What is Chicago Wilderness?

Chicago Wilderness is some of the finest and most significant nature in the temperate world, with a core of roughly 200,000 acres of protected natural lands harboring native plant and animal communities that are more rare – and their survival more globally threatened – than the tropical rain forests.

Chicago Wilderness is an unprecedented alliance of 172 public and private organizations working together to study and restore, protect and manage the precious natural ecosystems of the Chicago region for the benefit of the public.

www.chicagowilderness.org

Chicago Wilderness is a quarterly magazine that celebrates the rich natural heritage of this region and tells the inspiring stories of the people and organizations working to heal and protect local nature.

chicagowildernessmag.org

For a complete list of Chicago Wilderness members please visit the Web site at chicagowilderness.org.
The Pinch of Salt

Civlizations have withered and died because of salt. In ancient Mesopotamia several thousand years ago, farm fields became so saturated with salt that nothing would grow and the people had to move on. Not able to sustain themselves, they could not sustain their society either.

In Australia today, one-third of the arable land may become barren and unusable due to salt. Food prices there may double. Fortunately, as we learned from a recent visit by Brian Scarbrick, the CEO of an ambitious nationwide conservation movement called Landcare Australia, people are mobilizing in their communities to do something about it. They may be able to arrest the decline in the condition of their land — and ensure the health of their populace as well.

We, too, have a problem with salt, as Peter Friederici outlines in his article on page 25. At Lake Leopold in the Prairie Crossing community in Lake County, Illinois, Mike Sands has been monitoring water quality for several years. The lake is the site of a conservation project to reintroduce populations of several species of fish that are threatened in the state (CW, Summer '02). It's also where stormwater drains after passing through wetlands and buffers. In 2001, Sands noticed a dramatic spike in the amount of sodium chloride — salt — in the lake's water. Why? The village of Grayslake had assumed responsibility for clearing the roads at Prairie Crossing and was using a lot more salt than the community's own managers had in prior years. So far, the fish are okay, but the rising salt levels are a matter of concern.

Sands was able to document this change and monitor the results because he is one of hundreds of people in Chicago Wilderness who are heading into the woods and waters of our region to take the pulse of nature — people who count, watch, listen, measure, and report on what they find. We've profiled six of these wonderful people in this issue (see p. 6), but there are many hundreds more engaged in monitoring birds, butterflies, plants, fish, stream creatures, amphibians, you name it. These people are helping us to understand what is happening, for good or ill, on our lands. The data they collect help us to manage better and to plan more wisely.

In rural Kane County, a handful of watchful neighbors learned that rare Swainson's hawks were nesting nearby. While more common in the western U.S., these inspiring raptors are found in a single outpost east of the Mississippi — here, in Chicago Wilderness. But a residential development is slated for the farmland now harboring the hawks and the neighbors are worried about the birds' welfare — and their own. So, they've begun to organize and advocate on behalf of preserving the hawks' habitat (see p. 34). They're seeking not to stop all development but to adopt plans that allow for people and nature to thrive. Sometimes this approach is called "sensible growth" or "sustainable development."

Some of these local advocates have even become involved in the political process because they want to have a voice in the future direction of their community. Today, one of the current crop of candidates seeking the presidential nomination of his party got his start in politics because he cared about quality of life in his community: he wanted to build a bike trail. Often, this is how civic involvement starts.

People who care about nature are unquestionably people who count. You can call them local heroes, as we sometimes do. You can call them friends and family. Public citizens. Just plain folks. So step outside. Meet your neighbors. Lend a hand.
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Tree fox.

Cover: When DuPage County biologists announced last year that they had hard evidence of bobcats returning to Chicago Wilderness, it was the cat's tracks that told the tale. See page 18 for more about winter tracking. Photo by Joe Nowak.

Opposite: A rising moon and the last rays of sunlight illuminate McHenry County's meandering Nippersink Creek. Photo by Ray Mathis.
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**SOME YIPPING**

Dear Editor,

I read “Wiley Neighbor” by Chris Hardman recently (CW, Winter 01), and wanted to relay some of our own experiences with coyotes.

About a month ago, my husband found a coyote sleeping in a ball in our back yard in Crystal Lake, IL. He went out to get a picture, while Harley, our yellow lab, barked continuously inside the house. The coyote lazily got up and began to walk away through the back of our yard and into our neighbor’s four-acre partially wooded yard.

Just last night at around 10 p.m., my husband heard some yipping and didn’t know what it was. Harley was outside at the time — but my husband knew it wasn’t our dog. He went to the back door and saw Harley in the middle of six coyotes. They were circling him while he was barking and constantly turning to keep an eye on all of them as best he could. My husband said he counted six, but there may have been more; they were just moving too fast for him to be sure. He went out with a flashlight to scare them off and to bring Harley inside. The strange part was that our dog did not want to come in. My husband had to really pull him — Harley’s about 80 pounds.

*Jackie Goetz*
*Crystal Lake, IL*

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**CORRECTIONS**

In our Fall 2003 News of the Wild article, “Chicago Wilderness Welcomes Six New Members,” we incorrectly noted the founding date of the Prairie Club as 1909. It is actually 1908.

Also in that issue, we indicated that visitors could reach the dune blowout described in “An Indiana Dunes Blowout” by entering Indiana Dunes State Park near Kemil Beach. This entry is prohibited; visitors should enter from the park’s beach house to the west. Chicago WILDERNESS regrets the errors.

---

**CIVIL RIGHTS-OF-WAY**

Dear Editor,

I feel strongly that “changing the culture” is what conservation is all about. I’m glad that you feel and express this idea.

There seems to be little regard in our culture for the intrinsic value of natural land. I drive to work and see “empty lots” that are continually mowed so that only the smallest creatures survive.

Why must ComEd lands that are host to electrical towers be mowed into oblivion? It seems to me that these spots would be good places to let the vegetation grow back into indigenous prairie. Then I could see prairie on my way to work instead of grass clippings rotting in the sun.

I see this over much of the metropolitan area, now even by railroad tracks.

Why is there so much mowing?
Here are some people you might want to know. They slog through ponds, ramble over moraines, and trek across the grasslands to assess the health of the region’s wild places.

The stated goal is collecting data, but it’s the adventures that remain sharp in memory. On an outing to measure trees, someone runs across a preposterously elegant mushroom, or a sleeping red bat, or a rainbow rising over a beaver pond—and the world stops. The people out to monitor frogs find themselves learning from their volunteer partners about plants or butterflies. Many have experienced the palpable thrill of gradually mastering the difficult skippers, or sedges, or the songs of invisible grassland birds.

Many Chicago-area monitors would proudly call themselves “hard-core science-types” or “numbers people.” But the monitoring bug is spreading to a rising proportion of other people in Chicago Wilderness. In addition to the staff scientists of forest preserve districts, state and federal agencies, and nonprofit organizations, more than 700 volunteer citizen-scientists now send a steady stream of data back to land managers, creating a living picture of natural areas that were once, scientifically at least, dark points on the map.

For one person, science is her whole life and profession. For another it’s a hobby, an avocation, or an occasional bit of fun. But underlying these different motivations, monitors see what they do as a concrete, hands-on way to help nature thrive. The great quantities of data that are the fundamental building blocks of science can be daunting to collect—unless a few dozen enthusiastic volunteers chip in.

The Illinois Natural History Survey is the oldest state survey in the country. But only recently has Survey ornithologist Jeff Brown concluded from reams of data that the birds of oak woods can do better with controlled burns and the thinning of invasive trees. Similarly, DuPage Forest Preserve ecologist Wayne Lamja and Morton Arboretum botanist Gerry Wilhelm first demonstrated through monitoring that our unmanaged woods and prairies were losing species richness at about 3 percent per year. Good data demonstrated that the “leave it alone” idea of nature wasn’t working any more.

It was the monitors of the Bird Monitoring Network who captured West Nile virus headlines when their data showed a correlation between areas of human infection and those where chickadees and crows had vanished. Data from monitors has helped attract millions of dollars to restore a 1,000-acre savanna complex near the south suburbs, more a trail that would have wiped out rare prairie birds in the west suburbs, and bring nesting terns back to the lakeshore in North Chicago.

The cameras here show science professionals and volunteers who are saving nature by discovering its needs and secrets for themselves—on nature’s home turf.

—Editors

Apprentice to Many

Eyes glowed through the dark at Elizabeth Plonka. She was crouching by a pond, alone, near midnight, shielded by a patch of sawtooth sunflowers. Frightened and fascinated, she stared back at the brilliant eyes. They gleamed, disappeared, and ignited again. She held her breath.

"Then I realized they were fireflies," Plonka laughed. "There were dozens more right behind those two, and I hadn’t even noticed them."

Her eye for wildlife has sharpened considerably since that night as a rookie frog monitor in the West DuPage Woods. Now, trained by five years...
of monitoring butterflies, dragonflies, frogs, and woodland and grassland plants, she recognizes a green darter dragonfly by its flight pattern and an eastern tailed blue butterfly by the minute orange dots on the underside of its wing.

Plonka is one of the Habitats Project's most dedicated volunteers. Several days a week, she leaves the Lincoln Park apartment she shares with her husband, cats, and prairie plants for the parks and forest preserves of Cook and DuPage Counties. Her itinerary would dazzle a pollinator, as she flits from North Pond Nature Sanctuary in Chicago, where she leads plant identification walks, to West DuPage Woods in Winfield, where she works as a steward and monitors frogs and rare plants. Plonka harnesses her naturalist skills as a butterfly monitor at Belmont Prairie and studies grassland plants with Bob Claus in the outback at Willowbrook Wildlife Center. At Wolf Road Prairie she monitors dragonflies, and at the North Branch of the Chicago River, she gets her hands dirty on restoration work days.

"I'll apprentice myself to anyone who wants to teach me," she says. "I love the scientific process, and I think interpretation is hugely important. You see the beauty of a functioning ecological community once you know what to look for, the beauty in diversity."

Plonka, 31, grew up in Westmont and Lisle, graduated from the University of Chicago, and earned a naturalist's certificate at the Morton Arboretum. Her deliberate commitment to the Midwestern landscape leaves her little desire to travel. In fact, she says, the mountain scenery of the American West makes her feel claustrophobic.

"Illinois is totally interesting," she says, clearly in her element as she walks through a field of tall grasses and sedges, a pair of close-focus binoculars harnessed to her bib of her overalls. "There are millions of dramas unfolding here all the time. Our wild places don't involve large carnivores, but they're no less interesting than Africa's. Both Illinois and Africa have savannas," she points out. "The thing is, our savannas are more endangered."

**The Data Changed Us**

Scott Kobal travels the forest preserves of DuPage County wearing an official shirt and glasses that turn dark in the sun. One of his boots has no lace, the other an orange string with knots, yet he moves with meticulous care as he plies the simple tools of his trade: a tape measure, a handful of marker flags, and a small "quadrat" frame he made from plastic pipe.

With 25,000 acres under his care, Kobal moves constantly. He is the only staff person dedicated full-time to monitoring plant growth and distribution in the county's grasslands, woodlands, and wetlands.

Kobal uses the flags and tape to mark areas 16 meters square, which he selects at random when he studies a preserve. He interprets each plot as a "snapshot" of the forest and its condition. By tallying woody plants higher and lower than one meter, he appraises the forest's current health and future prospects. In healthy woods, he says, several generations of trees grow at once.

Using the little quadrat, barely larger than one square foot, Kobal frames plants in the understory, identifying and recording each one. During a recent session at Danada Forest Preserve, he quickly identified more than a dozen species. A healthy understory, or ground layer, he explained, should contain blooming flowers from April through October.
Kobal receives invaluable assistance from volunteers, who clear brush and monitor plant and animal species, and from two mentors. He often seeks the counsel of Gerould Wilhelm, co-author of the fourth edition of Plants of the Chicago Region, and Wayne Lampa, Kobal's predecessor as DuPage plant ecologist.

During his 13 years on the job, Kobal has benefited from the carefully kept records of the previous generation. In 1979, for example, Lampa studied a control area and found 52 white oaks and 12 black cherry trees. Twenty years later, Kobal found only 40 white oaks and 142 black cherries on the same ground. Kobal is troubled by the shift, because it is happening rapidly, creating darker forests that stifle regeneration of oak ecosystems.

