

**Nature Conservancy of Canada
Restoring Tallgrass Prairie in Rice Lake Plains
Report to Ontario Wildlife Foundation – March 8, 2017**

BACKGROUND:

The Rice Lake Plains is an area of roughly 100,000 acres located southeast of Peterborough, along the eastern flank of the Oak Ridges Moraine. The Rice Lake Plains contains the largest black oak savannah and tallgrass prairie remnants in the Great Lakes region.

Although the majority of the original tallgrass prairie and savannah tracts have grown in or have been planted with coniferous trees, remnants of the natural seed bank are still intact. This provides a tremendous opportunity to transform several sites on the Plains back into some of the best quality black oak savannah and tallgrass prairie in North America, and provide habitat for numerous rare and declining species, including grassland birds and eastern hog-nosed snake.

Since 2003, the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) has worked with partners as part of the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative to protect and restore key sites on the Rice Lake Plains, and to promote the long-term sustainability of the tallgrass prairie and savannah habitat. NCC owns and manages over 2,000 acres of land on the Rice Lake Plains, and works to restore the habitat on its properties by planting native species, removing invasive species, and conducting controlled burns.

With the help of funding through Ontario Wildlife Foundation, NCC planted 6,952 plugs of native species and spread 32 kg of seed on five of its properties (12 acres) in the Rice Lake Plains in 2016.

PROJECT BENEFITS:

Ecological benefits:

Restoring land in the Rice Lake Plains represents a significant opportunity to protect and restore a globally rare and important ecosystem. The grasslands found in the Rice Lake Plains provide habitat for species, and play a vital role in soil and water conservation, nutrient recycling, pollination, habitat and movement corridors for birds, climate regulation and carbon storage.

Cultural benefits:

By restoring habitat in the Rice Lake Plains, we are bringing back Canada's historic landscapes and enabling people to see what Ontario's natural landscapes looked like before European settlement.

Community engagement:

As part of this project, three Conservation Volunteers events were held to plant plugs on NCC's Barr, Hazel Bird and Salt Creek Nature Reserve properties in the Rice Lake Plains. 36 people volunteered 197 hours at these events to plant 3,900 native plant plugs.

Conservation Volunteers events provide an opportunity for the public to play a role in conservation, learn about Canada's natural spaces, connect with like-minded people in their community, and spend time in nature. Many of NCC's properties in Rice Lake Plains are open and accessible to the public, and provide an opportunity for the public to learn about Ontario's native habitats.

PROJECT DETAILS:

Plugs planted in this project were primarily grown at a local nursery operation from local native seed collected by NCC and our volunteers. In addition to planting plugs, we also spread native seeds on NCC properties. In the 2016 field season, NCC planted 6,952 plugs of native species and spread 32 kg of seed on five of its properties in the Rice Lake Plains amounting to 12 acres.

As part of this project, NCC purchased one harrow and one disc to pull behind an all-terrain vehicle to aid in preparing the ground for restoration in the summer and fall and in spring 2017.

Three Conservation Volunteers events were held on NCC's Hazel Bird and Barr properties to assist with planting. The events took place on July 22, August 20, and September 16. The last event was held with student volunteers from Trent University. Volunteers helped plant 3,900 plugs on five acres of NCC properties at these events. An additional Conservation Volunteers event was planned on September 24 to collect seeds to be grown for future planting. Unfortunately due to drought, no seeds were available, so instead, volunteers helped to clear the area of debris to prepare for future restoration work.

Thank you for making this project possible, and for playing an important role in restoring the incredible landscapes of the Rice Lake Plains.

PROJECT BUDGET & FUNDING:

Funding received from the Ontario Wildlife Foundation was used to help cover costs associated with plantings in the Rice Lake Plains. OWF funds were used for restoration work on the recently-expanded Salt Creek Nature Reserve and Hazel Bird Nature Reserve, where 3,900 plugs were planted over 5 acres.

LOOKING AHEAD:

Each year, monitoring is done on NCC's properties to review progress from the restoration/planting work done in previous years. Success of planting done in 2016 will be determined during property monitoring in the 2017 field season. Restoration work, including planting, seeding, and seed collecting will be conducted on NCC properties in the Rice Lake Plains again this year.



Volunteers at August 20, 2016 event – Plugs for the Prairies (photo by NCC)



NCC's Central Ontario stewardship staff Val Deziel (Assistant, Conservation Biology) and Todd Farrell (Coordinator, Conservation Biology) (photo by NCC)



Hazel Bird Nature Reserve, Rice Lake Plains (photo by NCC)



Species found in the Rice Lake Plains include eastern meadowlark (left; photo by Bill Hubick), bobolink (middle; photo by Bill Hubick), and eastern hog-nosed snake (right; photo by NCC)