

# The Prairie Breeze

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Anu Opanuga and seven other office workers from the Westchester headquarters of Ingredion spent a sunny afternoon out on the prairie collecting bags of seed to be used on Cook County Forest Preserve property to the west of the preserve, helping to expand prairie habitat.

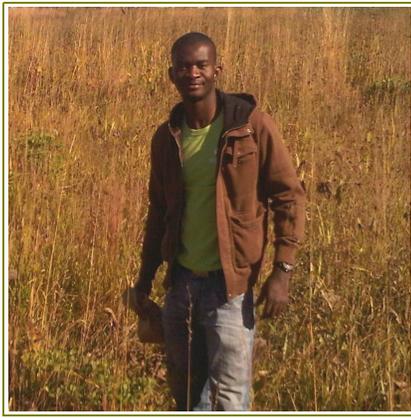


Photo by Mark Bosse

## NOVEMBER EVENT

Wolf Road Prairie: Flowers, Fire, Ice, Native Americans, A Big Fight, Monarchs, Leopold's Land Ethic, and More

The LaGrange Park Library 2-m – Sunday – Nov. 16

Dr. E.J. Neafsey has spent countless hours on the prairie removing brush and photographing its beauty. He has studied and researched its history, geology, and ecology. Through a slide show presentation he will share his knowledge, following-up with a discussion and question period.



## DECEMBER EVENT

LaGrange Park Library 2 pm - Sunday - Dec. 14  
Presenter: Patricia Reaves

A video on the folk traditions of Seiffen, Germany's most famous Christmas Village, will be presented showing how their holiday crafts, exported all over the world, are made. Follow the story of nutcrackers, incense burners, toys made on the lathe, and the miner's tradition of the Schwibbogen candle. A discussion and holiday treats will follow.



## Outreach: October Display of Photos And Paintings

For an entire month, the Westchester Library displayed prairie photos by Lawrence Godson and Fidencio Marbella along with paintings by nature artist Alice Anne Barnes. It was an opportunity to share the beauty of the Prairie with Westchester residents.

## The Monarchs Have Reached Their Winter Refuge

As tradition would have it, the first monarchs arrived at their winter refuge in the Mexican state of Michoacan, Nov. 2, the Day of The Dead, where they will overwinter in the protection of fir trees. Mexico has made a valiant effort to protect these trees. Deforestation is down from the previous years. The biggest threat to monarchs, however, is the decline of milkweed – the only plant that provides food for the monarch caterpillar. Our war on weeds is the main culprit. Gardeners and factory farms are using more potent weed killers. GMO corn and soy plants have been modified to withstand repeated sprayings of potent pesticides. This means that any stray milkweed along the margins of their farms or between crop rows can no longer survive. The best way to counter this loss is by planting milkweed.

## IT WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR

This growing season was inspiring from early spring to late fall. The spring started with an abundance of wild hyacinths, wood betony, and golden Alexanders. Later there were more shooting stars, spring roses, and prairie roses then were seen in the previous six years. Toward summer countless numbers of rattlesnake master were widespread. As usual, many prairie bush clovers fared well in several locations. The Joe Pie weed was not only thick, but exceptionally tall. Many more Michigan lilies and prairie lilies flowered escaping predation. Starry campion's numbers were up while there were many more of the usually scarce gaura than any of the volunteers remember seeing in the past, and in parts of the Prairie where they had not been found before. The obedient plants were common and their flowers were larger, fuller, more pink this year than in the last few summers. Some were seen blooming into September. For the first time in a long time, the carrion vines bore fruit. In the past, they were pared down by the deer before being able to develop seeds. Also successful were the spiderworts, native thistle, wood sunflowers, mountain mint, nodding onions, and coreopsis. This is not a complete list, but hopefully it will give you a snapshot of a resilient prairie.

While the bee population was not what it has been, we did see their numbers increase in late summer into early fall. Last year there was a downturn in the numbers of frogs and toads, but this year there was evidence that their numbers were up. We noted the absence of coyote scat on the sidewalks and unlike last year, they were not spotted by those reporting sightings. Volunteers were happy to see that the tick population was down. While the number of monarchs was also down despite plenty of available nectar, we are hopeful that with more and more gardeners planting milkweed we will have an upturn next year.

So why did we have such a productive year? The increase might have resulted from the Cook County Forest Preserve District's spring burn along with the spring and early summer rains. The cutting and clearing of buckthorn by volunteers also opened up whole areas to sunlight allowing a variety of prairie plants to sprout. Each year is unique and different plants flourish under different conditions. Next year will have its own surprises.

