

The following is simply a landowner's story that reveals a different way of thinking and engaging in a landscape, not by a scientific understanding of data, but by watching and learning how others engage in meaningful participation. Increased knowledge leads to corresponding changes in land management activities.

Discovering Allen Creek Fen

Kim Karow

Allen Creek Fen is part the Allen Creek wetland complex located near Star School Road in the Town of Koshkonong just south of Fort Atkinson. It is an exceptional site for many reasons. More than 200 native plant species are cataloged here, some of them quite rare. Several species rich plant communities are present including: calcareous fen of three subtypes, wet-mesic prairie, wet prairie, southern sedge meadow, moist sand prairie, emergent aquatic and oak woodland. This remnant natural area has a diversity of soils that have never been touched by a plow. Springs, seeps and rivulets supply the wetlands with constant water flow as slight undulations of the surface elevation create drier areas. Corresponding soils changes are mirrored by the changes in plant communities.

However, when we moved here this isn't how I would have described this piece of land to you. I would have said we have rented farm fields and a swamp that Dale, my husband, insisted on for hunting land. I never went out there. My tennis shoes would be soaked, muddy and I'd be covered in mosquito bites. This place had no purpose other than hunting, but it was sort of nice to see the birds (none of which I could name except the cranes) and the deer. The pretty red dogwood was so attractive in the winter when we had snow. The wetlands were merely beyond the yard but not really on my radar.

In 2003 the DOT began the public engagement process of planning the Highway 12 bypass, and there it was on paper, a highway coming next to the north edge of the property. I was despondent to think I would be having all of that highway noise and development right next to us. I began thinking that if only they knew we had wildlife here they wouldn't want to put the highway so near.

I went to a public meeting and learned that they would be doing an environmental impact study. Surely they would know we had “wildlife” here and they wouldn’t put the highway through... but they didn’t come. By 2004 I determined that they wouldn’t come unless they had a reason to. I would probably need to tell them that something was here they would be interested in. I walked out into the horrible mosquito infested swamp to see if there was anything there that was rare. I could name three plants: prairie dock, gayfeather and black-eyed susans. That didn’t look rare. I couldn’t name anything else and I was starting to feel resigned about having a highway for a new neighbor.

Dale was leaving to go to town one afternoon in the spring of 2004 and Evan and I were out working in the yard. Dale rolled the window of the car down and called for Evan to get the turtle off the road that was crossing in front of our yard so it wouldn’t get run over. We decided before we let it go that we would try to figure out what it was. It couldn’t be difficult to identify a turtle. How many kinds could there be? We looked online and were pretty sure it was a Blanding’s turtle and the website said it was a threatened species in Wisconsin. We called Dick Wanie, a retired science teacher and wildlife writer contributor to the local newspaper, to come out and take a look and he confirmed the identification. We also took pictures and then released it by the creek.

So now we knew we had something rare and we had to decide whom to call. The website we used was the Wisconsin DNR Bureau of Endangered Resources page. We decided that since the turtle was an endangered resource we should call there first. A person was designated as private landowner coordinator on the staff directory listing. That sounded about right. We contacted Darcy Kind.

I mentioned to her on the phone that we had this turtle and that if it is rare maybe we should be doing something to help it. She made an appointment to come out and we walked through some areas of the wetland (the drier ones) and walked down by the creek. I watched her look around and I watched to see what she was noticing. She was naming plants as she walked and I asked her, “*How* do you know what they are, they aren’t

blooming?” She started describing square stems, alternate and opposite leaves. I started looking at plants that way too.

At the end of the walk she seemed really excited about what she saw. “You have something rare here.” I wasn’t getting it. “You should consider donating your land to the Nature Conservancy. They could help you take care of it and protect it.” I was pretty skeptical about such a proposition, but Darcy continued, suggesting that she would like to have a co-worker come out and take a look too. A few weeks later Cathy Bleser, also with the DNR, came out for a look. Darcy seemed really nice and helpful. No harm in looking.

Dale went out with Darcy and Cathy on their tour and he remarked, “They looked like two kids in a candy store”, when he told me about the adventure later that day. Their enthusiasm was infectious, but what is it they are so excited about? Cathy told Dale that there was a lot of swamp thistle on the site and that Susan Borkin with the Milwaukee Public Museum happened to be in Madison. “She specializes in the study of the swamp metalmark butterfly which is an endangered species.” Cathy explains. The thistle is the host plant for the butterfly. “A good thistle?” I was thinking.

Two days later Susan Borkin came out to take a look during the day and called Dale later. “I didn’t see any feeding signs of the butterfly, but you have more swamp thistle than our best site where the butterfly lives now.” She suggested that if we were to put the land into a permanent conservation easement and restore it that she would be interested in using the site for a butterfly reintroduction.

Darcy followed up a few weeks later with a suggestion that we apply for funding a restoration with a WHIP grant (Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program). She began describing the area using words like sedge meadow and wet prairie. I remember asking her how it could be more than one? If it is a meadow, how can it be a prairie and a fen too? Is it a meadow or a fen? What is a fen? I don’t remember getting clarification, but I’m sure it’s not from lack of effort on Darcy’s part. I was full of questions all the time

and must have been quite a pest. As overworked as she was, she continued patiently answering questions or sending me to other places to find my answers. She also said she would like to have her boss, Mark Martin come out for a look around.

