



# Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

## ~ Fall 2021 Newsletter ~

*Mission: "To foster a greater awareness of the interrelationships between humans and nature"*

### ***In this Issue:***

With our Sept. 22nd autumnal equinox right around the corner, most folks are welcoming the cooler fall temps and some rain after experiencing one of our hottest and driest summers on record. Fall in our northern regions is a time to prepare for winter—crop or garden harvesting, adding to the wood pile, and fall hunting are just some of the chores and fun of fall. At the AELC we will be busy setting up for Haunted Trails and getting trails ready for winter recreation.

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**Note:** Even with Haunted Trails setup, all trails near the Nature Center will be open. Also archery deer hunting is allowed for AELC members. Be watchful & respectful.

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Comments or story suggestions welcome, please contact:  
*Wayne Goeken, AELC Newsletter Editor*  
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### **"We're Back!"...Haunted Trails Returns**

Bloody butchers, walking dead, chainsaws, a gorilla in a cage (or did it escape?!), and more are just some of the theatrical thrills being planned by this year's Haunted Trails Crew.



The Crew was out last weekend planning "scare spots" and tactics while also planning precautions for distancing and emphasizing open air situations to maximize this year's scares with minimal health risk.

With Covid-caused cancellation of the event last year, the crew is eager to put on a good scare to reset everyone's adrenaline levels. If you're lucky (and smart) you'll avoid the electric chair!

There are five Saturdays in October this year to allow everyone to get their fill of chills and thrills. The Haunted Trail will be open each of these Saturdays starting approximately a half hour after sunset. Admission is \$10/person.

Proceeds help support operations of the Agassiz ELC with a primary emphasis on providing support for students to be able to come out and enjoy outdoor experiences that they'll remember for a lifetime.

Sincere appreciation for the time and effort that all the Haunted Trails Crew volunteers put in to make this a fun and memorable event and everyone who comes out to show their support.

**Thank you ~ Miigwech ~ Takk ~ Gracias ~ Danke**

# Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

## AELC Board of Directors

Craig Engelstad, Fertile \*Chair  
Daniel Wilkens, Fertile \*Treasurer  
Stacy Erickson, Beltrami \*Secretary  
Laura Bell, East Grand Forks  
Nicole Bernd, Gentilly  
Kirsten Fagerlund, Crookston  
Laurie Fairchild, Faith  
Wendell Johnson, Crookston  
Brian Torkelson, Crookston

## Staff/Support

Wayne Goeken, Executive Director  
Lisa Liden, Administrative Support

The mission of the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center is to foster a greater awareness of the interrelationships between humans and nature.

The Agassiz ELC provides quality hands-on learning opportunities in the unique Fertile Sand Hills to promote stewardship of natural resources for present and future generations.

The Agassiz ELC shall not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, creed, gender, gender expression, age, national origin, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or military status, in any of its activities or operations.

## Contact

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...to find the universal elements enough; to find the air and the water exhilarating; to be refreshed by a morning walk or an evening saunter...to be thrilled by the stars at night; to be elated over a bird's nest or a wild flower in spring—these are some of the rewards of the simple life.

*John Burroughs (1837-1921) American naturalist & writer*

## Dan Wilkens ...AELC Board Member Profile

Dan has been a staunch advocate of the Agassiz ELC from Day One. Dan has long recognized the potential of the Fertile Sand Hills as a fantastic natural area that can provide fun recreation opportunities for all ages and abilities while enjoying and preserving the unique natural features that make the Fertile Sand Hills special.



Dan is currently the AELC Treasurer and has been on the AELC Board since its inception, helping provide context to current decision making. Dan's skills at partnership building have helped the Agassiz ELC with joint projects with the MN Turkey Federation, Sand Hill River Watershed District, Polk County, Sandhills Snowcruisers, and other partners.

In addition to service on the Board, Dan has been very generous in volunteering time helping with trail mowing, newsletter folding and stuffing, fundraising, burger and brat grilling, Haunted Trails ticket taking and many other tasks he pitches in to assist with that helps the Agassiz ELC be a part of the Fertile community.

