



Winter 2014/2015 Vol. 13, Issue 2

# Grasslands Gazette

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Pronghorn & coyote on Fresh Tracks  
Nature Preserve, photo © SPLT  
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*The Southern Plains Land Trust's mission: To create a shortgrass prairie reserve network that enables native plant and animal communities to once again thrive, with minimal human intervention. Join our membership to enact effective, permanent protection for prairie wildlife. If you're already a member, please let your friends and family know about us.*

There's never a dull moment here at SPLT. We have now held four work parties on our Raven's Nest Nature Preserve, removing (and recycling) literally *tons* of scrap metal and tires, to improve the land's natural values. We had a fantastic June Toast to the Prairie and are looking forward to a better-than-ever **Celebration of the Prairie on Dec. 4 (see back cover)**. Our LoveAnimals.org campaign was a stunning success, raising 2.5 times more than our goal of \$3,000. We've been at area festivals throughout the summer and have been surveying wildlife use of our preserves. SPLT would love for you to be a part of our efforts to gain more ground for prairie wildlife.

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## A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

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### SPLT Vital Statistics

#### *Board of Directors:*

Alena Amundson, Secretary  
Misty Ewegen, Treasurer  
Ramona Gaylord  
Melissa Hailey, President  
Judith Miller Smith, Vice President

#### *Volunteer Accountant:*

Donna Mei Lin Driscoll, C.P.A.

#### *Staff:*

Nicole J. Rosmarino, Director

#### **SOUTHERN PLAINS LAND TRUST**

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SPLT's mission is to create a shortgrass prairie reserve network that enables native plant and animal communities to once again thrive, with minimal human intervention.

SPLT is a 501(c)(3) organization. We are very streamlined, putting as much money directly into land acquisition as possible. **All donations are accepted, in whatever amount, and are fully tax-deductible.** Donors may specify whether they wish their contribution to be applied exclusively for land acquisition. In addition, you may choose to "dedicate an acre" for \$200. You can dedicate the acre to whomever or whatever you choose.

SPLT is a member of the Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts and the Land Trust Alliance. SPLT is certified to hold conservation easements by the State of Colorado.

*Editor: Nicole Rosmarino*

SPLT has grown substantially over the past three years, adding new supporters each year and increasing our land management and outreach activities. I thought it was timely to relate to our readers how SPLT fits in with the land protection community more broadly. I'll start with a question that I've heard more than once: how is SPLT different from other land trusts?

My answer: SPLT is about creating refuge for native flora and fauna in the southern Great Plains by buying land and then protecting the land and its native inhabitants. Other land trusts also do important work for land and wildlife protection in this region, and we often team up with them on projects of mutual interest. Our work is a different flavor: many land trusts do not buy land outright, but rather accept conservation easements, while SPLT does both; many land trusts are focused on preserving working ranches and farms, while SPLT focuses on restoring native ecosystems and providing refuges for wildlife; many land trusts do not restrict hunting, fishing, or trapping on properties they protect, while SPLT strives for categorical protection of native wildlife on our preserves.

While we recognize these distinctions, we don't presume to have a comprehensive answer to the problem of diminishing biodiversity and fading wildness in the southern plains, nor do we linger on judgments of others. We think that open space preservation and biodiversity defense can and should work in a complementary fashion – in other words, the work of SPLT, other land trusts, and conservation organizations and agencies, on both public and private land, utilizes an important range of tools in the toolbox.

But we're very clear that there need to be some places where wildness is the prime directive. This is the central focus of two books, "Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth" (2014) and "American Plains Bison: Rewilding an Icon" (2013). We review these books as part of the feature story of this newsletter (pp. 4-6).



In that article, we weave together our mission, some of the problems we've seen on our preserves, and how we try to remedy them, in ways that advance wildness and wildlife while addressing long-lasting effects of human activities, including non-native plants and disease. Canyon wren on Raven's Nest, photo © Rich Reading.

Another way that SPLT distinguishes itself is that we keep overhead very low, so that we can direct as many funds to land acquisition as possible. We have only one staffperson and no professional fundraising staff. We are truly a grassroots group (as in buffalograss!). Help make our lean approach work by attending our **Celebration of the Prairie** (see ad on backcover) or sending your donation today. 

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## NATURE NOTES

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☞ On a July 26 visit to Raven's Nest Nature Preserve, the creeks and ponds were full from summer rains.

☞ On an August 14 visit to Fresh Tracks Nature Preserve, we spotted a great blue heron using the "Big Pond," which has been full of water for over a year. Previously, we had spotted northern shovelers and a cormorant.

☞ During our August 2014 work party, we saw a badger on Raven's Nest, as well as a (migratory) Solitary Sandpiper, many dragonflies, and spadefoot toads. The creeks and ponds were full.

