



City of Burnsville

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KELLEHER PARK RESTORATION CONTINUES

Burnsville High School Students Lend a Helping Hand

A group of Burnsville High School students got a firsthand look at restoring native habitat in Burnsville earlier this spring. Students from four advance placement science classes joined forces with the City of Burnsville's Natural Resources Department to help bring native plants back to the historical oak savanna at Kelleher Park in southwest Burnsville.

During two sunny afternoons in April, more than 80 students logged 140 volunteer hours, hand-spreading native plant seeds across 14 acres of the 150-acre park. Prior to reseeded, the park underwent an extensive buckthorn removal process and was subject to its first "controlled burn" earlier this spring.

"We try to get students involved in as much experiential education as we can," said Jenny Hugstad-Vaa, a Burnsville High School environmental science teacher. "Seeing it firsthand is a great way for them to learn about things like native ecosystems, and at the same time, the students were able to provide a great service to the community."

"It was a huge area to seed and we couldn't have done it without their help," said Caleb Ashling, Natural Resources Technician for the City of Burnsville. "Many people think that if we leave nature alone, it will inherently find the right course. That's just not always true with all of the changes that humans have brought to the landscape."

Historically, oak savanna habitat such as the one found in Kelleher Park, is characterized by scattered, large majestic oaks and a prairie-like understory made up of grasses and flowering plants. It was once common habitat in the metro area. However, it has been in rapid decline, due in part to the invasion of the nonnative shrub species Common Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*). Buckthorn spreads rapidly, and can completely take over a forest, turning it into a jungle thicket if left unchecked. The scattered oaks that once gave the habitat a wonderful, spacious feel begin to fill in with dense, woody growth, closing in the canopy.

The lack of wildfires has also contributed to the habitat's decline. Wildfires historically play an important role in maintaining the habitat. In the past, naturally occurring wildfires frequently swept through savanna areas, killing most unwanted trees and shrubs and helping keep the area from becoming overgrown with woody plants. Over the years, oak trees have adapted a thick, insulating bark that protects them from fire damage.

In 2008, the City began removing buckthorn and other undesirable trees and shrubs from the savanna, with the aid of a “Woody Biomass Harvest for Habitat Restoration” grant from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. All of the removed woody material – 41 semi truckloads in all – was brought to District Energy St. Paul and used as biofuel to produce heat and electricity.

The next step in the restoration was a prescribed or controlled burn – one that is purposefully set by professionals to help manage habitat. Kelleher Park had its first substantial controlled burn this spring.

The ongoing restoration project at Kelleher Park is being funded by a Conservation Partners Legacy grant from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

“Oak savanna is home to many plants and animals that are listed as species of greatest conservation need,” said Jamie Gangaware, Minnesota DNR grant specialist “This site is unique given its location, limited historical use and current uses today. Restoring oak savanna habitat is a long-term undertaking, and the City of Burnsville has been doing an excellent job.”

The restoration work will continue for several years, and prescribed burns will become a regular part of the habitat management plan.

Youth assisting in the reseedling of Kelleher Park were students of Jenny Hugstad-Vaa and Lori Douglas at Burnsville High School. For more information contact Caleb Ashling at 952-895-4543.





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