



# Mud Prairie Renaissance

Story by Jeanne Townsend Handy, Photos by Tom Handy

**THE GRASSES** and flowers greeting the boundless sky above Mud Prairie were like a vision from the past. This land southwest of Waverly, Illinois in Morgan County has traveled from prairie to cropland back to prairie once again, returning from a long hiatus during which this soil gave its fertility to monocultures such as corn and soybeans. But Mud Prairie did not return on its own nor did it return overnight. It has, in fact, been nearly 30 years since Robert “Woody” Woodruff made the decision and the effort to recreate a community.

Woodruff’s dog Ruby led the way, racing in front of the UTV as we traveled the prairie trails. “When my neighbors saw me put in 50 acres of prairie restoration and take out 50 acres of row crop, they questioned my sanity,” Woodruff stated. He had been motivated to restore this land after learning of its past life from Bill McClain, a former heritage biologist with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources who had researched the location of former prairieland in the state. Mud Prairie

**A restored prairie grows into a diverse community benefitting numerous species, including people**

is, in fact, included on the “Historic Prairies in Illinois” list in McClain’s IDNR publication, *Prairie Establishment and Landscaping*.

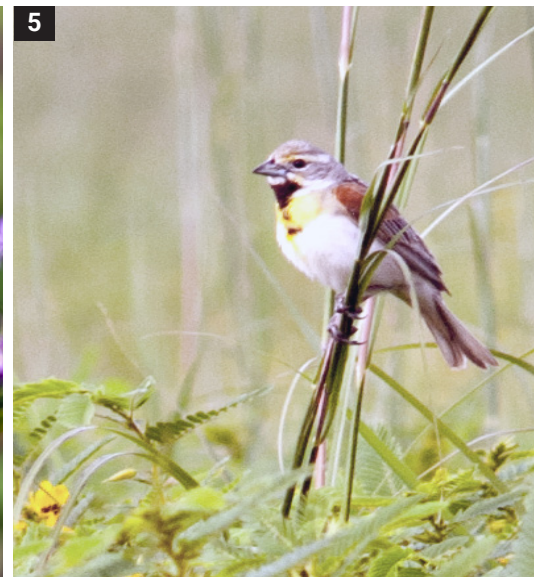
Woodruff described how he planted a diverse variety of seeds although for the first few years he saw little of that diversity develop. He said that after the first year he had a “mess” on his hands and would have given up if not for encouragement from McClain, who had inspected the site prior to its restoration and had identified enduring prairie specimens along its perimeter. But as the restoration matured, Woodruff started to see new species of birds and insects stopping by during their migrations for a safe place to rest and refuel. “Dragonflies and grassland birds were the first to come,” he explained. Then the numbers of everything started to increase at what had now become a refuge, also boasting 50 acres of timber and four acres of wetland ecosystem. The return-

ing species included bobwhite quail, ring-necked ducks, meadowlarks, great horned owls, northern harriers, praying mantis, honey bees, monarchs, ornate box turtles, king snakes, mice, white-tailed deer, cottontail rabbits, bobcats, and coyotes, all creating niches as the community grew and diversified.

As exhilarating as it was to admire the expansive vista of plant life while driving along the trails, much can be learned by being still, aware, and focused. We now stopped, hoping to capture an up-close glimpse of some of this community’s more elusive residents—the birds and bugs and butterflies that flit into view and then flit away again. While Ruby wandered off on her own exploration, we focused on what promised to be a hub of activity. Although the brilliance of the blazing

**Robert “Woody” Woodruff and his dog Ruby pose at the entrance to Mud Prairie, the prairie restoration effort he has championed for nearly 30 years. Native wildflowers support an abundance of insects (2) and seed sources (3) for wildlife.**





star drew my eye, it was the drearily named ironweed that at this moment proved to be an irresistible lure for the butterflies. The cameras brought along on this tour were not brought in vain.

There were so many species thriving here—the grasshoppers and the bees and the beetles and the birds that kept their distance but occasionally added a soundtrack to our adventure. One can but wonder at the life not readily seen or heard but that was surely at work contributing to this community and the health of the system. As John Madson notes in the book *Where the Sky Began*, “The world of the prairie grassroots is a teeming lifeswarm.” And what about us? Are we or can we be a part of this society? All too often, it seems, humans are missing from consideration as a member of this community and a beneficiary of it.

