Partners for Running Buffalo Clover Recovery

by Sarena M. Selbo

Running buffalo clover "on the move" to a safer home.
Photos by Sarena M. Selbo

In the space between forest and prairie, shade and sunshine, calm and disturbed, grows an unassuming endangered plant with historical ties to the buffalo *(Bison bison)*. Running buffalo clover *(Trifolium stoloniferum)* once occurred over a broad area of the Midwest. Today, however, it survives only in small populations in Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, and Missouri. The Fish and Wildlife Service listed this plant in 1987 as endangered.

The reasons for the decline of this species may be due to historic changes in land management. Running buffalo clover's relationship with buffalo is thought to have depended on the animal's habit of periodically disturbing areas and creating open habitat, as well as dispersing seeds. As buffalo were eliminated from much of the Midwest, their role in maintaining vital habitat disappeared. Fortunately, land management practices that maintain a somewhat open and disturbed habitat may prove beneficial for the recovery of this species.

Because running buffalo clover occurs in two fairly distinct habitat types (shaded lawn and open woodland), management recommendations are required for both habitats. Lawn habitats include cemeteries, parks, and old home sites. Although these sites are frequently mowed, the clover appears to thrive under these conditions if seasonal restrictions are followed. Woodland sites occur in mesic forests, often associated with streams and trails, where the clover is exposed to indirect sunlight. Management for invasive species such as Japanese honeysuckle *(Lonicera japonica)*, wintercreeper *(Euonymus fortunei)*, garlic mustard *(Alliaria petiolata)*, and Amur honeysuckle *(Lonicera maackii)* is critical in both lawn and woodland sites.

Recovery partners moving running buffalo clover from a site slated for development to a new home at a state Nature Preserve.

In Ohio, recent recovery efforts for running buffalo clover have focused on transplantation and habitat management, and have involved federal, state, county, non-governmental organizations, and private partners. The Ohio Historical Society, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Miami University, Hamilton County Park District, private botanists, and the Service recently teamed up to develop management recommendations for running buffalo clover in Ohio. Participants expressed concern over current inconsistencies in management practices and the need for improved guidelines. The Service then compiled recommendations to guide property owners and land managers in the management and recovery of this endangered species. Land managers in Ohio are hopeful that they now have the

tools to protect and recover this unique plant species.

Beyond directly protecting habitat for running buffalo clover, the Service is working closely with private landowners to conserve populations threatened by development. On Earth Day of 2003, a "transplant team" consisting of state biologists and land managers, as well as volunteers and Service biologists, moved 195 running buffalo clover plants, under an agreement with the landowner and developer, to a nearby state natural preserve.

Along with our partners, we hope to continue efforts that lead to the recovery of running buffalo clover in Ohio and throughout its range. Maybe some day we can even bring back this endangered clover's namesake.

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