

nebraska update

SUMMER 2024



CONNECT WITH NATURE: [NATURE.ORG/NEBRASKA](https://nature.org/nebraska)

GET A FRONT ROW SEAT TO THE PRAIRIE!

You are invited to the Platte River Prairies Field Day

The Nature Conservancy is hosting the Platte River Prairies Field Day on Saturday, July 13th from 7:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. in Wood River. Participants may come and go as they please. There is no cost for attending.

The day will include a birding hike, a close-up look at reptiles and small mammals, plant identification, and several other interactive activities with local ecologists. "This is a fun day for all ages, filled with hands-on activities for folks to get to know all the life that's in a prairie," said Director of Science and Stewardship Chris

Helzer. "Visitors can choose between multiple topics and hike options during each of several sessions throughout the day."

Snacks will be available as well as jugs of cold water, tea, and lemonade. Participants are asked to bring their own water bottles and lunches.

There is parking available at TNC's headquarters: 13650 South Platte River Drive, Wood River, Nebraska. Go to nature.org/nebraska for more details.

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 2 Follow the Fellows
- 4 Legacy Highlight
- 5 Nebraska Soil Carbon Project
- 6 Volunteer

The Nature Conservancy 
Nebraska

FOLLOW THE FELLOWS

The Nature Conservancy started the Claire M. Hubbard Young Leaders in Conservation Fellowship Program in Nebraska in 2013 with a gift from the Claire M. Hubbard Foundation. It's a one-year program for two selected recent college graduates in conservation-related fields, headquartered at the Platte River Prairies in Nebraska. Here they share some of their first impressions:

MEET CLAIRE MORRICAL!



In February, I left my home state of Illinois to begin the Hubbard Fellowship on the Platte River Prairies. At a glance, Illinois and Nebraska share many similarities – two midwestern states, historically home to vast prairies, and boasting a whole lot of corn fields. But with a closer look, the two states are very different. As I entered Nebraska on I-80, I was struck by the cattle turned out into the cornfields to graze on stalks through the winter.

Cattle grazing is not nearly as prevalent in Illinois as it is in Nebraska, and I had certainly never seen cattle grazing on cornfields. What's more, while we commonly use prescribed fire in prairie management, cattle seem largely absent from Illinois' prairie management practices.

Since applying to the Hubbard Fellowship and being introduced to the Platte River Prairies, I've learned a great deal about cattle grazing and I look forward to learning a great deal more. During our first week on the Platte, for example, Chris Helzer, who supervises the Fellows, showed us a site that used an open gate approach to grazing on restored prairie. This approach allows cows to graze in such a way that they create multiple, structurally different sections of prairie - some tall, some short, some thatchy, some nearly bare, all providing diverse habitat for wildlife with diverse needs.

When I think of conservation and agriculture working together, I tend to think of compromises - farmers giving up land or profit and conservationists scaling back objectives for the sake of feasibility. Of course, compromises are necessary to successful collaboration and conservation, but grazing cattle on prairies gives us a wonderful example of conservation and agriculture largely complementing each other. Farmers have land with an abundance of diverse grasses and forbs to feed their cattle. Meanwhile, prairies are exercised by grazing disturbance that strongly resembles that of the bison that would have historically been present. Grazing may supplement or substitute other disturbances like fire. Rather than giving something up for each other, conservation and agriculture have something to give each other.

Grazing is among many new tools I'm learning to use in my "land stewardship toolbox". As we add skills to implement management practices (such as repairing fences, lighting burn units, and creating seed mixes), we are invited to participate in the conversations that make up the decision-making and planning process. Take prescribed burning. There are a lot of questions that come before and after the decision to burn a site.

In what way should we use the tool? What time of year should we burn?

What are our objectives? Are we aiming to suppress eastern red cedars? Do we want to create more variation in habitat structure?

How do we tell we have achieved our objectives? Will we make anecdotal observations, or will we collect data?

This well-rounded experience is one of the main aspects of the Hubbard Fellowship that drew me to it. And this is just the stewardship, saying nothing of the work that goes into funding the stewardship, helping others learn from our work, sharing it with the public, and more! Conservation, like most things, is a huge and complicated undertaking. It's full of people sharing, developing, and challenging ideas. People utilizing, combining, and learning new skillsets. People appreciating each other's experiences and perspectives. As a Fellow, I am overjoyed that I get to observe and participate and ask questions of people working across this big conservation spider web. I look forward to spending my year and my career adding tools to my "conservation toolbox".



RIGHT: © Claire Morrival/TNC



MEET KEES HOOD!