This is a topic Woodruff wanted

to address when in April 2019 he spoke at the Soil Health Summit in Springfield, which brought together farmers, organizations, agency officials, legislators, and other partners to explore how policy can enhance soil health and stewardship of vital resources. Using Mud Prairie as an example, he discussed the “ecosystem services” provided by prairieland. Healthy, diverse prairies fix nitrogen in the soil, control erosion, recharge deep springs, filter pollutants, and support beneficial species such as pollinators. As a farmer, Woodruff knows all too well the value of these particular services.

But, he emphasized, natural and restored habitats provide many other benefits, from the obvious to the obscure. They support recreational activities such as hiking and camping as well as research studies into the dynamics of a living ecosystem; they engender a sense

Among the faunal species discovered on a recent Mud Prairie tour was a male monarch butterfly nectaring on iron weed (4) and male dickcissel (5).

of place and heritage; and they can be aesthetically pleasing, encouraging artistic endeavors and creative skills. Then Woodruff started using words such as “spiritual” and “transformative” as he began to describe the more obscure benefits resulting from a response to nature that is deeply rooted and yet more difficult to understand. “There are moments that make you see things in a different light,” he stated. “It inspires you to want to do or even be more in life.” Woodruff is not exaggerating the benefits of time spent in a community of other species nor is he alone in recognizing and promoting them.

The notion that a renewed rapport with nature will improve mental and physical health is not an unsubstantiated proposition for society’s ever-hopeful

To create vistas such as this consider viewing Bill McClain’s booklet *Prairie Establishment and Landscaping* at [dnr.illinois.gov/publications/documents/00000285.pdf](http://dnr.illinois.gov/publications/documents/00000285.pdf).







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7



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Woodruff enjoys discovering a new abundance of life residing on the restored prairie each year, including a common yellowthroat (6) and an ever improving stand of native grasses (8).

nature in their publication *Recharge in the Parks*.

or gullible but is, in fact, a topic of extensive research within the U.S. and worldwide. The studies described in the 2017 book, *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*, are concluding that time spent in diverse landscapes helps us focus on deeper thought, spurs natural opiates in the brain, and inspires a sense of awe that in turn promotes curiosity. British research has demonstrated that sound can be restorative, and studies using birdsong consistently show improvements in mood and mental alertness. Research conducted in Japan and Finland have found that 15 to 20 minutes in nature resulted in lower blood pressure, lower circulating cortisol and improved mood while at 45 to 50 minutes “many subjects show stronger cognitive performance as well as feelings of vitality and psychological reflection.” Healthcare applications are coming to the forefront with a \$16 million grant made available in Finland for the Green Health and Research Project while in Japan there is a scientific committee known as the International Society of Nature and Forest Medicine. Likewise, in the U.S. the National Park Foundation is touting the health benefits of a 15 to 30 minute walk each day in

Woodruff’s own words have corresponded and mingled with this outpouring of findings: “The prairie, timber and wetlands all have sights, sounds, and smells that are three dimensional and aesthetically pleasing year-round, keeping your senses flowing and measured by always wanting more experiences,” he proclaimed. And his “loss of sanity” has now spread to a neighbor who asked for his assistance in planting prairie habitat. Evidence is on the rise demonstrating that even one person can make a big difference, that even a small backyard prairie plot can support an amazing number of species. In a January 2019 Nature Conservancy blog, prairie ecologist Chris Helzer reported on the results of his one-year photographic study of the species found in a one-square-meter portion of restored prairie, itself only a few acres in total size and located between a suburban neighborhood and a cornfield. He documented 113 different species.

Ruby scrambled to catch up as we set off once again, and I noticed how the prairie plants seemed to complement the sky perfectly, somehow encouraging a more vibrant blue strewn with watercolor clouds. And, quite possibly, they were encouraging profound effects upon us as well. Woodruff himself has

sought and found solace and support from his prairie community as he continues a lengthy battle with cancer. Other individuals and groups have come here: children from church groups and the 4H club to explore, members of Slow Food Springfield to contemplate pollinators and their role in our food system, photographers and painters to transform sights and sounds and brief moments in time into enduring prairie portraits. “It can affect your soul or spirit in a way that nothing else in life can,” stated Woodruff. “I seem to get these moments more and more the healthier the ecosystem becomes.” ■



## BIOS

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Handy holds an M.A. in Environmental Studies and is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists. As a freelance

writer, she enjoys exploring the science and dedication underlying habitat restoration and protection efforts.



**Tom Handy** spent a career in visual communication at SIU School of Medicine while occasionally freelancing as a photographer.