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# Tracks Newsletter

## Volume 30, Issue 1

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In autumn, Ernie Miller Park's few acres of prairie change from lush green to dry brown, from tall waves to a downtrodden crush. Leaden skies will soon drop snow. Winter's arrival will bring rest to what is left of the prairie lands. So little of it is still here – plowed under by European settlers who replaced it with corn, a domesticated tall grass. The remaining tall grass prairie exists in small patches here and there. Viewing these small areas to appreciate the once vast scope of the prairie is like trying to understand the behavior of the tiger by watching it in a zoo's metal cage. Two hundred years ago, tall grass prairie stretched from Ohio to eastern Kansas and from Saskatchewan into Texas. Locally, it covered the northern half of Missouri and eastern Kansas.

Big bluestem and Indian grass, the two main species grow three to eight feet tall. In mid-summer, the blades wave in the wind, rippling like an ocean. Amongst the grass are a variety of forbs or broadleaf flowering plants. During spring, summer and autumn, they provide a kaleidoscope of color.

As autumn arrives, the prairie plants turn the same shade of brown as the desiccated twisted leaves from the forest. Big bluestem begins production of its hard-cased seeds. So costly in nutrients is this that in drought years, the process does not occur. The tops of annual grasses die each autumn as their chlorophyll fades. In October, nutrients are sent down the stalks of grass for winter storage. Big bluestem can transfer up to two-thirds of its nitrogen to the rhizomes. Still, there remains a massive amount of dead material waiting to return to the ground.



(continued on page 2)

## Events and Programs

- Animal Tales-9/7, 14, & 21, 10/5, & 19, 11/2 & 16
  - Little Cedar Theater-Starting 9/8
  - Monarchs & Wildflowers-9/10
- Preschool Night Hikes-9/16, 9/23, 10/7, 10/14
  - Preschool Fall Fun-9/17, 10/15 & 11/12
    - Orienteering Workshop-9/17
    - Compost Bin Workshop-9/24
      - Whimsical Woods-10/8
      - Haunted Kansas- 10/22
  - Owl Prowls—10/28, 10/29 & 11/4
  - Johnson County Artfest-10/30—11/20
    - Tellabration-11/19
  - Squaw Creek Birding Trip-11/19

See pages 3-5 for more information





**Autumn Blaze** (continued from page 1) In a dry autumn and during early spring, the dead blades are a powder keg of tinder waiting to be ignited. Caused by lightning strikes or man, the burn came – sooner or later. In the sunlight of day, fires were foreshadowed by a hazy, smoky flow down the draws. At night, an orange glow emanated from the horizon. Without the wind, the fires burned slowly providing time to clear away the grass from around homesteads or villages and thus allowing the fire a berth. Coyotes, foxes and wolves moved before the flames catching fleeing rodents.

When the fires came with the wind, it was described as a horror – black smoke billowing from walls of flames 30 feet high roaring like a locomotive, obliterating the sun and animals racing before it in terror. One fire could burn more than two hundred square miles and travel as fast as a bison can run. Flames are seen forty miles away. Ash is carried ahead of it and showered down like an earthen snow.

Fires kill the trees invading the grassland’s domain. Trapped nutrients from within the grass blades return to the earth providing for the following year’s growth. The cycle of tree encroachment and fire-purging has continued for thousands of years.

Autumn is the season of transition, of migration and movement. The prairie fades, hidden and obscure, holding its immense potential in a tightened fist within the earth.

### Nature Center Receives ORACLE Award

Since 1995, ORACLE Awards have been presented annually at the National Storytelling Network’s Conference to those who have excelled in their art, or made significant contributions to storytelling, NSN, or its members.

The nature center is specifically receiving the South Central Award for Regional Excellence, which recognizes "the creativity, professional integrity, and artistic contributions of storytellers who have not become known on the national circuit, but who have greatly enriched the storytelling culture of their region." The South Central Region includes Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana. The award was formally presented during the 2011 Texas Storytelling Conference on July 9 in San Antonio.

Senior Park Naturalist Molly Postlewait applied for the award with letters of support from Former Park Naturalist Elaine Giessel, Seasonal Naturalist Shiela Fowks, and Professional Storyteller Jo Ho.

