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## Super Day of Seeds in the Sand! - by Fred Wooley

So it's Super Bowl Sunday! (Can we say "Super Bowl" in the Rustling Grass newsletter?!...). I think I heard that 111.9 million people tuned into the big game. You wonder how many of those millions spent time in kitchen that afternoon mixing taco and meatball sauces, cheese dips, Chex mixes?... Has to at least be in the several millions, don't you think?...

How many do you think were out in their unheated garage, listening to The Best of The Eagles CDs and mixing previously collected prairie seeds into a damp sand medium for cold storage?... Could have been a few, could have been .... Well, there was one for sure, me.

I'd have to go back to my notes to see what day in the winter I've done it in the past. It's has been more of a fun pastime for me over the years than a living or a serious science.

At some point long ago, I fell in love with native plants and over the years have fallen in love with each step of the process of propagation. I love the collecting of seeds in summer and fall. For a month or two (or three) following, they are in bags stored in our garage. Care is taken to keep them dry and where critters don't get to them!



Then during the winter, on some day usually dictated by having some free time and by temperatures comfortable enough to work in the unheated garage, I take the seeds and stir them into a mix of clean, damp sand. Into plastic zip bags they go and into the refrigerator to simulate the damp, cold stretch they find during the winter outdoors. It's the process of cold stratification plant propagators do to enhance germination the coming spring.

When spring does come, and again on a day I find time, out come the seeds and into pots and flats of clean soil they go to be watered and nurtured. What fun to see those first seeds germinate and the differently labeled plant seedlings emerge and push skyward.

Then come summer, the pots and flats, now all sporting tall plants of great variety, are carried to sites carefully selected (or not) to be planted for prosperity. Again, we take great joy in seeing them take root and succeed to produce flowers this summer, or next year for sure.

We watch as proud parents, as those flowers bloom and eventually set seed. We return to collect those seeds, possibly thinking of the first time we pulled those of that species into our palms, dropped into the bag, and toted to the dry garage for storage.

This winter it happened to be Super Bowl Sunday when I had the time and the spirit moved me to take those dry, dormant seeds to the next level of propagation. It came to 25 species of native plants this year. Normally I do all open prairie plants, but this year, I'm experimenting with some woodland oak savannah and some wetland fen species, inspired by my 2015 work with Blue Heron Ministries. It's always fun to wonder about the success of each, as I carefully lay the rolled up bags of seed and sand down into the basement refrigerator crisper drawers, like rolls of stuffed cabbage into a crock pot. And what do I find in the shelf above the seeds? Ah, ranch dressing vegetable dip. Ah, carrots, celery, and broccoli anyone?... Who's playing tonight anyway?...

## **High Banks Savannah – A Pictorial Perspective, sort of... - article and photos by Fred Wooley**

The last Saturday of January was typical of this winter, but not a typical last Saturday of January! No snow and unseasonably warm temperatures. It was perfect for outdoor working and that we did, six BHM employees and volunteers at two oak savannah sites at the Pigeon River Fish and Wildlife Area in LaGrange County.

It was just a short afternoon of work and even shorter for me, as I had to pull out a little earlier than the rest. The target areas were two, small, oak savannah remnants, not far from each other, on the west end of the 11,000-plus acre wildlife refuge. A background on each, including the work being done, is covered in another article by Benjamin Aberle in this issue. Ben has taken these two areas under his wing to shepherd and restore them to better health. Each has the potential to represent the original, unique, open, oak savannah forest ecosystem that occurs in our region. Both areas need work. Invasive plants, mainly autumn olive and some scattered multiflora rose and bush honeysuckle have taken hold. Attention was also given to black cherry and some native species that are currently threatening to dominate the landscape. Removal, or at least seriously checking back these target species, and reintroducing fire to the landscape, will make tremendous leaps towards their restoration.



But I'm getting ahead of myself and stealing Ben's thunder! Days after our fast-paced

workday of cutting and treating stumps with herbicide, I received an e-mail from Director Nathan, asking if I had gotten photos of the day! He did not, caught up in the work of the moment, and neither did I, for the same reason! We simply got on site and set to working! Both sites were strongly encroached with autumn olive and with tools in hand and the work to be done, we had it! Sometimes, taking out invasive plants, like collecting seeds in the fall, is addictive. You see the plants, become focused, and go to work! What a treat to look back over a small hillside, choked with invasives, and see them, most of them, cut and on the ground!

