

Prairie State Park's

Tallgrass Tribune

Winter 2015

Missouri State Parks

Prairie State Park's Mission Statement

To preserve and interpret the largest remaining example of original tallgrass prairie in Missouri. The park further provides healthy outdoor recreation for all visitors. The park is dedicated to sustaining a large tallgrass prairie in its native form for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

Prairie In Winter

By Rebecca Knox

It usually begins in mid- to- late November. That first arctic blast of the season comes with a chill so deep that it permeates everything within reach of its icy grasp, and with it comes the killing frost.

To me, this is the signal that autumn is nearly over and that we are on the brink of winter in southwest Missouri. It is at this cue that my family and I pack up and head to Prairie State Park to catch a glimpse of the first frost flowers of the year.

Frost flowers really aren't flowers at all, but are beautiful delicate ribbons of ice that form on the lower stem of certain native Missouri plants. Frost flowers occur only in the late fall and are formed when the plants' stems are ruptured by the first hard freeze yet the root system is still sending up plant sap from the warmer ground. The sap pushes through the broken stem and freezes on contact with the cold air. As more sap moves up the stem, it forces the freezing stream of white ice crystals into ornate and beautifully folded ribbons of frosted swirls. Missouri plants known to produce frost flowers are dittany, stinkweed and white crownbeard.

While many warm days may follow this first icy blast, consistently colder temperatures and snowy days are sure to occur in the not-too-distant future. As winter prepares to settle in, here at the park many changes are taking place. The prairie grasses and other prairie plants and shrubs have changed from the golden yellows, rich bronzes and fiery reds of autumn to the subtler, more muted shades of winter browns and grays.



a white-tailed deer hidden among the leafless winter sumac, or the whole herd of bison with snow heaped high on their winter-thick, fur-covered backs.

Whether it's a long or short hike, if you take the time to look close and experience the nature around you, a trip to Prairie State Park in winter is sure to yield memories that will last you a lifetime!

Gone are the summer resident birds. The great clouds of swallows that circled overhead all summer long, the rare and endangered Henslow's sparrows, the cheery dickcissel, and the scissor-tailed flycatchers have all said "good-bye" to their prairie summer home.

At the same time these summer residents have winged their way south to warmer and sunnier locations for the winter, Prairie. State Park has become home to a whole host of newly arrived winter residents...birds such as the Northern harrier hawk, the American bald eagle and the short-eared owl. These have winged their way back from colder regions just to our north.

Other changes are taking place on and under the prairie as well. Prairie mice, rats, voles and crayfish burrow deeper underground to make their winter homes, the white-tailed deer, coyote and bobcat prepare for leaner days ahead, and the great bison grows thicker and shaggier as he dons his warm and wooly winter coat.

As the days grow colder and the snow begins to fly, don't let the park's seemingly, barren landscape fool you. The tallgrass might look empty and lifeless but it's not. In winter, even on the shortest and coldest of days, Prairie State Park is teeming with life. I'd like to invite those of you with an adventurous spirit to come experience winter on the tallgrass prairie for yourself. Go for a hike and look for animal tracks in the snow. Can you guess who made them?

Perhaps you'll come across a badger's burrow or a fox's den, or see a Northern harrier swooping close to the ground as it sails against a distant ridge, a red-tailed hawk perched atop a fence post or park sign, a coyote making his way across the prairie in search of his much-sought-after prey, a short-eared owl sitting in the middle of the trail,

~Mystery item ~

Henslow's sparrow

Jerry Decker of Rolla correctly identified our mystery bird as the Henslow's sparrow. This small sparrow has been declining over much of its range. It breeds in the grasslands of the Midwest and needs the prairie to survive. Thanks to CRP, Conservation Reserve Program, they are rebounding in some locations. For more information, check out this link. Learn about their life history and hear their call.

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Henslows_Sparrow/sounds

A Henslow's sparrow has a short two-note call and often can be heard singing at night. They fly sparingly, preferring to fly to the ground and scurry through the grass more like a mouse than a bird.



Prairie State Park has a nice breeding population. Last summer State Parks Youth Corps interpreter **Jessi Perry** helped researchers from the University of Nebraska with some fieldwork. They were checking the sparrow population for a more thorough project in upcoming years.

What prairie plant forms this delicate beauty ?



Send your answer to prairie.state.park@dnr.mo.gov The person with the first correct answer will be listed in the next newsletter.

Calendar of Events

~All activities will meet at the nature center~

Thursday, Jan. 1, 1 p.m.

First Day Hike - Bison

Start the year off with some exercise and see some bison. Meet at the Regal Tallgrass Prairie Nature Center. The hike will be on the prairie to see how animals survive the winter. Refreshments will be served after the hike.

Saturday, Feb. 7, 1 p.m.

Bison Hike

Winter is still in full force and the bison's woolly coat gives it plenty of protection from the cold and snow. Dress for the weather and take a guided hike to see them .

Saturday, March 7, 10 a.m.

Bison Hike

Spring is just around the corner and the grass will be greening up soon. Come out and see what changes are happening on the prairie. Dress for the weather and take a guided hike to see the bison.

First Day Hike

Prairie State Park's 4th annual First Day Hike will meet at the Regal Tallgrass Prairie Nature Center at 1 p.m. Jan. 1. It will once again be a guided bison hike. Last year, 55 people participated. We hope for even more people this year. We hope to see bison as well as other wildlife such as deer, coyotes, Northern harriers and numerous other birds. Bring your binoculars to help in viewing them.

Be sure to wear warm boots, coats, gloves and hats. The winter wind can be quite fierce out on the prairie. A drawing will be held among the participants for a free water bottle.

Snacks and hot beverages will be served following the hike at the Regal Tallgrass Prairie Nature Center.

Check out our Facebook page for photos, interactive posts, information on upcoming programs and events.

Give us a "like".

<https://www.facebook.com/PrairieStatePark>

Hey Kids!

Frost flowers have been seen the last month or so on cold mornings. Below is a coloring page drawn by our staff member Rebecca Knox.



FROST FLOWERS...

Have you ever seen a frost flower? Frost flowers really aren't flowers at all, but are beautiful, delicate ribbons of ice that form on the lower stem of certain native Missouri plants. Frost flowers occur only in the late fall after the first few hard freezes of the season. Frost flowers are formed when the plant's stems are ruptured by the first hard freeze, yet the root system is still sending up plant sap from the warmer ground. The sap pushes through the broken stem and freezes on contact with the cold air. As more sap moves up the stem, it forces the freezing stream of white ice crystals into ornate and beautifully folded ribbons of frosted swirls. Missouri plants known to produce frost flowers include dittany, stinkweed, and white crownbeard.