

OSAGE PRAIRIE BOTANICAL AREA

Auto tour down former Rogers-Bentonville Highway (102) August 2013



Two of the best places to go birding in northwest Arkansas include forest and springs of Lake Atalanta in Rogers and Craig State Fish Hatchery at Centerterton. Both are based upon the former Osage Prairie. Most of the obvious former prairie landscape has been altered beyond recognition, but many native prairie plants and some birds remain, testimony to the past.

If you live, visit, or work in the area of Benton County including Rogers, Bentonville, or Centerterton, you are in the former Osage Prairie – and probably you’ve never heard of it. Walmart World Headquarters – right on the old Osage Prairie. Northwest Arkansas Community College? – ditto. Bentonville airport, Searles Prairie? – all part of what more than a century ago was the Osage Prairie.

The Annual Report of the Geological Survey of Arkansas for 1894, described Osage Prairie (pages 1-2) as very roughly 13 miles east-west, but relatively narrow north-south, roughly 2.5 miles. Another way of describing this would be Rogers on the eastern end, Bentonville in the center, and Centerterton on the west. Highway 102, the old Rogers-Bentonville Highway, transects it.

The 1895 description probably underestimates extent of prairie from north to south. Even today, with extensive land use changes, it is apparent former prairie habitat extended in the south to at least Highfill-Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport in the south. Based upon 1895 description, the Osage was roughly 30 square miles; it may have been twice that. A typical prairie grid of straight roads and flat land

is visible in Google Earth aerial photographs. Presence of remnants of prairie habitat including prairie mounds and persistent plants like ashly sunflower is scattered but widespread.

Why do birders care one way or the other about a prairie that existed more than a century ago? Well, as ornithologist Doug James famously states, "Birds are distributed on the landscape according to their ecological requirements." Prairie – then and now – is important because in describing habitat, it also describes bird distribution.



The 1894 description of Osage Prairie starts with Rogers in the east. Today's Lake Atalanta in Rogers is an impoundment of at least two free flowing springs that join to form Prairie Creek, now impounded to form the lake. It is hard to see the prairie there now, but prairie plants easily seen there in 1894 remain in the park. Here are just a few examples: Gray-headed coneflower, Prairie Dock, Cup Plant, Ox-eye Sunflower, Rosinweed, Brown-eyed Susan, Prairie Rose, Shooting Star, Slender Mountain Mint, Narrow-leaf False Dragonhead, Winecup, Foxglove Beardtongue, Swamp Agimony, New Jersey Tea, Wild Senna, Hairy Wild Petunia, Ironweed (several species).

Lake Atalanta is a fine place to see birds because it combines habitats of its prairie background with that of adjacent oak-pine forests further east. The presence of the fine natural springs above the lake is also an asset in providing more ecological niches for birds.

If you leave the old Rogers downtown area and travel west on the old Rogers-Bentonville Road, now highway 102, you pass by the 8 acres of Searles Prairie Natural Area. This is the largest preserved segment of the original 30 square miles of Osage Prairie. In the middle of summer Searles has a fabulous

bloom of Big Bluestem Grass, Compass Plant, Ashy Sunflower, Rattlesnake Master, and Blazing Stars. These are the basic plants of Tallgrass Prairies everywhere. It is a high-quality, if small-in- scale, version of what the vast landscape of the former Osage Prairie must have looked like. That king of the grassland birds, Dickcissel, still finds a summer home in the preserved area.

Continuing on the old Rogers-Bentonville highway, we come to the growing campus of Northwest Arkansas Community College (NWACC). The NWAAC Nature Area Living Laboratory includes prairie mounds and a grove of mature hardwoods, mostly oaks. Prairie mounds, low and rounded like sand dunes, occur widely in northwest Arkansas, and mark out former Tallgrass Prairie habitats including those of the former Osage Prairie. Over more than a century, most of these mounds have been plowed down, but here a few remain in association with the old woodland. In pioneer times such woodlands were referred to as oak barrens.

There is an entire community of birds associated with such woodlands. Birds like Summer Tanagers, Eastern Wood-Pewees, Eastern Kingbirds, Red-tailed Hawks, and Great Horned Owls find homes there. These woodlands were formerly surrounded by open grasslands, used by Greater Prairie-Chickens, long ago extirpated from the Osage Prairie.

Beyond NWACC, and passing under I-540, highway 102 soon reaches the vicinity of the Bentonville Airport. Some 30 years ago, we used to regularly go birding in the wet fields around the north end of the runway. It was then an expansive open area, much of it a seasonal wetland covered by native hawthorns, button bushes, sedges. Nesting Willow Flycatchers, Bell's Vireos, and Painted Buntings, to name a memorable three, were attractions.



