

The Savanna Sentinel

an annual update from the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative

Bringing Natural History Back to Life

The Mansion Room at the Grafton Village Inn was packed on October 14th, 2003 as dozens of people gathered to celebrate the launch of an ambitious ecological restoration project. The goal: to bring back to life key examples of the oak savannas and tallgrass prairies that once dominated the Rice Lake Plains.

Grasses like Big Bluestem, Indian Grass and Switchgrass once grew more than two metres high, and a colourful array of wildflowers decorated the landscape throughout the spring, summer and fall. Today, the Plains are covered with many non-native species, and only small, disconnected fragments of the original habitat remain. According to ecologists, however, there is tremendous potential to resurrect the grasslands because in some areas the seedbed is still intact.

"This is a very exciting opportunity to restore key samples of a globally rare habitat," explained John Grant, Ontario Region Director of the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC).

That excitement was clear when Rick Beaver presented a slide show of the prairie restoration undertaken on Alderville First Nation land (see story on page 3) — an inspiring example of what can be achieved.

Five organizations have teamed up with NCC to launch the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative: the County of

Northumberland, the Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority, Lower Trent Conservation, Ontario Parks, and Wildlife Habitat Canada/Wetland Habitat Fund.

"We are tremendously pleased to have the support of so many key partners who share our vision of protecting this ecologically significant land," said Grant. He also acknowledged the generosity of the Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation (see story on page 4), which has contributed almost \$400,000 to the initiative.

The initiative will focus on three anchor properties within the Rice Lake Plains. Over the next three years, staff will be gathering data from each site, developing plans to restore and steward the sites, and then putting those plans into action.

"There is a lot to gain from this project," said NCC Board member Bill Caulfeild-Browne. "The work we do will result in important advances to our scientific knowledge and serve as an example to other restoration projects throughout North America."

A special guest at the launch was early pioneer, botanist and writer Catharine Parr Traill, brought to life by historical interpreter Audrey Caryi.

Caryi read from Traill's 1832 description of the Rice Lake Plains, which she said "rivalled any garden in beauty during the spring and summer months."



NCC Board member Camilla Dalglish (L) and "Catharine Parr Traill", played by Audrey Caryi. Mrs. Dalglish kindly donated the Grafton Village Inn facilities for the launch of the initiative.

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It All Begins with a Plan

Over the coming months, Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) staff will be busy developing management plans for key properties in the Rice Lake Plains area — Burnley–Carmel and Alderville Woods — as well as providing input into the Northumberland County Forest management plan.

In the case of Burnley–Carmel, this is one of many sites NCC administers

in partnership with Ontario Parks, so NCC will be collaborating with Ontario Parks in preparing a plan for it. As with all Ontario Parks' protected areas, the public plays an important part in developing the management plans. There will be several opportunities to review and comment on planning documents — for details of the Ontario Parks Management Planning Process, see <www.ontarioparks.com/english/manag.html>.

So what's involved in preparing a management plan? Here's an outline of the steps NCC takes:

Doing the homework

"First of all, we look at the big picture," explains Lisa McLaughlin, NCC's Ontario Region Stewardship Coordinator. "How does the property fit into the landscape? What role does it play in the ecosystem? What are the provincially, nationally or globally important species or habitats? How does the property fit into Ontario's system of protected areas?"

This information helps to establish preliminary goals for the property and — in the case of Ontario Parks — to select the most appropriate type of protected area. In the Rice Lake Plains, the aim is to restore rare tallgrass prairie and oak savanna, since only one percent is left of this habitat that once covered the central U.S., southern Manitoba, and southern Ontario.

Field work

Next is field work. NCC will compile a detailed inventory of plants, animals, birds and reptiles on the property. It will also look at cultural values associated with the property and how the land has been used in the past.

The priority is to conserve significant ecological and cultural features, but compatible recreational uses are also considered.

Then come any special issues. "For example, even though a property is in conservation ownership," says McLaughlin, "there may still be threats like incompatible use, invasive non-native species, or overgrazing by deer. We look for ways to reduce or eliminate those threats." At this point NCC also looks at liability issues like unsafe buildings or abandoned wells.