☞ On an October 11 visit to the preserves, we saw a coyote on ACME Ranch (a property adjacent to Raven's Nest that we are hoping to acquire next year), using a prairie dog town, as well as two coyotes on Raven's Nest, using both a prairie dog colony and a set of ponds. We also observed a western ornate box turtle (see newsletter's back cover) and a burrowing owl on ACME Ranch (all on prairie dog colonies).



☞ During our October 2014 work party, we found a beaver dam on ACME Ranch! This scrappy beaver constructed the dam out of sticks and muds, given the lack of trees in the area (pictured above, photo © Rich Reading). We observed leopard frogs as well as (non-native) bullfrogs. The creek was full for at least a mile of its length. Also on ACME Ranch and Raven's Nest, there was a beautiful display of silver bluestem (see photo on p. 6).

☞ Our remote cameras continue to bring us glorious surprises, including a pronghorn/coyote face-off. In the series of 9 photos taken by our remote camera (3 of which are pictured here), the pronghorn doe is actually pursuing this coyote! She looks to be lactating and is likely guarding her fawn(s). The coyote retreats from the doe. Other highlights included a family of five coyotes at play in July 2014, and two bobcats together in October. Judging from regular use by the same individuals, we appear to have resident mule deer on at least two of our preserves. We see a slew of wildlife using the refuge we're providing for them. Their presence re-affirms the value of our efforts.



## In Defense of Wildness

By Nicole Rosmarino

I recently read two books that resonate with SPLT's mission of preserving and restoring the shortgrass prairie in the Southern Plains. I wanted to share with you how our work fits into the conversation around "defending wildness."

In *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth*, well-known scientists and nature writers vehemently defend the concept of wilderness and wildlife preservation against the acceptance of an "Anthropocene era." While these authors concede that humans have dramatically altered natural systems across the globe, the contributors to this book do not believe that human dominion over nature is either complete or acceptable.



Family of coyotes on SPLT preserve. Photo © SPLT, taken by remote camera in July 2014.

Forward thinkers such as Terry Tempest Williams, Dave Foreman, Eileen Crist, Tom Butler, David Ehrenfeld, and George Wuerthner advocate that the conservation movement not accept the view that earth's systems should be managed first and foremost for human wants or that "working lands" are an adequate substitute for wilderness preservation and wildlife refuges. While the tone is at times strident (which matches what the authors contend is at stake: the soul of conservation), I find myself most in agreement with the sentiment by David Johns that:

Largely intact places won't solve every conservation problem, but they are essential to preserving wildness, biodiversity, and ecological communities (p. 35).



Tarantula on ACME Ranch in October 2014. Photo © Nicole Rosmarino.

SPLT is part of the land trust community, many of the members of which endeavor to protect working lands. We work with those groups and deeply respect their efforts, particularly in areas where intact habitat is threatened by urban or energy development. Some have laudably married wildlife conservation with continued agricultural operations. But, we also believe that SPLT's work to create refuges that are devoted to native animals and plants is a crucial approach for preserving biodiversity and native ecosystems.

It is precisely through the protection of nature that we think SPLT's preserves can actually provide something valuable for people. Our preserves provide a baseline against which other lands and their elements can be measured; and they unveil a fascinatingly different world for preserve visitors, both young and old. As we reported in our last issue of this newsletter, a troop of 40 local 5<sup>th</sup>-graders gave us glowing feedback in May about how rich of an experience it was for them to visit land that is protected expressly for native plants and wildlife.

SPLT's approach since our inception in 1998 has been one of minimal intervention, based on the notion that, if we simply disallow harmful land uses and activities on land we control, the prairie can heal itself. In most cases, that turned out to be right. We regularly see wildlife species finding refuge on our preserves: coyote, badger, rattlesnake, pronghorn, mule deer, and, of course, the prairie dog. Elsewhere, these species suffer from persecution or overhunting.

Prairie dogs raise a good point. There is a non-native disease, sylvatic plague, which is quite devastating to prairie dogs. Non-intervention by SPLT can mean large-scale die-offs for the prairie dogs (although our protection of prairie dogs from poisons and guns can help survivors recover from plague). At present, the only available method of combating plague is application of insecticide to kill the fleas that carry the plague. Of course, this approach is distasteful to us, as there are adverse impacts to other invertebrates beside the fleas and indirect impacts to species (including burrowing owls) that feed on arthropods. There is not yet a publicly available vaccine for plague, which would certainly be our preference. In the meantime, the only tool available for prairie dog protection from plague is to apply insecticide.

