

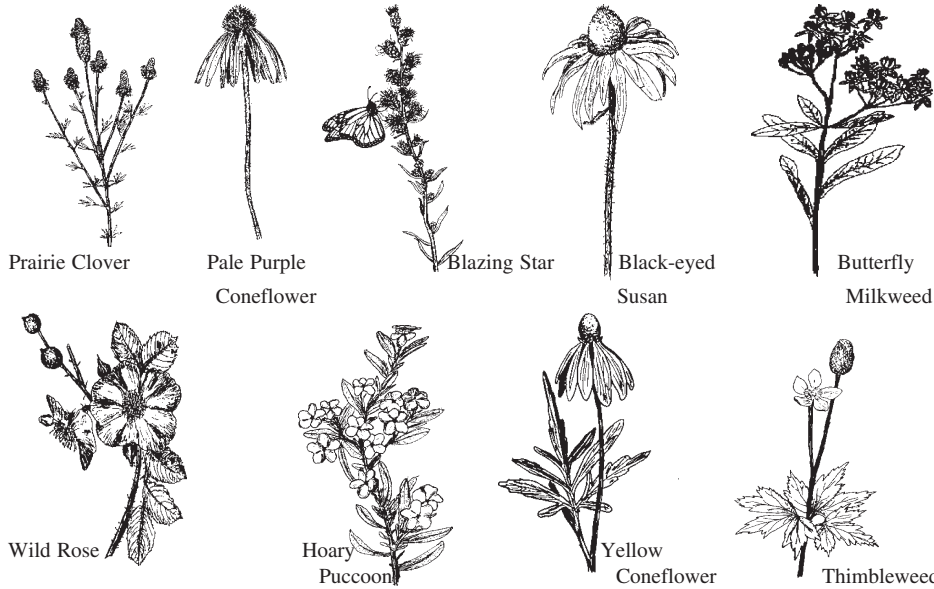
Morris Prairie Preserve

JASPER COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD

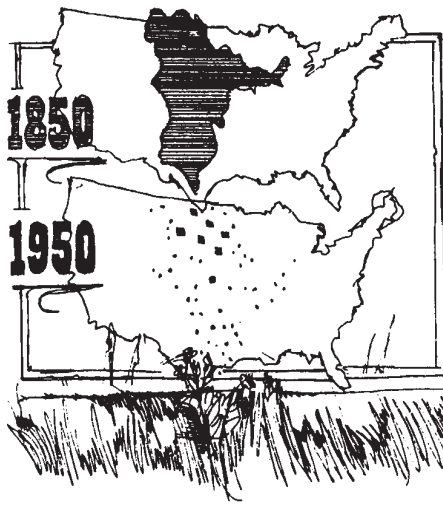
It is surprising how quickly the Midwestern prairies disappeared after the coming of the settlers, and even more surprising that any prairie flowers still survive after nearly a century and a half of intensive agriculture and overgrazing. The hundreds of thousands of square miles that were once prairie, comprising most of Iowa and the Middle West, are recognizable today only as "farm land". The destruction has been so complete that most of the farmers in this vast region have never seen a virgin prairie.

The word "prairie" is a French word meaning meadow. Almost three hundred years after the first French explorers described them, these prairies are only a memory.

Throughout Iowa there are few relic prairies to be seen and studied. In fact, some relic prairies are very small in size -- a fraction of an acre in an old settler cemetery, a short stretch along a railroad right-of-way, or a tiny patch in the corner of a farmer's field.



Preserving prairies provides living laboratories for ongoing experimentation. Most importantly, the prairies are an old source of pride, beauty and freedom. We can only preserve these values if enough people are interested in preserving our natural areas.



The Jasper County Conservation Board strives to preserve our prairie heritage by providing opportunity for public use and enjoyment through the activities of the Jasper County Environmental Education Program. Further information on the prairie, or the availability of guided tours by our naturalists, can be obtained from:

Jasper County Conservation Board
 115 N. 2nd Ave. E.
 Newton, Iowa 50208
 Telephone: (641) 792-9780



Prairie remnants untouched by plowing or overgrazing are called virgin prairies.

