

Southwest Wisconsin Grassland and Stream Conservation Area Newsletter



SWGSCA Newsletter

Produce. Manage. Explore.

Summer 2012

Message from the Outreach Coordinator

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Inside this issue:

<i>Driftless Area Land Conservancy Protects 450-acre Farm</i>	2
<i>New Discovery in Southwest Wisconsin: Lined Snake Population</i>	2
<i>Conservation Programs for Farmland and Wildlife Habitat</i>	3
<i>Upcoming Events</i>	3

This newsletter is for anyone that lives or owns land within the Southwest Wisconsin Grassland and Stream Conservation Area (SWGSCA) boundary (see page 4). The vision for the SWGSCA is to work with a diverse group of partners, landowners, and citizens to conserve and enhance grassland, savanna, and stream ecosystems in southwest Wisconsin, set within a rural landscape of working farms.

This place is special, not just for its beautiful topography, rural character, and cultural heritage, but also for its natural heritage: this is one of the best grassland conservation opportunities in the upper Midwest. We have many rare plants and animals, including grass-nesting birds that are declining rapidly across the Midwest and many remnants of pre-settlement prairie, one of the most threatened ecosystems in North America.

This newsletter marks the first edition that no longer carries the name "Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area". I have transitioned from coordinating partners and focusing just on the MRPHA area (the easternmost focus area on the page 4 map), and now focus on landowner assistance and outreach in the entire SWGSCA. Rural landowners within the boundary can still get free one-on-one land management advice and program assistance from me or the local Farm Bill Biologist, Erin Holmes. Just give us a call! If you have questions about the SWGSCA in general, contact Maureen Rowe, project coordinator (see contact information to the left).

See inside for examples of the partnership's activities, and "Like" our new Facebook page to get up-to-date news, event information, and land management reminders.

Sincerely, Katie Abbott

Mark your Calendars for Sept 8 Prairie Festival!

The SWGSCA partnership has an exciting event planned for this fall- a Prairie Festival! And it's free!

Events kick-off of Friday, September 7 at 4:30 with a field trip to a local prairie preserve, followed by local food tastings and screening of "America's Lost Landscape: The Tallgrass Prairie" at Folklore Village.

Saturday September 8 is the big day, with a series of activities from 10am to 4pm. This includes guided prairie walks, the Surly Surveyor (a program about the original land surveys), keynote speaker Jerry Apps, music, kid's prairie walks and activities, informational lectures, and art programs for adults. The day will wrap up with a barn dance from 4-5 pm.

The Festival will be located at Folklore Village, 3210 County Highway BB near

Dodgeville. For more details see www.swgsc.org/festival or contact Katie Abbott at katie.abbott@rcdnet.net or (608) 935-2791 x134.

The Prairie Festival is brought to you by: SWGSCA, Southwest Badger RC&D, Iowa County UW-Extension, and Pheasants Forever, with generous funding from: James E. Dutton Foundation, Alliant Energy Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, WI Department of Natural Resources, UW Extension-Iowa County, Pheasants Forever-Iowa County, The Prairie Enthusiasts, Riverland Conservancy, Driftless Area Land Conservancy, and Grassroots Citizens of Wisconsin.

This will be a fun event that has offerings for kids and adults alike. Please join us to be entertained, informed, and inspired.

Driftless Area Land Conservancy Protects 450-acre Farm

With funding assistance from USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service and Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, Driftless Area Land Conservancy recently purchased an agricultural easement on the 449.5-acre Barneveld-area Kirch farm. The farm plays a crucial role in connecting over **4 square miles of permanently protected properties**. That's about 2,695 acres, more than twice the size of Blue Mound State Park. The protected properties lie within the heart of Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area (MRPHA), recognized as a continentally important region for dry and dry-mesic prairies. A multitude of organizations and agencies have been working together since 2004 to protect over 4,500 acres of land within MRPHA.



New Discovery in Southwest Wisconsin: Lined Snake Population

By Corey Raimond

In September 2011, I set out to explore a prairie in Iowa County in the hopes of finding certain plants and catching a glimpse of an Upland Sandpiper before its long journey to Argentina. Although I accomplished neither, it still ended up being one of my best days in the field.

My first views of the prairie did not disappoint. The chunks of rock scattered over the ground showed the land had never been plowed. There were many high-quality prairie plants like Marble Seed and Violet Wood Sorrel (which was still blooming). The prairie looked nearly identical to a spot in Green County where I had found Plains Garter Snakes (a prairie species on the decline). The rocks give the snakes places to hide and stay cool while not actively foraging. In search of snakes, I started checking under rocks (carefully replacing them to their original positions) and after just 15 minutes I had found one! I went down to take a picture but stopped dead in my tracks. It dawned on me ... this was not a Plains Garter Snake; but what was it? I scanned my memory until I was able to convince myself of the unthinkable: It was a Lined Snake (*Tropidoclonion lineatum*). A new state record!



