

The first time a volunteer joins a burn crew to assist in prescribed burning, where everything is new and unknown, the experience often leaves a lasting impression. One such volunteer put his thoughts on paper with the following essay which, with his permission, is provided in full for the appreciation of both those who preceded him and those who follow. The essay, which was written after participating in a prescribed fire at Glacier Creek Preserve on 23 April 2017, placed 2nd in the “New Nature Writing Competition” and was first published in the magazine *New Nature*.

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Prairie Smoke

Written by Conor Gearin

The fire-line crept through tall grass, sneaking uphill against the wind. I lurched forward in a heavy yellow firefighting suit, carrying a long rubber swatter to smother wayward embers along the trail.

The smell of prairie smoke—carrying wildflower spice and something like burnt popcorn—embodies spring for me. Spring renews, resets plant clocks to zero. But spring fire renews in a larger sense: restarting prairie development after several years of lying dormant. An April with fire is a spring among springs, when not just plants but snakes, birds, and insects all change their relationship with their home—a new chapter in the land’s natural history.

That April was a new chapter for me, too. I was beginning a study of grassland birds. To learn more about prairie preservation, I volunteered for the Omaha Red List, which helps carry out controlled burns.

Dr. Thomas Bragg, who has managed Glacier Creek Preserve outside Omaha since the 1970s, waited for a day when smoke wouldn't drift into the new subdivision across the street. He wanted to be a good neighbor, but was itching to burn a stagnant prairie. A day came that was good enough—but not perfect. It reached 80° F, a tough day to spend velcro-d inside a flame-resistant suit and helmet.

In the morning, the wind blew away from town. Seizing our chance, we burned the largest tract, 50 acres of densely lodged grass. Dr. Bragg walked calmly along the trail, tossing flames from a metal drip torch. These flames created a backfire that traveled slowly against the wind, burning completely through the litter. Browned grass vanished, revealing basketball-sized ant mounds. Hawks cruised over the ashes for freshly cooked snakes.

A new recruit, my job was swatting stray flames left behind near the firebreak—a mowed trail at the tract's edge. I darted in, whacked at embers, and dashed back for air. I grew to like the smell of the smoke.

The wind became fickle, sometimes creating tame backfires, sometimes headfires that blazed up several feet and raced away. The firebreak snaked up the contours of a hill. Dr. Bragg's research plots, managed with scrupulous care since 1978, lay below us. I was filling in as water-hose-wielder. The wind gusted in our faces. Our new fires grew tall, threatening to jump the firebreak to the research plots. I blasted away with the hose, wetting the firebreak and suffocating feral flames. There were some tense moments—Dr. Bragg, usually jolly, worked slowly and precisely.

But we made it through that difficult stretch, finally reaching the side of the road leading to Omaha. "Hold this," said Dr. Bragg, handing me the driptorch to step over the fence. I obliged, happy to assist in small ways. "Okay, go ahead and light it," he said, to

my astonishment. I had been avoiding driptorch duty. I even had an audience: dozens of cars stopped to watch. The wind rushed at our backs. I shook the drip torch nozzle in tufts of bluestem and Indiangrass. The fire rose and roared upslope. The flames seemed to reach ten feet high. It was a fireworks show for the neighbors—perfectly safe yet deeply wild, right across from their backyards.

Fire figures into myths of initiation. That day I entered a new relationship with the land around me. Looking at a field, I saw not just which plants were there but its position in the lifecycle of growth, death, and fiery rebirth. Once I had thought I knew everything about the ecosystems around us, but a new drama within the tallgrass and wildflowers had begun revealing itself.