Another important issue is noxious weed control. All of the properties that we've purchased, and many on which we've accepted conservation easements, were previously degraded by livestock ranching operations. For most of the years that we've been in existence, there has been severe drought in the Southern Plains. The result is that aggressive non-native plants, especially Russian thistle, have gained a foothold.

If we do nothing, these non-native plants show no signs of surrender. We are therefore planning controlled experiments to see if we can make strides for native plants.



Bison on the Last Gulch Ranch, photo © Jess Alford.

One important possibility to restoring the native plant community is to bring back bison. If we reintroduce bison onto a SPLT preserve, we will first have to

invest significant resources to ensure the bison have adequate water, fencing, and monitoring.

SPLT has never “managed” bison before, although bison have grazed on one of our preserves. We therefore have the opportunity to plan for bison restoration in a mindful way. James A. Bailey’s book, *American Plains Bison: Rewilding an Icon*, is inspiring and instructive. There is an urgency in *American Plains Bison*, given the many ways in which the shortgrass prairie is impoverished by the absence of bison and given that Bailey reports that bison are missing from perhaps 99% of their historical range in the contiguous U.S.

In *American Plains Bison*, we find an informative exploration of the bison issue, including their natural history, their dramatic decline due to mass slaughter in the 1800s, their biology and ecology, and the need to bring them back.

There are more than 200,000 bison in the contiguous U.S., but less than 8,000 are estimated to be free from cattle genes. However, Bailey suggests (alongside other scientists) that limiting bison restoration to only genetically pure animals may be excessively limiting. Of additional importance is how they are “managed” once restored to the landscape.

Bailey reports the current state of bison conservation by describing the 44 conservation herds on native range in the country. One-quarter of these herds live on ranges of 1 square mile or less. 14 of these herds are on ranges with interior fences, where they are rotated between pastures, just like a rotational livestock operation. Most of the herds are rounded up for disease management and selective causes.

Bailey advocates that bison be brought back on large preserves with as little management as possible. Keeping bison wild (i.e., self-willed) and non-domesticated is paramount. We should want bison that act like bison. Fencing should be minimized (exterior fences only), disease management should be avoided, herd size should be as large as possible (striving for thousands of bison), 1:1 sex ratios should be the goal (rather than culling bulls), and native predators should be allowed to prey on bison, thereby naturally keeping the herd healthier (as these

predators are likely to pursue the sick, young, and old members of the herd).

Bailey's book provides much food for thought. For instance, it's hard for me to hear an argument for hunting a species from an author who is contending that the species is biologically threatened. Predicting that reaction, he also warns that hunting bison should be subordinated to the goal of wild bison restoration.

*American Plains Bison* is fascinating, both for its depth of detail and Bailey's impassioned defense of the wild, unruly, keystone species that is (or could be) the plains bison. His call for wild bison runs alongside the broader mandate for wildness in *Keeping the Wild*.

The authors of both books understand that wildness is not a perfect and unattainable state. Says Bailey,

...wildness is not an absolute. It may be diminished along a continuum from wild to semi-wild to semi-domestic to domestic (p. 100).

He therefore does not limit bison reintroduction to only genetically pure bison, or unfenced areas, or places where natural bison predators, most notably wolves, are missing.

This is in line with Dave Foreman's resistance in *Keeping the Wild* to the "New Pristine Myth," the idea that once wilderness is touched by humans in whatever manner, it has "evaporated" and there is no need to protect it from further human modification (p. 123). Let's do our utmost to protect wildlife and



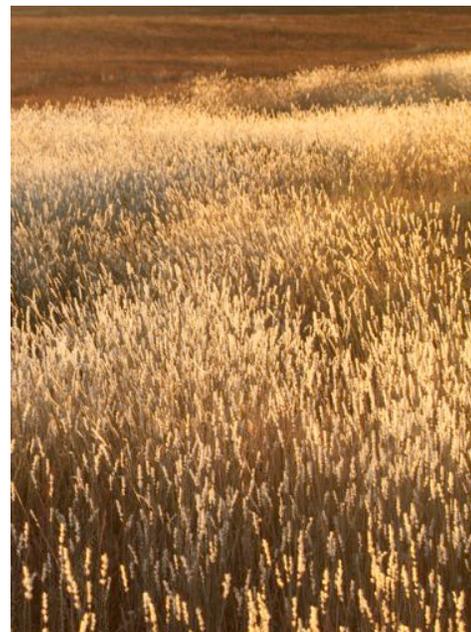
August 2014 Work Party Crew, removing barbed wire fence. Photo © Nicole Rosmarino.



Half-ton pile of barbed wire, which we delivered to the scrap metal recycling plant in La Junta. Photo © Nicole Rosmarino.

wild habitats, these authors are saying. Even if the result is something less than pristine, it's well worth it.

