



# Nature Notes

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## President's Corner

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### *Rich Thoma*

Members of WGNSS and the St. Louis Audubon Society met at the Green Center in University City for a **Joint Winter Party** in late January. The Green Center is a natural oasis located in the heart of St. Louis County containing a historic home and an outdoor arboretum, the perfect place for two natural history organizations to meet. About 40 people, approximately equally divided from the two organizations, spent the afternoon, eating, drinking and enjoying each others company. I found it very amazing how much WGNSS and Audubon have in common. We all got involved because we enjoy being outdoors and seeing plants, birds and other wildlife. Field trips are very popular for both organizations and I heard several stories about some interesting places people have been. In addition, our two organizations are both very conservation minded. I found it interesting that a significant number of our WGNSS members were also Audubon Society members. Everyone went home with a door prize, many of which were very nice. All had a good time.

After two months of discussion, WGNSS has sent a letter to Director **Bob Ziehmer** of the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) expressing our concerns about using **Patch Burn Grazing** (PBG) as a management tool on Missouri prairies. In particular, we feel that PBG is still an experimental procedure and should not be used on

“Natural Areas.” WGNSS strongly recommended that PBG be discontinued by MDC on all Natural Areas in Missouri and that no further expansion should be undertaken until the management technique is shown to be effective. We also suggested that MDC could show the effectiveness of PBG by experimenting on non-Natural Areas. With this letter, WGNSS joins other natural history organizations, including the Missouri Native Plant Society, Missouri Prairie Foundation and the Nature Conservancy, who have expressed concerns about the use of PBG on Natural Areas in Missouri. A copy of the letter that was sent to Director Ziehmer from WGNSS can be found later in this issue of Nature Notes [Editor's note – see pg. 17]. To all of the WGNSS board and everyone else who got involved in the discussion and preparation of the letter, Thank You!

Be sure to come to the **WGNSS General Meeting at Powder Valley Nature Center on Tuesday, March 1 at 7:30 PM.** **Cindy Gilberg** and **Barbara Perry Lawton**, authors of the recently-published book, *The Missouri Botanical Garden's Shaw Nature Reserve: 85 Years of Natural Wonders*, will be our speakers for the evening. The evening's program title is: “Shaw Nature Reserve – Yesterday, Today, and into the Future.” Limited copies of the book will be available for purchase and anyone may bring their own personal copy for the authors to sign after the program.

Also, mark your calendars for May 4 for the **WGNSS Spring Banquet**. This year the banquet will be at Orlando Gardens on Watson Rd., in

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Webster Groves. **Dr. Peter H. Raven**, President Emeritus from the Missouri Botanical Garden will be our guest speaker for the evening. Dr. Raven is possibly best known for his important work, *Coevolution of Insects and Plants*, which was published in the journal *Evolution* in 1964 with coauthor Paul R. Ehrlich. In St. Louis, Peter Raven has been the director of the garden for nearly forty years and has made it one of the premier botanical research organizations in the world. Under Dr. Raven's tenure, the Garden has grown to include the Shaw Nature Reserve and the Sophia M. Sachs Butterfly House. On the eve of his retirement, Dr. Raven will speak at the WGNSS banquet about his years of service to the Missouri Botanical Garden. Join us in this celebration of a life dedicated to biodiversity and conservation.



## Upcoming WGNSS General Meetings

Join us for a special program in March. Cindy Gilberg and Barbara Perry Lawton will present, *Shaw Nature Reserve – Yesterday, Today, and into the Future*. Note the special date: **Tuesday, March 1**, 7:30 p.m. at Powder Valley Nature Center. Cindy and Barbara are co-authors of the recently-published book, *The Missouri Botanical Garden's Shaw Nature Reserve: 85 Years of Natural Wonders*. There will be copies of the book available for purchase, and members are invited to bring their copies for the authors to sign after the program.

The April WGNSS General Program Meeting will be held **Wednesday, April 6**, 7:30 p.m. at Powder Valley Nature Center. Join us as Layne Van Brunt gives a talk titled, "Island-Hopping in the Southern Ocean: The Falklands, South Georgia, and the Antarctic Peninsula." It should be a fascinating program.



## January Bird Report

*David Becher*

This is my first effort at the bird report, so please excuse any mistakes or omissions. Please send me anything that you think might be included that is not on MO-Birds at my e-mail address below. I hope in the future to include more pictures to document the rare or interesting observations. If you have any pictures that you would like to be considered, please let me know.

January began cold and windy and continued that way for most of the month. Although the immediate St. Louis area avoided much of the major snow falls the fields were snow covered for much of the month and most of the open water was frozen. Despite this reports of irruptive northern species were very sparse. Sparrows also seemed to be in relatively low numbers although a moderate variety were reported. Most of the expected waterfowl were also present, but Snow and White-fronted Geese seemed less wide spread than usual. The lack of open water in many areas

undoubtedly reduced the number of waterfowl observations.

On a sad note, George Barker a long time member of the WGNSS birding died on January 10<sup>th</sup>. Although he had not been active for a few years, he will be missed.

A good variety of waterfowl were reported this month for the most part in the first few days at Riverlands Environmental Demonstration Area (REDA). The most surprising birds were probably the three male Wood Ducks and an American Widgeon near the Steinberg Rink in Forest Park, first reported by on January 28<sup>th</sup> by Phyllis Weidman and refound the next day by David Becher, Kent Lannert, and Bob Kleiger. After that widespread freezing dispersed the birds and made finding them more difficult. At the start of the month there were a large number of waterfowl at REDA including Northern Pintail, American Black Duck, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Redhead, Canvasback, Common Goldeneye, Greater Scaup, and Common and Hooded Mergansers. Ring-necked Ducks were rare, but two were spotted at the barrow pits near Horseshoe Lake on the 14<sup>th</sup> among a flock of American Coots. The only Ruddy Duck reports were from Horseshoe Lake on several occasions. Frank Holmes reported the only Bufflehead and Red-breasted Mergansers at Horseshoe on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

The usual large flock of Trumpeter Swans with the occasional Tundra mixed in and the large flock of Canada and Cackling Geese was also present. Mute Swans were observed by the Thursday group at Peabody on the 6<sup>th</sup> and at Horseshoe Lake by David Becher on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>. Lots of Snow Geese with the occasional Ross' Goose were reported at Baldwin and Carlyle Lakes, but they were not reported elsewhere. The WGNSS Thursday Group had at least Ross' Geese at Baldwin on the 6<sup>th</sup>. White-fronted Goose reports were also sparse. They were reported by Dan Kassebaum at Carlyle Lake, but it is not known if they were within the magic circle. Two flocks totaling over 200 birds were observed flying over Horseshoe Lake in Granite City, Illinois on January 29<sup>th</sup>, by David Becher, Kent Lannert, and Bob Kleiger.

