

MACALESTER COLLEGE

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA 55105

■ DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

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Subject: The GRASSLANDS at ORDWAY.

About 30 acres (approximately 10%) of the Ordway Area consists of meadow or grassland. This part of the property is both interesting and beautiful; furthermore, its beauty is seasonal. In the springtime the awakening earth sends forth the fresh green shoots of the grasses and forbs which will cover it for one more season. It has been this way for centuries.

We are not sure just how truly representative our grasslands are. One thing is certain - the land has been utilized by man and rather intensively, too; therefore, we find many of the aspects of a "true prairie" missing or at least attenuated. Both grazing and cultivation have made profound changes from the primeval nature of the soil. As a result, the vegetative inhabitants of our grassland plots are rather different than they would be in a never-cultivated prairie. It is not the grazing which has been so hard on the land - the pre-Columbian grasslands had plenty of that from the deer, the bison and the antelope. Rather, it is the plough which has made the big difference - particularly the modern machine-operated ploughs with their ability to cut a wide swath and deep (20") furrows across the bosom of the land, thus raising to the surface the sub-surface which had lain undisturbed for so long, supporting the surface soil and nourishing its plant cover. The Ordway property has been extensively grazed and perhaps all of it has been subjected to the plough; nevertheless, we continue to scrutinize each year's upspringing plantlife for evidence of the land's return to true prairie condition. Some interesting and encouraging manifestations are developing in the seven or so years which the college has held the property. One of the more dramatic of these has been the reappearance in good quantities of bunch grasses, notably the bluestems - Big Bluestem (Andropogon girardi) and Little Bluestem (Andropogon scoparius). Another heartening indication is the disappearance from much of the area of Sweetclover (Melilotus alba), which had "invaded" the land through the encouragement of man's activities in disrupting the natural course of growth.

Despite the fact that it is not "true prairie", our meadowland is beautiful, indeed. The autumn vegetation is especially pretty when the asters and Blazing Stars contrast their deep blue with the goldenrods. Even after the flowering plants have gone to seed and surrendered to the late frosty weather the whole prairie retains a sombre beauty which persists even after the first snows - the stalks of the bluestem take on a pinkish-ochre hue producing an aura which overlies the entire landscape. Just now, though, the sun has worked its power on the ridges and south slopes and among the litter of last year's growth one finds the re-nascent signs of the oncoming season's carpet of grasses and flowers.

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