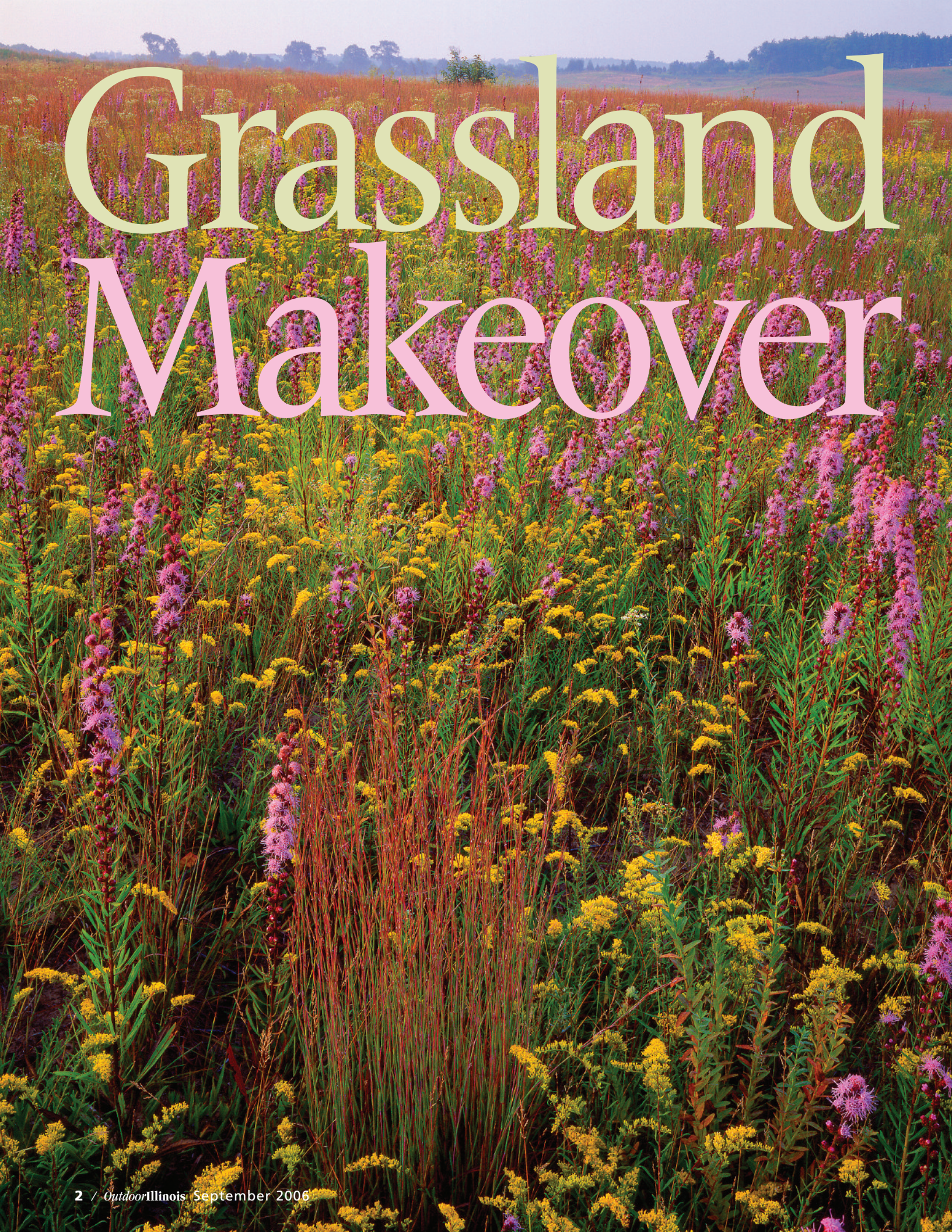
Grassland Makeover



Jay Stacy and other volunteer land stewards seeded much of Heinkel Prairie at Nachusa Grasslands Preserve by hand.

(Photo courtesy Cara Cannon Byington, TNC.)

At Nachusa Grasslands Preserve, The Nature Conservancy and a group of dedicated volunteers are working to revive a native Illinois landscape.

Located in north-central Illinois, Nachusa Grasslands is a work in progress, with dedicated volunteers helping restore one of the largest prairies remaining in Illinois.

(Photo courtesy Joseph Kayne, www.josephkaynephoto.com.)

Story By Cara Cannon Byington
Photos By Andrew Simpson, TNC

If Nachusa Grasslands Preserve in north-central Illinois were a television reality show, it might be called *Extreme Makeover: Prairie Edition—from prairie to farm field and back again*. Pieced together like a living quilt, the preserve is a patchwork of native prairies and restored grasslands. The scattered remnant prairies there have never known the touch of a plow, but many of the lands between the remnants once had former lives as fields of corn and soybeans.

