

Round the Year on Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary

by Judith Buhrman

Part 4: Summer

"Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun...." Noel Coward didn't include wildlife managers and amateur naturalists in this delightfully goofy song, I suppose because they defy rhythm and rhyme. Several hours post-meridian this August 5th, the sun is still a dominating presence as Sanctuary Manager Scott Hedges, Candy Weller, and I wend our way on to the prairie.

The first week of August has seen record-breaking temperatures all over the state and a continuation of a no-rain pattern. My heretofore exquisite timing has failed. I was hoping for a summer thunderstorm on the prairie, reasoning that it would be a spectacular and visceral experience, but the sky is distressingly clear.

Indeed, weather patterns have been well outside the norm. No water flows imperceptibly over the prairie, and only the lowest marshes have standing water. Groundwater is 14 inches lower than August, 1992, levels. The prairie is dry out of season. Yet none of the marvelously hardy vegetation seems stressed.

Weird weather notwithstanding, the overture to the fall extravaganza is under way. Pink and yellow are the colors of August. Patches of milkwort (*Polygala rugelii*), some a quarter-acre in size, others only a few square meters, are strewn over the prairie. Purest yellow, they grow close together, and the margins of the patches are quite distinct. Godfrey describes this species as annual, biennial, or sometimes perennial, and endemic to northeast and peninsular Florida. The flowerheads are modest in isolation, but what a gorgeous display a mass of them makes.

Two other wildflowers in this genus are plentiful this time of year — *Polygala cymosa* and *P. ramosa*. They are more randomly distributed than their gregarious relative, found among blooming toothache grass



Sabatia bertramii

(*Ctenium aromaticum*), meadow beauties (*Rhexia* spp.), and sabatias (*Sabatia grandiflora*, *S. bertramii*). The sabatias far outnumber the rhexias, and are so luminous a pink that I must finally abandon my long-standing dislike for this color. Pure pink is rare enough in nature, I think, to be startling when it manifests in swamp hibiscus (*Hibiscus grandiflorus*) or saltmarsh mallow (*Kosteletzkya virginica*). Or sabatia.

The first of the *Carphephorus* clan, *C. carnosus*, is beginning to bloom, and great drifts of white-bracted sedge (*Dichromena* spp.) sway in the gentle breeze. And here and there, slender and solitary, *Asclepias lanceolata* displays the only red to be seen, the delicate umbels seeming to float a meter or more above the ground.

The indigenous fauna has more sense than we, for there is little activity to be seen or heard as we trundle on to our day's destination. Even the usually voluble cricket frogs have little to say. We are headed for a marsh due to be reclaimed by fire from an encroaching growth of wax myrtles (*Myrica cerifera*) and bahia grass (*Paspalum notatum*), a most undesirable alien.

This is one of three marshes designated as mitigation sites for the road which is being built to allow access to the Sanctuary without trekking across private property. The road easement includes a section of wet-

land, and like everyone else, though certainly with more enthusiasm, Audubon must mitigate. Happily, active restoration of these marshes will satisfy both the law and Sanctuary management objectives.

Scott has asked us to help set the first of several transects to be used to determine the effectiveness of his efforts to restore the marsh. Feeling somewhat guilty about taking any of his time to lollygag and eager to be of assistance, we have readily agreed. And so, here we are, looking at a wax myrtle forest.

We tumble off the swamp buggy and quickly note how healthy the bahia looks. Scott opines it will not burn, and indeed, there is no dead or dry material visible. There are a few hold-out wildflowers, but most have conceded the match to the aggressive bahia. Several meters in the direction of the lower marsh, it becomes apparent this area is trying to become a hardwood forest — there are sapling bay trees (*Persea palustris*?) nestled within the voluminous skirts of the wax myrtles. Fire will take care of the woody species, but the bahia clearly poses a problem.

We work for a few hours setting the transect, cheered on (or possibly, jeered) by whistling Rufous-sided Towhees, who don't know they will soon have to find another place to live. Horseflies add interest to our labors, but as the shadows lengthen, the heat rapidly diminishes. Too soon, it is time to head back.

With the approaching dusk, the prairie comes to life. Common Nighthawks wheel and call, and once again set me looking for pig frogs with their peculiar "gronk," a display sound they supposedly make by vibrating of the primaries. Towhees, Bachman's Sparrows, and Eastern Meadowlarks provide the evensong, with an occasional and barely audible descant from Grasshopper Sparrows. Twice we encounter juvenile Grasshopper Sparrows in the road ruts. Their idea of escape is to fly a few feet down the road and duck into the sparse vegetation between the ruts,

Judith Buhrman

which gives us an opportunity to observe them at length, and confirm that they are the source of the high-pitched squeaks we have been hearing.

Too quickly the day is over. Insects and frogs take over for the birds, and it is time to go. By the time the buggy is unloaded and buttoned up, it is completely dark. We clamber into the truck for the tortuous trip back to our rendezvous point. Off the prairie and onto adjoining pasture, we begin to see fireflies, first a few, then hundreds. Scott turns off the headlights. In my imagination, I am in a spaceship sailing at relativistic speed through a distant galaxy, suns winking in and out of sight as we approach and pass them.

"I don't see them on the prairie where it's been burned," Scott says.

Remoteness is in short supply these days. If you go to the Sanctuary (by appointment only, see below), prepare yourself to experience it.

If you are a habitual watch-checker, leave your timepiece in your car. The diurnal rhythm here has nothing to do with clocks. Talking is an intrusion. Wilderness speaks softly here.

Set no goals. We find only what we look for and too frequently miss what is there.

Educate yourself. The wonder is in the details, and the more background you have, the more you will be able to assimilate what your senses perceive. And the more your sense of wonder will be engaged.

If you would like to contribute to the management fund of the Sanctuary, send a check, made out to National Audubon Society Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary Management Fund, to Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary, 17350 NW 203th Ave., Okeechobee, FL 34972. If you would like to help in other ways, or schedule a field trip, call Scott Hedges at (813) 467-8497.



Asclepias lanceolata

from *The Guide to Florida Wildflowers*, Taylor. By permission.

This is the last of a series of four articles of the seasonal changes in Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary. Author Judith Buhrman is secretary of FNPS.

Resources

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