The only loon report this month was a Common from Baldwin Lake reported by Dan Kassebaum.

The only Horned Grebe reports were from Baldwin Lake. Dan Kassebaum reported them at the start of the month and the WGNSS Thursday group refound them at the back gate on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Pied-billed Grebes were also present. Another Pied-billed Grebe was an unexpected find was another in the ponds north of the Steinberg Rink in Forest Park on the 29<sup>th</sup>.

The only Double-crested Cormorant report was from Baldwin Lake spotted by Dick Coles on January 6<sup>th</sup>. There were unusually no American White Pelican reports, undoubtedly because of the large amount of ice in the river. Great Blue Herons were the only herons reported, but there were common at REDA, Horseshoe Lake, and Columbia Bottoms among other places.

Turkey Vultures appeared to be somewhat less widespread than in recent winters and there were few reports. Frank Holmes reported one near Edwardsville, Illinois in the 16<sup>th</sup>. However, a group of at least 30 has taken to roosting in the pines at the start of the Fallen Oak Nature Trail at Busch Wildlife and were seen on a number of occasions. Caution is advised about walking under the trees early in the day.

There was more than the usual number of Rough-legged Hawk reports. The one that was at Columbia Bottoms earlier in the winter continued to be seen. On the first it was reported by Jack Cowan at Columbia Bottoms and David Becher saw it near REDA on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Tom Borman reported seeing three on the 15<sup>th</sup> including the one at Columbia Bottom, and two more near Winfield Dam and Clarence Cannon. That is an amazing number for one day in this area. The Clarence Cannon bird was also seen by Bill Duncan on the 17<sup>th</sup>.

Red-tailed Hawks were common as always, but a dark-morph adult that was seen repeatedly near the headquarters at Columbia Bottom was reliable and easy to see. Several other dark-morph birds were reported around the area. Cooper's Hawks remained very common, but Sharp-shinned Hawks reports were sparse. Stephanie Pippin on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and Jane Allen on the 24<sup>th</sup> reported them as yard birds.

The Merlin that had been along Confluence Road was reported on the first and may have been seen for another day or two, but has not reported later

in the month. There were a number of Peregrine Falcon reports including at Columbia Bottom on the 16<sup>th</sup> by Josh Uffman, two on the Chain of Rocks Bridge by Mike Thelan on the same day and one at Horseshoe Lake on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

Wilson's snipe was seen on the mud flats in Illinois near the Melvin Price Dam on warmer days.

Frank Homes reported a Killdeer, difficult to find in mid-winter, near Collinsville, Illinois on the 24<sup>th</sup>.

Interesting gulls were present, but often hard to find. On the first and second there was open water at the north end of Ellis Bay and the adult Iceland Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, and Thayer's Gull were all present. The immature Glaucous Gull was seen near the dam. Shortly thereafter the area froze over and the gulls dispersed.

Owl reports were limited this year. There were a number of reports of Short-eared Owls from a variety of locations including Peabody River King area in Illinois (Tom Borman) on the 9<sup>th</sup>, Horseshoe Lake (Frank Holmes) and Clarence Cannon (Philip Wire) both on the 17<sup>th</sup>. The only seen Screech Owl report was one that roosted in a holly tree outside the window of the Monsanto Creve Coeur research building on the 11<sup>th</sup> and was seen many people.



Photo by David Becher.

Another has been heard not seen near the Confluence parking lot at Columbia Bottom first reported by Josh Uffman on the 16<sup>th</sup>.

The WGNSS Thursday group made the only Kingfisher report at Castlewood on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Tom Borman reported a Loggerhead Shrike at Peabody on the 9<sup>th</sup> and it or another bird was refound by Roseanne Bodman and Jackie Chain on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

A Fish Crow was heard calling among a large flock of American Crows along Bend Road at Horseshoe Lake by Kent Lannert, Bob Kleiger and David Becher.

There were a few Brown Creeper reports mostly from Busch Wildlife. Red-breasted Nuthatches were also reported there both at the Fallen Oak Nature Trail and near Lake 6 on several occasions. Frank Holmes reported one from Edwardsville, Illinois on the 16<sup>th</sup>.

The bad weather increased the number of reports of Carolina Wrens at various feeders. The birds at Columbia Bottoms were seen on almost all visits. There were numerous reports of Golden-crowned Kinglet, but more unusual was a report of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet at Horseshoe Lake on the 17<sup>th</sup> by Frank Holmes.

There were several Brown Thrasher reports including one by the Marjamas at Babbler State Park on the 8<sup>th</sup> and one by the Thursday group at Columbia Bottom on the 13<sup>th</sup>.

The certain only American Pipit report was from the Howell Island area as part of the Busch Christmas Count by Mike Brady and Maryanne Auer.

There were no reports of Waxwings, which is unusual and may correlate with the low numbers of many other woodland fruit and seed eaters. Sparrow numbers were low in some places, for example the Blue Grosbeak Trail, and there were no reports of Harris Sparrow in the area. A LeConte's Sparrow which is rare in the area at this season was found near the Blue Grosbeak Tail on the 15<sup>th</sup> by David Becher.

There were only a few reports of Rusty Blackbird. There were a few seen on multiple occasions on Dwyer road near the intersection with Church road. There were about 6 to 8 birds present throughout the month. The large flock of Great-tailed Grackles that has been found in that area the past few years was missing. However, they were reliable at the Bryan Island Stables on Missouri Bottom Road, often in the front yard of the house. The only report of Brewer's blackbird was by Margy Terpstra on the 14<sup>th</sup> in her yard in Kirkwood, Mo.

