

# EFROYMSON RESTORATION AT Kankakee Sands

WINTER 2022

FULL RAINBOW AT THE KANKAKEE SANDS BISON VIEWING AREA IN FALL 2021. © ALYSSA NYBERG/TNC

## HAPPY NEW YEAR 2022!

- Trevor Edmonson, Jessica Gomez, Garet Litwiler, Alyssa Nyberg and Olivia Schouten

### 541 More Acres of Prairie!

This past summer and fall, we spent hours upon hours harvesting and preparing native plant seeds in preparation for converting a 541-acre agricultural field due north of the bison pasture to prairie. The prairie planting process is something we've done at Kankakee Sands for more than 20 years now in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. The earthwork is currently underway, and the seed will be planted this winter. This next planting will bring us up to 8,000 acres of planted prairie at Kankakee Sands!

This section will be composed of dry sand prairie and will grade down to wet prairie and will include a 12-acre shallow wetland in the lowest part of the field in the southeast corner. For each square foot of land, 60 seeds will be planted for a total of 3,554 pounds of seed! This will ensure a successful prairie planting filled with plants native to Newton County.

Next year, we expect to see a flush of Canada wild rye and black-eyed Susan growing, which will give way over the years to little bluestem, milkweed, goldenrod and aster in the uplands, and sedges, burr marigold and wild rice in the wetlands. Thanks to the many volunteers that helped with seed harvesting efforts this year! We could not have done this planting without you!



A double bloom of purple milkweed (*Asclepias purpurascens*).  
©Derek Luchik/TNC



A bulldozer begins excavating the 12-acre wetland.  
©Trevor Edmonson/TNC

**There is always so much to do and see at Kankakee Sands. Come enjoy it all!**  
**Kankakee Sands is free and open to the public every day of the year for non-consumptive use.**



## Restoring Bison to Tribal Herds

This year, in partnership with the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC), Kankakee Sands, along with the Illinois, Missouri, South Dakota, and Colorado chapters of The Nature Conservancy, restored nearly 200 bison from Nature Conservancy herds to Tribal herds across North America. Twelve of those bison came from our very own Kankakee Sands herd. For nearly 30 years ITBC has been restoring bison to Tribal herds, preserving the historical, cultural, traditional and spiritual relationships that were severed hundreds of years ago by European colonization and violence. They now have over 70 member Tribes from across the U.S. Through this partnership bison are also restored to the lands where they were historically removed, reconnecting the webs of plants and animals that long lived together.



Several members of our Kankakee Sands herd enjoy their last night at Kankakee Sands before the twelve bison leave for Tribal herds.  
© Olivia Schouten/TNC

In just five short years, the bison herd at Kankakee Sands has grown from 23 to more than 100! Our initial 23 bison, as well as an additional 20 bison, are all descendants of the bison herd at Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota, an especially genetically diverse bison herd. All the others were born here as offspring of those first bison. Now that some of our herd have reached the maximum size that allows for a balance of healthy grazing both to the bison and the prairie, we must transfer our bison to new homes. Our relocated bison are especially important, as they carry that unique genetic diversity from the Wind Cave National Park herd that will increase the genetic diversity and resilience of any herd they join. We are excited to have been invited to contribute to the mission of the InterTribal Buffalo Council, and we look forward to nurturing this partnership.

## Update on the Rivers Trails Conservation Assistance Partnership with the National Park Service

Kankakee Sands was a 2021 recipient of The National Park Service's (NPS) RiversTrails Conservation Assistance grant and NPS staff are working with TNC staff to facilitate the creation of a comprehensive plan for updating and developing the Kankakee Sands property. Our vision with this project is to create a welcoming Midwest destination, providing all visitors an immersive and inspiring educational experience that instills an appreciation of conservation. Our goal is to provide better accessibility, improved signage and an enhanced visitation experience for people of all ages and abilities.



Workshop participants dream big for Kankakee Sands improvements.  
© Mike Mencarini/National Park Service.



TNC's Trevor Edmonson, second from the right, chats with other participants at a brainstorming workshop.  
© Ashley Newson/National Park Service

In December of 2021, we hosted the first of several workshops that brought together our conservation partners to share ideas on how to make our vision and goals a reality. We will continue to solicit and refine ideas over the next year and will begin implementing the upgrades by the end of 2022.

To learn more about the Rivers Trails Conservation Assistance program visit:

<https://www.nps.gov/orgs/rtca/community-projects.html>



## Researcher Spotlight – Zach Finn

Zach Finn first visited Kankakee Sands in 2019 when he was an undergraduate at Purdue University. During his visit, he learned that more than 99% of prairie habitat in Indiana has been lost, and the significance of Kankakee Sands moved him. Zach went on to pursue his Master's Degree at Purdue, and when it was time to begin his thesis project, he decided to incorporate his passion for nature with his newfound love for prairie ecosystems. His research project explored the feasibility of bringing back the greater prairie chicken and the Franklin's ground squirrel to Newton County, specifically to Kankakee Sands. And what he found was very encouraging.