Wayne Goeken note: I would like to especially thank Dan for use of his tractor and brush mower for mowing of the x-c ski trails for the past many years before the ski season. It's become an annual ritual, meeting Dan at the farm, hooking up the mower, greasing all the zerks, and fueling up with a full tank of diesel for me to use for a full day of mowing over 10 miles of ski trails in the rugged Sand Hills. And I usually break something which Dan ably fixes. Thanks Dan!

To enjoy scenery you should ramble amidst it; let the feelings to which it gives rise mingle with other thoughts; look around upon it in intervals of reading; and not go to it as one goes to see the lions fed at a fair. The beautiful is not to be stared at, but to be lived with.

*Thomas Babington Macauley (1800-1859)  
English writer and statesman.*

# Sand Hills Stories

To paraphrase Mark Twain's phrase "There's gold in them thar hills," to "There's history in them thar Hills" would be an accurate assessment of the many stories to be told of people's various interactions over the years with the landscape of the Fertile Sand Hills and the Sand Hill River. The Agassiz ELC is very interested in documenting more of the history of the Fertile Sand Hills and share the many stories that folks remember of work and play associated with the Fertile Sand Hills and the Sand Hill River.

## Ski Devil Ski Area?

While the Fertile Sand Hills now provides premiere cross-country ski opportunities with over 12 miles of groomed trails, a downhill ski area was also popular "back in the day."



The Ski Devil (pronounced "SHE DEVIL") Ski Area appears to have been in operation primarily in the 1960s. Four rope tows serviced the six slopes located on the east side of the Fertile Sand Hills not far off MN Hwy 32 and just south of the present day Sandhill River Golf Course.

The patch shown above is a bit of memorabilia from this era, but very little history has been found. We would love to learn more about this ski area and share any stories or photos of its heyday.

## Fixing Fence...

While the Fertile Sand Hills were not suitable for tillage and crops, cattle grazing was one use for the area. Old fencelines provide evidence of this activity.



Fixing fence was a regular need from stories told, especially after weekends when drivers of dirt bikes and pickups would have some "fun" in the Hills.

## Flour Mills of Fertile...



At one time Fertile had two flour mills, both were built by Otto Kankel. The first mill,

just SE of current Fertile, was called Sohler and Kankel Mill and later the Valley View Mill when purchased by G.H. Gredvig. The second mill built west of Fertile was known as the Garfield Roller Mill and later as the Home Flour Mill. This mill dam was washed out in 1946 with plans to rebuild it as part of the West Mill Recreation Area which didn't occur due to dam building restrictions.

## Modern stories...

This "tipi" along one of the Sand Hills trails was likely the result of several industrious youth enjoying a day out in the Sand Hills.



## USGS Markers?

In the Winter 2021 AELC newsletter, a story featured Scout Tower—we've heard that there were a couple versions of Scout Tower which we're trying to track down further.

An additional feature of that area we are interested in relates to USGS markers that were once there. Currently there is one concrete base, as

shown in this photo, on the south ridge of Scout Tower where a USGS marker would have been. It has been noted that there were three USGS markers at one time in the Scout Tower area. Any information on these would be appreciated.

## AELC Community Programs

Below are a few activities lined up so far for the fall. Stay tuned for possible additional “pop-up” programs—especially possible guided hikes in the Fertile Sand Hills and trails work days.

**Pilates/Yoga ~ Wed. Sept. 15 at 6:00 p.m.** Experience the benefits of stretching and strengthening your body at an introductory session to pilates and yoga at the Fertile Nature Center. Amanda Lien will lead the session, sharing her years of experience guiding people to healthy lifestyles. Suitable for all. There was a \$10 program fee and participants were asked to bring their own mats.

