

12 months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

May – Bearbower Sand Prairie (<http://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Bearbower-Sand-Prairie.aspx>)

Directions: On Benton-Buchanan Road two miles west of Hwy 150.

If you go: Remember the park is a hunting area as well as a nature enjoyment area. Wear bright colors during spring turkey season and come mid-day to avoid most hunters. Long pants are recommended as both trails leading to the sand prairie have patches of wild parsnip. Binoculars are a good idea if you want to ID the many migratory songbirds that are here.

Controlled burns of prairie areas to prevent encroachment of trees and shrubs is a rite of spring for Buchanan County Conservation field staff. This spring, Bearbower Sand Prairie was one of the sites burnt. As a result, much of the standing prairie grasses and dried flower stalks are now gone and the landscape at the prairie is distinctly visible.

From the parking lot, a mowed trail leads you along the east park boundary and directly to the open sand prairie. Bluebird boxes dot the open space with the first box currently being fought over between sparrows and bluebirds. Nearby, corrugated steel sheets and plywood provide microhabitats for many of the reptiles that call the prairie home. These structures are part of an ongoing reptile population survey and should be left undisturbed. (Photo 1 - Garter snake beneath the steel research structure.)

Bearbower's sand prairie is a unique habitat among our county parks. The soil on the hilltop prairie is so sandy that relatively fewer prairie species grow here and those that do must be able to tolerate



rapidly drying soils.

Visitors will note the wild strawberries blooming and might want to make note of their locations – with enough moisture, June berries will be a great reward for visitors returning. (Photo 2 – wild strawberry blossom.) Just about to burst into yellow flower clusters is a signature species of the dry prairie – hoary puccoon.





The loose structure of the sand may be difficult for plants, but it makes for easy digging for burrowing animals (photo 3 – prairie with sand mounds). In the process of burrowing, animals dislodge plant roots, leaving behind raised tunnels and mounds of sand too hostile for plants to grow on. These sand bulges make great canvases for animal tracks of those animals who visit the prairie from the surrounding woodlands. Look for the distinct heart shaped hoof prints of deer, the clawed tracks of fox and raccoon among others.

Heading west across the open prairie, it is easy to see the charcoal remains of the controlled burn as well as the bright greens of plants emerging. Clumps of dead woody stems provide perches for many birds that forage for insects or seeds among the prairie plants. Look up as well as down – a pair of kestrels put on quite a show during my visit.

Crossing over the hilltop, keep your eyes open for one of Buchanan County's rarest residents – the ornate box turtle. Ornates are classified as a threatened species in Iowa and they have suffered population decline due to habitat loss and collecting of wild individuals. These land turtles are protected, so if you are fortunate enough to see one, take a picture and watch it for a while, but do not disturb it. (photo 4 – Ornate box turtle moves through the



recently burnt prairie). This dry sandy habitat is crucial to their nesting success. Unfortunately, most eggs/young turtles fall victim to predation by raccoons and skunks and young turtles have not been noted at the prairie in recent years. A mating pair was seen earlier this week, so we will continue to survey for young turtles in hopes of success.

After cresting the hill, you can see the west access road which will lead you back south to the road (or continue north along the road to the diagonally situated woodlands that make up the remainder of the park.) Keep your eyes peeled for another unique find before you leave the sand prairie behind; fragile prickly pear cactus (see photo 5) grow along the hillside on the east of the roadway.

Recent spring rain has the lower areas along the grassy roadway submerged in seasonal ponds and toads and



chorus frogs are calling out for mates. (Photo 6 – seasonal ponds in woodlands) Through the trees flit many little warblers along with chickadees and blue jays. Unfortunately, these puddles will likely mean many mosquitos are soon to emerge, so stop out now.

For more information

about Buchanan County Conservation Board parks, programs and activities, visit www.buchanancountyparks.com.