The Nature Conservancy is committed to conservation within the South Sound region and the Willamette Valley /Puget Trough/Georgia Basin ecoregion. The Conservancy will continue to perform outstanding stewardship, protect key conservation parcels and promote a conservation community of cooperative partners.

Controlled Burn Program Continues Success

Fire is a key ecological process for prairies and oak woodlands. Native Americans lit fires on the prairies to promote food production, especially camas. Today, fires are an effective way to control pest plants, create open sites for wildflowers to germinate and to correct nitrogen imbalances caused by Scotch broom. The legacy of fire suppression is one of the ecological debts we must overcome to have healthy natural prairies.

Conservancy firefighters help ignite a prairie burn on Ft. Lewis, an expansion in the cooperative burn program.

The Conservancy has been a leading force in the collaborative effort to bring fire back to prairies. Those efforts took another significant step forward this year, with controlled burns occurring at all protected prairies in the region. This is a significant milestone representing acceptance of fire and the prescribed fire team by a diversity of partners. Additionally, the South Sound Program's active controlled burn program has helped generate interest and acceptance for wider-use fire. Look for new efforts to coordinate fire programs across the state in the near future.

Investigating Pollinators on Ft. Lewis

The Conservancy initiated research to better understand pollinator communities and their influence on seed production of prairie plants. The purpose is to understand the relationship between the ecosystem service of pollination and our prairie restoration efforts. This effort will also yield the first systematic survey of flower-visiting insects in western WA, where little is known about native pollinators. Our investigation combines pollinator surveys, with an investigation of pollinator-limitation of seed production in Puget balsamroot. This latter part of the project is in collaboration with Betsy Kirkpatrick and Lisa Fazzio, a professor and student at University of Puget Sound.

Forceps holding disk flower used for manual pollination treatment of Puget balsamroot.

The field portion of these investigations has concluded, though species identifications and data analysis will continue into 2010. Initial observations suggest that flowers of both native and invasive shrubs in open habitats are heavily used by native bees and are likely important for sustaining pollinator communities. This is especially true as summer progresses and many prairie wildflowers senesce. In addition, micro-climates, such as shady areas and pockets of deep soil occurring on mounds or in swales, are important for providing 'fresh' nectar resources later in the summer. Our surveys also showed that native bees continued to be numerous on prairies in the weeks following prescribed burns.

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Prairie Conservation

Prairie Restoration at Ebey's Landing - The Conservancy, in cooperation with University of Washington (Eric Delvin's PhD research), has initiated prairie restoration efforts at Ebey's Landing this quarter to help recover 5 prairie butterflies. For Whidbey Island locals, the prairie restoration was most noticeable because of the prescribed fire pretreatment. A nice summary occurred in the local newspaper. The project also initiated prairie restoration at the near-by Au Sable Institute.
http://www.whidbeyexaminer.com/main.asp?SectionID=1&SubSectionID=1&ArticleID=2962

Justin Burnett / The Whidbey Examiner Mark Roth, a prairie restoration specialist with The Nature Conservancy, sets a water line firebreak to the flames started by University of Washington graduate student Eric Delvin on the bluff above Ebey's Landing

Bat Belfry at Ft. Lewis Ecopark – National Public Lands Day saw Conservancy staff and volunteers help retrofit an old church belfry for Ft. Lewis' Sequalichew Creek Eco Park. This structure will hopefully attract the rare Townsend's Big Eared Bat, creating roosting habitat for a maternal colony. The bats will then be able to forage over newly restored freshwater ponds at the site. Sanders Freed led the project for The Conservancy as part of his effort to create artificial habitat structures that help maximize rare species use of protected habitats. For some pictures try:
http://capitollake.com/free/PLD-09/Thumbnails.html

Prairie Science

Prairie Plant Establishment – The Role of Mycorrhizae Approximately 95% of all terrestrial plant species belong to families that have a symbiotic relationship with mycorrhizal fungi. The most widespread type of mycorrhizal symbiosis benefits plants by improving nutrient uptake, drought resistance and pathogenic defense. Mycorrhizal plants often have a greater competitive advantage in natural systems. Therefore, when restoring native prairie plants via seed or nursery-grown starts, it may be important to simultaneously restore the mycorrhizal fungal symbionts. The mycorrhizal inoculation study aims to identify how mycorrhizal inoculation influences the growth and long-term field establishment of nine plant species important on the prairies as resources for butterflies. So far, data has been collected on germination and initial growth in the nursery. Next spring we will out-plant plugs into the field, where survival and growth will be monitored for several field seasons.

Cooperative Conservation

Streaked Horned Larks on TV - Interest in the conservation of streaked horned larks has gone main stream! Streaked horned larks were the stars of an "Oregon Field Guide" TV show on October 15th. This is a long way from the anonymity the lark recently had. It was only a dozen years ago when an unnoticed bird of open grasslands was noted by an Evergreen State College student as the rarest in western Washington. Since then surveys confirmed the low numbers and limited distribution and the lark is now listed as a federal candidate for listing as threatened or endangered.

If you missed this show, don't despair. It is still available on the web and well worth watching. The program describes work in Portland, much of which was a direct result of cooperative conservation workshops lead by The Conservancy. Plus there is some great lark footage, even seeing the harrier eating the baby larks (Bad harrier and poor little chicks) is memorable.
http://watch.opb.org/video/1297719750/