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2010 Ranching in the Flint Hills - Tree Invasion (selected by Annie Wilson)

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TREE INVASION

RANDY RODGERS

Randy Rodgers' article raising awareness of the "Tree Invasion" of our prairies is even more important today than when originally published in 2003. Biologists now cite tree encroachment as the greatest among many threats to our native prairies and their rare, specialized wild species. Sadly, the complacency Rodgers warned against has prevailed. Aided by misguided aesthetics, apathetic landowners and recreational hunters, trees are metastasizing across our remaining prairies, not only in the Flint Hills but farther west. All have unwittingly contributed to the growing threat of catastrophic wildfires. Rodgers' call for action must be heeded by policymakers, landowners, entrepreneurs, government officials, nonprofits, youth groups and the public. — Annie Wilson

"I think that I shall never see ... A poem lovely
as a tree."

These first lines of Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees" reflect deeply held values for generations of Americans. No doubt, I stand among those who place great value on trees. As a boy I climbed them, drew them and explored kid-sized wilderness wherever I could roam in even an acre of them.

Perhaps we who live in prairie states value trees more than most. Those roots run deep. Who hasn't heard of European settlers cursing the incessant wind, the blazing summer sun and the sheer exposure of the Great Plains? Those settlers and their descendants were determined to change that. And how better to do it than with trees? As early as 1873, Nebraska Senator Phineas Hitchcock introduced the Timber Culture Act, a federal law that offered 160 acres of prairie to anyone who would plant



Trees in Late Autumn
Shin-hee Chin

40 of those acres to trees. Years later, University of Nebraska botany professor Charles Bessey advanced the idea that the vast grasslands of the Nebraska Sandhills should rightfully be pine forest. The level of enthusiasm with which his idea was embraced is evidenced by the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey. There, about 30 square miles of human-planted forest, in the heart of one of North America's greatest remaining grasslands, attest to our love for trees and to our ignorance of grassland.

True, the weather of the Great Plains can be harsh, and the beauty of our grasslands is sometimes subtle. But I think Kilmer would have also waxed poetic had he seen a bluestem prairie's rosy glow in the refracted light of an October sunset. Too few of us appreciate the beauty or comprehend the true value of our Great Plains grasslands. This and our culture's love of trees has sown the seeds of change that threaten our signature landscape, the prairies, like nothing since John Deere's invention of the moldboard plow.

For over a century, we have planted trees across the Great Plains. Windbreaks for farmsteads, crop fields, livestock and wildlife allowed us to bring the more moderate conditions and wildlife of the East onto the plains, at least on small scales. By themselves, tree plantings altered, but perhaps not seriously

threatened, our remaining prairie ecosystems. Our collective failure to understand prairie ecology has resulted in grassland management or, more correctly, lack of management allowing some species of trees to escape their original planting sites. Fire, the prairie's natural ally, was often suppressed and grazing sometimes misapplied, leaving a weakened prairie community vulnerable to an onslaught of invasive trees that are swallowing our grasslands at an alarming rate. No prairie is immune. Eastern red cedar, hedge and blackjack oak have invaded much of the Kansas Flint Hills. Russian olive, cedar, black locust and honey locust have consumed our central sand prairies. Red cedar is devouring the prairies of the Red Hills. In the Smoky Hills, cedar, hedge and honey locust are the main culprits. Even in western Kansas red cedar and honey locust are beginning to spread. They are a metastasizing cancer on our prairies.

Prairies, often taken for granted, are among Earth's most threatened landscapes. The prairie's unique assemblage of wildlife is a rare treasure on the global scale. Yet many of us who live here suffer from the delusion that meadowlarks are somehow ordinary. Grassland birds have shown steeper and more widespread declines than any other guild of birds in North America. Foremost among these species are

prairie-chickens, amazing creatures of wide-open spaces and clear horizons. Eons of adaptation have favored the survival of those birds that avoided trees, the hunting perches of hawks and owls and habitat for many predators. This avoidance means it won't take a sweeping front of woodland, but only widely scattered trees to eliminate prairie-chickens from otherwise suitable landscapes. Tree invasion is just as much the enemy of bobwhite, grassland songbirds and the exquisite upland sandpiper.

