Wild Things Workshop for Stewards and Monitors
February 7, 2010
Notes by Cara Keller

Session III:

Wetlands

Resource Experts:
Jean Sellar - Army Corps of Engineers
Dick Riner - Steward at Bartel Grassland; Outdoor Education teacher for Middle School students
Leon Halloran – Steward at Bluff Springs Fen, chemist

Q: How do you get great wetlands?

A: Correct hydrology, high biodiversity, intact soils, superb management

A: There is no ideal mix. Every wetland is different. Ask "Where is the water coming from and what is it like?" Wetlands describes the hydraulic regime, Ex: marsh is graminoid wetland. Biodiversity is treasured. In drier years you will scarcely see wetland plants, but they're waiting underground for a season of greater rain. Fires and dry years will open up ponds and wet areas; rainy years will fill it in.

Leon - Bluff Springs Fen is of such high quality we don't plant or add seeds. Our areas fight off invasives. Very alkaline, hard water. We do get a "seed rain" of nasty seeds. A box elder seedling will not survive in this atmosphere.

Types of Wetlands

- Fen - highly alkaline (limestone) discharged in small area. Peat builds up.
- Wet Prairies - intersection of water table with ground level; driest of wetlands
- Seep - less velocity of water; less alkaline
- Bog - formed in kettles left by melting ice, a water table wetland where water is close to the surface
- Marsh - ground depression. Peotone soil. Rain water.
- Sedge Meadows - near lakes & riparian areas, with blue joint grass; Ex: Spring Creek & Butter Creek in McHenry Co.

Q: I work a small wetland, and the water level changes frequently. What's going on?

A: It sounds like your water source is from storm water flooding which brings in invasives.

Q: What should be done to restore a small park district wetland?

A: Look for your source of water. Look at topographic maps. Look at plants and insects, look for conservative species, and walk the perimeter. Try to look at similar sites to guide you in restoration.

Invasives

Dick - We declared war on cattails which went from 14 plants to 1400. Herbicided by the "wipe method." Almost all cattails are hybrids. I don't know of any natives left. Even natives can overwhelm other species. Cattails and Phragmites clean up water and remove pollutants.

Q: What can we do about salt runoff?

A: Salt is a difficult problem - it locks itself into the soil. Likewise fertilizer.
Get the locals involved - help them to see it as "their wetland." Bullrushes clean up pollutants.

A: Plant a buffer zone. Plant in terrestrial, not water, areas. Plant as wide as possible. Jean says to plant tall grasses with deep roots, infiltration, big blue stem, Indian grass. Put your powerhouse grasses on the edges. Engage your neighbors (so they don't think you're "breeding mosquitoes") and your local government (so they don't enact laws limiting the height of plants in your front yard to 8 inches.)

Surface water causes many problems like spreading reed canary grass. It is NOT a good source for wetlands.

Q: How do we protect our wetlands as our group of volunteers goes in to work our sites?

A: You can create paths for workers, but it IS hard to control CCFP workers, crews, & vehicles. They introduce undesirable seeds on their boots and tires. Communication is the best way to solve this. Wash off boots and wheels. Don't walk single file - spread out. Compacting soils is never good, but the buffalo did it, and the deer still do. They will follow the trails made by your plant and butterfly monitors. Look for manuals of the U.S. Forest Service on trail building. Flagstone stepping stones on gravel make a good trail base. Work when ground is solidly frozen. But don't walk on a half inch of frozen over softer earth - the ice slips and cuts off plants.

Leon Halloran - The worst erosion on trails occurs on warm days which create a layer of water with ice underneath. This situation causes mud, which drives people off the trail and mucking up everything.