Kobal hopes his data will help educate people about when and why the Forest Preserve District needs brush control and controlled burning. "It contradicts what we all grew up believing – Smokey the Bear, and all that – but we've learned that woody plants can overwhelm forests. We're actually making the areas healthier."

**Professional by Day**

Mary O. has great boots. They're burnished brown, rich as dirt, scuffed ochre around the toes. Walking countless miles through the parks she manages for the St. Charles Park District has worn away the treads. They look ancient, maybe handmade.

"No, they're just boots," she says with a shrug and a matter-of-fact glance through her gold-rimmed glasses. "I wear them every day, so I go through at least a pair a year."

Mary Ochsenschlager – Mary O, for simplicity – grew up with a custodial sense of wilderness, because her father was a superintendent at Isle Royale National Park on Lake Superior and later at the Grand Canyon. Now settled in Kane County, she manages parks professionally by day and monitors frogs as a volunteer by night.

Frogs' voices help to tell her whether wetland restoration efforts are working. An hour after sunset on an April night, one might find her in Otter Creek Bend Wetland, silent, sitting where a few acres of original wetland meet a "new" pond, one that has been reestablished after having long been drained for agriculture. She's listening for the high notes, rising at the end, of spring peepers. For the past five years, she has heard their call only in the original wetland.

"Spring peepers are especially sensitive frogs," she says, "and if they appear in the new area, maybe there's hope for these man-made wetlands. By restoring the hydrology, we're trying to give native plants a spot they recognize.... Then we hope the insects, amphibians, and reptiles will come back."

Every year, she recruits and supervises from 80 to 120 frog monitors. She encourages them to pair up as a way of meeting new people and bolstering their commitment. Sandy Bauer, a retired elementary school principal, looks forward to her third year as Mary O.'s monitoring partner. Before she became a monitor, Bauer had not considered that economic development could harm the environment. "We can't just concrete the world!" Bauer says. "Over and over, Mary has impressed me with her wealth of knowledge. She has shown me my community is up against the same challenges as the rest of the world."
THE KIDS DID IT

Mike Mieszala won't take credit for the content of his novel science class.

"The kids did it, not me," he says. "I just gave them a chance to use the field monitoring techniques I learned at an EcoWatch workshop, and they did the rest."

Seven years ago, Mieszala invited junior and senior biology students at Warren Township High School in Gurnee to give up a Saturday to monitor butterflies and measure groundwater levels. They found their experience so interesting that they wanted fieldwork to become part of the curriculum. Mieszala suggested they talk to the department head, who sent them to the principal, who sent them to the school board. After board members listened to the students' presentation and watched a videotape the students had recorded of their experience, they approved the request.

Today, six sections of environmental science classes follow protocols for PrairieWatch and ForestWatch, programs developed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and study ecosystem dynamics and species identification in the classroom.

"Learning the names of species definitely makes you notice more," says Sarah Blue, a senior. "You think, 'Oh my gosh, they're not all the same. That butterfly is a painted lady, and that one's a pearly crescentspot.' When you see the details, you feel more connected to the land."

A smile lurks under Mieszala's sand-colored mustache, but he is a demanding teacher who makes his students think. Last fall, he took a group to Prairie Crossing to monitor groundwater levels for PrairieWatch at a restoration site. Old drainage tiles had been removed from a sedge meadow sloping down to a creek. The students' job was to check seven wells along the slope to monitor how water is returning to this historically wet ecosystem. They began by taking out clipboards and recording air temperature and cloud cover, the last time it rained, and the condition of the wells. Then they dropped a tape measure into each well, with a sensor tied to the end to shine a red light if it touched water.

"The red light didn't go on," said a student, "but there's mud on this thing."

"What does that mean?" Mieszala asked, slouching slightly and folding his arms.

"No water?"

"That's right, and that's important. So is the mud. Write it down." Later, Mieszala reminded them to deduct the length of the sensor from each depth measurement. His classes produce such high-quality data they have received letters of appreciation from the Department of Natural Resources.

"These students grew up in a landscape someone called 'The Wides,'" said Mieszala, looking toward a gentle slope and moving his arm along the arc of its contour, "and most of them will stay here. It bothered me that a lot of them didn't know the names of the trees in their own yards."
on Chicago's northwest side. Today, the two-acre grassland is surrounded by a buffer zone of woods, the roar of highways, and the bass-line thumping of car radios.

Spyreas returned there last fall from his home in Champaign, while in town for a conference. Though it was curiosity that brought him back to Bunker Hill, he and colleagues on the staff of the Illinois Natural History Survey monitor several nearby sites for "CTAP," Illinois' nationally acclaimed Critical Trends Assessment Program. In fact, the agency's six-person team is currently monitoring 600 sites selected at random statewide. They split up and spend about four months driving across Illinois each year, collecting data from forests, wetlands, grasslands, and streams. They spend the rest of the year analyzing it to figure out what's growing in Illinois and how to increase diversity and balance in ecosystems.

Spyreas, now 26, has lost none of his childhood enthusiasm. As soon as he reaches the prairie, he drops to one knee by a cluster of purple buds.

"That's a fringed gentian! These are very rare, and they're probably our latest blooming prairie flower." He speaks with a tone that is authoritative but not pedantic, and he laughs softly but often. When he finds an obedient plant, he gently moves its pink, trumpet-shaped blossoms around the stem to show how obediently they stay in place. Then he spots another clump of gentian.

"Oh my God, they're all over the place. There must be some great volunteers taking care of this site." Standing to look over the scene, he surmises that buckthorn has been cleared to increase light penetration and that as many as 150 plant species are growing in the small remnant, including tussocks of prairie dropseed, numerous grasses, compass plant, and obedient plant.

Excitement aside, Spyreas values his job for the difference it makes in our knowledge about the loss and destruction of ecosystems across the state.

"I can show legislators that 25 percent of our forest vegetation is made up of invasive, very aggressive plant species," he says. "The state used to be 65 percent tallgrass prairie, and..."
now 99.99 percent of it is gone. Tallgrass prairie is one of the world’s least-preserved ecosystems. People noticed these changes before, but the evidence was anecdotal. Thanks to CTAP, we have hard data now."

**EYES TOO KEEN TO MEASURE**

“I wear my binoculars to work, and I wear them to weddings,” says Wes Serafin in a carefully enunciated Chicago accent. “I don’t go anywhere without them.”

He doesn’t miss much when it comes to birds. He and a friend recently found the first breeding pair of osprey seen in Illinois in 50 years, and last May, he raced around the Chicago area to win a contest with a one-month tally of 200 birds. Even without binoculars, Serafin’s eyesight is so keen his doctor can’t measure it — the test equipment stops at 20/10.

Equally keen is Serafin’s enthusiasm for preserving bird habitat. A pharmacist and former president of the Chicago Ornithological Society, he helps other volunteers monitor and restore Orland Grassland, the largest prairie restoration effort in Cook County.

He took the position, unpopular at first, that dense stands of trees should be cleared from the property. The trees, he argued, divided the 1,000-acre parcel into fragments too small for many birds to use. His view ultimately prevailed, and last winter the trees were cut.

The results have been dramatic. Clearing tripled the size of the grassland, and numerous species, many on the Illinois endangered list, have returned. Serafin noticed the changes last June when he monitored nesting birds at the site.

“It was a big deal to see one or two Henslow’s sparrows here 15 years ago,” he says, “but last June, I saw 15 singing males. They are definitely breeding here now. In 2003, compared to the five previous summers, there were $50$ percent more of them.” He has also seen endangered northern harriers and short-eared owls at Orland, as well as sedge wrens and threatened pied-billed grebes. All but the grebes require large, open spaces to establish populations.

Every June day during the breeding census, Serafin hits the trail at dawn, his pants legs tucked into his socks to ward off chiggers, and searches the prairie for signs of avian breeding. He seldom finds nests — “grassland birds are too smart to let us see where they build” — so he looks for birds carrying food or nesting materials.

“This area is just great,” he says, “and it’s only going to get better. I love being out here first thing in the morning, especially when it’s drizzling. A light rain will ground the birds, stop their movement, and you never know what you’re going to see next.”
One of the Chicago area’s most distinctive sounds has been eerily rare for more than a year. The unmistakable *au-ow, au-ow* that used to wake you at an ungodly hour on weekend mornings or rise to a deafening collective roar is almost completely gone. Even among birders, it’s become nearly a triumph to be able to say, “I heard a crow today!”

Christmas Bird Counts in the Chicago region reported an 80- to 85-percent drop in the crow population last winter, according to Doug Stotz, conservation ecologist and ornithologist for The Field Museum. Famous local roosts in the western suburbs and in downtown Evanston once attracted so many noisy, messy crows that a Northwestern University student even started a locally famous, Web-based crow-poop alert. But from peak populations of more than 200,000 birds, the suburban roosts have been almost totally decimated. “I count crows on my way in [to The Field Museum] from Westchester, and I used to see 100 or more every day,” says Stotz. “Now it’s not uncommon to see no crows at all on my drive in.”

Many researchers now blame the West Nile virus for the nationwide devastation to the American crow. At a Centers for Disease Control facility in Fort Collins, Colorado, eight crows infected with the virus in a laboratory all died within

**The close correlation of human and crow infection carries weight: the Centers for Disease Control now bases its national West Nile surveillance system on crow deaths.**
six days, scientifically establishing the virus' high fatality to the species. Further experiments there also showed that crows can pass the infection among themselves through saliva, feces, from consuming carrion, or by eating an infected insect.

In Champaign-Urbana, Sarah Yaremych, at the time a graduate student with the Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS) team at the University of Illinois, followed a group of 55 radio-collared crows in 2002 and found that as many as two-thirds of them died. West Nile virus was the cause of death in more than 90 percent of these cases. And a fall 2002 survey by Audubon-Chicago Region reported dramatic "dead zones" of both crows and chickadees after the influx of the virus, mapping out a patchwork pattern of mortality characteristic of West Nile.

Some research suggests that other factors also may have contributed to the crows' recent decline. A 2003 study by David Bonter and Wesley Hochachka studied Christmas Bird Count and Project FeederWatch data over several decades. The study showed that in certain areas of the country, crow populations have dropped by even greater numbers than at present in several years before the arrival of West Nile. One difference this time, the study says, is that crow, blue jay, and chickadee populations have experienced drastic declines simultaneously, something they have never done in the past. Statewide, the Illinois Department of Health collected 502 dead crows in 2002 and found 65 percent of them to be infected with the virus. The department says it has not yet collected enough dead crows in our region to prove a definitive link, however.

Whether other factors are involved or not, crows appear to be situated squarely in the path of the virus. Richard Lampman, INHS research scientist, says that the mosquito species Culex pipiens, a primary carrier of West Nile, has a "strong ecological and temporal overlap with the American crow." That is, these mosquitoes feed at the time crows are in their roosts, typically feed at the same height as the roosts, prefer to feed on birds, and are abundant in our area at the same time of year as crows are.

No evidence yet implicates crows in human infection. In 2002, the Illinois Department of Health stated that in areas of high crow deaths, more human cases of West Nile were reported. However, whether crows live long enough to re-infect mosquitoes that would then bite humans (the most likely avenue for crow-to-human transmission) has not been proven and might never be, says Dominic Travis, veterinary epidemiologist at the Lincoln Park Zoo. Mosquitoes are exceedingly difficult to track in the wild, and crows are so intelligent that researchers have difficulty trapping them in adequate numbers for study. However, the close correlation of human and crow infection carries weight: the Centers for Disease Control now bases its national West Nile surveillance system on crow deaths.

The few crows we still see in this area might be families not yet infected or perhaps immune to West Nile, says Adam Ringia of the INHS. Typically, entire crow families succumb to West Nile once one bird has been infected. Over the past two years, crows have been regularly observed feeding others too sick to fly, almost certainly transmitting West Nile that way, either directly through saliva, or by providing more convenient targets for infected mosquitoes. Ringia points to a study by himself and other INHS researchers that found an antibody to West Nile in 5 of the 158 crows it examined. If immune, these survivors may endure further waves of the virus, provided it doesn't change, to repopulate the area.

