

12 more months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

August – Patton Prairie (<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Patton-Prairie.aspx>)

Directions: 1627 Quonset Ave., Aurora, IA 50607 South of Aurora County Hwy W45 then west on 150th Street for 1 miles and south on Quonset Ave for 1.2 miles.

If you go: Consider Joining the Iowa Native Prairie group on a hike here Aug 25 at 11 am. Parking in a lot off Quonset, but Patton Prairie (PP) is a native prairie accessible only by a mowed access between a field and farmstead. As we enter rabbit & squirrel hunting season on September 1, remember PP is open to hunting and wear bright colors or hunter orange. Firebreak trails were recently mowed throughout the property but thick cuttings are sometimes difficult to walk on. Feel free to venture off the trails as well to further explore this area. To venture off the firebreaks, wear long pants and sturdy shoes as the surface is uneven and in places soggy. During our Aug 15 visit with no wind, only the flies harassed me, but insect repellent is always good to bring along. Binoculars are helpful for bird and butterfly observations and a camera and or field guide(s) can help ID what you see or hear.

Yellow is the color that Mother Nature seems to prefer in the late summer prairie flowers, and the landscape at PP is a great example. “Yellow” is a bit of a simplification, however, as the palette varies from pale pastels to golden. Often a deep brown or black adorns the center of blossoms and the textures are varied. Of course, since the prairie is defined by its plants, green is the background that all other colors are painted into.

Among the most dominant of flower families this time of year are the goldenrods. Goldenrods have just begun their bloom here at PP, and at least 3 of the 16 species of goldenrod are listed by “*The Flora of North America*” as being native to Iowa, are currently flowering. I can identify some, but even plant experts sometimes have



trouble distinguishing some goldenrod species from each other and common names are the same for several species. One of those I can identify is one of the smallest and earliest. Lance leaved goldenrod (Photo 1) has thin leaves on delicate stems and is only 1-2 feet tall. Like all members of the family, it sports the

characteristic tiny yellow flowers in clusters that may be several inches across. Various other species of goldenrod will bloom from now through frost, many with a more characteristic peaked flower cluster (Photo2). With dense, heavy pollens, goldenrods are a magnet for pollinators – especially those that feed on pollen – and the predators that feed on pollinators.

Being so bright and showy as well as so widespread, goldenrods are often villainized as the culprit for seasonal allergies. They have the misfortune of blooming at the same time as the non-descript ragweeds (Photo 3) which produce copious amounts of lightweight windblown pollen that is the common allergen for sufferers. Many of those who know they have an allergy to ragweed will often misidentify a goldenrod plant/flower as ragweed. Many ragweeds are left standing and goldenrods sprayed, cut or pulled in misinformed attempts to minimize allergy problems.



Other species contributing to the dominance of the yellows at PP are gray coneflower, sweet coneflower, evening primrose, avens, and sunflowers. In contrast, the blues, pinks and purples of great blue lobelia(Photo 4), swamp milkweed and ironweed respectively, though not as numerous, seemed to stand out.



Along the recently mowed firebreak at the prairie edge, woody plants maintain a foothold. Here a bountiful harvest of wild edibles can reward observant humans



and attract wildlife (Photo 5). Elderberry clusters are sought after by jelly makers, but the widely spread clusters also make great landing pads for birds to sit and snack on the fruits. Wild grapes might seem small and seedy – maybe not worth our



effort- but for wine or preserves, their flavor is unrivaled by domestic grapes. Wild Plums are ripening – ready for harvest around Memorial Day when their now peachy skins will be a deep burgundy and the flesh soft and tart. To harvest either grapes or plums, you have monitor the ripening harvest and beat the opossums, birds, turkey, deer, raccoons, fox, and others who seem to know just when the fruit is at its peak. And the wild cherries are about gone – with plenty of evidence that raccoons have been enjoying the feast . We were still able to snag a few to enjoy.



Work your way to the northwest portion of the property and you will be treated to a splash of pink blossoms and a kaleidoscope of color flying among the flowers (Photo 6). Joe-Pye weed is a butterfly favorite and on our visit, though it was cloudy, several species could be seen. When I was looking to see if the plant's name should be capitalized, I learned that the plant gets its name from the Christian name of a Mohican healer that used the plant to treat a variety of ailments including fever – maybe the plant should be a human favorite also.

Joe-Pye likes “wet feet” as do the cattails and invasive Reed’s canary grass growing nearby. With different portions of PP being wetter or dryer, the plant community also changes. Portions are tall and lush while others are short and sparse. As the prairie plant community changes, so too does the animal community that makes use of the habitat.



Beyond the flowers being utilized by insects, there is a great deal for wildlife to take advantage of in a prairie and on our visit I was lucky enough to witness a good diversity. Watching cautiously from an adjacent waterway, a doe actually moved closer before melting into the cornfield like a player at the “Field of Dreams.” Using the mowed trail for easier travel, a mink scurried right toward us before also slipping through the prairie stems. Sitting among the tiny goldenrod flowers, a camouflaged assassin bug seemed unconcerned that I could see it as it waited for an unsuspecting insect to come enjoy the buffet at the rattlesnake master flower (Photo 7).

But camouflage is the norm and sometimes that wildlife stays hidden until they feel you approach too close. With a harsh buzzing, a cicada took flight from the stalk of a big bluestem. A leopard frog jumped out of the way just before I would have stepped on it (Photo 8) but stilled just at the edge

of the trail. Much quicker was the cottontail that bounded into the path and down the bunny trail for 50 feet before darting back into the cover of the prairie. This dart and freeze method of survival is very effective for both predator and prey.



Take your camera and visit PP or one of our other parks. For other 12 month locations, see the archived stories at www.buchanancountyparks.com under publications. Walk quietly and beyond the plants and landscapes, you may see some of the prairie wildlife before they see you. Watch the natural behavior and perhaps snap the winning photo for one of our Buchanan County Natural Areas Photo Contest categories. Entries are due by Sept 12 -see info at http://www.buchanancyiowa.org/services/conservation/photo_contest.php.