We at SPLT heartily agree. We aim for a landscape as free from human impacts as possible to let nature shine through. Buy the land, remove as much fence



River of silver beardgrass, photo © Rich Reading

as we can to make it more accessible to wildlife, eliminate destructive land uses, and insure that human visitation doesn't erode the preserves' wildness. Let's err on the side of letting the prairie heal itself, while being willing to take action when the situation warrants. We can smell, hear, feel, and observe the tremendous value of this effort every time we step onto one of our preserves – particularly when the coyotes burst into song.



Both of these books are worthy of your time:

**📖 Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth.** 2014. Eds. George Wuerthner, Eileen Crist, and Tom Butler. Island Press.

**📖 American Plains Bison: Rewilding an Icon.** 2013. Written by James A. Bailey. Sweetgrass Books.

# SPLT'S GROWTH

## YEARLY INCOME

SPLT has increased its yearly revenue dramatically since 2010. The last two years have been, by far, the highest grossing years in the organization's 16-year history.

Our sources of revenue have included grants, events, major donations, as well as a growing membership base. We're also quite creative, holding bake sales and selling organic produce to gain ground for prairie wildlife.



## MEMBERSHIP



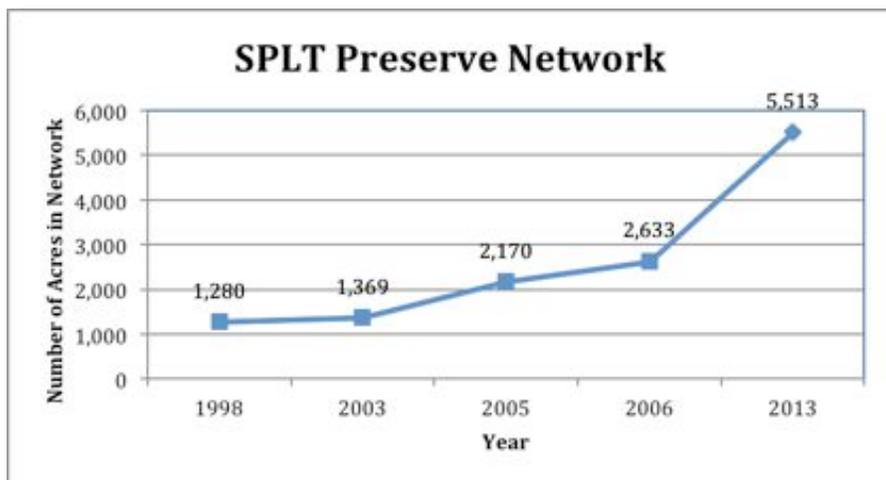
Our membership has grown as exponentially as our overall income, increasing from 36 members in 2010 to 162 members in 2013, as shown in the table. As more folks start to learn about our valuable efforts, we're hoping this trend will continue this year.

A major reason why SPLT is attracting more members is that we are stepping up our outreach events. If you'd like to throw a house party or know of a festival or other opportunity for us to reach more folks, please let us know. Also key is word of mouth: please let your friends and family know about the important work we do.

## AREA PROTECTED

We think that another reason why our membership is growing is the appeal of our mission – of creating a network of prairie preserves. Kind people like yourselves give us donations, and then we use that money to buy land for wildlife. It's tangible, no-frills, and incredibly satisfying. That's why we measure our progress in acres. The table here shows how we've done over the years.

Our aim is to pass the 10,000-acre mark by the end of 2015. Help us get there!



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U.S. Postage  
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Western ornate box turtle at prairie dog burrow entrance on ACME Ranch.  
Photo © Nicole Rosmarino.

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## CELEBRATION OF THE PRAIRIE!

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Southern Plains Land Trust  
6439 E. Maplewood Ave., Centennial, CO 80111  
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Join SPLT for our 3rd annual  
"Celebration of the Prairie"

Sponsored by *Bonterra*

Thursday, Dec. 4, 2014 from 6pm-9pm  
The History Colorado Center  
1200 Broadway, Denver, CO 80203  
(Broadway & 12th)

Enjoy organic wines from Bonterra, gourmet dining by Café Rendezvous, & auction treasures in the elegant Mountain View Room.

\$65 per person in advance, \$75 at the door.  
All proceeds go to SPLT's Land Fund.  
Purchase advance tickets by Nov. 25  
from Nicole Rosmarino at  
[splt@southernplains.org](mailto:splt@southernplains.org) or 720-841-1757.  
(Volunteers are needed and enjoy free admission)

A colorful illustration of three owls and a prairie dog celebrating. The owls are wearing party hats and a banner with stars and a crescent moon is draped across them. A prairie dog is visible in the background.