The Field Museum's Stotts is optimistic that crows will make a comeback in the Chicago area, because it's a great place for crows to live. They came to cities in the first place to take advantage of the lights, in order to more easily spot their personal boogie man, the great horned owl, as well as other predators. Having great restaurants (Dumpsters, etc.) and entertainment (Dumpsters, etc.) doesn't hurt either. An address in the city and suburbs also protects these birds from crow hunting season, sixteen weeks in summer and winter when the bird is fair game.

"Conditions still exist that enabled them to thrive here over the past 20 years," says Stotts. "And since they produce four young each year, there is plenty of potential for a fast recovery. I expect to see them back in their usual numbers in a decade." Let the cawing begin again.

---

Great eateries (Dumpsters) and entertainment attract crows to cities.
**DO CROWS MATTER?**

Some see beyond the crow's raspy voice to some rather familiar qualities

Beyond the fact that they give us early warning of West Nile virus hot spots, should we care that our crows are disappearing? After all, many people consider crows to be nothing more than pests. Admittedly, their personal habits have earned them their share of enemies. Alfred Hitchcock did not feature crows as some of his most menacing Birds for no reason. Some birders frown on crows' penchant for eating the eggs of other songbirds and preying on chicks from other birds' nests. Many farmers hate them for their alleged fondness for corn. They are also associated with death, through their taste for roadkill and garbage. "A lot of people don't like crows because their behavior is not far from a turkey vulture in terms of scavenging. I love them, though, for their intelligence and striking jet-black beauty," says David Johnson,

*Crows put family ahead of everything.*

owner of the Wild Bird Center in Fox River Grove.

Crows have another fan in Chicagoan Barb Kirpluk, who fed and tracked four crow families in her Northwest Side neighborhood for several years until they all disappeared last
year. "It was heartbreaking because they are so intelligent," she says. "When you look in their eyes, you can see that somebody's in there, especially if they know you." This year, two new crows have arrived in Kirpluk's neighborhood, and she's been using peanuts to introduce herself to them. "One day," she says, "they surprised me by sitting right outside my house on the telephone line waiting for their food."

The crows' disappearance may also concern the rest of us who don't know any crows personally. For one thing, crows have come to perform a vital function in the 20 or so years they've swarmed into urban areas. To put it simply: they clean the place up. This past spring, the Evanston Health Department reported that dead alewives were piling up on nearby beaches in part because the crows were not around to remove them. Ditto for roadkill and litter, although many other scavengers also help keep those leftovers in check. In addition, crows help control agricultural pests. Despite their reputation as corn lovers, they eat anything that sits still long enough. Farmers this year may find they should have been valuing their crow visitors rather than aiming shotguns at them. In one study, reported by Candace Savage in her book, Bird Brains, a single family of crows are nearly 40,000 agricultural pests during the nesting season.

The continued absence of crows, which despite their rauccous voices are classified as the largest songbird in Illinois, is probably not the boon some birders might expect it to be for other, smaller songbirds. According to Kevin McGowan of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in New York, one of the world's foremost experts on crows, though crows prey on the eggs and young of songbirds, small mammals do so more frequently. Since all of these mammalian predators formerly found their own young attacked by crows, their numbers will likely rise in the crows' absence, increasing songbird predation. Additionally, the decreased crow population will be less able to drive away predatory hawks and owls, opening another potential avenue of predation. However, McGowan continues, since crow populations were at historic highs in urban areas by the 1990s, the decline in their numbers might still relieve pressure on songbird populations.

But there's another reason to value the crow — they put family ahead of everything. "They have one of the most intricate family systems of any bird," notes McGowan. "They're long-lived — 30 years in the wild, possibly up to 50 in captivity — so they don't breed for as long as eight years after birth. Instead they hang around and help out with the 'kids.' Any time you see a group of crows smaller than 15 hanging out in your neighborhood, it's a family." Scientifically, this is called cooperative breeding, in which related juveniles or "auxiliaries" act as babysitters, giving the parents more time to spend searching for food.

McGowan has studied crows intensively for more than 15 years, climbing as high as 120 feet into the treetops to band chicks in the nest. He's been mobbed for his trouble by whole family groups, and often the entire neighborhood of up to 75 crows; but by following these birds, he's discovered that families interact in unexpectedly familiar ways. For instance, parents may give a new mating pair "the back 40" of their territory, just like American pioneer families did in settling Illinois. McGowan has also observed a group of sisters paying visits to each other. And most crows actually commute regularly to and from "work" — feeding areas away from their roost sites.

"Crows are cool because they're just like us!" laughs Carolee Caffrey, science associate with Audubon Science in Pennsylvania and co-author of the "American Crow" monograph in the Birds of North America Account. In fact, a juvenile crow resembles nothing so much as a teenage human: a little bit lazy, in love with a good practical joke, never missing the opportunity to hot-dog. Crows, she points out, don't always fly "as the crow flies." They often engage in such antics as barrel rolls in the wind and racing each other in dive-bombing runs toward the ground, apparently just for fun. Crows even have been observed hanging by one foot upside-down from a wire, apparently showing off for other crows.

A juvenile crow resembles nothing so much as a teenage human: a little bit lazy, in love with a good practical joke, never missing the opportunity to hot-dog.

Caffrey has personally observed crows apparently playing jokes on each other as well. In one instance, a female crow startled her brother by accident when she dislodged a petal from a branch in a flowering tree. Then she deliberately tossed another petal down on him, seemingly with the sole purpose of seeing him jump again. Such behavior is probably to be expected from a bird with one of the largest cranial capacities of any bird, relative to its body size.

Crows also have extremely acute sight and hearing, as well as a keen sense of opportunity. University of Illinois graduate student Sarah Yaremchuk, who studied a wild crow population, reports that she captured the same crow five times in her Australian cage trap. "Once he learned he only had to put up with a little handling to eat his fill of doughnuts and Cheetos," she says admiringly, "he was right there."

—NS
Explosion of Painted Ladies

I first witnessed the massive infiltration of painted ladies on the Museum Campus in downtown Chicago, where I walked outside to find hundreds of these small, orange-and-black butterflies flitting over the landscaped grounds. These butterflies, I discovered, were only a fraction of a larger 'invasion' that swept the region for two weeks in mid-September.

Of recent "painted lady years," this was by far the largest. At some sites in Chicago Wilderness, members of the Butterfly Monitoring Network recorded 300 to 400 individuals per hour — they normally spot 15 to 20. Painted ladies (Vanessa cardui) are one of several species that each year repopulate our region from their home turf across the American Southwest. Short-lived and unable to survive winter in our region in any form, in good years hundreds of them float through the spring skies of Chicago Wilderness to re-establish summer breeding populations here. These populations often spike again later in the summers after successful spring migrations — but this spring was not good. My quest was to find some explanation for this year's unusually large "late show."

As I studied records from butterfly monitors and scientists across the country, a definite pattern emerged. Over the course of the summer, the sightings of painted ladies clustered in a band across the lower Midwest, with the most sightings in Iowa and Nebraska. These areas had reported hefty numbers of Vanessa cardui as far back as July, while here in Chicago Wilderness, painted ladies were few and far between. Looking back to our unusually long, cold spring with its endless northeasterly winds, followed by several high-velocity summer storms, it's easy to see why butterfly populations of most species were down this year.

I wondered, though, whether our painted ladies were moving into Chicago Wilderness en masse or just breeding madly here? From most outward appearances, our area experienced an "influx" as opposed to an "irruption." First, a late influx seemed unlikely without evidence of a massive spring migration. Additionally, none of my sources recorded any courtship displays, although I did receive several documented observations of painted lady caterpillars as well as reports of the butterflies' "fresh" appearance.

Though most recorded sightings indicated that the painted ladies weren't headed in any one direction, the general consensus favored a northward migration fanning from the epicenter, with smaller numbers of the butterflies moving south and east. In the end, I decided that we had likely experienced an influx due to a southern population explosion. In other words, the expected spring migration, held back by difficult spring conditions, finally thrust north when the soy-nourished southern population suddenly exceeded its bounds.

The problem with all these conjectures is that nobody actually witnessed the arrival of the painted ladies — they just appeared without any obvious migration. And many questions about painted lady migration have yet to be explored. For instance, can they migrate in the evening? Can they soar on thermals high out of sight, travelling long distances with little wear and tear?

Alas, even an exceptional year must come to a close. Increasingly cold nights and dwindling nectar sources brought a rapid demise to the spectacular, unexpected flight of Vanessa cardui. For this year, "The Case of the Painted Ladies" has officially CLOSED.

—Mary Beth Prondzinski

Collections Assistant-Zoology, The Field Museum
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Into the Wild
OUR GUIDE TO THE WILD SIDE

1. FEL-PRO RRR – McHenry County
2. GRASSY LAKE FOREST PRESERVE – Lake County, IL
3. FREEMAN KAME-ED MEAGHER FOREST PRESERVE – Kane County
4. WOOD DALE GROVE FOREST PRESERVE – DuPage County

CHICAGO WILDERNESS: GET INTO IT
At chicagowildernessmag.org, you'll find the Web versions of all the preserve profiles in this issue as well as every profile since the 1997 premier issue. Arranged by county to help you plan the perfect weekend destination.
INTO THE WILD GOES WINTER TRACKING

After most humans have scampered indoors to wait out the cold and snow, the wild creatures that spend the winter in Chicago Wilderness quietly find a place to curl up, gather food stored in the fall, or go hunting. You’d never know they were there, except for the evidence they leave behind – tracks.

HOME INVESTIGATORS

To practice your tracking away from the forest preserve, scour your neighborhood sidewalks and driveways after a night’s snow. Search for where those yowling tomcats fought last night. Or look for tracks around the tipped-over garbage can, which could lead you to raccoons, opossums, or the neighbor’s pesky Labrador.

AERIAL ASSAULT

“My all-time favorite,” reports naturalist Nan Buckardt, “is when I found a place where an owl plunged into about eight inches of snow, presumably after a mouse. The shape of the body was easily seen and every feather detail on the wings was preserved neatly in the snow.”

WHERE TO LOOK FOR TRACKS...

Most people see tracks first in the snow alongside the trail, or perhaps in the wet mud and sand of a riverbank. A little research about winter animal behavior can help a tracker think more like a wild creature:

- Start where you are: because animals usually try to save energy, many animal tracks appear on manmade trails, other animals’ trails, and other easy terrain such as logs and frozen lakes.
- Follow the tracks: a tracker can virtually recreate an animal’s experience by following its tracks and looking for other signs, such as scat, fur, feathers, or more tracks, along the way.
- Think “basic necessities”: animals are always in the game of survival, especially in winter. Since necessity often drives an animal to move, a track will usually lead to and from places of food, water, shelter, or a hiding place.
- Notice animal interaction: crossed paths, places where an animal hesitated at the possibility of danger, chase scenes, high-traffic pathways to common resources.

OPTIMUM CONDITIONS

A fresh blanket of snow that stops falling in the sunset hours gives an entire night’s history of nocturnal animal activity the following morning. Even a light dusting of snow can provide important tracking clues. Damp, cold “snowball-packing snow” can preserve detailed tracks for weeks.

BEST FIELD GUIDES

Local trackers recommend the following field guides to help you decipher that interesting track or suspicious gait pattern:

- The Peterson Field Guide Series: A Field Guide to Animal Tracks by Olaus J. Murie
- Mammals of the Great Lakes Region by Allen Kurta
- The Science and Art of Tracking by Tom Brown, Jr.
- Tom Brown’s Field Guide to Nature Observation and Tracking by Tom Brown, Jr. and Brandt Morgan

FIELD ESSENTIALS

1) Small notebook – handy for sketching tracks and writing down data, such as where you found the tracks, how far you were able to follow the trail, weather conditions, and time of day. (Pencils can be more reliable than pens in cold weather.)
2) A small ruler or tape measure – to measure footprints and gauge the distance between them.
3) Field guide – for track identification.
4) Camera – for a second opinion on confusing tracks, or in case your efforts lead you to the animal leaving them.
5) Sunglasses, sunscreen, water bottle.