The Nature Conservancy owns the properties that make up Nachusa Grasslands, but the real makeover experts are people like retired retailer Jay Stacy, who, as part of a community of volunteers, has re-seeded former croplands in an effort to transform them into vibrant, functioning prairie grasslands.

Stacy has worked as a volunteer at the preserve for more than a decade and he knows every inch of Heinkel Prairie at Nachusa Grasslands: He knows what plants are there and what plants should be there. He knows the individual songs of the prairie birds and when the coneflowers will bloom. He knows the sounds and rhythms of Heinkel Prairie because over the last 10 years, he and his volunteer colleagues seeded much of the restored sections of this landscape by hand.

"The hardest part of any restoration is getting started," he said as he squinted against the bright sun, gesturing toward the grasslands that rise and fall around him in rolling green waves. "When you start the work, you have to get the native plants in fast and forestall the weeds. Then it's a matter of patience, persistence and commitment."

Stacy leaned down to pick up an old broken corn cob poking out of the soil near a blooming plant with yellow flowers called golden Alexander.

"I love finding old cobs in here," he said. "It's proof that this used to be a field."

But not anymore. Few people would be able to look across Heinkel Prairie today and know that most of it was once a corn field.

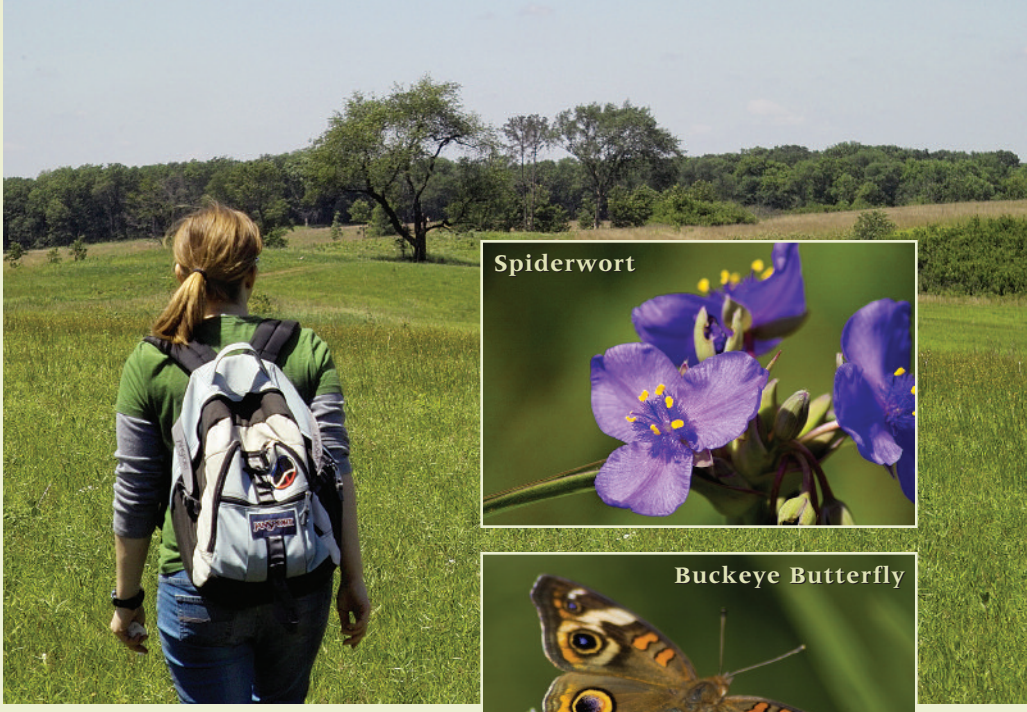
"The remnant prairie was a small patch on the knoll, the rest is restored," Stacy said as he dropped the cob and walked across the prairie with his head down, pointing out native plants. "Here's compass plant. Here's bird's foot violet, the regal fritillary butterflies need that. The spiderwort is almost done blooming for the day. And the prairie dropseed is coming in really nicely."

A living laboratory

Nachusa Grasslands Preserve borders the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) Franklin Creek State Natural Area and is near Lowden-Miller State Forest. Most of Illinois' native grasslands, with their rich soils, have long been converted for agriculture and development. But in a few places, scarce remnants of the state's prairie heritage still survive. At 2,500 acres, Nachusa Grasslands is a collection of remnant and restored prairies, wetlands and savannas. It also is one of the largest prairies remaining in the Prairie State.

