

Metroparks restore habitat with controlled fire

By Scott Abella
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As spring approaches, controlled fires set by Metroparks burn crews will soon be restoring and revitalizing habitat in sections of Oak Openings Metropark. Art Weber, Metroparks public information manager, said carefully controlled fire in Oak Openings is vital to restore oak savannas, among the rarest habitats on Earth.

"Burning controls undesirable species and woody growth from encroaching on tallgrass prairie and oak savanna," Weber said.

For years fire was considered an enemy to natural areas. Smokey the Bear and the feeling that fire harms all natural areas originated from the destructive wildfires in the Great Lakes region during the logging era in the late 1800s. Logging debris dried out under the direct sunlight and caught fire from lightning or human carelessness, resulting in uncontrolled wildfires that roared through forests and even towns.

"We grew up with the idea that fire is bad," Weber explained, "but the message today is that

uncontrolled fire is always bad whereas carefully controlled fire can be really great for a natural area."

Fire has long been an integral part of the Oak Openings region, and Native Americans in northwest Ohio probably used fire to stimulate blueberry production. Sudden fire suppression in the 1900s, however, reduced many native Oak Openings plants because they had been adapted to fire for 10,000 years, since the last ice age. Fire-dependent wild lupine, now a rare plant in Ohio partly due to fire suppression, has doubled in abundance since controlled burning began in Oak Openings, according to Metroparks naturalist Bob Jacksy.

Before the Metroparks conduct a burn, detailed plans are carefully prepared for the location and timing of each fire. Head naturalist Denise Gehring said burn locations are partly based on evidence the site burned naturally in the past indicated by buried charcoal, fire scars inside tree rings and observations in 1800 government land surveys.

The Metroparks conduct controlled burns at Oak Openings in early spring or late fall when

weather is optimal for burning. "Temperature, wind speed and direction, humidity and fuel conditions must be exactly right before we burn, which leaves very few days to perform controlled burns in a given year because we are very cautious," explained Gehring.

Fire creates the vegetative cover required by mammals and many birds including red-headed woodpeckers, bluebirds and cardinals. According to Jacksy, who has studied small mammals for six years in Oak Openings, the small mammal populations was 30 percent higher on a burned site compared to an adjacent unburned site.

"Many small mammals have burrowed under the soil by late fall, so flames during fall burning move safely over the top of the covered animals," Jacksy said. "When the animals wake up later in the season, they will have more food because burning stimulates blueberry, raspberry and acorn production."

Controlled fires set by the Metroparks return a friend to Oak Openings while bringing back part of northwest Ohio's heritage.