The past three months at the Platte River Prairies feel like they've gone by fast, until I think about all I've seen and done in such a short time. As a Hubbard Fellow, I've already learned a lot about exactly what I came here to learn - and things I never knew I would. Trying to describe these things, and the Hubbard Fellowship as a whole, to friends and family back home has been an interesting challenge. What exactly is a "skid steer"? Well, it's something like a forklift crossed with a tank. Why are

you setting the prairie on fire? It's called prescribed burning, and we do it because prairie plants thrive after fire while invasive trees don't. These are the kinds of questions I get better at answering with each passing day.

I grew up in the Los Angeles area, and spent my earliest nature experiences in the scrub of the chaparral. When I went to school at UC Davis, I encountered my first grasslands, and enjoyed spending time getting lost in the world of dense plants and open sky. I also learned how threatened these amazing landscapes were across the country. I saw the Hubbard Fellowship as an opportunity to engage with habitats both similar to and vastly different from what I've known in the grasslands of California, and an opportunity to learn the management techniques required to keep prairie landscapes diverse and functional. I was also excited about the possibility of witnessing Nebraska's incredible prairie plants, animals, and landscapes that I had only seen in pictures or read about in books.

Adjusting to life on the Platte has meant adjusting to Nebraska's seasons. I'm used to relatively warm temperatures of California and the unusual seasons of a Mediterranean climate. The sequence of seasons begins with the pouring atmospheric rivers of winter, an explosion of wildflowers in the short spring months, and the long months of rainless summer. On the Platte, I've watched a new kind of winter slowly turn to spring. I arrived at a dry, cold prairie covered in the snowy aftermath of a winter storm everyone told me I was lucky to have avoided. The prairie was brown and trees had no leaves. The first cranes I heard flying overhead sent me running out of the house to get a glimpse of them. A month later, the call of cranes was my world, from sunrise to sunset. Standing on the Derr sandhills and watching the countless thousands fly by, it was hard to imagine in a month they would be gone. As the last cranes circled high into the sky and soared away, the first prairie flowers emerged and the frogs began to croak in the wetland.



Every day is a little greener than the one before. Earlier in the year I walked the prairies looking for signs of newly emerging plant life in the cold. It was easy to keep track of the trickle of plants sprouting green growth: yarrow, junegrass, sun sedge, and smooth brome. Now plants are emerging at a torrential pace – puccoon, violet, penstemon, prairie groundsel, and hundreds of different little leaves I haven't been able to identify yet. The last round of thunderstorms brought nearly 4 inches of rain to Platte River Prairies. Huge puddles formed, wetlands filled, and the Platte rose high. Blue-winged teal, formerly concentrated in the Derr Wetlands, were swimming in the overnight ponds formed in what was dry pasture the previous day. The morning after the big storms was warm and humid, the air was sweet with the smell of happy plants and petrichor. The last traces of winter were gone.

I'm looking forward to future migrations and flowers yet to bloom here on the Platte. I'm also looking forward to the rest of the Hubbard Fellowship. I applied to this fellowship because I saw an opportunity to learn what conservation really means and how an organization like TNC accomplishes it. Part of that mission is innovating new methods to ensure that future generations can see the annual wonder of changing seasons play out as they have for centuries among the plants and wildlife that make the Platte River Prairies so special.

NEBRASKA'S LEGACY CLUB

MEET JO BARTIKOSKI & DON WESTLING

The Legacy Club is a group of Nature Conservancy supporters who have made a lasting commitment to conservation by making a life-income gift with the Conservancy or by naming TNC as a beneficiary in their estate plans. The Legacy Club is a way for us to recognize these profound contributions to The Nature Conservancy's future. We thank our Legacy Club members for their dedication to preserve the diversity of life on Earth and for their foresight in providing for its future.

Chloé Sweet, Associate Director of Development, visited with Jo and Don to find out why they joined:



Tell us a bit about you both... careers, and passions?

Jo: Growing up in Minneapolis, I was always attracted to nature. My mother was an avid gardener, who also encouraged me to spend time "playing in the dirt", although I didn't really appreciate that until I had my own first garden. As a child, I was forever picking up things and bringing them home to keep - rocks, shells, butterflies, including some clams from a lake up north. I put them in the tool shed because they were alive and couldn't come in the

house. I forgot about them, and it was summer. Mom found them about a week later in their plastic bag. I can almost still smell them now, and I learned a number of lessons from that (take a good close look, identify, and then leave whatever living thing it is, where it was found!). After college, I went to work for Northwestern Bell Telephone Company, starting in Customer Service, moving to Omaha, and ending my 27 year career there in a job utilizing the latest technology, while finding a path through pretty constant reorganization after the breakup of Ma Bell. A stint in retail, and 10 years of my own computer business followed, until I finally retired for good from anything with a paycheck.

