

Friends of the Blufflands Annual Report

December 2022

As 2023 starts, it's time to review the considerable progress Friends of the Blufflands has made since our August 2021 report, and present what our 2023 goals are.

Thank you to our members for your support of the local blufflands and the preservation efforts of Friends of the Blufflands. The task is huge, and we wouldn't make progress without your help. We provided 1,700 hours of volunteer labor in 2022 and 1500 hours in 2021. In addition, we hired professional contractors who worked 400 hours in 2022 and 320 hours in 2021.



Photo by Jon Rigden

Friends of the Blufflands Mission

To be a voice for a wide variety of blufflands users who value the region's blufflands for:

- the natural habitat and the diverse plant and animal species supported
- the scenic beauty provided for residents and visitors
- the outdoor nature study and nature-based recreation opportunities provided
- the values green space provides to local communities and their residents
- To promote sound conservation practices to maintain the health of the Coulee Region blufflands
- Forest management / reforestation
- Prairie management / restoration
- Invasive species control, encouragement of native species
- Preservation of rare and endangered species
- Advise on trail placement and construction
- Protection of bluffland from development

Partners

Friends of the Blufflands is working with many partners to achieve our goals.

La Crosse Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department

The City of La Crosse owns the majority of the land we work on. Friends of the Blufflands coordinates closely with the La Crosse Parks, Recreation & Forestry Department. We have an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) in place defining our roles in the mutual goal of enhancing the conservation and habitat value of Hixon Forest and all our blufflands.

Bluffland Coalition

Friends of the Blufflands has a Memorandum of Understanding in place with the Bluffland Coalition. The Bluffland Coalition is composed of local municipalities and non-profit organizations committed to

managing the regional bluffslands to preserve, protect, and connect land for wildlife habitat, recreational use, and the health and well-being of the residents and economy of La Crosse and Houston Counties.

Mississippi Valley Conservancy

Friends of the Bluffslands works closely with Mississippi Valley Conservancy. MVC has easements on many of the properties we work on.

The Prairie Enthusiasts

The Prairie Enthusiasts has been a great help in our bluff prairie protection efforts. TPE has written management plans to guide efforts on remnant bluff prairie restoration. TPE has been the lead agency for the prescribed burns on remnant bluff prairies, at no cost to the city. This is a major benefit toward improving and maintaining the health of the prairies.

Wisconsin DNR

We consult with the Wisconsin DNR on land management. We used DNR tools and expertise in 2022 to conduct a prairie vole survey on the Holland Sand Prairie.

WisCorps Local Area Crew, AmeriCorps Placement

Friends of the Bluffslands worked with the high school students on the Local Area Crews supervised by WisCorps and financed by the City of La Crosse. We also shared an AmeriCorps placement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy for the summer, with the costs split between MVC and Friends of the Bluffslands.

Viterbo University, UW-La Crosse, Rotary After Hours

Friends of the Bluffslands has worked with volunteer crews of Viterbo students on Viterbo Service Saturdays, with crews from UW-L clubs and departments, and with the high school students on the Local Area Crews supervised by WisCorps and financed by the City of La Crosse.

Grants Received

Grants and other funds raised for restoration since August 2021:

\$3,000	C.D. Besadny Conservation Fund of the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin	Lookout Prairie
\$2,000	Paul E. Stry Foundation	Zoerb Prairie
\$8,000	Paul E. Stry Foundation	Stry Prairie
\$12,280	Friends of the Bluffslands Conservation Fund	Zoerb, Lookout, Mathy Bluff, Juniper Prairies
\$11,760	La Crosse Park Department matching funds	Zoerb, Lookout, Mathy Bluff, Juniper Prairies
\$37,040	Total	

These funds were used exclusively to hire professional contractors for prairie restoration to supplement volunteer labor where the work is too steep or too technical for volunteers. I think you will see below that the results are impressive. We invite people to contribute to our Conservation Fund. More on that in a separate document.

