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MAR 16 1995

Visitor's Guide to

## CAYLER PRAIRIE

Wildlife Management Area  
and  
State Botanical Preserve



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*Gray-Headed Coneflower*

### Location

Cayler Prairie is located six miles west of Spirit Lake on Iowa Highway 9 or four miles east of Lake Park and two miles south on a country graveled road (see map). A parking lot is provided along the county road on the southwest side of the prairie.

Welcome to Cayler Prairie, one of Iowa's largest, most varied, colorful and best known remnant native grasslands. It is a land where seem to exist only earth and sky, where grasses roll before ever-present winds much as waves at sea, a last great vestige of the sight beheld by our pioneer ancestors little more than a century ago.

Maintained today as a Wildlife Management Area, Cayler Prairie is also designated a State Botanical Preserve. The area is additionally registered as a "Natural Landmark" by the National Park Service. Cayler Prairie has been pictured in **National Geographic** and **Audubon** magazines and is popular with everyone from first-time visitors to professional botanists. Faculty and students from nearby Lakeside Laboratory, a research and learning facility supported by Iowa's large state universities, may often be found here conducting studies on many different aspects of prairie ecosystems.

The Iowa Conservation Commission hopes you will enjoy your visit to this, one of the nation's most renowned prairie preserves. If you desire more information or wish to arrange a group field trip at Cayler Prairie please contact the Wildlife Management Biologist, 507 1st Ave., Rock Rapids, Iowa 51246.

### **Visitor Safety and Protection of the Prairie**

Because of Cayler Prairie's special status and rare plantlife, certain restrictions must be enforced. Before visiting the area be sure to note the following regulations:

- Digging, picking or removing any plantlife is strictly prohibited.
- Do not disturb stakes, tags or cages set out for research purposes.
- No vehicles are permitted beyond the designated parking area.
- No camping or open fires are allowed.
- Cigarettes should be extinguished before entering to prevent wildfires.
- All litter must be removed when leaving the area.
- Large groups should stay on worn trails to safeguard vegetation.
- Hunting is permitted but hunters must abide by all above regulations and applicable hunting laws.

For your own safety stay on established trails whenever possible and watch for numerous badger holes. Bees and other stinging or biting insects are numerous but there are no poisonous snakes at Cayler Prairie.



## History and Management

Cayler Prairie was acquired by the Iowa Conservation Commission in 1960. Its 160 acres have never been plowed, although portions of the area were once used for grazing and for making native hay.

Located as it is on a hilly, glacial moraine, Cayler Prairie is a particularly diverse and unique grassland. It is situated within a region of the United States frequently referred to as the "tallgrass" prairie, but Cayler is actually a mixed prairie exhibiting typical Iowa grassland plants as well as species normally found only in drier, western or "shortgrass" prairies. This interesting association of dry-site plantlife tends to exist on the area's numerous glacial ridges and hilltops where sand or gravel dominates the soils.



*Culver's Root*

In order to manage the vegetation in its historical condition, Conservation Commission personnel annually conduct a carefully controlled, prescribed burn here. Controlled burning is necessary to replace natural prairie fires which periodically swept our prairies in pre-settlement times. Without such burning, grasslands would gradually succumb to invasion by trees and brush, resulting in eventual loss of native grassland species. Only a portion of the prairie is burned, with a different segment prescribed each spring. This procedure leaves a majority of the cover undisturbed to provide good nesting habitat for wildlife. Thus both the goals of managing the animal community and the plant community are achieved.

## Plantlife

Over 265 species of plants reside at Cayler Prairie — one of the largest communities of flora known to exist on any similarly-sized tract of land in Iowa. Included are some of our rarest plants, listed as threatened or endangered species. Wildflowers may be found in bloom from April until October. Although the best show is to be seen in early August, a visit to the prairie every 2 weeks all summer long will reveal several new species flowering each time.

