

Prairie Spectacle

Fires in the Flint Hills of Kansas are a sure sign of spring on the prairie.

by Lisa Waterman Gray - AAA Midwest Traveler - March/April 2011

Several dozen people arrived at the private ranch in the heart of Kansas' Flint Hills on a crystal-clear April afternoon. A light breeze was blowing. Our host cautioned us to keep our distance as the fire that we were about to start grew in size and intensity, but photographs were welcome. We strolled down a gravel and dirt road towards the field that we would soon ignite.

Under the owner's watchful gaze, volunteers lit tiny fires with matches in the designated area and used rakes to merge miniature blazes into larger ones. Glowing pockets of yellow-orange flame grew in seconds and leapt skyward beside a barbed wire fence. Within 15–20 minutes, fire raced across the field, creating clouds of aromatic smoke and a patchwork of singed ground and dry grasses. In the distance, another blaze raced up the hillside of another ranch.

This is a prairie burn, specifically orchestrated for guests with reservations, in the heart of this country's remaining tallgrass prairie. Men have burned the tall-grass prairie since large numbers of Native Americans lived here and frequently began burns for warfare and hunting (it drew game to them).

Below: A rancher tends a portion of the fire. Prescribed burns help maintain prairie grasses. Otherwise, the grass would become dormant. ©Michael C. Snell photo



Although the tallgrass prairie once stretched from northern Texas to Canada, with much of it located in the Kansas Flint Hills, less than 4 percent of this gently undulating, treeless, vast and open terrain remains. Grass can't be easily cultivated here because limestone / flint / chert riddles much of the ground. Controlled fires or prairie burns help to re-generate the land and protect it from invasion by trees and brush.

In fact, the prairie would not continue to exist without burning, and the grass would become dead and dormant, offering no food value for cattle. Today, area ranchers burn a portion of their prairie acreage each year. Cows can graze there after new grass emerges.

THE BURNING CYCLE

The typical prairie burn season runs from mid-March into May, but the weather forecast, anticipated wind speed and neighbors' plans may impact the exact date that a landowner chooses for a prairie burn.

Ranch Management Group oversees six to seven Flint Hills ranches that encompass 85,000 acres. The group always contacts the sheriff, fire department and neighbors to coordinate their burn schedule with those scheduled for nearby properties.

"We minimize our exposure on a burn," says manager Cliff Cole. "We try not to [do them] with more than 15 mph wind speeds. We use a fire pipe towed by an ATV to create a consistent black line for one to three miles."

The need to rotate burned acres from one year to the next also impacts the burn schedule for an individual property. For instance, on average, the privately owned Flying W Ranch in Cedar Point, Kan., burns one-third to half of their 7,000 acres each year, with a maximum of 1,400 acres burning simultaneously.

"It's better for wildlife if you only burn every couple of years," says co-owner, Gwen Hoy. The Hoyes also begin prairie burns with a fire stick towed behind an ATV, and then finish out the process with matches.

SEEING THIS PHENOMENON

Flying W Ranch has occasionally allowed visitors to witness small controlled burns. When somebody has asked to see a burn, Hoy and her husband, Josh, provide their anticipated schedule and have sometimes offered an opportunity for patch burn participation. A pre-burned boundary provides protection for visitors, who may help light matches from horseback. The Hoyes are well aware of the potential risks.

"I really think that people don't understand, or take seriously, the danger involved [in these burns]," Josh Hoy says. As a Kansas agritourism site, Flying W Ranch clearly posts warnings and waivers regarding potential injury to visitors who participate in this and other ranch activities.

"Nine hundred acres of simultaneous burn was our biggest," Gwen Hoy says. "[One time], we burned the entire side of a hill, listened to music and watched the burn." A photography group of up to 30 people books annual three to four-day visits to observe day and night burns.

The Hoyes will offer their first large-scale burn event, Flames in the Flint Hills 2011, on April 16 from 3:30–10 p.m.

Visitors will learn about the Flint Hills ecosystem, the practice of prairie burning and the culture and history of the Flint Hills and its people. Snacks and beverages are provided. Guests may help light daytime and nighttime burns, shop for high-quality art made by Flint Hills artists and savor a ranch dinner with appetizers, a main meal and dessert. A concert and a campfire jam will round out the event.

"The [size of the] daytime and nighttime burns will vary from 400 to several thousand acres, depending upon the weather," Josh Hoy says.

BEDS AND MEALS

The Flying W Ranch offers comfortable, modern accommodations for up to 40 people with several full kitchens, including a lodge, a cabin and a bunkhouse. But there are also diverse dining and lodging options nearby.

In Cottonwood Falls, the AAA Four Diamond Grand Central Hotel offers luxurious accommodations with Western style. Reserve a cozy, newly renovated room at the Millstream Resort Motel. There are several private cottages at Pilgrim Ranch Retreat, located on a family-owned 4,160-acre ranch near the Flint Hills Scenic Byway.

A full bar and gourmet dining are available at the Grand Central Hotel. Choose from Sterling Steak to butterfly shrimp or Open Range Kabobs. Also located in Cottonwood Falls, the homey Emma Chase Café serves a casual lunch with a salad bar, pint-sized iced tea and daily specials, and accepts only cash. It's also part of the annual Prairie Fire Festival (*see related story).



Flying W Ranch Photo

Try the quiche, a deli wrap or a chai latte at the nearby Friendly D's/The Gallery. In Strong City, Longhorn Café offers beer plus a frequently changing menu, live music and karaoke, while Flint Hills Restaurant serves family-style meals.

Emporia, the area's largest city, lies approximately 40 miles from Flying W and provides many additional lodging and dining options.

*** HEATS UP THE HILLS**

The town of Cottonwood Falls has hosted the free six-day *Prairie Fire Festival* for more than a decade. Each spring, people drive in from Kansas City, Wichita, Emporia, Manhattan, McPherson and even Colorado to attend educational sessions about the tallgrass prairie, the necessity for controlled burning and how burning is accomplished.

During the festival, which is April 4–9 this year, seminars take place at 6:30 p.m.; Saturday seminars of 45–60 minutes typically occur at 11 a.m. and 1–4 p.m. The festival also features bluegrass music on Friday evening, while Saturday evening entertainment often features Native American performances."

We try to find something different from one year to the next," says event producer, Sue Smith, who also owns Emma Chase Café. "And we try to offer a variety [of topics from] bison and other mammals of the tallgrass prairie, to a Native American woman who talks about her ancestors who were Kaw, authors of books related to the tallgrass prairie, and Native American culture. A county extension agent always talks about 'What Constitutes a Tallgrass Prairie?' with biological and geological data to explain it."

To learn more, visit www.prairiefirefestival.com or contact Smith at (620) 273-6020.

BEFORE YOU GO

To attend Flames in the Flint Hills 2011, dress for inclement weather, with comfortable shoes and clothing.

Reservations are required.

Contact Josh and Gwen Hoy, The Flying W Ranch, at (620) 274-4357 or visit www.flinthillsflyingw.com.

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