

Burning with a Native Passion

By Nichole Riendeau, Wild Ones Member-Root River Area Chapter

My capstone project, a controlled prairie burn, was one that I think captivates everyone, young and old; and if done correctly, benefits both plant, animal, and pollinator communities alike. Wisconsin has many restored prairies, savannas and valuable forests throughout our state. Some of these areas can be thousands of acres of quality habitat for all animals great and small, while others are just as valuable but on a much smaller scale. Take the 22 acres of land in rural western Racine County that is privately owned by fellow Wild Ones member Diane Battisti. Her restored prairie is home to deer, fox, coyote, turkey, rabbits, and a healthy population of ticks. For more than twenty years she has been adding various native plants to her prairie and yard. As I worked to complete my native plant certification coursework over the past two years, I started wondering how we could reduce the number of invasive annoyances on her property such as buckthorn, garlic mustard and those nasty bloodsucking ticks. A prescribed burn could be the answer.



Photo courtesy of Nichole Riendeau.



Photo courtesy of Nichole Riendeau.

Prescribed burns, or controlled fires, have many benefits for the land and people. Benefits include wild fire prevention, habitat creation, nutrient recycling, invasive species control, reduced pest insects & diseases, increased wildlife opportunities, improve and protect habitats for threatened and endangered species. Repeated prescribed burns can even increase biodiversity of plant species and reduce tick populations. That last benefit was a win all by itself, in my opinion!

Surveying the land and mapping out our burn area was an important detail we needed to consider first and foremost. This property not only contained several acres of dry prairie brush, but it was also surrounded by several evergreen trees. Nearby neighbors were notified, and the local Raymond fire department was put on notice. Hopefully they would not be needed. By late fall 2023, when conditions were right, a group of friends and family volunteered alongside dedicated Wild Ones members to help me complete my project. We were finally going to perform a controlled burn on a small section of the prairie, which was an area roughly 20'x50'. The remaining prairie acreage would have to wait. We were not burn experts, but we did recruit the help of a fellow Wild Ones member and Prairie Enthusiast, Kat O'Connell Valuch, who had participated in several prescribed burns. She was extremely knowledgeable in making this project successful.



Photo courtesy of Nichole Riendeau.

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November 1, 1994:
Fox Valley Area became chartered as a Wild Ones chapter

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Photo courtesy of Deb Benada.

Burn Area



Photo courtesy of Nichole Riendeau.

It was a sunny, crisp 41-degree day in November. Humidity was 48% with winds coming from the west/southwest at 11 mph. A perfect day! At around 10:00 in the morning the flame was lit. Everyone had an important job to do, as outlined on my plan. Our main goal was to successfully burn this area of prairie without fanning the flames toward Diane's house or outbuildings. Following the detailed burn plan, we directed the fire in the right direction moving it along as it burned everything in its path. By 11:30 the flames had extinguished themselves, hotspots were watered down, and a successful burn was in the books. Next was the real test. Did this event achieve the results of reducing invasive and abundant woody plant material? Had plant diversity increased for our friendly pollinators? Would the tick population decline?

One week following the burn the ash had settled. We noted that the more mature woody shrubs like buckthorn, honeysuckle and dogwood remained but had a slight singe to them. Winter came in December and as the cold months slowly dragged, the burned area quietly slept under a light blanket of snow. Amazing things were happening! Spring 2024 brought an overabundance of rainfall, but the plants didn't mind, their deep roots were happy. Seedlings were enjoying the ash fortified soil. By early spring the burned area was regenerating, and everything was in bloom! As spring continued, we did notice that the area attracted more pollinators like bumble bees and provided better habitat for wildlife and did reduce the Queen Anne's Lace and Canada Thistle...for now. We also noticed that the tick population was lower this year.

Burn Resting



Photo courtesy of Nichole Riendeau.

Continued burns would be needed to improve the prairie, rejuvenate the soil, and allow native plants to flourish. Watching the prairie come back to life with renewed vigor was truly rewarding. After a full year of transformation, the prairie and I both gained something beneficial from the burn. Performing a controlled burn is a reminder of how fire, when managed wisely, can be a powerful tool in restoring and enhancing our natural landscapes. Yes! Fire was indeed GOOD but having a passion for natives and giving them the right prescription of an occasional burn was even better!

**I want to extend a special "Thank You" to Diane Battisti for being a good steward of the land and allowing me to learn from the burn!*

Burn Recovery



Photo courtesy of Nichole Riendeau.