

NEWSLETTER

Members work the annual MDC Furbearer Survey



Turkey tracks in an Andrew Co. furbearer station

Story by Kathy Bunse
Photos by various contributors

Nine members of the Loess Hills chapter participated in MDC's annual Furbearer Sign Station Survey. The project began in 1977 in order to collect population trend information for Missouri's furbearing species. During September and October data is collected in 25 counties throughout the state. However, 2020 is only the second year that volunteers have been enlisted for the annual event.

Dennis and Suzanne Rush surveyed Vernon County. Jason Simpson, Debbie Butterfield, Gerry Crawford and MaryJo Ostenberg worked in Clinton County. Jesse Nellums, Debbie's grandson, a recent graduate in wildlife conservation aided the Clinton County team. Bruce Windsor, Larry Bunse and Kathy Bunse covered Andrew County. Trevor Johannsen, an MDC wildlife biologist based in Columbia, MO, acted as coordinator. He provided online training, printed instructions, maps and other supplies for all volunteers. Each county's established route consists of 5 segments with 10 sign stations per segment for a total of 50 stations per route. Most segments run along gravel or dirt county roads.



Bruce and Larry prepare a furbearer sign station

Volunteer teams spent two days working on their routes. The first day they set up stations then revisited them on the following day. On the second day, teams identified any tracks found in the circles and recorded data. Each sign station was a 36 inch diameter circle of sifted soil, spaced 0.3 miles apart along the shoulder of the road. A fatty acid scent disk was placed at the center of each circle as an attractant. (This volunteer thought the tablets smelled like very strong cheese.) Stations alternated from the left to the right side of the road. An orange flag, indicating the segment and station number, was placed on the opposite side of the road from each station. These were vital for finding the stations the second day.

The study focused on furbearing animals such as coyotes, red and gray foxes, raccoons, striped skunks and opossum. However, other wildlife, such as deer, turkey, various birds, domestic dogs and cats could also be attracted. Volunteers consulted track guides to make positive identification. Some tracks were faint, distorted or otherwise unidentifiable. There was also the possibility that a car or road grader could drive over the circle and render the station inoperable. All of these outcomes were reported on the data sheet.

Chapter president, Bruce Windsor, commented “We thoroughly enjoyed working on the furbearer sign station project. I think the part I enjoyed working on the most was constructing the 50 sign stations. It took us a long time to get it done (over 11 hours), but it was so much fun”. He went on to say, “The second day was a little disappointing because we were unable to identify many of the tracks. We could see where various animals had come to the station, but they didn’t leave readable prints. Maybe our sifted soil was too dry. We will learn from our experience and perhaps try something different next year.”

Bruce concluded by saying, “I would encourage my fellow chapter members to consider volunteering for this project next year. It’s a great way to pick up some volunteer citizen science hours and enjoy the great outdoors.”

Dennis and Suzanne visited Vernon County twice, repeating their research on 3 of the 5 segments of their route one week later. Since their area had quite a bit of sandy soil, they took river sand, bought in Kansas City, on their second trip. They also used local sand and soil for reconstructing their stations. They were able to identify more tracks in these areas the second time. These included opossum, striped skunks, coyotes and a bobcat.

The Clinton County team reported seeing raccoon and coyote tracks. They set up their stations early in the morning and revisited them the next day at the same time. Having five members on their team made the job easier.



Raccoon prints in Vernon Co. furbearer station

All the teams agreed that they would participate again next year. Everyone enjoyed working together and being outdoors. Volunteers are already thinking about what soil mediums could be used and how to keep soil moist in order to obtain clearer tracks in the future.

In my Backyard by Bob Spurgat

Coming out of another cold NW Missouri winter, in early March, I began to think of how I would approach the annual spring clean-up of my yard. Then came COVID-19 and we were all forced to get serious about how we were going to deal with isolation and "stay-at-home" orders. Now, my chore became a way to pass confinement time in nature.