Purple Finches were in low numbers. A couple were reliable at the feeders at Busch and were seen

by multiple observers. Otherwise a report from Collinsville by Frank Holmes on the 29<sup>th</sup> and by John Hitzeman in Troy on the 30<sup>th</sup> were the only ones. Pine Siskins were ever harder to find with the only report being from Wally George of 2-3 in Cedar Hill in Jefferson County.

The large flocks of Lapland Longspurs that were present in many places in December seem to have mostly disappeared. Josh Uffman reported a large flock on the Confluence Road on the 16<sup>th</sup>. There were other reports from Columbia Bottom and the REDA area, but mostly of small groups on less than 10 birds mixed with Horned Larks. There was no sign of the Snow Buntings that seemed to be unusually common before the first of the year.



## December Botany Report

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*Compiled by George Van Brunt*

**December 6, 2010** – Low temperature kept the botanists at home.

**December 13, 2010** – Low temperature and high wind kept the botanists at home.

**December 20, 2010 – Rock Quarry Trail, Rockwoods Reservation, St. Louis County, MO** (contributed by Fr. Jim Sullivan).

Participants: Nancy and Wayne Clark, Paul Corley, Jack Harris, Rex Hill, Nels Holmberg, Michelle Lee, Jeannie Moe, John Oliver, Steve Turner, and myself.

We emerged from hibernation and were hoping that the wind would not blow too strongly on the ridge top. At my behest, we were studying the oaks.

- *Quercus velutina* (black oak). Some of the terminal buds are quite long, and every bud scale is covered with velvety hairs. *Velutina* means velvety.
- *Quercus shumardii* (Shumard's oak). The buds are much smaller and are essentially hairless. They are light gray or tannish.
- *Quercus rubra* (red oak). The buds are a deep reddish-brown, and if they have hairs at all, they emerge from the margins of the scales close to the tip.

- *Quercus coccinea* (scarlet oak). The buds are a deep reddish brown, but in their apical half are paler, by reason of whitish hairs and paler looking scales.

We have documented *Quercus coccinea* from Rockwoods Reservation before with more adequate specimens, but it was surprising how many of its twigs we seemed to find on our brief visit. They have too many hairs to be *rubra*, and not enough hairs to be *velutina*.

We also saw *Q. alba* (white oak), *Q. muehlenbergii* (chinkapin oak), and *Q. stellata* (post oak). We recognized *Sideroxylon lanuginosum* (gum bumelia), *Acer saccharum* (hard maple), and *Celtis tenuifolia* (glade hackberry) with fruits. Two evergreen ferns were here: *Polystichum acrostichoides* (Christmas fern), and *Asplenium platyneuron* (ebony spleenwort).

**December 27, 2010 – Weldon Spring Interpretive Center, St. Charles County, MO** (contributed by George Van Brunt).

Ten botanists met at the Weldon Spring Interpretive Center in St. Charles County for a morning of indoor study. Morning temperatures in the teens and snow cover helped us to decide on an indoor setting. Botanists participating were Fr. Sullivan, Jeannie Moe, Jack Harris, Pat Harris, Burt Noll, Wayne Clark, Nancy Clark, John Oliver, Steve Turner, and George Van Brunt. We divided the morning into three parts: a study of oak twigs and acorns directed by Fr. Sullivan, a slide show on plants of Tierra del Fuego, the Falkland Islands, and Antarctica that I presented, and a slide show of various sites in Argentina visited by Wayne and Nancy Clark. Wayne and Nancy visited Argentina in April 2010 for a meeting of the AAVSO (American Association of Variable Star Observers), a worldwide organization. While there, they visited Buenos Aires, Iguazu Falls, and the province of Mendoza in western Argentina (where the meeting was held).

Worldwide, there are about 450 species of oaks although some sources state that there are as many as 600 species or as few as 275. Some of these species are shrubs, but most are trees. All are classified in the genus *Quercus*, which is the Roman name for the English oak (*Quercus robur*), a species that ranges over most of Europe. The United States and Canada are home to about 54 oak species of which 21 are native to Missouri.



L-R: Steve Turner, John Oliver, George Van Brunt, Burt Noll, Rev. Jim Sullivan, Jack Harris, Nancy Clark, Wayne Clark. Photo by Pat Harris.



L-R: Burt Noll, Jeannie Moe, George Van Brunt, Jack Harris, Steve Turner, Rev. Jim Sullivan, Nancy Clark, John Oliver. Photo by Pat Harris.

Identification of oak species is notoriously difficult, which helps to account for the wide range of opinions on the number of species. Identification of some species is fairly obvious, but identification of many others is not. Variability of leaf shape within a species complicates identification, as do variability of winter buds, bark, and acorns. Young leaves are often quite different in shape from mature leaves. A further complicating factor is the tendency of oaks to hybridize and produce fertile offspring. To identify many oaks, one must look at winter buds, leaves from different parts of the tree, acorns (both cap and nut), bark, and location. Even then, some identifications are educated guesses.

Missouri's recognized native oak species include:

- *Q. alba* (white oak)
- *Q. bicolor* (swamp white oak)
- *Q. coccinea* (scarlet oak)
- *Q. ellipsoidalis* (northern pin oak)
- *Q. falcata* (southern red oak)
- *Q. imbricaria* (shingle oak)
- *Q. lyrata* (overcup oak)
- *Q. macrocarpa* (bur oak)
- *Q. marilandica* (blackjack oak)
- *Q. michauxii* (swamp chestnut oak)
- *Q. muehlenbergii* (chinkapin oak)
- *Q. nigra* (water oak)
- *Q. pagoda* (cherrybark oak)
- *Q. palustris* (pin oak)
- *Q. phellos* (willow oak)
- *Q. prinoides* (dwarf chinkapin oak)
- *Q. rubra* (northern red oak)
- *Q. shumardii* (Shumard's oak)
- *Q. stellata* (post oak)
- *Q. texana* (Nuttall oak)
- *Q. velutina* (black oak)

In addition, *Q. acutissima* (sawtooth oak) and *Q. margaretta* (sand post oak) are non-native oaks found in Missouri. A few of these species have a fairly restricted distribution in Missouri, particularly in the southeastern counties, but most are widely distributed. So if you ask a botanist, "What species of oak is that?" do not be surprised if there is a long pause followed by "I think it is \_\_\_\_\_, but I'm not sure."

