



Ospreys and Songbirds and Deer – Oh My!

By Ann Oestreich IHM

Sisters of the Holy Cross restore 14 acres to native prairie.

A few years ago, the Sisters of the Holy Cross took a closer look at a parcel of land on the back of the Saint Mary's campus. There, a 14-acre floodplain of the Saint Joseph River had lain dormant for four decades. Until the 1960s, the land had been used for farming, but since then the Grounds Department had simply mowed it once or twice a year to keep weeds down. In 2007, the Congregation decided to restore that land to native prairie. The Leadership Team asked Saint Mary's very knowledgeable Grounds Manager, Tom Stimson, to guide the restoration.



To learn more about this process, Congregation Justice Coordinator Ann Oestreich IHM interviewed Tom for *Perspectives*.

Sr. Ann: What exactly is a “prairie” and what are some of the benefits of prairie restoration?

Tom: A “prairie” is the result of restoring *native* plant communities to an area in order to increase biodiversity and provide natural habitats for songbirds, butterflies, and other animal species. Here on campus we restored 14 acres, planting them with 6 native species of grasses and flowering marsh plants called sedges, and 25 species of “forbs,” broad-leaved flowering plants other than grass.

One of the great benefits of prairies is that they improve the environment by capturing and absorbing storm water and sequestering carbon. Native plants

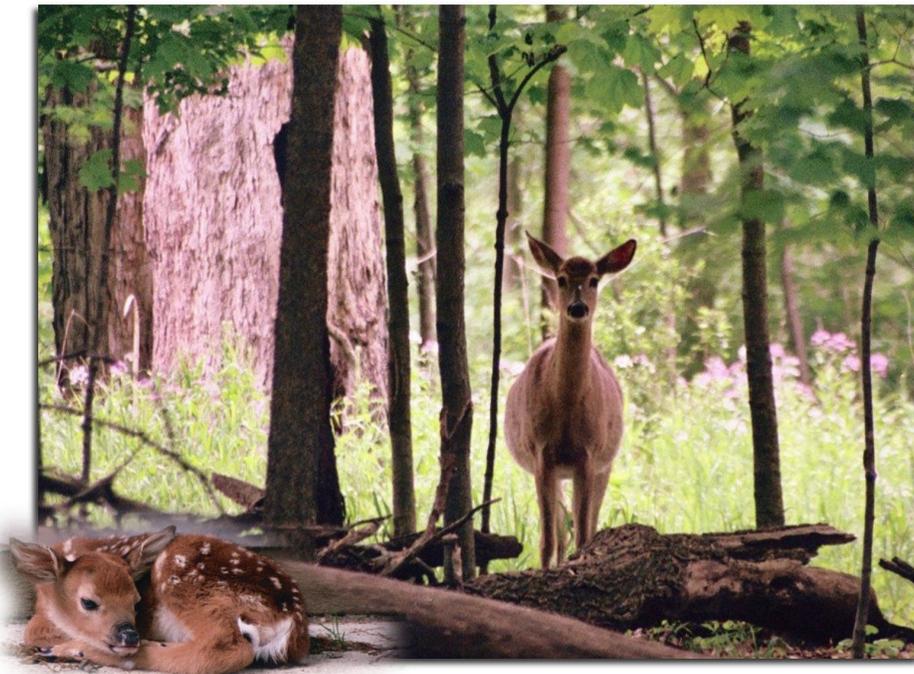
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also require fewer inputs and less maintenance, so the prairie restoration fits with our commitment to decrease our campus carbon footprint.



Typically it takes two to four years for the restored prairie to reach maturity, and that's where we are now.

Sr. Ann: The prairie is such a beautiful place, whether it's in full bloom or dormant in winter. Has it attracted new birds and wildlife?



Tom: We haven't done an "official" census, but those of us who spend most of our time outside on the grounds have observed that there are definitely more birds, many more butterflies, and plenty of deer. Probably our most famous newcomers are the ospreys.

In 2005, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources approached the sisters and asked permission to erect an osprey nesting pole at the edge of what is now restored prairie. The sisters agreed, and in 2007 the first three osprey hatchlings were born in the nest at the top of the pole. So ospreys became part of our prairie community. Birdwatchers on campus really enjoy watching the hatchlings grow – from afar, of course, with binoculars. The ospreys are *big* birds!



LEFT: Photo credit: McQuillan Photography

RIGHT: Photo credit: South Bend Tribune/Jim Rider



Sr. Ann: Recently, there was a “controlled burn” on the prairie. What role does fire play in maintaining a prairie and how often are they necessary?

Tom: Controlled burns, the most cost-effective prairie management tool, are essential to long-term prairie maintenance. Burning simulates historical processes that once maintained prairies. It greatly reduces the number of woody species and enhances the health of those without woody stems. It also clears thatch, making way for new growth in the spring. The black, burned surface absorbs and retains heat, giving native plants an early start in the spring. Typically, burns need to occur every three to five years.

Sr. Ann: You and your staff have given so much time and energy to this restoration, Tom. What was the best part of the project for you?

Tom: The whole process from start to finish has been fascinating, especially watching the landscape evolve gradually over time. The progression from germinating seeds to barely established vegetation to mature plants has been a powerful example of nature's dynamism, unfolding before our eyes.

We say of perennials "the first year they sleep, the second year they creep, and the third year they leap." That certainly has been true of the native grasses and sedges, some of which even reached eight feet tall this year.

All in all, this project has been a remarkable learning experience for us as we've studied the changes and learned to identify new native species. And, in this case, knowledge is wonder!

