

# PATCHES OF PRAIRIE

*by Dr. Valerie Wright  
Environmental Educator/Naturalist, KPBS*

## *How Can We Protect Our Ecosystem?*

In July a group of birders, including myself and two docents-in-training, traveled together to Ecuador to experience the rich diversity of the tropics. As a group we had extensive experience traveling and several of us were biologists with good capacity to comprehend the ecosystems we were visiting. Even with this background we were dazzled by the diversity and complexity of the Amazon rain forest. Plants, fungi, birds, insects - everywhere you looked there was something new. Our "field guide" was an excellent birder and prided himself on being able to find the most secretive birds for his clients. His enthusiasm was infectious. For nine years he had been a guide and had personally seen most of the 1,578 species of birds in Ecuador. We asked him how many Ecuadorians took advantage of the local guides, tours and resorts. "Almost none", he said. This was the sad truth that the citizens of Ecuador did not know the natural history of the Amazon or of the other diverse ecosystems of their country. There was little environmental awareness. Why didn't they visit these places? Basically, the tours are expensive and most people went to the coast for vacation.

I began to see the parallels between the rain forest and the prairie. Frankly, I had always been a bit cynical about the great emphasis put on the rain forest in this country. Children were being taught about the rain forest before they can even understand or be aware of the ecosystem that they lived in. Since the tallgrass prairie is one of the most endangered ecosystems on earth, shouldn't they learn about it first? I still believe this is true. The people who have the ability to conserve and protect an ecosystem are those who live in or near it. How many Americans feel that they have a good perception of the tallgrass prairie? Perception means that we are aware of the elements of the prairie environment through experience, some sympathetic understanding or comprehension of its existence. Having firsthand knowledge of an ecosystem is one of the few ways to be truly aware of it. Do Kansans take

trips to visit the tallgrass prairie? Perhaps some. How can we make our people more aware of this ecosystem?

There are fewer "field guides" in the country of Ecuador than we have docents for Konza Prairie. Our docents are key to the awareness of the public of the tallgrass prairie. They have a wealth of information to share with visitors. Their enthusiasm about the ecosystem makes others perceive its value. They dedicate time in their busy lives to attend docent training and learn more about "their" ecosystem. On September 29, 2000 during the Annual Meeting of the Friends of Konza Prairie, we will graduate a group of "docents-in-training". This is an important step for them. Come to the meeting and hear about their accomplishments. We are fortunate to have a large cadre of docents available to give guided tours on Konza. Join us in recognizing them as a major component in the Konza Environmental Education Program.



*Left to right: Simon Malo, Lena and Clyde Ferguson, Valerie Wright, Chuck and Sandy Bussing in Ecuador.*