Father Sullivan brought winter twigs and acorns of 6 species and Jeannie Moe provided two others. We spent time examining many specimens of each species (because of the variability), consulting our field guides, and discussing the similarities and differences. Following are some observations and photographs of the specimens we studied.

***Quercus shumardii* (Shumard's oak)**

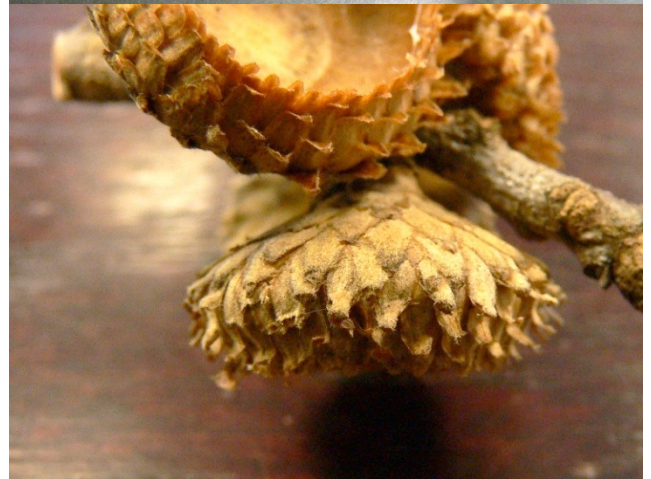
Hairless, straw-colored buds, buds smaller than black oak buds:



*Quercus shumardii*. Photos by George Van Brunt.

***Quercus velutina* (black oak)**

Large, velvety buds, loose outer scales on acorn caps:



*Quercus velutina*. Photos by Pat Harris (top) and George Van Brunt (middle and bottom).

***Quercus rubra* (northern red oak)**

Large acorns with very flat caps, widest part of nut is not at the top, but in the middle:



*Quercus rubra*. Photos by Pat Harris (top) and George Van Brunt (bottom).

***Quercus coccinea* (scarlet oak)**

Apical half of bud is covered with hairs, resembling a snow-capped mountain:



*Quercus coccinea*. Photos by Pat Harris (top) and George Van Brunt (bottom).



## *Quercus alba* (white oak)

Each scale of the acorn cap is a bump:

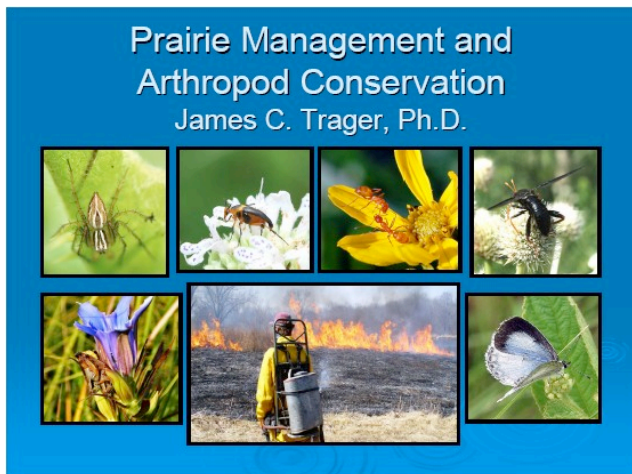


*Quercus alba*. Photos by George Van Brunt (top) and Pat Harris (bottom).



## January Entomology Report

Jane Walker



The Entomology Group met at the Butterfly House on January 17 for their first meeting of the year. **James Trager** presented “Fire and Natural Area Arthropods – A Review” to an audience of 23. James gave an overview of the history of fire as a shaping factor in prairie ecosystems – “fire created and maintained the prairie.” Historical references to indigenous people burning the prairies came from early Spanish explorers and early European/American botanist-explorers. Physical evidence of historical burning prairies goes back even further, probably to the time indigenous people first came to the area. As a consequence of this long period of burning, prairies, and prairie plants in particular, evolved with fire.

Currently, prescribed burning is used to manage prairies, prairie remnants, and other fire derived ecosystems. The ecologist burns to stimulate reproduction of native herbaceous perennials. However, fire can be catastrophic to invertebrates in the short term. Is this fate permanent? Fire sensitive species generally do not occur in frequently burned prairies. Predominantly fire tolerant species recover quickly post fire, resulting in little overall change in the long term. In a study done at Konza Prairie, researchers found that the greater the structural vegetative diversity, the greater the number of kinds of grasshoppers. They also found that fires at 1-, 2-, 5-, or 20-year intervals had no significant effect on grasshoppers. James looked at other research papers, not only from the United States, but from all over the world, and found that fire sensitive species do recover, but over a long period of time, 70 months or 5–7 years.

James fielded many questions from the audience. His topic segued into a possible project of the Entomology Group. As a group, we may have the chance to look at the effects of fire management on insects at LaBarque Creek Conservation Area, recently upgraded to LaBarque Creek Natural Area. Within the next two years, the Conservation Department will begin prescribed burning at LaBarque Creek to restore degraded sandstone and dolomite glades and woodlands in the Natural Area. We discussed possible approaches, such as general insect surveys, tracking of individual species vs. overall species diversity/richness, and what scientific method would be used. The

general consensus was that tracking individual species would be the easiest for the group to accomplish. Suggested groups included: grasshoppers, leaf eating beetles, and butterflies and moths. Much had to be decided, so we picked a committee to discuss and come up with a project proposal and what insects would be tracked. Jane Walker, Rich Thoma, Steve Penn, and Father Jim Sullivan volunteered to be on the committee with James Trager, Ted MacRae, and Mike Arduser to serve as consultants.

We wish to thank Laura Chisolm for hosting our meeting at the Butterfly House.



## Lucky Viewing of Northern Visitor at Heron Pond

*Paul Bauer<sup>1</sup>*



A most unusual situation occurred at Heron Pond in Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary (RMBS) on December 28, 2010. For several days, Allen Smith and I had been visiting Columbia Bottom Conservation Area and RMBS late in the day with the hope of seeing and Photo-Birding a visiting Short-eared Owl before dark.