It is impossible to list all plant species in this brochure but the following selection will assist casual visitors in finding a few of the more important, common or showy types. In this introductory list, common names are followed by scientific names, probable best months for viewing, as well as where species might be found on the site. Months and locations are abbreviated as follows:

A = April

Au = August

M = May

S = September

J = June

U = upland

Jy = July

L = lowland

Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*); Jy-Au; U-L

Little bluestem (*Adropogon scoparius*); Au; U

Sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*); Au; U

Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*); Au-S; U-L

Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*); Au-S; U-L

Prairie cordgrass (*Spartina pectinata*); Jy-Au; L

Porcupine grass (*Stipa spartea*); M; U

### Forbes:

Thimbleweed (*Anemone cylindrica*); J-Jy; U

Pasqueflower (*Anemone patens*); A; U

Larkspur (*Delphinium virescens*); J-Jy; U-L

Tall cinquefoil (*Potentilla arguta*); J-Jy; U

Leadplant (*Amorpha canescens*); Jy-Au; U

Ground-plum (*Astragalus caryocarpus*); M; U

Canada tick-trefoil (*Desmodium canadense*); Jy; L

Purple prairie clover (*Petalostemon purpureum*); Jy-Au; U

Silverleaf psoralea (*Psoralea argophylla*); J-Jy-Au; U-L

Rattlesnake-master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*); Jy-Au; U

Golden alexanders (*Zizia aurea*); M-J; L

Downy genetian (*Gentiana puberula*); S; U

Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*); Jy; U

Prairie phlox (*Phlox pilosa*); M-J; U-L

Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*); Jy; L



Wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*); Jy-Au; U-L  
Mugwort sage (*Artemesia ludoviciana*); Au-S;  
U

Tickseed (*Coreopsis palmata*); J-Jy; U

Purple coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*); J-Jy; U

Stiff sunflower (*Helianthus laetiflorus*); Au; U

Dotted blazing-star (*Liatrus punctata*); Au; U

Gray-headed coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*); Jy-Au; U

Missouri goldenrod (*Solidago missouriensis*);  
Au-S; U

Stiff goldenrod (*Solidago rigida*); Au-S; U

(A good reference for amateur identification of almost all the forbes listed is Peterson's **A Field Guide to Wildflowers** of Northeastern and Central States.)

## Animal Life

Wildlife abounds on the prairie but it is frequently obscured by the tall, dense plantlife. Some of the more common mammals at Cayler Prairie include several species of mice, voles, and shrews; also thirteen-lined ground squirrel, badger, striped skunk, cottontail, white-tailed jackrabbit, and red fox.

Birds at Cayler Prairie are typical grassland varieties. Regular nesters include ring-necked pheasants, gray partridge, killdeer, mourning doves, common nighthawks, horned larks, sedge wrens, bobolinks, western meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds, American goldfinches, savannah sparrows, grasshopper sparrows, vesper sparrows, and the endangered upland sandpipers. Unusual migrants, some of which might rarely nest, include northern harriers, water pipits, LeConte's sparrows, and chestnut-collared longspurs. Long-billed curlews and prairie chickens once nested here but are now extirpated in Iowa. Burrowing owls, also extirpated as nesters, have again been sighted in the vicinity of Cayler Prairie in recent years but have not been verified as nesting.

Reptiles and amphibians are seldom seen, but several varieties live here, and all are harmless. Insect life is abundant and forms complex relationships with plantlife in need of pollination. Most readily seen are several varieties of moths, butterflies, bees, and ants. One of the conspicuous features of Cayler Prairie is its large mounds constructed by harvester ants. These colonies may be more than a foot high and as much as 3 feet in diameter. Harvester ants may inhabit such mounds for decades.

As is probably evident to even first-time prairie visitors, this vast assemblage of plant and animal life is

one of nature's great wonders. Although its complex ecological relations are not completely known even to scientists, good texts do exist that explain prairies in more simple terms for lay people. If you are interested in reading a most interesting introduction to our native grasslands, David Costello's **The Prairie World** is highly recommended.

### Reliving the Past

Cayler Prairie might be thought of as a living museum. Here it is possible for visitors to walk through native plantlife reaching waist-high or more and, in the prairie's grassy swales, even lose all sight of our modern world. With warm prairie winds masking distant noises, one can step back in time and actually experience some of the sensations that early pioneers must have known. You might almost expect to look up and sight a herd of bison wandering the horizon or an elk contentedly grazing on lush grasses.

Few other locations in Iowa have such a vestige of primal wilderness still remaining, a veritable grassland sea. Cayler Prairie will, under careful management, continue to preserve this valued reminder of Iowa's once vast, grassy landscape.

