Under Fire

By Anthony Pioppi,
Contributing Editor

Superintendents burn turf to preserve native vegetation and encourage wildlife

Tony Kalina is a fan of Aldo Leopold, the father of wildlife ecology, whose 1949 book, "A Sand County Almanac," is a literary landmark in the subject of conservation. Leopold and others documented the beauty, vitality and eradication of the prairie, writing on such subjects as prairie grasses that reached up to the head of a rider atop his horse.

Kalina grew in Prairie Landing Golf Club, an upscale daily-fee course near Chicago that opened in 1994. He remained as superintendent, trying to put into practice the management tools to preserve and foster the prairie.

Kalina burned on his course for the first time two years after it opened in an effort to maintain the prairie grasses by keeping out unwanted plants such as weeds.

"Fire is a tool of prairie management. It's a necessity," Kalina says. "Some plants thrive on it."

From the east side of Chicago to the Kansas Sand Hills to a 6-mile-long piece of land in the

"A land ethic ... reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity." ***— Aldo Leopold***

Fire is a tool of prairie management at Prairie Landing Golf Club.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY PRAIRIE LANDING GOLF CLUB

Long Island Sound, fire is an oft-utilized tool of the trade and one that is becoming more common as a way to preserve native vegetation and at the same time encourage wildlife.

Kalina goes by the one-third rule, meaning he burns one-third of his grasslands a season. The two-year break between burnings allows the turf time to rejuvenate, in part by using the soot from the previous burn as fertilizer.

At Prairie Dunes Country Club in Hutchinson, Kan., Superintendent Stan George — the "dean of controlled burning," in the words of one superintendent — has been holding off the march of undesired wooded vegetation such as dogwood, honeylocust and volunteer cottonwoods for more than a decade. Fire is also used to control wild plum bushes in native areas but not eliminate them. Fire also knocks back cool-season grasses that compete with desirable warm-season grasses such as sand lovegrass and switchgrass.

"It also gets rid of the aging population and encourages new growth," George says of the turf.

George points out that wildfires scorched the prairie every two to five years prior to human expansion. That stopped when mankind came west and settled. From 1937 to 1993 the prairie within George's course was untouched by fire. As a result, nonindigenous species such as cottonwood thrived, and as humans moved deeper into the prairie, they brought plants with them that dominated the environment to the detriment of the natural vegetation.

"It was starting to go from Prairie Dunes to Dogwood Dunes," George says of the vegetation invasion.

Burning off the thatch and matt gives ground-nesting animals more opportunity to call Prairie Dunes home. Since he first started using fire, George says there has been a noticeable increase in the amount of wildlife present on the course. He points out that small burrowing animals such as mice have flourished, which has led to a larger hawk population.

At Fishers Island Club in Fishers Island, N.Y., the undergrowth appears to be retaking the golf course right before one's eyes. Cherry trees and gnarly thickets of vines and thorns seemingly are poised at the course's edge waiting for a chance to advance.

Tennis courts that once existed behind the 18th green are now sub-

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Burning off thatch and matt has been good for the population of ground-nesting animals at Prairie Dunes Country Club.

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merged in an area classified as wetlands by the state of New York.

"I swear by it," says Superintendent Donnie Beck, who has been burning for nearly a decade. "If I could, I would burn the entire course. The grass comes back better."

Beck is forbidden to burn close to the shoreline of the seaside layout because of environmental reasons. Because of nervous members, Beck is also restricted from burning on much of the outside of the course. Burning is restricted to areas buffered by the shore or fairways.

What some players at Fishers and other courses have come to realize is that areas with tall grasses such as blue-stem fescue are easier to hit out of after being burned off because the thick layers of duff and leaf mold are eliminated, leaving the wispy grasses behind.

Politics plays a large role in getting the go-ahead to burn from members at private clubs. George says invariable member complaints range from being unable to find balls hit into scorched areas to soot-stained shoes, socks and pants. Kalina deals with the same gripes.

George says a compromise was reached over time and he does not burn large tracks of the course on a yearly basis. Some seasons he just ignites small out-of-play areas and other times he refrains from lighting up at all.

The original tallgrass prairie comprised an area from northern Indiana to Texas to Saskatchewan, about one-third of the country. Grasses that dominated were big bluestem, Indian grass and prairie cord grass or rip gut in wetter ground. Other prairie grasses included little bluestem, prairie dropseed, porcupine grass, sideoats grama and needlegrass. The true prairie held about 150 kinds of grasses, although no more than 10 were dominant in their special niches.

George attended a class through the Kansas State extension service to learn burning techniques. Kalina learned from a contractor, who lit and managed the fires at his course. Beck was taught by his predecessor.

Not coincidentally, all three superintendents also participate in controlled burns off the property. At various points around Fishers Island, fire is used to hold back scrub brush. George participates in burns at the nearby Sand Hills State Park, which encompasses more than 1,100 acres, most of it Kansas grasslands.

Kalina, in a role that would have surely made Leopold proud, is a volunteer member of the West Chicago Prairie Stewardship Group. Although municipal employees do the actual burning, Kalina and others maintain fire breaks, clear debris and monitor the fire during burns at the more than 300 acres of 10,000-year-old prairie. ■

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