

Saving OUR GRASSES

EVEN AS DEVELOPERS THREATEN
to swallow up surrounding farmland in the name of progress,
an experiment is underway to turn back
the hands of time.

American Revolution, the heath hen (a prairie chicken) was a major source of protein in the Eastern United States. The last heath hen died on Martha's Vineyard in 1932.

The Chester River Field Research Center at Chino Farms, with its plots of bluestem, switchgrass, Indian grass and deertongue (among others), offers a glimpse at our past, if not the return of an extinct species. Here, scientists from the University of Maryland and Washington College are undertaking a restoration project supporting endangered grassland species in which migratory birds are major study indicators. The vista of grasses, woods and water is as it might have appeared before the dawn of the indus-

WASHINGTON College's Leslie Sherman, an environmental chemist specializing in soil chemistry, was surprised to learn that the tall prairie grasses she grew up with in the Midwest are also native to Maryland's Eastern Shore. "Most people thought the land along the Atlantic seaboard was heavily forested," Sherman says, "but evidence suggests it was predominantly grasslands during various periods in geologic history, i.e., since the last ice age." For the past four years, she and her students have been part of a Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain grasslands restoration project at Chino Farms near

Chestertown. Their job is to analyze the effects of controlled burns on the soil nutrient composition within experimental plots of grasses. Sherman hypothesizes that the tri-yearly burns—simulating the deliberate burns that Native Americans performed hundreds of years ago—will support row crop production. Prior to the

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