My backyard is a typical urban/suburban setting with a steep hill, dog fence and deck overlooking a dense woods. Raking is the mainstay of yard clean-up in the spring, so I was forced to concentrate on the ground while doing so. What a wealth of nature I found in or on the ground! The first and most obvious finding was dried flower heads from a nearby hydrangea bush. Then, there were the acorns of Northern Red and Bur Oaks. The fruit husks of bitternut hickory, the shells of Black Walnut and the airy seed pods of American Sycamore came next. Seed heads of Pale Purple Coneflowers that I had planted a couple years before were easy to identify. Although the grass was typically brown and drab for that time of year, the moss in a shaded part of the dog's pen looked fresh with new green growth. While sweeping the leaves and debris from my deck, I noticed small pieces of stripped bark from branches of an over-hanging hackberry tree--squirrel damage!

Since I feed the birds most of the year, I get a lot of visits from raccoons, opossum, squirrels and white-tail deer. Sometimes, I am frustrated by the fact that I seem to be feeding more animals than birds. As my father-in-law used to say, "The animals have to eat, too." Coming out my back door one day, I almost stepped on a 6' long Black Rat Snake stretched out on the sill. He/she looked as surprised to see me as I him. Although I haven't seen the snake since that first encounter, I suspect it's still around as the number of chipmunks tunneling my yard has significantly decreased.

With the coming of summer the trees have leafed out, things are greener (mostly) and flowers are in bloom. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are seen flitting from flower to flower with feverish feeding (late August) as they get ready for the long migration south. Butterflies are seen, also, with Cabbage Whites, Red-spotted Purples and Yellow Sulphurs.

Sometimes we take the day-to-day sightings of nature in our backyards for granted. With time to truly be aware of my surroundings, I've come to appreciate what goes on in my small piece of real estate. Now, if I could only get the lawn guys to quit cutting down my milkweeds!

References:

David M. Knotts and Frances Main, 2005. Fifty Common Trees of Missouri. Missouri Department of Conservation

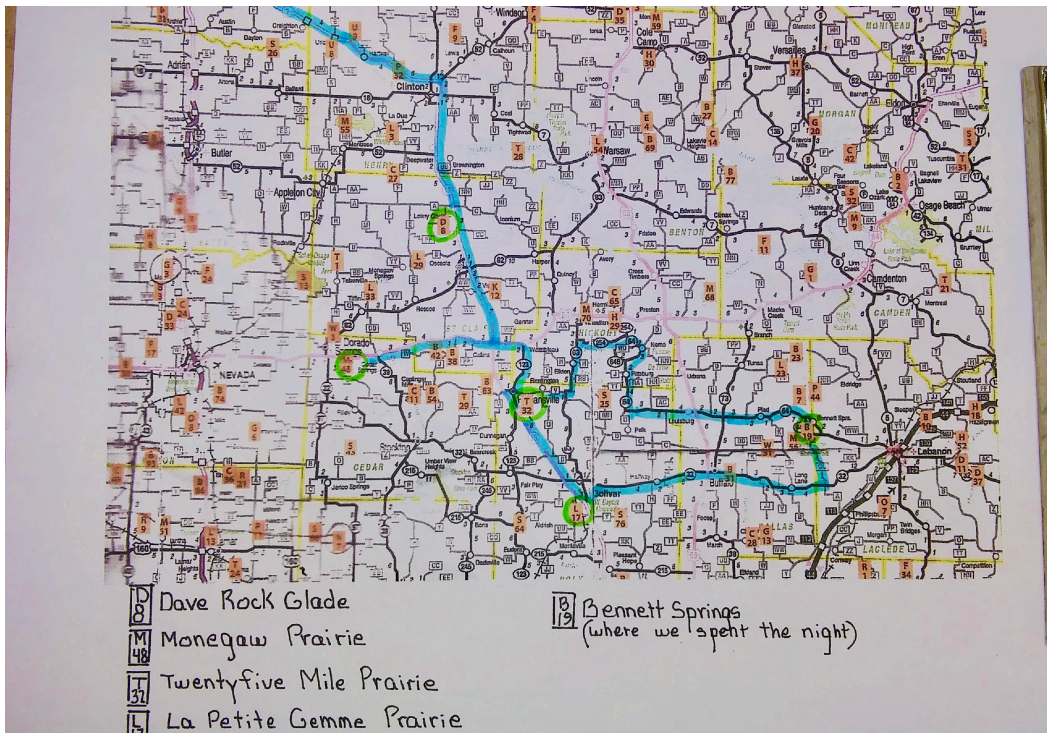
Don Kurz, 2005. Trees of Missouri, Field Guide. Missouri Department of Conservation

Betsy Betros, 2008. A Photographic Field Guide to the Butterflies in the Kansas City Region. Kansas City Star Books

Editor's note: Bob shared some of his backyard discoveries with us at the July Chapter meeting held outdoors.

