

Working for Pollinators at Cecil M. Harden Lake

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Prairies have always been a symbol of the Midwest and a part of Indiana's natural history. In pre-settlement times, tall-grass prairies occurred in a vast area which extended from Iowa and Missouri to central Ohio. Indiana constituted approximately 15% of this area, with prairies that were concentrated in the northwest and west-central portions of the state. Today, fewer than 1% of these areas remain due to drainage, urbanization and agriculture. While a few large prairies in Indiana have been preserved, most of those remaining are small remnants found in areas left unplowed or undeveloped.

In response to the dwindling amount of prairie habitat in Indiana, as well as the recent USACE pollinator initiative, the staff at Cecil M. Harden Lake made it a priority to restore and expand upon prairie and pollinator friendly plantings over the past two years. In the spring of 2020, wet conditions and onsite staffing issues due to Covid-19 halted pollinator progress. However, staff were eager to begin working on the sites once again this year. Several sites were burned with prescribed fire, while others were planted.

A seed drill, donated by partners from the Indiana Chapter of Pheasants and Quail Forever, was used to plant over 6 acres.

Within those 6 acres, close to 80 pounds of seed consisting of over 27 different species of native forbs and grasses including Purple Coneflower, Common Milkweed, American Senna, Partridge Pea, Indian Grass, and both Little and Big Bluestem were planted. Prior to seeding, the sites were cultivated with the use of both mechanical and chemical means in order to better prepare the soil and help combat the presence of the noxious weeds and invasives that once grew rampant there.



Photos Upper Right Block: (Top) A view from atop the Cecil M. Harden Lake Dam during the planting of one prairie plot. (Bottom) An early spring prescribed burn being conducted on a small plot. **Photos Bottom Block:** (Top) First year prairie planting after mowing to a height of 10" in order to help combat noxious weeds and invasive plants. (Middle Left) Bumble Bees rest on a Purple Coneflower. (Middle) Bumble Bee rests on a Daisy Fleabane flower. (Middle Right) An assortment of native warm season grasses, purple coneflower, and purple bergamot in an established prairie plot. (Bottom) A mature, well established prairie plot in full summer bloom.

In total, more than 10 acres of warm season grasses, fescue, and noxious weeds are slowly being transformed into diverse plots of native forbs and grasses. When working with native plantings, both patience and persistence are needed. The rule of thumb for most native plants is “sleep, creep, leap.” The first year the plants sleep, the second year they creep, and the third year they leap. Thus, it typically takes several years for efforts to be truly realized and appreciated. The 10+ acres are spread across seven different sites at Cecil M. Harden Lake with the majority of sites below the dam. Once established, these plots will offer a spectacular view from atop the dam of an array of color and life for those recreating at the project.