



Restoration Cases Flagship Collection

Case #5: Restoring tallgrass prairie in Illinois, USA



Newborn bison calves and their mothers at Nachusa Grasslands. Photo credit: Greg Baker

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In brief

Overview

The Nachusa Grasslands Preserve in north central Illinois, USA, is a large-scale, long-term, high-quality restoration effort coordinated by The Nature Conservancy. Since 1986, crew members, volunteers, researchers, and staff have collaborated to reconnect remnant patches of tallgrass prairie, woodland savanna, and wetland ecosystems at Nachusa Grasslands, creating one of the largest and most biologically diverse grasslands in Illinois. Restoration was undertaken by a team of dedicated volunteers and staff with the goal of preserving a rich mosaic of natural habitats and abundance of diverse species. Nachusa is an unusually diverse and spatially heterogeneous mosaic of prairie, wetlands, and savannas with more than 730 native plant and 180 bird species, including a dozen bird species that nest only in grasslands. The Preserve supports a rich diversity of reptiles, insects, mammals, and geological features. Rare, endangered or threatened species of plants, butterflies, turtles, and snakes are regularly monitored. Nachusa Grasslands serves as a living laboratory for natural areas management and restoration, including fire, grazing, invasive species control, and species reintroduction. Bison reintroduction in 2014 provided a key opportunity to better understand the relationship of large mammals to species composition and balance on a prairie. The bison at Nachusa are an essential component of the original ecosystems and landscapes of northern Illinois.

Exemplary practices

Volunteer stewards are the heart and soul of Nachusa Grasslands. The Nature Conservancy works collaboratively with neighbors and adjacent landowners to protect prairie remnants, restore wetlands, conduct regular prescriptive burns, collect and scatter seeds, control invasive species and unwanted trees and brush, and monitor restoration progress. The preserve is divided into management units, many of which are supervised by experienced volunteer stewards who receive great satisfaction from their achievements. Nachusa Grasslands has achieved an unparalleled level of dedicated stewardship, and the restoration effort has become a mainstay of local social and cultural life. The site has become an important hub for research on all aspects of tallgrass prairie restoration, including the effects of bison on the entire ecosystem.

Key lessons learned

- ◇ *Engage volunteers.*
- ◇ *Restoring grassland habitats requires frequent fire and grazing disturbance.*
- ◇ *Weed control requires repeated treatments and a variety of approaches. Avoid planting in areas with weed infestations.*
- ◇ *Reseed with high diversity seed mixes from the beginning and use a large quantity of seed.*
- ◇ *Invest in monitoring, scientific research, and partnerships with researchers.*