Prairie Restoration Projects

It has been another busy time for Friends of the Blufflands and its restoration efforts in the bluffs around La Crosse. Volunteers have put in around 1500 hours cutting buckthorn, oriental bittersweet, honeysuckle and multiple other invasive species. We continue to remove invading brush from our rare remnant prairies. We've also made significant progress towards the restoration of the savanna below Lookout Prairie. New this year, we spent more time working on the Mathy Bluff Prairie and started restoration efforts on Juniper Partners Prairie. With the volunteer help of The Prairie Enthusiasts, and staff from the Mississippi Valley Conservancy and the DNR, Friends of the Blufflands was also able to complete several burns of the hill prairies, including the Mathy Bluff prairie, Lookout prairie, and Zoerb prairie. So here are some of the comparisons to last year.

Zoerb Prairie

Restoring Zoerb Prairie has been a major focus of our efforts over the last few years, with two grants from the Paul E. Stry Foundation. The good news is that we've now completed the planned restoration efforts and are entering the maintenance phase on this prairie. We've cleared and expanded the main prairie, creating a first buffer which allows further natural prairie expansion and a second buffer where invasive species have been eliminated, making it more difficult for them to reinvade the prairie. During the maintenance phase we'll use prescribed burns and regular control of any new growth of invasives to keep the prairie as a model of dry bluff prairies. We accomplished this by cutting, treating, stacking and burning buckthorn and other woodies; cutting sumac and aspen; basal bark treatment of black locust; treating crown vetch; gathering seed from the prairie to spread in the buffer area; and doing a prescribed burn. In 2022, a total of 479 hours were put in by volunteers on Zoerb Prairie.



Above: Zoerb Prairie in November 2021. You can see brush piles to the right. The dark grey areas on the hillside indicate recent clearing.



Above: Zoerb Prairie October 2022. Those grey areas in the picture above have filled in nicely. The prairie is re-expanding to the east (right) and connecting to a remnant patch on the far-right side. Note that the white aspens on the left in the first photo have been removed.

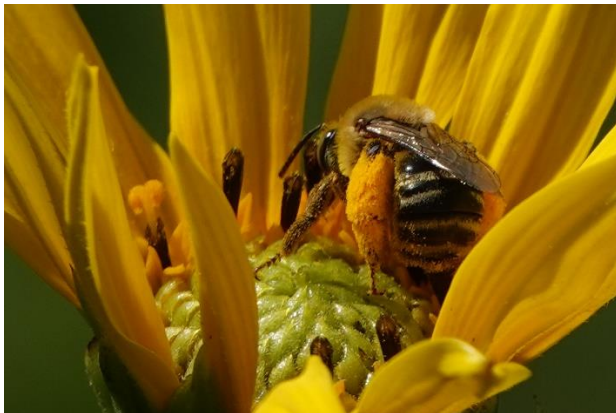


Above: Zoerb Prairie after a burn in December 2022 performed by The Prairie Enthusiasts. A small area was left unburned. This allows a refuge for insects which can then quickly repopulate the prairie.

Lookout Prairie

Lookout prairie has also received considerable restoration efforts, thanks to three grants from the C.D. Besadny Conservation Fund of the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin. The main prairie has been restored and there have been three phases of prairie expansion. The fourth and last phase of prairie expansion is underway. When that's complete we can enter the maintenance phase on Lookout Prairie. In addition to the contractor's efforts, FBL volunteers cleared buckthorn and honeysuckle, treated crown vetch, double-cut sumac, gathered seed from the prairie and spread it in the buffer along the edge of the prairie to encourage prairie expansion.

