



Kansas Biological Survey

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Visitors enjoy an early autumn tour of the Rockefeller Native Prairie. KU Field Station staff hold frequent tours of the site for the public and for private groups. Inset: Many prairies historically have been maintained as hay meadows.

**The 10-acre, unplowed prairie before you** is a jewel of biodiversity. Although many of the large animals of the prairie, such as bison, are no longer present here, there still are hundreds of birds, small mammals, reptiles, insects and invertebrates associated with this prairie.

More than 200 species of native plants are found here, including several rare species. The topsoil is dark, rich and teeming with microbes (bacteria, fungi and invertebrate animals) characteristic of a healthy and sustainable ecosystem.

**Scientists study plants, animals and soils** at this site. Some studies are long-term and are needed to understand complex life cycles and processes. The native prairie also serves as a baseline for comparison with experimentally managed and restored areas.

**Remember: A native prairie ecosystem is a complex and interacting set of soils, plants and animals—not just a sea of grass.**

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Photos: Kansas Biological Survey

Among the native plant species at the Rockefeller Prairie are (top, left to right) *Rosa arkansana* (Arkansas rose), *Verbena stricta* (woolly verbena), *Ratibida pinnata* (pinnate prairie coneflower); bottom, left to right, *Asclepias viridis* (spider milkweed), *Echinacea pallida* (pale purple coneflower), and *Mimosa quadrivalvis* var. *nuttallii* (catclaw sensitivebiar).

**Why did this prairie survive when so many were lost?**

Only about 1 percent of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem remains across North America. In the 1850s, Douglas and Jefferson counties (this part of the Field Station straddles these counties) were 95 percent prairie. Today, all that remains are a few remnant prairies scattered among farm fields, woodlands and towns. What factors led to the preservation of the Rockefeller Prairie?

**Luck.** This prairie was never plowed but rather was treated as a hay meadow from about 1870 until 1956. Under this management, vegetation was harvested (cut) in the summer, cured and stored, then fed to livestock in winter. Haying preserved plant diversity.

**Foresight.** In 1956, KU professors Henry S. Fitch (namesake of the nearby Fitch Natural History Reservation) and E. Raymond Hall obtained funds from the philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr., with whom Hall had become acquainted, to acquire the 160-acre farm for the long-term study of prairie management and to preserve this prairie for future generations.

**Management.** Springtime burns at one- to three-year intervals, along with occasional mowing, have been used to maintain this prairie since 1957. Preserving this small remnant prairie for future research, education and enjoyment is the basis for the surrounding restoration efforts.