### **Story Stroll ~ Summer Green to Autumn Gold ~ Sept 17-27**



Families of all ages are invited to enjoy the trails at the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center and read *Summer Green to Autumn Gold: Uncovering Leaves' Hidden Colors* by Mia Posada from Friday, Sept. 17<sup>th</sup> to Sept. 27<sup>th</sup>. This visually appealing and informative picture book moves through summer, fall, winter, and spring to explain the science behind the seasonal changes in

deciduous trees. You'll be able to see the changes talked about in the book in real-time out on the trails.

This free outdoor activity is being coordinated by the Fertile Public Library and the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center. The stroll will begin just east of the river deck in front of the Nature Center and follow the river trail less than a quarter mile east to Summit Avenue.

### **Buckthorn Control Demo/Work Day ~ Fri., Oct. 8: 1-6 pm**

Buckthorn is a non-native invasive shrub/tree that has taken over many wooded areas. It outcompetes other plants and turns woodlots into a monoculture with very limited diversity and wildlife value. Control is best done early before it gets out of hand. The Univ. of MN-Crookston Natural Resources Club will lead a buckthorn removal project on Friday, Oct. 8<sup>th</sup> from 1-6 p.m. The public is welcome to attend to learn how to identify and control buckthorn and help out if so inclined. All activity will be near the Nature Center.



## Recent Activities

### **3D Archery Shoot**

In August, 130 archers enjoyed an array of challenging shots along a new trail to Scout Tower. Archers young and old came from a wide region to shoot the 42 target course hosted by the Fertile Community Conservation Club at the AELC Fertile Sand Hills.



### **Mosaic Art**

Mosaic artist Elizabeth Rockstad of Ada guided 12 participants in creating nature inspired artistic mosaics at this fun program held July 21<sup>st</sup> at the Fertile Nature Center.

### **BATS**

Bats are beneficial was the message shared by Amy Westmark, MnDNR Region 1 Nongame Wildlife Specialist at a bat program held August 25<sup>th</sup> at the Fertile Nature Center. Bats help control harmful insects and serve as an important pollinator. Bat populations have declined dramatically due to white nose fungus that has spread throughout North America.



During an outdoor “listening” session following the program, five of the seven bat species found in Minnesota were detected using a bat echo location meter.

Watch for program announcements on Facebook and in the local/regional media. We especially want to keep AELC members informed—any member that we have an email for will receive direct email notices of any hikes and programs; so members, make sure we have your current email. Thanks!

# 2021 Drought Status

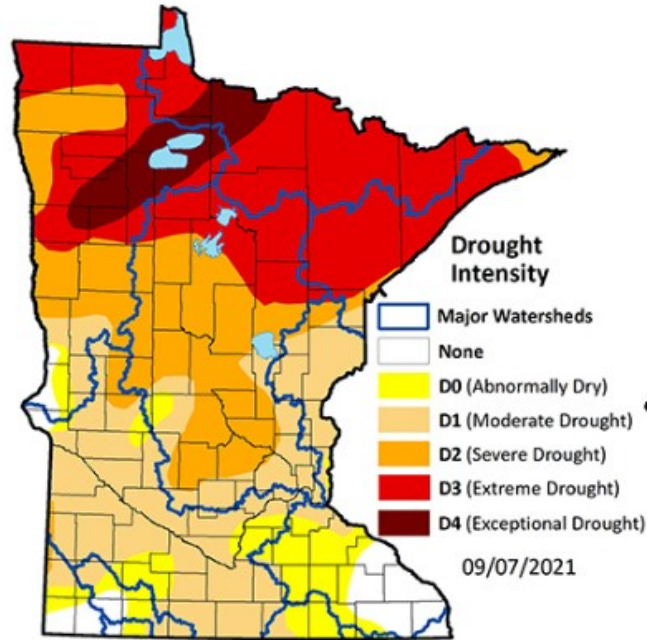
Some rains the last week of August and first week of September resulted in the need to mow lawns but did little to bring drought relief. The Fertile area remains on the edge of “Exceptional Drought,” the worst drought category possible.

As of the 9/7/2021 drought report, Polk County was experiencing the second driest year in 127 years of records, running at 7.84 inches below normal for the year.

Drought impacts are obvious to our important ag sector as crops are severely stressed with lower yields and livestock producers struggling to keep up to grazing and hay needs.

