

## Director's Message

Tolif Hunt, Executive Director



Enthusiasm continues to grow for our newest project constructing more than 30 miles of state-of-the art sustainable natural-surface trails that will take visitors to some of the most special portions of our landscape. This project is evolving quickly, so keep checking our website for updates.

On September 14, WRC's team of internationally-recognized trail designers and scientists gave some amazing reports on what they had found in their preliminary surveys: improved plant communities; an archaeological site holding a primitive campfire; and even a previously undiscovered 5-foot high waterfall!

Scott Linnenburger, the main trail designer, was impressed with the incorporation of science into the trail plans: "This is the first time I have ever been involved in a trail project that has this level of involvement and commitment to science as a central part of structurally designing the trail and supporting the trail experience."

Linnenburger tells us that, once completed, our trail will represent a national-caliber experience for hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians. Current plans are to have the new trail open by 2013. I hope you will plan a visit to Whiterock and watch this project grow!



1390 Highway 141 Coon Rapids, IA 50058  
(712) 684-2697  
[www.whiterockconservancy.org](http://www.whiterockconservancy.org)

## Conservation & Improvements

Chris Troendle, Whiterock Conservancy Land Manager

My first months as Whiterock's new land manager have been fun, especially meeting and working with some of our volunteers!

Recently, Whiterock has been undertaking facility repairs, clean-up, and landscaping at our historic Garst Farm. It has been my pleasure to work with two special volunteer groups in these efforts. One was the extended family of Dean Jackson, our hunt master, who recently retired from many years as a local 6<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher. The others were guests of the St. Gregory's Retreat Center, located in near-by Bayard. These great volunteers, all persons recovering from addiction issues, are undertaking community service as part of their personal turn-around process. We are grateful and appreciative of all the wonderful help!

Coming up soon will be our fall burn season. Each spring and fall, Whiterock puts together a largely-volunteer crew to burn 500-1,000 acres of timber and grassland in an effort to restore our many scattered prairie remnants. The controlled burns help to knock back invasive species such as honeysuckles and rose bushes, while stimulating the growth of the native species still present.

In the spring, Whiterock will be planting a diverse mix of trees and shrubs just southwest of

Coon Rapids and east of the Middle Raccoon River, along 7.2 acres of river bottom near our new trail. Species such as Red Osier Dogwood, crabapple, plum, and birch will beautify and protect the river's riparian corridor. If you can help us by donating fruit trees (apple, peach, pear, or cherry), this would enhance future wildlife (and human) benefits!

To be added to our volunteer list (for burns or tree planting) please give me a call at (712) 684-2697 ext. 114, or email me at [landmanager@whiterockconservancy.org](mailto:landmanager@whiterockconservancy.org),



## Farewell Trent!

Over the last two years, Trent Milam did a wonderful job renting WRC lodging, helping visitors engage with Whiterock's land, making weddings held at Whiterock truly special. Trent recently accepted a job as Park Ranger with the Bureau of Land Management in Ukiah, California. We wish him all the best in his new position. Interviews are now being held to fill the staff vacancy left by Trent. For more information, contact [Tolif@whiterockconservancy.org](mailto:Tolif@whiterockconservancy.org), or call 712-684-2697, Ext 111.

## Ecology Corner

*Remnant vs. reconstructed prairie – is there a difference and does it matter?*

**By Dr. Thomas Rosburg, Drake University**

There is a finite (and very small) amount of remnant prairie remaining in Iowa. A remnant is a prairie community composed of populations that are indigenous to the site. The plants or their descendants have occupied the site continuously from the time prairie covered the Iowa landscape. Therefore, the number of remnant prairies cannot increase significantly even with the best management. Whiterock is a special landscape in large part due to the large number of prairie remnants scattered throughout its property.

Reconstructed prairie is created when previous vegetation was killed in order to replant the area with prairie seeds. Reconstructions are essential in prairie conservation, but keep in mind that reconstructed prairies are manufactured by humans. Whereas the remnant is a product of centuries of nature exerting factors that shape the prairie into its composition, structure and form, the reconstruction has virtually no experience with nature. It is simply what was planted.

