Michigan Nature Association

Sand Creek Prairie Nature Sanctuary

Sanctuary at a Glance:

Location: Hillsdale County

Size: 12.5 acres

History: MNA purchased this nature sanctuary in 1997.

About MNA:

The Michigan Nature Association is a nonprofit conservation organization working to protect Michigan's rare, threatened and endangered species by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

Established in 1952, MNA's members, donors, and volunteers have built a remarkable network of more than 170 nature sanctuaries across the state – the largest network of natural areas established and maintained by a nonprofit conservation organization in Michigan.

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Photo: Ranessa Cooper

Sand Creek Prairie Nature Sanctuary lies on the edge of the Jackson Interlobate Ecoregion, an area which was positioned between three glacial lobes that formed approximately 13,000-16,000 years ago.

The sanctuary is noted for the presence of the oak barrens. An oak barren community is a fire-dependent savanna community dominated by oaks. An oak barren community has between five and 60 percent canopy, with or without a shrub layer, and is typically found on droughty soils.

Sand Creek Prairie protects an assemblage of species typically found in prairie remnants, including golden Alexander, western sunflower, grey-headed coneflower, wild lupine, wild bergamot, and hairy beardtongue.

Historically, the surrounding landscape was predominately oak barrens, however there appears to have been a somewhat open canopy for the diverse prairie flowers which established themselves here.

Protecting the Hill's Thistle

Sand Creek Prairie also protects the last known extant population of Hill's thistle in southern Michigan. Hill's thistle is a generally short, perennial thistle with a deep, hollowed. and thickened taproot. It has soft, rigid leafy stems with woolly hairs. Biology students from Hillsdale College have been conducting research assessing the genetic diversity of the Hill's thistle population at the sanctuary.

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Protecting Against Invasive Species

Sand Creek Prairie is threatened by the presence of invasive species, including glossy and common buckthorn and bush honeysuckle. In addition, concentrations of trees and shrubs are trying to establish themselves within the interspace between oaks, turning this savanna into a forested community. MNA's stewardship efforts at Sand Creek Prairie include controlling and removing these invasive species and encroaching woody growth.

Management Through Prescribed Burns

Fire management also plays an important role in management of the prairie's oak barrens, and the species that live within are fire-dependent. Frequent fires maintain the oak barren's semi-open conditions, promoting oak regeneration and diversity within the understory.

Oak barrens themselves likely originated when prairie fires spread into surrounding oak forest with enough intensity to create open barrens, so repeated low-intensity fires working in concert with drought, frost, and windthrow maintain oak savanna ecosystems. Fires in oak barrens and prairie typically occurred during the spring, late summer and fall.

The Hill's thistle. Photo: Ranessa Cooper

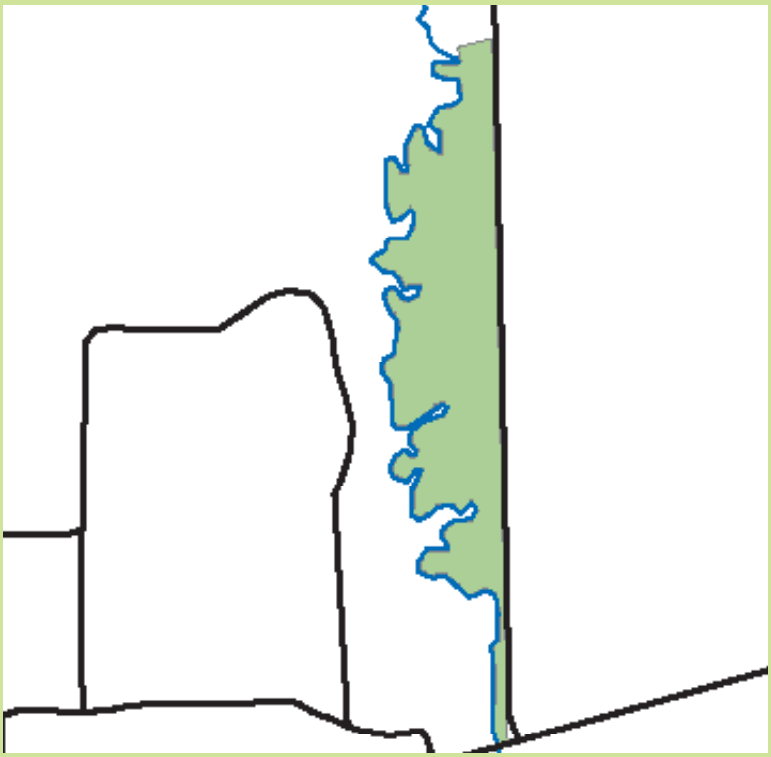
MNA staff oversee a prescribed burn. Photo: Matt Schultz

Planning Your Visit:

Sand Creek Prairie Nature Sanctuary is classified as a C sanctuary by the Michigan Nature Association. C sanctuaries contain sensitive areas, pose significant risks to visitors and/or otherwise do not ordinarily allow public access. Visits to C sanctuaries must be arranged through the MNA office. Please call 866-223-2231 for more information.

Get Involved:

Join MNA for a volunteer workday at a sanctuary in you area. For a complete list of volunteer days, visit www.michigannature.org and click the News and Events button.



Sanctuary Map