While deep-rooted prairie plants are better suited to withstand drought conditions, blooms have nevertheless been fewer, and not as long-lasting or colorful.

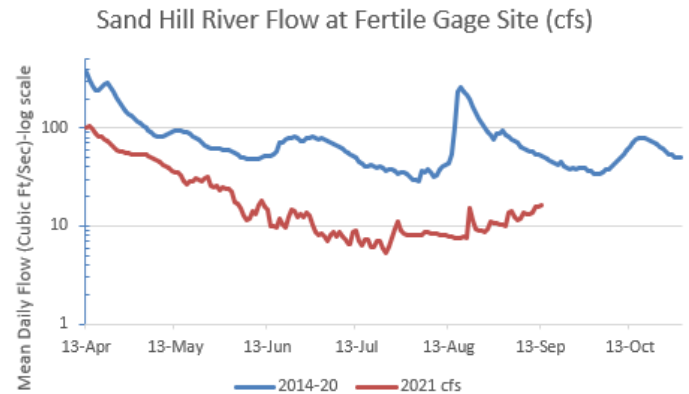
Regarding fall colors, this summer’s excess heat and drought are expected to result in earlier leaf change and dropping of leaves as well as less colorful leaf color altogether as trees try to conserve moisture and energy going into winter. Southern Minnesota, where there has been little to no drought, may be the place to go for this year’s fall colors.



## Sand Hill River Flow

As expected, water flow of the Sand Hill River has been very low, with irrigation restrictions even in place at times. The graph at right shows this year’s 2021 flow levels compared to the seven year average of 2014-2020.

While flow has been low since mid-May, for this time of year in mid-September, flow was actually lower in 2015, 2017, and 2018 than it is now in 2021. High flows in 2016 and 2020 are actually more the anomaly of high flows at this time of year that allows paddlers to float their boats.



## Drought Impacts on Ecosystems

\*Shallow water warms up more, creating ideal conditions for cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae growth which is associated with many dog deaths over the past several years.

\*Warmer water also holds less oxygen which stresses fish, macroinvertebrates and the entire aquatic ecosystem. Fish tend to go dormant during hot weather, eating less and being stressed by catch and release practices.

\*Drought not only will impact fall colors, but hot dry weather makes trees more susceptible to insects and disease. As trees die, this creates more fuel for potential forest fires.

## Drought Information Statement

Issued by NWS Grand Forks, ND Sept. 11, 2021

### PRECIPITATION/TEMPERATURE OUTLOOK...

The 30 Day Outlook for September (updated on August 31st) and the 90 Day Outlook for September through November (issued August 19th) both call for an increased risk of near to slightly above normal temperatures and near to slightly below precipitation throughout the autumnal period.

### HYDROLOGIC SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK...

Warmer than normal temperatures with no commensurate increase in precipitation from September through November could continue to hold streamflows in lower quartile levels into freeze-up.

# Site Management

## New Trail Sign Plan Underway

A concern often noted by visitors to the Fertile Sand Hills relates to way-finding, i.e. not getting lost! Although maps are posted at all major trail intersections, trail users still seem to be “directionally challenged” with all the intersecting trails providing access throughout the Sand Hills.

Efforts are underway through a \$10,000 grant from the Northwest Minnesota Foundation to improve the way-finding or directional signage. As resources allow, interpretive signage will also be developed to help site users better understand the unique habitats and history associated with the Fertile Sand Hills.

In August a new updated GPS layer was logged by traveling all the trails. A few major loops are planned to be named and signed before winter to try the Carsonite sign system. The current maps will remain with future plans to have separate summer and winter maps.

Color coding of selected trails is also being considered as well as information about degree of difficulty, length and estimated time to cover a trail.



## Fall Trail Work Days

With high hopes that snow will be more plentiful this winter than rain was over the summer, skiers and snowshoers are invited to come out and help get all the trails ready for winter use. Major mowing of the trails will be done by trained staff, but lots of trimming of side and overhead branches is needed as well as throwing sticks and debris off the trails thereby creating a smooth surface and clearance for safe, enjoyable winter recreation.

