

A Prairie Calling

ISSUE 5 – MAY 2021



FRIENDS OF
NACHUSA
GRASSLANDS



Picturing the Prairie

A Vision of Restoration

On the afternoon of June 12, 2018, I found myself in an unusual circumstance for a landscape painter. Having nearly completed a study of a small knoll festooned with Nachusa's bison herd, I was interrupted from my painting by a contingent of that herd that had ceased reclining under the knoll's oaks and were now wandering in my direction. As it became clear that I would soon be surrounded, I retrieved my painting gear and retreated, as instructed, to the utility vehicle I had been generously loaned for my outing. Sitting in relative safety

in the open cab, I was enveloped in a soundscape of snuffling and soft tearing and munching of mouthfuls of prairie grass as the animals shuffled past. Around us, birds sang, pollinators buzzed, and a breeze ruffled the grasses. With a thousand acres of Nachusa's blooming prairies and savannas around me, I couldn't help but feel that the sensory impressions I was experiencing would have been much the same on the wild, pre-Columbian tallgrass prairie. Yet, as I knew well, it was an entirely modern experience, an effect achieved through the

Philip Juras

Philip Juras is a landscape painter whose work is an expression of his desire to explore, understand, and conserve healthy natural environments. He combines direct observation with the study of natural science and history to depict, and in some cases recreate, these landscapes in oil on canvas.

powerful combination of dedicated volunteers and organizational expertise that had converted cow pastures and cornfields back to functioning tallgrass prairie—replete with native megafauna. This was no ordinary painting experience. □





Savanna

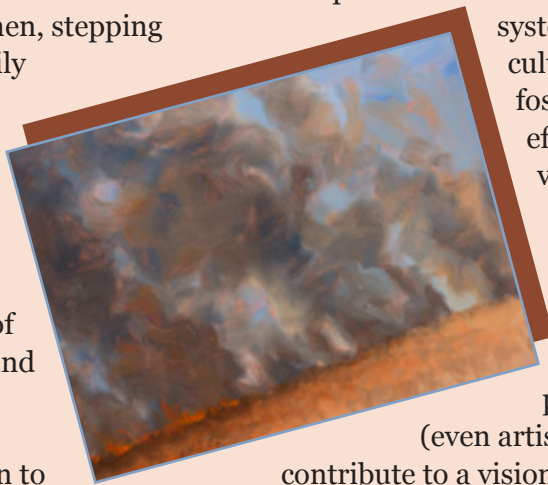
I likewise found inspiration in the surrounding prairies, wetlands, and woodlands—in general, the prairie landscapes transitioning to woodlands along Franklin Creek. That woodland transition plays a compositional role in my paintings, providing framing for views at the wooded edge or a focal point for views out on the prairie. I was attracted to it repeatedly. □

Prairie Burns

I found the November burns very striking with the smoke column rising above a wide-open prairie, beautifully backlit by the extremely low afternoon sun. A favorite March memory was a burn in Big Jump Prairie where from the “green”—the as-yet unburned area—I quickly painted a heading fire, backing up several times in the process, and then, stepping over the temporarily diminished flame front, followed behind it to paint a second quick study from the “black.”

Like the sound of bison grazing around my utility vehicle, those burns were another connection to the original tallgrass prairie, in this case the ecosystem maintained by the intentional

fires of Indigenous peoples. Those experiences, combined with my observations of Nachusa’s forms, patterns, colors, textures, and atmospheric qualities, are a cornerstone of my wider project to picture the prairie of Illinois. From them, I could begin to imagine the past, but more importantly I could see the beauty and energy of the prairie

