



State of Wisconsin \ DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Jim Doyle, Governor
Scott Hassett, Secretary
Ruthe E. Badger, Regional Director

South Central Region Headquarters
3911 Fish Hatchery Road
Fitchburg, Wisconsin 53711-5397
Telephone 608-275-3266
FAX 608-275-3338
TTY 608-275-3231

Potential Neighbor of Rock River Prairie State Natural Area

Subject: Rock River Prairie State Natural Area

Dear Potential Neighbor:

I thought I would take a minute to introduce you to the special place you may be living adjacent to should you choose to move into the Heron Bay development - Rock River Prairie State Natural Area (SNA). I am a Conservation Biologist with the WDNR Bureau of Endangered Resources – the person responsible for managing SNAs on behalf of the people of the State of Wisconsin. State Natural Areas are special pieces of Wisconsin's natural heritage, connections to days past, places where you can find remnants of the landscape that existed prior to the settlement of the area by our European ancestors. Rock River Prairie, for example, is a land described by hardened 1836 surveyors as being covered by "beautiful prairie", and much of this still remains.

State Natural Areas are simply another type of State property, like Wildlife Areas or Fisheries Areas, each of which has a designated purpose or goal. The purpose of SNAs is to protect outstanding examples of Wisconsin's native landscape – since they are often the last refuges for rare plants and animals. Thus, we try to protect the best examples of the different native plant communities, including prairies, sedge meadows, oak savanna, oak woodlands, and many more. Wisconsin's 410 SNAs are valuable for research and educational use, the preservation of genetic and biological diversity, and for providing benchmarks for comparison to the rest of the manipulated landscape that covers most of the state. They are not intended for intensive recreation, such as camping, biking, and horseback riding, but rather, are more for the activities that have little or no impact, such as hiking, photography, and wildlife watching. For more information on SNAs, see the following website: <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/er/sna/>

Rock River Prairie is a dry prairie situated on the rolling terrace above the Rock River. It contains large populations of prairie flowers and grasses, including several rare plants. The site is predominately managed as open prairie, but also grades into a small oak savanna in the northeast portion of the property with large open-grown bur, white and black oaks. Both prairies and savannas once made up a large portion of southern Wisconsin's landscape. After European settlement, however, much of the rich prairie sod was tilled up and converted to agricultural uses or urban areas. Those areas that weren't directly destroyed by such activities suffered from the removal of fire from the landscape.

Rock River Prairie is owned by the State of Wisconsin (i.e., you), and thus, you are welcome to enjoy it. Because the area is protected so that all people of the state can study and experience a piece of our natural heritage, we ask that you do so in

a manner that is conducive to the goals of the Natural Areas program. There are very rare plants found here, for example, so a strict no picking or digging of any plant policy is in place and is enforced, including seed collecting. In addition, our hopes are that this site is respected for its delicate nature and trampling of plants is kept to a minimum. While we don't encourage dogs here, they are allowed if they are leashed at all times. Domestic cats wreak havoc on birds and small mammals, and thus, we encourage you to keep them out of the area. We have a parking area at the south end of the property and have installed a new fence on the west and north sides, thus limiting access to foot traffic only from the south parking lot. ATV and mountain bike use is not permitted. Finally, there is a local *No Hunting* ordinance on this property. This will remain intact, but at some point in the future may be clarified to permit deer archery hunting only, to try and control the deer population in the local area.

For a number of years now, we have been trying to control the invasive plants, including the woody species, and restore the element that was largely responsible for the development and maintenance of prairies and savannas in the first place – fire. Wildfires, started both by lightning and Native Americans, were what shaped and maintained the open landscape of the prairies and oak savannas (most woody species do not tolerate fire). Now, with the ecological impact of fire suppression and the spread of exotic plant species, many of the prairies and “open” oak savannas are overgrown by trees and brush. Unfortunately, the groundlayer species of these plant communities do not tolerate shade, and thus, many have been lost. Prescribed burning is not only biologically justified given its history in the area, but it is also our most effective and efficient management tool. We have been burning this site on an annual basis during this intensive initial restoration phase, usually burning approximately half of the site each spring. This practice will continue at this regularity until the unwanted shrubs and weeds at the site are under control, at which point it will occur at a somewhat lesser frequency.

We also spend a lot of time removing the woody species from the site, with the goal of creating a virtual treeless landscape outside of the northeast area, which we're managing as oak savanna. We may also mow shrubs and non-native herbaceous weeds. We follow-up this cutting by applying herbicide directly to the stumps of the trees and shrubs we cut to prevent resprouting, as well as spray individual herbaceous plants such as garlic mustard. We will try and post the property with signs stating date and type of herbicides used when we are out here doing such an activity.

Our hopes are that you will enjoy and respect this wonderful place, but also that you will gain a sense of ownership to this property and help us control any activities that are not compatible with sustaining these rare habitats. I will try to be in touch with you about this soon, but in the meantime, I encourage you to contact me if you have any questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Matt Zine

Conservation Biologist – WNR Natural Areas program

matthew.zine@dnr.state.wi.us

phone: 608/273-5943