Watch for notices in the Fertile Journal, on the AELC Facebook page, and direct email to AELC members alerting volunteers to dates, times, and tools that would be handy—though no need for tools to help throw debris from the trails and trimmings from other volunteers with loppers.

## Pollinator Patch?

The area where a prairie or botanical garden has been in the past will be sprayed to kill off the quack grass with plans next spring for planting selective pollinator plants. BUT, **volunteers** will be needed to maintain the area or it will just revert to weeds again. Sign up now to assist with this project next spring.



## What's in a name....Poplar...Poppo...Aspen

A fun question to pose to students when hiking by a large group of poplar trees in the Fertile Sand Hills is to ask how many poplar trees they think are present. Answers range from 50-100 or more. But the truth is it is likely all one tree connected by an extensive root system with many stems or what pass as “trees.” All these “stems/trees” are genetically identical, having grown from underground stems or rhizomes to form in aggregate, a clone.

Poplar is the species name with three general groups in North America; cottonwoods, aspens, and balsam poplars. The most common in the Fertile Sand Hills and in North America is the quaking aspen. In fact, the largest single organism on earth is a huge quaking aspen grove in Utah called the Prado which has been aged at 80,000 years, covers 106 acres, has 47,000 stems, and weighs in at 13 million pounds.

Aspens are one of the species that often encroach on oak savanna and prairie areas when natural controls such as wildfires or grazing by bison or cattle is not present. Aspen often have white bark and can be confused with paper birch. Aspen have a chalkish white substance that rubs off whereas paper birch has thin bark that peels off. Paper birch bark has horizontal line markings not found on aspen.



## Agassiz Fundraising Endeavors

Thirty years....in 2022, the Agassiz ELC will celebrate its 30th year anniversary of becoming established as a nonprofit corporation. Since its inception, the primary focus of the Agassiz ELC has been to provide quality outdoor education experiences for elementary students. Programs and site management activities support this focus along with community programs and provision of recreation opportunities.

The past couple of years have been especially challenging to deliver school programs on-site with Covid concerns. Prior to 2020 over 350 elementary students were coming each year for a variety of on-site naturalist programs. The AELC Board is seeking ways to ensure the AELC continues to be able to deliver quality programs and services to students and the public, including exploring funding options to ensure a sustainable future to allow fulfillment of its mission.

With this in mind, an Endowment Fund was recently established and the Board is currently engaged in developing fundraising campaigns through partnerships with GiveMN and Giving Hearts Day. Success in these efforts will help provide assistance to schools to defray costs of bringing students to the rich outdoor learning environment of the Agassiz ELC and the Fertile Sand Hills where students will enjoy experiences that last a lifetime.



Norman County East Summer Recreation Field Trip to Fertile Sand Hills



On a regional level, AELC will be working with Dakota Medical Foundation and the High Impact Institute to establish a fundraising goal and strategies to provide for quality, memorable student outdoor education experiences. More details soon.

AELC Board members participated in several “coaching sessions”

provided by RaiseMN staff to help better define the “story” of what the AELC provides in terms of outdoor experiences for students and the positive impact it has on kids. Watch for how you can help AELC and the students we serve benefit via giving on Give to the Max Day on November 18th.



## Agassiz ELC Volunteer Opportunities

- Pumpkin Carvers to help get ready for Jack-O-Lantern Walk.
- Haunted Trails Scare Specialists or Support Crew (ticket takers, set-up/take-down).
- Nature Center hosts. We look forward to the Nature Center being open to the public again, but we need volunteers to serve as hosts and to check out skis and snowshoes!
- Help improve AELC’s social media presence by posting photos of your outings in the Fertile Sand Hills to the AELC Facebook page and your social media outlets.
- Graphic artist to assist with marketing and promotion items for AELC.
- And MORE...Contact Stacy Erickson at 218-945-3136 or Wayne Goeken at 218-280-0516 to help out.