Willow Flycatchers were first described scientifically when Audubon found them in a wet prairie thicket in southeastern Arkansas. A century and a half later, due to widespread disturbance of their nesting habitat, Willows had almost totally disappeared from Arkansas as a nesting species. However, wet thickets associated with the former Osage Prairie adjacent Bentonville Airport was one of only a few places in the whole of Arkansas where Willow Flycatchers hung on.

Starting in the 1980s, commercial and population growth exploded along the 102 corridor. The wet prairie thickets of the former Osage Prairie were drained. In place of nesting Willow Flycatchers, Bell's Vireos, and Painted Buntings, we now have strip malls with storage buildings and apartment complexes.

Scattered, small relicts of the old days and old ways survive even this intense and ongoing conversion of the former Osage Prairie. Traveling west on 102 in early August 2013, Joan Reynolds and I keep spotting small, isolated patches of sawtooth sunflowers, now six feet tall, and heading for 8-10 as they start to flower. It is almost a conspiracy. A wet ditch hard to mow along the freeway ramp exhibits a dozen growing plants. A place where 6 powerline guy wires anchor into wet ground obscures big mowers. So, growing up among steel cables are sawtooth sunflowers; nobody told them it wasn't still a prairie.



Just look out the window and become a time traveler. Along 102, just past the freeway, a big field with for sale signs has been left unmowed. Up has come an almost normal-looking patch of sawtooth sunflowers, like the past century never happened. There are scattered patches of other native flowers, like slender mountain mint. An abandoned barbed wire fence is accented by scattered, brilliantly yellow, ashy sunflowers. Out there, in the field is a reminder of where we are, and not especially highway 102 in the year 2013.

Just a few miles further west, the old Rogers-Bentonville highway reaches downtown Centerton. In the 1980s, when Willow Flycatchers still nested in wet prairie thickets of the former Osage Prairie, Centerton was a village of 200 with a few crumbling buildings and a famous artesian spring. It's only real employer as such was the Arkansas Game and Fish state fish hatchery. Today there is a formidable traffic light and a McDonald's; 200 people have ballooned to 10,000+. Fish are still being reared at the hatchery.

There is more of the old prairie extending west from Centerton, but in terms of this auto tour, we're ending here. Copious supplies of clean water are required for commercial fish rearing and Centerton had this precious raw material in big gushing artesian springs. Ponds were built to trap the flows. Starting in the 1940s, the state fish hatchery began to rear channel catfish.

Catching fish in these ponds requires removing the water. The drawdowns expose mudflats, prime habitat for scores of shorebird and duck species migrating across this eastern edge of the Great Plains flyway. Centerton became so attractive to birds that it was named an Important Bird Area by Arkansas Audubon. More than 1000 birding field trips to Centerton over three decades form part of the database in National Audubon's ebird data base. You can explore these data for the American Avocets, Willets, both dowitcher species, and other migrants that have made the hatchery so important to birds, and birders.

Springs have been reduced by heavy development in the area, but flows are still evident. These nurture communities of wetland-loving plants and birds, mostly in out-of-the-way places: ditches, low fields, the odd thicket for which no economic value is yet known. They link us up with their distant past, when such places were just the wetter portions of a widespread Osage Prairie.



The wet fields and weedy ditches provide habitats for migrating birds, like Soras, and an array of interesting and unusual plants. A plant that is pretty rare in the rest of Arkansas, swamp milkweed, makes its impossibly reddish-pink clusters of flowers in a wide area around the hatchery, mostly outside the security fence down along the flows in the ditch, much as it must have done in a different-looking landscape in the 1890s.

Buttonbush is there, too, along with a prairie dogwood, plus other come common flowering wetland plants. At least three plants are unusual enough that they are tracked by Arkansas Natural Heritage

Commission. No one as far as I know is formally tracking bees, beetles, and flies common among these native wildflowers in the wet corners at Centerton, but these pollinators are very much part of the natural heritage of former Osage Prairie.



Obviously, most of what was the former Osage Prairie is gone. On top of it is a growing urban area, part of the 300,000 people now living in northwest Arkansas. For birding, we now mainly are restricted to the east and west areas of the old prairie, in very changed, but still remarkably productive habitats. Here and there, opportunities pop up to protect something of the old prairie. Sometimes it means buying a few acres and protecting it, sometimes it means not mowing as often.

For real progress to occur in northwest Arkansas, the task before us is understanding and remembering that everything we have from Rogers to Bentonville to Centerton is a former prairie. Highway 102 is a road through our past, present, and future. The better we understand this, the better our chances to manage our natural resources in a way that protects everyone's future, people, birds, plants, and insects.

--Joe Neal with Joan Reynolds August 2013