Compiled by Graham Trenda with contributions from Carl Strang, Erik Neidy, Nan Buckardt, and Sandy Fejt.

STAYING HEALTHY ON THE TRAIL

Snow-covered ground is like a giant mirror, reflecting the sun into the eyes of trackers. Be sure to wear sunglasses and sunscreen on your face, while limiting the amount of time spent staring at the snow. And don’t forget to drink plenty of water, too. Even though it’s cold outside, your body is still perspiring.

USING LIGHT

Low light angles that persist throughout the winter months (until about mid-March) can expose intricate details left behind in tracks. Keep the track between you and the sun to view the greatest detail. Not enough light? Use a mirror to reflect sunlight into the track, or use a flashlight.

TROUBLESOME TRACKS

MONSTER SQUIRRELS?

At some point later in the day, a tracker may stumble across what looks to be a squirrel track. He’s seen hundreds by now, but this one catches his attention: it’s three times the size of a normal squirrel track. He begins to wonder if he should get the ranger. Then he realizes that it’s four in the afternoon, and the sun has shone on the track all day. Sunlight can cause tracks to “grow” or expand over the course of the day. Looks like this tracker won’t be calling Ripley’s tonight after all.

DOG, COYOTE, OR FOX?

There is no easy rule for telling these tracks apart, as they all share the same basic canine print. Add the countless sizes and ages of domestic dogs out walking with their masters, and you’ve got confusion. Best bet: look for coyote and fox farther off human trails, and scan for fur-laden scat.

BEWARE PSEUDO-DEER!

Dogs place their weight on their middle two toes, sometimes to the extent that when the toe blends with the toenail, a dog’s tracks can look like deer tracks.
Glacial Park, Moraine Hills, or Marengo Ridge; these are names of preserves in McHenry County. But “Fel-Pro RRR”? Though it could be a factory, a railroad, or some kind of subversive political organization, Fel-Pro RRR is actually a park nestled in the most densely populated portion of McHenry County. And even its unusual name has historical richness.

Located in Cary in southeastern McHenry County, Fel-Pro RRR sits beside the Fox River and encompasses a total of 220 acres. The site features prairie, fen, sedge meadow, wetlands, and savanna. Gazing out from the peak of a glacial kame, one can get lost in the beauty of the wetlands that spread out around the small, clear stream meandering through the park. Nancy Williamson, site steward for the 140 wild acres now dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve, refers to this section as a “mini Glacial Park,” invoking McHenry’s 2,806-acre flagship preserve. The eastern portion of the park has been developed for recreation and includes a baseball diamond, swimming pool, volleyball court, basketball court, and two pavilions.

Fel-Pro RRR is a perfect family spot. From the parking lot, a one-mile hard-surface trail leads through the developed area of the park, negotiating gentle rolling hills and large oak trees. A rustic dirt trail then branches off toward a much wilder setting, passing into an oak savanna and over steep glacial hills. A quarter-mile segment over several wood bridges circles the largest pond, which is connected to a smaller pond by a steep spillway and a narrow stream. From there, a half-mile trail leads through the savanna out to a field and the third pond. All trails in the park are groomed for cross-country skiing in the winter.

For the past three years, Nancy Williamson has worked with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and scores of volunteers to control invasive plants and reestablish the property’s native ecosystems. Columbine and bottlebrush grass are returning to the site’s recovering oak savannas. To the east rises a rare and unusually steep dry gravel hill prairie, home to dropseed, little bluestem, and birdsfoot violet. In the west, a high-quality graminoid fen harbors Ohio goldenrod, swamp thistle, angelica, and fringed gentian. To restore the site’s natural communities, volunteers and TNC staff have conducted several controlled burns, but much work remains to be done.

Fel-Pro RRR had a previous life as a private park for the workers and families of the Fel-Pro corporation, an auto-parts manufacturer. Fel-Pro’s owners bought the property to provide RRR—or Rest, Relaxation, and Recreation— for their company’s 2,800 employees. The company’s positive employer-employee relations, fostered in part by company picnics, summer camps, and everyday visits to the property, led Fortune Magazine to rank Fel-Pro the fourth-best place to work in America in 1998.

Fel-Pro’s owners sold the company that same year, but they deeded the 220 acres, appraised at $7.5 million, to a collaboration of TNC, McHenry County Conservation District, and Metropolitan Family Services (management of the nature preserve portion is currently being handed over to MCCD). The family owners wanted to keep this area’s natural beauty protected from development and to provide educational and recreational opportunities for other families.

For MCCD programs, snow conditions, and additional information, call (815) 338-6223. For information about restoration, call Nancy Williamson at (847) 608-3100, ext. 2051. For pillow and site reservations, or family and child programs, call Metropolitan Family Services (at 847) 658-8212. The park is open year-round from 8 a.m. to sunset.

—David Rigby
Relatively secluded before the addition of a trail system last year, Grassy Lake Forest Preserve in Lake Barrington is still one of the area's better-kept secrets. The preserve includes 558 acres of prairie, wetland, woodland, and savanna in various stages of recovery from agricultural uses, and is home to a variety of plant and animal life. In October 2002, the Lake County Forest Preserves (LCFP) opened a 3.5-mile serpentine trail throughout the site, making it more accessible to outdoor enthusiasts, regardless of season.

The well-marked smooth gravel trail begins at the Lake Barrington Municipal Center on Old Barrington Road. Hikers can follow the trail north to explore the streamside wetlands of the Flint Creek corridor, or south to observe the woodlands and wet prairie ecosystems of the Grassy Lake portion. The preserve is full of wildlife, says Tom Smith, LCFP stewardship volunteer coordinator. Coyotes, herons, egrets, raccoons, opossum, deer, and ducks can be observed amidst acres of native prairie grasses, such as big bluestem, switch grass, Canadian wild rye, and little bluestem. The wood duck and bluebird nest boxes near the trail hint at some of the preserve's bird communities. Fortunate visitors may also see sandhill cranes.

According to Ken Klick, LCFP restoration ecologist, land managers are restoring parts of the preserve through controlled burning, removal of invasive species, and selective thinning of aggressive native species.

North from the trailhead, the trail loosely follows the eastern bank of the meandering Flint Creek, traveling mostly through wetlands and restored prairie. Private residences line portions of the landscape. Nearby, on now-developed property outside of the forest preserve, archaeologists uncovered remains of a Paleo-Indian encampment thought to be 10,000 years old, the oldest traces of human presence in Lake County.

The Grassy Lake side of the trail stretches south from the Municipal Center. Take particular note of the oak savanna near the trailhead. Willowy Indian grass and an assortment of wildflowers, such as mountain mint and bergamot, can also be found in the area. Further along the

**Directions**
From Rte 12 (Rand Rd), head west on Rte 22 (Main St) for about four miles. Turn right/north on Kelsey Rd, and follow it 1.5 miles as it curves east. Just before it curves back north, turn right/south onto Old Barrington Road. Parking is restricted to the lot in front of the Municipal Center, which will appear immediately on the right/west.
trail, explorers can view woodlands with bitternut and shagbark hickory trees, red and white oaks, cherry and walnut trees, and a variety of sedges. Cavity-nesting birds such as woodpeckers and yellow-shafted flickers abound, breaking the silence of this serene area. Grassy Lake itself, a distance from the trail, hides from sight.

In addition to Grassy Lake and Flint Creek, the preserve includes Wagner Fen, a 100-acre wetland. Dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve, Wagner Fen is home to several rare plant species. Part of the fen is managed by Citizens for Conservation, a group of local conservationists. Four natural communities comprise Wagner Fen: graminoid fen, sedge meadow, marsh, and perennial stream, and approximately 190 species of native plants have been recorded there. Located near the northernmost reach of the trail, this important fen is largely surrounded by deep cat-tail marsh, making access difficult.

Sports lovers interested in communing with nature during the winter months might consider cross-country skiing on the preserve’s wide, gently sloping trails. When the snow has melted, try hiking or running. Bicycles are permitted, as well as leashed pets.

Grassy Lake is open every day from 6:30 a.m. until sunset. Restrooms are located in the Municipal Center, which is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 3 p.m. For more information, call (847) 381-6010.

Roaming

While in the area, visitors can explore nearby Fox River Preserve & Marina, (847) 381-0669, on West Roberts Road in Barrington, two miles north of Grassy Lake, where there is an impressive rookery of great blue herons and egrets. Numerous other nearby preserves include Cuba Marsh (CW, Spring ’98), Lyons Prairie and Marsh (Summer ’02), Flint Creek Savanna (Fall ’03), Spring Creek Valley Forest Preserve (Fall ’02), and the heron rookery at Baker’s Lake Nature Preserve (Spring ’00).

Stillman Nature Center, (847) 428-OWLS, on West Penny Road in South Barrington, offers 80 acres of woods, lakes, and prairie. November through March, the center, which has no indoor facilities for visitors, is open to the public on Sundays, 1-4 p.m. (Sundays, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. the rest of the year).

Got kids? Make a stop at the Health World Children’s Museum, (847) 842-9100, which provides a “hands-on” approach to learning about the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle. Located on South Grove Avenue in Barrington, the center is open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday. Admission is $6 for adults and children.

The 76-year-old Catlow Theater, (847) 381-0777, on Main Street in downtown Barrington, provides a relaxing break from the great outdoors. Grab a homemade sandwich at Baloney’s Sandwich Shop, (847) 381-0645, next door and eat it inside this ornate movie house, which has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1989. Shows are just $4 a person!

Foraging

For even more nostalgia, check out Chessie’s Restaurant, (847) 382-5020, in the Ice House Mall on Appleby Street, just minutes from the Catlow Theater. Enjoy classic American cuisine in a railroad setting – dine in a vintage 1927 dining car or in the original Barrington train station. Dinners range from $8.75 (turkey club) to $25.95 (filet mignon). Sunday buffet brunch draws large crowds.

Historic Long Grove, located near the intersection of Routes 83 and 53, is an area of Lake County you don’t want to miss. A quaint, charming village filled with specialty shops, craft stores, galleries, and restaurants, Long Grove is sure to entice your senses. Sample delectable chocolate-covered strawberries at the famous Long Grove Confectionery, (847) 634-0080; grab a gourmet coffee at Beans & Leaves Coffee & Tea Café, (847) 821-0011; or explore memorabilia from the 50s, 60s, and 70s at Nifty 50’s, (847) 821-7047. Visitors can eat lunch at one of the fine restaurants in the village, such as the delightfully fresh, mouthwatering Italian dishes of Enzo & Lucia’s, (847) 478-8825. Request a table in the kitchen to see the chefs in action! Or enjoy hearty American-style fare at the Village Tavern, (847) 634-3117. All-you-can-eat specials Monday through Friday.

Located just minutes from Grassy Lake is the Port Barrington Bar & Grill, (847) 382-1366, on Kasiloum Drive, just off of Kelsey Road. Enjoy a variety of house favorites from raw oysters, steaks, chops, and ribs (children’s menu available) while viewing the Fox River from the large bay windows. Average entree is $15. Beer lovers should check out the Millrose Brewing Co.

Events

Seathe year-round activities year-round for the unique atmosphere.

Bedding Down

Looking for a bed and breakfast nearby? Try Wakan Cove Bed and Breakfast, (847) 487-1310, at 641 E. Liberty Street in Wauconda, just seven miles from downtown Barrington. Rates range from $80 to $175 per night, depending on the season. Enjoy the fireplace in the winter or the private access to the lake in the summertime.

Through December 24:


Through January 4:

Holiday Festival of Lights
Cuneo Museum and Gardens Grounds, (847) 367-3700. 6 p.m. – 10 p.m. daily. Intersection of Routes 60 and 21 in Vernon Hills.

New Year’s Nature Walk
Stillman Nature Center, (847) 428-OWLS. 10 a.m. West Penny Road in South Barrington.
Imagine this place thousands of years ago,” says Drew Ullberg, director of planning for the Forest Preserve District of Kane County, sweeping his hand across a swath of Freeman Kame-Ed Meagher Forest Preserve in far northern Kane County. “Over there would have been a massive glacier, the ice a mile thick. As it retreated, the sands and gravel in the meltwater runoff left behind what you see now.” He’s referring to the rare moundable glacial kames, the formations for which the preserve was named.

