

CHESNEY PRAIRIE NATURAL AREA, Siloam Springs



Location: Benton County, near Siloam Springs, AR. **How to get there:** From Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers, take highway 412 W to near Siloam Springs city limits. At the intersection of 412 & 59, turn N onto 59. You pass the Siloam Springs airport. Approximately 1 mile past the airport, note an intersection: the road west is “Chesney” and the road east is “Bill Young.” Take Bill Young Road east approximately 0.8 miles. At this point there is a gravel farm road going north. Go approximately 0.5 miles north on this road to the dead end and the entrance sign to CPNA. At this writing (January 2012) the 4 former chicken houses that used to be on your left have been torn down. Stump Prairie, which is privately-owned, lies along highway 59, just southeast of Chesney. Visitors are welcomed on Stump which is ecologically similar.



Chesney and Stump are part of a much larger former Tallgrass Prairie, the historic Lindsley Prairie that once comprised 20-25 square miles in the Siloam Springs area. Its grassland flora includes Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indian Grass, and Switch Grass. Remnants remain, including Chesney at 82 acres, and a privately owned smaller parcel nearby on Highway 59, Stump Prairie, that is also open to the public. All of these grasses, plus numerous other native grasses and other plants, thrive here.

Chesney’s 82 acres is roughly divided in half. The head of Sager Creek, here an ephemeral stream, divides the area. Chesney is unique because only part of it was ever plowed. Numerous prairie mounds remain on the site. Pocket gopher diggings are apparent. Prairie mole crickets vocalize here in the spring.

Most of the justifiably famous Tallgrass Prairie flora can be seen at Chesney. There is a fine display of Indian Paintbrush in May, several

Liatris species in mid-July. Ashy Sunflowers in mid-July are covered by American Goldfinches harvesting the seeds. Fall is the time to see the mature tall grasses.

Over the last few years, we have found productive birding all year and in all seasons. Also, be sure and check the farm road driving into Chesney. For example, you can find Savannah Sparrows and Vesper Sparrows along this road in the proper seasons. There were two Loggerhead Shrike family groups along this road during late May 2004. We see all kinds of blackbird species in the pastures and feedlots including expected ones (Red-winged Blackbirds), rarer ones (like Yellow-headed Blackbirds) and others like Great-tailed Grackles, Rusty and Brewer's Blackbirds, depending upon the season.



You can walk the perimeter around Chesney in a leisurely 2-3 hours, using fire lines and mowed trails. You can widen your search with views of the big fields around Chesney. Red-tailed Hawks are always present. In migration periods of spring and late summer, keep your ear cocked for Upland Sandpipers overhead. In winter we find various subspecies, of Red-tailed Hawks including Harlan's, Krider's, and the dark morph of the western red-tail (*calurus*). There are also a couple of mid-winter Prairie Falcon sightings. Bald Eagles are common in winter.

You can cut across through the area as well to investigate the mounds or grassy-shrubby habitat. The southwest end is marshy. We usually see a few Short-eared Owls in the winter. Dense vegetation is good in migration for both Marsh and Sedge Wrens. Sedge

Wrens may breed here on occasion in late summer. Dense grasses in the upland areas have frequently yielded Le Conte's Sparrow in migration and to a lesser extent, in winter. Loggerhead Shrikes are permanent residents. If you don't see them on Chesney, keep an eye out for them along the road in or one of the farm roads that loop through the area. In migration and winter, White-crowned, Swamp, and Song Sparrows are common, and Harris's Sparrow is frequently in the same areas.

Chesney Prairie Natural Area is an ongoing project. No prairie is static. It is always changing and that includes the associated bird communities. Habitat work that continues includes regular use of prescribed burning, eradication of non-native invasive plants, continuing work on reducing tree cover that advanced during more than 30 years of active fire suppression. Management work is aimed at expansion of the native grasses and forbs.

Joe Woolbright of Siloam Springs is Land Steward for Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. He also directs prairie management and restoration efforts on the small public prairies all over northwest Arkansas. He has taken the lead in efforts to restore more of the native flora and to reduce non-native plants associated with grassland ecosystems. He is also a good botanist and birder. Joe founded Ozark Ecological Restoration, Inc to further these interests. He can be reached at 479-427-4277 (cell) or at joewoolbright@cox-internet.com. —prepared by Joe Neal in January 2012