

Project Report: Illinois Prairie Programs

Funded by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Preservation Fund

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Introduction

It is the mission of the Anita Purves Nature Center to serve the community by promoting the wise stewardship of the natural environment by fostering appreciation, understanding, and responsible use of the earth. The Nature Center offers environmental programs to individuals of all ages, from preschool through adults, and has served as an environmental resource center for educators in central Illinois since 1979. Starting with the School Tour program, the Nature Center has expanded environmental education programs to include Naturalist in the Classroom and Traveling Naturalist programs, the Loan Box program, and an Educator Resource Room. Community programs are also offered. Hundreds of area students are served each year through these programs, and all School Tours and Naturalist in the Classroom programs are aligned with Illinois Learning Standards.

The study of the tallgrass prairie is an important curriculum area in elementary and middle schools in Urbana, Champaign, and surrounding school districts. Nature Center programs addressing this curriculum component include School Tours (field trips) to the Park District's restored tallgrass prairie, Naturalist in the Classroom programs, Educational Loan Boxes for both the elementary and secondary levels, a "Prairie Plant Preview" program for middle schools, and Service Learning opportunities for middle schools. Despite the number of programs provided, staff has been unable to meet the demand of area educators and each year some classrooms remain unserved. In addition, field trip materials and equipment have received so much use, mainly out of doors, that they have become worn. Items in the elementary loan boxes have become worn and outdated, no longer meeting the needs of area educators.

The goal of this project was to update the curricula and materials used for prairie programs, including the following:

- Replacement of worn materials and equipment used on field trips
- Addition of new materials for field trips
- Production of standards-based curriculum guides for the loan boxes
- Replacement of worn and outdated items in loan boxes
- Creation of expanded slide shows for all prairie programs
- Addition of a slide program to the secondary level loan box and revision of the slide shows in the elementary loan boxes
- Expansion of the Prairie Plant Preview program to elementary schools to assist educators planning to take a self-led tour of the prairie

Materials and Methods

Grant funds were intended for the purchase of items and services for use in all of the prairie programs offered by the Nature Center. Items purchased included a dry erase board, markers, and erasers for use in the barn where the prairie School Tours originate. Other items purchased included office supplies such as cardstock, ink, and laminating pouches for the creation of materials used both for programs and in loan boxes. Film was purchased and photographs taken for use in updating slide shows used during field trips, classroom visits, and in loan boxes. (Traditional slides are used, as PowerPoint capabilities are not available at the site of field trips.) Services purchased included the processing of slides and lamination of posters used at the prairie and in loan boxes. Additionally, permission was obtained from the creator of the Prairie School Project to use the Build a Plant activity in Nature Center programs.

The Environmental Education Coordinator created the following items for use in prairie programs:

- Revised leader guides for the field trips
- Revised teacher guides for use before and after field trips and classroom visits
- New worksheets for students for field trips
- Sets of Prairie Plant Identification cards for field trips and classroom visits
- Sets of "Who Am I" game cards for field trips
- Sets of "Build a Plant" cards for field trips, classroom visits, and loan boxes
- New slide shows for the Prairie Inhabitants and Prairie Plants field trips
- New slide shows for both elementary loan boxes and the secondary loan box
- New standards based curriculum guides for the loan boxes
- New leader guide for the elementary level Prairie Plant Preview program

Results

All materials, slide shows, worksheets, and leader guides for prairie field trips and the Prairie Plant Preview were completed before the start of the fall 2004 prairie field trip season. Loan box materials were completed during the winter.

Nature Center staff conduct prairie field trips in early fall each year. For 2004, 23 classes (493 students) participated in the Illinois Prairie Inhabitants and Prairie Plants of Illinois

field trips. Leaders felt that the new materials enhanced their ability to lead the programs, especially on rainy days when the students must stay inside the barn, rather than hike in the prairie.

All teachers were given evaluations, of which eight were completed and returned. Results are as follows.

5=excellent; 4=above average; 3=standard; 2=below standard; 1=needs improvement

	# of Evals. Returned	Program Introduction	Outdoor Activities	Tour Leaders	Program Info. Level
Prairie Inhabitants	6/21	4.4	4.7	4.8	4.8
Prairie Plants	2/2	4.5	4	5	4.5

Teacher comments indicate that these programs tie in very well with their science units and generally promote more discussion of the prairie in the classroom.

Two elementary classrooms (49 students) participated in the new Prairie Plant Preview program. Both were done on days that substitutes were in the classrooms and neither teacher returned the evaluation form. The Nature Center staff that conducted the programs believe that the students enjoyed them. Based on the results of the Build a Plant activity, the staff also feels that the students grasped the concepts being taught, including plant adaptations to survive in the harsh prairie environment.

The new Prairie Discovery (elementary level) and revised Prairie as a Habitat (secondary level) Loan Boxes have not yet been used. They were not completed until late winter, and most area educators teach their prairie units in the fall. It is expected that use will resume in fall of 2005 and subsequently increase because the boxes now better meet the needs of area educators.

Yet to be completed are the revised teacher's guide and slide show for the Prairie Settlers classroom program. It is anticipated that enough new slides remain to complete this in time for the upcoming academic year.

Discussion and Summary

Study of the tallgrass prairie is an important curriculum component in the Urbana and Champaign school districts, as well as surrounding districts in central Illinois. The Anita Purves Nature Center continually strives to provide programs meeting the needs of area educators. The Illinois Prairie Inhabitants and Prairie Plants of Illinois School Tours offered by the Nature Center have always been very popular and the new materials allowed by this grant improved the students' experience. However, each year there are classes that are unable to participate in the field trips due to capacity limitations. The expansion of the classroom programs and revision of the Loan Boxes funded by this grant will assist area educators by providing tools to enhance the classroom experience and enable educators to lead self-guided tours of the tallgrass prairie.

Images
See attached.

Expenditures
See attached.

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Illinois Prairie Programs - Actual Expenditures

Amount of grant: \$570.00

Date	Vendor	Item(s)	Amount
7/9/2004	Bate's Camera	Slide Processing	\$7.20
7/23/2004	Rogards	Prop fabricating (office) supplies	\$221.74
8/4/2004	Kinko's	Poster laminating	\$30.00
8/11/2004	Kinko's	Poster laminating	\$5.00
8/16/2004	Rogards	Prop fabricating (office) supplies	\$109.75
8/27/2004	Bate's Camera	Slide Processing	\$7.99
2/25/2005	WalMart	Loan Box containers	\$6.82
2/28/2005	Kinko's	Poster laminating	\$21.00
Total Spent			\$409.50

Urbana Park District: Illinois Prairie Programs



Urbana Park District barn used for introduction to prairie field trips



Urbana Park District staff member leading introduction to Illinois Prairie Inhabitants field trip program.

Urbana Park District: Illinois Prairie Programs



Third-graders meet Prairie Mary at Meadowbrook Prairie



Prairie Mary talks to students about life on the prairie in 1845



The Urbana Park District's Meadowbrook Prairie



Prairie Mary and staff member starting a demonstration of the root lengths of prairie plants

Urbana Park District: Illinois Prairie Programs



Hunting for insects among the prairie plants



Investigating a prairie insect