



WINTER 2026

## Bison Update

The Kankakee Sands bison program is now in its tenth year, and our herd is nearly 100 animals strong. Over the years, we have watched the bison transform the 1100 acre bison pasture into a flower-filled healthy prairie that only a big grazer can make possible.

Last fall, TNC staff and the Indianapolis Zoo's Veterinary Team worked together during our annual Bison Vet Day. The bison were moved through the corral for a quick health check, ear and microchip tagging, and blood sample—all of which took less than one minute per animal! Data from the 2025 vet day confirms that 16 calves were born into our herd this year. Our oldest cow is 14 years of age and is one of the original founders of our herd from South Dakota. The heaviest cow is 1,070 pounds with most of the other cows averaging 800-850 pounds. Our heaviest bull weighed in at 1,682 pounds!

The data collected during our vet day is shared with other TNC herds across the nation to deepen the collective understanding of bison, with the goal of ensuring the health and resiliency of bison and our prairies.

**14**

Age of the oldest female bison in our herd, meaning she was one of the original bison brought to Kankakee Sands in 2016!

## Kankakee Sands Staff Updates

The Efroymsen Prairie at Kankakee Sands team of Jessica Gomez (Fire Lead), Carly Hlebasko (Invasive Plant Species Lead), Olivia Schouten (Grazing Lead) and Alyssa Nyberg (Preserve Coordinator) look forward to continuing to work together with you for the good of our natural world and all the creatures that inhabit it!

Each year, we bring in young professionals to join us in managing the prairies at Kankakee Sands to build their skills and talents. In 2025, Shay Seibring (right) returned as our Restoration Technician, and Maddie Christian (left) joined us as a summer intern through the Jay N. Darling Institute at Drake University. Thank you, Shay and Maddie, for all your help with harvesting seeds, removing invasive plants and connecting people with nature!



PHOTOS: (Top) Kankakee Sands bison herd © Trevor Edmonson/TNC; (Bottom left) Summer intern Maddie Christian records native plant data in a prescribed fire research plot. © Jessica Gomez/TNC; (Bottom right) Restoration technician Shay Seibring removes woody debris from a ditch alongside U.S. 41 to improve water flow. © Alyssa Nyberg/TNC



## Update on the Franklin's Ground Squirrel Project

In 2023, a three-year collaboration between TNC, Indiana Department of Natural Resources and Purdue Fort Wayne was formed to reintroduce the state-endangered Franklin's ground squirrel to the restored prairies at Kankakee Sands.

Why here and why now? The Efroymsen Prairie at Kankakee Sands has been building and growing since the project's inception in 1996, with a vision to support complex ecosystems at scale and thus be a harbor for many species that cannot thrive elsewhere.

The Franklin's ground squirrel is one such species, as it prefers tallgrass prairies interspersed with wetland edges. Historically, Franklins were present in 20 counties in Northwest Indiana; however by 1984, their numbers had declined steeply, mainly due to habitat loss. They were officially listed as a species of special concern. Any squirrels left in the area were banished to marginal railroad prairies and forgotten corners, isolated and bottle-necked.

By 2023, the Efroymsen Prairie was a thriving canvas of reconnected and reconstructed prairie ecosystems in the same area where Franklin's ground squirrels once were documented. It made sense to try and reconnect the species with its lost habitat.

In the spring of 2024, Purdue graduate student Justin Moore released the first batch of 25 ground squirrels from South Dakota, where the species is abundant and the genetic pool is strong. That first year we had many questions. Would the Franklins survive the winter? Would they find Kankakee Sands a suitable place to live? Would they run far away, never to be seen again? In order to answer these questions, Justin and his team of student interns tracked the squirrels with GPS collars and PIT tags to help answer some of those questions. Over the summer of 2024, the squirrels were tracked until they burrowed under the sandy soils for the winter. Many settled down not too far from where they were released, which was a good signal for habitat selection, as we tried to put a lot of thought into a suitable site where the initial release would be.

During the summer of 2025, a second group of 30 Franklin's ground squirrels was released, also equipped with GPS collars to track their movements. During this time, Justin and his team were thrilled to capture animals released in 2024, as well as young with no tags—meaning that they were born at Kankakee Sands. This was an incredible sign of success that the population was growing in only the second year.

So far, the project has the markers of a short-term success story as we had hoped. What we are learning will help to identify optimal future release sites and will aid in the recovery of the Franklin's ground squirrels beyond Kankakee Sands. These complex ecological projects and partnerships are what conservation is all about, and they fulfill a vision for what Kankakee Sands is supposed to be—a canvas for connections to nature.

