

# Southwestern prairie field day reinforces native plant ID skills



The Technical Training and Certification Program is funded 50-50 by state Clean Water Funds and by federal dollars via an agreement with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

**M**ONTEVIDEO — A plant identification training course for conservation professionals culminated with a late-summer field day that explored remnant prairie and conservation easements spanning upland, wetland, streambank and woodland habitats in southwestern Minnesota.

Trainers Dennis Pederson, a regional sales representative for Shooting Star Native Seeds; and Paul Bockenstedt, an ecologist with the environmental consulting, engineering and architecture firm Stantec; led the Aug. 11 field day at Pederson's Yellow Medicine County property.

The 11-county Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area (TSA) 5 initiated the training, with support from the Technical Training and Certification Program (TTCP).

"It's a specialty, to be a really strong botanist or be an expert in plant ID, but it's very general to all of our work. I think that's one of the reasons we see it



BWSR South Region Training Conservationist Tyler Knutson, left, helped with field day logistics.

in such high demand across the board. Everybody needs to know it," said Tyler Knutson, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) South Region training conservationist.

"Everybody's dealing with some kind of

Stantec ecologist Paul Bockenstedt, in orange, pointed out the finer points of native grass identification during an Aug. 11 field day on Dennis Pederson's Yellow Medicine County property. The two served as trainers during the event, which capped a plant ID training course initiated by Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area 5. Among the memory aids: "Big bluestem has hairy legs," referring to coarse hairs along the leaves.  
**Photo Credits:** Ann Wessel, BWSR





Farm Bill programs like CRP (the federal Conservation Reserve Program). Everybody's going out and inspecting RIM (Reinvest in Minnesota) easements. They're looking at buffer strips. So they're identifying species that people have seeded, or distinguishing native grasses and flowers from weeds," Knutson said.

Rock County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) engineering technicians Lee Tapper and Brandon Bosch spot-checked more than 50 CRP enrollments this season — most of them filter strips, some of them wetland restorations, riparian forest cover or rare-and-declining habitat restorations.

Different types of enrollments require different numbers of native species. Spot-checks determine if a site requires additional management. In Rock County and elsewhere, SWCDs are assisting Natural Resources Conservation

**“ To find them, to see them, to figure out what they are, to remember the hundreds of different species that exist — that's a challenge. ”**

— Dennis Pederson, trainer, landowner, Shooting Star Native Seeds salesperson



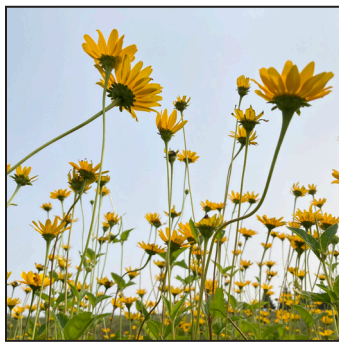
*Pederson led a group across Stony Run Creek during an Aug. 11 field day on his Yellow Medicine County property, which featured remnant prairie and conservation easements including upland, wetland and streambank habitats.*

Service (NRCS) staff with inspections.

“Grasses can be very challenging,” Tapper said. “This training has helped me tell which is which.”

He and Bosch were among 29 conservation professionals who examined the distinguishing features of the plants, grasses, and seedlings Pederson, Bockenstedt and Lac Qui Parle SWCD Manager Rhyann Schicker pointed out. Tapper was particularly interested in how different soil types can affect different species.

Ryan Forster, who joined the Swift SWCD as a Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist in June, honed the plant ID skills he picked up during a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources



**Ox-eye sunflower**



**Stiff sunflower**



**Yellow coneflower**



**Cut-leaf coneflower**



internship. Like Tapper, he found the hands-on native grasses ID especially helpful.

This season, Forster surveyed CRP enrollments and RIM easements, recording both native and non-native species. Seed lists show what was planted — not what grew or emerged from the existing seed bank, and not invading weeds.

“It’s always nice to have somebody show you,” Forster said.

Pederson supplied a list of about 130 forbs, grasses, sedges and rushes known to exist on his property.

He bought the land just north of Stony Run Creek — and just north of the farm where he grew up — in 1991 while he was in the U.S. Marine Corps. He joined Shooting Star Native Seeds after his interest in conservation led first to part-time work with the USDA’s Farm Service Agency, NRCS and SWCD, and then to full-time work as a Pheasants Forever habitat specialist.

“Through the whole process, I became really interested in native vegetation,” Pederson said.

Becoming proficient in plant ID requires practice.

“To find them, to see them, to figure out what they are, to remember the hundreds of different species that exist — that’s a challenge. You need to be doing it all the time,” Pederson said.

Among the plants identified during the field day: two blazing star species, three coneflower species, four goldenrod species and five milkweed species.

In some cases — such as wetland delineation



**False boneset**



**Culver's root**



**Purple prairie clover**



**Prairie onion**



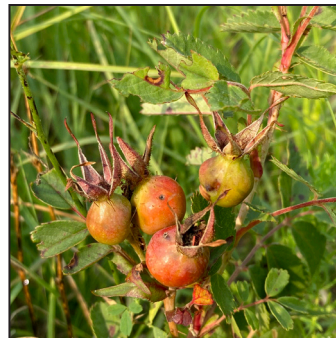
**Common ironweed**



**Showy tick-trefoil**



**Dark green bullrush**



**Prairie rose**



*Bockenstedt used rings of plastic tubing to mark plots for seedling counts.*

— Bockenstedt said differentiating between species is crucial because it carries regulatory implications. For example, Canada goldenrod and giant goldenrod look similar, but the former prefers uplands, the latter prefers wetlands.

The group shot reference photos and took notes. They passed around grasses to get a close-up view of nodes and seed heads. They studied seedlings within the small plastic hoop Bockenstedt tossed onto a new planting.

Understanding the minimum native plant density seeding is important, Bockenstedt said, especially when calculating the germination rate after the first couple of winters.

“I hope it piqued their interest to learn more,” Bockenstedt said. “There’s no one course that can provide people with all the information they need to successfully ID plants. ... The goal is to provide them some tools and insights to enable them to better ID plants they come across.”

“It definitely can be overwhelming as a new technician. There’s a lot you can take on,” Tapper said of technicians’ wide-ranging duties. Trainings have ranged from soil health to engineering. Tapper said TSA 5 technicians help each other out, and can rely on Southwest Prairie TSA training coordinator Dawn Madison as a resource.

“If she can’t answer your question, she’ll help you get in touch with somebody that can help,” Tapper said.

BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.