Prairie-chickens are disappearing from lack of fire in some places and from too much fire in others. Annual spring burning of vast sections of the central Flint Hills has left greater prairie-chickens and other ground dwelling birds with little or no nesting cover. Neither extreme is what's needed. Most prairie wildlife is adapted to a shifting mosaic of burned and unburned areas. Burning frequently, but not annually, would go far toward improving prairie health, while leaving nesting cover and suppressing tree invasion.

Conservation is an ongoing journey with frequent course corrections. The first step in making those corrections is to acknowledge we've made mistakes. Inevitably, as our ecological knowledge grows, hindsight shows some practices were not as clearly beneficial as once

believed. Tree plantings at the hand of man, no matter how good the intentions, have been the source of invasive trees throughout the Great Plains. More troubling is the fact that inappropriate tree plantings still continue.

More landowners and land managers must recognize the magnitude of this threat, and soon. Many cases of tree invasion are rooted in an inadvertent failure to recognize the problem, but just as many stem from simple failures to act. It's just too easy to ignore little tree seedlings scattered around a pasture. But with tree invasion, the old axiom "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is very much an understatement.

Ranchers are stewards of the prairies. Most recognize their interest in preventing invasive trees from taking over grasslands. We must join them as allies to turn back this invasion. It will take money, time and effort. The soldiers can range from crusty old ranchers to school children, from government officials to private entrepreneurs. They must wield weapons like tree shears and pruning shears, chain saws and hand saws, drip torches and herbicides.

Of paramount importance is to assure that invasive trees advance no further. Complacency would prove a huge mistake.

There are good uses and appropriate places for trees on the plains. But we have

planted trees on the prairie with a near-religious fervor only to discover that some spread like hell. Those of us living on the Great Plains must realize it is as much an act of redemption for us to kill trees that invade our prairies as it is for others to plant trees in urban parks. We must realize that for the prairie, occasional fire is an act of renewal, not destruction.

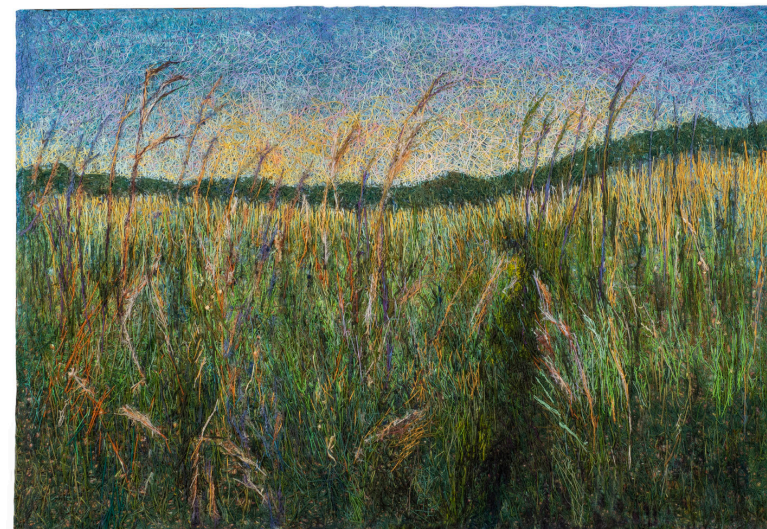
It is not for us on the plains to grow third-rate versions of the great deciduous forests of the East or the conifer forests

of the West. Our responsibility is to guard our precious remaining prairies for ourselves and generations to come, for spectacular prairie-chickens and tiny grasshopper sparrows, and for the other people and creatures of the Earth. Maybe you remember the chorus of an old Joni Mitchell song: "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone?" When it comes to our prairies, I beg you to help the answer be "No!"

Excerpt from Kansas Wildlife and Parks, Volume 60, September–October 2003.

Randy Rodgers is a wildlife biologist from Hays, Kansas, who worked for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks for 31 years. Since formal retirement, he and his wife Helen continue improving the soil, water and wildlife conservation on their working-land tracts in Rush County.

Annie Wilson is a rancher and songwriter with over 80 recorded "Songs of the Flint Hills," including "Stop Those Cedar Trees." She and her band Tallgrass Express String Band have provided afternoon roving music at 19 Symphony in the Flint Hills Signature Events. With help from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, her family has removed all trees from their upland prairie, restoring its gently rolling, heavenly landscape, and clean horizon unbroken by a single tree.



Grass of the Field
Shin-hee Chin