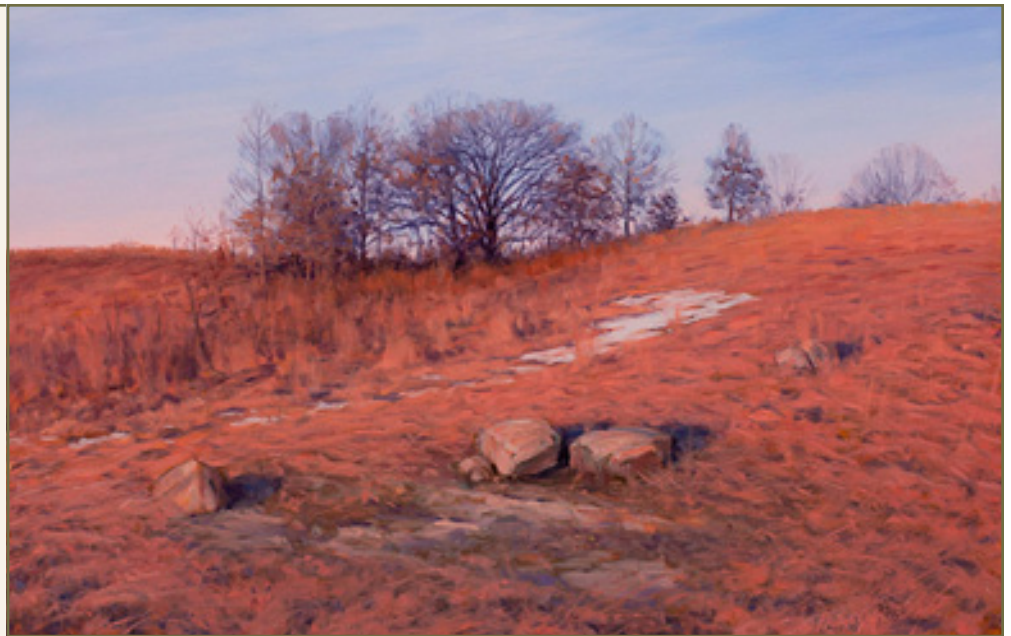


reawakened by a system and culture that fosters the efforts of volunteer stewards, research scientists, and all kinds of participants (even artists) to contribute to a vision of what tallgrass prairie can become. May these paintings celebrate their accomplishments. □

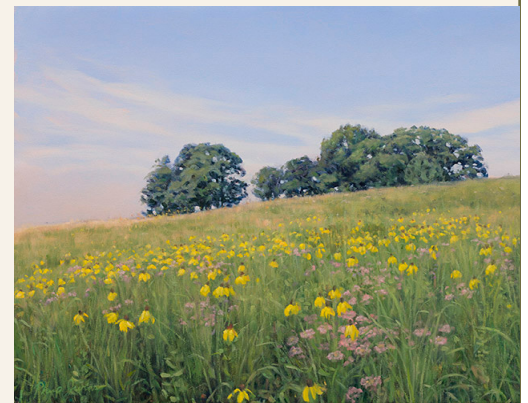
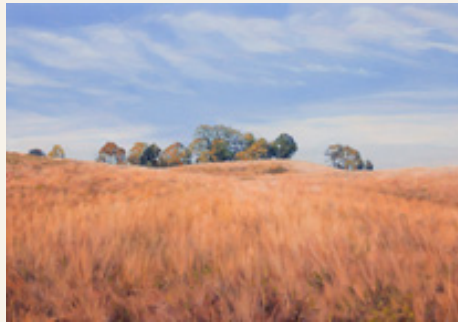


Doug's Knob

I could have made an extensive study of any of Nachusa's richly varied sections, but found I was most often compelled to paint and photograph in the neighborhood of Doug's Knob. From my first visit there I was drawn to its characteristic topography, remnant flora, small grove of oaks, and its history as a founding site for the preserve. □

