What is an oak savanna?

Simply put, a **prairie** is a grassland with no trees. An oak **savanna** is a grassland with scattered oaks, usually with a spreading canopy. An oak **woodland** is a dense stand of oak trees that create a continuous canopy.

Why restore oak savannas & prairies?

- Less than 2% of savanna and prairie habitats remain in the Willamette Valley.
- As native savannas and prairies disappear, so do species that need these habitats.
- Over 150 plant, animal and insect species depend on these habitats.
- Nearly all locally-rare species use the prairie and oak savanna habitats.
- The greater Mt. Pisgah area, including Buford Park, contains perhaps the largest prairie and oak savanna remnant in public ownership (over 1,000 acres).

What are the benefits?

- Beautiful wildflower displays and better vistas.
- Reduced danger of destructive wildfire.
- Better birding and habitat for grass-nesting birds (**like the Western meadowlark, Oregon’s state bird**).

Rare species that will benefit include:

- Western bluebird
- Western meadowlark
- White breasted nuthatch
- Several bat species
- Wayside aster
- Western pond turtle
- Native bees, butterflies and pollinators

Suggested reading


Project support

- Friends of Buford Park & Mt. Pisgah
- Lane County Parks Division
- Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife
- Oregon Department of Forestry
- Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board
- US Fish & Wildlife Service
**Oak savanna & prairie restoration strategies**

- Arrest Douglas fir encroachment of white oak habitat. *Remove firs and create snags for wildlife.*
- Foster vigor, acorn production and larger canopies in oak trees. *Thin selected, small diameter oak trees with sparse canopies to reduce competition for water, nutrients and sunlight.*
- Retain woody debris within understory to provide wildlife habitat. *Pile slash to benefit small rodents, reptiles and other wildlife. Scatter large limbs and branches to provide perch points and structure for insects, reptiles and birds.*
- Enhance native understory vegetation. *Control invasive vegetation and plant a diverse mix of native shrubs, grasses and wildflowers to benefit a host of wildlife species.*
- Conduct periodic ecological burns to maintain the prairie. *Partner with Oregon Department of Forestry to conduct ecological burns that double as wildfire training.*

**Why remove trees from savannas and prairies?**
- To conserve rare oak savanna and prairie habitats.
- To improve habitat for rare plants and wildlife.
- To reduce woody fuels that could result in a destructive wildfire.
- To prepare the site for beneficial, historically-based ecological burning.

**Why is it called “habitat restoration?”**

In this case, removing trees restores open oak savanna habitat. This restores ecosystem functions necessary to support plants and animals once common throughout the Willamette Valley, including species still present at Mt. Pisgah.

**Why intervene in this seemingly natural progression?**

Oak savannas and prairies may disappear if no action is taken. They are already gone from about 98% of their historic Willamette Valley range. These habitats have been lost to development, agriculture, fire suppression, encroachment from evergreen trees, and invasion by exotic species.

Nearly all of our locally-rare species need oak savanna and prairie habitats. If we lose those habitats, we lose those species.

Among the rare species that benefit from oak savanna and prairie habitat restoration are a host of native bees, butterflies and other pollinators that depend on the much wider diversity of flowers present in oak savanna and prairie habitats.

According to a leading entomologist at Oregon State University, over three-quarters of Willamette Valley native bees that use these habitats have been lost.

**What about climate change?**

With predictions for increased temperatures and more intense summer drought, it is likely that oak savanna and prairie ecosystems will become increasingly important for biodiversity. They may also help reduce the risk of destructive wildfires. Mt. Pisgah habitats can serve as a source of native flora and fauna to restore other sites, but only if we act to protect them now.

**How did the projects develop?**

Oak savanna and prairie restoration is a top priority in the statewide *Oregon Conservation Strategy* (Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, 2007). Friends of Buford Park & Mt. Pisgah proposed both the Spring Box Savanna and Meadowlark Prairie projects to Lane County, which owns the park and approved these projects. Staff of Friends of Buford Park & Mt. Pisgah and Lane County are closely coordinating to implement the work.

**How do we know this will work?**

These methods have been used successfully on the Ft. Lewis Military Reservation in Washington, at Bald Hill in Corvallis, along the City of Eugene Ridgeline Trail, and many other locations in the Pacific Northwest.

Lessons learned from this habitat enhancement project could be applied to other areas of Buford Park.