

Friends of Wisdom Prairie

2020



Friends of Wisdom Prairie Annual Report 2020 and the State of Wisdom Prairie

The purpose of the Friends of Wisdom Prairie is to help the sisters at Holy Wisdom Monastery care for the earth. It has been a rich and fulfilling year, somewhat tempered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even with the shutdown of many activities at the monastery, a lot has been accomplished.

Master plan

The main way in which the sisters care for the earth is through ecological restoration. The latest long range plan for land management was created in 2014. This plan calls for the restoration of prairie, savanna and oak woodlands on more than 190 acres of land. This land includes the 53 acre parcel that was acquired in 2012, which was comprised mostly of farm land and needed to be restored from "scratch." It also includes the 60 acre North Mendota Wildlife Area, owned by Dane County Parks, but maintained by Holy Wisdom Monastery. The sisters started restoring prairie more than 20 years ago. As a result of their persistent efforts, there are now more than 90 acres of well-established prairie and an additional 33 acres of relatively new prairie that was planted on the new parcel's agricultural land in 2014 and 2015.

The Land Management Advisory Council, chaired by Prioress Sister Mary David Walgenbach, initiated a master planning process for Holy Wisdom Monastery. With assistance from Dean Proctor, a professional architect and landscape designer and Julie Loehrl a landscape architect, an overall plan and several studies have followed. This 10 year master plan for Holy Wisdom Monastery explores effective ways of dealing with many design issues related to the physical presence of the monastery's land. In 2020, construction drawings for a 53 stall parking lot and paved road to the hermitages were developed. Progress toward construction halted in March as the monastery was shut down due to the pandemic.

The office of Mission Advancement received some financial support for the columbarium court yard project. Further refinement of the plans for this expansion of the columbarium were developed.

Maintaining the prairie

Prescribed burns were conducted on only seven acres of prairie. The pandemic prevented us from burning an additional 93 acres. Recent prairie plantings were monitored. We were very pleased to find more than 115 different kinds of prairie plants growing in the 33 acre south and central prairie, which is now in its sixth season. Other more recently planted prairie areas were mowed to control weed growth and weed seed production.

Seed collecting

Volunteers from Holy Wisdom Monastery and Dane County Parks collected seed at the monastery and in county-owned parks this fall. We have developed a cooperative agreement with Dane County Parks to help them collect prairie seed and they continue to be very generous to us with native plant seed. Friends of Wisdom Prairie volunteers also participated in seed cleaning and processing with Dane County Parks. Many other organizations have collected prairie seed at Holy Wisdom Monastery including University of Wisconsin-Madison students and the Clean Lakes Alliance.

Savanna restoration

Seed of prairie and savanna understory species were sown into a cool season grass turf on the seven-acre old field south of the white house in 2017 and 2018. This area is transitioning from a field to an oak opening savanna. Thirty-five bur oaks were planted in this area two years ago. In the winter of 2017-2018, weedy trees and shrubs were removed from a remnant oak savanna on the south, east and north sides of the woods. The trees were removed using a low impact forestry practice, where the logs were skidded out with a team of horses. A grant from the John C Bock Foundation made this work possible. The work was further subsidized by the sale of saw logs to a lumber mill. We are very appreciative of the generosity of the John C. Bock Foundation. An inventory of savanna species in the remnant was conducted two years ago. Based on the results of this inventory, a desired seed list was drawn up. Last year two acres of savanna understory seed were sown by Friends of Wisdom Prairie volunteers, Rotarians and Middleton High School students. Also last year, one acre of prairie seed was sown by UW-Madison students. This year weedy vegetation was cut down before setting seed, letting light in for the new savanna seedlings. We have developed plans for a prescribed burn through this remnant savanna area in 2021. This will be the first burn in this fire dependent community in 180 years.

Woods

Weedy trees and shrubs were removed from our existing oak woodland. We will let fire run through this woodland within the next couple of years.

Surveys of the biota

The Friends of Wisdom Prairie continued a program of systematic surveys of various elements of the biota at Holy Wisdom Monastery. A frog and toad survey was conducted in the spring, bird counts were carried out at several times during the year. A bat survey was conducted last year, using a sonar sound identification and GPS instrument borrowed from the Wisconsin DNR. Due to the pandemic, the DNR did not loan out its equipment for the bat surveys this year.

A DNR trail camera and two recently purchased trail cameras were deployed to record the presence of several species of animals.

Nature trails

A new trail system has been developed for the monastery, including the new parcel of land and its prairie and savanna areas. Some of the old trails are being eliminated and have been planted to prairie. A committee has been formed to devise an interpretive system for Holy Wisdom Monastery which will include signs on the trails, maps and access to information about the inhabitants of our prairies, savanna and woodlands. A map brochure is available to visitors.

Sylvia Marek and Peter Marshall, of the Friends of Wisdom Prairie, developed two prairie wild flower identification brochures. One for early summer prairie plants and one for late summer prairie plants. They were enjoyed by many visitors who have come to walk the trails at the monastery, in increasing numbers, during the pandemic.

