



Conservation in Action

by Sabrina Carlson

On May 11, 2016, 50 students from Mr. Ross and Mrs. Chapman's 5th and 6th grade classes paid a visit to The Nature Conservancy Hart Prairie Preserve. This semester, the class has been studying ecology and the interconnectedness of nature. We were grateful for the opportunity to see conservation and restoration work in real life.

Once we arrived, Hart Prairie Caretaker Blair Foust came out to greet us and to give everyone a tour. We started by viewing the oldest building on the property. He shared the history of its construction and how it eventually became a barn. Being almost 150 years old now, it will soon fall apart if not restored. Blair explained the importance of preserving its historical integrity through careful restoration work. This will help keep the building strong and upright in the future.

He then led us on a hike around the property, beginning in a grove of bebb willows. Bebb willows are not a particularly rare species, but this is the largest known community of them anywhere in the world. This makes these trees special and worthy of preservation. Blair showed us how they grow and survive along a small intermittent stream fed by the property's springs. Historical photographs of this property show that the vast majority of the surrounding mountainside used to be prairie. But during the fire suppression era of the late 19th and most of the 20th century, a dense forest canopy of ponderosa pines had grown in, taking over what was previously grassland. Now, some of the restoration efforts at the preserve have been to remove the excess pines and to restore the grasslands, and the water flow to the springs.

As we continued our hike around the property, we came to visit the "grandmother's house." The story goes, that as the family on the property grew, it began to get too noisy and busy for grandma. So she built a house across the prairie away from the boisterous bunch, where she could find some quiet. The grandchildren knew to give grandmother some peace unless she rang the bell on the porch inviting them to come for a visit. The bell still stands in the same place today.

We also inspected some recently restored prairie and counted the tree rings on freshly cut pine stumps. We learned that most of the trees that have been growing there are 50-70 years old at the most. Blair explained to the students the difference between "old growth" trees, and trees that are simply large. By seeing how wide each ring was, we could indicate that these trees had received plenty of water and had grown extremely fast.



Blair explains the restoration being done on the old cabin.



Counting tree rings

After a quick stop at Aspen Island, we were able to look at a number of scientific instruments. In a small enclosure are a number of tools that Nature Conservancy scientists are using to gather data on rainfall, temperature, phenology, animal visitation and more.

We ended our tour back at the community cabin for lunch and to take in one of the most beautiful views in the world. After lunch, Mrs. Chapman gave everyone a quick art lesson on how to paint nature and landscapes. Everyone was given their own high quality art paper and watercolors, and set off to create their own masterpieces.

It was an incredible and inspiring visit, and we all left impressed and grateful for all the work being done to restore this beautiful place.



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