



THE PRAIRIE SAGE



SPRING CREEK PRAIRIE Audubon CENTER

January
2005

Making Hay (Bales) While the Sun Shines

by Marian Langan, Center Director

Many of you may be aware that Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center's new education building will be built of hay and straw bales. But you may not be aware that Spring Creek Prairie's own hay will be used in the construction of the building.

When the bale building technique was originally being developed by Nebraska settlers in the early 1900's, they were using the most plentiful material they could find:

prairie hay. Today, straw is used in most cases because it is easier to obtain, but we thought that using hay from this site would not only be a wonderful way to honor this heritage, it would also support the use of local materials for construction.

Because the landscape of Spring Creek Prairie is littered with many large rocks left behind during past glaciations, few areas can be hayed without damaging mowing and baling machinery. One

mowable area yielded 230 bales, roughly half of the bales needed for the building. The bales will be used to construct the walls of the main room through which visitors will pass on their way outside to explore the trails.

It is exciting to see the progress that has been made so far. The architectural drawings, done by the Clark Enersen Partnership of Lincoln, are complete, construction documents are being finalized, the building has

been staked out, and soil tests are done.

Construction is set to begin in spring 2005.

The spring issue of *The Prairie Sage* will provide more details about the building's progress and articles on sustainable building materials and design.



PHOTO BY CHRIS SOMMERICH

Marian Langan, Kevin Poague, and Arnold Mendenhall pile hay bales for the new education building at Spring Creek.

The staff at
Spring
Creek
Prairie
wishes
everyone a
healthy and
happy
new year.

PROGRAMS

Class sizes are limited so register early by calling 402-797-2301.

NEW YEAR'S WINTER WALKABOUTS

SATURDAY, JANUARY 8 10:00 A.M. TO 12:00 NOON & 1:00 TO 3:00 P.M.

Winter on the prairie can be a true test of endurance. It can also be a wonderful time to discover some of Mother Nature's best-kept secrets. Don your warmest winter togs and come explore some of the more remote areas of Spring Creek Prairie. Learn why winter is an important, even essential, part of the cycle of life in Nebraska. Most of the time will be spent outdoors, so participants should dress for the weather. This event is appropriate for all ages.

Fees for either session are \$5 for adults and \$3 for children 12 and under. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Preregister by January 7.

A TRIBUTE TO THE PRAIRIE WINTER: NATURE JOURNALING FOR ADULTS

SATURDAY, JANUARY 22 10:00 A.M. TO 1:30 P.M.

There are secrets to be discovered and stories to be revealed to the curious and mindful about the winter prairie. Join local writer Amy Plettner-Lind and center staff as they embrace the wonders of the winter season. Participants will explore Spring Creek Prairie's many habitats while honing observation and recording skills with fun and enlightening activities. Time will be divided between inside and outside activities, weather permitting. Participants will need to bring a sack lunch and dress for the weather. Writing materials will be provided, but participants are invited to bring their own journals if they desire.

Fee is \$8. Program is designed for people 16 and older. Preregister by January 20.

REFLECTIONS ON A PRAIRIE WINTER: NATURE JOURNALING FOR ALL AGES

SATURDAY, JANUARY 29 10:00 A.M. TO 1:30 P.M.

This season of bare-bones landscapes offers us a chance to discover the fascinating stories that escape our notice the rest of the year. Tracks, traces, burrows, and dens give clues about the lives of some of the prairie's more elusive residents. Learn to record these stories through a variety of fun and surprising techniques. Time will be divided between inside and outside activities, weather permitting. Participants will need to bring a sack lunch and dress for the weather. Writing materials will be provided, but participants are invited to bring their own journals if they desire.

Fees are \$8 for adults and \$5 for children 12 and under. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Preregister by January 28.

SNUG AS A BUG

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 12 10:00 A.M. TO 12:00 NOON

Using magnifiers, microscopes, and mindful techniques, adult/child teams of 2 or 3 will probe through leaf litter and logs to discover a variety of spineless wonders wiling away the winter. Activities include a short hike, weather permitting, and an indoor investigation session. This program is appropriate for grades K through 6.

Fees are \$6 for adults and \$4 for children 12 and under. Preregister by February 9.

Write On!

New journaling series to tap creativity

To meet the requests of past journaling program participants, Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center is offering two new series of journaling programs. "A Tribute to the Prairie Seasons: Nature Journaling for Adults" will be offered on one Saturday in each of the four seasons: January 22, May 7, July 23, and October 8.

