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### Our Mobile Fire Crews

To treat more habitats with good fire, The Nature Conservancy fire crews are hitting the road. When they are not busy in their home location, they travel to help out elsewhere.

Our crews in warmer, southern areas head north after they wrap up their fire seasons to help with prescribed fires in cooler areas. Or if a planned burn day is canceled due to bad weather, the crew may drive a few hours to assist with a burn where the weather is good. Our crews are also supporting our partners, including the National Forest Service and Indigenous communities, with prescribed burns to help restore the lands they manage.

By going mobile, our fire crews are increasing the total number of acres we treat with good fire. A small crew may only be able to treat 20 acres with prescribed fire. With the help of additional crew members, they may burn 200 acres.



A Midwest landscape greens up quickly after a prescribed fire. © Charles Larry

## The Magic of Prescribed Fire

Midwest habitats depend on fire to survive and thrive

Picture a dense forest choked and tangled with invasive shrubs and plants like buckthorn and honeysuckle. Hikers would need saws and loppers to clear a path. Meanwhile, native plants and tree saplings struggle to grow, starved for sunlight under layers of fallen leaves and branches. One spark could easily start a devastating wildfire.

Then a fire crew arrives to set a prescribed fire, or an intentional, carefully monitored burn. The fire moves across the forest floor, clearing away invasive shrubs and plants, as well as debris that could help wildfires to spread.

Months later, the transformation is striking. Charred ground gives way to fresh green shoots. Mature trees are mostly unscathed. Wildflowers bloom, tree saplings stretch upward, and a variety of wildlife forages and nests. “Fire acts as a reset button on Midwest prairies, wetlands and other ecosystems,” says Jeffery Walk, TNC’s Midwest strategy director, *Leveraging Our Lands*.



### Midwest Wildlife that Rely on Fire

Discover Midwest species—from ground bees and lark sparrows to jack pines and wild blue lupine—that have evolved to depend on fire. Plus, learn how Indigenous Peoples have used fire for thousands of years, which helped shape Midwest prairies, wetlands and other habitats.



Nathan Speagle on chainsaw © Tony Tang

## Q&A: Setting the Bar for Prescribed Fire

Nathan Speagle with TNC's Southern Illinois program

Nathan Speagle, deputy program director of The Nature Conservancy's Southern Illinois program, is very close to achieving his burn boss designation, which is like earning a doctorate in fire. In Southern Illinois, TNC owns very little land, and yet this past spring Speagle and his team burned 9,000 acres through fire assists with partners like the US Forest Service. TNC's Illinois conservation leadership has historically prioritized prescribed fire as a restoration strategy in Illinois, burning more acres per year than in the rest of TNC's Midwest division combined.

**Why is prescribed fire so important in Illinois?** Fire is an absolutely crucial part of maintaining prairies. Fire is basically the reset button on those ecosystems. That's what keeps woody trees and shrubs knocked back and keeps those prairies from converting into different ecosystems. And a lot of the plant and animal species that evolved in these ecosystems are fire adapted or fire dependent, so they need fire to complete aspects of their life cycle.

**What about the more forested parts of Illinois, like Southern Illinois?** In forested ecosystems, we're able to go in and remove some of that understory so more sunlight gets in. That way, we can start getting back some of the tree species that we want but also bring more grasses and other plants back into the mix, making it a more complete ecosystem that can sustain more species.

**What's one of your favorite things about prescribed burns?** Some of my favorite burns are what we call "first entry"—basically areas that haven't seen fire in who knows how long. That's when we get the starkest contrast. And then there are some of the burn units here in Southern Illinois where I've burned the same places five, seven times now, so you can see the long-term effects. That's what it's all about. We know we're making these ecosystems healthier and giving space for things that we want to make a comeback and really bring a lot of ecosystem benefits along with them.

## NATURE ILLINOIS

### Illinois Fire by the Numbers

7

burn bosses, the most of any Midwest state

MORE THAN

19.4K

total acres burned in 2024 (including burn assists)

6<sup>th</sup>

in the United States for total number of burns on TNC properties in 2024 (tied with Florida)

10<sup>th</sup>

in the United States in 2024 for fire assist acres

Sources: TNC data

Learn More!

[www.nature.org/illfire](http://www.nature.org/illfire)