

July 26, 2005

## **Our Prairie Past - and future**

Driving in the Rice Lake area these days, it's hard to imagine that much of the land used to be tallgrass prairie. Catherine Parr Traill, in her 1835 description of the Rice Lake Plains, wrote: "A number of exquisite flowers and shrubs adorn these plains which rival any garden in beauty during the spring and summer months. Many of these plants are peculiar to the plains, and are rarely met within any other situation... These plains were formerly famous hunting-grounds of the Indians, who, to prevent the growth of timbers, burned them year after year."

Tallgrass prairie, which is characterized by several grass species reaching over two meters in height, used to extend over large areas of southern Ontario, southern Manitoba and the northern United States. The Peterborough and Rice Lake area was its northeastern extreme. It is now the rarest ecosystem in Ontario. Only one one-thousandth of one percent remains today, mere scraps of what used to be. The rest has fallen victim to the plough or has changed to woodland as a result of fire suppression.

Peterborough itself has a prairie heritage. The downtown was originally an oak savannah, a prairie-like environment interspersed with black oak trees - hence the original name of "Scott's Plains". Samuel Strickland, an early settler to this area, was one of the first people to describe the grasses and flowers that adorned these plains.

When white settlers first arrived here, it is estimated that about 150 square kilometers of the area south of Rice Lake consisted of near treeless grasslands. Smaller pockets of prairie habitat could be found along the Otonabee north to Peterborough and in the vicinity of Stoney Lake. Prairie ecosystems thrived in areas where the soil was thin and sandy, having been scraped almost bare by the glaciers. Because these areas were prone to drought, the plants growing there had to have special adaptations such as very deep roots.

Historically, the Ojibway First Nation called Rice Lake "Pemedashdakota", meaning "Lake of the Burning Plains". This referred to a long-standing native practice of burning these grasslands. Not only did burning attract game which would come to feed on the new, succulent grasses, but the fire would burn away the leaf litter and promote the growth of new prairie plants. Fire also killed tree seedlings which, if not suppressed, would grow and eventually shade out the prairie plants.

In addition to the typical grass species such as big bluestem, little bluestem, switchgrass and Indian grass, tallgrass prairie is home to a number of beautiful wildflowers. In our region, these include butterfly milkweed, wild bergamot, smooth beardtongue, black-eyed Susan, sky blue aster, prairie buttercup and showy tick-trefoil. When there are significant numbers of trees scattered about the prairie, the term "savannah" is used. Black oak is the dominant tree of Ontario savannahs. It reaches 20m in height and the bark is almost black in colour.

Unfortunately, many of the animals associated with the tallgrass prairie ecosystem have become extremely rare. These include the Henslow's sparrow, loggerhead shrike, greater prairie chicken and the Karner blue butterfly. The latter two species have disappeared from Ontario altogether.

Aldo Leopold, the father of wildlife ecology, wrote: "No living man will see again the long grass prairie, where a sea of prairie flowers lapped at the stirrups of the pioneers." To a large extent, this is true. However, tiny remnants of the prairie sea do remain and can give the visitor some sense of what used to be. Several of these sites can be found south of Peterborough in the vicinity of Rice

Lake. Red Cloud Cemetery, located southwest of Warkworth, is one of the few prairie remnants that has never been ploughed. You can actually feel the soft, sponginess of the soil under foot. Although it is very small, much of the original prairie vegetation can still be found there including big blue stem and little blue stem grasses as well as herbaceous plants like butterfly weed and blazing star. Several black oaks are also present. Prescribed burns are carried out regularly at the site as well as plantings. From Warkworth, Red Cloud can be reached by taking County Road 29 west to Smith Road. Follow Smith Road south to Red Cloud School Road. Turn right. The cemetery is on your right.

A second, much larger site is located on the Alderville First Nation south of Hastings on County Road 45. The 100 acres of black oak savannah is the largest remnant of tallgrass prairie left in south-central Ontario. Tours of the savannah can be arranged by calling Amanda Newell at 289-251-1484 or sending an email to [amandadnewell@hotmail.com](mailto:amandadnewell@hotmail.com).

In order to bring back some of the Kawartha's prairie heritage, a large-scale prairie restoration project was begun in 1998 on the Rainbow Restoration Site, a 19.5 acre field located on the 2nd Line of South Monaghan Township. The site is accessed via the Rainbow Cottages Resort. Seeds of five grasses and 24 other plant species were collected from several of the remaining prairie remnants in the Rice Lake area. Local prairie flora was used in order to protect the unique genetic diversity of this area. These seeds were nurtured into seedling plugs and planted using a tobacco planter. The site is open to the public but the landowner asks that visitors come to the office at the Rainbow Cottages Resort first.

When I visited the Rainbow project in mid-July, the dominant prairie species in bloom were huge rafts of wild bergamot and black-eyed Susan. At the south end of the property, there were also a number of butterfly milkweed flowering. Round-head bush-clover was just beginning to come into flower. Goldenrod will peak in late August while the various asters come into their own in September and continue to flower throughout much of October. September is also the time to see the grasses at their best. The yellow flower head of Indian grass is particularly striking at this time. Later, when its flowers go to seed, the golden-coloured seed head droops distinctively to the side. Big bluestem, too, which can reach 8.2 feet in height, is unique. The flower clusters are arranged in two or three short spikes which have given it the common name of "turkey foot".

The Ecology Park, located at Beavermead Park on Ashburnham Drive in Peterborough, also has a prairie demonstration site that was planted with locally indigenous prairie plants. There is usually a good display of the main grasses by late August. A large variety of prairie plants can be purchased here as well.

Restoration projects such as the Rainbow site and Alderville suggest that maybe people can restore at least some of the damage done in the past and reconnect us with our prairie heritage, a floral pagentry that flourished in our area for close to 5000 years.

What to watch for this week:

With bird and frog song coming to a conclusion for another year, insects have jumped in to fill the void. Listen for the voices of countless crickets, grasshoppers and cicadas as the males call to attract a mate. Many species like the snowy tree cricket can be identified quite easily by sound.

**Drew Monkman is a local naturalist, teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*.**