The second series, designed for both children and adults, is "Reflections on a Prairie Year: Nature Journaling Activities For All Ages." This will also be offered on one Saturday each season: January 29, May 21, July 30, and November 5.



In each session, participants will explore a different journaling technique while experiencing the ever-changing beauty of Spring Creek Prairie. Programs will take place indoors and outdoors and will provide time for solo nature encounters. Local writers and center staff will facilitate, allowing time for individuals to share experiences and insights with each other. Each program is self-contained; individuals may register for the entire series or for the sessions of their choice.

Winter, spring, and autumn sessions are scheduled from 10:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. with participants providing their own sack lunch. Summer sessions will be from 8:00 to 11:00 a.m. See class descriptions in the programs section for fees and age requirements.

Luck, Sweat & Thesis at Spring Creek Prairie

by Tnyla Hansen

By luck in 1998, Kay Kottas read an article that the Audubon Society had just purchased a large tract of tallgrass prairie near Denton. Kottas, who held a B.S. in Horticulture, had that summer decided to pursue a master's degree at UNL and needed a research project. Her interest in natives lead her over the next two years—mostly during the sweat of summer—to inventory the prairie's plants for her thesis "The Floristic Composition and Characterization of Spring Creek Prairie, Nebraska."

Kottas knew a M.S. research project involved more than walking around, keying out plants, and keeping a log. She created a database, and also collected, dried, and mounted each of the 352 plant species she found (all parts: root, stem, leaf, flower, seed) onto herbarium sheets—voucher specimens—for Spring Creek Prairie, UNL Agronomy/Horticulture Range Plant Herbarium, and the UNL State Museum. She also conducted two-year vegetation comparison studies between plots on Spring Creek Prairie and Nine-Mile Prairie near Lincoln.

Because these 500 acres of native grass had been heavily grazed as private property, a plant taxonomist told her she'd be lucky to find 100 species. From March to October in 1999 and 2000, Kottas spent four hours per week at the prairie filling plant presses and conducting research. She then keyed out and identified these plants—more than three times as many as expected—using standard scientific tools and methods.

"The research was fun because of what all I learned," Kottas said. "Spring Creek has plants expected of a prairie, but when



PHOTO BY CHRIS SOMMERICH

Kay Kottas, right, behind table, and Irene Alexander, left, at 2004 Twilight on the Tallgrass.

I ran across one I hadn't seen before, it was exciting. Like when I found the first butterfly milkweed in bloom, it just took my breath away. I had my favorite places, these pockets of vegetation where almost week by week something new would show up." As is typical of prairie, the various species are present, but may grow at different times, even in different years, making a systematic study challenging. And other unexpected forces come into play. "I remember seeing the first *Liatris aspera* (rough gayfeather) in vegetative growth by a pond and was waiting to photograph it in bloom. When I came out later, the cattle had eaten it off! But fortunately I was able to find others the next year."

So far, no threatened or endangered plants have been found at Spring Creek Prairie, but the delightful *Spiranthes cernua* orchid (nodding ladies' tresses) and *Gentiana puberulenta* (downy gentian) have. One or two species are added each year to Kottas's original list. Kottas agrees that the diversity—flora, fauna, topography, history—at Spring Creek Prairie is filled with potential for discovery, for the schoolchild to the scientific community and everyone in-between.

Kottas received her Master of Science degree in Agronomy/Horticulture from UNL in 2000. She is currently an ecological research specialist and instructor in the UNL Dept. of Agronomy/Horticulture. Her thesis can be found in C. Y. Thompson Library on East Campus.

Classes at Finke Gardens

Audubon will present two classes next February as part of Finke Gardens and Nursery's series of Saturday classes from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m..

"Audubon: Backyard Birds" will be presented by Kevin Poague on February 19. Kevin is the Important Bird Areas Coordinator for Audubon Nebraska.

On February 26, Marian Langan, Director of Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, and Kay Kottas, ecological research specialist and instructor in the UNL Dept. of Agronomy/Horticulture, will present "Audubon at Home: Prairie Gardening."

Finke Gardens and Nursery is located at 500 North 66th Street. Visit their website at <www.finkegardens.com>.

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Weekend hours seasonal.

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YES! I want to support and help promote conservation and nature education at Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center. Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution of \$ _____
Name _____
Street Address _____
C/S/Z _____
Please mail to the address above. Thank you!

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

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(Finke Gardens and Nursery)
- 26 AUDUBON AT HOME: PRAIRIE
GARDENING (Finke Gardens and Nursery)

MARCH

- 18-20 RIVERS AND WILDLIFE CELEBRATION
(Kearney, Nebraska – www.nebraska.audubon.org)