Remnant Status: Morbidity and Mortality

By
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On Thursday, March 20, 2008, the first day of Spring, we set out to examine and photograph the prairie remnants that Charles Allen and Malcolm Vidrine had studied in the 1980's. Only the smallest piece of the Frey Prairie remnant had been burned; none of the other remnants appear to have been burned in the last few years. Otherwise, here is the status of each of the remnants:

Frey Prairie: This prairie appears to be in relatively good shape; however, unburned. The middle segment has been made into an air-strip and clearly no longer has any significant prairie plants. Some areas have a tangle of *Rubus* spp. (hereafter simply called briars).

Estherwood Prairie: The south side of the railroad track is essentially on its last bit of life support. It is heavily overgrown with *Baccharis halimifolia* (eastern baccharis; hereafter simply called baccharis) and briars. Young *Sapium sabifera* (hereafter called tallow-trees or just tallows) were vigorously resprouting. Only a trail created by four-wheelers was traversable in the overgrown prairie, where only small areas had remnants of prairie flora. The northern side of the railroad tract had been mowed recently and had some obvious prairie plants. The western wet site, which once was nearly an acre of *Amsonia* and *Hymenocallis*, was reduced to small open islands within an encroaching forest.

East Midland Prairie: The prairie on the southern side of the railroad is the first prairie that Charles located. The eastern parts were scraped on both sections. The rest is partially overgrown with baccharis and briars. Again the northern side of the railroad tract had been recently mowed.

West Midland Prairie: The prairie on the southern side of the railroad tract appears to have been overgrown with baccharis, briars, and tallow; however, recently the overgrowth had been scraped into 10-foot high piles for burning. The end result is bare ground. The northern side of the tract again was mowed.

East Mermentau Prairie: The southern side of the railroad tract is overgrown with baccharis, briars, and tallow (the usual suspects), but there are some open prairie areas.

West Mermentau Prairie: The southern side of the railroad tract is overgrown with pine trees and the usual suspects. It is so shaded as to have insufficient undergrowth to sustain a fire; however, the pine needles may be sufficient. The northern side of the tract was partially mowed.

Welsh Prairie: This prairie looked good from a distance. It was too wet to approach this prairie as it is well off the road.
North Iowa Prairie: This prairie is mowed, except for the northern part, which is overgrown with baccharis and briars. Islands of prairie plants are apparent.
South Woodlawn Prairie: This prairie is overgrown with the usual suspects. Again islands of prairie plants are apparent.
North Woodlawn Prairie: This prairie is now part of the four-lane highway under construction.
South-South Fenton Prairie: Both sides of the railroad tract (east and west) are intact. Much of it was damaged by crosstie replacement in the mid-1990's, but it seem to be re-establishing. Baccharis and briars and some tallow are visible.
South Fenton Prairie: The site that once had a large seep and wet area with lots of *Aletris, Amsonia* and *Hymenocallis* as well as the little *Calopogon* and a huge circle of big bluestem is intact. Both sides of the railroad are in moderately good shape; however, the usual suspects are popping-up. Unlike the other prairies along U. S. 165, where the DOTD has put up netting and signs warning of "protected native grasslands," this area is not so designated (It is ironic that these prairies are all dying from the absence of maintenance by fire—the signs are what is the irony).
South Kinder Prairie: Both sides of the railroad tract appear intact; however, they are mowed.
Elton Prairie: This prairie appears to be completely forested by pine and other trees. Only the smallest islands of prairie plants are visible.
General overview: The remnants are all rapidly declining as prairie habitat. North Woodlawn is lost. Elton, Mermentau, West Midland, and Estherwood are in great peril and may already be lost. The remaining prairies, including mowed sections, could be reclaimed by the reintegration of fire as a management tool. Some additional herbiciding and clearing may be necessary. In either case, there is not much time. With the price of fuel and the danger to the integrity of the railroad tracts by falling trees (trees in prairie are poorly rooted because of the clay pan and readily fall over in high winds), the use of fire is readily defensible. It is essential in the maintenance of the integrity of the prairie flora that fire be routinely placed into management schemes. The bottom line is that there are few opportunities remaining to protect the remaining remnants—restoration is not a simple option as we can testify. We plan to return twice this year to reassess and photograph the remnants (probably May and August)—we hope that on those forays we see an entirely different picture.