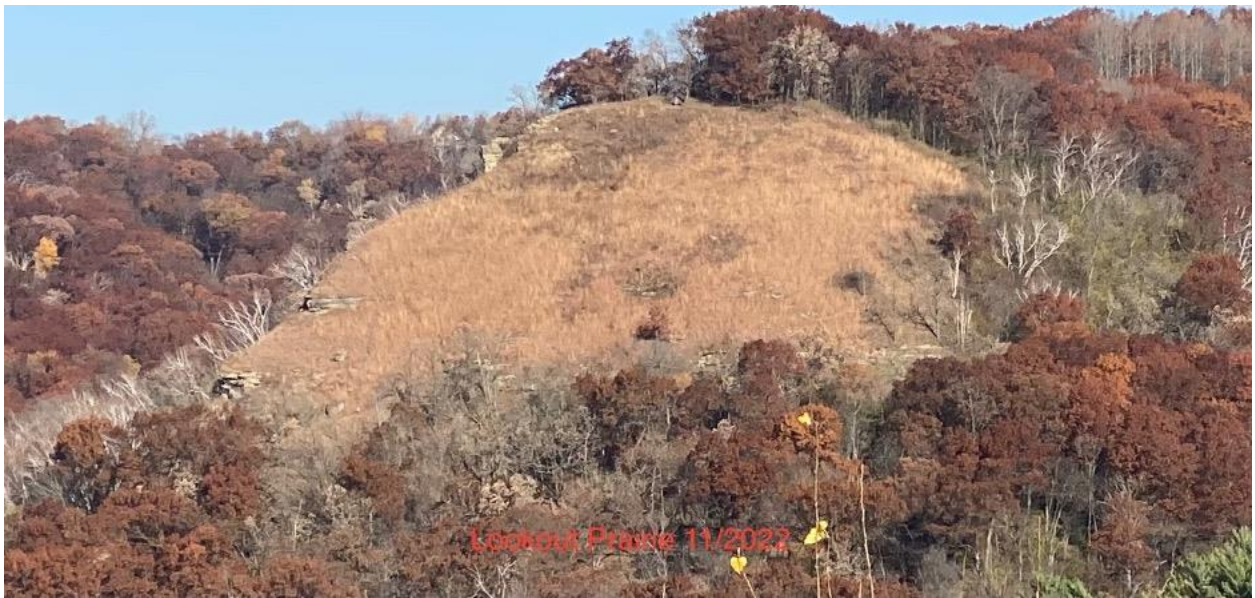
More work is being done to re-establish the prairie on its western and eastern flanks. There has been a lot of progress on the savanna below Lookout as well.



Above: Lookout Prairie in full bloom, August 2022. This prairie was burned six months before in February 2022. This shows the benefits of prescribed burns on prairies.



Above : Lookout Prairie, February 2022 - This is a picture of the February 2022 burn of Lookout Prairie in progress. This was a perfect time of the year for this burn. Some of the benefits of burning off the dead grass includes returning nutrients to the soil, exposing the growing point of the plants to sunlight, and having the black residue heat up the soil to jump start the next growing season.



Above: Lookout Prairie, November 2022 - This late fall picture only gives you a small indication of the lush growing season this prairie had as a result of the burn.

Lookout Savanna

Friends of the Blufflands is working on creating an oak savanna adjoining Lookout Prairie. We continue to cut, stack, and burn buckthorn in the area and do foliar spraying to prevent resprouts. We've continued cutting trees in the savanna to open the canopy to levels typical of savannas. We've purchased grass seed and will spread it to speed the return of the grass understory. We cleared the trees and brush on the cliff separating the savanna from the prairie so the view is now opened to the top of the bluff.



Lookout Point is now visible from the Savanna Trail. Looking through Lookout Savanna. We're burning brush piles on the savanna in this photo.

Jon Rigden of Friends of the Blufflands started a scientific project on the savanna this year to measure the best way to kill buckthorn

without using herbicide. In several small tracts he's measuring the optimal frequency and duration the buckthorn has to be cut to kill the understory shrubs.

Dobson Blufflands

Work continues on restoration and reseedling of prairie species in the once degraded field next to the Dobson Parking lot. It may start looking like a prairie in the next few years. Because of the discovery of a rusty patched bumble bee nest on the Dobson Tract, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has increased interest in the Dobson site and provided a grant to the City of La Crosse to do restoration and invasive species control. This is coordinated with MVC and Friends of the Blufflands and adds to the work already being done by Friends of the Blufflands.

