

Conservation Corner

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I trust everyone had a good Easter weekend. Did anyone plant potatoes on Good Friday? Did you wake up early on Holy Saturday to watch the third blood moon event in the 2014-15 Tetrad of four successive total lunar eclipses? Did you dye eggs for the grandkids' Easter baskets and celebrate Easter Sunday with family and friends? Easter and spring – a season of rebirth, regeneration, and resurrection – a chance for new beginnings for each of us.

Here in the prairie pothole region, nature is also entering a season of new beginnings. Winter is but a fleeting memory of bitter cold, colorless landscapes, and bleak loneliness. Suddenly, all that has changed. The winter winds have shifted and softened – spring has arrived on the prairie and its annual miracle of rebirth, regeneration, and resurrection is under way. Wildlife awakens from its winter sleep, migrators return from the south, and a faint green tinge appears across the prairie.

Iowa prairie life has endured winter and celebrated spring for the past 10,000 years. Following the retreat of the most recent glaciers, Iowa's warm, dry climate favored the establishment of prairie plants with massive root systems. Once established, these plants held their ground. Did you know two-thirds of a prairie's biomass is underground?

For the past 10,000 years Iowa's prairies have also been regenerated by fire. Historically, American Indians used fire to keep out invasive shrubs and trees, enrich the soil, and stimulate regrowth in order to help attract bison to northwest Iowa. Early settlers used fire to keep their pastures open and healthy. Today farmers and land managers still include fire as a safe, cost-effective way to revitalize pastures, prairies, and brushlands.

Fire is often called nature's "gardener." Following a fire, the blackened soil absorbs sunlight, warming the soil and encouraging seed germination. The charred plant material acts as a fertilizer, returning the nutrients locked in the cover litter to the soil while encouraging new growth from the prairie's extensive root system. In Laos, the native people and our son Neil use the same principle to revitalize their gardens, burning rice hulls on top of garden plots to enrich the soil.

Fire also helps improve wildlife habitat. The enriched soil promotes flower, seed, and fruit production as well as insect diversity and numbers – both important food sources for game and nongame birds and their young each spring season. Wildlife requiring open areas such as bluebirds, bobolinks, and sharp-tailed grouse often benefit the most.

Before conducting controlled burns on Conservation land, detailed burn plans are carefully prepared that include a specific objective, specific area, appropriate weather, and correct time of year as well as necessary fire control equipment and fire crews. Remember, while fire may be beneficial, we also need to recognize and respect fire's changeable nature and destructive force.

Recently there have been many controlled burns in the countryside. As we watch the fires transform the landscape, may their smoke signal the start of a new season and the promise of new beginnings and new life on the prairie.