Finally we were “four-times” lucky. Allen and I were leaving RMBS at 2:30 p.m. heading to Columbia Bottom Conservation Area and had stopped at the restrooms just west of Heron Pond. As we were getting back into the cars, Allen noted a big lump on a sign near Heron Pond. We both glassed it, and I noted it seemed too plump to be a Harrier and thought it might be an owl.

<sup>1</sup> Photos by Allen Smith.

Yes; there it was, a SHORT-EARED OWL sitting on the sign with my name on it! Allen told me to go buy a lottery ticket!

Not only did we see the bird at 3 p.m. in good light and capture many great flight shots, but I called this owl sitting on a sign with my name on it. Almost 20 others stopped to see or photograph it and share my excitement, and the photos by Allen Smith share the moment.

This owl was closer than any previous sighting of this species in my life, and in better light! If you wait long enough everything will come to RMBS. Included in the very rare/accidental list of over 30 species are: Wood Stork, Neotropic Cormorant, Smew, Barrow's Goldeneye, Harlequin Duck, Slaty-backed Gull, and Ross's Gull. Years ago, Dick Anderson wondered out loud if we might ever see a Purple Sandpiper on the rocky beach, now named, Lincoln-Shields. Maybe some day, Dick – we are still looking!



ALWAYS HAVE FUN; GO BIRDING!



## In Memorium: George Barker

*Paul and Fran Bauer*

We are saddened to learn of the passing of George Barker. George and his wife Terry were an important part of the St. Louis Birding Community for at least 35 years. As I recall, we first met George and Terry while birding in the field at Busch Conservation Area in 1964.

During much of that period, they both served as one of the anchor points for the area telephone “Hot Line” that locally contacted over forty

birders when a worthy bird was found. That Hot Line was our only method to rapidly spread the birding news in that “era” before cell phones, and MOBIRDS on the Internet.

The best birding story that I recall about Terry and George relates to some 15 to 20 birders crammed into their kitchen looking out at their several bird feeders, and trying to get better looks of a visiting Redpoll. Sadly this bird has some streaks on the sides and in the rump, so it was relegated to be the rare and erratic “Common” Redpoll, and NOT a new species for the St. Louis area, Hoary Redpoll. Great adventure mixed with disappointment.

On this occasion, we thank both Terry and George Barker for what they have done over the many years to support the St. Louis Birders.



## Sixtieth Weldon Spring Christmas Bird Count Results

*Anne McCormack*<sup>1</sup>

The 60<sup>th</sup> annual Weldon Spring Christmas Bird Count on Sunday, January 2, 2011, was remarkable in many ways. A Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is a tally of the birds and number of species within a 15-mile diameter circle, in this case, centered on the town of Weldon Spring, St. Charles County. MOWS (Missouri Weldon Spring) CBC has been sponsored by [Webster Groves Nature Study Society](#) since 1951.

We had a “high count” of participants this year; that is, we had an unusually large group—32. Give the weather credit for this—last year the roads were covered with snow, though we still had 19 participants. I’d like to give the social network some of the credit too! We had several new birders that learned about the count through the [WGNSS Facebook page](#) invitation, and several more that were visiting from out-of-town and decided to join us after seeing WGNSS on the net. And when I say out-of-towner, I mean out-of-town. [Michael Wickens](#), an ornithology student, just back from research in Peru, joined in, as did our youngest participant, 10-year-old Amanda. The 32 people

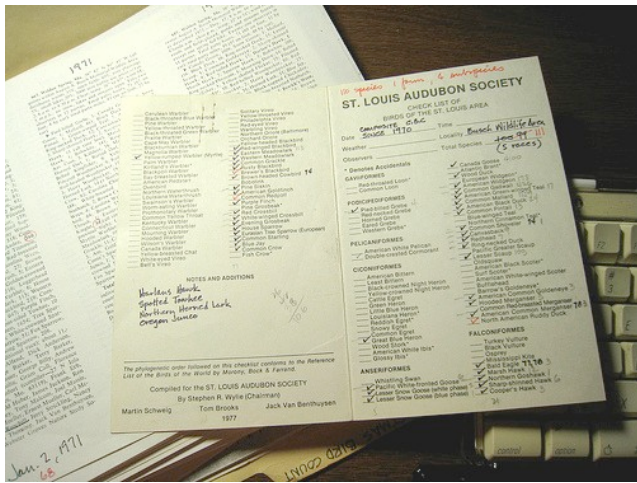


were divided into 16 teams that counted an assigned area on foot or by car.

I thought 32 might be the biggest ever till I began looking through the yellow, smudged records I received from Tom Parmeter and other compilers over the last 6 decades. There are also [interactive data tables](#) of historical results available on National Audubon’s website, though the old papers are more fun to look through. On Jan. 2, 1972, Jim Comfort compiled the observations of 52 participants. It was clear that day, and Busch’s many lakes were open. The temperature started at 26° F, but made it up to 47. Contributing to the count were many that whose names WGNSS members will recognize and some that will be recognized well beyond the 15-mile diameter circle: [Dick Anderson](#), George and Terry Barker, [Edgar Denison](#), [Jim Jackson](#), Betsy, Don, and Doug Menke, [Claudia Spener](#), [Kyrle Bolt](#), Roseann Bodman, Dottie Close, Jack “Van” (Van Benthuisen), and [George \(Pete\) Winter](#). Pete’s competitor for largest life list of birds, [Phoebe Snetsinger](#), is not named, but she participated the next year when Busch was frozen and 12°.

At the WGNSS-St. Louis Audubon Winter Party, many of you expressed skepticism about the total I announced. Birders are usually right and spreadsheet formulas sometimes aren’t and mine wasn’t! The combined number of species seen was 71—respectable, but not one for Ripley’s Believe It or Not. We had 81 party-hours, which sounds *really* fun. Actually, it’s just a total of the hours the groups spent surveying. The number of individual birds of each species is available in the Audubon tables going back to the earliest Weldon count, but the “Species total” is not listed until the 1996

<sup>1</sup> Photos by the author.



count year. It's taking more time than I have right now to sift through the records, but so far the biggest total I've found was 80, on Jan. 3, 2009, with 61.5 party-hours. The prior year to that had 78 species in the composite list, with 79 party-hours.