## A Camouflaged Surprise in The Prairie Garden

On August 31<sup>st</sup>, Drew Reaves was weeding in the Prairie garden when a slight movement caught his eye. On closer examination, Drew spotted a walking stick insect. What an unexpected surprise for the gardeners - most of whom had never seen one before. Its name is its best descriptor. This wingless imitator depends upon its ability to blend in to avoid predation. The legs, body, and long antennae - our all representations of sticks. In the spring, the newly hatched nymph is green enabling it to blend with the leaves of grasses and low growing bushes on which it feeds. By midsummer, many of them have morphed to a gray or brown and can be found on the twigs and branches of trees. It ranges in size from 2 to 3 inches with the female being larger than the male. Perhaps to avoid detection, walking sticks move very slowly - making it easier to observe them once spotted.

Before reaching their final adult stage, walking sticks molt five times and during their nymph stages they can regenerate missing limbs. These limbs are a bit shorter than the originals, but go along ways in helping the insect survive. At the end of her life span, the female will drop hundreds of eggs onto the floor of the forests.

In an article in the Illinois Natural History Survey Prairie Research Institute newsletter ( July 1998) it was noted that they were so common in the early 1900's that “. . . sounds of the abundant eggs dropping in the forest floor was like the patter of constant rain.”





## **Welcomed Visitors**

At the tail end of September, teacher Will Hudson along with docents Mary Cray and Rita McCabe led students from **Berwyn's Children's School** (photo right) on a prairie adventure. Some of the students were surprised at the height of our sunflower plants and the size of the prairie. Mr. Hudson plans to return with his students for another visit in the spring. In October, the **Westchester Middle School** (middle photo) brought 33 students to help with seed collecting. For the majority of the students, it was their first time on the Prairie, and many of them expressed a desire to come back on their own. Later in the month, an enthusiastic group of office workers from the **Westchester Headquarters of Ingredient** (left photo) spent an afternoon on the Prairie gathering seed to be used on Cook County Forest Preserve's Property to the prairie's west. Our thanks goes out to all of them, and to the **Nazareth Academy** students who are continuing each Saturday to cut invasive buckthorn in the northwest Prairie.

Photo credits left to right: Mark Bosse, Lawrence Godson, Will Hudson.



*It is the time of harvest. Gather now your seeds, lest you find yourself bereft of spring. Thomas Bradford*

## **A Squirrel's Nest**

As we drive down the tree-lined streets of our neighborhoods, it is hard to miss all the squirrel nests now made visible by the absence of leaves. They are large and leafy and it is not unusual to see more than one on a single tree. From the ground, they look to be no more than a whirlwind of leaves entangled in the tree's forked branches ready to scatter to the winds. But we know that doesn't happen. The squirrels it seems have learned that there is an advantage in gathering flexible twigs with intact leaves. They are taking advantage of the fact that leaves no longer connected to a tree will never receive the tree's hormonal signal to separate from the twig. So they chew through many leafy twigs, often letting them fall to the ground where they can select the best ones for constructing the foundation of their nest.

Naturalist author Bernard Heinrich in his book **Winter World** described in detail the inner nest of a particular gray squirrel as being multi-layered with flattened dried green oak leaves interlocking in such a way as to serve as watertight shingles. Within this globe of leaf layers, he found finely shredded inner bark enclosing a round central cavity. Other naturalist have found the inner layer lined with fur, feathers, thistle down, and bits of cloth. Regardless, the nest is wind and waterproof – a snug home in which to weather our colder seasons.

Often times a squirrel will construct several nests in one year. Summer nests are a must-have for squirrels. They are airy and open affording the inhabitants the pleasure of a cooling breeze. But as to the multiple cold weather nests, there are many theories. Some believe that a squirrel will abandon a nest if it becomes infested with parasites. Others believe that “false” nests are built to confuse predators. Or perhaps the squirrel has discovered, much to his chagrin, that the location he chose was not the “home sweet home” he had hoped it to be. Like us, many motivating factors can be the cause for moving and beginning again. Only long term observational studies can answer the many questions we have regarding the habits of our gray squirrels and the larger fox squirrels. Steve Sullivan, a local scientist working with the Peggy Notebaert Museum, is compiling data garnered by citizen scientists who share their observations and photos through the website [www.projectsquirrel.org](http://www.projectsquirrel.org). Steve has also developed a smart phone app to make reporting easier. It can be found on Google Play. So get involved. The potential of citizen scientists sharing information is extraordinary.



*Save The Prairie Society's Board of directors wishes you  
a relaxed, stress-free Thanksgiving with all your favorite foods.*