The greater prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*) is a prairie grouse that was extirpated from Indiana more than a half century ago. It is known for its entertaining mating displays, in which males strut, inflate colorful air sacs on their neck, drum with their feet and whoop for the females. The state-endangered Franklin's ground squirrel (*Poliocitellus franklinii*), in comparison, is a much quieter prairie dweller. It spends most of its time in underground burrows and hibernates for six to seven months of the year. There are no Franklin's ground squirrels in Newton County.



Zach and his wife Sara on a recent River Clean-up © Zach Finn

For his thesis, Zach used a computer program to predict habitat suitability. The modeling results for the greater prairie chicken indicate that there are many areas in and around Kankakee Sands suitable for mating display and year-round success. The modeling results for the Franklin's ground squirrel were inconclusive; more research will be needed to ascertain whether this species would thrive in Newton County.

A very special thank you to Zach for compiling this research that may one day allow us to return these two prairie dependent species back to Newton County.



A male greater prairie chicken in full display in the Northern Flint Hills of Kansas, May 2020 © Greg Kramos



Franklin's ground squirrel. © Alberto Cea

## Wish List

Our winter wish list includes items that would enable our Kankakee Sands team to be safe, fire-ready, well-organized and able to capture inspiring wildlife images.

- **U-line Emergency eye wash and shower station.** \$550
- **Weighted 40 lb and 25 lb vests for Prescribed Fire Pack Test training.** \$100 – \$200 each
- **Milwaukee 56-inch High Capacity 8-Drawer and/or 10-Drawer Steel Storage Tool Cabinet.** \$800 - \$1,000
- **Nikon Z7II Mirrorless Camera for Video and Wildlife photography.** \$3,400

If you would prefer to make a financial donation to our work, you can do so by visiting [support.nature.org/Indiana](https://support.nature.org/Indiana) or by contacting Trevor Edmonson at [trevor.edmonson@tnc.org](mailto:trevor.edmonson@tnc.org). In addition to helping us achieve amazing conservation results, you'll also receive our annual Indiana chapter newsletter and our quarterly Nature Conservancy global magazine.



## Kankakee Sands Volunteer and Outreach Program

A very big thank you to all of our 2021 volunteers for dedicating your time and skills to Kankakee Sands and the stewardship of our beautiful Hoosier state! You all are hands-down amazing, and a big part of what makes Kankakee Sands such a special place. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

With 2022 already upon us, the Kankakee Sands staff is teaming up with other Newton County partner organizations to offer more events and opportunities for you to visit, connect with nature and lend a helping hand. A great way to learn about the prairie, bison and the natural world is to visit Kankakee Sands and attend one of our outreach events where we discuss the local history and wonderful wildlife and plants that make Newton County such a special place to visit. Volunteer workdays are also a great way to learn about the magical complexities of the prairie and take an active and rewarding role in stewarding the land.



Want to Volunteer with Us?  
[www.nature.org/indianavolunteer](http://www.nature.org/indianavolunteer)



Andrea Wallpe and volunteers harvest grey-headed coneflower at the Kankakee Sands Nursery last summer.  
©Alyssa Nyberg/TNC



Volunteers clean seed on the prairie – who needs a building when you have the beauty of Kankakee Sands?!  
©Alyssa Nyberg/TNC



Bison Rangers, John Hardwick and Ralph Knapp, ready to meet and greet the public during November's National Bison Day at Kankakee Sands.  
©Alyssa Nyberg/TNC

To that end, we are excited to share our Indiana Chapter Volunteer webpage and events calendar which will include all TNC Kankakee Sands activities, as well as TNC activities all around the state:

**[www.nature.org/indianavolunteer](http://www.nature.org/indianavolunteer).**

Watch for our new QR code stickers around Kankakee Sands. Just hover over the code with the camera on your phone, tablet, or other device and whoosh – you'll be taken right to our Kankakee Sands volunteer page!

In 2022, we have more than 60 activities planned. Below are a few winter and spring, family-friendly, FREE activities that we will be hosting in partnership with Friends of the Sands, the Newton County Park Board and the Newton County Public Library. We are excited about these partnerships and hope you can join us! To stay informed of all of our volunteer opportunities, sign up for our new volunteer e-newsletter at [www.nature.org/indianavolunteer](http://www.nature.org/indianavolunteer).

- Walk back in time history hike at Conrad Station Savanna
- Evening walk to see woodcocks at Kankakee Sands
- Earth Day greenhouse workday and intro to botany hike
- Brush removal and bonfire workday at the Bison Viewing Area (will include marshmallows!)
- Evening salamander hike at Kankakee Sands
- Evening of stargazing under a new moon
- Evening Woodcock Walk at Kankakee Sands



TNC staff and volunteers enjoying a mug of cocoa at the Bison Viewing Area during a December End of the Year Get-together. ©Alyssa Nyberg/TNC

## Want to volunteer, make a donation or learn more about Kankakee Sands?

If you would like more information about our conservation work and/or how you can be involved, visit us online at [nature.org/kankakeesands](http://nature.org/kankakeesands) or contact Trevor Edmonson at 219-285-2184 or [trevor.edmonson@tnc.org](mailto:trevor.edmonson@tnc.org). Thank you!