Volunteers

This year, the Friends of Wisdom Prairie helped care for the earth by providing more than 1,000 hours of volunteer service to the monastery. Due to the pandemic, Greg Armstrong worked with volunteers on a one-on-one basis. In spite of these restrictions, we accomplished a lot of good work and had a good time doing it.

Donating

During the year, many Friends of Wisdom Prairie members and others from the Holy Wisdom Monastery family gave generously to support our land management work. Visit HolyWisdomMonastery.org if you are interested in donating.

Friends of Wisdom Prairie Council

The Friends of Wisdom Prairie Council helps guide the activities of the Friends of Wisdom Prairie. The following people were members of the Friends of Wisdom Prairie Council in 2020:

President – Paul Slota | Vice President - Julie Melton | Treasurer – Mary Trewartha | Secretary – Kathleen Wessels | Peg Davey | Jeannine Desautels | Howard Fenton | Drew Howick | Jan Lottig | Sylvia Marek | Peter Marshall | Maia McNamara | Michael Shinnars | Judy Troia | John Van Dinter | Ex-officio – Greg Armstrong

Environmental education

The Friends of Wisdom Prairie had planned a series of lectures to educate participants about the environment and the spirituality of caring for the earth. Only one of these events was held, but it was a good one! Sylvia Marek spoke to more than 100 of us about the Owls of Wisconsin. Friends hosted a socially distant, self-guided butterfly walk for the public for Butterfly Action Day in July. All of the other planned events were cancelled due to the pandemic.

A third year of Caring for Common Ground, a program of spiritually infused environmental education, was planned. It was scheduled twice and canceled twice because of the pandemic. In this program, people from different religious traditions and spiritual practices are invited to learn together about how to do ecological restoration that helps to heal the land, and to share how their faith perspectives inform their care for the environment. This program was funded by a grant from the High Winds Association Foundation, the MG&E Foundation and by many Friends of Wisdom Prairie. We will now use these generous gifts to put on a Caring for Common Ground workshop in 2021.

Bluebird trail

The monastery and Friends of Wisdom Prairie would like to thank volunteer Karen Bate for her dedication to the bluebird trail and for monitoring the trail for 20 years. In 2020 the bluebird trail was updated. Friends member Mike Crawford monitored the Wisdom Prairie Trail where 21 bluebirds fledged this year. Howard Fenton monitored the trail in the North Prairie where 10 bluebirds fledged.

Phenology blog

Friends of Wisdom Prairie Council member Sylvia Marek has created a monthly phenology blog of plants and animals normally seen in our area. Visitors to our website can learn about what they might see before they come out and walk the trails.

Nature note cards

Note cards with beautiful images of Holy Wisdom Monastery's native beings, including prairie plants, birds and butterflies were printed as a fundraiser. Very few note cards were sold this year since the buildings have been closed to the public and since we cancelled most of our events where we usually sell these cards.

Friends of Wisdom Prairie membership

This year 122 people joined the Friends of Wisdom Prairie, which is a little over half of last year's membership count of 206. Annual membership starts with the annual meeting in November each year. Individual memberships cost \$30, family memberships cost \$40 and student memberships cost \$15. Memberships also make great gifts.

Succession

Many changes have taken place in 2020 in Land Management staffing at Holy Wisdom Monastery.

Paul Boutwell retired from the Groundskeeper position after 30 years of service. A tree will be planted in his honor in the spring. **Cortez Mitchell** is the new Groundskeeper and is working hard to keep the grounds in good shape. **Greg Armstrong** retired as the Director of Land Management and Environmental Education in December 2020, after eight years of service to Holy Wisdom Monastery. **Amy Alstad, PhD**, started as the new Director of Land Management and Environmental Education in November of 2020. Amy's exceptional education, experience and warm personality, will help her excel in this position of helping the sisters care for the earth at Holy Wisdom Monastery.

Friends of Wisdom Prairie Council election

The Friends of Wisdom Prairie has traditionally elected members to the Friends of Wisdom Prairie Council at their annual meeting. This year, due to the pandemic, the Council has asked the membership to accept the slate of candidates recommended by the Nomination Committee and approved by the full Council. All five of the Council members, whose first terms are ending in 2020, have agreed to serve another three-year term. The Nomination Committee has recommended that all five, Jeannine Desautels, Jan Lottig, Julie Melton, Judy Troia, and Kathleen Wessels, be re-nominated and approved to serve a second term. All but one of the remaining 10 Council members are willing to continue serving their terms in 2021. To fill that one vacancy, the Nomination Committee has nominated, and the full Council has approved, Greg Armstrong.

-Submitted by Greg Armstrong, Director of Land Management and Environmental Education and Paul Slota, President of the Friends of Wisdom Prairie

Photos (from cover)

1. Howard Fenton (center) organized volunteers to conduct several bird surveys and posted results on eBird. Howard is also monitoring three trail cams. Photo 4: Birders are also pictured in photo 4 during the Nov. bird count.
2. Thank you Greg Armstrong for your dedication to the land at Holy Wisdom Monastery!
3. More than 60 people came to our Butterfly Action Day. This was a self-guided walk on the prairie. Look for more self-guided nature events next year.