The [checklist you see in the above photo](#), filled in by an unknown compiler—I suspect Jack Van—includes every species seen at least once starting in 1970. There is no end date specified, but it appears to be 1978. In that 8-year period, the total was 111.

We had 3 teams in the St. Louis County portion of the circle, including excellent wetland habitat in Howell Island, and Big Muddy, and mature forest and a small area of old growth in Babler State Park, covered by Richard Palmer and Dennis Martin. At Howell Island, Mary Ann Auer and Mike Brady found a bird never recorded in the 60 year history of the Weldon Count: American Pipit!

Several birds were found by only one of the 16 groups: Tom Parmeter, working the northwestern portion of the circle touching Lake St. Louis found Green-wing Teal, seen on only 10 of the 60 Weldon Spring counts. Connie Alwood's group was the only one to find Ring-necked Duck, and an amazing Short-eared Owl, seen only one other time in count history, in 1975! Dan Curran and Mary Smidt found Lesser Scaup in the southwest part of Busch. My group found Ruddy Duck on Lake 33. Bill Rowe's group found Eastern Screech-Owl, seen on only 4 counts since 1951, and Brown-headed Cowbird. The only owl we lacked was Long-eared Owl, seen 15 times in count history, most recently in 2008—after a gap of 21 years. Working their way through central Weldon Spring CA, Bryan Prather and Paul Corley found

Great Horned Owl and 6 Cedar Waxwings. This year was a low count for that species. Following the Hamburg Trail, Ken Hollinga was the only one to find Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Mike Grant, Mike Brady, and Mary Anne Auer were the only 2 groups to find Eastern Meadowlark, in the St. Louis County section of the circle. Jeannie Moe and Karen Meyer, as well as Bill Rowe's group found Winter Wren.

There were a number of "high count" species, that is, birds in unusually high numbers. Turkey Vultures set a record of 85, and I really think it was much higher than that. I saw a kettle of 50 but I could not determine if others counted the flock already. Their previous high count was 18 in '06. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers also set a record of 17 (11 in '04), as did Yellow-rumped Warbler with 202 (200 in '02). White-throated Sparrow totaled a mind-blowing 700, crushing the previous high count of 493 in '01. 26 Eastern Towhees revealed themselves (previous high was 21 in '08). Pileated Woodpecker scored an unusually high count of 32, just shy of the record of 33 set in 2004.

All together we counted 15,189 individual birds in the 15-mile diameter circle centered on Weldon Spring, St. Charles County. Our most widely distributed species were the Blue Jay (285 individuals), American Robin (3054), and of course, the 700 White-throated Sparrows! These were the only species seen by every team whether counting in the forest at Lost Valley Trail or Babler State Park, the fields in Busch Wildlife Area, along the Katy Trail, or along the Missouri River at Howell Island or Greens Bottom Road. Other widely distributed bird, seen by 14 of the 16 teams, were Red-bellied Woodpecker (129 birds), N. Flicker (83), N. Cardinal (253).

I know what you're thinking: Why do I keep saying this was the 60<sup>th</sup> count if it has been held since 1951? Well, there was no count data for 1968. Whether that was because of bad weather, lost records, or a lack of an organizer I don't know.

You can check the National Audubon website [here](#). I have posted the spreadsheet [here](#), and a narrative about the day in my blog [here](#) and [here](#). See more photos of WGNSS events [here](#). Thanks to everyone who participated! If you spot errors or omissions, please let me know so I make corrections: [annemccormack@sbcglobal.net](mailto:annemccormack@sbcglobal.net)



## “Rush skeletonplant pea gall wasp”

Ted C. MacRae<sup>1</sup>



*Lygodesmia juncea* with galls of *Antistrophus lygodesmiaepisum* (Hymenoptera: Cynipidae) on stem.

The Loess Hills landform along the western edge of Iowa and extreme northwestern Missouri is home to a unique assemblage of plants and animals. The majority of these are associated with loess hilltop prairies – grassland remnants that have their origins in the hypsithermal maximum of several thousand years ago and that persist as small relicts on the landform’s steep, dry, south- and west-facing slopes. Many of the plants and animals found in these grassland remnants are more typically found further west in the Great Plains but hang on in the Loess Hills as hypsithermal relicts.

One such hypsithermal relict is rush skeletonplant, *Lygodesmia juncea*, a wirey, leafless-looking plant in the family Asteraceae<sup>2</sup>. More common in the Great Plains, this plant occurs in Missouri only on these loess hilltop prairie remnants. The first time one encounters this plant, they are left with the impression that the plant bears small, pea-like fruiting structures along the length of its stem.

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from an article posted January 20, 2011 at <http://beetlesinthebush.wordpress.com> Photos by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with rush skeletonweed, *Chondrilla juncea* - also in the Asteraceae, which despite the similarity of common names, specific epithet, and general appearance (except with yellow flowers) is an altogether different plant that was introduced from the Mediterranean Region and is now considered an invasive weed in much of the Great Plains.



*Antistrophus lygodesmiaepisum* galls on stem of *Lygodesmia juncea*.

These are not fruiting structures, however, but galls made by the cynipid wasp *Antistrophus lygodesmiaepisum*. Although this insect does not have a common name, it is associated exclusively with *L. juncea*, as suggested by its specific epithet (which also alludes to the pea-like galls with the suffix *-pisum*), so I see no reason why this wasp cannot be called the “rush skeletonplant pea gall wasp.” Some sources variably misspell the genus as *Anistrophus* (without the first “t”) or the species name as simply *pisum*, a synonym first introduced by Ashmead in the late 19th century a few years after the species was described (I made both mistakes [and also erroneously referred to *L. juncea* as skeletonweed] in one of my earliest posts: [The Loess Hills in Missouri](#)). It would seem that *Antistrophus lygodesmiaepisum* is the correct name, according to Pickering (2009).

Rush skeletonplant exudes a latex-like sap when damaged, making it unpalatable to most grazers – this latex-like sap can be seen when the galls made by the wasps are cut open. Cynipid wasps are the second most diverse group of gall-making insects behind the gall midges, and many species are mono- or oligophagous (Ronquist and Liljeblad 2001), meaning that they are associated exclusively with a single plant species or group of closely related species. *Antistrophus lygodesmiaepisum* is one such monophagous species, thus its occurrence in Missouri, like that of *L. juncea*, is restricted to the tiny loess hilltop prairie remnants in extreme northwestern Missouri. In recent years, these prairie relicts have suffered heavily from conversion to agriculture, abusive grazing, and suppression of fire that has led to invasion by woody and exotic plants. In Missouri, only about



*Antistrophus lygodesmiaepisum* larva in gall on stem of *Lygodesmia juncea*.

