There is a perfectly natural reason why not mowing your lawn is a good idea.

# Less Mowing = More Wildlife

Story By Tom Hintz
Photos By Adele Hodde

For more than 100 years, Americans have been obsessed with neat, manicured turf grass lawns.

Manicured lawns became a social norm in Europe in the 1700s and were the pride of the wealthy. On some estates, the turf was maintained by grazing livestock, while on others the labor-intensive work was carried out by hired labor using sickles or shears. This landscape application caught on in popularity and even spread to the New World, where it became the American lawn.

The first lawn mower patent was registered on August 31, 1830 by Edwin Beard Budding in England. Amariah Hills patented the first U.S. mower in January 1868. Since that time, Americans have spent uncountable hours walking or riding back and forth on their lawns.

Today, lawns have become an obsession. Arguments and disputes between neighbors over lawn upkeep are common. By-laws for many development projects stipulate a short period of time that homeowners have to establish a lawn. Public ordinances support and drive the idea of what looks "acceptable" and what looks "weedy" on our lawns.

For most of the country, grass that is 3 inches or less in height and dependent upon regular herbicide and fertilizer treatments and watering—using good, clean, fresh drinking water—is what society considers acceptable. We are guilty of creating a monoculture—a habitat that, by its very definition, is devoid of a diversity of life, making it difficult and expensive to maintain.

Across Illinois, many state parks are making an effort to reduce mowing, which makes sense both financially and ecologically. Reduced mowing results in substantial savings on gas and machine repair bills and shifts staff time to more critical tasks, such as managing native habitat.

**Adopting a sustainable, native landscape enhances the ecological diversity of the site and saves the landowner time and money.**

Ecologically, taller grasses help reduce erosion by slowing water runoff and eliminating sheet runoff on hillsides. They also retain more water per acre through condensation, as evidenced by your soaking wet shoes and socks after a dewy morning walk in the grass. Allowing grasses to grow creates more surface area for water to condense, therefore saving more water.

As turf grass grows and dies it is replaced by other blades of grass. The

DNR recommends that unnecessary mowing of grasses used for nest cover by ground-nesting wildlife be stopped from April 1 through August 1 annually.

old, dead material decomposes and becomes humus or soil. Hauling raked grass clippings off site reduces soil nutrients. Keeping this organic material where it is produced, such as in the use of a self-mulching mower, makes ecological sense.

Reducing mowing for ecological preservation and improvement is nothing new. In the 1993 publication "Habitat Establishment, Enhancement and Management for Forest and Grassland Birds in Illinois," the Department of Conservation (now DNR) addressed the decline of grassland wildlife as a trend that could, to some extent, be reversed with reduced mowing.

"Since the 1960, there has been a 50 percent decline in the number of acres in hayland and pasture in Illinois," said John Buhnerkempe, chief, DNR Division of Wildlife Resources. "Many species rely on undisturbed grassy cover to rear their young, such as rabbits, bobwhite, ring-necked pheasants and field sparrows. Grassland-dependant birds, such as eastern meadowlarks, bobolinks and grasshopper, savannah sparrows and Henslow's sparrows, have declined 75 to 95 percent since the mid 1900s."

**Establishing native prairie grasses provides nesting and brood cover for wildlife, and teaches our youth about the heritage of the Prairie State.**

**Delaying mowing until after August 1 allows grassland birds, such as the bobwhite, to successfully rear a clutch of young.**

"The key factor contributing to the decline of grassland wildlife is disturbance of the habitat too often, or at the wrong time of the year," Buhnerkempe continued. "Roadside mowing and cutting of hayfields takes place over the same critical time wildlife are raising their young. On the other hand, on grasslands where appropriate management is lacking, such as prescribed fire, the grasses become too rank or woody cover invades, to the exclusion of grassland wildlife."

Discontinued mowing also provides habitat for mice and voles, which in turn are staples in the diets of red-tailed hawks, great horned owls, foxes, coyotes and other predators.

