

Protecting the prairie

Siouxlanders make sure area is saved from expansion, destruction

By Michael Koehler
Journal staff writer

Steps have been taken this year to protect the native prairie of Broken Kettle Grassland Preserve.

In February, Barry and Carolyn Knapp of Westfield, Iowa, donated a conservation easement on their 1,100-acre family farm to the Iowa Nature Conservancy. The farm is located in the Loess Hills of Plymouth County near the Conservancy's Broken Kettle Grassland Preserve.

"We watched all of the houses being built north of Sioux City and we did not want that to happen on our land," Knapp said. "This was a wonderful way of being able to make sure that would not happen and still be able to use the land for pasturing and all of the things that we still use it for."

The Knapps have been interested in conservation for more than 30 years and have at least 15 years of working with The Nature Conservancy.

"A conservation easement is a document that provides legal protection for the property," said Scott Moats, director of stewardship for the Iowa chapter of The Nature Conservancy. "Even after they pass on, the property will remain managed for conservation."

The conservation easement keeps the property in private hands as a working farm but provides long-term protection against housing development, fill soil mining and other development that would mar the scenic values and biological treasures of the property. This is one of the largest conservation easements ever donated in Iowa and brings the total protected by The Nature Conservancy and its partners at Broken Kettle to 4,000 acres.

The families of both Barry and Carolyn Knapp have lived in the area since the 1870s or earlier, and the Knapps see this as a way to have the land stay the way they want it for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

In May, the Iowa Nature Conservancy announced it was adding 600 acres to the Broken Kettle Grassland Preserve, protecting almost all of the single largest native prairie in the Loess Hills. The protected prairie, known as the "1,000 prairie" (its actual size is 998 acres), blankets Loess Hills slopes and ridge tops.

"With this tract it forms the largest contiguous tract of native prairie in the state," Moats said.

Size is important for prairies and other natural communities because studies of island ecology show that larger habitat areas can support more species of plants and animals and are more likely to survive natural and man-made disasters. There are 300 species of plants and 150 species of birds and a multitude of insects that make their home in the native grassland. It is also the last remaining home for the prairie rattlesnake in Iowa.

The Conservancy will replant the non-prairie areas of the preserve, which are primarily bottomlands, with native prairie species to increase the viability of the "1,000 acre prairie."

The Iowa Nature Conservancy was founded in 1963 and focuses on preserving the biological diversity throughout the state. It is the largest conservation membership organization in Iowa, with more than 7,200 members. It is distinguished from other conservation agencies in the state by a science-driven focus and an organizational approach of working on a local and regional level while maintaining a global perspective.

Since only 2 percent of Iowa remains in a natural condition, the Conservancy's mission to identify and preserve Iowa's remaining plants, animals and natural communities is urgent, they say.

The Iowa Nature Conservancy is a non-profit international organization, dependent on membership dues, individual and corporate contributions and foundation grants to continue its mission to protect biological diversity.



Carolynn and Barry Knapp have donated a conservation easement to the Nature Conservancy. The Knapps are among Siouxlanders who believe it's important to preserve natural prairie grass for generations to come. (Staff photo by Jim Lee)

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