50 acres of loess hilltop prairie remain, and only half of these are in conservation ownership, making it among the most critically imperiled of natural communities in Missouri. While lacking the conservation charisma of *L. juncea* and the dozen or so other plants and vertebrates that are restricted in Missouri to these prairie remnants, the occurrence of *A. lygodesmiaepisum* in Missouri is every bit as tenuous as those species. It thus deserves equal consideration as a [Missouri species of conservation concern](#).

**REFERENCES:**

[Pickering, J. 2009.](#) Database of Hymenoptera in America north of Mexico. <http://www.discoverlife.org/proceed-ings/0000/6/html/Cynipidae> (accessed 20 Jan 2011).

[Ronquist, F. and J. Liljeblad. 2001.](#) Evolution of the gall wasp-host plant association. *Evolution* 55(12):2503–2522.



## 8-Week Native Landscaping Course at Meramec

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Native Landscaping for Wildlife and People (BIO:156), an 8-week course at St. Louis Community College at Meramec, will be offered from March 24 to May 7. It will meet on Thursday evenings from 5:00 pm to 7:00 pm and for four Saturday field trips (3/26, 4/09, 4/23, & 5/07) from 8:00 am to 3:15 pm. This unique landscaping class focuses on native plant species, which are not only aesthetically appealing to humans but also furnish crucial habitat for wildlife groups such as songbirds, butterflies and hummingbirds. Using native wildflowers, grasses, shrubs, and trees, people will learn how to design, plant and maintain gardens and landscapes around homes, common grounds, businesses and public lands such as parks. Besides having an interest in nature, there are no prerequisites for this course that can be either audited or taken for credit. Dave Tylka, keynote speaker for Missouri's Grow Native program, will teach this course. For more information, call him at 636/942-3142.



## TNC Spring 2011 Conservation Speaker Series

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The Nature Conservancy has announced their **Spring 2011 Conservation Speaker Series**. Mark your calendars – all talks are free & open to the public and are held at Schlafly Bottleworks in Maplewood.

**Tuesday, March 15; 7 p.m.**

*Conservation and Fire* – Blane Heumann, Director of Fire Management, The Nature Conservancy.

**Tuesday, April 12; 7 p.m.**

*Genetically Modified Agriculture and the Environment* – Barbara Schaal, Evolutionary Biologist, Washington University, St. Louis.

**Tuesday, May 24; 7 p.m.**

*Natural History, Human Culture, and Conservation in Missouri* – Doug Ladd, Director of Conservation Science, The Nature Conservancy in Missouri.



## St. Louis Zoo Lecture Series

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The St. Louis Zoo presents two lecture series, *Science Seminar Series* and *Conservation Conversations*, co-sponsored by the Academy of Science –St. Louis. Programs are held in the Living World, with free parking available in the North parking lot. These lectures are **FREE** and open to the general public, no reservations required. Visit [www.stlzoo.org](http://www.stlzoo.org) or call (314) 646-4544 for more information.

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### SCIENCE SEMINAR SERIES

#### **Wednesday, March 2; 7:30 – 9 p.m.**

*Re-Energizing America: Renewable Energy Solutions for the Future* – an energizing and lively talk and book signing Dan D. Chiras, Ph.D., founder and director, The Evergreen Institute; President, Sustainable Systems Design, Inc.; and nationally known author of more than two dozen books on green building, residential renewable energy and sustainability. Dr. Dan Chiras describes and talks about how we can avert disaster by turning to renewable energy now, renewable energy’s potential to meet our needs, and how we can heat our homes, cook food, provide hot water and generate electricity via clean affordable, and reliable renewable energy technologies. Books available for signing and purchase after the talk.

#### **Wednesday, April 6; 7:30 – 9 p.m.**

*Squeaks and Scents: The Neurobiology of Animal Social Communication* – Timothy E. Holy, Ph.D., 2009 Outstanding St. Louis Scientist Innovation Award recipient, Academy of Science- St. Louis; Associate Professor of Anatomy and Neurobiology, Washington University School of Medicine. Dr. Timothy Holy gives us the inside scoop on the neurobiology of animal social communication among mice: chemical signals, often called pheromones, and “courtship songs” sung at frequencies too high to be detected by humans.

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### CONSERVATION CONVERSATIONS

#### **Tuesday, February 22; 7:30 – 9 p.m.**

“Congo’s Curious Chimps” – David Morgan,

Ph.D., Executive Director, African Association of Zoos and Aquaria; and Cirquette Sanz, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Physical Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis



## Group Activity/Walk Schedules

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### **BOTANY GROUP**

Chair – George Van Brunt

**Monday Botany Walks** (Leader – Fr. James Sullivan; now in his **44<sup>th</sup> year** as Botany Walk Leader!). The WGNSS Botany Group visits many of the same locations as the Bird group: Busch Conservation Area, Shaw Nature Preserve, the Missouri Botanical Garden, Babler State Park and Cuivre River State Park. Learning plants will help you learn butterfly host plants. Sign up for WGNSS Botany Group emails from Jack Harris by contacting him at [jahar@mac.com](mailto:jahar@mac.com) or (314) 368-0655 and receive an email no later than Sunday about the following Monday’s trip.

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### **ENTOMOLOGY GROUP**

Co-Chairs – Phil Koenig and Jane Walker

#### **Monday, February 21; 7 – 9 p.m.**

Mark Grueber, Urban Forester for this region with the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC), will be talking about the emerald ash borer (EAB) and Asian longhorned beetle. He will cover the beetles, their life histories, and the monitoring program MDC and USDA-APHIS have established for EAB. The meeting will be held at the Butterfly House, Faust Park, 15193 Olive Blvd., Chesterfield. For directions call (636) 530-0076 or visit <http://www.butterflyhouse.org>

#### **Monday, March 21; 7 – 9 p.m.**

Phil Koenig will be our speaker for the March Entomology Group meeting. His talk is titled “Preliminary Investigation of *Calephelis muticum* (Swamp Metalmark) in Missouri.” The meeting will be held at the Butterfly House.

