



Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2024 - Stewards of the Land (Sandy Carlson,
editor)

Anyone Can Be a Steward

Michele Kessler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh>

Recommended Citation

Kessler, Michele (2024). "Anyone Can Be a Steward," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.



Through the Grasses: Coyne Creek Rd. Series 3, #3
Diana Werts

ANYONE CAN BE A STEWARD

Driving the Flint Hills Scenic Byway in late spring, I am hypnotized by the undulating green waves of grass.

Even though the brilliant orange butterfly milkweed in the ditch fades out of sight at the fence line, a closer look confirms wildflowers punctuating the green waves. The wildflower reward comes when I decide to dive in.

I first “dived into the prairie” at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve during an annual butterfly count, then again on a restoration workday and then again during a cold winter bird count. My toes had never been so cold as on that count. Still, the place enchanted me, the prairie chickens stirred up from the morning frost, the coyote loping across the hillside, a brown creeper silently hopping up the side of a tree, and the still, silent cold punctuated with the occasional bird call. I didn’t know what birds they were at the time, but now I do.

I learned no expertise is needed to volunteer and that anyone can be a steward of a place merely by loving it and spreading the word about it. After that very cold bird count, I wished aloud for more people who love this place to volunteer.

The wonderful prairie advocate Cathy Hoy was also wishing for more people to become invested and involved with the ever-changing prairies at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. Cathy and I, along with representatives from The Nature Conservancy and National Park Service, met to explore ways to get more folks involved in stewarding the place.

The Prairie Steward group was born of this love of place and the wish to share it. The group assists staff at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve with bird and butterfly surveys, seed

collection, prairie restoration and monarch butterfly tagging. No experience is needed to join the Prairie Steward volunteers, but a deep and abiding love of nature is a common thread. Our differences are dwarfed by the vastness of the tallgrass prairie, where we can all join

**EACH TIME I VOLUNTEER,
I LEARN SOMETHING NEW
AND AM ENCHANTED BY
SOMETHING I WANT TO
INVESTIGATE FURTHER.**

together to further a common good and preserve this natural wonder.

I'm not an expert naturalist, but I love nature. Each time I volunteer, I learn something new and am enchanted by something I want to investigate further. I've gone from knowing a little to knowing much. I was merely a note-taker at my first bird survey, recording what others saw, but I learned a couple of birds that day. The next time I helped, I learned a couple more, and soon after, on my way home from a winter count, I was stalking a snowy owl reported in my home county.

The work of the Prairie Stewards follows the natural seasons in the Flint Hills, and there is much to see and learn on the prairie every season. Winter

sparrows and rough-legged hawks are followed by whistling upland sandpipers in spring. Then comes the summer season of dainty sulphur and regal fritillary butterflies.

Native plants, from the signature Flint Hills tallgrasses to ephemeral wildflowers delight the senses, each in their own time. Unlike the birds, butterflies and bees, the plants stand still for intimate inspection with no urgency. I can stand in the wind and ponder every flower in my guide until I come upon a match to the one nodding in front of me. I can snap a photo and touch a leaf, and still the flower obliges me. I have learned that with a touch cat-claw sensitive briar may shyly fold upon itself, but when her seed pods are ready for collection, beware the briar in her name.

The birds, butterflies, bees and native plants in this ecosystem are all related. The health of one impacts the vitality and growth of all.

The bottomland along Fox Creek at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve is in a state of restoration. Pollinator plots have been planted, weeded and watered by volunteers, and seeds have been collected to add to those restoration efforts.

Collecting seeds from dried-out plants sounds pretty straightforward. My first thought was to get a list of what plants are ripe with seed at what times, arm

myself with shears and a bucket, and fill buckets with seed. But it's not that cut and dried.

Wild plants grow according to many variables; I might find a plant in seed next to one that's not even close, despite being the same kind of plant. Did one have a bison hoof print at its base that held precious drops of nourishing water, allowing it to thrive, while the other did not? During a spring walk, I may come across a beautiful stand of blooming spiderwort, then during a summer walk, find it again, having surrendered its seeds. There is no rigid rhyme or rhythm to seed collecting; just take a walk with shears and a bucket and let serendipity be the guide. That's the glory of it. I can't know when the seeds are ready until I wade through the waving golden grasses. I must go and look; I must go often; I must go when the fall winds blow.

When the wind turns and begins to blow from the north in September, the monarchs come on their southern migration toward overwintering sites in Mexico. Prairie Steward volunteers use tags, tiny stickers provided by Monarch Watch, to tag monarch butterflies refueling on the Tallgrass Prairie

National Preserve. Each tag is recorded and includes the date and the butterfly sex. Once you know the secret, it's easy to tell which is male and which is female. Fifteen monarchs tagged on the Preserve in 2021 were recovered at three different overwintering sites in Mexico, underscoring the importance of the tallgrass prairie as a vital refueling stop on their long and arduous migration from Canada to Mexico.

It's easy to become distracted on the prairie. The distractions are myriad, from field surveys to butterflies atop gorgeous flowers and from bird counts to bumblebees and dung beetles busy among the flora. And, of course, the seeds — when many of the seeds are ready, the migrating monarchs arrive to gather fuel from the prairie sunflowers and tall thistles still holding onto their blooms.

Bumblebees buzz over the butterfly milkweed in June when I'm counting butterflies. All I have to do to see them is wade into the prairie. I can help them, too — the birds, the butterflies, the bees, the prairie itself — just by telling people about them. It's easy for anyone to be a steward.

Michele Kessler is a retired attorney who grew up in Kansas. Growing up, Michele loved the outdoors. Michele is a lifelong learner, participating in many community science projects and loves to ride her bike and walk on the Flint Hills Trail State Park.