

THE PAINTBRUSH PRAIRIE NEWSLETTER

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GENSBURG • PAINTBRUSH • SUNDROP • DROPSEED

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY GENSBURG PRAIRIE!

In May of 1988, Gensburg-Markham Prairie was dedicated as a National Natural Landmark by the U. S. Department of the Interior. Five years later, I can still feel the lump in my throat when I recall that day.

It was rainy, the first rainy day in weeks, and umbrellas and raincoats were plentiful. Sandy Mishur spoke for The Friends and Al Pyott said a few words on behalf of The Nature Conservancy. We had arranged for some students from Markham Park School to attend. I believe it was a meaningful experience for them since the future of the prairies will one day be in their hands. Markham's Mayor Evans Miller told the group: "The university may own the land, but it's our prairie. It belongs to every one of you. You have conferred ownership upon yourselves by your intent."

Markham-Gensburg continues to be the "crown jewel" of the Indian Boundary Prairies. It contains an exceptionally large variety of plant and animal species, many of which are endangered in Illinois. It's the largest of the four Markham prairies and the one most visited by large tour groups. However, the specialness of Gensburg does not overshadow the other prairies entirely, nor does it mean that Dropseed, Paintbrush and Sundrop get neglected.

With the help of fencing, signs, and some work on community awareness, the use of off-road vehicles on Sundrop Prairie has been greatly reduced. As a result, the last five years have brought about an increase in the size and numbers of native plant communities. The plants in turn attract birds. The annual bird count traditionally begins at Sundrop Prairie due to its wonderful variety of birds.

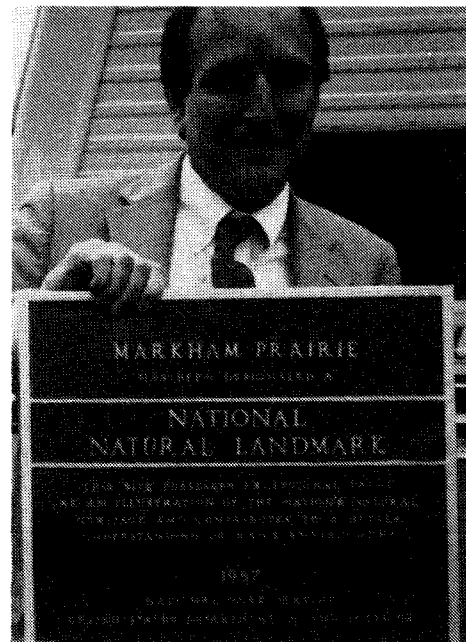
Many trees and bushes have been cleared from Dropseed Prairie to allow the sunlight to reach areas where native plants are making a comeback. The newly installed split rail fence gives it a very "cared for" look, which indeed it is. Because its smaller size does not make it seem so overwhelming to youngsters, Dropseed Prairie is often used for educational purposes. Our Prairie Week tours and Earth Day walks are usually held on Dropseed.

What Sundrop is to birds, Paintbrush is to flowers, especially the lovely Indian paintbrush for which this prairie is named. The variety of color on Paintbrush, in any season, is always amazing. In the last few years, a great deal of work has gone into reclaiming the wetland on the far east side. The work is already paying off. Green herons and hooded mergansers have been spotted, and this spring it's home to a nesting pair of Canada geese. These are only a hint of the possibilities for attracting other nesting species to Paintbrush, due to the massive effort to restore the wetland.

So, as we mark the anniversary of the dedication of our large and gorgeous Gensburg, we can take pride in knowing that a dedicated group of volunteers have kept ALL of the Markham Prairies thriving.

Congratulations to Gensburg Prairie, and congratulations to all of us.

T. Stepenski



Department of Interior official shows off bronze plaque collectively designating Markham's Prairies as a National Natural Landmark. In the last five years our 'Markham Prairie' has become increasingly recognized throughout the scientific community for its quality, diversity and species tenacity. Management techniques pioneered here are being duplicated in urban nature preserves across the country.

INSIDE:

- FAREWELL KARL BARTEL
 - SPRING BIRD COUNT
 - EARTH DAY '93
 - MIDLOTHIAN CLEANUP
 - SUMMER CALENDAR
- FREE BROCHURES