FRIENDS OF
NACHUSA
GRASSLANDS

August 2026

Dear Friend,

We sometimes see the beginnings of the restoration of a unit at Nachusa. And sometimes we see the final stages of a restoration. But seldom do we get to see both, over time—beginning to end.

In this issue of *A Prairie Calling*, Mary Vieregg shows us one of her units from bare soil, after a prescribed burn of what was once growing corn, to lush restored prairie. She presents some of the problems and joys of the process. We see beauty in the development of a habitat that once covered most of the state of Illinois.

I think you will enjoy reading this issue.

With warm regards from Nachusa Grasslands,

Charles Larry

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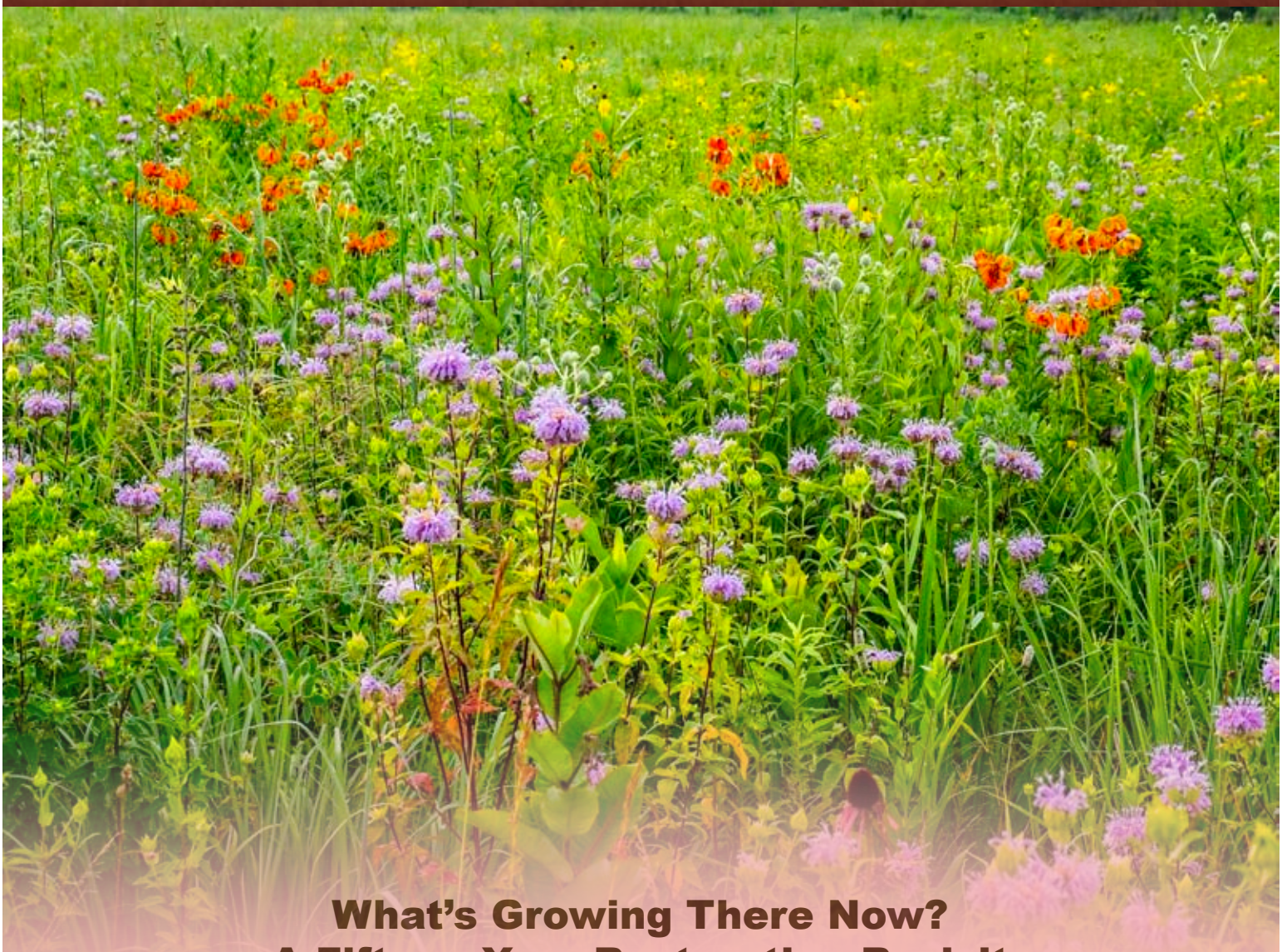
A Prairie Calling
Issue 21 - August 2026
FRIENDS OF NACHUSA GRASSLANDS



What's Growing There Now? A Fifteen Year Restoration Revisit

By Mary Vieregg

In 2008, the conversion of 6.25 acres of cornfield into reconstructed prairie began in the Clear Creek Knolls East Unit of Nachusa Grasslands. The acreage offered the opportunity to collect and plant seed suitable for three different habitats all in one planting. I revisited this planting as an observer in 2025, asking the relatively simple question:

"What happened over the course of 15 years?"

Beginnings...