All this data is used to develop a management plan. This could be as simple as repairing fences and mounting signage, or it could involve monitoring key species to make sure the population levels stay healthy year after year, or actively restoring or enhancing habitat.

Active stewardship

On the Rice Lake Plains properties, habitat restoration may involve cutting some of the non-native trees such as Scots pine that have been planted over the years. NCC would be careful to remove trees in an ecologically appropriate way, in the fall or winter when there's little danger of disturbing nesting birds or animals.

NCC may also use prescribed burning, a common technique to restore and maintain fire-dependent ecosystems. Fires are a key part of prairie and savanna ecology, keeping trees and shrubs from dominating the grasslands. As the Rice Lake Plains were settled, however, humans repressed the natural cycle of fire.

"It's clear from our data that removing the non-native trees and re-creating a fire regime will be most

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“ A number of exquisite flowers and shrubs adorn these plains, which rival any garden in beauty during the summer months. ”

– Catharine Parr Traill, 1832

Top row (L to R): Big Bluestem, Indian Grass, Blue Lupin. Bottom row (L to R): Blue-eyed Grass, Butterfly Weed, Prairie Buttercup, Cylindric Blazing Star, Field Lily.

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 effective in restoring this endangered habitat," says McLaughlin.

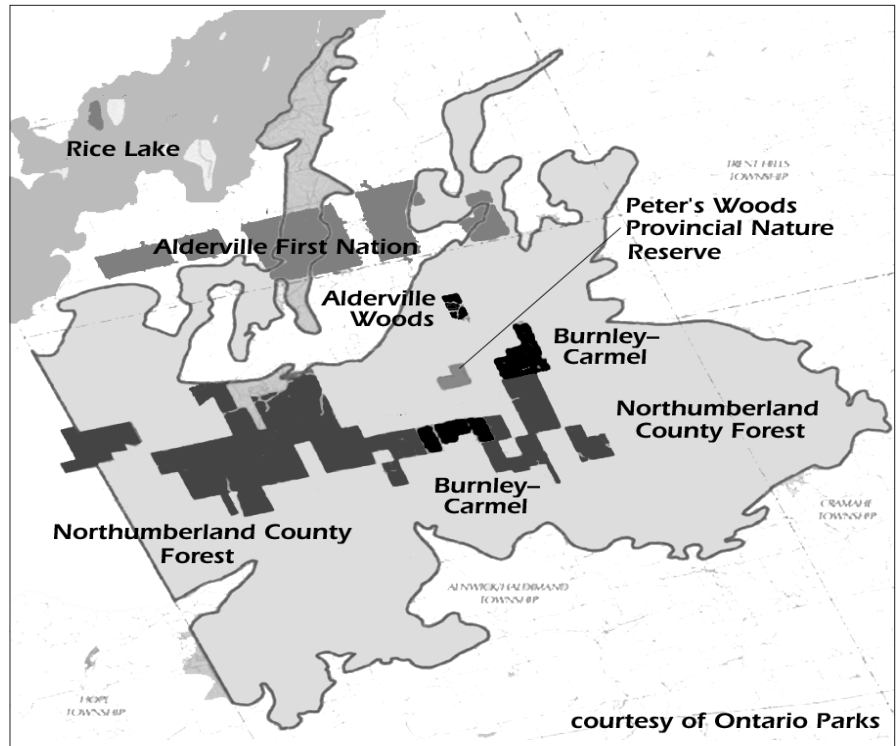
If NCC goes ahead with controlled burning, it will work with professional fire crews to develop detailed plans for the burns. The weather must be exactly right: fires won't be lit if it's too windy or too dry, for example. All the standard fire management and safety steps will be followed, such as using fire breaks and "back burns" to keep the fire within a designated area. Tanker trucks filled with water will be on site to make sure the fires stay completely under control.

The approved management plan and implementation strategy will specify the timing of the first burns.