Darcy assisted with the grant paperwork and we found it necessary to list plants and animals that were rare and rare things generate points. More points mean a greater chance of being funded. Dale suggested we start keeping a list of the plant names that Darcy was sending. Turns out that in 1986 and 1987 Jim Zimmerman had been out to the property months before we purchased it. Zimmerman had also generated a list that DNR had a copy of. We merged the two lists and began actively managing the plant list.

Darcy, Mark Martin and Gary and Penny Shackelford came out for a tour with Dale in the fall. Lots of plants were being cataloged and Mark started making predictions about what plants we might see after restoration work began. He explained that the increasingly dense canopy of trees and shrubs were taking away essential light from the rare plants at ground level. If nothing is done to reverse their decreasing access to light the rare plants would die and become displaced by the shrub/forest layer.

If we were to start actively managing the land by removing woody vegetation and using fire to keep woody vegetation suppressed the prairie would come back. The restoration process was time critical: the degree of success would be greatly influenced by the speed of the activity. Some areas were so densely forested there might not be anything left in spots. The longer we wait, the bigger those dead spots would be.

Mark also said that the area was quite rare, a diamond in the rough that just needed some work to be restored. It's all there, plants that are hanging on, plants that are dormant in the soil, and seeds waiting for optimal conditions to sprout in the seed bank. It just needed some work. He suggested that the state might be interested in offering a permanent conservation easement and technical assistance through the State Natural Areas program.

The WHIP grant was awarded in the fall of 2004. Dale and I were going for walks frequently to see what we could find and photographing plants and doing lots of reading. I bought a pair of rubber boots. We now had “work” to do. We had a new purpose for engaging in this landscape. We were going to name all the parts and work on this plant list. We were going to be actively managing the land, but the grant would bring a contractor in to do most of that. We would just be assisting and learning I naively thought.

In January of 2005, Ron Martin from Midwest Prairies brought out his new Rayco forestry mower. Amazing. In two and a half days all the brush in the wetland parcel was down, but I couldn't see how anything was going to grow there. Now the entire ground was covered with the mulch leftover from brushing. Ron assured us that it would need some time and a few fire seasons to recover.

Spring of 2005 came with our first fire season at the end of March. The burn was o.k. with about half of the area burning. A few weeks later it began to green up. I was excited about what we might see. We were out all the time. I decided that since all the natural resources people seem to be using the scientific plant names that I would need to learn them too.

Summer of 2005 was a great season. Lots of walking, lots of learning, lots of visitors, but I started noticing lots of buckthorn, dogwood and willow coming back too. I felt a little frustrated. When I saw the forestry mower tear those plants to shreds and we burned them all up two months later, why weren't they dead? It was the hard lesson of resprouts. These plants were not going down without a fight and they had lots of energy stored in their roots.

The winter of 2005 we started using a gas-powered brush cutter with a saw blade on the woody vegetation and treating the stumps with herbicide at every opportunity. And here I am on spring break in 2008 spending my week off cutting brush with my bigger gas-powered brush cutter and treating it with herbicide.

There are four seasons in the prairie I've learned: the brush killing season (winter), the invasive killing season (spring, summer and fall), the monitoring season (spring, summer and fall) and the seed collection season (summer, fall). Notice mosquito season isn't on the list anymore. This isn't going to be *some* work, it's going to be the rest of my life.

So, what's the reason for the big changes in our activities in only a few years? Education. Each time someone would visit I would ask, "*How* do you know that?" They would explain how they engage in their visual perception and knowledge of the landscape. They taught me how to see it and how to learn about it, but they also modeled their spiritual/emotional connection with the landscape. I felt the responsibility to care more about my own land than my visitors, and they were showing a passionate connection to it. I was learning how science informs perception.

My favorite story, though, is when Quentin Carpenter from UW-Madison came out for a prairie visit. We were walking for a while as he was patiently answering all of my questions. He came to a spot and said, "Shhh. This is a low-to-the-ground place." He bent down, almost crawling to explore. He could see that this was a place to look carefully for small, subtle plants that need the most careful of observers to appreciate. I wanted to be the person that knew this landscape well enough to understand low-to-the-ground places.

That one line perhaps best describes a way of engaging in this landscape; slow, quiet, meaningful participation that takes the white noise out of the interaction. White noise is the mind spinning and trying to make sense of what it has no prior knowledge or experience to connect to. When you can stop and call a plant, an animal or an insect by its name, surely, you have shown the capacity to appreciate it. Once you appreciate it you will find the motivation to provide stewardship for its continued existence.

There is still a great deal of work left to be done. We continue working on the species list. We used to call it the plant list, but now we are monitoring for butterflies and dragonflies. We would like to begin undertaking the work of monitoring for reptiles and amphibians.

The oak woodland needs a great deal of work to replant and the fields north of the creek are showing promise as we begin to include those areas in our surveys. Restoration planning is beginning to take on the scope of the whole farm and the wish that it continues beyond our property edges.

We still do not have a conservation easement in place, but we clearly understand that restoration and active management will need to continue in perpetuity. Like raising a child, we are preparing the natural area to go on without us by planning carefully and documenting the work, the objectives and the vision. The greatest threat to the site now is perhaps the hydrologic system that involves off site recharge areas. My thanks to the great research that is being done by scientists and natural resource technicians/specialists to help well meaning landowners like Dale and myself be able to bring private lands back to their former glory with some measure of competence.