



Prairie Stewards prepare to work in wildflower restoration plots designed to attract bees, butterflies and other pollinators. © Tom Gross

Prairie Stewards Fill the Restoration Gap

Volunteer group assists The Nature Conservancy and National Park Service

Michele Kessler cuts right to the chase.

“I tell people, “This is your chance to save the bees and the butterflies and save yourself, too.”

Kessler is the volunteer coordinator of the Prairie Stewards, a group of volunteers that assist The Nature Conservancy and National Park Service with the preservation and restoration of prairies in Kansas. Most, but not all, of their work is conducted at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

Last year, the Prairie Stewards spent almost 300 hours on projects ranging from bird and butterfly surveys to seed collection to plant and restoration monitoring. It was the first year the group organized, and plans for 2019 are already underway.

“One of our goals is to have a pool of people we can call on, sometimes on short notice,” says Kessler. “Not everyone can come to every workday, but I can put the word out ‘Hey, it’s been really dry this week, can anyone come help water the restoration plots?’”



Michele Kessler, Prairie Stewards Coordinator

“Without the Prairie Stewards, we just wouldn’t be able to take on all the restoration projects we’d like to,” says Kristen Hase, acting superintendent

at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. “Sometimes a group of 10 people can accomplish more in a few days than what one ranger can get to all summer.”

Kessler says it’s great to spend time with like-minded people who care about our prairies, but there’s another benefit.

“We get to spend time in parts of the preserve that the regular visitor doesn’t have access to. And we get to learn from the professionals at TNC and the park service.”

For more information about becoming a Prairie Steward, contact Kessler at prairiestewards@gmail.com. Looking for other ways to volunteer? Visit nature.org/ksevents to find a workday that works for you.



Sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*) in bloom © Chris Helzer/TNC; Stripping seed from the stalk in the field © Matt Bain/TNC

Growing Native Seed

Favorable weather leads to 76,000-pound harvest

Conservation is spreading at The Nature Conservancy's Smoky Valley Ranch. The 17,520-acre shortgrass prairie ranch is nearly all native, unplowed range. But about 2,000 of those acres used to be farmed. Those areas have since been restored to native prairie plants including one part that is dominated by a grass called sideoats grama.

Every so often, good rains at just the right time leads the sideoats—named for the distinctive seeds that hang off the blade of grass—to produce so much seed in a concentrated area that it can be harvested. TNC contracts with a local seed company to harvest the oats in August. That timing is important. It's after grassland birds have finished their nesting season. Because the combine sticks to a relatively small area of land, birds and other wildlife can easily escape the temporary disturbance. The

Restoration with this seed provides important habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken.

Matt Bain, western Kansas conservation manager

contribution to grassland restoration in Kansas. This variety of grass is adapted to the semi-arid landscape of western Kansas, and it has been used in thousands of acres of Conservation Reserve Program seedings. Providing the rare, local seed for native grass restoration projects means TNC can have conservation impacts that extend well beyond the ranch's borders.

"Grassland restoration with this seed provides important habitat for species like the lesser prairie-chicken," says Matt Bain, western Kansas conservation manager.

Last August, 76,151 pounds of seed were harvested from just 1,200 acres at Smoky Valley Ranch. TNC also purchased a small inholding at the center of the ranch last year, an area of cropland that will soon be restored to prairie grasses. Perhaps some of last year's sideoats seed will find its way back to the ranch.

combine is fitted with a stripper head; the small teeth strip the seed from the stalk and leave the rest of the plant intact.

Over the years, this stand of sideoats grama has made a significant

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Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve

2480K-177 Highway, Strong City

- 50 miles of hiking trails
- Catch-and-release fishing

Cheyenne Bottoms

5 miles north of Great Bend

- 7,654-acre preserve
- Hunting at state wildlife area

Smoky Valley Ranch

Hiking trailhead on Cty Rd 350, Oakley

- 5 miles of hiking trails
- Western Vistas Historic Byway



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What's Happening at Little Jerusalem?

The work to get Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park open to the public is underway. At the time of this printing, no date had been announced, but it's still on track to open sometime in 2019. The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism is in the process of hiring a naturalist who will be instrumental in providing public access. Construction of trails, fences and a parking area has started.

Get The Most Current Info

and watch for the grand opening announcement at nature.org/littlejerusalem