

GARY ELDRED (1947–)



Gary Eldred at the Schurch-Thomson Prairie (TPE owned), 2020. Photo by Tim Eisele.

Entirely as a volunteer and teaching himself along the way, Gary Eldred has dedicated most of his life to the effort of identifying and protecting prairies. He is unique in being self-educated about prairie habitats and rare prairie species. Eldred has been instrumental in preserving and re-establishing thousands of acres of prairies in Wisconsin.

While working seasonally on a state-owned bike trail in Green County in 1974, Eldred became exposed to the fieldwork of parks, forestry, wildlife activities and to the protection of endangered and threatened prairie plant communities. During his free time, he would travel around Green County hunting and fishing. Eldred discovered numerous small, isolated tracts of rare plant communities along the way.

In 1980, Eldred was hired as a Natural Resources Assistant at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Wilson State Nursery in Boscobel, Wisconsin. The position, which later evolved to Forestry Technician, would span his 28-year career. It paid the bills, but importantly, it was only part-time. This gave him ample time to commit to his passion – locating

and preserving Wisconsin prairie remnants.

Fortunately, Eldred had a group of seven friends equally dedicated to the task. Each crew member brought different skills sets, knowledge and diverse ideas to the project. Together, they became the initial prairie aficionados of Green County. In 1976, they were instrumental in securing the site named Muralt Bluff Prairie which was bought by Green County. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources classified it as a State Natural Area, the first such site initially protected by a county government. Thus, began the subtle transformation of Eldred's thinking. A tally of protected prairie acreage began to grow that year, too. By 2014, eleven prairie remnants totaling 170 acres had been protected under Eldred's leadership.

Eldred's grassroots work became a conservation organization. In 1987, the local group that he founded incorporated into a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating about, protecting and restoring prairies and savannas. Networking by Eldred brought in two other nearby prairie groups and led to a change of name to The Prairie Enthusiasts (TPE). As of 2020, TPE has nearly 1,400 members and eleven chapters in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota. It owns and manages over 2,100 acres and has worked with landowners to protect over a thousand acres of prairie through conservation easements. And the number of prairie acres protected continues to grow.

For nearly 50 years, Eldred has been a passionate prairie advocate and conducted surveys of eleven counties in Wisconsin and three in Iowa. Sometimes driving every road in a county to look for prairie remnants, Eldred has gone door to door to educate private landowners about prairie remnants and pique their interest in saving the rare ecosystem. In some instances, it took years to gain landowner support for restoration and preservation efforts

“What is impressive about Gary is his willingness to act, to step forward and lead, and his all-out commitment to conserving the remaining prairie ecosystem of the upper Midwest. He is mostly self-taught on prairie ecology, and he had no formal training in group organizing, leadership, or environmental education. Yet, he moved forward with remarkable accomplishments.”

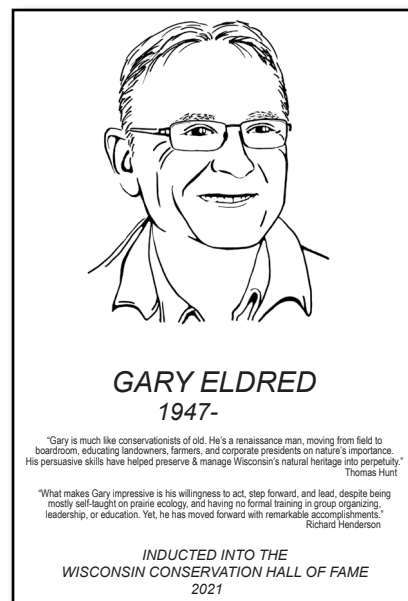
*~ Richard Henderson, TPE
Board of Directors*

on those lands. Many times, Eldred led work parties to restore those very places. His motivation came from deep commitment to Aldo Leopold's principle of ecological conscience to “save the parts.”

Eldred has led field trips and negotiated the purchase of prairies (through ownership or conservation easement) to ensure long-term preservation. He has worked with a variety of landowners, farmers, and corporate entities to share the importance of native landscapes.

Eldred has taken his love of prairies to pen and paper, drawing accurate,

continued



GARY ELDRED *continued*

exceptionally beautiful illustrations of native and endangered and threatened prairie plants. The sale of his extraordinary artworks has supported prairie protection efforts. Eldred also wrote stories and booklets about the wondrous world of native landscaping and rare plant communities.

Wisconsin has perhaps never known a more dedicated and passionate volunteer for its prairies than Gary Eldred.

“Gary is much like conservationists of old. He is a renaissance man – artist, writer, scientist, organizer, and leader. He moves seamlessly from field to boardroom, educating landowners, farmers, and corporate presidents on the importance of nature. His skills of persuasion have helped preserve and manage Wisconsin’s natural heritage into perpetuity.”

*~ Thomas C. Hunt, Director of Science,
Applied Ecological Services*



Eldred in the Iris Drive Prairie in Crawford County, WI.
Circa 2020. Photo by Steve Hubner.