



# 20 YEARS OF DUNN RANCH PRAIRIE

## Celebrating History, Conservation, and the Future

By Ann Vernon

When the Dunn family homesteaded in northern Missouri 150 years ago, the land was miles of virgin bluestem and switchgrass, a sea of grass as far as the eye could see. Through the years, the countryside changed. Most was used for grazing cattle or turned into fields of wheat or corn. The prairie grasslands diminished.

By the mid-1900s, of the original 15 million acres of grassland in Missouri, there were only remnants of the original tallgrass to remain. Rumor had it that some was still to be found on Dunn Ranch Prairie, where Billie Dunn Meadows and her husband, Forest "Frosty" Meadows had protected some of the prairie as a family legacy.

Doug Ladd, former Director of Conservation with The Nature Conservancy in Missouri, had heard stories of Dunn Ranch Prairie. "The first state director talked to the owners back in the 1970s," said Doug. "We tried to negotiate buying the land from the family, but they were not interested."

Doug saw the land for himself back in the 1980s. "It was beautiful property," he said, "more than 2000 acres, half of which had never seen a plow."

"There was some brush and a few trees in the valleys and by the river, but the pasture was pretty clean," he recalled.



On his first day at the prairie, Doug saw several wildflower plants that he found really interesting. As a botanist, he knew that those plants – and this land – was very important. The grassland was precious and needed to be saved.

It took nearly 30 years of conversation before the owners were ready to sell, in 1999. “All of what the Meadows owned, we bought,” said Doug Ladd. And a staff was assembled to work on-site.

Assessment began to decide what needed immediate attention and to define long-term projects for restoration. And that began a well-planned conservation program that has continued for 20 years.

Today, the wind whistles through the bluestem fronds. Some say that on a good year, grasses shoot up tall enough to hide a deer or a boy. Bobolinks and grasshopper sparrow...coneflower, wild indigo, prairie clover and poppy mallow...owls in the tree tops, rough-legged hawk, prairie chickens...wooly headed bison all live in harmony in the landscape.



### **Dunn Ranch Prairie Staff & Volunteers Work Year Round**

Dunn Ranch Prairie on-site staff and numerous volunteers annually work – hands-on – in an effort to return the land to its natural state.

These efforts include removing invasive (non-native) trees and plants, seeding and re-planting a diversity of native grasses and wildflowers. Much of the seed collection is done by hand with workers collecting as much as 800 pounds of seed a year. It is tedious work.

TNC collaborates with other conservation teams like Missouri Department of Conservation, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on conservation projects throughout the prairie. Community and landowner outreach is also vital, so that knowledge gained from test strategies and research can be shared. Learning what issues face local landowners and working together is a priority.

On Dunn Ranch Prairie, hundreds of children and their families come in school groups, scout troops and clubs to learn about this unique landscape. In addition, TNC works with the Missouri Department of Conservation to co-sponsor Prairie Days, a bi-annual event with interactive activities that allows the community to enjoy and take in the prairie experience.



## Controlled Burns Rejuvenate the Grasslands

Mother Nature used lightening to burn the fields and pastures, laying down a rich bed of ash to mix with the soil and promoting quick spring growth. Native Americans would regularly burn a stretch of grass, flushing out deer and small animals, and encouraging new greenery to attract the bison. Later, farmers began to burn pastures to improve grass for cattle, and that still goes on today.

The Nature Conservancy does the same thing at Dunn Ranch Prairie with regular controlled burns, removing old stalks and refreshing the soil, which also benefits wildlife. By burning tracts on a rotating schedule, some grasses are left tall to attract certain species of birds and wildlife; some vegetation is kept short as habitat for others.



## Species Are Re-Introduced and Restored to the Prairie

Not only does TNC work to reinstate grasslands, they are saving water sources locally. Almost all of Missouri prairie headwater streams have dried up or have poor water quality. One victim is the federally endangered Topeka shiner, a silvery minnow with a black stripe. Working with the Missouri Department of Conservation, the shiner has been brought back to Little Creek at Dunn Ranch Prairie and is multiplying rapidly. The minnow is an important part of the food chain and its other values are part of an ongoing study.



Greater prairie-chickens were disappearing throughout the state, particularly when their breeding grounds were spoiled due to habitat loss. Since 2015, the prairie-chickens have increased in number, and their leks, or active breeding grounds, have been

restored. The largest population in the state of these fascinating birds now dwell at Dunn Ranch Prairie, and the annual “booming” mating dance attracts many visitors to see the sight.

Until the late 1870s, the American Bison was a vital part of prairie life, carrying seed pollen in its furry mane, eating woody vegetation, enriching the soil with nitrogen from urine, and creating pools of water to invite other species, by their stomping and wallowing in the dirt.

In 2011, a herd of 35 bison from Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota was re-introduced to Dunn Ranch Prairie to help restore the land to a healthy ecosystem.





## Twenty Years of Growth & Development

Little Creek Farm, just south of Dunn Ranch Prairie, was overgrazed with cattle who were not restricted from the creek. With 217 acres of pasture, TNC is restoring water quality, improving vegetation along the creek, and improving two culverts which impeded wildlife crossing and water flow. They are also working with a local farmer to establish TNC's first sustainable grazing demonstration farm in Missouri, testing new strategies and incorporating native grasses into the grazing mix. A house on the property will soon be used as researcher quarters and a meeting place for staff and visitors.

Today, Dunn Ranch Prairie totals 3,247 acres, offering much opportunity of scientific study, research and restoration. James Cole, Director of Conservation, is optimistic about the future.

"We hope that Dunn Ranch Prairie thrives for another 20 years and continues to influence and inform grassland conservation. This is a special place to so many people and provides much needed habitat for some endangered and threatened species. We are still learning from the prairie every year and we want future generations to learn from it as well."

## Join Us

Our conservation successes at Dunn Ranch Prairie over the last 20 years would not be possible without the dedication of our supporters—and for that we are truly grateful. But our work is not done. We invite you to join us. Your support is vital for grassland conservation success. It will enable tangible and lasting results, including a healthy, diverse prairie ecosystem that benefits both nature and people, while providing rare opportunities for research and public enjoyment.

If you are interested in learning more or supporting our work at Dunn Ranch Prairie or around the state, please call us at 314-968-1105.

For more information on Dunn Ranch Prairie visit: [www.nature.org/dunn](http://www.nature.org/dunn)



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