

Restoring Savanna at Bur Oak Woods Nature Preserve

Owned and managed by Shirley Heinze Land Trust, Bur Oak Woods is an 84-acre tract of remnant oak savanna located on Liverpool Road in Hobart, IN. The property is named for its most striking feature: massive, open-grown bur oak trees - some over three feet in diameter. The broad, spreading crowns of these trees are evidence of the open landscape once found here and throughout Hobart and Merrillville. Historically, periodic wildfires regenerated and sustained this open savanna habitat, preventing nearly all species of trees but fire-tolerant bur oak from becoming established among the prairie grasses and wildflowers.

Over time, fire has been eliminated as a natural part of the ecological process. In the absence of wildfires, other tree species such as hickory, ash, hawthorn, and Osage orange became established and formed a dense canopy that prevented the sun-loving oaks from regenerating. The native prairie grasses and wildflowers also nearly disappeared from the site due to this dense shade and due also to the pressures placed on the plant community by livestock that used to graze here.

In 2007, the Shirley Heinze Land Trust began a long-term restoration project to restore the high quality savanna habitat once found here. Funding assistance from grants awarded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Chicago Wilderness, and NiSource as well as special contributions by individual donors have allowed us to get this large restoration effort off the ground. In 2008, volunteers contributed over 120 hours of labor to help complete Phase I of this project by thinning the canopy, managing non-native species and sowing seed on 12 acres of the preserve adjacent to Liverpool Road.

On February 14, 2008, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Shirley Heinze Land Trust is holding the first of three volunteer workdays in 2009 to continue the restoration work on this unique preserve and implement Phase II of the project, which will restore an additional 15 acres. Staff and volunteers will work to thin the canopy and prepare the area for larger equipment that will be used to control brush and non-native species in the understory. Additional workdays are scheduled for later this year:

August 8, 2009: Volunteers will control brush and measure the results of the project thus far.

December 12, 2009: Volunteers will thin the tree canopy and sow seed.

All workdays are from 10am to 3pm Central Time. Please call Jim Erdelac at (219)879-4725 or e-mail him at volunteer@heinzetrust.org for directions and more information.

Shirley Heinze Land Trust owns and manages over 1,000 acres of nature preserves and natural areas in Lake, Porter and La Porte Counties, which are open to the public for hiking and wildlife viewing. Properties are managed to promote biodiversity, preserve rare species and provide examples of the rich natural heritage of the region. With grant funding, individual donations and assistance from volunteers, their staff restores the ecological health of prairies, savannas, wetlands and other natural communities in northwest Indiana.