Prairies which have been modified in some way by man or domestic animals and which contain both prairie plants and introduced weedy plants are known as degraded prairies.

There were many types of prairies in the United States, but the prairie covering most of Iowa was known as Tall Grass Prairie.

Scientists say that due to climate, rainfall, and soil type, Iowa could have been forested rather than having prairies. Why were prairies found in Iowa and the Middle West? The reason was because of the presence of fire.



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Mark D. Wagner '92

Original Range of Tall Grass Prairie



Big Bluestem

Fire is a very important natural force in the prairie. During the late fall and through early spring, large amounts of tinder dry grass lie exposed to any spark. Once ignited, the fire sweeps quickly over the ground, charring the earth. Wildfires covering hundreds of square miles were common in pioneer days, and the homesteader had to be ready with oxen and plow to plow a barrier around his log buildings. Stories abound of people perishing in the flames. Often, fires were ignited by Indians to drive game.

Fire is very important to the prairie community. It returns the nutrients tied up in the dead grass to the soil. Many species of plants respond vigorously after a fire. Woody plants are burned off. Prairie vegetation has adapted to early spring fire by waiting until late May to begin growth.

Most of the virgin prairie remnants have fourteen to eighteen inches of topsoil, while the topsoil in surrounding cultivated fields frequently averages less than ten inches. This would indicate that six inches or more of topsoil have eroded away since the introduction of farming.

While plowing destroyed most of the prairies, some were ruined by overgrazing. For thousands of years these prairies had been grazed by herds of bison, elk and deer, with little injury. Most of the grazing by these wild creatures was widespread and intermittent, enabling the prairie plants to recover from having their aerial parts eaten off. But when large numbers of domestic animals were confined in fenced prairies, the prairie plants were killed by the continuous grazing and trampling. When this happened, the prairie farmers said that the prairie was "grazed out".



Indian Grass

Over two hundred different species of plants have been found on the Midwestern prairies. With few exceptions, the prairie plants are relatively longlived perennials. While the upper parts die back to ground level each autumn, the roots remain alive. There is indirect evidence that many prairie plants live for decades, or even centuries, just like the towering trees of an old forest.

The type of prairie to be found in an area is determined by rainfall and moisture. In western states where rain is sparse, shortgrass prairies occur. In the tier of states bordering Iowa to the west, moderate rainfall gives rise to midgrass prairies. In Iowa, and its neighbors to the north and east, heavier rainfall produces the tallgrass prairie. Pioneers reported that these grasses were "tall enough to hide a man on horseback."

MORRIS PRAIRIE

The late A. C. Morris recognized and appreciated the beauty and rarity of natural, unmolested native vegetation. In 1977, Mr. Morris provided the Jasper County Conservation Board with a lease to a 20-acre tract of virgin prairie, located a quarter mile south of the entrance to Mariposa Recreation Area. The area is open to the public for the purpose of viewing this unique remnant of a bygone era.

A visit to Morris Prairie during late spring and summer provides an exciting array of prairie forbes and grasses.

June, 1st Week

Hoary Puccoon	Full bloom
Spiderwort	Full bloom
Golden Alexander	Bloom
Common Cinquefoil	Bloom

June, 4th Week

Pale Purple Coneflower	Full bloom
Blackeyed Susan	Begin blooming
Butterfly Milkweed	Begin blooming

July, 2nd Week

Yellow Coneflower	Begin blooming
TickTrefoil	Begin blooming
Prairie Blazing Star	Begin bloomin



Native prairie grasses on the site include Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indiangrass, Sideoats gramma, Scribner panicum, Porcupine grass and Canada wild rye. Other forbes to be viewed at Morris Prairie include Saw-toothed sunflower, Prairie rose, Goldenrod, Wild bergamot, Leadplant, Compass plant, Thimble weed, Turks cap lily and Roundhead bush clover.