Remnant prairies are called remnants because they are all that remain of the sea of grass that once stretched from Indiana to Kansas. The goal of restoration at Nachusa is to use remnant prairies as core pieces and connect them through a patchwork of restored prairies so that the preserve can ultimately support a full array of the plants and animals native to this part of Illinois.

The project is an important part of larger prairie conservation and restoration efforts across Illinois and the Great Plains, aimed at protecting native prairie species, especially grassland nesting birds. Across North America, grassland nesting birds are suffering more precipitous declines than any other comparable group of species, largely due to loss of habitat. At Nachusa Grasslands, restored and remnant prairies provide important habitat for many of these birds, including bobolinks, meadowlarks, dickcissels and grassland sparrows.



Spiderwort

Buckeye Butterfly

Coneflower

Visitors to Nachusa Grasslands can get a glimpse of Illinois' open prairies as they once were.

Today, Nachusa Grasslands has 67 ongoing prairie restorations and some of the work is funded by DNR Conservation 2000 grants. Many of the individual restorations are overseen by volunteer land stewards who, like Jay Stacy, donate their time to manage specific parcels of the preserve. Often, these are commitments to the land that last years, if not decades.

"One of the things that's most notable about Nachusa Grasslands is the unparalleled level of dedicated stewardship that occurs there," said Todd Bittner, a DNR natural heritage biologist who uses plant seed collected at the preserve for prairie restorations at neighboring Franklin Creek State Natural Area. "The work at Nachusa Grasslands—particularly the work of the volunteers—is an excellent model for other natural areas and conservation efforts around the state."

Prairies evolved with fire and are designed to burn. At Nachusa Grasslands, volunteers and land managers use fire to manage the land and maintain the health of the prairie.

A community of volunteers

Jay Stacy is not the only one who has crawled across the landscape to collect or plant seed. One of the most amazing things about Nachusa is the people who are the heart of the restoration. There are many more volunteers like Stacy who are restoring the connections between the land, the plants, the birds, the insects, the reptiles, the mammals and, they hope, the people of Illinois.

Mary Scott, an 84-year old volunteer, goes out four mornings a week to collect

Come see for yourself

The Nature Conservancy has worked at Nachusa Grasslands for 20 years. This fall will mark the 17th annual "Autumn on the Prairie" festival at the preserve, which features guided prairie hikes, self-guided prairie plant tours, live music, work by local artists, children's activities and rides on a horse-drawn wagon.

Plan to visit on Saturday, September 16 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. to see the beauty of the prairie in fall when the grasses and flowers blaze with color in the final weeks before winter. The event is free and open to the public.

seed and remove invasive weeds at Nachusa Grasslands' Thelma Carpenter Prairie. Mary Vieregg, a retired teacher, has learned to identify more than 200 species of native plants at the preserve and has collected seed for most of them. Tom and Jenny Mitchell have created 21 acres of high-quality prairie plantings and removed brush and invasive weeds from their parcels at Nachusa. Jenny is retired from a career in retail and Tom still works full time for the federal government, but both find time to go out twice a week to work on the preserve.

Chris and Jennifer Hauser consulted old notes from the 1977 Illinois Natural Areas Inventory and discovered that forked aster, which grows wild only in about 50 places on Earth, had been documented near the lands that would become Nachusa Grasslands. Chris, who works as a restoration ecologist for Kane County Forest Preserve, taught himself to identify the plant and located four populations that are thriving at the preserve. The stories of similar dedicated volunteer effort at Nachusa go on and on.

"We couldn't do half of what we do without the volunteer land stewards," said Bill Kleiman, who manages Nachusa Grasslands Preserve.

The preserve, which is open to the public, gets several thousand visitors every year. There is information about the plants and animals of the prairie. Every third Saturday in September, an "Autumn on the Prairie" festival features prairie hikes led by the volunteers who are making the restoration a reality as well as live music and activities for children (see sidebar).

At Nachusa Grasslands Preserve people have come together to work on an extreme makeover of a changed landscape. In the process, they have created an enduring community of volunteers based on an intimate knowledge of the land. By the work of their hands, they are proving that restoration of a vastly altered prairie landscape can be done.

The Autumn on the Prairie festival provides an excellent opportunity to explore Nachusa Grasslands with knowledgeable guides.

"The restoration is working," said Kleiman. "Some of our prairie restorations are so crowded with rare plants that they fool botanists into thinking that they are original prairie. We want birds, butterflies and various other rare creatures to be fooled too, and make this their home."

Facts at a glance

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Telephone: (815) 456-2340.
Website: www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/illinois/preserves/art1116.html.
Directions: A map and detailed directions are available on the Website.

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