Travel has always been another passion, and we continue to find new places to explore. One of my favorite trips ever was to the mountains in Mexico to experience the winter home of the Monarch butterflies. I still get chills at the thought of being surrounded by millions of those gorgeous orange butterflies.

Don: I started with a degree in studio arts from the University of Minnesota and became a senior systems programmer in an IT department. I went back to drawing and painting after retirement. I have a passion for art and the arts.

What is your favorite activity to do outside?

Jo: Gardening is at the top of the list, but also the travel to special places. Our road trips usually involve hiking in natural areas, mountains, rivers, prairies; anywhere I can listen to the birds, the wind, and try to spot little creatures just living their lives.

Don: Working in the garden. I enjoy the planting and harvesting rather than weeding!

How did you first become involved with The Nature Conservancy?

Jo: I honestly don't recall when we first learned about TNC, but somehow we were invited to the holiday open house one year, and found we knew quite a few people there that we could talk to and learn more. That event also had a lot of information to impart. Learning what TNC was striving for, and how the organization goes about accomplishing those goals, just made a lot of sense to us.

What do you hope for what your legacy gift will accomplish?

Jo: Hopefully, we can help TNC continue its mission for the long term. Our Nebraska Chapter is very special to us, not only for prairie restoration and preservation, but especially for their work helping to acquire and manage land adjacent to the Platte River so that the Sandhill Cranes continue to have the area available to them for food and roosting on their yearly migration, as they have had for tens of thousands of years. Last year we were also lucky enough to become acquainted with the Niobrara Valley Preserve: this place is amazing, so add that to our list of reasons to help Nebraska TNC as much as we can.

Anything else you'd like to add?

Only that we are so thankful that organizations like TNC are continuing to help keep our planet viable. It often seems overwhelming, but they bring hope. We thank them for doing the work.

Jo and Don at the Niobrara Valley Preserve



NEBRASKA SOIL CARBON PROJECT UPDATE

NEBRASKA FARMER USES CONSERVATION PRACTICES TO IMPROVE SOIL - AND FINANCIAL RETURNS

By Chrystal Houston, Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District

If your idea of a successful Nebraska farmer is one who has the biggest equipment, and whose fields are regularly turned into black soil with nothing but corn in perfect rows all the way to the horizon, then Todd Dzingle's operation might disappoint you.

Dzingle's corn and soybean fields in Hall, Adams, Clay, and Sherman Counties includes no-till on all of his acres and cover crops on the majority of them. "I'm after soil health, and profit per acre along the way," he said.

"I'm happy with the yields, and each year I'm seeing better yields as I'm increasing my soil health. I want my investment per acre to be as slim as possible without sacrificing yield," he said. Like any new practice this takes a little time, patience, and a positive attitude.

Dzingle applies nitrogen sparingly, opting instead to do all he can to boost the health of his soil, with the understanding a well-functioning soil system is the key to success. "I want to take care of the land. I'm not farming year-to-year. I'm looking five years plus down the road," he said.

This long-range view was part of the reason he signed up for the TNC-led Nebraska Soil Carbon Project in 2021. This program provides funding incentives for producers in the Central Platte and Upper Big Blue NRDs to implement no-till, cover crops, and rotational cropping systems as a means to restore soil health and sequester carbon.

Dzingle grew up farming with his grandpa and dad. He started his career as a crop consultant with Servi-Tech, helping other farmers make decisions about their most important resource, their soil. By 2009, he was ready to see for himself if there was any power in what he had been preaching. He rented 90 acres of ground from his dad and started farming his own way, including transitioning to conservation tillage. Over the years, he added more acres to his operation and more practices to those acres.

For some, the multigenerational aspect of farming can be a barrier to getting started with conservation practices, as there is pressure from the previous generations to farm 'the way we've always done it.' Dzingle said he was fortunate that he didn't have that problem, as his dad was supportive of trying out new strategies.

He quickly discovered that using conservation practices requires courage and constant learning. "If you're not messing up, you're not trying hard enough," he said. "You have to manage cover crops. I've had some bumps and bruises, but nothing that's going to make me stop trying."