Photo by Corey Raimond

This find was unthinkable for several reasons: First, it was nowhere near Wisconsin's border. I had gone on several journeys to the far southern corners of the state hoping for new finds with no luck. Second, this must be a native relict population that had somehow gone undetected for hundreds of years. Most of the time, if new species are found in a state, it is the result of a human introduction or a human-induced range expansion. Third, of all the herps (reptiles and amphibians) that were "on the radar" for possibly being found in Wisconsin, the Lined Snake was not anywhere near the top of the list. Fourth, this is the 2010s and everyone knows that everything has already been discovered in the U.S., especially vertebrates. The last time a new reptile or amphibian species was found in Wisconsin was in the 1970s.

This find has been published in *Herpetological Review* and represents a range expansion of 95 km (59 miles) as the crow flies from the nearest known population in northwest Illinois. The northwest Illinois populations were only discovered within the last 10 years.

DNR staff returned to the site on Oct. 5 and found seven more Lined Snakes, including two young-of-year. The Lined Snake was quickly designated as State Special Concern to protect the species and is now being tracked by the Wisconsin Natural Heritage Inventory Program.

The Lined Snake is a small species native to the Great Plains region. Its main range extends from Nebraska to Texas, with several disjunct populations in Illinois and Iowa. There is one known population in southwest Minnesota. The great mystery, now, is: Are there more populations of Lined Snakes in southwest Wisconsin or northwest Illinois waiting to be found? Because of the

lack of records and the prairie specialization of this species, anyone who spends time in prairies should be on the lookout for this snake.

However snake seekers will have their work cut out for them. The Lined Snake is fossorial (digs underground), secretive and likely the smallest snake in Wisconsin. Adult snakes are only 20 to 38 cm (8 to 15 in) in length. They prefer to hide under rocks, leaves and other debris, to escape predators and find their prey, which includes earthworms and soft-bodied insects. Anyone who turns over cover objects in search of snakes should carefully replace them to their original position. Cover objects that are not replaced to their original position become unusable to snakes and other animals who seek very specific microclimates.

Lined Snakes resemble Garter Snakes (*Thamnophis*) in having a light line down the center of the back. Lined Snakes differ from a Garter Snake in 1) their smaller size 2) their smaller head (scarcely larger than rest of body) and, most noticeably, 3) a belly with two rows of black "half moons." The only other Wisconsin snakes with this belly pattern are Queen Snakes (*Regina septemvittata*) and northern Water Snakes (*Nerodia sipedon*) which both live near permanent sources of water and are substantially larger with heads wider than their bodies.

If you think you have found a Lined Snake, please report it to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources-Bureau of Endangered Resources. You can fill out a rare animal field report (Form 1700-048) found online or contact DNR staff Rich Staffen (608.266.4340 or Richard.Staffen@Wisconsin.gov).

Funding for Farmland and Wildlife Habitat Projects

If you missed the recent Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) sign-up, there are still opportunities in continuous CRP for lands within the SWGSCA boundary, south of Hwy 18/151. Contact your local Farm Services Agency for more information (www.fsa.usda.gov/wi).

Through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program, the Fish and Wildlife Service will match your investment of time and/or money to help you to achieve your land management goals, including removing brush from pasture or enhancing grassland, savanna, wetland, or stream habitat. Contact Mike Engel at Mike_Engel@fws.gov or (608) 221-1206 ext. 21. More information can also be found at www.fws.gov/midwest/partners/.

Upcoming Events

Field Trips (with The Prairie Enthusiasts):

September 9 (Sunday): Monarch Butterfly tagging on TPE Preserves, 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM

Monarch butterflies begin their migration south to Mexico roughly around Labor Day. With many flowers that serve as nectar sources, Prairie Enthusiasts preserves serve as vital way-stations on this journey. They're also ideal locations to catch, tag, and release butterflies. Join Scott Sauer to aid in this research effort; data is crucial to understanding monarch migration patterns and population trends. Monarch migration numbers are down considerably in the past decade. Monarch tagging is a simple, enjoyable, and educational way to contribute to real science, and is accessible to people of all ages and abilities. Students and educators are strongly encouraged to participate. **Contact:** Scott Sauer (608-237-0904 or 608-772-3539 (C)) ahead of time to confirm time, location, and conditions. **Location:** Mounds View Grassland

