

Prescribed Burns – Spring 2015

The Landscape Plan for the Rt. Hon. Herb Gray Parkway features an overall Carolinian theme, focusing on preservation, protection and expansion of Tallgrass Prairie ecosystems and Oak Savannah habitats. Prescribed burns – deliberately set, carefully controlled and closely monitored fires – are the most effective management tool for Tallgrass Prairie maintenance, conservation and restoration.

The spring 2015 Parkway prescribed burns will be completed by April 17, 2015, in the following areas:

- Chappus restoration area (numerous sites between Malden and Matchette Roads, north of Armanda Road)
- on the south side of Highway 3 (LaSalle) between the Grand Marais Drain and Todd Lane.

Since spring 2012, approximately 20 hectares of Tallgrass Prairie associated with the Parkway have been burned. In these sites, we have found an increase in high quality prairie species, not previously found in these locations. This includes the Purple Twayblade, a rare orchid listed as a threatened species under Ontario's *Endangered Species Act, 2007* (ESA). Photos and videos of the burns and before and after photos are posted on our Flickr (www.flickr.com/hgparkway) and YouTube (www.youtube.com/hgparkway) pages.

The Importance of Tallgrass Prairie and Oak Savannah

Tallgrass Prairie and Oak Savannah ecosystems in Windsor are grasslands with a high diversity of plants, birds, mammals and insects, including a number of species that are considered to be rare, threatened or endangered in Ontario. Tallgrass Prairie and Oak Savannah are among the most endangered ecosystems in Canada with less than one per cent of their original extent remaining. Windsor's Ojibway Prairie Complex is one of the largest protected prairie complexes in Ontario. The remaining prairie sites in Windsor and Essex County contain more species at risk than anywhere else in Ontario, outside of Walpole Island.

Why Fire is Essential for Tallgrass Prairie Habitats

Prescribed burns are carried out on a regular basis throughout Windsor and Essex County for the purpose of restoration and management of Tallgrass Prairie habitats.

Without a regular fire regime, over time, woody vegetation will displace prairie plants. Fire leaves the ground covered with black ash. This warms the soil and stimulates the germination and growth of deeply rooted native prairie plants. It also removes less fire-tolerant invasive species which are not part of a prairie community.

Controlling the Burns

All species at risk work is conducted in accordance with permits issued under the *Endangered Species Act, 2007*. A detailed burn plan has been prepared for each block of Tallgrass Prairie to be burned.

Wildfire Specialists Inc. is conducting the burns on behalf of the Windsor Essex Mobility Group (WEMG) and Parkway Infrastructure Constructors (PIC). PIC has obtained a permit to proceed from the City of Windsor Fire Prevention Officer. Wildfire Specialists Inc. has conducted all the burns for the Parkway.

The spread of fire and smoke will be controlled by ensuring that burns take place only when the weather, wind speed and direction, and atmospheric conditions specified in the detailed burn plans are present. This means that although several Tallgrass Prairie patches have been identified for the burning period, it may not be possible to complete all of the prescribed burns this season.

Each burn is expected to last for a maximum of 20 minutes. The burn patch will then be monitored until the burn is declared out by the lead burn expert, known as the burn boss.

Safety is the central focus for prescribed burns. The Parkway burns are considered to be low complexity because the individual patches being burned are small, the fuel load is low, and the expected burn time for each patch is short. As with any burn, the highest safety measures are being employed.

A number of steps are taken on the day that it has been determined that a burn can take place.

- A briefing is held for all on-site trained staff, local Emergency Service Providers and other key personnel. An overview of the operation, equipment, escape routes, safety zones, communications procedures, ignition and suppression plans and anticipated fire behaviour is provided.
- This site is reviewed to ensure all combustible material has been cleared from the boundaries of the burn patch, exclusion fencing is erected and other measures to mitigate the spread of fire are in place.
- Prior to ignition, burn breaks are inspected to ensure there is fire control at the edges of each burn block and the crew does not move to the next block until all fires are out.
- Species at risk specialists inspect the site immediately prior to the burn and are on-site during the burn.
- The equipment on hand includes drip torches (a handheld incendiary device that releases slow-burning flaming fuel at a predetermined rate), fuses, walkie-talkies, backpack pumps (a portable water container equipped with a hand pump and backpack straps carried on the back of firefighters, used for applying water during fire suppression), shovels, and first aid kits.

Frequency and Timing of Burns

Prescribed burns are an ongoing management technique to maintain healthy, functioning prairie ecosystems. Rather than prescribing a burning frequency (for example, every two years), the timing for burns will be determined and adapted based on management objectives and site-specific conditions. Generally, as the prairie community matures, the fire frequency can be reduced. Using a combination of spring and fall burns is expected to promote the highest possible diversity of prairie species.

More information

The Ojibway Nature Centre (5200 Matchette Road, Windsor) and Canada South Science City (930 Marion Avenue, Windsor) have valuable information on display about the Carolinian and Tallgrass Prairie ecosystems and the need for prescribed burns.

If the public has any concerns regarding prescribed burns or other aspects of the Parkway, please contact or visit the Public Liaison Office at 1-877-937-5929, 2187 Huron Church Road Suite 340, or hgp-plo@wemg.ca.

Please visit www.hgparkway.ca to learn more about the Rt. Hon. Herb Gray Parkway. Updates are posted on Twitter (www.twitter.com/hgparkway) and photos and videos are posted on Flickr (www.flickr.com/hgparkway) and YouTube (www.youtube.com/hgparkway).

Reference documents:

http://tallgrassontario.org/TS_SAR.htm

"Caring for Nature in Essex" by the Carolinian Canada Coalition

<http://www.ojibway.ca/index.htm>