

# The Prairies of Pope Farm

*A Self-Guided Tour of Pope Farm Conservancy*



***Tour Length:*** One and a half hours

*Please note—tour trail covers moderate to steep terrain.*

***Text and photo credits:*** Trel Gimber

## Welcome!

As you enter the conservancy and drive to the top of the hill, tall grasses and other flowering plants sweep by on both sides of the road. The restored prairie reminds one of a time when animals and Native Peoples populated the land. This self-guided tour will show you that there are different types of prairies, defined by the topography, underlying soil, and amount of available water.

The word ‘prairie’ is the French word for meadow, which is what the early explorers would have seen on their adventures. Over 300 different types of flowering plants grow in prairies, and each one has a season for blooming and producing seeds.

In Wisconsin, there are three main types of prairies: short grass, mixed grass, and tall grass. Tall grass prairies are native to Wisconsin because of our rich soil and increased rain fall. The loam soil valued by farmers originated in the prairie.

### **Station 1: Prairie Overlook toward Lake Mendota**

Beginning in the picnic area at the top of the hill, take a look at the beautiful view of the prairie and Lake Mendota. This kind of tall grass prairie was abundant in southern Wisconsin prior to European settlement. Lightning did cause prairie fires and the native people also managed this land by burning the dead plants



*A bumblebee visits a coneflower in the tall grass prairie.*

(duff), to improve hunting, travel, and visibility. Burning is very healthy for many prairie plants.

## **Station 2: Short Grass Prairie**

Next, turn away from Madison and Lake Mendota, and pass through the gap in the rock wall. Turn right, and head past the Burr Oak and down the hill to the small stone amphitheater where the trail forks at the bottom of the hill. This prairie was planted to display short grasses that a landowner may use in their landscaping. Short grasses are more common further west where there is sandier soil and less precipitation. In the fall this prairie is a gathering place for the migrating green darner dragonfly and other animals.



*Burr Oak at the north end of the stone fence.*

## **Station 3: Oak Savannah**

From the amphitheater, take the trail west along the ridge toward the large cottonwood trees growing in the ravine. Walk past the CCC spillway and continue along the pine forest planting. At the next fork, take the left trail. Shortly you will turn left again and uphill to the savannah restoration. Historically, Southern Wisconsin was dominated by grasslands with clusters of oak trees. The Friends have selected a one acre restoration, adding more than 140 native wild flowers to an area too steep and rocky to till. Even though this land was grazed, it was never cropped and more importantly the oak trees were allowed to grow. This is our savannah.





*Indian Plantain grows tall in a tall grass prairie.*

#### **Station 4: Wheat Field Prairie**

Retrace your steps to the bottom of the hill. Turn left and walk through the small valley on the west side of the hill. Keep left and circle around the bottom of the hill and the oak savannah towards the farm buildings.

Between the savannah and the farm buildings, you will find the Wheat Field Prairie. This is a different kind of tall grass prairie that has a large amount of sage plants. Their silver color makes them easy to spot.

#### **Station 5: Rain Garden**

Finally, head back to the lower parking lot. On the side of the lower parking lot towards the hill you will see a

rain garden. Rain gardens are filled with plants that like to have wet roots. The rain runoff flows downhill over the surface and also infiltrates or soaks into the soil. Prairie plants have long roots that go deep into the soil, and are excellent at helping water soak into the soil. The roots put carbon and nitrogen into the soil, and can tap the water stored deep in the earth.

The Prairies and surrounding crop fields are home to thousands of animals, ranging from large to microscopic. There are reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals that shelter and feed here.



*Indian grass, asters, & big blue stem.*

## Thank You for Taking This Tour!

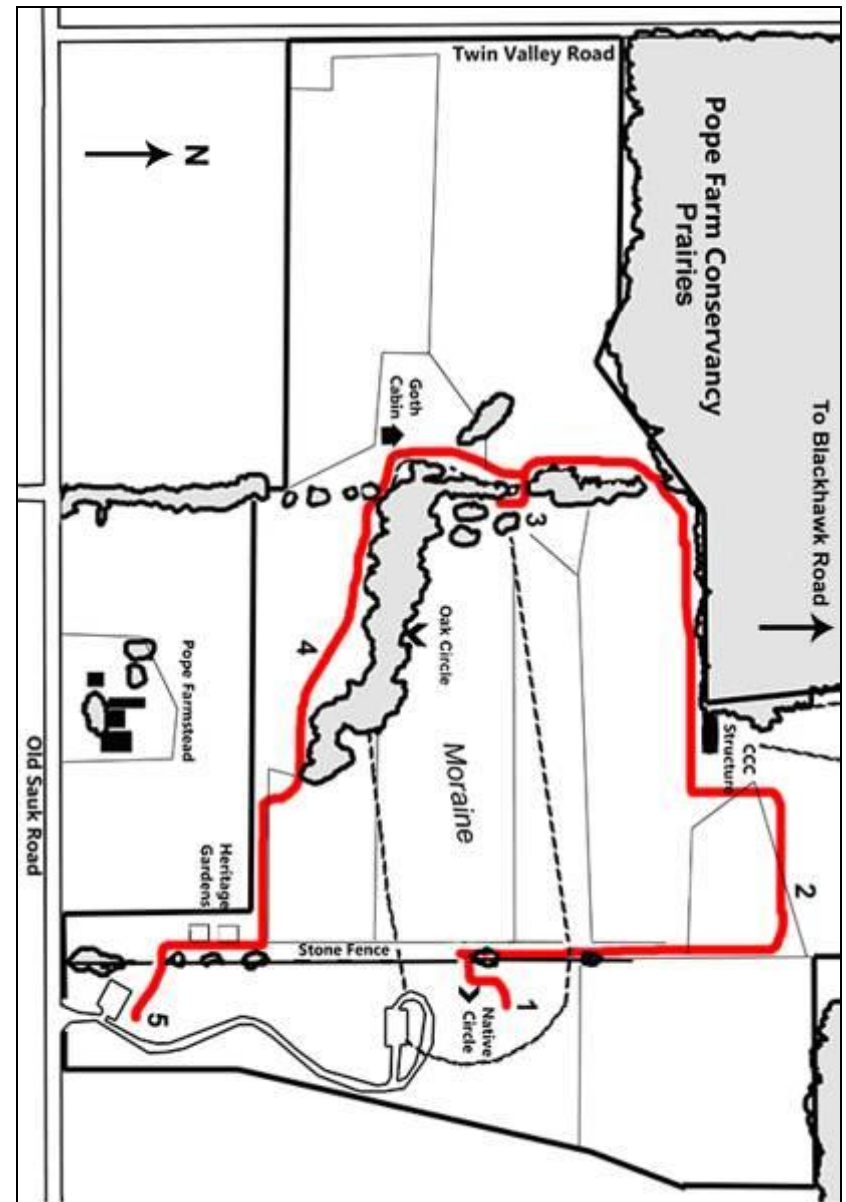
The Pope Farm Conservancy exists to help people learn about prairies and our land. We are fortunate that we're able to have examples of different pre-settlement landscapes. Thank you for visiting and we hope you come again!



*A monarch butterfly caterpillar munches on milkweed at the rain garden.*

We encourage you to continue to check out the *Friends of Pope Farm Conservancy* web page for information about the conservancy and upcoming events.

[www.popefarmconservancy.org](http://www.popefarmconservancy.org) or  
[www.info@popefarmconservancy.org](mailto:www.info@popefarmconservancy.org)



For more information, please visit:

[www.popefarmconservancy.org](http://www.popefarmconservancy.org)