

# Gentry Prairie

**DIRECTIONS:** The city of Gentry is located in Benton County along highway 59. At the intersection of highways 59 and 12, turn WEST onto 12 and proceed 0.8 miles. Just past a sharp curve note J.R. Bever Blvd. This short paved road goes through the middle of the 8 acres of prairie. The north ½ was bulldozed several years ago, but some prairie flora survived. The south ½ was less disturbed and contains the best plants.



The land is privately owned, but Mr Bever has given permission for visitors. He is also working with those, like Terry Stanfill, hoping to save this last high quality piece of native Tallgrass Prairie in the Gentry area.

**HISTORY:** The 8 acres of Gentry Prairie include the most botanically intact pieces of the historic Round Prairie in western Benton County. In his *ANNUAL REPORT OF THE GEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF ARKANSAS, VOLUME II* (published 1894), state geologist John C. Branner described the Round

Prairie as extending from what is today the Gentry area west to Cherokee City (page 2). The area described as Round Prairie was at least 4 miles long by 2.5 miles at widest. Today's community of Bloomfield is mentioned in the description. "Bloomfield" just as well described what you can see today in Gentry Prairie. The 8 acres in Gentry Prairie is all that remains of what was once roughly 10 square miles of native prairie.

**OAK BARRENS IN GENTRY'S CITY PARK:** Gentry City Park is adjacent the prairie, at mile 0.5 on highway 12. Within this park are two open, mature hardwood stands, mainly oaks. Also note the low conical rises dotted throughout, upon some of which are picnic tables. These rises are prairie mounds and they were much more common around Gentry before widespread plowing lead to the generally level fields of today. The oak barrens, as pioneers called them, were places to cut firewood, shade for animals, and often the place of choice for building a home place.



Taken together, oak barrens in City Park and adjacent Gentry Prairie preserve important elements of an ecosystem upon which the entire modern community is built.



**BIRDING AROUND GENTRY:** To a great extent, comments about birding in this area of Benton County are covered in the guide for EAGLE WATCH NATURE TRAIL, an Important Bird Area located less than 2 miles west on highway 12. The area at Eagle Watch was also part of the former Round Prairie. Another guide, also on the NWAAS site, includes more local birding information: GENTRY AND ROUND PRAIRIE INCLUDING SAFARI AND FLOYD MOORE ROAD.



Tallgrass Prairie habitat at Gentry Prairie and open oak woodland-barrens habitat in adjacent City Park provide access to common birds and especially, to become familiar with the habitats native to this

region of the Ozarks.

**A MID-SUMMER VISIT TO GENTRY PRAIRIE:** On July 15, 2013, I had the outstanding good fortune to run into Terry Stanfill at Eagle Watch Nature Trail. He was parked under the shade of a giant old hackberry



tree while waiting to drive to a meeting with botanists Burnetta Hinterthuer and Steve Smith. They had agreed to start a botanical survey of Gentry Prairie. I was invited!

As mentioned above, the 8 acres in Gentry Prairie constitute the most intact parcel of what was approximately 10 square miles of native Tallgrass Prairie extending west to Cherokee City. Most of that is gone, but you get a sense of past days. Gentry Prairie is today covered with those 4-foot tall purple wands called blazing stars, brilliant yellow patches of ashy sunflower, and white masses of mountain mint, with lots of plants in between, including clumps of little bluestem grass.

Terry has volunteered to head up an effort to acquire these 8 acres from a willing seller. He wants to make it into Arkansas's newest natural area.

You just *gotta* appreciate a guy like Terry. He is a retired chemist from the SWEPCO electric generating plant in Gentry. In retirement, he could just sit on the porch of his home down in Coon Hollow north of Gentry and let the rest of us fight our own battles for the protection of native birds and plants, and quality habitat for all wildlife, and for places where school kids can learn firsthand about their natural heritage. Instead, he keeps up the effort at Eagle Watch and now heads up the effort to acquire and protect this last high quality patch of prairie at Gentry.



Terry represents responsible civic activism at its very best. He knows this is all that is left and he wants folks in the future to have a chance to learn about the natural history of western Benton County. Today that effort involves getting the professional botanists out in the field. That's why he has invited Burnetta and Steve.

Burnetta is an old friend of mine and I have been out in the field following her botanizing elsewhere, too. Besides being a botanist and consultant to private and public agencies, she teaches at Northwest Arkansas Community College, is a proud mother and grandmother, and folk musician with the group Steve and the Recliners.

She and Steve Smith are identifying and cataloguing plants at Gentry Prairie today. Some go on the list right away, samples of others collected for identification later. Scientific knowledge gained in this way will be passed on to others, including school students in Gentry. This how we learn the enduring facts about the world upon which our lives depend.

The Tallgrass Prairie is at its peak in mid-July. I had binoculars with me – Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Northern Mockingbirds, a Red-tailed Hawk chased by American Crows and later by the scissor-tails. An Indigo Bunting sang the entire time we were out there. Terry found a nest in dense vegetation near a ditch that must have been that of nearby Red-winged Blackbirds. An Eastern Wood-Pewee called from the adjacent oak barrens in City Park.

It is easy to see just how fabulous the old Round Prairie must have been when the settlers saw it in the early 1800s. They may not then have paid that much attention to the pollinating insects, but I did, while following Burnetta, Steve, and Terry through the prairie. The binoculars I usually use for birding are also perfect for an undisturbed viewing of bumblebees on prairie flowers, and all kinds of other very colorful, fascinating, insect pollinators.

Stout red beetles with long, segmented “horns” on a gracefully curving leaves of bluestem grass. Numerous butterfly species crowding into a patch of white flowering mountain mint.



A curious wasp investigates flowers on rattlesnake master.



I think all of this means the native insects really **LIKE** this patch of the old Round Prairie. You can **LIKE** it, too, by helping with the effort to acquire these 8 acres. Check out Gentry Prairie on *facebook*.

**GO HOGS GO!**

**SAVE GENTRY PRAIRIE!**

--prepared by Joe Neal, July 2013