By the 2020 growing season, Dzingle was all in on cover crops. He purchased a 30-foot no-till drill and significantly increased the number of acres he had in cover crops. By 2021, he had enrolled in the Nebraska Soil Carbon Project, which he said has helped with seed costs.

How does he know if his investment in soil health is paying off? Other than the obvious benefits he has seen year after year including improved soil structure and infiltration rates, the proof is in the lab results. He samples annually and has seen a steady increase in soil organic matter. He also bases his fertilizer strategy on what the test results tell him he already has available in the soil. After all, fertilizer is expensive, and since his goal is to get the most return with the least investment, it makes sense to add only as much nitrogen as is needed.

These continuous improvements motivate Dzingle to do more for the soil. In the upcoming year, he plans to move from a single species cover crop to a multi-species mix. Eventually, he plans to integrate livestock into the operation.




"Most are hesitant to step outside the boundaries of conventional agriculture," he said. But as for him, "It feels good to work with nature and getting the soil back to a healthy state while improving yields with less inputs."

LEFT: Cover crops on TNC land along the Platte River. © Jacob Fritton/TNC
RIGHT: Todd Dzingle at a Nebraska Soil Carbon Project Field Day. © Jill Wells/TNC

OUR MISSION:

TO CONSERVE THE LANDS
AND WATERS ON WHICH
ALL LIFE DEPENDS.



 [facebook/NatureConservancyNebraska](https://www.facebook.com/NatureConservancyNebraska)  [Instagram/nature_ne](https://www.instagram.com/nature_ne)
 [Twitter/@nature_neb](https://twitter.com/nature_neb)

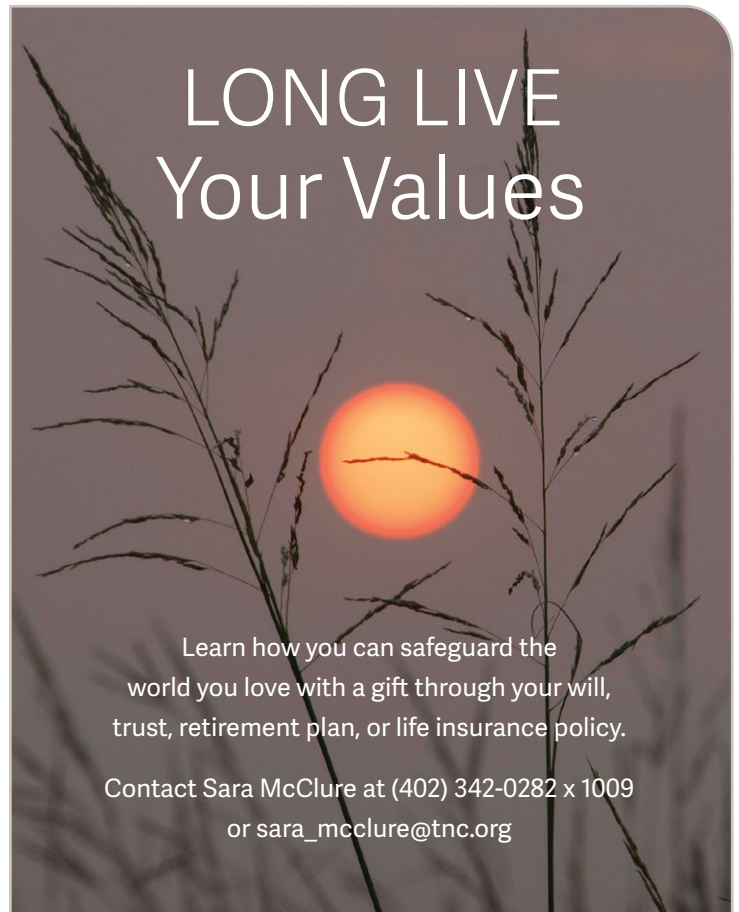
© Chris Helzer/TNC



We are looking for friends who would like to help out with stewardship tasks like seed collection, invasive species removal, and other important jobs to keep our prairies chirping and humming.

Upcoming 2024 dates are:	June 29	September 7
June 1	July 27	September 21
June 15	August 10	October 5
	August 24	October 19

Volunteers meet at TNC's Derr House in Wood River, Nebraska. We work from 9:00 a.m. until noon. RSVPs are requested so that we may contact you in the event of a cancellation. Get all the details by emailing Steve Schafer (steven.schafer@tnc.org).



LONG LIVE Your Values

Learn how you can safeguard the world you love with a gift through your will, trust, retirement plan, or life insurance policy.

Contact Sara McClure at (402) 342-0282 x 1009
or sara_mcclure@tnc.org