A remnant will always have species that are native to the locality, in other words, have a history of evolution at the site. Reconstructions often have species that are not native, either purposefully or accidentally.

A remnant will likely have more native species, partly due to the time that has allowed for species interactions to sort species out, and niches (conceptual places in habitats where species exist to some degree in isolation) to become more finely carved. Seed mixes in reconstructions are limited in their species by cost and seed availability.

The individual plants in a remnant have a spatial configuration that results from many factors over a long time period. Some of those factors are no longer present (like bison herbivory), yet their effects live on. Individual plants in reconstructions have spatial configuration that is strongly affected by the pattern in which they were seeded, and much less influence from natural factors and processes.

Remnants were assembled long ago when there were no invasive or non-native species present. They represent (at least historically) only interactions among native species. Reconstructions are assembled with much pressure from invasive non-natives, which invariably have effects on the outcome.

Finally, there is an intangible quality that I sense on remnants that is missing on reconstructions. It's a feeling of wildness, a restless spirit of sorts, and at the same time the contented mood one feels when returning home – it's a reaction that reconstructions can never produce.

Reconstructions are ecologically important. For many species of wildlife, it's the grassland structure that is important, and in that regard, reconstructions are as good as the real thing. But they are not equivalent to remnants, and that in itself is the best argument for remnant protection. Remnants keep our natural heritage alive, and we need them to provide the "model" for learning how to design and plant reconstructions. Remnants are awesome! Whiterock is lucky to have so many remnants, and we are all lucky that Whiterock is protecting these.



*Prairie remnant on WRC's Long Farm, summer 2011*

## News Briefs

### River Safety & Community Float a Success

A Guthrie County Community Foundation-sponsored river safety and fun float was held on June 29. The event provided water recreation safety education for participants enjoying the scenic Middle Raccoon River.



### Walkers Swarm WRC Trails

In mid-June, more than 400 walking enthusiasts from across the country enjoyed WRC's Garst Farm Trail as one activity of the national Volkspoint Annual Conference held in Des Moines.



### WRC Hosts Music in the Park at Riverside

For the third July in a row WRC hosted a concert at Riverside Park in Coon Rapids, this one featuring Matt and the Thunderbolts.

Sponsored by *Iowa Savings Bank*, the evening event enabled both locals and visitors to enjoy some great outdoor music.



## Ecological Assessment Reveals Big Changes at Whiterock

*Expanding Access:* Whiterock's Sustainable Soft Trails Project began this summer with a host of scientists scouring the Whiterock valley to document its unique ecological, geological, and archaeological features.

The assessments will enable the designers to route the new trail so that Whiterock's rich natural and historical assets are both protected and highlighted.

When the trail corridor is finalized this fall, the scientist will return for a more thorough assessment of the trail corridor itself, to ensure protection of archaeological and environmental resources. The scientists will also develop and implement a research program to measure the impact of the trail on natural resources over time. Additional property-wide assessment of the river corridor and streams and more geological and archaeological survey work is also planned after leaf-fall this autumn.

Scientists working on the project include Dr. Tom Rosburg from Drake University, Mimi Wagener from Iowa State University for river channel consultation, the State Hygienic Lab at the University of Iowa for water quality studies, Wapsi Valley Archeology and a consortium (Artz, Bettis and Krieg) from the University of Iowa for geological work.

Once completed, the trail system will be a national caliber recreational attraction and an outdoor education experience.

The ecological assessment by botanist Dr. Thomas Rosburg highlighted the positive changes

since Whiterock took over management of these lands seven years ago. He wrote:

*"The Whiterock landscape has changed since I completed the 2004 field work to delineate the extant plant communities... There are now considerably more prairie remnants on the landscape, and the forests are generally more open and less shrubby... As an example, in 2004 and in the same project area, there were 22 prairie remnants mapped. There were over twice that many remnants (49) mapped in this project, and in many cases the size of individual remnants has increased".*

These prairie remnants, along with prairie reconstructions, at Whiterock will be accessible to visitors once the new trail is completed so that the public can observe and understand the differences between the two.

