
Gourdneck State Game Area Kalamazoo County, Portage Habitat Improvements

Frequently Asked Questions



Where is the Gourdneck State Game Area located?

This game area is located in Kalamazoo County, Portage. It is best viewed from the rest area located in northbound lanes of US-131 north of Shaver Road or by hiking in from the parking lot located off Vanderbilt Avenue.

What are the wildlife management goals at the Gourdneck State Game Area?

Our primary goal is to restore the historic prairie and savanna complex that was once associated with Prairie Ronde and provide grassland and savanna habitat for species associated with these communities.

Why are renovations necessary at the Gourdneck State Game Area?

Much of the property for Gourdneck State Game Area (SGA) was purchased in the 1940's and 1950's. Leading up to the time of purchase the land was in agricultural production. Past management on the SGA was aimed at maintaining some form of agriculture for wildlife habitat purposes. For various reasons agricultural production became increasingly difficult on some portions of the SGA, including the location for this project. The last sharecropper pulled out of this project area in the late 1980's leaving the fields to slowly convert to brush.

Overtime invasive brush like autumn olive and multiflora rose became established in the old fields. These fields became almost impenetrable for all but the smallest wildlife species or bravest of hunter. Attempts at removing some of the brush using available equipment only resulted in broken equipment and nothing more than a dent in the brush.

In addition a shifting trend toward prairie management was underway both locally and within the DNR. Locally the Kalamazoo Nature Center, Western Michigan University, Pfizer, city of Portage, and both Fort Custer Recreational Area and Training Facility were all taking up tall grass prairie projects. The proximity to US-131 and the rest area make this location ideal for showcasing a prairie/savanna restoration project.

What kinds of renovations are being done?

- This project got underway in the summer of 2005 with the initial bulldozing of the permanent burn line around the entire project area. In addition, 3 small fields were cleared of brush and trees during the late summer months. Rye was broadcast on the burn line and some of the newly opened fields to provide green forage through the winter.
- In 2006, additional bulldozer work was completed to clear brush and trees from several other old fields within the prairie portion of the project. Following

bulldozing, rye was planted to aid in weed control and provided winter forage for wildlife.

- From 2007 to 2009 a timber sale contract was in place to remove some of the biomass in the slash piles. This resulted in a general reduction in the size of the piles, however much of the smaller or poor quality wood remained. An unexpected result of this activity was the poor condition the field was left following the use of large equipment. Late in 2009 it was determined that the site was ready for prairie planting and the remaining slash piles would be allowed to decompose naturally or with the use of fire.
- In order to prepare for planting the prairie, seasonal DNR staff were charged with consolidating the remaining piles of brush and smoothing the prairie area in preparation for planting. All of this work was accomplished in the summer of 2010 and rye was aerial seeded on the site in September in order to reduce soil erosion and provide winter forage for wildlife. In the summer of 2011, DNR staff installed the prairie with follow-up treatment as necessary to ensure the success of the planting.
- A spring burn across the entire project will be conducted each year between 2012 and 2014. This should aid in the restoration of the prairie and woodland. Following the burn in 2014 there will be two consecutive non-burn years then followed by a burn in 2017. After this the normal maintenance schedule can be established.

How long will it take to finish these renovations?

Work began in the summer of 2005 and has continued at various levels of involvement since then. Original plans call for completion by 2010, however complications arose and now the anticipated end date is slated for 2014.

What kinds of animals will these renovations attract and house?

So far the response by cottontail rabbits and wild turkeys has been positive as these species were able to take advantage of the brush piles and cool season grass portions. It is expected that as the prairie becomes established these two species will greatly benefit with additional hiding and breeding cover. Other species Wildlife Division has targeted for management include Eastern meadowlark, bobolink, red-headed woodpecker, and white-tailed deer and are all expected to benefit directly due to this management plan.

How will these changes benefit hunters?

So far comments have been mixed from hunters using the area. Some enjoyed hunting the brush that was there before and were able to adapt to these conditions. Others have commented positively about the clearing of the fields and ease of access to some of the remote areas of the SGA using the burn line as a trail. As the area continues to be developed and a natural disturbance regime established hunters will likely continue to benefit from the effects. It is anticipated that deer and turkeys will continue to thrive

in the prairie and savanna complexes. The savanna with scattered trees should allow for good hiding cover for hunters as they pursue these game species. Small game hunters will benefit from additional cover for rabbits and squirrels, it would not be surprising to someday have a pheasant or two on the area as well.

Where can I learn more?

Our website will provide you with up-to-date information, and display visual progress, on the renovations taking place: www.michigan.gov/workingforwildlife

How can I get involved?

If you would like more information please contact Steve Chadwick, DNR wildlife biologist, at the Crane Pont State Game Area Field Office – (269) 244-5928.