The variety of habitat and structure created by the close proximity of the kames and marshland depressions tucked among them makes this area not only rare, but stunning. In part because of its exceptional topography, Freeman Kame is now one of the highest-rated natural areas in the county. Beginning with the initial acquisition of the Freeman estates in 1985, the Freeman Kame-Ed Meagher preserve has grown to 450 spectacular acres, including high-quality wetland, woodland, and prairie. In the north and west of the preserve lies part of the old Meagher Farm. Though portions are still farmed, the district plans eventually to restore natural communities there as well.

Interestingly, nearly every acre at the preserve has been either logged or grazed. Many of the trees here are “grubs,” Ullberg explains, trees that have been chewed by animals (typically deer or cattle) or cut down and have re-sprouted from the roots. For this reason, the occasional red oak becomes two, each growing in its own direction. Despite this use by prior owners, high-quality natural communities survive all over the preserve. In the wooded areas, the owners cared for the land and did not overgraze or overlog. In the lower wet areas, the owners did not plow or drain the land, so it remained relatively undisturbed.

In fact, some of the land even benefited from controlled burning before being acquired by the Forest Preserve District. The hunt club that once leased its land here allowed volunteers to burn and manage the area. From atop a kame, we overlook the savanna that was once home to the club. The results of the controlled burns are obvious – we can see an area free of buckthorn and other invasive species.

Despite the preserve’s proximity to a small private airport, the most startling noise visitors are likely to hear are the hoisterous calls of the site’s several pairs of nesting sandhill cranes. Due to the diversity of habitat structure here, visitors can often see a wide assortment of birds. The woodlands draw warblers, woodpeckers, cuckoos, thrushes, and hawks. Step into the marshlands to see the marsh and sedge wrens, rails, cranes, and willow flycatchers. Another winged inhabitant of the marshes, the Baltimore checkerspot butterfly, relies on the stands of turtlehead plant here for nourishment.

Having descended the wooded kames, we tread through the adjoining basin. The ground wobbles beneath our feet. We’re standing on what was likely once a bog (an acidic type of wetland), says Ullberg, pointing to a colony of bog goldenrod. On our way through the basin we also find blue-leaved willow, buckbean, hoary willow, marsh marigolds, bog violet, paniced aster, and marsh shield fern. Beyond the bog and a sedge meadow, we encounter a fine example of a signature Chicago Wilderness ecosystem – an oak-hickory savanna.

Visitors will find 3.5 miles of mowed trails at Freeman Kame – excellent paths for cross-country skiing during the winter. Horseback riding is also permitted. The district is currently looking for a volunteer steward for the area. To learn more about Freeman Kame and its restoration, call (630) 232-5980.

— Jennifer Tang
To many, Wood Dale Grove Forest Preserve in northeastern DuPage County is known for its accommodating shelters and the nine-acre Grove Lake, a 28-foot-deep recreational resource stocked with largemouth bass, bluegills, crappie, channel catfish, sunfish, and rainbow trout. But ecological finds abound at this 179-acre preserve, and visitors without fishing poles and picnic baskets can discover much in an afternoon.

The 1.1-mile marked trail that follows Grove Lake's shoreline cuts north through a wooded area that is benefiting from Forest Preserve District management efforts. Winter hikers and cross-country skiers may very well see piles of freshly cut buckthorn along this portion of the trail, signs of a successful volunteer workday. In this upland savanna, colonies of Jack-in-the-pulpit, spring beauty, rue anemone, trout lily, and red trillium bloom in spring. In fact, more than 450 native species are rooted at this one preserve.

Avian migrants such as the common loon, yellow-rumped warbler, and ruby-crowned kinglet have been spotted here. Birders looking to add to their life lists may also want to note that the preserve has been host to the hooded warbler for the last two summers. Within the last year, monitors have sighted the black-cuckoo and the blue-gray gnatcatcher.

The larger and more ecologically diverse area of Wood Dale Grove, accessible by deer paths, lies north of Third Avenue. A moist-towet prairie and sedge meadow ecosystem appears first on this side of the preserve. District staff and volunteers have worked over the years to cut brush from the prairie, and the results are evident. Although a monochrome winter scheme blankets the area early in the year, when the weather warms, visitors will see golden Alexanders, blue-eyed grass, and balsam ragwort. Summer yields species such as white wild indigo, Michigan lily, and a spectacular display of marsh blazing star. And late summer and early fall bring asters, bottle gentians, and goldenrods. The area is home to some unusual shrubs such as New Jersey tea and meadowsweet, both with delicate white blooms.

North of this prairie spreads a black oak savanna and flatwoods system, another area once heavily invaded by buckthorn and recently restored by resource management efforts. The flatwoods community in particular is quite rare in DuPage County. Tree species such as bur, white, and black oak, as well as shagbark and bitternut hickory, prevail in drier portions. Rue anemone, wild geranium, white baneberry, and wild leeks inhabit the herb layer. Trees such as red and green ash, black willow, and swamp white oak characterize the flatwoods, with an understory of sedges, lady fern, water parsnip, and blue flag iris. The ephemeral ponds in this area provide habitat for a number of amphibian species.

For information on volunteering with restoration efforts at Wood Dale Grove or to learn about special events planned at the preserve, call the Forest Preserve District at (630) 933-7200.

—Jayne Bohner
Natural Events

Here's what's debuting on nature's stage in Chicago Wilderness by Jack MacRae

WINTER 2004

Early Winter

Red-shouldered Stranger
Early last winter, a red-shouldered hawk began working the morning shift at the northwest corner of Glenview Road and the Edens Expressway. He (she?) arrived at the end of November and left abruptly, without giving his two weeks notice, in March. Many thousands of human commuters would pass him daily as he performed his duties as a rodent control specialist. Such a skilled, experienced worker is a valuable asset to any enterprise.

Male and female red-shoulders live apart in winter - they'll re-establish their pair bonds in the spring. They prefer to breed in wet woodlands and river valleys, with plenty of rodents.

Water Penny Lane
Water pennies are one of the wonderful macroinvertebrates (creatures lacking a backbone and visible to the naked eye) that live in the swift riffles of our clean streams. And, if you don't mind getting really cold fingers, you can find them in the winter. Water pennies are coppery brown and the size of an aspirin, but much flatter and flexible. They're found on submerged rocks, clinging securely to the slick layer of slime that also serves as their food. They travel slowly, grazing on the periphyton (a tasty blend of algae, bacteria, fungi, and protozoa) as they move.

Water pennies are the larval, aquatic stage of a small beetle. Over the organism's two-year life span, it will undergo a complete metamorphosis. The larva will turn into a pupa (something like a butterfly's chrysalis) above the water line, with the emergent adult beetle staying close to the water. The adult is thought to be short-lived. It breeds but most likely does not feed.

Middle Winter

Mutilated Mice
At the risk of sounding like a Warren Zevon song, last winter I found nine headless mice on a gravel trail. Evidently something had eaten their brains. It looked like the work of a weasel, a ferocious predator with a fondness for organs. Perhaps the culprit was a least weasel, the world's smallest carnivore, and an uncommon creature in our region. Least weasels are white in the winter and brown in the summer. The trail of decapitation passed through brushy habitat adjacent to a fen - an area well-suited for these secretive hunters, that need to eat half their body weight (one or two mice would do it) each day.

Way-Cool Snakes
In the winter world of reptiles, garter snakes are known as light sleepers. Through the years, there have been numerous local reports of active garter snakes in mid-winter. The details are similar: the snakes usually are spotted taking in the warm, early afternoon sun, close to the rocks or bricks in which they have been hibernating. Tolerance of cold is a trait of the garter snakes - they are the most northerly snake in North America.

To Live and Die in a Gall
Next time you're taking a cold stroll through a grassland, check out the big, round galls on the goldenrod stems. They're notable examples of co-evolution and the complexity of nature. Galls, formed last summer, are the plant's response to a larval insect living and growing inside the stem.

All is not safe inside a gall. During the winter, both black-capped chickadees and downy woodpeckers (see page 31) adeptly extract the squishy, high-calorie maggot morsels. Holes made by a chickadee's stout, pointed beak are larger and more ragged than the neat, round holes made by the woodpecker. If a goldenrod gall larva survives until spring, it will morph into a picture-wing fly.

Late Winter

Trespassers Will Be Violated
By the ides of March, male coyotes have staked out their territories, establishing a fragile yellow border in their special way. Females will be house-hunting. During this time of year, coyotes have little tolerance for foxes, which they see as competition. Dogs are not appreciated either. Noted bat enthusiast Ozzy Osbourne lost his little black Chihuahua to a coyote last year. True story.

If you want to sound impressive at a holiday party, use the term "RLUs" in casual conversation. It's short-handed jargon for "raised leg urinations" and is used by coyote and wolf researchers in population and behavior studies.

Early Mourning
Mourning cloaks are one of a few local butterflies that hibernate as an adult. During winter, they practice a natural form of cryogenics, relying on a self-made antifreeze, sorbitol, to stay alive. They fly as soon as the air begins to warm and are often spotted in March, flying through our oak and maple woods and more open areas. On occasion, I've found them flapping in the bottom of sap-collecting buckets.

Mourning cloaks hold the North American record for longest life span (butterfly category). Some will live for 11 months.

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Yes. The eastern massasauga rattlesnake, which is quite rare, lives in savannas and hibernates in mammal and crayfish burrows.

During migration, cranes sometimes use the thermal currents generated by burns to circle high into the sky.

Illinois' state tree is the white oak.

About 6,000 volunteers, including scientists, stewards, and nature lovers.

Prairie plants can root as deep as 15 feet, allowing them to survive fires and harsh cold weather.

Prairies range from a foot or two tall up to about 7 feet.

No. As winter approaches and the ground freezes, these furry animals simply dig deeper, always staying below the freeze line.

These and many other fascinating facts can be found in the pages of Chicago WILDERNESS magazine.
It's as much a rite of winter as ice skates and hot chocolate: the storm clouds gather, the cold winds blow, and — often before the snow flies — the trucks are out on the roads, bouncing small chunks of salt on the pavement or spraying it with a brine solution. We've come to expect that traffic and commerce can flow unencumbered all winter long. Salt is the main tool states and municipalities use to ensure that's the case.

Salt — sodium chloride, the same stuff as ordinary table salt — causes water to freeze at a lower temperature. The technology used to spread it has become much more efficient in recent years, as computerized delivery systems ensure that drivers can spread it evenly. But, in an effort to keep streets totally clear, more and more municipalities have also begun to spread salt crystals or brine before any snow falls. In some cases, alternatives are in use, such as calcium chloride. But ordinary sodium chloride is much cheaper than alternatives, and it retains the widest use. Every winter some 13 million tons, more than half the salt produced in the United States, is spread on wintry roads. In the six-county Chicago area, the Illinois Department of Transportation alone uses 140,000 tons of sodium chloride in an average winter, and counties and municipalities cumulatively add even more.

If any other substance were scattered into the environment in such quantities, there would likely be a public outcry. But salt, for the most part, is taken for granted. It has caused great costs as cars and
Salt in the Air

Salt has been used to improve traction since the 1930s. But it was the construction of the interstate highway system in the 1950s and 1960s, and the concurrent boom in car ownership, that dramatically swelled the use of deicing salts. One of the regional sites where its effects became most apparent was the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, which was founded in 1922 by Joy Morton, who, ironically, made his fortune with the Morton Salt Company and was the son of the founder of Arbor Day. Morton Salt has sold road salt for most of its existence and still sells a lot today.

Interstate 88 was built along the Arboretum’s southern edge in the 1950s. The Arboretum staff planted the highway margin with trees and shrubs intended to show off how roadside landscaping could look beautiful. It did, up to a point. But as the western suburbs boomed and traffic swelled, says soil scientist Pat Kelsey, who studied salt deposition at the Arboretum in the 1980s and 1990s, “there was a significant decline in that vegetation from the use of deicing salts. Close to the tollway you could see all this dieback.”

