

Iowa Native Plant Society Newsletter

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The Iowa Native Plant Society - Fall Meeting

by Linda Scarth

The Iowa Native Plant Society's Annual Meeting was held on Saturday November 5th which tried to be the first day of winter but was headed off by the subject of the program - Iowa Orchids: Special Flowers and Special Places. Ed Freese introduced the program presenter, Paul Whitson, Professor of Biology at the University of Northern Iowa, who outlined the history of his interest in native orchids dating back to 1981 in the Big Bend National Park. Dr. Whitson narrated the slide show which was prepared by William Witt, Richard Golz and himself.

The photography and information gathering involved traveling 14,000 miles over a five year period and yielded a set of beautiful slides showing 23 of the 31 species found in Iowa. The unique biology and ecology of many of the orchids were described by Dr. Whitson. We were all enchanted and educated as we listened and watched. It is a show well worth seeing.

The program was followed at 11:20 by the business meeting called to order by Ed Freese. Twenty-two people signed the attendance sheet though there were more in the room who missed the sheet. Highlights from the minutes include a bank balance of \$2166.10 and current paid membership of 160. There are some newsletter expenses to be paid. Roseanne Healy distributed the membership directory. The new officers were elected and committee members sought. The Iowa Native Plant Society is seeking official non-profit status.

The 1999 annual meeting may be held in conjunction with the Iowa Natural History Association and/or the Nature Conservancy. Past newsletters are available to take to distribute at appropriate meetings. The INPS display board is also available. The INPS e-mail discussion group was announced by Diana Horton. The remainder of the meeting until adjourned at 12:50 was devoted to a spirited but civil discussion of the "Proposed listing of threatened, endangered, and special concern plant species in Iowa in 1998" document written by John Pearson of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Buffalo Slough - Field-trip Report

by Ed Freese

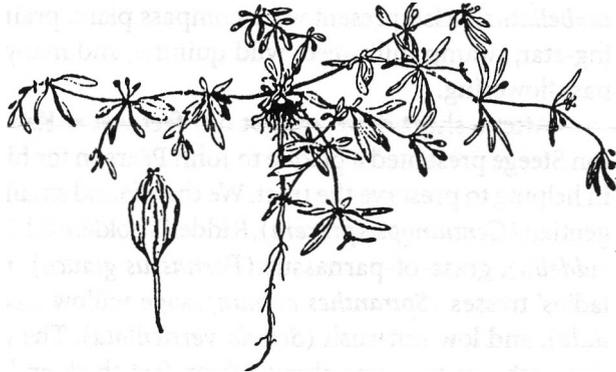
On a warm Saturday, June 13th a small group of plant enthusiasts met to continue the floristic inventory at Buffalo Slough in Mason City. The area is called a channel fen, being an old riverbed, and is surrounded by a golf course and residential lots. Field trip leaders were Jerry Selby, Bill Norris, and Mark Leoschke. The slough had been searched last year during late August, so we hoped to find early summer flora in fruit or bloom.

Searching through the vegetation, we encountered several sedge species, indicating quality wetland, such as *Carex prairea*, *C. sartwellii*, *C. interior* and *C. hystericina*. Standing tall and in flower was *greater angelica* (*Angelica*

Iowa's Sandbar Waifs

by William Norris

The INPS logo in the bannerhead of this newsletter depicts three plants - turtlehead, gray-headed coneflower and showy orchid. These were deliberately chosen to represent three major habitat types in Iowa - wetland, prairie and forest. Do these encompass all the plant communities that occur in Iowa? I'm not so sure. For instance, how would you classify old field vegetation, comprised primarily of Eurasian weeds? And how about the bizarre mixtures of plant species which occur along railroad right-of-ways? These



plant assemblages may not be of great interest to every native plant enthusiast in this state, but they exist nevertheless.

This fall, I have spent a lot of time exploring one of these plant communities which seem to defy assignment to the "big three" habitats - the sandbar plants that occur on exposed sandy shoals in the bends of many Iowa rivers. The plants that reside here are certainly opportunists, for their very existence is dependent on the whim and fancy of Iowa's many waterways. I suspect that these plants had a tough go of it during the great flood of 1993, since most sand bars were "up to their necks" in water for most of that year. However, 1998 was a good year for finding these plants where I



live because many sandbars in central Iowa were exposed during the late summer and early fall months.

I have managed to convince some friends to accompany me on several forays to sandbar habitats this year. On one trip, led by fellow plant enthusiast Jimmie Thompson,

we put on rubber boots and walked/waded/splashed our way along Squaw Creek just northwest of Ames to reach these habitats. On the other, I was provided expert guide service by Dr. Jim Colbert of the ISU Botany Department on a four mile canoe ride along the Skunk River. Which mode of travel did I prefer? BOTH!!