"For 25 years the Ernie Miller Nature Center programming has revolved around the art of telling a story," Postlewait wrote. "The center continues to create new story programs, to inspire and encourage the young and young at heart to listen and tell. Ernie Miller Nature Center was the site of more than 1,000 story programs presented in 2010. Stories for all reasons and stories for all seasons is truly the mantra for the nature park."

In her letter of support, Giessel talked about the impact her effort to be a better storyteller has had on her outdoor education efforts.

"One of my greatest personal rewards, now that I am semiretired, is to have people recognize me and remember the characters and stories I told, sometimes years ago," she wrote. "As a trained scientist, I would never have accomplished this without EMNC, which provided me with both the training and the opportunity to share the art of storytelling. In the process, I have discovered my own talents and learned that storytelling can be a highly effective way to interpret natural and cultural history for audiences of all ages. Storytelling is such a powerful vehicle for transferring information and sharing experiences!"



**WE WANT YOU . . . .**



**TO BE A VOLUNTEER!**

- **Meet interesting people!**
- **Help us maintain fascinating creatures!**
- **Learn cool stuff about nature and history!**

**BE PART OF THE FEW,  
THE PROUD,  
THE ERNIE MILLER PARK  
VOLUNTEERS!**

Training and support will be provided.  
Must be at least 18 years old.  
Call Molly Postlewait at  
(913)826-2804 for more information.



## ADULT PROGRAMS



**Map & Compass: Orienteering Workshop**  
**Sat., September 17, 9 am-12:30 pm (Ages 16 & Older)** Do you like to hike cross-country but fear losing your way? This beginner's workshop introduces you to orienteering, a fun way of learning the basic skills for using a topographic map and magnetic compass. This class includes a practice orienteering hike in the park. Workbook and loan of compass are provided. Dress for the weather. Instructor: Possum Trot Orienteering Club. **\$15 (\$17 nonresidents)** Visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com) or call (913)831-3359 to register. Class Code: 44

**Go Green: Compost Bin Workshop**  
**Sat., Sept 24, 9:30-10:30 am**  
**(Adults 18 & Older)**



Discover how simple it is to make your own dirt. Make your own simple compost bin to take home and start composting right away. This bin will be easy to recreate at home and inexpensive when you want to add more bins. Find out what you can put in the compost and how to take care of it. You will then reap the benefits of the fresh fertile soil you have created for your gardens or flower pots. **1-1 hr. class - \$20 (\$22 nonresidents)** Pre-registration required. To register call (913)831-3359 or visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com) Class Code: 16

## TRAVEL

**Trip: Squaw Creek Birding**

**Sat., Nov. 19, 8 am-3:30 pm (Ages 18 & Older)**  
Let's go bird watching at Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge. Enjoy a day of viewing all the ducks and geese and other wildlife as they migrate south for the winter. Other wildlife we may observe include white tailed deer, pheasants, and the bald eagle. It should be a great year for Snow Geese! We will stop for lunch after birding. Depart Antioch Park at 8 am and return around 3:30 pm. Van transportation and tour guide services are included. Participants must provide own meal expenses and should bring binoculars. For information about the trip call Chris Pennington at (913) 888-4713. **To register visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com) or call (913) 831-3359. Pre-registration required. \$38**  
Class Code: 1155

## YOUTH PROGRAMS

**Kids & Nature: "Little Cedar Theater" (Ages 6-12) Thu., 4:30 pm, Starting Sept. 9** Attention young aspiring Naturalists! Do you love nature and enjoy sharing stories with family and friends? Then join us as you learn about nature and how to perform telling imaginative stories using creative dramatics. The class will culminate with a unique opportunity for the young naturalists/actors performing at the Nature Center's special event "Whimsical Woods" on **October 9. 6-1 hr sessions - \$42 (\$46 nonresidents)** Visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com) or call (913) 831-3359 to register. Class code: 206



## Preschool Programs

**Preschool: Fall Fun Series 9/17, 10/15 & 11/12 Sat. 9:30 am**

**(Ages 4-5)** The Preschool Package includes all three Fall Fun Series preschool programs below. **3-90 min. sessions - \$37 (\$41 nonresidents)** Visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com) or call (913) 831-3359 to register. Class code: 136

