

Illinois Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Preservation Fund Grant
#04-042W: Natural Areas Habitat Management

Introduction: The Urbana Park District (UPD) manages two different existing natural areas and has begun restoration efforts at two recently acquired sites. Although the UPD has recently created a paid natural areas steward position much of the management that goes into maintaining and restoring these sites is performed by volunteer stewards, groups, and individuals. The UPD is very fortunate to draw tremendous volunteer support, averaging over 400 per year, from the communities of Champaign Urbana, the University of Illinois, and Parkland College. Workdays are commonly devoted to tasks such as invasive species removal, seed collection, planting of native species, trail maintenance, prescribed burns (for experienced volunteers) and other associated tasks. It is not unusual to have upwards of 40 volunteers at a single workday, with average workdays drawing 10-20 volunteers. Work groups of this size demand a considerable supply of tools, including but not limited to loppers, saws, pitchforks, shovels, gloves and burn equipment. Additionally, the UPD is committed to showing volunteers appreciation by providing workday snacks at the need of every two-hour workday. Volunteers at longer workdays such as prescribed burns are often provided a full meal, typically pizza as well as traditional snack items. Every year during the winter season, the UPD hosts a natural areas volunteer holiday party to provide additional thanks to its legions of volunteers. In addition to pizza, snacks, and beverages, the UPD provides volunteers with small tokens of appreciation in the form of gifts and door prizes.

Materials: Materials for volunteers works days include loppers, saws, pitchforks, shovels, gloves, rakes, hoes, deer fencing and burn equipment. Additionally, volunteers are provided with workday snacks, beverages, and occasionally pizza.

Methods: Volunteer workdays are conducted three times a month for most of the year. Specially scheduled workday for large groups are also common. Volunteers additionally help with prescribed burns each spring and fall, many of which are members of the UPD's volunteer Natural Areas Committee. Other special projects that are completed with volunteer assistance over the course of the last year include the installation of a rock riffle structure and riparian restoration on the upper McCullough Creek at Meadowbrook Park, a savanna restoration on the west fill of Busey Woods, and the rebuild of a dilapidated dock/overlook structure on the south pond of Busey Woods. Ongoing management volunteer assistance includes brush removal of honey suckle, autumn olive, multi flora rose, and privet, pulling of garlic mustard and sweet clover, woodland, savanna, and prairie seed collection, woodchipping and lining of trails, and a host of other tasks. Volunteers are essential to the continued maintenance and health of UPD natural areas.

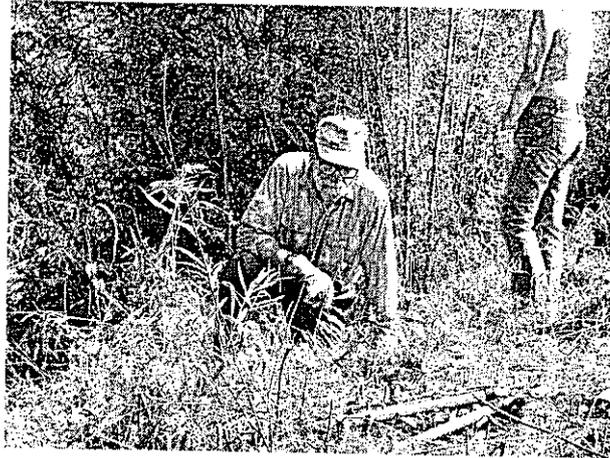
Results: Approximately 10 acres of invasive dense brush was cleared from Busey Woods as well as isolated clearing throughout the woods. Approximately 5 acres of invasive brush was cleared from Meadowbrook Prairie as well as scattered clearing throughout the park. Volunteer groups combed the entire 130 acre site of Meadowbrook and pulled of sweet clover and the entire 60 acres of Busey Woods in search of garlic

mustard. Several ponds of seed were collected from UPD natural areas. The west fill of Busey Woods was seeded with a woodland/savanna/prairie mixture according to sunlight exposure. Areas of Meadowbrook Park received supplemental seeding. Two prescribed burns took place at Meadowbrook Prairie. A rock riffle structure was installed, invasive species were cleared, and native species planted at Meadowbrook's McCullough Creek. Several trails were covered with woodchips at both Meadowbrook and Busey Woods. A dock/overlook structure at Busey Woods was repaired, essentially replaced, with volunteer assistance. Finally, all UPD volunteers were gratefully provided with snacks, drinks, and occasionally pizza as a token of the UPD's indebted thanks.