It’s well known why sodium and chloride ions—the constituent elements of common salt—harm plants. They interfere with the osmotic balance of cells, making it impossible for cells, and ultimately entire plants, to properly regulate the absorption of water. Plants exposed to excessive salt show symptoms of dehydration. Their uptake of water and nutrients is inhibited, growth slows, needles or leaves turn brown, “witch’s brooms” form, branches die. When the soil becomes salty, the germination of seeds slows or stops entirely. Add enough salt to the soil, and even the soil structure changes; it becomes poorly aerated and alkaline and becomes much less hospitable to many plant species.

The dieback of trees and shrubs at the Arboretum prompted Kelsey and his colleagues to study how salt travels by air. Even pine trees planted more than 200 meters from the highway, it turned out, were suffering damage from salt. They were exposed primarily to the white rime that

What Can You Do?

Sure, you want your driveway and sidewalk cleared. But that doesn’t mean you have to use piles of salt. Try these tactics instead.

- Combine salt use with snow shoveling. Use salt only on icy spots that can’t be removed with a shovel.
- Use calcium chloride (available in most home supply and hardware stores) rather than sodium chloride salt. Though not benign, it’s less harmful.
- Mix deicing salt with sand or kitty litter to provide traction and lower the need for salt.
- Enrich soil near roads and sidewalks with compost or peat moss, as that will increase its salt tolerance.
- Go easy on water softening, which uses a great deal of salt. Use softened water for such purposes as washing, but not for outdoor uses.
- Since municipalities and state agencies use much more salt than the average citizen, residents can contact their local public works department to voice their concerns.
you’ve seen on expressways during cold, dry weather; tires turn it to dust that can disperse a long way.

The most immediate result of that study is visible today to drivers along both the North-South and East-West tollways as they pass the Arboretum; it is walled off by a high earthen berm intended to shield the Arboretum from both traffic noise and salt. The barrier works, up to a point. It keeps most salt confined in the highway corridor, though at least one study has shown that Chicago and other urban areas are effectively enveloped in a cloud of salt dust during the winter.

The other visible effect of the Arboretum study is along Lake Shore Drive. A desire to minimize salt’s effects on roadside plantings and adjacent parts of Lincoln Park prompted Mayor Daley to reduce the winter speed limit to 40 miles per hour there in 1991. The mayor based his decision on Kelsey’s discovery that speeds of 45 and higher put significantly more salt into the air than lower speeds.

Salt in the Water

Salt doesn’t just leave roads by air; much of it drains off and collects in ponds, lakes, and waterways. How it does so has been very clear at Prairie Crossing, a new conservation-oriented subdivision in northwest suburban Grayslake. Through the late 1990s, while the subdivision was being built, its roads were treated only lightly with salt. They were, at times, a bit slippery. In 2001, the Village of Grayslake took over certain maintenance duties and greatly increased salt use. As a result, chloride levels in the subdivision’s lake are more than five times what they were, while grasses have visibly browned and died along the road shoulders.

Mike Sands, the subdivision’s environmental team leader, grew up in rural New England and rather fondly remembers how roads there might be snow-covered for days after a winter storm. These days, he says, drivers want streets cleared immediately, and concerns about liability ensure that municipalities strive for just that. The effects show in the lake at Prairie Crossing. “Chloride levels aren’t high enough that any major species are going to disappear,” he says, “but they are high enough that you’re going to see subtle changes in algae populations, zooplankton, and eventually plant communities.”

The effect of salt on plants is borne out by experience elsewhere. In the 1960s and early 1970s, an uncovered road-salt storage pile sat along the Indiana Toll Road immediately adjacent to Pinhook Bog, part of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Runoff from the salt pile entered the bog and caused a dieoff of bog plants such as tamarack trees, red maples, and sphagnum mosses, which were replaced by more salt-tolerant plants such as narrow-leaved cattails. “It’s not a direct tie,” says the USGS’ Wilcox, “but salt gives an additional competitive advantage to the species that can tolerate it.” Wilcox says it can take 20 years or more for precipitation to flush out high salt concentrations to levels native plants can tolerate. Long after the salt pile was removed, bog plants had only begun a very slow recovery in the affected area.

More recently, some of the highest levels of salt in the area have been recorded in artificial wetlands constructed as retention basins. The Conservation Research Institute conducted a study of such wetlands in the Chicago area for the Army Corps of Engineers, and found that salt concentrations often reached 650 parts per million (ppm). Relatively undisturbed natural wetlands in the region typically have concentrations of 8 to 20 ppm; the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency stipulates that drinking water supplies should not exceed 250 ppm.

“Six hundred and fifty ppm is up in the range of salt marshes,” says Wayne Lampa. “Native plants just can’t hack it, but halophytes [salt-loving plants] from the East of Gulf Coasts can.”

Along many area roadways, salt-tolerant plants have become more common — annual saltmarsh aster, salt meadowgrass, narrow-leaved cattails, phragmites reeds, seaside goldenrod. Though no one has been able to point to a precise cause-and-effect relationship to show that salt runoff promotes the growth of these plants, it’s clear that there is a connection. Salt changes water and soil conditions, and that affects which plants grow where.

“We have seen a generalized shift in wetland patterns, espe-
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cially along highways, from a diverse mixture of wetland species to a mix of cattails and phragmites,” says Dennis Dreher, an environmental engineer with the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission. “That’s pervasive throughout the region. Salt levels are leading to more monotypic vegetation.”

Salt All Around

More difficult to tease out are the effects of salt on aquatic animals. High salt levels are known to change the composition of invertebrate communities in lakes and springs, but most mammals and fishes are believed to tolerate raised salt levels fairly well. Still, little is known about the effects of particularly high levels of salt in a localized area, such as a vernal pool where frogs or salamanders—which absorb water through their skin—breed. Concentrated salt has been shown to inhibit amphibians from crossing forest roads in at least one study.

“Certainly where you have vernal pools, one would predict quite a bit of an effect, because it’s such a limited system,” says Richard Forman, an expert on road ecology at Harvard University. “And salted roadways are certainly truncating the route that’s available to salamanders to move. My sense is that there are probably big effects but rather few of them have been studied. It’s a clarion call for research.”

Further research is beginning, partly through volunteer work. In McHenry County, people such as retired engineer Ed Ellinghausen of the Boone Creek Watershed Alliance are monitoring salt levels in rare fen communities and correlating them with levels of new development and road salt use. He’s finding that a combination of road salt runoff and leaching from the septic systems of homeowners who use water softeners is often causing a tenfold increase in salt levels in area wetlands, raising concerns about the survival of rare plants.

The question residents of Chicago Wilderness and other heavily populated regions may have to ask themselves, then, is how much we are willing to sacrifice for convenience. Biodiversity and high-speed winter travel may not always coincide. JoAnn Seagren of Barrington Hills remembers when her town spread sand on the roads rather than salt. “I think people drove more carefully and slowly then,” she says. “Now the roads are totally clear and people don’t have to slow down.”
Sumac: local shrub makes good

My first experience with sumac trees happened when my older brother neglected to mow the grass behind the garage for seven weeks. When the family returned home from a long vacation, we discovered several hundred two-foot-tall staghorn sumac saplings growing in our backyard. They were beautiful, with soft bark and symmetrical leaves. Of course they couldn't stay, and were cut down within days. But I always remember all those cute little trees, and I've been a fan ever since.

As described in the literature, sumac trees wouldn't seem to possess a lot of star quality. They're short, rather stubby, with weak wood. They will pop up in heavily disturbed areas, and can form dense colonies that suppress other plant life. A few local species even cause severe dermatitis. But all it takes is one long, close look at a sumac tree to see their beauty and grace. The sumac's leaf structure, color, and branching pattern are delightfully pleasing to the human eye.

Chicago Wilderness is a little too cold for the majority of the world's sumac species. Most family members are tropical. But several hardy varieties of the genus Rhus do live here in the cooler north and are fascinating, handsome trees unlike any other. We have sumacs that are fragrant, poisonous, smooth, fuzzy, and shiny. For 12 months a year, they stand out from other shrubs with their unique appearance and properties. And, to badly use a trendy commercial tagline: Sumac in the fall? Priceless.

Staghorn sumac takes its name from its fuzzy, pithy twigs, which are similar to deer antlers "in velvet." Growing along the borders of woodlands, the species rarely exceeds 25 feet in height; the state-champion staghorn of Illinois that stood along the Illinois and Michigan Canal towpath in LaSalle was only 29 feet tall. Staghorn sumacs have distinctive compound leaves made up of lance-shaped leaflets that turn brilliant red in the autumn. In summer, they sport tall, cone-shaped clusters of hairy red fruits at the end of their branches. These fruits rise prominently above the leaves and remain through the winter, providing color and structure against the snowy landscape. Also common in our area, smooth sumac resembles staghorn but has less hair. It displays equally brilliant fall colors.

Fragrant sumac is a short shrub adapted to sand dunes. Uncommon in the region due to scarcity of that habitat, native colonies can be found along the tops of dune blowouts at the Indiana Dunes. Another colony, thought to be native, resides on a gravel hillside in Kane County. Non-native colonies are more widespread, as many local plant stores stock a cultivated variety of fragrant sumac. The leaves of this species give off a pleasant aroma when crushed.

Poison sumac possesses an acrid sap capable of producing a wicked case of dermatitis. Not surprisingly, it is a close relative of poison ivy — they both have three leaves and share the same itch-inducing chemical, urushiol. They do not share habitat, however. Poison ivy spreads throughout sunny natural areas, while poison sumac survives only in acidic wetlands such as those found at Nelson Lake, Volo Bog, and Cowles Bog.

People around the world have found culinary uses for sumac. Recipes from the Mediterranean are full of creative uses of sumac: Turkish chefs, for one, use the crushed berries of elm-leaved sumac as a condiment. Chef Yilmaz, of the fantastic new Turquoise Grill in Houston, is also a master when using sumac in cuisine. Locally, native peoples were known to steep the berries into a tart, throat-soothing tea, the flavor coming from citric and ascorbic acid. The Potawatomi mixed leaves of staghorn sumac with the inner bark of dogwood for a smoking mixture. But whether it's served up on a plate, in a pipe, or alongside the prairie, the unmistakable sumac is sure to delight.

—Jack MacRae
Bob Lootens was skeptical when he first heard about the professor who wanted to plant a prairie at the particle physics research facility known as Fermilab.

At that time, the early 1970s, a young Lootens had only recently begun working with the Roads & Grounds department at Batavia’s Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, where Dr. Bob Betz, a retired professor of biochemistry and biology at Northeastern Illinois University, was attempting what was at the time the largest prairie reconstruction in the world. “The crew I worked with had farming backgrounds,” Lootens reflects, “and we heard about this professor coming from Chicago, who was going to tell us how to plant a bunch of weeds on some perfectly good agricultural soil.” Lootens’ connection to that soil reaches back; his family once lived on a dairy farm bordering the site, moving away in the early 1960s, just a few years before the government bought out the remaining farmers to establish Fermilab.

“It took a few visits meeting and listening to [Betz] to understand the concept of prairie,” recalls Lootens. Now, 30 years later, Lootens, fellow lead groundskeeper Dave Shemanske, grounds manager Mike Becker, and the rest of their 16-person crew have rebuilt native prairie on this land, where Lootens bailed hay as a boy. The property’s vast 1,100-acre prairie, sprawling across Fermilab’s 6,800 acres, sprouted other farm implements to prepare, plant, and harvest large areas of prairie. These innovative applications of traditional techniques enabled restorationists to think on a scale closer to that of the vast original prairies.

Lootens was 19 when he took his first job with Fermilab in 1971. A few years later, Becker and then Shemanske joined him. Together, the trio has logged 86 years of service at the lab. “We shared a lot of time in the field working together,” says Becker, who worked for a tree service before Fermilab. “We learned to get along a long time ago,” he smiles. All three are married, have children, and are in their early 50s.

In 1975, the crew took to the fields in tractors to plow the ground and seed the first prairie plot. It looked like a bunch of weeds, recalls Lootens — but Betz pointed out tiny prairie plants amidst the mess. Within two years, the crew did their first controlled burn to encourage growth of native species.

