

- Director's Letter 2
- New Board & Staff 3
- Gorge Stewards 4
- Storm Drain Stenciling 4
- Greenway Planning 5
- Organizational Update 7
- Events/Announcements 8



FRIENDS

OF THE

MISSISSIPPI

RIVER

Spring 2002

Welcome to Pine Bend Bluffs

Protecting a riverfront treasure in our midst

Pristine natural areas along the Mississippi River can be few and far between, particularly in urban centers like the Twin Cities. In the southern part of our metro area, however, there is a series of relatively untouched open spaces along the river — a “string of pearls” that offers much-needed habitat for migrating birds and other wildlife.

Pine Bend Bluffs, located along the Mississippi in Inver Grove Heights and Rosemount, is one of these rare and special natural areas. With over 1,000 acres that include native oak woodlands and savannas, floodplain forests, wetlands, and rare sand gravel prairies, Pine Bend contains some of the largest remnants of pre-settlement landscapes in the metro area. “What’s so special about Pine Bend is that it includes forests, grasslands and oak savanna in close proximity to one another,” said Hannah Dunevitz, a regional plant ecologist for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR). “Combined with the fact that it’s located right on the Mississippi in the heart of the metropolitan area makes it very important from an ecological perspective.”

In addition to providing high biodiversity and critical habitat, Pine Bend’s native plant and wildlife populations are an important part of the Twin Cities’ natural heritage. Because of its size and key location along the Mississippi River, protecting and restoring Pine Bend has been a focus of FMR’s conservation

work. “There are not many of these places left in the metro area, and when they’re gone they are gone forever,” said FMR Executive Director Whitney Clark. “By protecting and expanding the natural areas around Pine Bend, we are getting that much closer to recapturing the seamless wilderness that once existed along the Mississippi.”

A Rare Natural Area in a Fast-Growing County

One of the best ways to see Pine Bend is from the river. Here you can spot some of the towering old white pines that gave Pine Bend its name. You can also see how steep these majestic forested bluffs really are. The steepness offers more than just beauty—it also protects the area from the development that has claimed so much riverfront land in the Twin Cities. Steep terrain, along with the strong conservation ethics of many local landowners, has kept Pine Bend safe thus far. But with the area’s population growing rapidly, the land is clearly at risk.

Dakota County is one of the fastest growing counties in the metro area with both farmland and natural areas under pressure from new development. According to FMR Conservation Program Director Tom Lewanski, “Dakota County is experiencing rapid growth, and there is a



FMR’s restoration ecologist, Karen Schik (right), points out native prairie species at Pine Bend during an interpretive tour last spring. Participants learned about the restoration work being done with Flint Hills Resources on their riverfront property.

push to establish new residential and light industrial developments in the Pine Bend area. People are beginning to understand that if we’re going to truly protect Pine Bend for future generations, we need to take action now.”

FMR’s Teamwork-Based Conservation

FMR is making Pine Bend Bluffs a priority by utilizing a number of tools and working with an array of partners to preserve and restore this important landscape. Because most of the area is privately owned, outreach to the individual and corporate landowners has been a critical first step. FMR’s conservation staff has

Continued on page 6

Continued from Page 1

contacted nearly every landowner around Pine Bend to discuss land protection goals and opportunities for improving the health of native plant communities located on their property.

Based on the landowners' interests, FMR helps facilitate a range of initiatives. Some landowners are working with FMR and its partners to carry out ecological management projects, such as removing exotic plant species or conducting controlled burns on native prairies. Other landowners agree to work with FMR on donating a conservation easement, which ensures that their land will never be developed.

Working with the DNR Metro Greenways Program, FMR has been able to connect property owners to funding sources for land improvements and, in some cases, set up the purchases of key lands for public ownership. Several acquisitions are underway and an important goal of these efforts is to create a new Scientific and Natural Area in Pine Bend, which would be managed by the DNR and open for limited public use.

Two key landowners FMR is working with at Pine Bend make up the "book-ends" of this important natural area: Flint Hills Resources (formerly Koch Petroleum Group) and Macalester College. FMR's partnership with Flint Hills includes ongoing extensive ecological restoration on over 100 acres at the southern end of Pine Bend (see sidebar). FMR has also completed a natural resources management plan for the Katharine Ordway

Natural History Area, which is owned and managed by Macalester College. Ordway is an important natural area at the north end of Pine Bend that includes 280 acres of oak forest, tallgrass prairie, and floodplain forest.

FMR's work with these landowners has been part of a larger initiative to restore critical river habitat, called the "Big Rivers Partnership" (BRP). The BRP, a team of nonprofit and government agencies led by Great River Greening, has made Pine Bend a priority area and is providing some of the resources for management planning and restoration work.

"People are beginning to understand that if we are going to truly protect Pine Bend for future generations, we need to take action now."

One of the hallmarks of the BRP is the involvement of community volunteers. On-the-ground restoration initiatives, powered by volunteer workers, are generating truly inspiring results at Pine Bend. Farm fields are being transformed back to their native prairie, and areas of oak savanna, once choked by invasive plants, are being restored to ecological health. One of the biggest volunteer events took place on Flint Hills Resources' property and involved over 350 people removing buckthorn and other invasive species.

Although Pine Bend is currently in private ownership, there are a few opportunities to get out there and see this amazing natural area in our midst. Volunteer activities are in the works for both Flint Hills and Katharine Ordway. FMR also leads natural history programs at both sites, giving people a chance to learn about the diversity of birds and wildflowers of Pine Bend.

For the many projects helping to protect and restore Pine Bend, FMR has taken a leadership role by coordinating

Working with Flint Hills Resources

FAQ: So why is an environmental group working in partnership with a petroleum refinery?

Answer: It's an opportunity to protect and restore hundreds of acres of prime habitat along the Mississippi River.

Several years ago FMR identified the Pine Bend Bluffs as a conservation focus area, based on the presence of large tracts of high quality natural landscapes such as native oak forest, oak savanna and prairie. Upon further investigation, we learned that Flint Hills Resources (formerly Koch Petroleum Group) owned 4,000 acres in the area, only 1,000 of which are used for refinery operations. The remaining land was purchased as a buffer for their industrial operation.

FMR approached the company about working together to plan ecological restoration and management of their riverfront lands. To their credit, Flint Hills saw this as an opportunity to make a positive contribution to the environment that is consistent with their business objectives.

After two years of a successful partnership, Flint Hills is planning to keep the project going and to contribute more resources to it. They also have a growing number of employee volunteers who are helping with restoration activities.

partnering agencies and providing the ongoing advocacy needed to ensure that projects are completed. It is work that is appreciated by many area partners. "Pine Bend has enormous environmental, historic, and scientific significance for our city and surrounding communities as well," said Joe Atkins, mayor of Inver Grove Heights. "FMR's role in local preservation and conservation efforts has been absolutely critical."

For more information about Pine Bend Bluffs or how to get involved in FMR's activities there, please contact Tom Lewanski at 651/222-2193.



Removing Buckthorn is hard work! Volunteers wrestle with exotic species removal during a Big Rivers Partnership volunteer event at Pine Bend Bluffs.