

Prairies in Ohio

by Nora Highland*

When the first settlers arrived in Ohio they found great forests over much of the land, but they also found open areas of prairie. These beautiful grasslands were composed of striking flowers and tall grasses. Many old fields and unkempt grassy places we see today are not real prairies. The original prairies were made of special, uncommon plants seldom found in other habitats; these special plants define a prairie. The Darby Plains west of Columbus, the Sandusky Plains in north central Ohio, the Firelands Prairies in the Sandusky area, and the Oak Openings in northwest Ohio are a few of the great prairies that once existed. When the settlers discovered how rich the soil was beneath these grasslands they quickly drained and farmed them. Only remnants of these great native ecosystems can be seen today.

How do we know where they were and what grew there? Evidence comes from the first official land survey records and accounts written by early settlers telling the size and location of Ohio's original prairies. By the end of the 19th century, Ohio's schools, colleges and universities were collecting specimens from marshes and the many remaining local patches of unplowed prairie. Live remnant populations are still being discovered in ditches, edges of open woodlots, along railroads and other isolated spots. A few of these exceptional remnants can be seen within a short distance of Columbus. Smith and Bigelow cemeteries in Madison County have never been plowed or grazed. These areas contain healthy colonies of prairie grasses and wildflowers that once carpeted the Darby Plains. Some are considered rare, threatened or endangered in Ohio. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Natural Areas and Preserves maintains the two cemeteries as well as other native prairies in Ohio.

Ohio prairies were not the short grass prairies of the high plains where growth is restricted by lack of rainfall. Our abundant rains produced different types of tall grass prairies dominated by two or three species of native grasses. The two most common were big bluestem and Indiangrass that can reach heights of 6 to 8 feet by the end of the summer. These are complemented by colorful prairie wildflowers. The summer wildflowers attract myriad butterflies, moths and other insects while the late ripening seed heads of the grasses and flowers attract an abundance of birds. Sunflowers, goldenrods, black-eyed susans and coreopsis bloom profusely in shades of brilliant yellow while blazingstar, bergamot, asters, and coneflowers glow with purple. Autumn reveals a warm blend of tawny gold and orange.

Ohio prairies are among the most rare and beautiful native wild habitats. They are naturally low maintenance when not intruded upon by non-native invasive plants. They are long lasting, needing no fertilizers or pesticides. They are perfectly adapted to our climate and seldom eaten by deer, while attracting a wide variety of insects, butterflies, birds, reptiles and other small animals. The extensive root systems of prairie plants are ideal for resisting drought, holding soil in place and absorbing excess water. Luckily, concerned individuals are beginning to restore, even in small garden plots, this great natural ecosystem.

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