The woodlands south of the parking area are slowly being cleared of invasive species. The small remnant hill prairies in the park received a boost this fall with a week's work from contractors. In the past year Friends of the Blufflands has done cutting and treating of buckthorn and Oriental bittersweet, girdling of aspen, pulling of garlic mustard, foliar spraying of crown vetch and of buckthorn regrowth, mowing, and piling and burning of cut brush.



A south facing hill-prairie remnant on Dobson.



This is a picture of the same spot on Dobson taken after clearing of buckthorn and other invasive brush on the lower slope. The red cedar will gradually be thinned. Re-establishing the prairie and its flowering plants is important because this particular area is known to have a consistent population of the endangered rusty patched bumblebees.

Mathy Bluff Prairie

Restoration efforts have intensified on Mathy Bluff Prairie now that we're in the maintenance phase on Zoerb and Lookout Prairies. We had many hours of volunteer work on this prairie as well as work by the WisCorps Local Area Crew and our AmeriCorps summer placement Blake Olson. The Prairie Enthusiasts did a burn here in March, 2022. In addition, we hired a contractor for 67 hours of work with funds from the Friends of the Blufflands Conservation Fund. As with other prairies, we cut and treated buckthorn and cedar, treated crown vetch, girdled and cut aspen. The prairie boundaries have been expanded to the east. We cleared enough invasive brush to increase the size of this hill prairie by about a third.



Above: Mathy Bluff Prairie, December 2021 – Invasive brush has been cleared off the prairie. The brush was organized into piles at the bottom of the slope to facilitate burning. Invasives were cleared on the edges of the prairie – in this picture in the upper center.



Above: Mathy Bluff Prairie, November 2022 - Brush and some smaller trees are now replaced with brush piles in the upper center. In the coming years we hope to connect the remnant patches of prairie together – the lighter brown patches in the picture.



Above: Here's a photo of the burn done by The Prairie Enthusiasts on Mathy Bluff Prairie in March 2022.

Stry Prairie on Miller Bluff

Friends of the Blufflands has done limited work on Stry prairie in the past year, but that will increase soon since we just received an \$8,000 grant from the Paul E. Stry Foundation to work on this prairie that was initially preserved by the Stry Foundation back in 1995. There's been some work on Stry Prairie in the past year. Friends of the Blufflands reinstalled the interpretive sign that had been stolen. Look for more work here soon.



Juniper Partners Prairie

The La Crosse Park Department hired a consultant in 2022 to do a Management Plan for the Welch and Juniper Partners Tracts in the blufflands. Friends of the Blufflands members participated in a plant survey of the property with the consultant and participated in meetings reviewing the management plan progress. The remnant Juniper Partners bluff prairie is prime habitat on this tract badly in need of restoration. Justin Nooker started the restoration effort on his own. Friends of the Blufflands then hired a contractor with our funds from our Conservation Fund to work 170 hours clearing and stacking buckthorn, cedar, and other invasives from the prairie. FBL volunteers also helped with the effort. This prairie is quite sandy and easily disturbed, so the work had to be done carefully. The prairie is now freed to begin recovery. A future prescribed burn would be helpful.



Showy Orchid on Juniper Tract

Mathy, Fitzpatrick, and Thompson Pollinator Prairies

Friends of the Blufflands has been monitoring the recently planted Mathy and Fitzpatrick pollinator prairies for invasive plants such as reed canary grass and crown vetch. We mowed fire breaks for the May 2022 prescribed burn on Mathy Prairie. We also mowed and foliar sprayed reed canary grass patches that emerged after the burn. We worked with the La Crosse Park Department to set up contractor spraying of crown vetch and bird's-foot trefoil on Mathy. We helped plan work for the WisCorps Local Areas Crew which cleared Oriental bittersweet along the quarry fence. On Fitzpatrick Pollinator Prairie we applied herbicides in spots and mowed at a strategic time to control reed canary grass. We did basal bark treatment of black locust on Thompson Prairie.



