

## About this poster: WET PRAIRIES

Iowa's original prairie landscape included many low, poorly drained areas. When these occurred in the open, they were dominated by grasses and sedges (grass-like plants) and were sometimes called "prairie swales." Many wet prairies were found in the transition zone between mesic prairie and marshes. Waterfowl was abundant, and the plant life included a number of wildflowers, grasses and sedges unique to this wet habitat.

Early settlers considered these wet, sometimes water-logged, areas an impediment to settlement and agriculture, so Iowa's prairie swales and other wetlands were tilled and drained. The soils proved rich, agriculture prospered, and now prairie swales – with their unique flora and fauna – are rare. But they're making a comeback. Wetlands, including prairie swales, have proven beneficial in controlling floods and improving water quality by slowing and temporarily storing stormwater runoff. For these and other ecological and economic reasons, wetlands are being restored around the state.

## THE TALLGRASS PRAIRIE

**Tallgrass prairie** is the name given to the grassland ecosystem that covered much of the Upper Midwest and most of Iowa for over 8000 years. When early French explorers emerged from the dense, hardwood forests of the East, they unexpectedly encountered large, grassy openings scattered with bur oaks and other massive-crowned trees. Traveling further west, the openings stretched into vast, treeless oceans of grasses and wildflowers which took weeks to traverse on horseback. The explorers called these grasslands "prairie."

In the eastern portion of this prairie region, there was enough annual rainfall to support tall grasses like Big bluestem and Indiangrass. These grasses grew 7 to 8 ft. tall and dominated the landscape. Further west, in the mixed-grass and shortgrass prairies, the grasses were shorter, adapting to that region's drier conditions.

When the first European settlers arrived in Iowa in the early 1800s, they too were greeted by the tallgrass prairie landscape. These prairies were composed of hundreds of plant species, including a colorful array of wildflowers that bloomed from early spring to late fall. Cougar, wolves, bears, elk and bison were among the many animals that roamed the region. Endless flocks of waterfowl, upland gamebirds and songbirds filled the prairie skies.

Along with its beauty and diversity, the early Iowa prairie held deadly perils. Fierce winter storms howled for days, and raging wildfires could overcome a person on horseback at full gallop. Though frightening, these periodic fires were beneficial to the landscape, allowing the deep-rooted prairie plants to flourish, while most invading trees and shrubs perished.

Because the first settlers found so few trees on the prairie, they assumed the soil was poor. But they soon learned the prairie had created some of the deepest, blackest, richest topsoil in the world. It was no easy feat to plow through the dense root mass of the prairie sod, but with the advent of the steel moldboard plow, the pioneers began to plow with a vengeance. Within a few short decades, one of the greatest ecosystems in the world was almost entirely converted to agricultural cropland. Of the original 30 million acres of tallgrass prairie that once covered more than 80% of Iowa, less than 0.1% remains.

## NATIVE PRAIRIE PLANTINGS

Today, prairie restorations and other native prairie plantings give 21st century Iowans a glimpse of what their state looked like when tall grasses and colorful wildflowers graced the landscape. In addition to restoring a piece of Iowa's natural heritage, these plantings are durable and long-lived – well-adapted to Iowa's climate and growing season. Because of the beneficial services prairie plantings provide, they're now planted in a variety of landscapes, including roadsides.

Iowa road departments plant native prairie vegetation for many reasons:

- Native plants are hardy perennials, adapting to a wide range of soil and moisture conditions.
- Extensive, native plant root systems provide superior erosion control.
- Deep roots and dense, above-ground foliage reduce stormwater runoff by intercepting raindrops, slowing water flow and increasing infiltration.
- Extensive roots and decaying foliage further increase stormwater infiltration by adding organic matter to the soil, making it spongier and more absorbent.
- Root systems penetrate 6-8 ft. or deeper, enabling prairie plants to survive drought and high salt concentrations.



- Extensive root systems deprive weed roots of water, nutrients and space.
- Tall prairie vegetation shades out weed seedlings.
- A wide swath of prairie grass in the right-of-way traps blowing snow, reducing the amount deposited on the road.
- Native roadside plantings provide valuable food and cover for songbirds, game birds and small mammals.
- Native roadside plantings provide important habitat for agricultural crop pollinators.
- Native plants add color and natural beauty to the right-of-way.

## The LIVING ROADWAY TRUST FUND

Recognizing the value of native plants in roadsides, the Iowa Legislature established the Living Roadway Trust Fund (LRTF) in 1989. This annual, competitive grant program provides funding for integrated roadside vegetation management (IRVM) activities, including the preservation, establishment, and maintenance of native vegetation along Iowa's roadsides. To learn more about the LRTF and the projects it funds, visit [www.iowalivingroadway.com](http://www.iowalivingroadway.com).

This poster series, illustrated by Iowa native, Mark Müller, is one of many educational tools provided by the LRTF to promote public awareness of native prairie and the benefits it provides in highway rights-of-way. Iowa residents may order a complimentary set of posters at [www.iowalivingroadway.com](http://www.iowalivingroadway.com).

