



## Huffman Prairie



Huffman Prairie Flying Field

### A Natural Resource



Perhaps more than any other plant community, prairies are uniquely associated with North America. Stretching from Ohio to the Rocky Mountains and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, prairies once covered almost a quarter of this continent. Today only bits and pieces of this vast sea of grass remain. One small piece is best known not for its plants, but for a revolution of wings that was launched from its soil. Two brothers ventured to this spot to turn their dream of flight into reality.

### Change in the Wind



At the turn of the nineteenth century this area looked very different than it does today. The occasional presence of standing water meant this ground was not suited for growing crops. It was used as a wet bottom-land pasture devoted to horses and cows. Standing water also cut down on the number of trees and bushes that could survive here. From the 1880s through the 1940s efforts were undertaken to drain the

prairie of standing water. This prairie, like others, is not just a place of grasses. It is home to dozens of flowering and non-flowering plants. These plants attract many other species. As a result some 80 different birds and 30 different moths and butterflies have been observed here in the last twenty years.

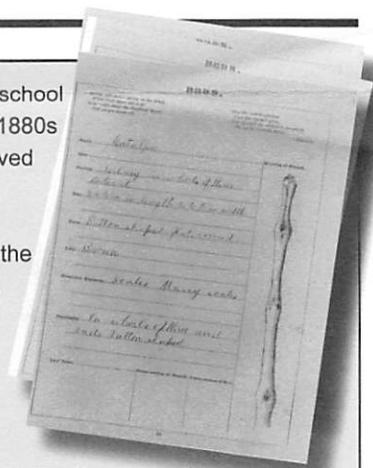
### The Science Teacher

Wilbur and Orville Wright did not just happen to this place. William Werthner, a biology teacher at Dayton's Central High School introduced Orville to the area. He led students to Huffman's prairie to study the native plants that survived in the fence rows and along road edges. Over the years those students included both Orville and his sister Katharine.

On June 21, 1904 Wilbur described the area in these terms. "We are in a large meadow of about 100 acres. It is skirted on the west and north by trees. However, this matter we do not consider anything serious. The greater troubles are the facts that in addition to cattle there have been a dozen or more horses in the pasture and as it is surrounded by barbwire fencing we have been at much trouble to get them safely away before making any trials. Also the ground is an old swamp and is filled with grassy hummocks some six inches high so that it resembles a prairie-dog town."

In the Dayton high school classes of the late 1880s I had a quiet, reserved boy, faithful in his work, but not strikingly different from the rest, named Orville Wright, whom I should have forgotten among the hundreds of yearly newcomers had not his sister Kate in after years also attended our school and told me that she was the second of her family to recite in my classes.

Orv loved that class, preserving a small notebook filled with plant descriptions and meticulous drawings of wildflowers as one of his few high school keepsakes.



William Werthner

## Restoration

At 109 acres, Huffman Prairie is one of the largest prairie remnants in the state of Ohio. Prior to 1984 the area was regularly mowed by crews from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. The mowing stopped in 1984 and the dormant prairie plants began to make their presence known, attracting the interest of area botanists. The state of Ohio named Huffman Prairie a natural landmark on February 24, 1986. Today's growth of prairie grasses and plants is the result of work by volunteers and staff from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Five Rivers Metro Parks and The Nature Conservancy. The base's efforts to restore the prairie began in 1990 and fire has been reintroduced as a management tool since 1993. Areas of the prairie have been manually cleared of shrubs and young trees and portions have been reseeded with native grasses and plants. Restoration and maintenance efforts are on-going. Without the use of fire or the physical removal of shrubs and young trees, the area could be overrun and in time become another wooded area.



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## Science Strikes Again

Huffman Prairie has always been a place for discoveries. It attracts both the professional and the amateur scientist. In 1835 and 1836 John L. Riddle published several works on plants found in Ohio and nearby states. In his writing he described some 20 species of plants that were new to science. Three of the species he described were first found at what is now called Huffman Prairie. As restoration work progressed during the 1990s native animals and insects began to find their way back. During this period, scientists working at Huffman Prairie discovered a new species of moth. *Glyphidocera wrightorum* was discovered in 1994. It was given its name in honor of the Wright brothers and the work they did here. Additionally, several state endangered species have been found on the prairie, including the Blazing Star Stem Borer which was found in 1992.



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## Reflections

Today this place affords an opportunity to explore the rich diversity that is a North American tall grass prairie. As you walk the area, look closely for the purple coneflower and the red blossoms of the royal catchfly. Watch for the swaying stalks of big bluestem and the blowing seeds of the purple milkweed. If you pause you might catch a glimpse of the bobolink, the thirteen-lined ground squirrel, or the varied patterns of the tiger swallowtail butterfly. From the dragonfly flitting above the wildflowers, to the hawks and birds above, there have always been wings here. Wilbur and Orville Wright simply added to the list that makes Huffman Prairie unique.