Above: After the Mathy Pollinator Prairie Burn

We also proposed a trail reroute on Mathy to eliminate a trail showing considerable erosion. This is in process.

Skemp 2 Reforestation Project

The goal of this reforestation effort in the old field at the corner of County Roads F and FA is to provide an oak forest extension to Hixon Forest. We pruned trees, fixed and moved tree cages, installed some tree tubes, and controlled weeds around the trees. This reforestation project is looking good.

Hixon Forest

We treated black locust in the oak savanna area adjacent to the Upper Hixon parking lot.

Grandad Bluff

Friends of the Blufflands did a survey of plants on the north slope of Grandad Bluff, which would be a prime area for spring wildflowers. We then made a list of native forest wildflowers that would typically be found in this habitat but are not there now. It's a future project to obtain the selected wildflowers and plant them here.

Education

In addition to maintaining interpretive signs in the blufflands, Friends of the Blufflands board members presented a session on bluffland prairies to UW-L Students for Sustainability, did a prairie hike for elementary school children for WisCorps, led a hike and had a display at the La Crosse Park Department Bluff Bash event, and had a booth at the UW-L Volunteer Fair. We introduced many Viterbo students to Hixon Forest through the Service Saturday work outings

Friends of the Blufflands has posted educational and entertaining blogs to our website through the year – www.friendsoftheblufflands.org. We also post educational information on our Facebook page - www.facebook.com/friendsoftheblufflands.

Friends of the Blufflands worked with the DNR and The Prairie Enthusiasts to live-trap mice and voles on Holland Sand Prairie, hoping to find a rare prairie vole. While we didn't find a prairie vole, we did find several prairie deer mice (a species of special concern in Wisconsin), western harvest mice, a meadow jumping mouse, and a white-footed mouse.



Setting traps on Holland Sand Prairie

Friends of the Blufflands participated in a UWL Capstone Project with UWL student Lauren Brochtrup joining the Buckthorn Study and reporting about it formally at the end of semester as well as making an information poster about buckthorn.

2023 Goals

1. Friends of the Blufflands goals for 2023 include five areas that we want concentrated effort, to restore them to healthy productive ecosystems that we can preserve through maintenance activities:
 - Mathy Bluff Prairie
 - Stry Prairie
 - Juniper Prairie
 - Dobson Blufflands
 - Lookout Savanna
2. Some of the areas we've been working on are ready for the maintenance phase, where less effort is needed to keep them healthy:
 - Zoerb Prairie – maintenance activities including periodic burns
 - Lookout Prairie – complete the work on the east side of the prairie and enter maintenance phase with periodic burns
 - Skemp 2 and other reforestation projects – monitor the trees and keep them healthy

- Mathy, Fitzpatrick and Thompson Pollinator Prairies – continue the effort to control reed canary grass, crown vetch, birds-foot trefoil, and other non-native invasive species.
- 3. Monitor for threatened and endangered species and aid their recovery when discovered.
- 4. Take on additional restoration efforts as time and resources allow, including in other communities.
- 5. Educate the community on the value of our bluffland resources.

Bluffland Conservation Fund

All this restoration effort takes money. Friends of the Blufflands' Conservation Fund has funded \$12,280 of restoration work thus far, with more to come. 100% of the funds have gone to hiring contractors to do restoration work in the blufflands. Thank you to those who have contributed to the fund. We welcome any contributions. You'll hear more in the future.

Board of Directors

Friends of the Blufflands has an active board of directors committed to improving the area blufflands. They've spent considerable time working in the field, leading 1,500 hours of volunteer labor in 2021 and over 1,700 hours in 2022.

There are seven members – Pat Wilson (President), Jon Rigden (Vice-president), Pat Caffrey (Treasurer), Stephanie Hanna (Secretary), Sunshine Love, Mike O'Brien, Fred Skemp (emeritus) and new members Todd Huffman and Alan Hecht.

Thank You

In conclusion, thank you for your support in the past year, and we hope you can participate in a work outing supporting these important projects in the coming year.