September 23 (Sunday): Schurch-Thomson and Underwood Prairies, 1:00 to 4:00 PM

Come hike into the secluded valley of the Schurch-Thomson and Underwood prairies for an afternoon of exploring dry prairie remnants, progress in recovering degraded prairie, and efforts at inter-seeding prairie vegetation into smooth brome sod. Displays of asters, other early fall flowers and waving prairie grass should be in the offering. Bring binoculars, a hat, and be prepared for a long hike. **Trip Leader:** Rich Henderson (608-845-7065) **Directions:** From US Hwy 18-151 near Blue Mounds in western Dane County, take County F south approximately 5 miles. Turn right onto Reilly Rd, and proceed to parking lot and kiosks at the end of the road (past the barn). (Note: A half mile down F from 18-151, pay close attention to the road signs, for F turns to the right & the straight ahead road becomes County Z. Stay on F.)

Work Days (with The Nature Conservancy): Dress appropriately for outdoor, grubby work. Long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, sturdy footwear, and work gloves are essential. Sunscreen and bug spray are good to bring in summer.

August 11 (Saturday): Muehlechner Addition-Barneveld Prairie 9 AM – Noon

We will be pulling Queen Anne's lace and other weeds. **Directions:** Approximately 0.2 miles east of Barneveld, turn south on Cty Hwy K. Follow Hwy K for 2 miles and turn into The Nature Conservancy's parking lot on the right. If you pass Prairie Grove Road, you have gone too far. Contact: Jim Lesniak (608) 576-3310

October 13 (Saturday): Muehlechner Addition-Barneveld Prairie, 9 AM – Noon

We will be clearing invasive brush and trees. **Directions:** Approximately 0.2 miles east of the village of Barneveld, turn south on Cty Hwy K. Follow Hwy K for 2 miles and turn into The Nature Conservancy's parking lot on the right. If you pass Prairie Grove Road, you have gone too far. Contact: Jim Lesniak (608) 576-3310

September 8 (Saturday): Thomson Memorial Prairie 9 AM – Noon

This preserve is a lovely dry prairie remnant that has survived in a mostly agricultural landscape. Volunteers will collect native seeds for restoration planting. **Directions:** From Hwy 18/151, turn south on Cty F near Blue Mounds and continue for just over one mile. At the intersection with Cty Hwy Z, turn right to stay on Cty F. The preserve will be on your right in about 1/2 mile. Park in the small fenced lot or along the road. Contact: Jim Lesniak (608) 576-3310.

Other Events:

August 14 (Tuesday): Goats For Brush Control Field Day 10 am- 1 pm

Goats are being used to control brush re-growth after logging for a second year. This field day will feature Ben Robel of Vegetation Solutions LLC, UW-Madison Professor John Harrington and DNR Wildlife Manager Bruce Folley. Presentations at 10 followed by a pasture walk and light lunch. For more information contact Carl Fredericks of Grass Mapping Enterprises LLC, 608-437-4395, rehlfred@mhtc.net. RSVP for BBQ lunch should be made to Bruce Folley via email only: Bruce.Folley@Wisconsin.gov by Wed. August 8 (608-575-9288 for folks without computer). Location: Yellowstone Wildlife Area, Lafayette County between Blanchardville and Darlington on County Highway F. Watch for signs at English Hollow Road ½ mile south of Yellowstone Lake State Park entrance.

September 7 and 8 (Friday evening and Saturday): Southwest Wisconsin Prairie Festival See page 2 for more details or visit www.swgsc.org/festival or www.facebook.com/SWGSCA.



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Newsletter for the Southwest Wisconsin Grassland and Stream Conservation Area

The Southwest Wisconsin Grassland and Stream Conservation Area (SWGSCA) is a partnership between local, state, federal, non-profit organizations, landowners, and individual citizens, all working together towards the common goal of sustaining functional grasslands, savannas, and stream habitats. This area of Southwest Wisconsin contains some of the best historic native prairies, wild-life diversity, and compatible land-use practices in the state. It also harbors regionally important populations of grassland birds, which have seen declining numbers in recent decades. We want to help those landowners that wish to improve their grasslands, savannas and streams. Our partners can provide technical as well as possible financial assistance to landowners looking to take on conservation projects. Through our partners we are also seeking to establish natural areas that encourage public use.

Inside this issue:

<i>Message from the Outreach Coordinator</i>	1
<i>Mark your Calendars for Sept 8 Prairie Festival!</i>	1
<i>Driftless Area Land Conservancy Protects 450-acre Farm</i>	2
<i>New Discovery in Southwest Wisconsin: Lined Snake Population</i>	2
<i>Conservation Programs for Farmland and Wildlife Habitat</i>	3
<i>Upcoming Events</i>	3