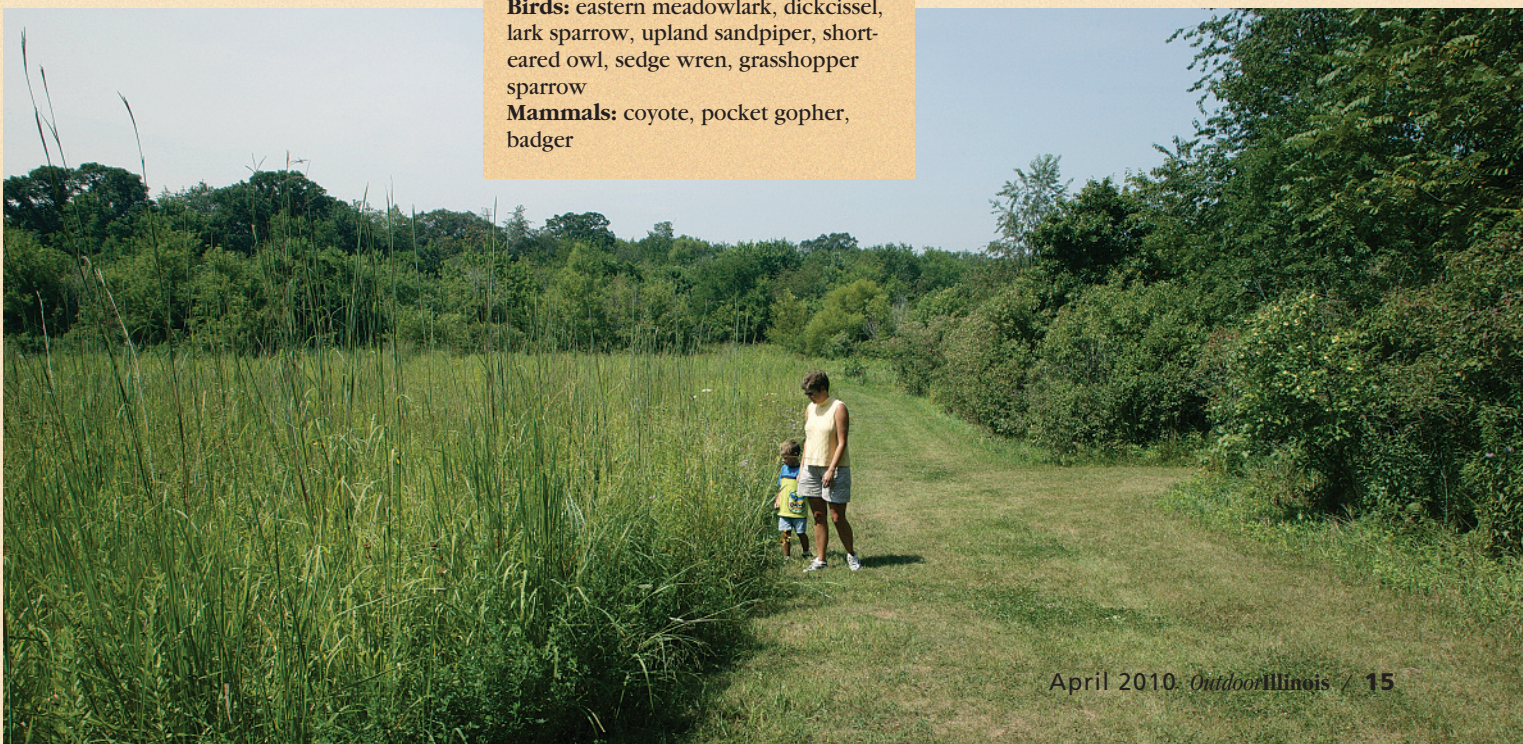
While reduced mowing is advantageous for wildlife and has become a priority in some state parks, mowing cannot be eliminated entirely. Turf grass does have its place on sports fields, playgrounds, cemeteries and picnic grounds. Mowing paths to walk-in campsites, day-use areas and around campsites is necessary for the safety and comfort of the park visitors.

Buffalo grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*) and various brands of low-mow fescue, are becoming popular in some areas as a turf grass alternative. Buffalo grass, native to the western grasslands of the United States, rarely grows more than 3 inches tall. Its deep roots help it survive even the driest droughts.

Less mowing, using turf grass alternatives and restoring turf grass to prairie habitat equates to more wildlife.

Less mowing helps preserve the ecological diversity of the Prairie State.

## What are some of Illinois' grassland species?

**Insects:** great spangled fritillary, cone-headed grasshopper, prairie cicada
**Herps:** glass lizard, plains garter snake, prairie king snake, ornate box turtle, yellow mud turtle, massasauga
**Birds:** eastern meadowlark, dickcissel, lark sparrow, upland sandpiper, short-eared owl, sedge wren, grasshopper sparrow
**Mammals:** coyote, pocket gopher, badger

Tom Hintz is the site superintendent at Jubilee College State Park west of Peoria.