



The Prairie

Background Info

What is a Prairie?

Prairie is the French word for meadow. The French were the first Europeans to explore the continent. Prairies are made up of:

- Grasses (~25 species)
- Sedges (grass like plants, most stems have edges, interesting seed heads)
- Forbs (flowering plants, ~300 species)
- Other plants and organisms
- Insects
- Animals

Why do we have prairies?

We have prairies because of the rain shadow effect from the western mountains. There are different types of prairies in different parts of the US based upon the underlying geology and climate. We have Tall-Grass Prairies in Southern Wisconsin due to our rich soil, amount of precipitation and growing season.

What are some special features of prairie plants?

Prairie plants have evolved to thrive in the hot, sunny environment.

Leaf adaptations include:

- Lobed or dissected leaves, like the fingers on your hand, catch the sunlight but the wind can blow through cooling the leaves. Birds

foot violet shiny, narrow leaves vs. common blue violet's large leaves.

- Hairy Leaves help reflect sunlight, shade the leaf surface and decrease the wind and sun's ability to dry out the leaf. Prairie dock and leadplant.
- Thick, succulent leaves store moisture.
- Rolled in leaves or sticky sap hold water.
- Some leaves rotate throughout the day to have edge towards the sun. Prairie dock.
- Some leaves trap water. Cup plant.

Root adaptations include:

- Very deep roots (drought resistance, improve the soil and infiltration of water)
- First year seedlings grow deep roots
- Mature plants have very deep roots (14 –22 feet deep!)
- Root to shoot ratio (long root to short shoot)
- Prairie legumes put nitrogen back into the soil
- There are different plants that do well in different soil conditions such as dry, damp or wet soil.

Role of Fire

Prairies need fires to thrive. A

controlled burn is a way to remove last year's growth and some invasive, leave room for new growth and allow the soil to warm up faster in the spring.

Competition from other plants

There is competition between plants for water, air and sunlight. Earlier in the season the blooming plants are shorter. Later blooming plants are taller than earlier blooming plants.

Animals

Someone once told me, "The prairie is like the ocean of the Midwest. We can look across it and think we see it all, but there is an abundance of life below what is visible." The prairie is home to:

- Soil microbes and invertebrates
- Aboveground invertebrates
- Prairie reptiles and amphibians (turtles, snakes, frogs, toads, and salamanders)
- Prairie birds
- Prairie mammals

Prairie Public Service

Prairies perform a public service by rebuilding worn out soils, preventing soil erosion, sequestering carbon, managing storm water infiltration, providing wildlife habitat and a place for human experiences and connection to the natural world.

IMPORTANT NOTE: It is important to know how to identify and avoid plants that can do harm when touched. Please know how to identify and avoid poison ivy and wild parsnip.

The backpack project was the original idea of the Friends of Pheasant Branch Conservancy Senior Advisory Council. Providing these backpacks for check-out at the senior centers, senior living communities, public libraries and Memory Cafes will support older adults, family members, friends and other support staff to independently enjoy the Pheasant Branch Conservancy. It is funded in part by a grant from Bader Philanthropies, Inc.



The Prairie Exploration Guide

Scavenger Hunt

Here are a few of the things you may notice as you explore. Take your time noticing little details as well as the big ones. There are spaces for you to add a few of your own observations.

Weather Conditions: Air Temperature: Precipitation: Humidity:	My feeling being here:	
	Insects eating	Bird calls
Birds eating	Plants blooming	Mammals
Water Clarity		
Plants blooming	Smells	Grasses
View of the wetlands toward Lake Mendota		View of Fredrick Hill towards the north
	Breeze	
Cloud Formations		Leaf Shapes
	Seeds	
Sedges (with triangular stems)		Rain

Take a moment and close your eyes to experience the sensations of the prairie.

- **What did you see?**
- **What did you hear?**
- **What did you feel?**
- **What did you smell?**
- **What made an impression on you?**

As you explore the prairie, use your senses (sound, sight, smell and touch) to enjoy the area. If you have a camera, take a few photos of your favorite experiences.

Use the silent time and your walk to inspire your pictures.