



*Tom Lerczak (left) and Maury Brucker first meet at Hopewell in October 1997
(Photo by Emiko Yang)*

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Protecting Hopewell Hill Prairies

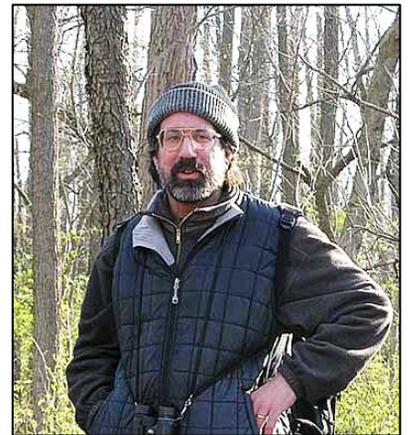
By Thomas V. Lerczak, Illinois Nature Preserves Commission

In the late summer of 1997, I had been working for the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission only a little over one year. In that busy first year, I spent most of my time becoming familiar with natural areas in the 16 counties for which I was assigned in central Illinois and meeting their owners. Occasionally I would receive a call from a landowner describing an old-growth forest or high-quality prairie, asking me to see their “natural area,” and wondering about permanent preservation and tax reductions.

Typically, though, after seeing a site, the meeting ended with a note of disappointment after my determination that their forest

was not really that old or undisturbed, or the prairie was simply an old field with a few common prairie grasses.

So when Maury Brucker called sometime in the early fall of 1997 and described a land acquisition he recently completed with Emiko Yang, which he said contained a small high-quality hill prairie, I was slightly skeptical. Yet even so, from what I could gather from our conversation, his prairie was within Marshall County’s 78-acre Hopewell Estates Hill Prairies Natural Area (as identified in the original Illinois Natural Areas Inventory in 1977), which raised the possibility that he could own



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part of the 2 acres of high-quality glacial drift hill prairie that was known to be within the privately owned natural area. And he sounded sensible and convincing. So I thought that a site visit might be worth my time. It was also fortunate that in those days I remained rather more unfettered than today and more able to follow leads, as I was not yet constrained by shrinking budgets or nearly buried in a pile of half-completed preservation proposals, management plans, and other administrative paperwork.

When I saw Maury and Emiko's hill prairie, though, I immediately knew that I had made the right decision. For not only was it obviously a high-quality glacial drift hill prairie—though woody encroachment was occurring and exotic species were present—it was the largest and best hill

prairie opening within the entire Hopewell Estates Hill Prairies Natural Area, which remained completely unprotected. I was looking at gold, and was only barely able to contain my enthusiasm.

After that first meeting, we wasted no time: we conducted the first prescribed fire on November 20th, and the Commission dedicated the first of several lots (1.26 acres) within the Village of Hopewell the following May as the Hopewell Hill Prairies Nature Preserve. By 2012, seven lots totaling 11.0 acres had been dedicated. And with a consistent application of restoration management techniques, the natural quality of the hill prairie openings and surrounding woodlands has continued to improve. Though one might reasonably say that 11.0 acres is quite small for us to



The first prescribed fire at Hopewell Hill Prairies on November 20, 1997.
(Photo by Emiko Yang)



Hopewell Hill Prairies Nature Preserve, June 17, 2010
(Photo by T.V. Lerczak)

be so excited, and not all of this acreage is hill prairie, it should be noted that hill prairies do tend to be small, and on the original Illinois Natural Areas Inventory, only 34 acres of high-quality glacial drift hill prairie existed over the entire state.

But even with these successes, now is not a time for relaxation. In fact, we can never relax. If management, such as exotic species control and prescribed fire, were to discontinue for any significant length of time, woody plants and exotic species would inevitably gain a better foothold and begin taking over the prairie just as they had before. For example, surrounding

forests are loaded with the bird-dispersed, non-native bush honeysuckle, which can spread quickly over an unmanaged landscape.

I might be busier with office work these days than I was in 1997, but when an unfamiliar landowner calls and says I simply must see the prairie on the old family farm or in the corner of a subdivision lot, I hope that one of my options continues to be to glance quickly at my stack of unfinished reports, click “Shut Down” on the computer screen, and head for my truck. That is, after all, the reason I am here in the first place.

The mission of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC) is to assist private and public landowners in protecting high quality natural areas and habitats of endangered and threatened species in perpetuity, through voluntary dedication or registration of such lands into the Illinois Nature Preserves System. The Commission promotes the preservation of these significant lands and provides leadership in their stewardship, management and protection.