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### **NATURE BOOK CLUB**

Chair – Pat Diener

The Nature Book Club is a group of naturalists who meet once a month to discuss a book chosen for its general interest from botany to zoology. The group meets at members' homes on the second Tuesday of the month from 1:30 – 3 p.m. For meeting locations and directions contact Pat Brock Diener at (314) 962-8665 or Lisa Nansteel at (636) 391-4898. All are welcome – especially newcomers! Upcoming books:

**Tuesday, March 8; 1:30 – 3 p.m.**

*The Lost City of Z*, by David Grann.

**Tuesday, April 12; 1:30 – 3 p.m.**

*Dark Banquet*, by Bill Schutt.

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## ORNITHOLOGY GROUP

Chair – David Becher

**Saturday Bird Walks** (Leader – David Becher). Walks are at Des Peres Park on February 19, March 5, 19, and 26. All trips begin at **8 a.m.** and normally go through early afternoon, so bring lunch if you wish to stay out. Everyone is welcome. The leader reserves the right to change the schedule if necessary. If you have questions, contact David at (314) 576-1146 or [DavidBecher@msn.com](mailto:DavidBecher@msn.com)

**Thursday Bird Walks** (Leader – Jackie Chain). Walks are at Des Peres Park – meet in parking lot (east side of Ballas Rd. just north of Manchester Rd.) at **8:30 a.m.**, return is usually by 3:30 p.m. (you may leave at your convenience). Bring lunch, beverage, binoculars and if you have one a scope/tripod. If you have questions, contact Jackie at (314) 644-5998 or [chainjac@sbcglobal.net](mailto:chainjac@sbcglobal.net)

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For general information about WGNSS activities, contact Membership Chairman Paul Brockland at [pbrockland@sbcglobal.net](mailto:pbrockland@sbcglobal.net) or (314) 961-4661.



## Editor's Corner

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*Ted C. MacRae*

### **NATURE NOTES BY EMAIL**

*Nature Notes* is available not only by regular post, but also by email. Not only does this save paper and reduce mailing costs, it allows viewing of the newsletter and the included photos **in full color**. Embedded hyperlinks also allow instant navigation to email addresses and websites. Of course, you can always print your electronic copy of *Nature Notes* if you wish (if you do, please be sure to use both sides of the paper ☺). The electronic newsletter is sent as a PDF, which can be opened using Adobe Reader (free download available at <http://get.adobe.com/reader/>). Send your name and email address to the Assistant Treasurer at [whittex@aol.com](mailto:whittex@aol.com) to receive *Nature Notes* by email.

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### **CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS**

We welcome all announcements of WGNSS or other nature related events in the St. Louis area, notices of published articles – especially those authored by members, and original nature oriented articles. Suggested topics include accounts of field trips you have taken, information about local natural areas, interesting nature sightings, or reviews of nature related books. Reprinting of articles from other sources requires permission from the copyright holder. Previous *Nature Notes* issues are a good source of ideas – copies of recent issues can be provided upon request.

Please direct all submissions by email to the Editor at [ted.c.macrae@monsanto.com](mailto:ted.c.macrae@monsanto.com) Limit text formatting to bold for emphasis and italics for scientific names. Additional formatting (e.g., use of tabs and extra spaces, multiple hard returns, underlining, etc.) should be avoided, since it must be removed by the Editor during final formatting. Photographs are encouraged and will be published on a space-available basis. Contributions are welcome from all but especially encouraged from members – remember; this is your newsletter!







## Webster Groves Nature Study Society

February 2, 2011

Director – Bob Ziehmer  
Missouri Department of Conservation  
P.O. Box 180  
Jefferson City, MO 65102-0180

Director Ziehmer

With over 350 active members, the Webster Groves Nature Study Society (WGNSS) is one of the largest non-professional, natural history organizations in Missouri. Members of WGNSS have a diverse array of interests including botany, ornithology, entomology and conservation, all with a primary focus on Missouri's natural communities. Nearly all WGNSS field trips and other activities take place in Missouri and as such, we take a lot of interest in what the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) is doing to protect the states natural communities.

Recently, the use of Patch-Burn Grazing (PBG) by MDC as a management tool on Missouri prairies has caused a great deal of concern for those of us in WGNSS. We have reviewed the available data and followed this issue for some time and have come to the conclusion that PBG may not be the best management tool for all prairies. In particular, we are concerned about the use of PBG on "Natural Areas". As posted on the MDC web site, "Natural Areas represent some of the best, and last, examples of the state's original natural landscape, each offering a shining example of Missouri's outstanding biological and geological features". As such, Natural Areas need to be handled with the utmost care. WGNSS feels that PBG at this time should still be considered an experimental management tool and therefore, inappropriate for use on Missouri's Natural Areas including Niawathe, Taberville, Pawnee and Osage prairies. At this time WGNSS strongly recommends that PBG be discontinued by MDC on all Natural Areas in Missouri and that no further expansion should be undertaken until the management technique has been shown to be effective.

WGNSS does recognize that the citizens of Missouri have asked MDC to perform a very difficult task. A prairie is a very dynamic habitat that is not easily managed, especially when so little remains. PBG may be an excellent way to manage these few remaining prairies under some circumstances. However, we in WGNSS feel that Natural Areas should not have been the first sites to be put at risk. For the future, PBG management should not be expanded to any additional Natural Areas. Instead, we recommend that MDC choose Missouri prairie sites of lesser quality for additional PBG experiments. Show us that species diversity increases and that the prairie habitat has improved by using PBG on lesser quality sites first. In particular, show us that prairie endemic species benefit from PBG. A successful demonstration of PBG using a degraded site is an important step towards convincing WGNSS that it is an acceptable management technique.

On behalf of all in WGNSS, we thank you for listening to our concerns.

Sincerely,

Richard S. Thoma - WGNSS President  
320 Frieda Ave.  
Kirkwood, MO 63122  
314-541-4199  
[thomarkas4@sbccglobal.net](mailto:thomarkas4@sbccglobal.net)