At one point, I looked around at the fallen autumn olive limbs, which I have found tend to decay relatively quickly once cut or killed in place. I smiled and said to Phil Bieberich working nearby, "It would be great to run fire across this little hill this spring and hasten the disappearance of these branches."

He smiled and nodded in return. When doing this work, you can nearly envision how nice it will look as one season progresses to the next and to the next, until a couple of years cycle through. It might be one of the most rewarding things about this work. Some of you can relate to the work of cleaning a child's room! It looks bad at first, may look a little worse during the process, but then really looks nice when done!

So back to the photos. I had none! Fortunately, the next day I had time and reason to be out and about, so I went back to that first site we worked. Ben calls it High Banks Oak Savannah. I smiled as I walked up the hill and surveyed the open, oak forest, now even more open with the autumn olive and multiflora rose cut and down. I could nearly close my eyes and see the finished "clean room!" So while I cannot offer looks of the six people working hard, you can get a feel for the landscape. Take this as a work in progress and hopefully you can visit some day and see the fruits of these six peoples' efforts.



Should you return soon, you'll find cut stumps with the green stain of herbicide that was carefully applied to each (yeah, yeah, I took back my loppers to point them out in the photo!). You'll see the openness of the hillside and the beautiful "bluff" overlooking a meandering Pigeon River. A careful look towards the river's edge, you'll discover the work of another busy tree cutter; a good sized tree being gnawed by a very busy beaver. Off to the west, the savannah drops off to a very expansive wetland. There you have three very distinctive habitat types, the river in its valley, the hilltop oak

savannah, and the expansive wetland in the distance. As time progresses, it will become even more picture perfect.

Just remember to take your camera!...

## **Pigeon River Savanna Restoration - Benjamin Aberle**

Six volunteers recently battled Autumn Olive on an unseasonably warm day at Pigeon River Fish and Wildlife Area. This invasive shrub has been threatening the integrity of two savanna remnants west of Mongo. The first site, called High Banks, is a small sandy



knob overlooking the Pigeon River and hosts some uncommon savanna plants. Pale Indian Plantain, Culver's Root, and Smooth False Foxglove are among them. Reducing the cover of Autumn Olive here will allow more sunlight to reach the herbaceous layer; thereby restoring the structure of the savanna, helping these plants to flower, and perhaps enabling unseen natives to emerge from the seed bank.

The second site, Snakeroot Savanna, is suffering much more from the effects of invasive species. Autumn Olive and Bush Honeysuckle have become so pervasive that savanna plants seldom grow there anymore. However, this was the last known location of Rattlesnake Master in Northeast Indiana. This is also where one of two remaining Indiana populations of Pale Vetchling Peavine reside. The memory of these species indicates much more open conditions in the past and gives us hope for what may show up in the absence of exotic pests.



These remnants are but small glimpses of what once was a grand landscape. Clearing the brush away is a small yet vital step in restoring the complex and vibrant savanna ecosystem. The seeds that will come as a result of our work can be collected and planted in other areas under restoration. Meanwhile, these relic stands will continue to serve as a living model of what we strive to protect.

Plans are being made to continue our work there. A foliar application of herbicide may be necessary to control resprouts. We also hope to reintroduce fire to these sites. Many thanks to Don Luepke, Fred Wooley, Kate Sanders, Nate Simons, Phil Bieberich, and Ben Aberle for your hard work and dedication.

## Mission Statement

The mission of Blue Heron Ministries, Inc. is to build communities where creation is kept and to keep creation so that community may be restored.

Blue Heron Ministries, Inc. is a nonprofit organization and a ministry of the Presbyterian Chapel of the Lakes, a 501(c)(3) organization.

Because the Presbyterian Chapel of the Lakes is located in the heart of lake country, environmental stewardship, education, and advocacy is a significant part of our Christian witness. Acting upon our faith that relationships may be restored and experience substantial healing in an imperfect world, we offer the following four initiatives as tools of reconciliation:

Land Trust • Conservation Design • Education • Natural Lands Restoration

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