Scientists, community volunteers join forces to celebrate one of Illinois' rarest communities —the hill prairie.

Festival of the Bluffs

Story By Kathy Andrews

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

Illinois' rare hill prairie communities will be celebrated during the May 14 Festival of the Bluffs.

Perched high above the Mississippi River floodplain in southwest Illinois—from vantage points so stunning they were revered by Mississippian period Native Americans—are narrow bluffs untouched by glaciation. Capped with windblown silt left by the retreating glacier, the southwest bluff exposure provided the ideal conditions for the establishment of one of Illinois' rarest habitat types, the hill prairie.

"Unfortunately, these rare natural communities have suffered from decades of inattention and are gasping their last breath," explained Debbie Scott Newman, southwest Illinois Natural Areas Preservation Specialist for the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. "Fortunately, they have gained an avid and vocal fan base that won't sit by and let the passage of time obliterate these precious landscape remnants."

The fan base is a diverse assemblage of organizations working with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission to protect and manage the 40-mile, 130,000-acre hill prairie corridor stretching from St. Clair County, south through Monroe County to the northern reaches of Randolph County. Protecting these areas for future generations involves a variety of organizations, such as the Illinois Audubon Society, Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation and American Bottom Conservancy. Also involved, often on a daily basis, are local volunteer groups donating hundreds of hours annually pulling invasive weeds, inventorying plant populations, assisting with prescribed burns and educating landowners and local residents.

Clifftop—Conserving Lands in Farm, Forest, Talus, or Prairie—was founded in 2006 by a group of concerned landholders interested in assisting local

landowners with land stewardship for enhanced wildlife habitat and to learn how to provide permanent land protection for properties along the Mississippi River bluff corridor through conservation easements. The volunteer-led organization dedicates considerable time to increasing public awareness through workshops and field trips.

"Clifftop works to synergize everything we do, and we do that with volunteers assisting the Department of Natural Resources and DNR assisting the volunteers," explained Carl DauBach, executive director of Clifftop.

The organization focuses on the 130,000-acre Hill Prairie Karst Sinkhole Plain Conservation Opportunity Area in southwestern Illinois. Additionally, two site-specific groups also volunteer in the area, Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves and Salt Lick Point Land and Water Reserve Stewardship Committee.

In conjunction with the Salt Lick Point committee, Clifftop, DNR and INPC, plans are under way for a second Festival of the Bluffs. The celebration of Illinois' remaining hill prairies will take place in Valmeyer on May 14 from 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Festival of the Bluffs will celebrate Illinois' remaining hill prairies on May 14.

Festival of the Bluffs is a family-oriented event, where attendees can learn about conservation through a variety of hands-on demonstrations and information booths. Biologists and amateur naturalists will lead interpretive hikes where visitors can observe a stunning assemblage of spring woodland wildflowers along the base of the cliffs, or if adventurous in spirit, may hike up the steep bluff for a panoramic view of the floodplain—with a vista of the St. Louis arch on a clear day. Nature-oriented vendors, food and music will be available.

(Photo courtesy Marty Kemper.)

Restoration of the hill prairies includes volunteer-led efforts to collect, germinate and plant native species.

(Photo courtesy Tom Rollins.)

Spring woodland wildflowers carpet the base of the Mississippi River bluffs near the Salt Lick Land and Water Reserve.

"The theme for this festival is biodiversity, and we're kicking everything off at noon on Friday, May 13 with a BioBlitz," explained DauBach.

A BioBlitz is a rapid assessment of all living things within a specific area. Over a 24-hour period, scientists and amateur naturalists will document Salt Lick Point's flora and fauna. This comprehensive understanding of the area's biodiversity will arm scientists and land managers with the information

(Photo courtesy Valerie Nelson.)