**Preschool: Fall Fun 1 -Migratory Madness, Sat., 9/17, 9:30-11 am**

When winter approaches, many birds take flight for warmer places. Find out where, how, and why these birds go. Meet a live bird and make your own binoculars for our hike. **\$14 (\$15 nonresidents)** Visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com) or call (913) 831-3359 to register. Class code: 148



**Preschool: Fall Fun 2- Native American Celebration, Sat., 10/15, 9:30-11 am**

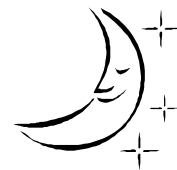
Learn about the history of Native Americans through stories, games and songs. Make a dream catcher and find out how Native Americans once lived off the land. **\$14 (\$15 nonresidents)**  
Visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com) or call (913) 831-3359 to register. Class code: 156



**Preschool: Fall Fun 3 - The First Thanksgiving Sat., 11/12, 9:30-11 am**

Meet Patience, a Pilgrim woman, who will teach you about the Mayflower, the Native Americans, and the many trying times of Plymouth. Help prepare a Thanksgiving snack. **\$14 (\$15 nonresidents)** Visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com) or call (913) 831-3359 to register. Class code: 161

## Preschool Programs Continued



**Animal Tales**  
(Ages 2-6 with adult)  
Wednesdays, 10:30 am



Visit the Nature Center for stories, songs, and surprises geared to preschool children. Come listen and learn. Meet a special animal friend every time. All children must be accompanied by an adult. **1-30 min. session - \$2 per person (including adults) Paid at site.**

9/7 Friends in the Prairie	9/14 Looking at Birds
9/21 Johnny Appleseed	10/5 Animal Action
10/19 Fall Fun	11/2 Busy Beavers
11/16 Turkeys	

**Preschool Night Hike**  
(Ages 2-6 with Adult)  
Fridays, 7-8:30 pm,  
Explore the trails as the sun sets. Listen for the nocturnal sounds of a cricket's chorus and a barred owl's call. Gather around a cheery fire ring for stories, songs, and a tasty treat. Participants should bring a flashlight. **\$6 (\$7 non-residents) per person (including adults) Visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com) or call (913) 831-3359 to register. Class codes:**

97	9/16
99	9/23
101	10/7
102	10/14



## Mud Pies



Nature activities for children  
By Andrea Johnson, Park Naturalist

**ABC**

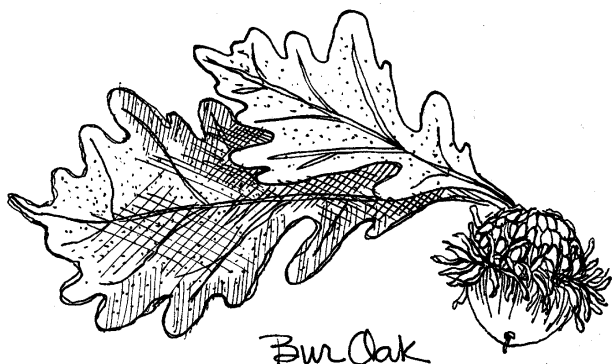
### Alphabet Hike

**XYZ**

Next time you take a hike with your kids try a taking an alphabet hike. Take a pen and paper and write down the alphabet, one letter per line. Leave space to write found items next to each letter. Have children find items that start with each letter. Try to find at least one item found on your hike for each letter.

For example:  
F is for flower  
T is for tree  
I is for Ivy

Be creative! You will have to be imaginative for letters like X and Q!



### Pressed Leaves



Preserve the beauty of fall colors by pressing leaves, grasses or fall flowers.

Go for a hike and pick up some pretty leaves of red, orange, yellow or green. Make sure you don't pick up and poison ivy as it turns a gorgeous yellow and orange. Plants that can be easily flattened work best. Bringing a small book and immediately putting them in helps prevent withering.

As soon as possible flatten them and place in a telephone book or other type of large book. Put them in between paper, tissue or paper towels in the book to help absorb moisture. Stack more books or anything to add weight on top of the book your leaves. This will help press the plant. Wait a week.

After a week check on the pressed plants. These plants can be put in a picture frame, decoupage onto a box or can or used as is for decoration. Pressed flower look great scattered on a table under place settings and candles.