Seed Mix.
Photo by: Dee Hudson

During the 2008 growing season, 225 pounds of bulk seed of 176 species were collected to plant in the unit. The seeds were processed and combined into dry-mesic, mesic, and wet-mesic mixes. The average per acre seed weight was 36 pounds. A complete list of the species collected and planted was kept at the time.

Harrowed Field.
Photo by: Bill Kleiman

After the corn was harvested in 2008, the stubble was burned and the field was harrowed.

The seed mixes were planted in late November using a New Idea Drop Seeder. Multiple passes were made to facilitate even distribution of the seeds. The three different mixes were planted according to the soil type and relative topography in different parts of the field. No carrier was used with the seed.

Mary and Jim Vieregg with the New Idea Drop Seeder.
Photo by: Bill Kleiman

Clear Creek Flooding.

A disconcerting, anomalous event occurred that changed the trajectory of the planting strategy. In late December, an unusually heavy snow accumulation was followed by a rapid thaw and simultaneous heavy rain. Extensive flooding occurred in the planting acreage and the Clear Creek area generally. How much planted seed had been washed into the buffer zone between the planting and the creek or into the creek itself? It was impossible to know.

Hand Seeding.
Photo by: Charles Larry

New Beginnings...

Consequently, the stewards decided to collect additional seed during the growing seasons of 2009 and 2010 for overseeding the planting. Another 99.5 pounds of seed were overseeded by hand into the acreage in areas where native growth seemed particularly sparse. Additional species were also added in the overseeding mixes bringing the species total up to 192.

Since the last overseeding was completed in 2010, prescribed fire has run through the unit approximately every other year, primarily because the planting is a subset of a larger management unit.

Twenty-eight plugs of Queen of the Prairie (*Filipendula rubra*) were hand-planted into the wet Sawmill soil area in 2009.

Queen of the Prairie.
Photo by: Mary Vieregg

Some Unwanteds

Additionally, there has been consistent surveillance and control of the relatively modest populations of birdsfoot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), white sweet clover (*Melilotus albus*), and reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*). The populations of all three of these weed species have declined, but still require surveillance and control.

Birdsfoot Trefoil.
Photo by: Charles Larry

White Sweet Clover.
Photo by: Dee Hudson

Reed Canary Grass.
Photo by: Charles Larry

So...what's growing in the planting 15 Years Later?

Answering that question became the motivation for revisiting this modest planting of 6.25 acres during the growing season of 2025. The planting was visited 15 times, beginning in April and ending in late October. During each visit, each new species observed was recorded. Identification and taxonomic designation were based upon: *Flora of the Chicago Region* (Wilhelm & Rericha, 2017).

Mary Vieregg

Mary has been a volunteer steward at Nachusa Grasslands for 27 years. She is also a former high school and college science teacher, author, friend, wife, mother, grandma, and proud UIUC alum. She presently lives in the city of Chicago.

Photo by: Amy Brewer

Clear Creek Unit discussed in this issue is in black outline.

Prairie Lily (C-10).
Photo by: Nathaniel Weickert

Pale Purple Cone Flowers (C-10).
Photo by: Dee Hudson

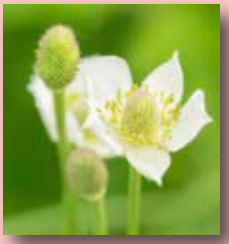
Downy Yellow Painted Cap (C-10).
Photo by: Dee Hudson

Canadian Milk Vetch (C-8).
Photo by: Dee Hudson

15 Years Later...

One hundred thirty-four, or 69.8% of the 192 species in the 2008-2010 seed mixes were found in the planting during 2025. There were 30 native species found in the planting that were not knowingly included in the original seed mix. There were seven non-native species found in small, scattered populations. The C-values (coefficients of conservatism) of the native species found in 2025 range from 0 (least conservative) to 10 (most conservative). Of those species planted in 2008-2010 and found growing in 2025, 57 or 42.5% of them have high C-values (8, 9, or 10). Please note: in the following photos where plants are identified, their C-values are in parentheses after the plant name.

White Prairie Clover (C-10) and Purple Prairie Clover (C-9).
Photo by: Charles Larry



Thimbleweed (C-8).
Photo by:
Charles Larry

Bumblebee and Green Sweat Bee on Queen of the Prairie (C-10). Photo by: Charles Larry

Regal Fritillary on Pale Purple Cone Flower (C-10).
Photo by: Charles Larry

Observing many of the familiar plant species travel their seasonal journey first sprouting through the warming soils and then rapidly growing, flowering, producing seed, and senescing was a fascinating and intellectually satisfying exercise. And the planting is home to numerous insects, birds, snakes, and mammals I could more fully appreciate as a quiet observer and note-taker. Their beauty and soundscape filled my hours with peace, awe, and delight. To quote Aldo Leopold, "It is, by common consent, a good thing for people to get back to nature."

Dickcissel. Photo by:
Charles Larry

White-tailed Deer in Winter.
Photo by: Charles Larry

People have asked me whether the time we have spent and the work we have done at Nachusa over the last 27 years has been "worth it". This 15 year "revisit" helped me answer that question. I think Aldo Leopold's words again seem most fitting in this context: "Acts of creation are ordinarily reserved for gods or poets, but humbler folk may circumvent this restriction if they know how."

Yes, it has been worth it.

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This Newsletter was produced by Friends of Nachusa Grasslands volunteers

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