



The Katharine Ordway  
Natural History Study Area

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ORDWAY BULLETIN  
No. 84

MACALESTER  
COLLEGE

located at 9550 Inver Grove Trail (Dakota County Road 77), Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

#### PLANTS ALONG the RAILROAD at ORDWAY.

Walking along or near the railroad tracks reminds one that this "intrusion" upon the surroundings is itself interesting habitat. The plant-life along or near the tracks is quite different from that just a few meters away. In intruding upon the scene the railroads have caused the conditions for a special environment.

Prominent evidence of this different environment is the growth of various of the cereal grains - oats, wheat, rye - in those places nearest the rails. This is to be expected when one considers the number of grain-carrying freight cars which pass over the rails. The same cause brings the local pheasant and pigeon population for foraging, both winter and summer. Not infrequently one finds a flax plant in flower, its beautiful compact blue blossom in incongruous contrast against the crushed stone ballast of the railroad bed. Much more infrequent is the appearance of maize. For some reason this plant does not seem to flourish; perhaps the alkalinity of the limestone ballast makes the environment unsuitable.

The cutbanks along the railroad also present different types of environment and here one finds on the more-shaded banks the Wild Phlox and the Lead Plant in season - both plants of "the open"; on the opposite, sunny side one finds the Wild Rose (the Wrinkled Rose), Milkweeds and various members of the Helianthus genus.

Because the operation of the railroad makes it necessary that undergrowth be kept clear of the tracks one finds conditions which approximate those of the primitive grasslands - open and free: open to the sun and wind, free of the shade-effect of trees. The resulting effect on the plants is dramatic: The Wild Rose plants which grow within two or three meters of the track are truncated at about 30-38 centimeters although they proceed to flower and fruit just like their "fellow" plants further away, which attain a height of perhaps 70-75 centimeters. In places where the right-of-way widens one will find a good stand of prairie grasses, particularly the Bluestems (genus: Andropogon).

In its own, almost microcosmic way the land alongside a railroad track is very much like a reversion to the original prairie conditions for there is that natural selectivity which comes about whenever an area is freed from the effect of shade of shrubs and trees.

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Naturalist

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