Discussion: Volunteer workdays not only play a critical roll in the maintenance and restoration of UPD natural areas, but also provide an ideal mechanism for public outreach. Every year the UPD is benefits from the assistance of first time volunteers, some who come for class credit or a merit badge, others just because a friend mentioned the possibility to them. Before the beginning of every workday, volunteer stewards and UPD staff introduce the given project site to the group of volunteers, explaining the significance of natural areas, biodiversity, natural history, invasive species control, and restoration efforts. Volunteers are welcome and encouraged to ask questions throughout the workday and often enjoy hearing more about upcoming restoration projects and volunteer opportunities over follow-up snacks. Volunteers leave with a new appreciation for even the smallest of these urban natural areas, and intern become better stewards of the community as a whole. The UPD benefits directly of course as well. Without the tremendous assistance of countless volunteers, these natural areas would fall into mismanagement. School tours, amateur naturalists, and visiting public would be greeted to areas overrun with invasive species, badly eroded trails, and limited opportunities for observing the diverse natural history of east central Illinois. Without the assistance of volunteers the UPD would likely be a traditional mowed turf and ball park agency, providing little in the way of habitat to so many of Illinois's already imperiled fauna.

Summary: Volunteers and volunteer workdays are essential to the ecological integrity and maintenance of Urbana Park District natural areas. Thanks in a large part to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Preservation Fund Grant, UPD natural areas volunteers have been especially productive and appreciated over the course of the past year. As the UPD's natural areas holdings continue to grow and provide for expanded habitat and environmental education opportunities, volunteers will play an increasingly valuable role in the future of Urbana's local urban natural areas.

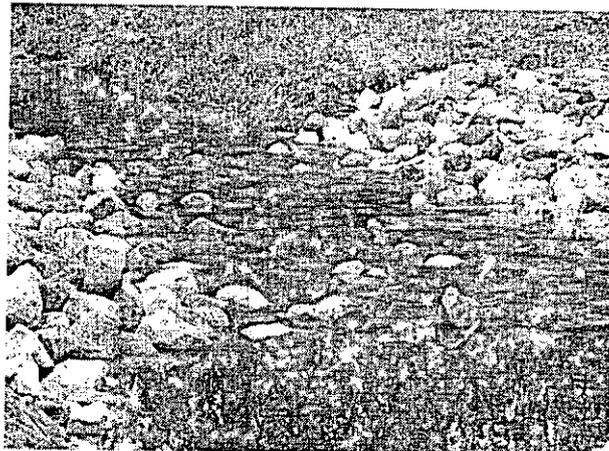
Volunteers remove invasive brush along McCullough Creek, Meadowbrook Park



Volunteers celebrate completion of brush clearing, Meadowbrook Park



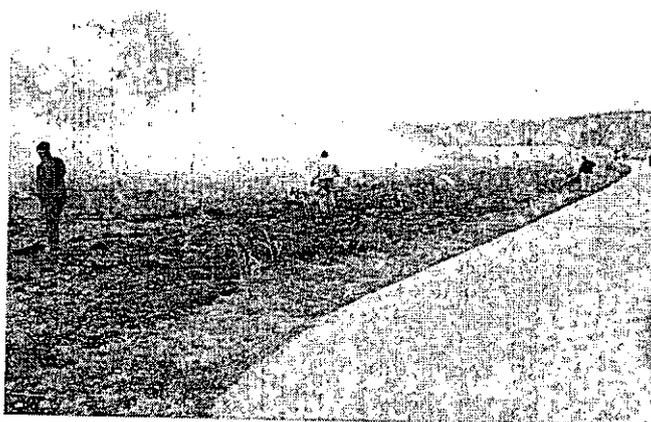
Completed rock riffle structure at McCullough, Meadowbrook Park



Volunteers in search of invasive brush at Busey Woods



Volunteers help man fire line at Meadowbrook Park



Submitted by Derek Liebert, Urbana Park District Environmental Stewardship Technician.