

12 months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

August –Bryantsburg Prairie (<http://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Bryantsburg-Area.aspx>)

Directions: Immediately west of Hwy 150 on Bryantsburg Blvd 2 miles south of Hazleton.

If you go: This small prairie has many ruts and anthill bumps. Ruts will be wet after rains. Good shoes are recommended. I have not seen poison ivy at this park, but despite pulling, some wild parsnip likely remains. Parking is just along gravel roadside.

Anyone who knows me – even just casually, is aware of the fact that I really have a passion for monarch butterflies: learning about them, wondering about how various things affect them and their population, and sharing the mysteries, questions and answers with just about anyone who expresses an interest.

That said, the Buchanan County Park of the month for August couldn't be anyplace except for Bryantsburg Prairie. This little patch of native prairie sits in the wedge between Hwy 150 and the gravel Bryantsburg Blvd. At just over an acre in size it is a tiny, but incredibly diverse area that I spend about an hour a week at through the summer monarch reproductive season. Its three species of native milkweed provide a nectar source for many pollinators as well as a larval food source for monarch caterpillars.

Part of the monitoring that is done each week is noting the “plants in bloom” which means a stroll on the uneven terrain of the prairie to discover the showy as well as the diminutive wildflowers. Some of the wildflowers are present nearly every week through the summer months and others make a short appearance of only a few days.



May brings the shooting star that is visible at 55 mph driving past as well as the smaller blue-eyed grass and yellow star-grass. June ushers in the wild geranium, golden alexander, spiderwort, black-eyed Susan, meadow rue, wild white indigo, dogbane and pale lobelia in turn. Around July 4th each year, the Michigan Lilies bloom, followed by the, mountain mint, milkweeds, and sweet coneflower. Late July into August, the creamy gentian, goldenrods and blazing stars bloom: first the prairie blazing star and then the meadow blazing star (which I

have just recently discovered is not rough blazing star). It is the blooming of meadow blazing star that brings out the monarch butterflies in abundance.



Bryantsburg is the only Buchanan County Conservation prairie – native or reconstructed – on which I have seen meadow blazing star. I recently read – but have not been able to confirm – that it produces a chemical that replicates monarch pheromones. Since I have always understood that the research indicates monarchs

do not use or produce pheromones for attracting mates, I am skeptical of this bit of information. Regardless of how they find it – which is one of those really intriguing questions – I have often claimed that having this blazing star blooming is a guarantee that you will have monarch butterflies. Since there is not much in the natural world that is a guarantee, this is quite a claim.

Since 2001, nearly 9,000 monarchs have been tagged by students, families, care center residents and individuals helping with the ongoing citizen science project through the University of Kansas – Monarch Watch. I estimate that about half of those butterflies tagged that were captured in the wild were captured in this tiny monarch oasis. When the blazing stars have finished their bloom, the stiff goldenrod and asters will provide a less preferred nectar source to monarchs still traveling through.



Even after the last butterflies have left for warmer southern climates, Bryantsburg still has its treasures to find. Bottle gentian's brilliant royal blue flowers are among the last blooms to flourish here before the frosts and winter winds blanket the area in white.

Unfortunately, Bryantsburg's small size is its biggest downfall as well as the saving grace that likely kept it from the plow. Invasives are able to establish a foothold from both roadways and it is a battle to keep some of these from overtaking the prairie. Pulling of wild parsnip has taken place for about 10 years with the assistance of summer campers and staff. This annual pulling has reduced the number of plants significantly, but mowing along both roadsides allows seeds to begin growing with little competition, so we will likely never eliminate it completely. Queen Anne's lace was particularly abundant this summer, so we spent about 12 hours pulling it to prevent its numerous seeds to create an even bigger problem next year.

With these species largely controlled, we expect to host several school groups and perhaps our public monarch tagging event – all depending on how long the blazing star continues blooming. These groups as well as our pulling teams have created mini pathways through the prairie, and we invite you out to enjoy the diversity of wildflowers and the many pollinators making use of this valuable resource. But with the end of the flowering season, we hope to address another invader.

One of the biggest struggles with maintaining this prairie is the removal of woody species that will eventually shade and outcompete the prairie plants for sunlight. Most prairies are managed with controlled burns to help reduce or eliminate the influx of woody species, but Bryantsburg is a difficult prairie to burn successfully. Because it sits in a low spot between two roadways, it is often wet; being next to a highway and a residential area means we can only burn with limited wind conditions; and finally, it is dominated by flowering species with only sparse prairie grasses, so it does not have the fuel source to create a hot, sustained burn.

Because burning is not a viable management tool, we have decided to try a different approach to removal of the woody vegetation – the Great Race Against Shrubs and Shade – GRASS!

We are looking for teams to compete in this ambitious race to eliminate the shrubs and shade of invading woody plants at Bryantsburg Prairie. The competition will involve removal (by hand tools: pruners, loppers, etc or pulling) of woody willows, dogwoods, sumacs and a few cedars. Teams will need to supply their own tools and a vehicle to load & haul the woody material removed. Buchanan County Conservation will assist with identification of unwanted woody species and chemical treatment of stump cuts where needed. In this small prairie several teams could easily complete the project in a couple of hours. Get together a team to assist in the community service effort. Prizes will be awarded!

Please contact Sondra (fontanapark@iowatelecom.net) or Michael (naturalist@iowatelecom.net) for more information on creating a team to compete in GRASS.