PHOTOS: (L) Purdue grad student Justin Moore releases a Franklin's ground squirrel onto the Kankakee Sands prairie. (R) The first group of Franklins tentatively leave their crate to explore their new home. Both photos © Justin Moore





## Lighting up the Prairie

In 2025, our Kankakee Sands staff either led or assisted with the controlled burning of 993 acres at Kankakee Sands and 1,977 acres elsewhere in Indiana. These carefully planned fires are vital to maintaining plant and animal diversity. Fire is one of the most effective tools for controlling invasive plants and allowing native species to thrive.

At Kankakee Sands, we hope to burn 1,500 acres in 2026. That's ambitious, but important as we restore the natural process of prairies and savannas that keeps them healthy and vibrant into the future.

When conducting prescribed fire adjacent to our neighbors, we like to notify them as a courtesy. If you would like to be notified on the morning of a burn adjacent to your property, please reach out to Alyssa Nyberg, Preserve Coordinator, at [anyberg@tnc.org](mailto:anyberg@tnc.org) or (219) 285-2185 and let us know the best way to reach you (phone/text/email) on the day of the burn.

## Infrastructure Updates

In late 2024, we unveiled new visitor improvements at Kankakee Sands. Our goal was to transform Kankakee Sands into a welcoming destination for an immersive, educational and inspirational nature experience for all.

To accomplish this vision, TNC collaborated with the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program, as well as our many regional partners, to create more inclusive and accessible infrastructure that invites visitors to connect with the land and the many stories it holds. The improvements include accessible parking, restrooms, and trails built with compacted limestone for firm, smooth surfaces. There are viewing decks with ramps and viewing scopes in two heights, and with a special lens to help those with colorblindness see the prairie in full bloom. Additionally, QR codes were installed on our signage that link to Spanish translations.

Come experience the new improvements!

## Wish List

New 70 HP Tractor, John Deere or Kubota (\$60,000)

Mini-striker portable water pump and seal kit for prescribed fire, Waterax (\$2500)

Two 16" x 34" outdoor information kiosks for the Grace Teninga Trail and Conrad Station Savanna, Alphabet Signs (\$340 each)

60V 13" cordless string trimmer and leaf blower combo kit with battery and charger, Greenworks (\$300)

100 ft x 3/4" stainless steel garden hose, Giraffe Tools (\$85)

50 ft x 3/4" stainless steel garden hose, Giraffe Tools (\$50)

ImageMate® PRO Multi-Card Reader for use with Unmanned Aerial System, SanDisk (\$42)

*If you are interested in donating a Wish List item, please contact Alyssa Nyberg at [anyberg@tnc.org](mailto:anyberg@tnc.org). Thank you!*



## Student Conservation Internship

Students are an important component of our work at Kankakee Sands. Through the Newton County Student Conservation Internship, funded by the Jasper-Newton Foundation and the Newton County Economic Development Commission, we are thrilled to continue jointly hosting Newton County seniors for year-long internships!

Interns gain skills and experience working alongside staff at the Newton County Soil and Water Conservation District Office, DNR's LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area, Willow Slough Fish and Wildlife Area, and TNC's Kankakee Sands Office. Through the internship, they are helping to protect Newton County natural resources by participating in conservation farming, cover crops, rain gardens, invasive plant removal, native plant seed harvesting and processing, and community outreach. They give so much to their county! May all that they learned during the internship serve them well in all that lies ahead after graduation!

## Connecting People with Nature

In 2025, volunteers gave more than 1,500 hours of their time to Kankakee Sands! Together with **Friends of the Sands** (who hosted 95 events!) and the **Kankakee Sands Bison Rangers** who met with the public and answered their questions about bison and prairies, we were able to connect nearly 3,000 people with nature!

Join us in 2026 for more nature-based events, activities and volunteering. To find out more, visit [friends-of-the-sands.com/calendar-of-events/](https://friends-of-the-sands.com/calendar-of-events/) or sign up to receive our weekly email by contacting Alyssa Nyberg at [anyberg@tnc.org](mailto:anyberg@tnc.org). We hope to see you soon!

### We'll soon be hiring for the next round of interns!

- 12 month internship
- Newton County students
  - Incoming seniors
  - 500 hours
  - Paid internship



Scan this QR code or click on this [Newton County link](#) to apply online

### Join us in 2026 for these nature-based events, and many more!

February 7: Walk across Kankakee Sands  
 March 14: Quest for the Fairy Shrimp  
 April 11: Pursuit of the Elusive Woodcock  
 May 9: Friends of the Sands Plant Sale  
 June 5: Coreopsis Hike on the Prairie  
 July 8: Natural Wonders Walk  
 August 12: Blazing & Shooting Star Celebration  
 September 12: Monarch Migration Celebration  
 October 24: Conrad by Moonlight Hike  
 November 27: Day after Thanksgiving Hike  
 December 24: Holiday Hike