Today, managing regular prairie fires is probably Shemanske’s favorite part of the work. “It involves a lot of planning and coordination; you need cooperation from weather and the winds.” Adds Lootens, “What excites us most is in the spring when we walk out after a burn and see plants coming back with renewed vigor — and you see plants you haven’t seen before.”

“It takes teamwork to do this type of restoration,” says Shemanske, describing the crew’s regular burn, plant, and harvest cycle. In addition to the crew, who actually spend most of their time on non-prairie tasks at Fermilab, a corps of volunteers twice yearly handpicks seeds that are sorted and cold-stored over the winter for spring planting.

“We try to stay with what the experts say are the native plant species in order to resemble original prairie as much as possible,” says Becker, explaining the trio’s stewardship philosophy. “We’ve been entrusted with this public land, and the approach is to be a good steward and keep it healthy.”

The crew is proud of the young prairie, which they’ve grown gradually, plot by plot. “In some cases we’ve gone from a three-year-old prairie, with 25 plant species, to our oldest prairies, with 80 to 100 species,” says Becker, noting that new insects, birds, and butterflies have flocked to the native vegetation as well.

Though the crew hasn’t yet met the goal of reaching the prairie’s original species diversity, their progress encourages them to work with Betz to further hone the art of rebuilding this lost corner of the natural world. “The physi-cists here are trying to find the smallest particle of matter, and we’re trying to build the prairie without a textbook,” Lootens notes. “We’re both on a journey of discovery.”

—Anne E. Stein
Downy Woodpecker: winter food-finding fits the bill

A thin layer of snow dusted the evergreen- and forb-laden forest floor when I walked through Lake County's Lyons Woods one cold winter day. Many bird species had left Chicago Wilderness in fall for warmer climates, and though the day was beautiful, I longed for some sign of bird activity. I was not disappointed.

On this cold, seemingly insect-less day, a downy woodpecker (Picoides pubescens) fitted, called, and displayed his bright black-and-white plumage, with red at the nape of his neck. The bird gave his telltale rapid, single-pitched series of tones. He pecked deliberately at the bark on a pine about five feet high. Then he flew to a goldenrod plant, tightening his muscular toes around a sturdy branch. From this perch, he pounded on the spherical, inch-wide galls that form on goldenrod stems, trying to extract the overwintering maggots encased within.

Downy woodpeckers feed on a variety of insects during the winter. Gilbert Waldbauer of the University of Illinois, author of The Birder's Bug Book, has seen them dig overwintering corn borer caterpillars out of dead cornstalks as well as pierce the thick wall of a cecropia moth cocoon to seize a juicy pupa.

Most songbirds, such as warblers and tanagers, cannot accomplish these feats and so cannot survive the cold months here, but woodpecker species have all the right anatomical stuff to be successful predators in winter. The strong, chisel-like bill enables a woodpecker to hammer a hole into the tough casing of a plant gall, for example. A pointed bill might get stuck.

A long, extending tongue helps the downy woodpecker reach inside the hole it makes to snatch its hapless prey. The tongue is also barbed and sticky, making it easier to hold on to the prey. A bony but flexible apparatus wraps around the downy's entire skull, giving the bird a place to store its tongue when not in use.

Come fall, the downy may begin "caching" food in tree crevices and other places for later retrieval. Woodpeckers may also eat berries in fall, but when winter comes, they must become more resourceful. In addition to the usual insects they find spending the winter under bark, downy woodpeckers help themselves at suet and peanut feeders in birdwatchers' backyards. Those who forget to put food out—fear not. Birds that feed in backyards make sure they know the location of several food sources.

The downy woodpecker is the most common woodpecker species in Chicago Wilderness. Others include the hairy woodpecker—which looks like a giant downy—and the red-bellied woodpecker. Both of these can be found in winter.

Northern flickers and red-headed woodpeckers mostly migrate out of the region in winter and nest here in summer. The yellow-bellied sapsucker passes through during spring and fall migration, and pileated woodpeckers make only rare appearances here.

So it is the downy woodpecker that hikers through our woods are most apt to see in winter. This bird can brighten a cold winter day and give a person pause to think about the remarkable adaptations in nature—and perhaps ponder what it would be like to have a tongue so long you'd have to wrap it around the inside of your head.

—Sheryl De Vore
In the chilly night air of December 21, 2002, strains of the brass quintet’s holiday songs wafted through the 50-acre woods of North Park Village Nature Center, on the northwest side of Chicago. Laughter and shouts echoed from the big stone stove where kids sampled freshly roasted chestnuts. Families began to drift toward the hay bale stage to watch the winter solstice shadow play.

The cast gathered “backstage” around the bonfire that would project their silhouettes onto a wide, white screen hung between two big oak trees. One of the bubbly ten-year-olds, in a many-legged insect costume, grabbed my arm and pointed at the huge golden moon rising through thin fingers of cloud. We all stood still for a moment, marveling at the scene – the moon hovering over the woods, the crackling fire, and expectant whispers from the crowd gathering on the other side of the screen.

Here we were, out in the cold woods on the longest night of the year. The next day, the sun would begin its return journey north toward us, rewarding us with more daylight. What, I wondered, is so compelling about this phenomenon that it would lure all of us out of our warm houses to this cold bit of wilderness just four days before Christmas?

Some studies suggest that people were originally motivated by fear to observe the solstice. People depended on the sun for warmth and food; they feared that if they did not appease the gods with ritual, the sun would continue to recede, and they would be left in the dark to die.

These days, we know the sun isn’t going anywhere. But we have new fears – and we still need rituals. In the conservation community, what we treasure – and what we most fear losing – is the exquisite web of biodiversity in this region. We fear losing to unwise development, pollution and invasive species – the ecosystems that all of us depend on for clean water, clean air, recreation, education, and revitalization of the spirit. But we also hope.
The Riverbank Neighbors, a group of residents who live along a stretch of the Chicago River, hold a winter solstice gathering to celebrate their riverbank restoration work and each other. For the community to sustain its vigor, says resident Pete Leki, it is necessary to do the essential work of “just celebrating!” The group invites the whole neighborhood, and the gathering becomes an occasion for community-wide recollection of successes and for marking of the passage of time.

The Friends of Northbrook Forest Preserves also see the winter solstice as an opportunity to celebrate their work and community — by igniting a huge bonfire fueled by stacks of buckthorn cleared during the past season. Linda Masters, a volunteer steward, feels that gathering with other volunteers and neighbors is a great way to acknowledge the good work they accomplished in the previous year, and also to clear the slate in preparation for new work in the coming year.

Henrietta Saunders, another bonfire participant, prizes the gathering as an opportunity to re-center herself, to “reconnect feet to the ground and eyes to the sky.”

I find myself drawn to the darker, quieter meanings that lie in the solstice. In winter, the natural world feels steeped in dormancy and loss. Living things disappear behind the cloak of migration, hibernation, and death, and we have little choice but to wait the season out. But many of these living things actually require a cold winter to propel them through their life cycles — many turtles, for example, need to hibernate in order to mate successfully in the spring, and many seeds need a period of cold dormancy before they can germinate. Likewise, we humans need these times of stillness to grow.

I find solace in the rituals marking this dark time of year, because they remind us that the sun is beginning its slow return, bringing with it the distant promise of spring. I look more carefully around me in the woods and find seeds of wilderness concealed everywhere in the winter landscape.

Rebecca Blazer, a volunteer at North Park Village, will direct the solstice play again this year. For more information, visit www.city-of-chicago.org/Environment/NaturalResources/winter-solstice.html.
Citizens, conservationists rally to save Swainson’s hawk

In rural northeastern Chicago Wilderness, conservationists and community groups are confronting several proposed developments that could severely disrupt the only population of the Swainson’s hawk east of the Mississippi River.

Since the mid-1970s, when the Swainson’s hawks were first discovered here, the rolling, rural landscape around Hampshire, Illinois, has harbored a small population of about five nesting pairs of the birds, which summer here each year. The state-endangered hawks nest in former open oak savannas among hilly pastures and farm fields. In the fall, the Swainson’s hawks migrate to spend the winter in the pampas grasslands of Argentina.

Hampshire and other communities sit along a wave of recent development in the western collar counties. Currently, six developers have submitted plans to build on sites that could disrupt Swainson’s hawk habitat.

Conservationists predict that such development pressures will likely affect the nesting and foraging strategies of the Swainson’s hawk. “Often the hawk is very site-faithful, returning to use previous years’ nests unless there’s a nesting failure,” says Robert Montgomery, a biologist who has been following these birds for more than 30 years. “In that case, the pair might shift to another nearby woodland or other area for nesting.” But widespread development, he says, may interfere with other places the hawks could go. This past summer, of the five nesting pairs, no more than four young were fledged from three nests, according to Dan Wenny and John Bergstrom, of the Illinois Natural History Survey, and Bob Morgan, of Loyola University.

As a result, local residents are banding together to protect the Swainson’s hawk. As part of their mission to control urban growth and preserve the area’s rural character, the group Citizens After Responsible Expansion (CARE) is educating townspeople and village officials about the Swainson’s hawk’s habitat needs.

Researchers are racing to learn more about the Swainson’s hawks in Illinois, such as their habitat requirements, the size of their home ranges, and how they use their habitat. More information about the Swainson’s hawk and the development of its habitat is available from the Bird Conservation Network at (847) 965-1150.

To contact CARE, call (847) 683-3752.

—David B. Johnson

New Cook FPD Guidelines

On November 5, the Board of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County approved new guidelines for land management that had been assembled under the leadership of the new General Superintendent, Steve Bylina. The new guidelines replace inefficient and counterproductive work rules under which land managers — staff and volunteers alike — labored for nearly seven years. The FPD board had hastily adopted the rules in 1996 after articles in the Chicago Sun-Times criticized the restoration programs of Cook, Lake, and DuPage County forest preserves. The new guidelines encourage the use of best practices in ecosystem management, including cutting of invasive trees larger than four inches in diameter (such as black locust and silver poplar), when those trees are shading out high quality natural ecosystems. “Both staff and volunteer stewards highly respect and appreciate the new guidelines,” said John Sheerin, president of Friends of the Forest Preserves, which helped to write the update.

“Land management will now be both more efficient and better quality.”

A Wild and Successful Benefit

Chicago WILDERNESS Magazine held its second benefit dinner in mid-October at Kendall College in Evanston, raising more than $37,000 to support the magazine. Sponsors for the event included Strachan Donnelly/Center for Humans and Nature, BP, ComEd/Exelon, and Christopher Burke Engineering. Enormous thanks go to the following leaders who made their time and culinary creativity to cook for the guests: Tracey Vowell of Frontera Grill and Topolobampo, Michael Altenberg of Campagnola, Paul Kahan of Blackbird, Jennifer Newbury of Fortunato, and Della Cossette of Charlie Trotter’s. Thanks, too, to the students and Chef Paul Draz of Kendall for serving as wait staff and providing hors d’oeuvres.

Pierre Lasserre from the Ritz-Carlton arranged for wines, and Two Brothers Brewing Company, Red Hen Bakery, and The Natural Garden donated beer, bread, and baskets of native plants, respectively.

Birds Find Sanctuary at McCormick Place

On October 18, 2003, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, members of Audubon Chicago Region and Chicago Park District officials dedicated the six-acre McCormick Place Bird Sanctuary, located just south of McCormick Place atop an underground parking garage. This is the city’s fourth.
lakefront bird sanctuary, part of a plan to attract and protect the estimated five to seven million birds that migrate through the region every year.

For feathered visitors, the sanctuary offers specialty tailored native prairie plantings and more than 800 native bushes with tasty berries. A solar-powered birdbath will be added. Human visitors can look for birds from a wheelchair-accessible observation platform and an unfenced three-acre portion of the prairie with interpretive signs.

The sanctuary has already attracted migratory birds. Last summer, Hyde Park resident and avid birder Scott Carpenter spotted more than 60 species in just a handful of visits. More than 200 species are expected to frequent the sanctuary once the prairie becomes established.