## WISH LIST

- ⇒ Pumpkins for Jack-O-Lantern Walk
- ⇒ Loppers to trim back branches from trails
- ⇒ Chain saw for tree removal
- ⇒ Rakes and shovels
- ⇒ Hand or garden tools
- ⇒ Hand sprayer for targeted weed control

# The Back Page...*More Nature Notes and Fertile Sand Hills Natural Wonders!*

## Mow and Mulch to help Butterflies



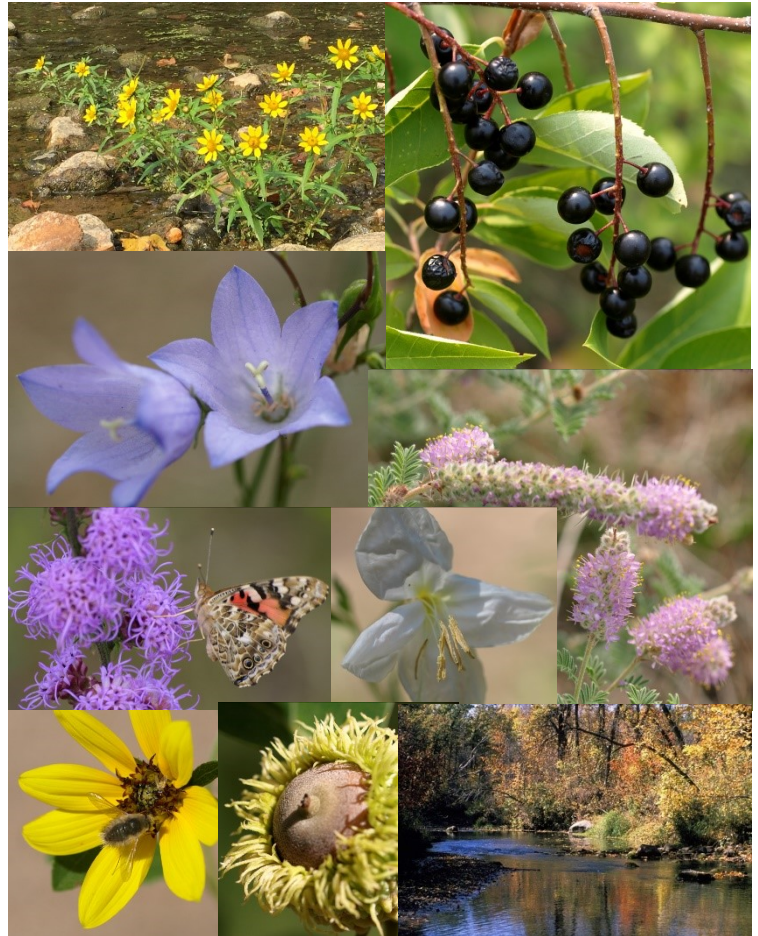
Fall chores...lawn leaf management. Don't rake and bag...mow and mulch! Benefits to mulching leaves

into your lawn include fertilization, moisture and weed control, butterfly promotion, and less labor and landfill costs. For more information, check out <https://tinyurl.com/522ju3up>.

## Outdoor Skills and Stewardship Webinars

The MN DNR offers a series of Minnesota Outdoors Skills and Stewardship (MOSS) webinars every Wednesday at noon through the end of November. Anyone interested in the outdoors can learn about activities like small game hunting, pheasant hunting, fall bass fishing, waterfowl hunting or creating wildlife habitat in your woods. The sessions are free, but participants are required to pre-register. More on topics and registration here, <https://tinyurl.com/kpf5p2wy>.

## Enjoy the Fertile Sand Hills in all seasons!



## Mushrooms around the Fertile Sand Hills have responded to late summer rains...



## Fertile Haunted Trails

- ◆ Are you ready for the Scare of your Life?
- ◆ Every Saturday night in October at the Fertile Nature Center.
- ◆ \$10/person with proceeds to help provide outdoor experiences and recreation for all.
- ◆ See You at the Scare....if You Dare!!!