Traveling this Summer by MDC Map

by Suzanne Rush



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We've always looked forward to short get-aways involving throwing binoculars, reference books, a few clothes and some food into the truck and taking off for a few days traveling backroads throughout Missouri. With the way things are these days, it has sounded even better. So, over the summer, we've headed out three times, just for a day or two. On these trips we had a planned itinerary created with the use of our 2004 DISCOVER MISSOURI map put out by MDC. This poor old map is so well used that each fold is held together by clear packing tape. I don't know if they still publish this map, but it is a fabulous source of information on over 800 Conservation Department areas with road directions to each.

Each orange rectangle on the map represents a conservation area. Each has a code. On the back of the map each code is identified. So, we checked out all the orange rectangles within the area we planned to travel and picked out those that interested us. Our itinerary was in place. Our focus for these 3 trips was SW Missouri north of Springfield. Our goal was to visit prairies and glades and become acquainted with these ecosystems, the grasses and forbs that grow there, and just revel in the amazing beauty and peace of these natural areas. All together, we visited two glades, six prairies, and three Conservation Areas. Our favorite glade was Dave Rock near Oceola. If we are allowed to congregate next spring, we hope to organize a MMN one day field trip there. It is an amazing sandstone

dome covered with a variety of mosses, lichen, succulents, etc. and bordered by sandy soil supporting some oak and hickory, little bluestem and tiny wild flowers. There are occasional circular depressions, some holding water.



Pool of water at Dave Rock Glade

Sorry, we couldn't narrow down the prairies to one favorite. We chose four: Wha-Sha-She Prairie, Twenty-five Mile Prairie, Monegaw and La Petite Gemme Prairie.

Wha-Sha-She is a nearly level, 160 acre tall grass prairie in the Osage Plains Natural Division. It is located on the KS/MO line above Joplin. While there we met a couple who have a native seed business and a contract with MDC to collect seed on this prairie. They were the Hamiltons who were featured in the August 2020 issue of THE CONSERVATIONIST in the article "Prairie Voices".

Then there was Twenty-five Mile Prairie. If we had to pick one favorite, I guess it would be this lovely shortgrass prairie near Humansville. (Yes, there is a town in MO named Humansville.) We loved this spot so much we came back again on another trip. It is 334 acres with an unbelievable variety of native wildflowers in spectacular color. Standing on the rolling hills of this prairie, color and textures, bird songs and breezes excited the senses.



Dennis beside Compass Plant at 25mi Prairie

With my field guide to common wildflowers and plants of Midwest prairies we headed out, identifying about 30 of the 180 species of forbs found on Twenty-five Mile Prairie. Sure wish Dr. Rushin had been along.

Another favorite was La Petite Gemme Prairie near Bolivar. This remnant Prairie consists of a more alkaline soil over limestone bedrock. We didn't visit here until August, the season of yellow prairie flowers. Being only 38 acres, it certainly packs a punch for its size. We missed the prime time for the unbelievable abundance of Prairie Blazing Star, but we already plan on being back next July.

Last, but not least was Monegaw Prairie, a 270 acre remnant tall grass prairie near El Dorado Springs. This vast grassland was punctuated with the yellow of Tall Coreopsis, Stiff and Tall Goldenrod, Rosinweed, and Black-eyed Susan and other late blooming wildflowers including Swamp Milkweed and Tall Green Milkweed.

I'm preaching to the choir when I tell you of the peace and joy that was ours being out wading through these magnificent natural gardens. I ran across a list of prairies in Mo by regions. In Southwest Missouri there are 58. In Northwest Missouri there are ten, right out our back door. The opportunities are amazing.

Editors note: I inquired at the MDC publication office and the 2004 MDC Discover Missouri Map is no longer in print so maybe we'll have to borrow Suzanne's.