

March 8, 2013

Denver City Council,

On February 19, I spent approximately 2 hours touring Hentzell Park with local Denver parks and prairie advocates Bob Stocker, Nancy Stocker, and Kathleen Wells. We walked through the entire southwest portion of the park, including the restored prairie and prairie dog colony in the southern extent of the park, the Cherry Creek riparian corridor, and much of the restored prairie area between Cherry Creek and the subdivision to the west. The purpose of the tour was to investigate the natural attributes of this park and assess its value as a prairie conservation area.

While areas of the park have been invaded by non-native grasses, including Crested Wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*), Smooth Brome (*Bromopsis inermis*), and Cheatgrass (*Anisantha tectorum*), I was pleased to discover a good representation of native grasses throughout the park, including Blue Grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), Buffalo-Grass (*Buchloë dactyloides*), Sideoats Grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), Sand Dropseed (*Sporobolus cryptandrus*), Three-Awn (*Aristida* sp.), Needle-and-Thread (*Hesperostipa comata*), Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), Prairie Cordgrass (*Spartina pectinata*), and Sand Bluestem (*Andropogon hallii*). In many areas of the park, native grasses or cultivars of Blue Grama and Buffalo-Grass appear to cover 50% or more of the ground area. We found significant patches of native grasses throughout the park, including a portion of the park that has been proposed for designation as a natural area.

Though our visit occurred during midwinter, we nevertheless observed a good number of native prairie forbs and shrubs, including Showy Milkweed (*Asclepias speciosa*), Pasture Sage (*Artemisia ludoviciana*), False Tarragon (*Oligosporus dracunculus*), Rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*), Prickly Pear (*Opuntia* sp.), Plains Evening-Star (*Nuttallia nuda*), and Tall Evening-Primrose (*Oenothera villosa*).

This sand prairie remnant, encompassing 30 or more acres, is one of the largest I've seen in an urban area. In comparison, the celebrated Curtis Prairie at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, advertised as the world's oldest restored prairie, encompasses about 60 acres. Iowa's Sioux City Prairie, touted as the "largest known prairie preserve within an urban environment," encompasses 150 acres. The much-publicized and visited prairie remnants at the University of Iowa encompass only about 7 acres.

In addition to its size and diversity of native grasses, Hentzell Park lies along a major riparian corridor linking other prairie remnants to the south and east with natural areas throughout

Denver. I was surprised and very pleased to see that the stretch of Cherry Creek running through the park remains in a relatively natural state, with wide meanders, sandbars, and sand banks supporting native cottonwoods, willows, and a variety of native tallgrasses. Beaver sign was apparent along the creek, and we saw Kingfishers, a variety of native songbirds, and a Sharp-shinned Hawk. The ecological mosaic created by this relatively natural stream corridor and the adjacent sand prairie and prairie dog colony provides unique and invaluable wildlife habitat within the confines of a large city.

Citizens of Denver should be proud of this remarkable prairie preserve located so close to the urban center. With continued restoration--especially planting of native bunch grasses and forbs--this park could eventually become one of the finest urban prairie preserves in all of North America.

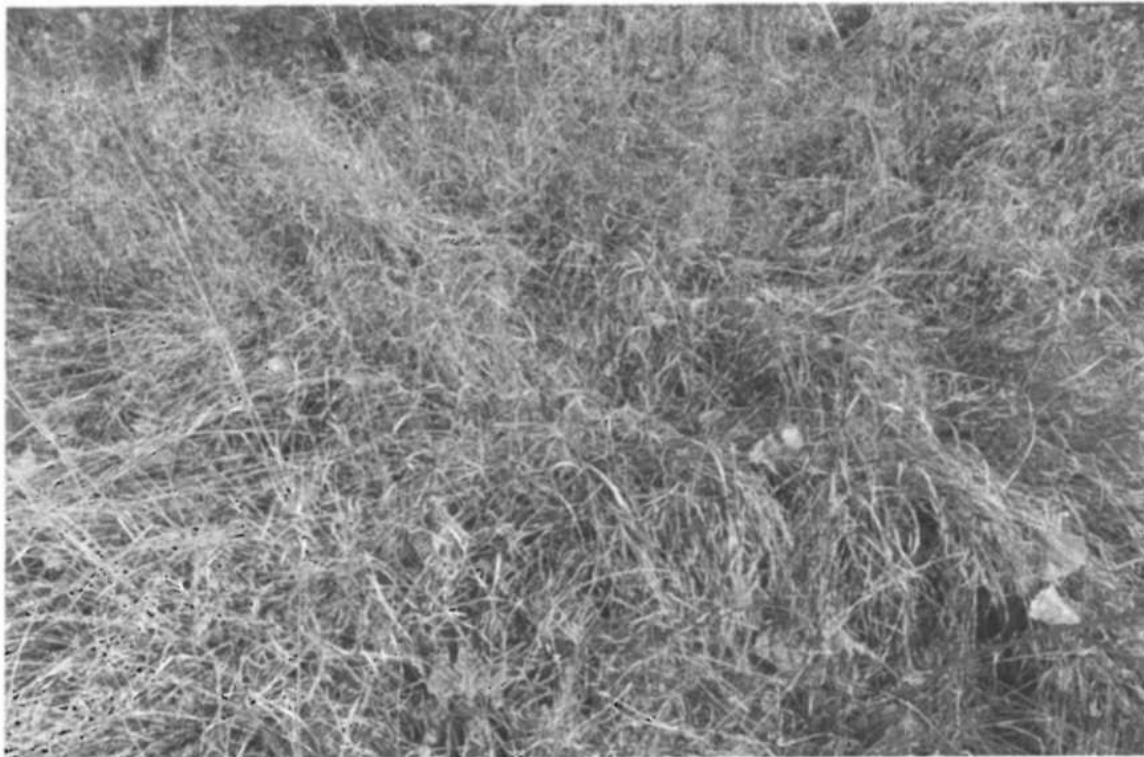
Sincerely,

Stephen R. Jones, Environmental Consultant

Author/co-author: *Peterson Field Guide to the North American Prairie*, *The Last Prairie*, *The Shortgrass Prairie*, *Colorado Nature Almanac*, *Butterflies of the Colorado Front Range*

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Shortgrass prairie (mostly blue grama and sideoats grama growing beside hiking/biking path.



Native switchgrass (one of the four tallgrass prairie dominants) growing beside Cherry Creek.



Natural meanders, sandbars, native grasses, and willows in Cherry Creek drainage.