## JCPRD Launches New Focus on Fun Photo Contest

A total of \$400 in prizes in each of three categories is being offered through a new JCPRD photo contest for patrons and area residents.

The contest runs through Nov. 30 and is for amateur photographers of all ages. Employees of Johnson County (including JCPRD) and their immediate families are not eligible to participate.

Entries are being accepted in three categories. These include: **Parks & Trails**, which seeks photos of park visitors enjoying JCPRD parks and trails; **Activities & Events**, which seeks photos of participants and activities at JCPRD-sponsored programs, classes and events; **Nature & Wildlife**, which seeks photos showing natural beauty and wildlife in JCPRD parks. There is no entry fee and participants can enter up to three photos per category.

All photos must have been taken within the past two years at a JCPRD park or facility or at a JCPRD-sponsored class, program, or event. Release forms will be required from persons who are recognizable in submitted photos. Photos are not to be digitally altered beyond standard optimization.

For each category, the district will award a first place prize of \$250 cash, a second place prize of a \$100 JCPRD gift certificate, and a third place prize of a \$50 JCPRD gift certificate. In addition, all of the prize-winning photos will be featured on JCPRD's website and Facebook page. To be considered, photos must be received on disc by Dec. 1 at the JCPRD Administration Building in Shawnee Mission Park.

For more details, including resolution requirements and information on photo releases, as well as complete contest rules, visit [www.jcprd.com](http://www.jcprd.com).

### Special Thank you's

#### • GoLizards

Exotic Pet Store & Bait Shop  
in Bonner Springs

For supplying crickets for  
feeding reptiles and  
amphibians at the  
Nature Center.

[www.golizards.com](http://www.golizards.com)



#### • All of our Summer Camp Staff

For all of your hard work and  
dedication in making the  
summer fun, memorable and a  
huge success!

### New Recycling Bins Placed at All JCPRD Park Shelters

Recycling bins for plastic and aluminum were purchased and placed at all shelters at all district parks earlier this year.

"It was the right thing to do," said Superintendent of Parks and Golf Courses Bill Maasen. "It's something we've been thinking about for a couple of years and we finally put it into action this spring. I think our public expects us to promote and do the right thing and the admin team wanted to make sure we give the public that option at shelter houses and various sports fields."

"We bought 112 recycling barrels with the intent that every shelter would have at least one, and if it is a big shelter, it may have as many as two or three," Maasen said.

### Hours

(Closed from 12-1 pm for lunch)  
Monday-Saturday 9 am to 5 pm  
Sunday 1:00 to 5 pm

#### Winter hours-from Nov. 1 to Mar. 31

Monday-Saturday 9 am to 4:30 pm  
Sunday 12:30 pm to 4:30 pm

Closed Sundays June, July & August  
Park trails open dawn to dusk daily

Closed Nov. 11 for Veterans' Day

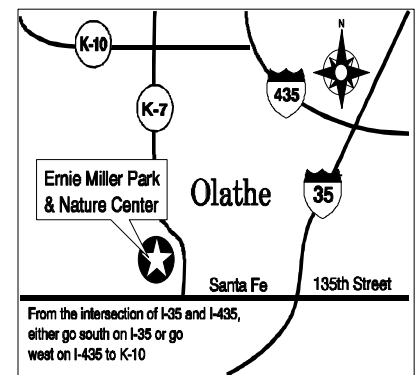


#### Nature Center Staff

Cindy Lawrence... Interpretive Assistant  
Leon Gordon..... Park Supervisor  
Bill McGowan..... Outdoor Education  
Manager  
Molly Postlewait... Snr. Park Naturalist  
Andrea Johnson... Park Naturalist  
and Tracks Editor  
Regina Wasson..... Park Naturalist

### Ernie Miller Nature Center

909 North Highway 7  
Olathe, Kansas 66061  
(At the intersection of  
127th & K-7)  
**(913) 826-2800**  
[www.erniemiller.com](http://www.erniemiller.com)



From the intersection of I-35 and I-435,  
either go south on I-35 or go  
west on I-435 to K-10

*Johnson County Park and Recreation  
District does not discriminate on the  
basis of race, color, national origin,  
sex, religion, age and handicapped  
status in employment of the provision  
of programs and services.*