

12 months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

July – Ham Marsh

<http://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Ham-Marsh.aspx>

Directions: On Indiana Avenue one mile west of the curve on Hyw 150 (3 miles north of Independence.)

If you go: Remember this is a marsh and wet meadow that can be spongy much of the year. There can be a lot of gnats and mosquitos in summer, especially when calm. Poison Ivy is found along the north woodland edge and wild parsnip is found in a small portion of the west prairie edge. Staying on the trails will help avoid contact if you are unfamiliar with these plants.

Summer's heat and humidity and the presence of gnats, mosquitos, horseflies, and no-see-ums make enjoying our many Buchanan County natural areas more challenging right now. You have to pick your times and locations to minimize the negatives and maximize the many balancing positives. Early morning is often cooler and brings the liveliest bird calls and activity and dew can bejewel both flower blossoms and insects sitting among them. Late afternoon again cools and any winds often begin to lessen, but insect activity – especially butterflies and dragonflies reaches a peak. These are the best times to visit Buchanan County's native and restored prairies in summer.



A recent late afternoon visit to Ham Marsh provided a diversity of bird, butterfly and dragonfly activity to complement the early summer flowering of the glacial marsh and restored prairie. From the parking area along Indiana Ave, the mowed trail passes the recently mowed hay ground (the hay feeds the bison at Fontana in winter), crosses the railroad tie bridge and continues past the private residence to the top of the hillside. Here the prairie restoration area begins. Following the trail west will take you to the bird blind (photo 1) and

marsh area. Summer plant growth makes the marsh area less visible in summer than in winter and spring when the best waterfowl viewing occurs, but the avid explorer may venture forth.

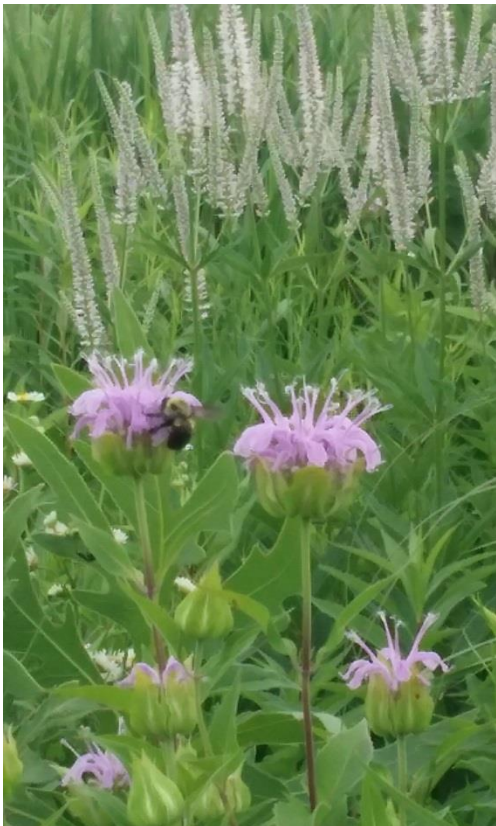
The prairie was burnt this past spring (photo 2) and the removal of last year's vegetation has created a stunning habitat to traverse. You could stay on the mowed trail and continue west toward the marsh, but you would be missing the chance to truly engage all of your senses. This restoration is a great example of how we work to mimic native prairie diversity that supports so many animals – above and below ground.



Tallgrass prairies were the major habitat in Iowa prior to settlement and they were much more than their name implied. Big Bluestem, Indiangrass, and switch grass reach heights of six to eight feet when they flower and seed in August, but they are just three to four foot clumps in early July after a burn. Between the clumps of tall grasses, prairie wildflowers (varying in height from several inches tall to eight or more feet), shorter grasses, and sedges bloom from May – October.

Many people are familiar with Black-eyed Susan (photo 3) as a prairie species, and it certainly provides a summer splash of gold to the hilltop. But as you step to get a closer look at a cluster, you might inadvertently step on or over a shorter plant that would be easy to miss were it not for the enveloping fragrance released from the bruised stems. Mountain mint is just now opening its tiny white flowers atop the 2 foot stems. Close your eyes... take a moment to savor the smell!

Let your eyes rest a bit longer and you might begin to notice the



diversity of sound beyond the buzzing of gnats in your ears. Bees buzz from their work pollinating flowers (photo 4). Crows raucous calls resound from the hayfield where they now have easy access to prey.



Trills and chirps from the prairie come from hidden songbirds. A deep barump from the marsh reveals bullfrogs. The raspy, warbling whine of the season's early cicadas resonates from the nearby woodland. And on my recent visit, not a car, mower, or tractor could be heard. Ham Marsh can be a local escape from all the "noise" of our busy lives with the relaxing sounds of nature.

Step through the marsh fence, but expect to bushwhack through the tall grasses hitting against you as the ground gets noticeably softer underfoot. Plopping bull froglets (tails still present) escaping into the water will greet you at the marsh edge. A whole new plant and animal community is just in front of you. One step into the mucky marsh will bring a whiff of

decaying plant material as you sink into the sediments. Wild rice, arrow leaf, purple flowering pickerel weed and tiny floating duckweed provide food and shelter for aquatic insects that in turn feed the frogs, birds, and dragonflies.



Back on the more solid prairie ground; notice the whisper of a gentle breeze or the fan of a strong gust blowing to dry sweaty skin as you return eastward to the parking area. Textures abound among the wildflowers; what does the head of rattlesnake master or gray coneflower (photo 5) feel like? Touch the feathery Culver's root or the downy leaves of stiff goldenrod. Powder-like scales might slip off in your fingers if you can catch a nectaring butterfly.

And don't forget to look... Close – to notice things like the lacewing egg nearly “floating” off the side of the rattlesnake master (Photo 6).

Up – to the blue and white of the sky and the tree swallows darting to catch flying insects. Down – to the crawdad holes

with their surrounding mounds of soil where maybe you can see the architect peeking out. And out – to see the many tall compass plants with their yellow flowers standing as sentinels (photo 7) amid the shorter prairie community.

Explore this unique area with Buchanan County Naturalist, Sondra Cabell on our Saturday, July 22 Marsh Walk. We will get into the prairie, the sedge meadow and even the marsh (if you are so inclined and have shoes that can get wet.) Conditions are currently dry, but the area may be spongy if we get rain. Meet at the Ham Marsh Parking area at 10 am. (Lot holds only 3 vehicles, so please consider bringing someone along in your car. Additional parking along the gravel road) Binoculars are recommended for bird, dragonfly and butterfly observations. Insect repellent may be desired as gnats and/or mosquitoes may be out. Bring drinking water. Ham Marsh has little to no shade and no restroom facilities.

