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Point Pelee National Park

Sowing the seeds of a savannah

Restoring a rare ecosystem in Canada's most southerly park

When she first took high school students to [Point Pelee National Park](#) to collect seeds from native plants in 2010, Parks Canada's Jenny Costa had no idea whether the park's savannah restoration project would take root and grow. But grow it has: almost four years later, more than 600 people – including students, First Nations, and community groups – have participated in hands-on activities to restore this rare and vibrant ecosystem.



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Giant Swallowtail butterfly



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Five-lined Skink

A tiny southern jewel

Located on a peninsula jutting out into Lake Erie, Point Pelee is not only the southernmost national park in Canada, it's the very southern tip of the country itself. Tiny in size, at only 15 km², it plays an enormous and vital role in conserving biodiversity. Point Pelee is home to a whopping 66 species at risk -- more than any other national park in the country.

Of the many habitats found in the park, the Lake Erie Sand Spit Savannah has emerged as a top restoration priority. The savannah covers a mere 2% of the park, yet shelters one quarter of its species at risk. These include the sun-loving [Five-lined Skink](#), the [Eastern Prickly Pear Cactus](#), and the [Common Hoptree](#), which plays host to the [Giant Swallowtail butterfly](#), one of Point Pelee's most graceful visitors.



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Clearing the way

Before the creation of the park, overgrowth in the savannah was regularly cleared out both naturally (by violent storms and fires) and by human hands, including First Nations encamping in the area who used fire to help keep the landscape healthy. However, as these activities disappeared from the park, the meadow-like savannah became crowded out both by the surrounding forest and by invasive species.

To re-establish the savannah, Parks Canada staff set an initial goal of opening up and restoring 10 hectares of savannah habitat. To do so, they recognized that they would need to first clear away the overgrowth and then re-plant native species.

Clearing overgrown areas required heavy-duty efforts with both chainsaws and prescribed fires. Given the park's size, these prescribed fires were conducted on a very small scale. Parks staff set up wet-line perimeters as a precaution, and sometimes limited a fire to one or more individual plants in a given area.

Seeing a unique opportunity to increase public appreciation and understanding of Point Pelee, the savannah, and ecological restoration, parks staff built in engagement opportunities at a very early stage. Once restoration sites were cleared, volunteers helped park staff meticulously uproot exotic plants by hand to prepare the sites for re-planting.

As a result of these painstaking efforts, the park has seen significant results. For example, at one site, park records originally showed only one [Dwarf Hackberry](#) tree (a threatened species under the federal Species at Risk Act). But as the area was cleared, more than 30 trees were found, completely covered by vines and shrubs. This more than doubled the number of known Dwarf Hackberry in the park!

Spreading roots in the community

Once space was cleared, there was room to replant the characteristic grasses and wildflowers that make up the savannah's vegetation. These plants, like Short's Aster, Little Bluestem, Evening Primrose and Canada Wild Rye, provide food and shelter for the many birds, butterflies, and species at risk in the park.



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And that's where the students at Cardinal Carter Secondary School in Leamington, Ontario came in. In the fall of 2010, students joined Jenny Costa and other Parks Canada staff to gather seeds from native savannah plant species. They then propagated more than 8000 seeds of Wild Rye in their school greenhouse and cared for the seedlings until the following spring.

Since that time, over 600 volunteers from all walks of life have helped plant Canada Wild Rye and other native species in the park. This includes members of the Caldwell First Nation, who participated in replanting efforts in the summer of 2013, and later returned to the park to collect seeds and exchange knowledge about native grasses and flowers.



Eastern Prickly Pear Cactus

Moving Forward

The fruits of the volunteers' labour are now on display throughout the park. For example, a newly restored area has been opened to the public. The aptly named 'Cactus Field' offers park visitors a chance to see and learn about the Eastern Prickly Pear Cactus and its habitat up close (but not too close!). Project information is also being incorporated into Visitor Centre exhibits, helping visitors truly understand how special this rare ecosystem is.

By the end of 2013, Point Pelee had successfully restored more than 13 hectares of savannah habitat, exceeding their original 10 hectare goal. One sign of success: rare bird species— such as the [Loggerhead Shrike](#) and [Henslow's Sparrow](#) - are returning to these sites for the first time in many years, cause for huge excitement in a national park renowned for its birding experience.

But for park staff and volunteers alike, the work is only just beginning – seed collection, propagation, and planting will continue well into the future, to keep the wild savannah blooming in the heart of Point Pelee National Park.

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