During the summer of 2003, the Chicago Park District collaborated with the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority to build the sanctuary. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also contributed funds to the project. Audubon-Chicago Region helped select diverse prairie plants that would grow well in the shallow soil above the parking garage. ComEd partnered with the park district to provide the signage.

The sanctuary is most easily reached by foot or by air (meaning fewer people and dogs) though drivers can get there by parking near Lake Meadows Park (31st Street and the lakefront) and walking north 0.8 miles along the lakefront. Visitors can also walk south from the Museum Campus, and the lakefront bike trail passes directly in front of the sanctuary.

Audubon-Chicago Region is organizing a group of volunteer stewards to collect seeds for new plantings and to take part in planning. For more information, contact Judy Pollock at (847) 965-1150 or jpollock@audubon.org.

—Ben LeFort

DuPage Forest Preserve District Hires New Director

Brent Manning officially began as the new executive director of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County on October 1. Manning was the first director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources from 1995 to 2003. After leaving IDNR, he served briefly as the director of the Wyoming Fish and Game Department.

During his career with the IDNR, Manning was active in land acquisition and spearheaded public ownership of the 19,000-acre Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie near Joliet and the 15,600-acre Jim Edgar Panther Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area in central Illinois.

When asked about plans for his new post, Manning stated, "As an ecologist, I know that the natural resources in suburban areas require careful stewardship and creative solutions to maintain and restore native flora and fauna. As an outdoorsman, I look forward to expanding the county's recreational opportunities. By working with the Board of Commissioners and with staff members, I hope to formulate long-term strategic thinking, secure important land acquisitions and develop local coalitions to successfully fulfill the district's mandate."

Hawk Watchers Score High Marks

This autumn, the hawk watchers at Illinois Beach State Park in Zion counted more raptors than in the three previous autumns combined, tallying 14,690 as of mid-November. "This season...has been absolutely amazing!" says Vic Berardi, the coordinator of the Illinois Beach Hawk Watch.

Broad-winged hawks lead the field. The numbers of these fall migrants in the past three years ranged from 39 to 424. In 2003, an astonishing 9,563 "broadies" cruised past the ecstatic spotters. "They kept streaming by, one by one, then by the hundreds," says veteran hawk watcher Eric Delbecq. "We all had big grins on our faces."

Rick Schmude, a relatively new hawk watcher, says that the broad-winged hawks reminded him of World War II movies where endless squadrons of planes fly by. "It was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen," he says.

Merlins and rough-legged hawks were also seen in record numbers this fall. Since this was only the station's fourth season, birders say that it is too soon to know if the high numbers indicate any trends.

Predicting numbers of migrating hawks is never a sure bet, but weather often provides clues. From September through November, Berardi spends 30 to 60 minutes a night studying weather patterns on the Internet to determine how many watchers to send out each day. In the second half of September,

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when the "broaders" were due, Berardi says, "We were getting a very strong westerly flow of air.... Those west winds typically move the birds closer to the lakefront." Hawks generally fly through Chicago Wilderness about 15 miles west of Lake Michigan. They ride thermals (rising columns of warm air) to gain altitude. Strong west winds this year caused these thermals to angle east toward the lakeshore.

During fall migration, broad-winged hawks spend about a month migrating from their breeding grounds in Canada and the northern American states down to South America. "There isn't another hawk watch south of Illinois Beach State Park until you get to Texas," says Berardi. "Geographically, we're in a fantastic location for the study of hawk migration."

Check hawksinthesky.com for the final figures for all 16 species of raptors counted.

—Betsy J. Green

Buckthorn, Kudzu Added to Exotic Weed Act

On July 10th, Governor Rod Blagojevich approved an amendment adding the creeping vine kudzu and six species of buckthorn to the Illinois Exotic Weed Act. The 15-year-old Act, which already included Japanese honeysuckle, multiflora rose, and purple loosestrife, makes it illegal to buy, sell, distribute, or plant these species in Illinois.

"I think it's a victory for the native plants in Illinois," said Carolyn Grisboll, director of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. "It prevents species from being sold where most people would go to purchase plants for their yards and landscaping. It's key to preventing them from getting into open areas."

Chicago-area conservationists especially applauded the inclusion of common and glossy buckthorn, two invasive shrub species that have spread rapidly across northern Illinois.

—Don Parker

Southwest Suburban Preserves Gain Extra Protection

More than 1,600 acres of land in the Southwest Suburban Forest Preserve District of Cook County and roughly 400 acres of Will County Forest Preserve District holdings have gained extra legal protection from the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC) to ensure that they will remain natural areas.

The Orland and Bartel Grasslands, both near Tinley Park, and land adjacent to the Camp Sagawa Nature Preserve, near Lemont, comprise the Cook County parcels. Lake Renwick Preserve East Unit, near Plainfield, the Rock Run Preserve, in Joliet, and the Theodore Marsh Preserve, in Crest Hill, are the Will County sites.

The commission designated five of the sites as Land and Water Reserves, which means they may be used for wildlife viewing, nature photography, hiking, approved scientific research and other approved activities that do not have negative impacts on their natural features. The land near Camp Sagawa Nature Preserve has been designated a Nature Preserve Buffer, which will accommodate all but the "other approved activities."

The INPC's pursuit of these protections stemmed from agreements between the forest preserve districts and CorLands, a nonprofit conservation group that administers wetland acquisition and restoration grants in conjunction with the Chicago District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Soils in Peril

Few people probably know that the land area of the United States contains more than 13,000 soil series, or soil types. Defined by factors such as water saturation, carbon levels, and texture, a "series" is to soil what a "species" is to a plant or animal. Probably still fewer people know that they have a "state soil series": if you're in Illinois it's Drummer, Indiana it's Miami, and Wisconsin it's Antigo.

Now some of these soils may be in peril. Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, revealed in the October 2005 issue of the journal Ecosystems that 508 soil series in the United States are endangered. The researchers called soils "rare" when they covered less than 25,000 acres. They labeled a rare soil "endangered" if more than half of its original area had been altered by land disturbances, such as housing developments and crops.

The Midwest is one of the most affected areas. According to the article, Indiana has the highest percentage of its rare soil series classified as endangered, at 82 percent. Illinois follows not far behind at 66 percent.

Robert McLeese, state soil scientist of Illinois says, "This concept of endangered soils kind of came out of nowhere," and adds, "All of a sudden these become a very hot political item."

Nonetheless, local scientists do see the...
value of the study. Mike Miller, a senior soil ecologist at Argonne National Laboratories, relishes the idea of local scientists going out to classify pristine areas of soil. "It's something we need to be considering in Chicago Wilderness; we need to get a better idea of the state of the soils...and this should be one of the criteria when we make decisions on preservation."

—Allison Knob

11 Watersheds Protected

The forest preserve districts of both Lake and Kane County took further steps in September to protect their watersheds.

The Lake County Forest Preserves purchased 60 acres of woodlands and wetlands surrounding Seeno Mount Creek as it winds its way between Sun Lake and East Loom Lake near Lake Villa, Illinois. Added to Sun Lake Forest Preserve, which now covers 581 acres, the land is part of the important East Loom Lake Advanced Identification Wetland Complex and is also an Illinois Natural Areas Inventory site.

Prompted by a 1995 study indicating the need to protect the 40-square-mile Tyler Creek Watershed, the Forest Preserve District of Kane County (FPDKC) is protecting its rough-and-tumble glacial past with two large purchases totaling 903 acres.

In Rutland Township, the 358-acre Oury land acquisition borders a prior 170-acre purchase and features a mix of oak savanna, gravel hills, and wetland. A small subdivision separates it from the 450-acre Freeman-Kame-Ed Meagher Preserve (see p. 22). These preserves piece together a spacious kettle, kame, and outwash complex along the Marengo Moraine, which sweeps through the western part of the county.

In neighboring Plato township, the 564-acre Muirhead acquisition preserves the heart of ancient Lake Pingeet. Torrents of water pouring off a melting glacier created the lake when the water became trapped between two moraines, but only the degraded Pingeet Creek flows through the new preserve now. The district plans to restore both the creek and a tallgrass prairie that is home to gray prairie chickens.

—Elizabeth Rietto

12 Aphrodite Fritillaries Released in Glacial Park

The Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum's butterfly restoration project continued this past year with the introduction of Aphrodite fritillary caterpillars to Glacial Park in McHenry County. Aphrodite fritillaries (CW, Summer '03) are beautiful orange butterflies about the size of a monarch. In the Chicago Wilderness area, they are found in larger prairie remnants.

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Aphrodite fritillary caterpillars feed on violets, especially prairie violets. In September, scientists took female Aphrodites from the Nachusa Grassland in Lee County and placed them in special egg-laying cases along with violet leaves. They collected more than 100 eggs, 66 of which hatched. Then they placed the new caterpillars on prairie violet leaves at Glacial Park.

If all goes well, the caterpillars will hibernate this winter, complete their metamorphosis next summer, and become a viable population of this locally rare species.

—Doug Taron

Three New Chicago Wilderness Members

On November 19, 2003, Chicago Wilderness welcomed three new members, bringing the total to 172.

The Boone Creek Watershed Alliance (BCWA) is a group of concerned citizens and landowners who have joined together to protect one of the rarest natural areas in northeastern Illinois, the Boone Creek Watershed Ecosystem. Located in McHenry County, this mosaic of landscapes includes high-quality fen, sedge meadow, and woodland communities, as well as seeps and springs. The BCWA provides workshops on native vegetation and land protection options, leads educational tours, and organizes restoration activities. For more information, call (815) 337-3734, or visit boonecreekwatershed.org.

The National Association for Interpretation (NAI) – Region 5 promotes interpretation, or “on-site informal education,” as a profession. A nonprofit organization, the NAI provides education and training resources for up-and-coming interpreters who go on to enlighten the public at parks, zoos, nature centers, historic sites, museums and aquariums. The NAI also provides workshops and certification programs. For more information, contact nainregions.org/5.

Indiana’s Richardson Wildlife Sanctuary, a 3.4-acre preserve including 400 meters of Lake Michigan shoreline, has wooded dunes, blueberry-oak savanna, and wildflowers. It is also a nonprofit organization hard at work on education, research, and preservation of the natural history and ecosystems of the southern Lake Michigan region. It is a founding member of the Environmental Educator Network of the Southern Lake Michigan Region, a teachers’ hub for the region.

The sanctuary is open by appointment. Call (219) 787-8983 or visit richardsonwildlifesanctuary.org.

For a listing of winter events, visit chicagowildernessmag.org/calendar.
The red fox is reddish from head to tail to toe. If you see a fox of dappled russets and grays, however, you have found the classic small predator of oak woods and savannas, *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*, the gray fox.

The gray fox is a tree climber. Notice those short legs. They, along with long, curved claws, mark the only canid (the dogs, wolves, coyotes, and foxes) that is adapted to life in the trees. The gray fox has been called a “primitive canid;” its lineage has been separate from all the others for more than four million years. As the legs of the others have become more and more specialized for running, the gray fox has developed limbs more like those of bears, cats, and humans. They’re good at hugging.

Step back a few hundred years, and the large mammal predators of Chicago Wilderness consisted of cats, bears, otters, badgers, and three canids. Wolves ruled. Coyotes survived by wilyness. Gray foxes climbed trees.

That adaptation continues to benefit the grays today. Gray foxes are said to do better than reds where there are coyotes, because of their knack at tree climbing.

But gray foxes don’t like tall trees that grow close together all that much. True, people report seeing them napping in crow or hawk nests as high as 60 feet off the ground. But gray foxes eat mostly rabbits and mice – with occasional hors d’oeuvres of fruit, birds, eggs, and insects. Their food thrives in the open oak-hickory woodlands and grassy oak savannas. They’re most at home in crooked trees with big, spreading limbs. That straight ash tree on the right suggests a woods of gradually deepening shade, and diminishing life in the understory. The gray fox won’t long thrive in this woods, unless a fire or some land managers come through to thin the ash trees and encourage the oaks, shrubs, and wildflowers.

Look for *Urocyon cinereoargenteus* in woods full of light and butterflies and the most colorful birds. It’s an animal of the classic Chicago Wilderness.

*Photo by Joe Nowak. Words by Stephen Packard.*
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