plant nursery business, has energetically redirected his time to hosts workdays and provide stewardship to the site since the groups inception in 1991. On a walk a couple year ago, he showed me an area where he thinned out 900 sugar maples in one winter. In the same area, he then pointed out all of the diverse native plants that have re-emerged as a result of the incoming sunlight to the forest floor. Now that is inspiration. Farther down the trail he pointed out a rusted old Model T that was pushed into a gully to stop erosion years ago. Henry explained that the group decided to leave the Model T as an example to folks on how far we have come in learning how to take care of our natural places. It was an opportunity to explain how the extensive root systems of native plants can hold the soil. The idea of leaving a bit of human history was intriguing and reflected how humans have impacted the land. Henry and other stewards such as Ken Schaal and Gary Colin have also lead prescribed burns on this site and have lent their support to neighbors and other private landowners interested in managing their land. They also work on other sites such as Roderick Hill Prairie Nature Preserve, Denby Prairie Nature Preserve and Beaver Dam State Park. This group also participates in the Butterfly Monitoring Network (a state monitoring program). In fact, Shoal Creek was ranked highest among all the sites in total number of species of butterflies. This group has a regular email newsletter and they provide annual walks, workdays, and gatherings to engage the community. With some assistance from The Nature Conservancy, they became owners of an incredible woodland called Hogan Woods a few miles north of Shoal Creek. Owned by a St. Louis family that wanted to see it protected in perpetuity, this woodland is abundant with native spring flora like bloodroot, Jacob's ladder, Blue bells, and the uncommon Michigan Lily.

From my experience in supporting the valiant efforts of these and other groups within the VSN, I have heard many stories of how these incredibly passionate people began their volunteer service and what keeps them motivated. In summary, here is a hand full of reasons why many of these folks chose to volunteer for nature: Enhance a love of nature, reconnect them to nature; practice life long learning and sharing; experience hands-on, interesting projects; make friends with similar interest; "give back" to their community and nature; it provides a sense of place; to heal the land and river is to heal themselves, to have FUN!

From my experience, these are the elements that seem to exist within the volunteer groups that are successful. A successful volunteer program: provides meaningful work; empowers volunteers, provides a variety of tasks that are clearly defined; identifies potential long-term volunteer leaders; matches volunteers to a task that suits their interest and skills; provides training and ongoing learning opportunities, provides frequent communication, appreciates volunteers, and shares the vision (how a volunteer's work fits into the bigger picture.)

A successful volunteer program also realizes that word of mouth is the best recruitment tool. Stories in the local newspaper, workday signs, presentations in the local community, and partnering with education-based programs all help create a strong program.

It is also important to seek opportunities to gather with your peers and learn from others. This roundtable today is a good example of that. We (volunteer coordinators) need inspiration too!

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