

“On the summit levels spreads the wide prairie, decked with flowers of the gayest hue; its long and undulating waves stretching away till sky and meadow mingle in the distant horizon.”

— David Dale Owen, 1848



Prairie landscapes require human involvement

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Middle America’s vast grass-covered landscape astonished the first French explorers. Having no word for it in their vocabulary they called it “prairie,” meaning meadow. Early southern Wisconsin travelers likewise expressed wonder at the virgin prairies and the more prevalent oak savannas.

MILLENNIA OF HUMAN INVOLVEMENT

Is it surprising to realize that the grasslands that so awed early Europeans were the product of thousands of years of human management? In fact, people are an integral part of the prairie community—and fire is the management tool they have always employed. Native Americans regularly burned prairies to drive game, facilitate growth of forage, and aid warfare and travel.



Beginning in the 1990s, volunteers scattered seeds by hand on the carefully prepared ground that would become Donald County Park. The seeds came from the UW-Madison Arboretum and other Dane County parks.

REESTABLISHING TALLGRASS PRAIRIES

As 19th-century settlement progressed, fire suppression, overgrazing, plowing and the introduction of non-native species destroyed most of America’s vast tallgrass prairies.

In the 20th century, interest grew in reestablishing prairies, in recognition of the region’s natural heritage. Scientists rediscovered fire as an essential management tool, to encourage native growth and discourage woody plants and non-native invasive species.

Many of today’s prairie restorations—although not as complex as virgin prairie—are home to numerous interdependent plant and animal species. These prairies rely on people and fire to maintain their character. Think of Donald County Park’s prairies as large cultivated gardens—planted and continuously maintained by people.



Friends of Donald Park volunteers help Dane County Parks staff to burn portions of the park’s prairies annually. Participants use approved equipment, wear fire-resistant clothing and follow proven methods.

Please visit the Friends website at donaldpark.org for more about prairie restoration.



A COMPLEX AND CHANGING ECOSYSTEM

- ▲ 1 The prairie constantly changes throughout the year—plants grow, bloom, set seeds, go dormant. Visit often to experience the prairie’s many faces.
- 2 Numerous interdependent plant and animal species live in prairies. Flowering plants are of crucial importance to many animal species, providing life-giving nectar, pollen and seeds.
- 3 Today, Donald County Park’s extensive prairies annually provide hundreds of pounds of seeds for other Dane County parks and Ice Age Trail plantings.
- 4 Under a layer of snow, the prairie still teems with life. Many mammals and birds remain active in winter, feeding on prairie seeds—and one another—in this complex ecosystem.

IMAGE CREDITS Donald Park prairie, seed collector: Don Hartman. Prairie planting: Lea Spaay. Meadowlark: Richard Armstrong. Butterfly, winter scene: Courtney Laper. Prairie burn: Phil Johnson.

