

FALL WALK ON THE HEMPSTED PLAINS: A Magical Place
By Tom Stock

I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate the first day of October than to tour the Hempstead Plains. We met at 10AM at the Education Center on the campus of Nassau Community College. Karen and I were there to lead a workshop on poetry and nonfiction. Since nobody else showed up, we joined the group from the Brooklyn Botanical Garden.

Betsy Gulotta, the manager of the Friends of Hempstead Plains opened the gate. We gathered in the center for an introductory talk. Betsy retired as a biology professor at the college in 2001 to take over management of a 19 acre remnant of what is left of the original 40,000 acre prairie. She stressed the importance of this natural resource commenting "Nassau County is 97% developed." She said in a gravelly voice. If there ever was a case for its preservation, this is it.

She proudly pointed out several green factors of the center. Solar energy, compostable bathroom, rain collecting on the roof to supply water to the plants there and stored water to flush the composting basin. The center is open for three seasons, closed in winter. The building itself was shaped from four shipping containers. Three garage doors open to break the barrier between us and the landscape. One another unique feature is the living roof. Trays of plants common to the preserve were placed on the roof. Little bluestem, Switch grass, and Indian grass were started in plugs on the ground, then put into trays with absorbent soil and placed on the roof.

During her introductory talk, she explained that the plains were not flat. They were dissected by the headwater channels of several creeks that run south into the Great South Bay: including Valley Stream, Meadowbrook, Milburn Creek, Cedar Creek, and Massapequa Creek. Although the water table has dropped considerably, Meadowbrook still has a trickle of water which swells during heavy rainfall events.

We headed out. Fall is prime time for the prairie. Many plants are mature or just past maturity. Dominating the scene at the start is a field area dominated by Hyssop-leaved Thoroughwort. From a distance, these plants are two feet high with dirty-white flat tops of flowers. Ulrich Lorimer, Curator of the Native Flora Garden at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and a group from New York City was here to tour the area. I quickly learned that he is an expert botanist. He identified Gray Goldenrod, Rough Goldenrod, and Scented Goldenrod among dozens of other plants. My plant book listed 33 species of goldenrod. I was already confused. We found Indian Grass, Switch Grass, Wild Indigo, Little Bluestem Grass, all natives. "The drought this summer has affected the height of Indian Grass". Betsy said. This grass grows to six feet high. "It is stunted this

season.” said Betsy.

We headed toward the fence enclosure. This is the place where the globally endangered Sandplain Gerardia is growing. No human foot traffic may enter. “Look” someone called, “A tiny pink flower right near the Fence...Sandplain Gerardia.” Someone else said, “It’s abundant.” I stared out into the space. Hundreds of pink spots popped into sight. “There are almost 4,000 this year.” said Betsy. From previous visits, I knew immediately that this was an explosion. Gazing over this enclosure I was enchanted. Among a dazzling assemblage of textures, tiny, delicate, pink flowers, rare worldwide. I feasted for several minutes to let this sight burn into memory. Did the flower save the site, or vice versa?

Sometimes I dropped back from the group to inspect more closely. I missed a lot in doing so. Ulrich was identifying plants that were new to the list that Betsy has assembled.

“I want you to see an area nearby.” We followed her to a field that looked strange. There were no non-natives. All the growth looked to be about 18 inches high. It is the most beautiful part of the preserve I’ve ever seen. There is nothing like what was seeing anywhere else on Long Island. Here was the way the plains looked 200 years ago. Ulrich called “Blue Curls” and immediately crouched. I saw tiny specks of blue and I fell to my knees to look close. “Blue Curls are an unusual member of the mint family.” Perhaps only a foot high, it grew under the canopy of larger plants. I noticed that there were several flowers on the ground. I found this information on the internet: “Trichosterna dichotomum, flowers fall off at midday. Blossom opens in the morning and only lasts a half day.” It was impossible to avoid stepping on the plant. I delicately picked up a fallen blossom. Less than a half inch in size, it had three arching anthers that arise from behind the throat of the flower and block the entrance. This is its strategy to insure future generations. An insect cannot avoid bumping into these overhanging anthers and insuring pollination. For me, the area immediately took on a sacred tone. We all stepped carefully.

Someone asked about the difference between a rush and a sedge. Ulrich had the answer: “Sedges have edges; rushes are round; grasses have sheaths; that run to the ground.” Ulrich then demonstrated. I felt like I was experiencing one of the best nature outings I’ve ever been on.

Ulrich found a praying mantis. “This is a Carolina Mantis, a relative.” He spread the legs of his tripod to take photographs. Betsy noticed that this special area has more lichens growing on the ground. “This might be a clue as to why this area is so unique.” she said.

I decided it was time to do my solo. I wanted the poets who didn't show up to experience a half hour sitting alone in their chosen spot with ear protection to block out the traffic noise on Meadowbrook Parkway. For me, noise is just as bad as non-native plants. Both are invaders that shadow the past.

I brought along a padded cushion and pair of Tasco ear protectors. I wanted to see if I could create a new and unique experience that I might try in a future poetry or writing workshop.

I headed west to try to get as far from Meadowbrook Parkway as possible. I approached two large autumn olive shrubs and a few clumps of spike grass. One of John Potente's bird nesting poles offered a nice back rest. I plopped myself down, covered my ears and waited. The noise disappeared. I was deaf. Now what? Although I didn't have a panoramic view I was left with the switch grass. Out of the wind, I entered a mode of less information. I rested which was nice. The stalks of switch grass drew my attention. Gusts of wind swayed them. I watched periods of calm and wind. The tawny-colored leaves droop like the St Louis Arch. I noticed the soil. There is more humus here than in treeless areas. This spot is accumulating organic material. A small sumac tree grows near an autumn olive. Sumac is a pioneer shrub-like tree, although native, it doesn't belong on a plains habitat. I am in my own little world. I had picked up a dog bane stalk and stuck it in my hatband. I decided to break the stem and peel off the fiber. The blue-gray long, skinny seed pods were all empty. Dogbane and Wild Indigo add to the texture of species here.

I felt that I had come to the end of my "solo". The plains whispered..."Yes, Tom, this is a magical place. I'll be back.