Whiterock Conservancy has aggressively used fire, brush removal, and agricultural tools such as grazing to restore and protect prairie habitat at Whiterock. According to Dr. Rosburg, and many thanks to the hard work of our volunteers, contributions from donors, and with the help of project partners, these efforts are paying big habitat dividends!



*Prairie Reconstruction, West Betts Farm*

### THE CHALLENGE OF OPENING WHITEROCK

Whiterock Conservancy was created in 2004 to steward and restore an enormous 5,000-acre land gift from the Garst Family of Coon Rapids.

The initial donors charged this new non-profit not just with protecting and restoring the land, but also with seeking creative ways to open this beautiful landscape to the public.

Such a mission is no small task. Not being a state park, Whiterock does not receive public operating support. However, thanks to programs such as Great Places, Vision Iowa, and federal and state trails programs, not to mention many generous private donors, Whiterock has been able to take big steps forward.

Over the last six years, we have installed 30 interpretive signs, built 3.5 miles of packed aggregate trail, opened the lovely new Bur Oak Visitor Center, and hosted the state-wide *Khrushchev in Iowa* commemoration.

This year, private donors stepped up again to help us acquire a critical piece of riverfront property that is crucial to the routing of our upcoming Soft Trail system (see article).

**But to truly make Whiterock accessible, many challenges still remain!** These include:

- Raising the final \$670,000 needed to complete the Sustainable Soft Trail Project.
- Undertaking badly-needed repairs at the historic Garst Farm and several other properties.
- Continuing our aggressive prairie and oak savanna restoration efforts
- Hire additional staff to develop new education programs for you and your family to enjoy.

**Won't YOU make a donation to Whiterock today?** Tax-deductible donations can be made on-line at [www.whiterockconservancy.org](http://www.whiterockconservancy.org) or mailed to Whiterock Conservancy, 1390 Hwy 141, Coon Rapids, IA 55058.



## Crucial Stream Frontage Property Added to Whiterock

In June Whiterock Conservancy added a key piece of river-front land to our holdings. The property came at a steep price, but acquiring this parcel was critical for the construction of our new trail system north from the River House and to ensure habitat connectivity along the river.

*"An amazing level of generosity from key donors made this property addition happen," says WRC Executive Director Tolif Hunt, "I just cannot thank those persons enough, and I appreciate their recognition of the importance of this property to Whiterock's long-term plans."*

The 35-acre Dobby's Place (formerly the "Brewer Property") is densely timbered and located in the heart of the Whiterock valley. It boasts an array of natural attributes, including

sandstone outcroppings, forested wetlands, and a high quality tributary stream flowing into the Middle Raccoon River: *"Adding Dobby's Place was huge for Whiterock from an ecological perspective",* notes WRC Board President Ken Herring, *"Whiterock now stewards all but a few hundred feet of both banks of the Middle Raccoon River for an 8 mile stretch."*

*"The new property is a critical part of the Sustainable Soft Trail System"* adds WRC Board member and Soft Trails project manager Liz Garst, *"Whiterock now has the ability to build a completely connected trail system on both sides of the river without the need for additional bridges, nor will we need to route the new trail along the road."*

Used in the past as a auto body repair site and covered with ruined outbuildings, the property does need a considerable amount

of clean-up. *"Dobby's Place is a great property"* WRC Land Manager Chris Troendle remarks, *"but we've got our work cut out for us just to remove the discarded appliances and old car parts from the woods; it'll take some time, donor support, and volunteer help to get it done."*

Funds raised to date for this project are just \$10,000 short of budget. Anyone wishing to make a donation to the project, please call Tolif Hunt at (712) 684 -2697 x 111.



*Dobby's Place along the Middle Raccoon River*

If you prefer to receive your newsletter electronically, please let us know at [april@whiterockconservancy.com](mailto:april@whiterockconservancy.com).



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