Should you decide to embark on your own sandbar expedition next year, expect to find a lot of "weedy" plants. Cocklebur (*Xanthium strumarium*) seems to find sandbar life quite appealing, as does redroot (*Amaranthus rudis*) and various species of goosefoot (*Chenopodium* sp.) One ubiquitous exotic plant of sandbars is carpetweed, *Mollugo verticillata*. This prostrate plant is easily confused with various bedstraw (*Galium*) species, but it is not closely related. Carpetweed is, in fact, the sole Iowa representative of the Aizoaceae, a family which reaches peaks of diversity in far-off places like South Africa. Many of us probably have purchased "living stones" (*Lithops*) at some succulent show or greenhouse. Guess what? Same family!

Another very common plant in sandbar habitats is an inconspicuous grass - pony grass (*Eragrostis hypnoides*). To the untrained eye, this grass is virtually characterless. Indeed, to the trained, the same can also be said. If you happen to visit a sandbar late in the field season and see a dwarf, sprawling grass rooting at the nodes and no other name occurs to you, it is probably pony grass.

Of major interest to me are several tiny sedges in which seem to reach the peak of their abundance on sandbars. These are the umbrella sedges in the genus *Cyperus*. Two species can be routinely found in this habitat - *Cyperus aristatus* and *C. rivularis*. They are easily distinguished because spikelets in the former species have obviously recurved scales while the spikelets of the latter are very, very flat. Usually, these species reach no more than nine or ten inches in height.

Finally, the "queen of the sandbar", in my mind, is a very diminutive sedge with no common name; *Hemicarpha micrantha*, to which the two umbrella sedges mentioned previously are giants in comparison. This sedge has tiny, pine cone-like spikelets emerging laterally from its shoots. It really is necessary to get down on hands and knees and pull out a hand lens to observe this plant. Eilers and Roosa de-

clare that *Hemicarpha* is rare in north-central and northeast Iowa, and infrequent in the southeast part of the state. I suspect that this plant is more common than is currently realized. For instance, Jimmie Thompson has recently found a population of hundreds of plants in Boone County. So, here is the opportunity for all you native plant enthusiasts to get out and pick up some county records!

What are the lifestyles of these sandbar residents? Are they nomadic, dispersed from site to site every year via wind, water and bird foot? Or do some manage to persist as seeds in the sand and stick up their diminutive shoots whenever current water levels permit it? These remain unsolved mysteries (at least to me). I hope that I have piqued the interest of some of you and that you'll venture out during the summer and autumn months next year to feel the sand grains between your toes while carefully stooping over to observe some of these sandbar waifs.

(All illustrations accompanying this article are borrowed from a classic book, "A Manual of Aquatic Plants" by Norman C. Fassett, except for the line drawing of *Mollugo verticillata* which is taken from an equally classic book, "New Britton and Brown Illustrated Flora" volume II).



Prairie Restoration Workday

by Tom Rosburg

On Saturday Oct. 24, three members of the INPS joined forces with eight members of the Volunteer Conservation Corps out of Omaha to cut trees on a site for *Lomatium foeniculaceum* (biscuit root) in the Loess Hills near Thurman Iowa. Our goal was to clear an area where biscuit root was observed 3-4 years ago near the bottom of the steep western bluffline. We started at the very bottom of the bluff along the road and cut a swathe about 50 yards wide up the bluff. The trees that were cut as we worked up the hill were hauled to the bottom of the bluff and piled up along the road. The first 30-40 yards up the bluff was covered with relatively young eastern red cedars, and there was quite a bit of prairie vegetation recognizable under the canopy. This area should respond very nicely next year with prairie regrowth. At about 40 yards up the bluff, we encountered an old fenceline. Our progress was slowed on the uphill side by some dense thickets of dogwood and much larger (although fewer in number) eastern red cedars. Also by this time of day (3pm) we were beginning to feel the effects of the many trips up and down the steep slope.

Although we didn't get the swathe cut all the way through to open prairie on the uphill side of the bluff, we made an impressive dent in the woody encroachment on the bluff. I anticipate another workday (not INPS) before next spring to try to finish clearing the swathe so that more of the biscuit root population will benefit. Check future newsletters for announcements for an opportunity to work on this long-term project.

Membership/Change of Address Form and Survey:

Your input and support of the Iowa Native Plant Society are important:

Please complete and send with your 1998 dues of \$10 to Mary Brown, 330 Windsor Dr., Iowa City, IA 52245.

Name. _____

Address: _____

Phone # () _____

email address/web site: _____

Additional information or special interests for member directory entry: _____

Mark this box if you DO NOT wish this information published in the INPS member directory. The INPS mail list is **never** distributed to other organizations or companies. Dues are payable on a calendar year basis, from January 1st to December 31st. Use this form for change of address. INPS form: NOV. 1997