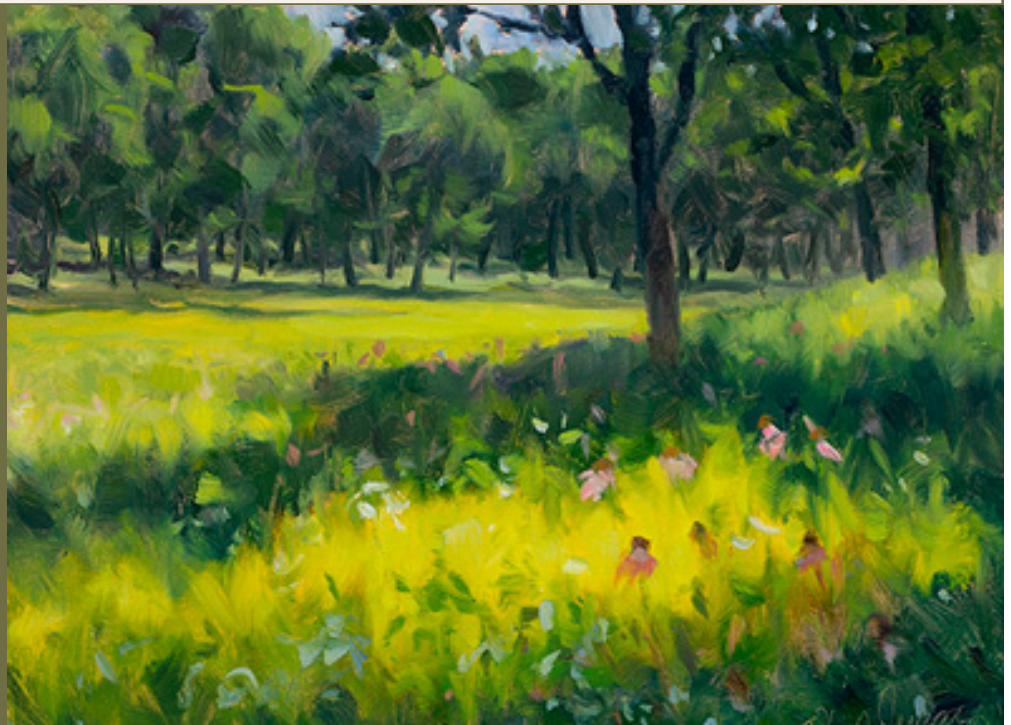


“I was most often compelled to paint and photograph in the neighborhood of Doug's Knob.”



Sedge Meadow

The previous year's prescription of fire seems to make all the difference in determining whether an early summer patch of prairie will have a revivifying, intense tone, or if last year's remaining dead stems and leaves will lend a more subtle and subdued character. Painting on location rather than in the studio seems to magnify these aspects. □

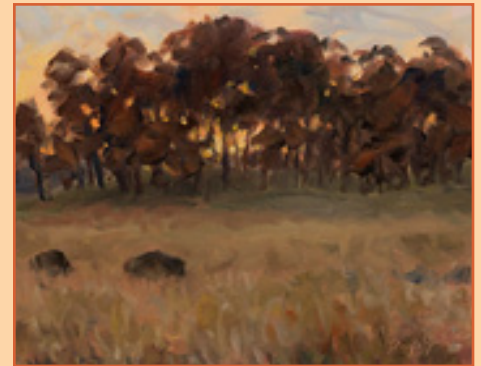


High-Quality Prairie

In my search as an artist to understand the original Illinois tallgrass ecosystem, Nachusa offered what most preserves couldn't: the combination of high-quality prairie environments and the sight of them stretching nearly to the horizon. Under those conditions I could investigate a fuller complement of the aesthetic aspects that defined the tallgrass landscape: large patches of flora, of course, but also wide-open skies, the transitions of prairie to woodland, and the effect of atmospheric perspective—distant views of prairie cover rather than cornfields and hedgerows. In addition, with frequent



enough visits I could explore seasonal characteristics along with structural changes in the vegetation caused by fire and animals. □



This newsletter was produced by Friends of Nachusa Grasslands volunteers:

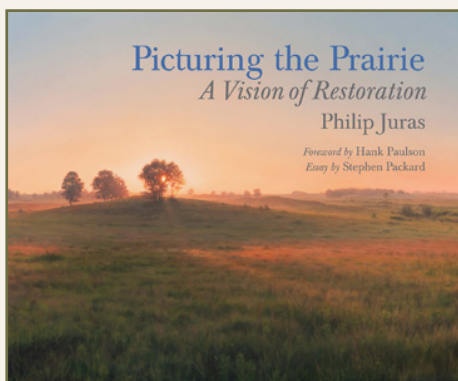
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Philip Juras is the author of *Picturing the Prairie: A Vision of Restoration* (Publisher: Little Bluestem Press, Athens, Georgia, May 2021). The fifty-four paintings in this volume celebrate the natural beauty of the rare tallgrass prairie environments of Illinois and the remarkable legacy of conservation that sustains

them. Artist and author Philip Juras' evocative canvases are based on extensive research, travel, and time in the field with prairie conservation experts. As a result, his luminous paintings, and his descriptions of them, are rich in ecological and historical detail. □

Exhibition

May 1–September 12, 2021

Picturing the Prairie

Chicago Botanic Garden

Glencoe, Illinois