Get involved

NCC will be holding a stakeholder event and other public consultations in collaboration with Ontario Parks in 2004/05. Check the website for details (see page 4) and visit <www.ontarioparks.com>. You can also join NCC in the field — see the website for information on volunteer work days and educational tours.

The Big Picture



The Rice Lake Plains (shown in pale grey) lie southeast of Peterborough. The Joint Initiative will focus on key examples of grasslands on three anchor properties: Burnley-Carmel, purchased by NCC in

partnership with Ontario Parks; Alderville Woods, which was secured by NCC and Lower Trent Conservation; and suitable tracts within the Northumberland County Forest.

Alderville First Nation's Success Story

When a band of Mississauga Ojibway moved to the area south of Rice Lake in the 1830s, it was covered with black oak savanna and tallgrass prairies. Today, Alderville First Nation is still home to 100+ acres of this rare habitat — one of the most endangered in North America — thanks to the traditional practices of their ancestors and current preservation efforts.

For the past three years, the community has been busy managing and restoring the grasslands by reclaiming industrial and agricultural

land, removing invasive species, reseeding native species, conducting prescribed burns, and installing bluebird nesting boxes.

"We are already seeing a dramatic increase in savanna species," says Rick Beaver, who coordinates the restoration project. Big and Little Bluestem grasses, Prairie Buttercup and Bicknell's Frostweed are among the species that are thriving.

The site contains several provincially rare plant species and is a candidate for the reintroduction of the Karner Blue butterfly, which hasn't

been seen in Canada since the early 1990s. "It was a special place to begin with," says Beaver, "and the hard work of so many people is making it that much more remarkable."

Happy camper: a Tiger Swallowtail caterpillar at Alderville First Nation.

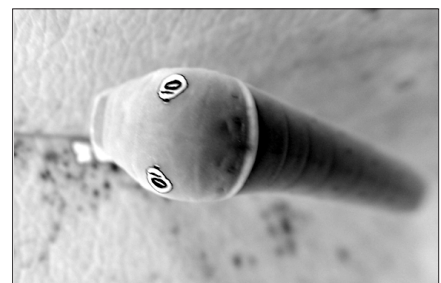


photo credit: Rick Beaver, Alderville First Nation



Making it official: representatives from each of the partners in the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative sign the Memorandum of Understanding. Seated, L to R: Fred Holloway, County of Northumberland; Mark Stabb, Wildlife Habitat Canada/Wetland Habitat Fund; John Immerseel, Ontario Parks; Jim Kelleher, Lower Trent Conservation; Linda Laliberte, Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority; John Grant, Nature Conservancy of Canada. Looking on: Bill Pyatt, County of Northumberland; Michael Scott, Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation.

Funder with a Vision

The Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation was established in 2002 with a clear vision: to support the preservation, protection and restoration of the Oak Ridges Moraine, which stretches from the Rice Lake Plains to the Niagara Escarpment.

From the very outset, one thing was clear — the Foundation wasn't going to duplicate the valuable work carried out by landowners, local governments, and conservation groups. Instead, explains Foundation Chair Ric Symmes, "what is urgently needed is more funds and the ability to bring various agencies together to

do what none could do alone."

So, to date, it has committed almost \$960,000 to support conservation and restoration projects on the Moraine worth \$3.4 million. \$400,000 of that is funding NCC's participation in the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative, says Executive Director Michael Scott.

"This vital project reflects the Foundation's most important objectives — helping to protect the Moraine, while working to achieve a better public understanding of its ecological significance," says Scott.

For more information on the Foundation, visit <www.ormf.com> or call (905) 833-5733.

Online Info

Our website has all the latest news and background information on the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative, as well as details of upcoming stakeholder

meetings, property tours, and volunteer days. Just set your browser to <www.natureconservancy.ca> and look for the "Rice Lake Plains" button in the lower right.

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The Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative is dedicated to the identification, protection and stewardship of the best remaining tallgrass prairie and black oak savanna within the Rice Lake Plains.